SHIKE

TIME OF THE DRAGONS

A NOVEL BY

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by Robert J. Shea

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Chapter One

They stripped Jebu naked. They threw his yellow aspirant's tunic into the fire bowl on the right side of the altar.

"You will not need that again. Tomorrow morning you will put on the grey robe of an initiate. Or you will be dead, and we will burn your body:" Sitting on an unpainted wooden stool before the altar, Taitaro, abbot of the Waterfowl Temple, looked steadily at Jebu. Around his neck Taitaro wore the plain white rope that symbolized his office. He was Jebu's stepfather, but tonight his eyes said, I know you not. He would burn Jebu's body and throw the ashes in the rubbish pit if his son failed, and he would never look back.

The flimsy tunic flared up with a hiss, throwing sparks into the air. As it crisped and blackened, a rope of smoke coiled up to the dark cypress beams of the ceiling.

"As that tunic is reduced to ashes, so will your entire life be consumed this night. Know this, aspirant Jebu: whatever comes to pass, whether you live or die, tomorrow morning you will be nothing." Taitaro's mouth was set in a straight line behind his short black beard, and his weary, deep-set eyes burned into Jebu's.

A monk on the left side of the altar struck a wooden club against a hollow log that hung suspended from the temple ceiling. A deep, musical boom resounded through the hall.

"Take the aspirant to the crypt," said Taitaro in his quiet voice.

Two grey-robed monks carrying blazing pine-knot torches stepped to either side of Jebu. The tops of their heads did not reach his shoulders. He stood straight, fighting the urge to stoop over and try to

make himself shorter. It was so painful to be different from the others. Had Taitaro deliberately picked the two shortest men in the monastery to stand beside Jebu, just to humiliate him?

The two monks took a step forward in unison, their wooden sandal soles clacking on the stone floor. Jebu stepped forward with them, starting off on the left foot as he had been instructed, his bare sole shrinking from the cold floor. He had better get used to pain. There would be much more of it before morning came. He walked with the monks around the black stone block that served the Zinja temple as an altar. In the dark wall behind the altar was the simple outline of a waterfowl, incised by a sculptor when the temple was built.

The monks said the Waterfowl Temple was so old it had been here when the sun goddess Amaterasu appointed her great-great-grandson, Jimmu, the first Emperor of these islands. It was a wooden framework with paper walls, standing on a platform of stone. The platform had been carved out of the rock of the mountainside. The Zinja kept no records, and no one knew exactly when the temple had been built. Pits, chambers and tunnels had been dug into the mountain beneath the temple, and with the passing centuries had grown deeper and more tangled, like the roots of an ancient tree.

Directly behind the altar was a square opening on the floor. Stone steps led down into darkness. Jebu had only been in the crypt three times before, when monks of the Order had died and their ashes had been carried there in procession.

One of Jebu's escorts gestured, and Jebu started down the steps of the crypt, feeling a strange, tremulous sensation near his heart. The torchlight did not reach to the bottom of the steps, and he seemed to be descending into total blackness. It frightened him, frightened him all the more because he didn't know what was going to happen to him. He had never been permitted to see an initiation, and there had

been very few such ceremonies during the whole time he had lived at the temple.

The two monks followed him down the stairs. In the light of their torches Jebu could see the ninety-nine black stone jars standing on nine steps carved in the wall of the crypt. Every crypt in every Zinja temple contained nine times eleven urns. Each time a monk died, the leftmost urn on the bottom step was carried up out of the crypt, and the ashes in it were scattered on the ocean wind that beat against the temple all the year round. Then the jar, refilled with the ashes of the monk who had just died, was put on the right side of the top step, while all the other urns were moved one space to the left. Over the years, death by death, the urn would travel along the steps until it reached the bottom of the crypt, and the ashes of a monk whose name by then had been forgotten would be thrown away.

"These are the relics of the brothers of our Order," said one of the monks with Jebu. "You have seen them before. You may not know that almost half of these jars are empty. The bodies of these brothers were lost. We put the empty urns here in their memory."

The other monk said, "Almost all the monks whose funeral urns are here were killed by men. They died in combat, or they were murdered, or they were executed. This is what a Zinja can expect- you are asking to be killed. And yet you want to be a Zinja. You are a fool."

Jebu guessed that the words were part of the ritual. He saw no need to reply.

The first monk said, "Now take that ring there in the floor, and lift it."

The ring, made of black iron, gleamed in the torchlight, having been polished by the grip of many hands. Jebu tugged at it. The Zinja were

trained for strength, and Jebu, being bigger than most of the monks, was the strongest young man in the Waterfowl Temple. Even so, he could only slightly raise the great stone slab to which the ring was attached; then he had to let it fall back. One of the monks handed his torch to the other and helped Jebu. Together they slid away the stone. The monks gestured silently to him, indicating that he was to climb down into the chamber below the slab. It was a stone box with just enough room for him to lie down. The cold of the stone shocked his naked body; the little chamber was damp and smelled of mould.

"You will lie in this chamber and we will put the slab back into place. No matter what happens, you must not try to get out. If you do, you will die. It may seem that you are going to die if you do not escape, but you will die if you try to escape. Believe that, and believe nothing else that you hear from this moment on, until the Father Abbot himself comes to release you, at his pleasure."

Jebu lay in the stone box, staring up at the two monks. He had thought them short before; now they towered above him, their faces strange masks in the flickering torchlight. Together the monks pushed the slab into place. The darkness was total. He brought his hand up over his face and moved it from side to side, but he could see nothing. He was buried alive in a stone chamber the size of a coffin. It was made for people smaller than himself; the top of his head and the soles of his feet pressed hard against the ends when he lay at full length. There was barely room to move his hands away from his sides. And when he lifted his head he struck his forehead against the top of the chamber.

He was afraid, but not panic-stricken. He had begun his Zinja training at the age of four, learning to balance on wooden railings, to hang by his hands for hours, to run, to dive, to swim and to climb; but the first thing he had learned was mastery of fear in any threatening situation. "The purpose of fear is to drive us to preserve our lives," said

Taitaro, "just as the purpose of hunger is to drive us to eat. But a Zinja is not interested in preserving his life. His aim is to lose the craving for life. Only those who have lost this craving are truly free." So, little children not yet able to read or write were subjected to sword thrusts, mock hangings, the bites of supposedly poisonous insects and snakes, and dozens of other frightening experiences. As the children dedicated to the Order grew older and harder and became proficient in the use of weapons, these encounters with terror, at first only simulated, became more realistic. The year before, one of Jebu's friends had died at the age of sixteen when he panicked and fell from a plank no wider than a man's foot which bridged a mountain gorge.

Jebu lay on his back in the dark in the stone coffin and wondered, not for the first time, whether the Order consisted of madmen and fools and whether he himself was the biggest fool of all. Why was he doing this? Because they got him when he was young. Because his father was killed and Taitaro married his mother and adopted him and put him through the training as a matter of course.

Though no light penetrated the stone above him, sound did, and Jebu heard approaching footsteps, and then a voice saying, "My son." "Is that you, Taitaro-sensei?"

"Yes," said the abbot, his voice muffled but unmistakable. "We come now to the centre of your initiation, to the truth which is to be revealed to you as a Zinja. This truth will sustain you through this trial and through all the ordeals of life to come. We call it the Saying of Supreme Power. Swear now before all the kami of this place, all the kami of the Order and all the great kami of these Sacred Islands that you will reveal to no one what I tell you now."

"I swear."

"Even if other brothers of the Order tell you they already know the Saying of Supreme Power and are only testing you to learn whether you know it, you must not repeat it to them. You must not even admit that you know it. On pain of expulsion from the Order, and even death, Jebu."

"I understand," said Jebu quickly, eager to learn what final truth lay locked at the heart of the Zinja mysteries.

"Then hear the Saying of Supreme Power." There was a silence in the absolute blackness. Then: "The Zinja are devils."

"What?"

"The Zinja are devils."

"Taitaro-sensei, I don't understand."

"Say it back to me. I want to be sure you heard me correctly." Jebu hesitated. "I may not."

"Good. You have understood that much."

Jebu shook his head. He wanted to climb out of this stone box and seize his stepfather by the shoulders and shake him. "But, sensei, that is contrary to everything I've ever been taught. Is it a true saying, or is it just the kind of spell conjurers use to call up spirits? I don't see how it can be true. The Zinja are not-we are not-that."

"You do not know. You are not yet a Zinja. Farewell now, Jebu. I hope I shall see you in the morning."

Jebu was acutely conscious of the enormous weight of the stone suspended over him. It seemed suddenly as if there were no air to breathe. What could it mean: the Zinja are devils? He had been

taught to believe that the highest calling a man might hope for-unless he were born to the robes of the Emperor-was to be a Zinja. Anyone, no matter how lowborn, could be a Zinja, if he could endure the training. Even an untouchable, a slave, a hairy Ainu from the north, even a barbarian foreigner. Yes, that was why he was a Zinja, because they would take anyone, even the strange-looking red-haired son of a man from across the western sea. But perhaps the Zinja would take anyone because they were devils. Devils would take anyone.

Something icy touched his shoulder blades. He wriggled to try to escape it, and his heart started pounding harder than ever. Was it the touch of a devil? The cold feeling spread to the small of his back, to his buttocks. He put his hand flat on the floor of the stone coffin in which he lay. Water. Water was trickling into the chamber from outside. The temple was at the edge of the sea; perhaps when the tide rose the water entered this box. No, unlikely. This chamber was high above the level of the sea. It was more probable that this was part of the ordeal. The water continued to rise. His back was submerged, the cold trickling into his armpits and freezing his groin, and his teeth began to chatter. He lifted his head as the water soaked into his hair and bumped his forehead painfully against the stone slab that imprisoned him. The water rose around the sides of his head and he grimaced and shook his head from side to side as it crept into his ears. He put his fingers into his ears to keep it out.

The water seemed cold enough to freeze his blood. He began automatically to twitch the muscles all over his body, in a regular rhythm he had been taught, to raise his body heat. The Zinja training enabled a man to endure freezing cold for hours. But how high would the water go? Another inch and it would drown him. Or else he would have to try to push that stone slab out of the way, even though he probably could not manage it and even though, if he succeeded in climbing out of the crypt, he would be killed. This was what they had

warned him about: it may seem that you are going to die if you do not escape, but you will die if you try to escape. The water stopped rising when only the front of his face was still clear of it. He lay immersed, buried in the total blackness, shivering. How long would he have to stay like this? How long before he died of the cold?

There was a grinding noise above his head. The stone slab was moving.

"Jebu. It's Weicho and Fudo. Come out before you drown." A torch was waved over his head, its light blinding him after the hours-or was it only moments?-he had spent in the darkness. Gradually he made out the shadowed faces of the monks Weicho and Fudo looking down at him. They were a few years older than he, an inseparable pair, known for the slackness of their discipline, which had led Taitaro on one occasion to threaten to cast them out of the Order. Fudo was lazy and Weicho was cruel. It was rumoured among the aspirants that they were lovers. Jebu had always disliked them.

"No."

"It's all right. The Father Abbot has given permission." "I'll come out when he himself tells me to."

There was silence, then Fudo, the taller and thinner of the two, laughed.

"You're a fool, Jebu. You'll drown in there. The purpose of the initiation is to test whether you think for yourself or follow orders blindly. If you follow orders blindly, you die."

Jebu said nothing. He was not following orders blindly. He was choosing to follow a particular order. He was making a judgment about which orders to follow and which not to.

Short, stout Weicho whispered to Fudo, giggled and said, "Jebu, you are the stepson of the Father Abbot and his favourite."

"I am the stepson of the abbot, but he has no favourite."

"You lie, Jebu. Listen. We know that the Father Abbot has shown you special favour. He has given you the Saying of Supreme Power."

Jebu did not answer. So this was what Taitaro meant when he warned against revealing the Saying to anyone.

"We want the power the Father Abbot has through the Saying. All of us were promised the magic Saying. Otherwise, do you think any of us would submit to this hell on earth of being a Zinja? We know now that only a favoured few actually get it. The rest of us grub out our lives in poverty and misery, living on false hope until we are killed serving the Order. We are not among the favoured, Fudo and I, because we have been caught disobeying some silly little rules of the Order."

Fudo said, "We intend to be miserable no longer. We know you must have been given the Saying of Supreme Power, Jebu. You must give it to us."

"I don't know any magic Saying. The Abbot has been as a father to me only on the days when everyone spends time with his family. Otherwise, he is as distant from me as he is from anyone. He has given me no secret. What you are doing is wrong. You sow dissension in the Order."

Fudo laughed. "You think there is harmony in the Order, Jebu? The Order is riddled with hatred and treachery, just as you are lying to us now."

The Zinja are devils. Was this what it meant?

Weicho said, "Enough of this." He stepped away from the edge of the crypt and reappeared holding a naginata by its long pole, the polished steel blade glowing red in the torchlight. He thrust the weapon down into the pit. "Feel this, Jebu." The sharp point pressed against Jebu's breastbone. He shrank away from it, and it scratched him. Weicho probed at him, pricking his chest in different places till the point of the naginata came to rest on the upper part of his belly, just below the rib cage.

"Tell us the Saying, Jebu, or I'll slice your belly open."

" 'A Zinja who kills a brother of the Order will die a thousand deaths.' "Jebu quoted The Zinja Manual, the Order's book of wisdom.

Fudo snorted. "That book is a collection of old women's tales. You are wrong, Jebu. The Father Abbot foolishly appointed us to guard you. We have only to say we killed you because you were trying to escape from the crypt."

"I don't know any Saying."

"Kill the dog and be done with it, Weicho."

The instant Jebu felt the point of the naginata press harder against his skin, he swung his hand over and struck the weapon aside. With a quick chop of his other hand he broke the long staff into which the blade was set. The curved steel blade splashed into the water, and Jebu felt around for it. He grabbed the broken wooden end and held the naginata blade like a sword. But he still dared not climb out of the crypt.

"Come and get me," he said.

"Come and get us," said Weicho.

"He won't," said Fudo. "He still thinks he'll die if he comes out of that grave."

"Jebu," said Weicho softly, "we can make the water rise all the way to the top of your chamber. Tell us the Saying, or we'll drown you like a kitten."

"I don't know any Saying."

"Fare you well then, Jebu. May you be wiser in your next life." Jebu heard the grinding of the stone, then a heavy thud as it fell into place. Was the water higher? It might be.

He had learned, as had all aspiring Zinja, to slow his breathing so that he would need hardly any air. He could do that now, but he could not breathe under water. The water was now tickling the edges of his nostrils. He lifted his head and wriggled backward in the tiny space so that the back of his head was wedged in an upper rear corner of the stone box. It was an uncomfortable position, but no more so than hanging by his hands for hours in the course of Zinja training, and it was a position he could hold without conscious effort. He began counting his exhalations-one, two, three, four . . . He went into a light trance.

He was riding on the back of a white dragon whose wings beat only once a minute, so powerful was each stroke. Far below he could see the four great islands of the Sunrise Land, Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu and the four thousand lesser ones. Then they were over the blue western sea. They sailed through a sky that was clear overhead, though he could see masses of grey-green thunderclouds to the south as if a terrible storm were rising there.

They passed over land. Below were enormous walled cities and palaces with red-tiled roofs along the banks of gigantic, winding rivers. He saw a stone wall fortified by guard towers that stretched on and on, like an endless, twisted bamboo pole, over grasslands and mountains and valleys.

A mighty army of men on horseback swept down towards the wall. All moved as one man, flowing in wavelike patterns over the land below. They breasted the wall like a flood cresting over a dam.

He saw a great battle being fought. The men on horseback met another army of men in horse-drawn chariots and scattered it, leaving the land littered with the dead.

Then the white dragon was drifting over a desert painted gold by the late afternoon sun. He saw the hide tents of savage people and the herds of cattle. The herders, dressed in furs, sat around smoky fires. The animals munched grey-green vegetation. He sensed that the dragon was carrying him backwards through time as well as through space, and that the herders below would later become the terrible army on horseback he had seen in the land of huge cities.

Then he was flying towards a giant.

The giant was taller than the mountains around him, and he stood with one fur-booted foot planted on each side of a broad lake. His head was covered with a fur-trimmed steel helmet. He was dressed in furs, and there was a necklace of jewels around his neck. One great white jewel, larger than all the others, blazed on his chest. His face was hard and seemed like wind-worn rock. His green eyes glittered, and he laughed and stretched out his arms, sweeping clouds aside as the white dragon, with slow, stately wingbeat, flew towards him.

In a voice that shook the earth, he said, "Welcome, little cousin, to your homeland."

Chapter Two

Jebu felt himself being lifted by many hands. They stood him on his feet and rubbed him with warm blankets. Shivering still, he tried to fight off those who helped him. He must get back into the water-filled stone coffin until the Father Abbot called him.

"Jebu, awake." It was the voice of Taitaro. Jebu was standing in the crypt, facing Taitaro. Behind Taitaro were the ninety-nine stone urns, and on either side of him stood Weicho and Fudo and the two monks who had brought Jebu into the crypt. Would he ever stop shivering?

"Come upstairs, Jebu," said Taitaro. "You can stand beside a brazier until you are warm again."

Wrapped in a heavy robe, Jebu stumbled up the stone steps on legs that almost refused to move, a monk supporting him on either side. Taitaro led the way. They bundled Jebu back into the main hall of the temple and led him to a pile of cushions beside a charcoal brazier. He sat facing Taitaro in front of the altar. All the monks of the chapter sat cross-legged on the floor, in rows, their grey hoods pulled over their heads. The temple was still lit by candles set in bronze lamps suspended from the ceiling. The sun had not yet risen.

"Tell me everything that happened during the night," said Taitaro.

Jebu began his account, not with his visit from Taitaro, but what happened between himself and Weicho and Fudo. The two sat grinning at him with infuriating audacity when he looked accusingly at them. Jebu went on to tell of his journey on the back of the white dragon and his encounter with the giant.

Taitaro said, "If you see an animal or bird in your initiation vision, it means that animal or bird has adopted you as its own. There is no kami more wise and powerful and fortunate than the kami of dragons. That you rode a white dragon suggests that your future may be bound up with that of the Muratomo clan, whose crest is the White Dragon."

"But what of the giant?" said Jebu.

"As you describe him, he could be either your father or your father's slayer, but there is nothing in the vision to suggest that he is either one. He is most certainly one of your father's countrymen. He must be a powerful spirit. That is why you saw him as a giant." Taitaro smiled. "It may require the rest of your life for you to unravel fully the meanings of what you have heard and seen this night. You have experienced an authentic vision and, I believe, achieved authentic insight.

I welcome you into the ranks of the Zinja. Bring him the robe of a brother of the Order."

Joy flooded through Jebu like the golden sunlight that had bathed the desert in his vision. The wings of the dragon he had seen in that vision suddenly seemed to be his. Still seated on the cushions, his eyes fixed on Taitaro, he soared inwardly. He had passed the testing, and he had at last the prize he had worked for since early childhood.

A monk stepped forward with a grey robe draped over his outstretched arms. Jebu looked beyond him and saw the sapphire light of morning through the open doorway of the temple. The monk helped Jebu pull the grey robe on over his head. The Zinja robe was really more of a tunic, stopping just below the knees. The sleeves came halfway down the forearms. On the left side of the robe was

sewn a circular patch of white silk on which a willow tree was embroidered in blue thread. It seemed a simple garment, but it was lined with hidden pockets to accommodate a variety of Zinja weapons and tools. A strip of grey cloth belted the robe. Jebu tied the ends of the belt in the intricate world-serpent knot that the Zinja always used for this purpose. He pulled the hood of the robe over his head.

"Beyond this robe, you need possess nothing," said Taitaro.

In unison the monks chanted, "The grey is all colours. The cloth is all matter. The Willow Tree is all time."

Taitaro said, "Bring him the bow and arrow of the Zinja." Another monk stepped forward with the short, powerful, double-curved compound bow which the Order had been using for centuries, and a cloth quiver containing twenty-three arrows with various heads-willow leaf, turnip head, frog crotch, armour piercer and bowel raker. The monk slung the bow and quiver over Jebu's left shoulder. Glancing at the temple door, Jebu saw that the light in the sky was almost white.

"You are warrior as well as monk, monk as well as warrior," said Taitaro. "Take the bow and arrow with reluctance. Use the bow with dread. Grieve for those who fall to your arrows. But make every arrow count."

The monks chanted, "The arrows kill desire and point the way to insight."

Taitaro said, "Bring him the sword of the Zinja."

A third monk stepped forward with a sword in a plain wooden scabbard and belted it around Jebu's waist. Unbidden, Jebu drew the sword and held it out to look at it. The Zinja sword was broader

and about half the length of the swords most samurai used, but it was heavy and sharp and hard enough to cut through solid rock. The handle was longer and wider at the end than most samurai swords. Zinja swords were forged by the Order, using a secret process centuries old. As Jebu gazed at the sword, its polished steel surface suddenly reflected a blazing light that dazzled him. He looked at the temple doorway. The sun was rising. Its crimson edge appeared over the mountainside, silhouetting the pines that grew outside the temple.

Taitaro said, "Take the sword with reluctance. Draw it with dread. Grieve for those who fall to it. But make every blow count."

The monks chanted, "The sword is the Self, cutting through matter and time and penetrating to true insight."

Taitaro stood and raised his arms. "Welcome the new brother into the Order of Zinja!"

Suddenly the temple, always so solemn and quiet, was pandemonium. The grey-robed monks threw back their hoods, baring their heads, and shouted for Jebu. They broke ranks and crowded around him, touching him, squeezing his hand, slapping his shoulder, hugging him. Many were openly weeping. Pride and joy buoyed him up like winds lifting a kite. He was a Zinja. Over the tops of the monks' heads he could see the full red disk of the sun framed in the temple doorway.

Then he remembered. Weicho and Fudo were on the edge of the crowd around him, smiling at him like the others.

Jebu broke free from the crowd of well-wishers and held up his hand. "Wait. Father Abbot, I have denounced these two before you. I demand that you pass judgment."

Taitaro laughed. "I judge them to be consummate actors. The testing by brothers of the Order is the climax of the ordeal an aspirant must undergo to become a Zinja."

"Ours is a hard task," said Fudo. "Our obedience to the Order lies in seeming to be disobedient."

"And our success is failure," said Weicho with pain in his eyes. "If we are clever enough to deceive the aspirant, it is we who must kill him."

Jebu wanted to ask if they had ever killed. He tried to remember whether any of the initiations that had taken place in his time had been followed by the mysterious disappearance of the aspirant. He could remember only five initiations and in all five cases he had not seen the aspirant afterwards.

Taitaro said, as if guessing his question, "After an initiation the newly ordained monk is immediately sent from the temple. The aspirants do not know what has become of him. That way they cannot be sure whether any initiation ended in the creation of a new brother or the death of an aspirant."

"I will be sent away now?"

"Yes. We'll go to my cell now, and I'll tell you where you will be sent." Taitaro smiled. "Then you will have time to say goodbye."

The house of the monks was built of cypress beams, roofed over with bark shingles and screened with paper and bamboo. It was somewhat sheltered from the seaside cliff on which the temple itself perched. Beyond the house was the stable.

Jebu climbed the steps and entered the one-storey building. It was empty, the futons on which the monks slept rolled up against the

walls. The shoji screens around the abbot's cell at the north-east corner of the hall were closed. Taitaro was waiting for him there, drawing a screen aside and beckoning him to enter.

Taitaro's cell was empty except for a simple dark brown vase of irregular shape that stood on a low unpainted table in one corner. In the vase was a deep red peony blossom flanked by two willow branches. The screen on the east side of the room was open, giving a view of the pine forest that grew on the mountainside.

Taitaro was still wearing the white rope of office around his neck. Slowly he took it off and placed it carefully on the table before the vase. His dark, tired eyes burned into Jebu's and Jebu realized that Taitaro must not have slept the night before. Taitaro opened his arms to Jebu, and they embraced and stood silently together. It was Jebu who drew away first, his mind full of the unspoken question. What does my father think of me now?

It was Taitaro, though, who asked the first question. "Tell me, Jebu, do you think I should have done anything to make the ordeal easier for you?"

Jebu was shocked. "I would be ashamed for ever if I thought you had done anything like that."

Taitaro smiled. It seemed to Jebu that he looked relieved. "Your ordeal was as painful as it has ever been for any Zinja. But we can't make the initiation as severe as life itself will be. For you, as for all of us, the worst is still to come."

Jebu remembered the words his stepfather had spoken to him as he lay in the stone coffin: the Zinja are devils. "May we speak of the Saying of Supreme Power?" he asked.

"Nothing can be gained by talking about it, and much could be lost that way. You must think it through-live it through-for yourself, in silence."

"Then tell me, Father. What has the Order in mind for me? Is there a task for me to perform?"

Taitaro chuckled. "There are more tasks than there are Zinja to perform them. You will go to Kamakura, a small city on the north-east coast of Honshu. You will serve the Shima, a very wealthy family which holds first rank in Kamakura. They are a branch of the Takashi clan."

"The Takaski," Jebu said. "The house of the Red Dragon."

"Yes. Even though your vision was of the White Dragon of Muratomo, your first task will be in the service of the arch-rivals of the Muratomo, the Takashi."

During his training Jebu had learned about the wars of the two great samurai clans, but now that he had passed through the death and rebirth of initiation, all that seemed rather remote to him. "Tell me again, sensei, why the Takashi and the Muratomo are such great enemies."

Taitaro recounted the story. The Emperors of long ago had had many wives and many sons. The Imperial family had grown so large that its support became an intolerable burden on the national treasury. It was decided to lop off some of the branches, give them new names and some land, and let them fend for themselves. The descendants of Emperor Kammu-he who built the capital at Heian Kyo-were called the Takashi. They took as their symbol the Red Dragon. The descendants of Emperor Seiwa were known as the Muratomo, and their crest was the White Dragon.

No longer dependent on the throne, the newly created families lost the gentle, refined ways of the Imperial Court and became tough and self-reliant. They took up arms to defend their lands against frontier barbarians and against other landowners who coveted their holdings. They armed their servants, who became known as samurai.

Meanwhile the Imperial army had dwindled to a few troops of exquisitely caparisoned courtiers who had neither the will nor the ability to wage war. And so, when there was hard fighting to be done, when great landowners rebelled against the throne, when the hairy Ainu attacked in the north, when pirates made the Inland Sea impassable, the Son of Heaven would call for help from his cousins, the Takashi and the Muratomo. The armed clans became known as the teeth and claws of the crown, and their samurai armies grew larger. Inevitably the two families became rivals, trying to outdo each other in feats of glory and conquest.

Inevitably, too, they became involved in the intrigues around the Emperor. There had always been factions jockeying for power around the throne, and those who failed at political manoeuvring sometimes sought to win through force, with the help of the samurai. As a matter of course, whichever side the Muratomo took, the Takashi would support the opposing faction.

The competition between the Takashi and the Muratomo had turned into a blood feud four years earlier, when the Emperor's brother had raised a rebellion, claiming the throne for himself. The chieftain of the Muratomo clan came out in support of the pretender, setting up a stronghold in a palace in Heian Kyo and sending out a call for reinforcements.

One prominent member of the Muratomo family remained loyal to the incumbent Son of Heaven. This was Domei, captain of the palace

guard. He had taken an oath to protect the Emperor, and he believed the rebel brother's claim to be false. Domei was the son of the Muratomo clan chieftain, so his decision put him in the agonizing position of fighting against his own father.

The Takashi also sided with the Emperor. The chieftain of the Takashi was Sogamori, a wily, bloodthirsty and ambitious warrior. Seeing that most of the Muratomo were backing the pretender, Sogamori saw his chance to ruin the rival clan by making war on them. Thus, the unhappy Captain Domei found himself fighting alongside the enemies of his clan.

Domei was a renowned and audacious fighter. In spite of his difficult situation he led the palace guard and his temporary Takashi allies in a night attack on the rebel stronghold. He burned it to the ground and captured his father.

The victorious Emperor now had to decide what to do with the leaders of the uprising. Since the coming of the Buddha's gentle way to the Sacred Islands, centuries ago, there had been very few executions. Those rebels who had survived the perils of battle might expect, in the normal course of events, no worse punishment than exile. The death penalty was meted out only to commoners, and then only when they were found guilty of murder or major theft. Sogamori now shocked the capital by calling for the execution of all the captured rebel leaders.

Sogamori had an ally close to the throne, Prince Sasaki no Horigawa, an Imperial adviser. Prince Horigawa pressed the demand for the death penalty in the Emperor's council. Finally the Son of Heaven decreed over seventy executions. Going beyond that, he commanded Domei to behead his own father, the Muratomo clan chieftain.

Ultimately, another Muratomo relative volunteered to perform the execution, then killed himself by cutting his stomach open.

"What a painful death that must have been," Jebu said. "Why would anyone deliberately do that to himself?"

"It is a new practice among the samurai," said Taitaro. "They kill themselves to expunge stains on their honour. But they don't want it to be said that they committed suicide from want of courage, so they inflict on themselves the most excruciating death imaginable."

Instead of rewarding Domei for his loyalty to him, the Son of Heaven had ignored him ever since, resenting Domei's failure to execute his father. The Takashi, on the other hand, enjoyed the Emperor's favour and were raised to new heights. Sogamori, the Takashi leader, became Minister of the Left, one of the Emperor's chief councillors.

Domei, still captain of the palace guard, was now chieftain of the Muratomo clan. He seethed with hatred for those who had engineered his father's death and his own disappointment. And all over the country small battles between supporters of the Takashi and Muratomo would break out at the slightest provocation.

"It is into this cauldron that I am about to toss you," Taitaro chuckled, "to serve the Shima family of Kamakura."

"What will I do?"

"Lord Shima no Bokuden, chieftain of the house of Shima, is sending his daughter, Taniko, to Heian Kyo to be married to a prominent person there. You will escort Shima no Taniko to Heian Kyo for her wedding. Your party will journey down the Tokaido Road from Kamakura to the capital."

Jebu grinned delightedly. "Heian Kyo. I have been hearing about it

since I was a child. The most wonderful city in the land. And soon I shall see it. And the famous Tokaido Road as well."

Taitaro shrugged. "I hope you won't be disappointed. Had we lived in earlier times, then you would have seen Heian Kyo in its glory. Now the city is tumbling down and overrun with brawling samurai. As for the Tokaido, much of the territory it passes through is controlled by the Muratomo. And the girl Taniko is a kinswoman of the Takashi. What's more, her husband-to-be is Prince Sasaki no Horigawa."

"The one who pressed for the executions of the Muratomo?"

"Yes. The Muratomo hate him even more than they do their Takashi foes." Taitaro stood. "Prince Horigawa comes of a Heian Kyo family that has an ancient name but little wealth. The Shima have an inferior name but great wealth and great ambition. Both sides look on the match as useful."

Together Jebu and Taitaro walked out of the monks' quarters. Taitaro went on. "But Lord Bokuden, Taniko's father, is one of the most tight-fisted men in the Sacred Islands. Witness the fact that he is only willing to pay for one Zinja initiate to escort his daughter all that way through enemy territory. As for Horigawa, he is bloody-minded and treacherous, and has worn two wives to death already. And the Lady Taniko is a wilful girl of thirteen. She has never met Horigawa, and my informants tell me she rebels fiercely against the match. She would rebel even more if she had met him.

"You are going to be in the midst of a very interesting situation."

Then Jebu found himself alone, standing at the edge of the cliff with the temple behind him, its peaked roof spreading low over the rock like the dropping wings of a huge bird. The sea wind blew against his face; the rising sun warmed his back. Below, the white-capped

waves rolled in as regularly as the beating of a heart, carrying unreadable messages from the land of his father.

The women's quarters of the Waterfowl Temple were set back from the cliff, to the east and north of the main temple and a respectable distance from the monks' building. It was a distance that made little difference, because there was nothing in the Zinja rule to stop the men from visiting the women's quarters whenever they wished. In the past few years Jebu had been among those unattached monks who slipped into the women's quarters at night. There was great pretence of secrecy about such visits, but actually they were condoned by the Order.

As befitted the wife of the Father Abbot, Jebu's mother, Nyosan, had the largest bedchamber on the eastern side of the women's quarters, with a view of the morning sun and the monastery garden. Amazingly, there were no other women in the building, or so it seemed when Jebu entered. Nyosan was sitting with her back to him, watching the red ball of the sun float above the small, wind-twisted pine trees. A singing board, placed so as to warn the abbot and his wife of intruders, squeaked under Jebu's foot as he entered the room. Nyosan's back stiffened.

"Mother."

Nyosan turned, looking at him with anguish and joy, and scrambled to her feet. "I have been waiting. I have been waiting oh, so long. This has been one of the two longest nights of my life." She did not have to tell Jebu what the other one was.

They held each other, and she wept in his arms. "My son, my only son. I died a thousand deaths for you. All last night and the weeks before that, when your father told me the time had come for your initiation."

They sat facing each other. Jebu's mother was not yet forty, but her face was lined and tired, though her eyes were serene now that she knew her son had lived through the Zinja ordeal. She wore a plain commoner's robe, as did all the women connected with the temple. Beside her there was a pot of hot rice gruel, a bowl of pickled vegetables and a basket of cakes. She handed him a cake. Smiling at her, he took it and devoured it in two bites. It was juicy and still warm. She handed him another and filled a small bowl with rice gruel. Except for the cakes, it was an ordinary Zinja breakfast.

"Was it truly dangerous? Might you have died?"

Jebu thought of protecting her from the truth, but instead said, "Yes." When tears came to her eyes he added, "Mother, I am a Zinja. The Zinja are dedicated to death. You must remember that I may die at any moment. Perhaps you should think of me as one already dead."

Nyosan wiped her eyes with her sleeve and shook her head. "Strange. Your father spoke that way to me, many times. When I told him I feared to lose him, he said, 'Think of me as one already dead. I have been condemned, and I await my executioner.' "

"Taitaro-sensei says they are going to send me away at once, Mother."

"He told me. And I may never see you again. But I am thankful for the years I have had with you, even though I know you are doomed, just as your father was doomed."

"To be alive is to be doomed," Jebu said.

Nyosan laughed. "Oh! Ordination in the Zinja has made my son a wise man. He is full of sayings that boom like the hollow log in the temple."

Jebu joined in her laughter. "You're right, Mother. My sayings are hollow. I know nothing."

"How could you be expected to know anything, a boy of seventeen years? You will know something of life if you live as long as I have. I have been the daughter of a peasant, and I became, barely out of childhood, the bride of a splendid foreign giant, rich with jewels. And your stepfather, Abbot Taitaro, he, too, is a strange and wonderful man. He has loved me fully, and I have been very happy. Not that I'm so old. I may be twice your age, but I'm still young enough to have babies. Only, what the monks call karma has decreed that Taitaro-sensei beget no babies. So you will always be my only son. My magnificent, red-haired, grey-eyed giant of a son. Live long, Jebu." She took his hands and held them. "Live long, long, long. Love. Marry. Be a father. Don't let the Zinja destroy you when you are still little more than a child. You are not just a Zinja, to be used and thrown away like a grey robe. You are Jebu. A man."

Chapter Three

Above the gatehouse of the Shima mansion the Red Dragon banner of the Takashi snapped and sparkled in the clear autumn air. Two retainers armed with long naginatas lounged on either side of the entrance. When Jebu showed them the letter from Taitaro to Lord Bokuden they called inside, and the great wooden gate, reinforced with spike-studded strips of steel, swung open.

Jebu strode across the courtyard, his wooden-soled sandals crunching on the white gravel. Solid ground still felt strange under his feet after so many days on a deck. He was delighted to be off the trading vessel that had carried him through the Inland Sea and up the east coast of Honshu to Kamakura. Trained though he was to remain calm and meditative, he found the journey extremely boring.

He kept the hood of his grey robe pulled over his head. He hated to see strangers staring at his red hair. His second robe was folded and tied at his cloth belt. His short Zinja sword swung at his side in its wooden scabbard, and his small bow and quiver were slung over his shoulder. He touched the Willow Tree patch sewn on the breast of the robe for reassurance as he approached the main house of the Shima compound.

A steward wearing a grey silk kimono met Jebu and conducted him into the main building of the compound, down a series of screened, shadowy passageways. Finally the servant slid back a shoji screen, announced Jebu and gestured for him to enter.

Lord Bokuden, chieftain of the Shima clan, was a small, bald man with a deeply lined face and a thin moustache. Wearing a gold-embroidered green kimono, he sat before a carved ebony table which Jebu recognized as a costly import from China. On a scroll, he

added up accounts with brush and ink. One side of the small chamber was partly open to let sunlight in.

Jebu felt himself disliking Shima no Bokuden at once. He had heard that the Shima were grasping, cold and treacherous, and Bokuden looked as if he epitomized all those qualities. The Shima were a branch of the great Takashi family, but declining fortunes had reduced them to earn their way through fishing, trading and, some hinted, piracy. Having fallen far, the family was rising again. They used their profits as merchants to buy and develop tax-free rice land in the Kanto Plain north of Kamakura. As wealthy landowners they produced samurai sons, and hired bands of warriors. Now they were the first family of Kamakura and were marrying into the nobility of Heian Kyo.

Jebu bowed and said, "Initiate Jebu of the Order of Zinja, here at the invitation of Lord Bokuden." He handed over the letter from Tai-taro, which Bokuden unrolled and read with a suspicious frown.

"I suppose that as an ordained Zinja you should be considered a shike. However, since you are not even wellborn enough to have a family name, I shall address you merely as 'monk.' Has your abbot explained this mission to you?"

As Jebu repeated what Taitaro had told him, Bokuden drew a scroll out of a drawer in his Chinese table and unrolled it, revealing a map of Honshu. "This is the season of storms, and the fishermen are turning to piracy. The season's catch was poor. Therefore you will take the

Tokaido Road to Heian Kyo." His fingernail traced the thread of black on the map between Kamakura and Kyo.

Jebu reflected that the trading vessel that had brought him here had

not encountered any pirates. But Bokuden undoubtedly knew more about piracy than he did.

"From here to Miya you will pass through country controlled by the Muratomo. The less attention you attract, the safer my daughter will be. Surrounded as we are by Muratomo, we would need an army to protect her if she were to travel in the state appropriate to her family's station. My hope is that you will slip out of Kamakura and get as far as Miya unnoticed. The whole journey down the Tokaido should take you from ten days to a month."

"I will need a horse."

"You have no horse? Are we expected to supply you with a horse?" "I bring with me no more than what you see, my lord."

"I will supply the horse, and whatever else you need. But if you fail, monk, if anything happens to my daughter, you will die and I will seize all the wealth of your temple."

Jebu pressed his lips together to hold back an angry answer. Like all boors, Bokuden imagined that the Zinja hoarded vast wealth in the dozen temples they had scattered over the islands. But Bokuden was undoubtedly too cowardly to make any move against the Zinja. Surely he knew that those who offended the Order never lived long. In a casual-seeming gesture Jebu touched the Willow Tree patch on his chest. Bokuden looked into his eyes and swallowed.

"Armed monks are a plague on the country," he muttered.

"But they can make themselves useful, my lord," said Jebu. "If anything happens to your daughter, I shall certainly die. Because whoever would harm her must kill me first."

"I hope you live up to your brave words, monk. You will spend twenty

days on the road with my daughter, who will have only two maidservants with her. Even if you are rather odd-looking, you are young, and subject to a young man's passions. What guarantee do I have that my Taniko will arrive in Heian Kyo-" Bokuden hesitated "-intact?"

"You are your own best guarantee of that, Lord Bokuden." Bokuden frowned and pulled nervously at his moustache. "What do you mean?"

"Lord Bokuden would hardly raise a daughter so foolish as to give her virginity to a poor monk on the eve of her wedding to a prince of the Imperial Court."

"You are, perhaps, too clever, monk. Go now. My servant will show you where you may eat and sleep."

Jebu laughed to himself as he followed Bokuden's servant out of the courtyard.

Jebu was awake long before sunrise. He washed in a bucket of cold water and passed an hour in seated meditation in a corner of the yard. He made his mind blank by counting his exhalations up to ten, then starting over again. As the edge of the sun appeared at the top of the bamboo palisade that protected the Shima grounds, Jebu stood up and began his calisthenics, a series of movements from position to position that looked like-and in fact, was-a vigorous, complicated dance. Next he drew his sword and performed his sword drill.

Now he could hear the sounds of the household waking up. An attendant in a grey cloak took him to the stable and showed him the horse Bokuden had chosen for him. Jebu examined it closely. It was a brown stallion with no outstandingly good qualities, a little past his

prime, but with no serious defects either. He was called Hollyhock. Jebu was to return Hollyhock to the Shima town house in Heian Kyo. The selection of Hollyhock as his mount showed typical Shima parsimony, Jebu thought.

Lady Taniko's party was beginning to gather. Two porters loaded large, heavy packs on the backs of two ancient, wheezing mares. Those jades would be lucky if they survived all the way to Heian Kyo. Servants in grey robes led three more horses out of the stable. Jebu went and fetched Hollyhock. He stood beside the brown stallion, holding his reins. The maidservants, wrapped in identical peach travelling cloaks, appeared on the porch of the women's house. They looked at Jebu, whispered together and giggled.

Apparently the plan was for the women to travel on horseback. No self-respecting lady of Heian Kyo would ever ride in anything but an ox-drawn carriage. Of course, no lady of Heian Kyo would ever venture more than a few miles outside the walls of the capital. It was a good thing the Shima ladies, like most samurai women, were able to ride horseback. A carriage could not negotiate the whole Tokaido Road from Kamakura to the capital.

At last the Lady Taniko came out on the porch of the northern building, the women's house, followed by a group of children and a blubbering, middle-aged woman, doubtless her mother. Lord Bokuden emerged with stately pride from the central building and joined his family on the porch of the women's house. All bowed low to him.

Jebu studied the girl he would be escorting half-way across Honshu. She wore a lavender travelling cloak over a dark red trouser skirt. She had a fine, pale complexion, a tiny, rounded nose, a wide mouth and a pointed chin. Her gaze swung round to Jebu, and he felt as if the claws of a cat had raked his face. It was a surprisingly mature,

candid look for a pretty thirteen-year-old girl. There was something ruthless, even cruel, in Taniko's eyes. Her look raised Jebu's hackles and excited him all at once. This baby chick could grow up to be a dragon.

"Is that gangling, ugly monk to be my sole escort?" Her voice was light and slightly metallic.

Bokuden said, "It is well known that one Zinja is the equal of ten samurai."

"If I know my family, it is more likely that ten Zinja are the equal in price of one samurai."

"I would not send you with this monk if I were not sure you were absolutely safe."

"It might serve your purpose better if I were raped and murdered by a gang of bandits on the way to Heian Kyo. Then you would have made the gesture of offering your daughter to the elderly and influential Prince Horigawa and be saved the expense of a wedding."

Jebu chuckled to himself, amused at the way she bore down on the words "elderly" and "influential." By the Willow Tree, the girl was shrewd. She might even be right. Perhaps the two of them were both being thrown to the sharks by this son of pirates.

Bokuden's seamed face was white with anger. "Keep up this disrespect towards your father before his household, and there will be no journey to Heian Kyo and no wedding. You will spend the rest of your life in a convent telling your troubles to the compassionate Buddha."

Taniko fell silent, her cheeks burning red. She has gone as far as she dares go in baiting her contemptible father, Jebu thought. Many

times further than most daughters would have the courage to go. He liked her. She was brave. She was intelligent. She was witty. Indeed, she was destined to be a dragon, quite a beautiful one.

Servants helped Taniko and her maids to mount their geldings. The women rode side-saddle. Jebu in the lead, the three women next, and the two porters on their baggage-laden old horses last, the party clattered out through the gateway. The Shima gate shut on the weeping mother, the impatient father, the cheering children, the waving servants.

The Tokaido passed north of Kamakura, and they rode out of the city in that direction. From here on, five lives were in Jebu's hands. He reminded himself that a Zinja acts for the sake of action and does not concern himself with the outcome of what he does. Whether the party got to the capital or was massacred by Mutatomo hirelings within the next mile should be as one to Jebu. Should be, but in fact he was nervous.

The horses' hooves thudded on the packed dirt street. The smell of fish-fresh fish, cooking fish and rotten fish-pervaded the air of Kamakura. Every so often as they rode out of the city Jebu looked back to see if they were being followed. There was no sign of it. Evidently the third daughter of Lord Shima no Bokuden was not of enough interest in Kanakura to attract even the hint of a threat.

As their road climbed into the hills, Jebu looked back at Kamakura. It was a city dominated by the sea; the heart of the city was clearly the collection of wharves and warehouses at the crescent-shaped water front, and its pulse-beat was the arrival and departure of its big fishing fleet. Ringing the dock area were humble houses of the fisherfolk and those who worked on the wharves. Beyond them were the larger houses of the owners of ships and warehouses and of those who had grown wealthy trafficking in each season's catch. But

at the outermost edge of the city, rising into the hills and far from the docks, were the newly built mansions of the great lords who were moving into Kamakura from the north, great landowners like Lord Bokuden, whose estate, as befitted the first family of Kamakura, was visible from a long distance, the red Takashi banner standing out against the dark green trees growing near it.

Jebu noticed that Taniko was riding beside him. She never glanced back at her childhood home but kept her face resolutely turned forward. Perhaps the long journey ahead frightened her. Jebu turned to her with a smile and said, "Kamakura is as important in this part of the country as Heian Kyo is in the south."

Taniko's piercing black eyes glared at him. "Of what interest is the opinion of a ragged monk of an obscure order who has doubtless never poked his long nose out of the monastery before? Keep to yourself and do not speak to me again. I have troubles enough."

"In my Order we say, he who thinks himself a victim, makes himself a victim. But if you choose to consider yourself a person of many troubles, my lady, I wish you joy in your choice. And I respect your wish to brood over your sorrows in solitude." He spurred Hollyhock up the path ahead.

He felt not the least bit angry; he still liked the girl. In fact, that had been a rather neat touch, the business about his long nose. She was a keen observer; the nose was one of the things he'd inherited from his foreign father. Jebu felt pleased with himself that his Zinja training enabled him to remain calm and cheerful in the face of hostility from others. He hoped Taniko would not fret constantly about her grievances, though. That would be a heavy burden to carry all the way to Heian Kyo.

That night they stopped at the country home of one of Lord

Bokuden's allies. From her baggage Taniko took the pillow she had slept on ever since she was a little girl. Its paint worn, its corners chipped, the wooden headrest gave Taniko a warm, safe feeling, just as a cherished doll or a favourite sleeping robe might give to another girl. In the pillow was a concealed drawer, its edges made to look like ornamental carving. Taniko opened the drawer and took out a notebook, its carved wood covers bound with decorative red and gold string. Also in the drawer were a brush, an ink stick and an ink stone. Using water she had brought with her to the bedchamber in a soup bowl, Taniko began to rub the stick on the stone to make ink.

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

People who cannot think for themselves are in the habit of saying autumn is the most beautiful season of the year. I think it is too sad to be beautiful. I do not, like so many silly young girls, think sad things are beautiful. I see the lines of ducks flying overhead and think to myself that they are deserting us. They fear the coming of the cold that kills. I hear the murmuring of the insects in the woods and think to myself that soon they will all freeze to death.

And for my life, too, the summer is over. I am to become the wife of a man whom I have never seen, but who, I have heard, is old and cruel. Like winter, he will chill me through and through. But this also means I leave the rustic backwater, of Kamakura to live in the city I have always longed to see, the capital, Heian Kyo. To see and walk among the exalted people who rule this Sunrise Land! It has always been my dream to move among the great ones. If I must suffer a misconceived marriage in order to climb above the clouds, I am willing to pay that price.

My father, it seems, is unwilling to pay much to ensure that I travel safely, judging by the strange youth he has hired to protect me. One hears dark tales about this sinister Order of Zinja, that their warriors

are aided by evil spirits and that no one is safe from them. One also hears interesting things about the goings-on between the Zinja monks and their temple women. I wonder if this one has ever been a lover. He is so huge and of such an odd colour. I would be afraid to let him near me. But if he were near me I would be afraid to refuse him whatever he wished. There is something pleasurable in the thought of a man who makes one feel helpless. The Zinja monk's presence makes this journey far more interesting.

-Seventh Month, twenty-third day

YEAR OF THE DRAGON

Chapter Four

The white cone seemed to block out half the sky. Every time Jebu looked at it, he gasped again. He had never seen a mountain of this size. No one had warned him that on this journey he would behold such a marvel.

He had seen it from a distance as they rode into the hills above Kamakura, but then it was small and far off. As they crossed the neck of the Izu Peninsula he began to grasp its size. Its simple symmetry astonished him; the way its snowy peak reflected the colours of the day, from rose to white to gold, brought tears to his eyes. But it was only today, approaching Hara, that he had a full sense of the silent volcano's immensity. Yesterday he had spoken to no one of his feelings about the mountain. Today, as it happened, the Lady Taniko was riding beside him. He overcame his hesitancy and addressed her.

"Please, my lady, what is the name of that magnificent mountain?"

She turned to him slowly, her face a mask of exaggerated surprise and contempt. "You mean you've never heard of Fuji-san? Truly, the Zinja are ignorant as well as poor and miserable."

She lowered her head so that the brim of her circular sedge hat hid her eyes. She pulled her horse's head around abruptly and trotted back down the road towards her maids. The sudden movement startled two cranes in the near-by reeds, and they flapped upwards until they were two tiny silhouettes in the sky above Mount Fuji.

The journey down the coast was slow. No one spoke to Jebu. Taniko and her maids apparently considered him beneath their notice, and the porters were afraid of him. The days were punctuated only by

frequent rainstorms and the necessity of passing innumerable toll barriers. Every so often the road would disappear altogether, and they would have to pick their way along boulder-strewn beaches or through pathless woods.

The baggage included a small tent, which the ladies used for sleeping outdoors and as a shelter in wet weather. Jebu and the two porters took turns standing watch when the party slept out of doors. When possible they stayed at monasteries or at the homes of Lord Bokuden's friends, several of whom had built castles overlooking the Tokaido.

One sunny afternoon, eight days after they set out, they were riding single file along a hillside that rose sheer out of the sea, when the porter leading the way suddenly threw up his hands. He fell from his horse, rolled over and over down the hill, arms and legs flailing, and disappeared with a great splash amid the brown rocks and blue-white breakers. Jebu got a glimpse, as the man fell, of the grey and white feathers of an arrow protruding from his chest.

Jebu clenched his fists and ground his teeth with rage. He had failed. Because he had chosen this particular afternoon to bring up the rear, he had let the porter ride to his death. A life that had been in his keeping was lost. He shut his eyes momentarily and reminded himself that a Zinja is aware at all times of his own perfection, regardless of circumstances. Then, shaking his head angrily, he spurred Hollyhock up the path to put himself between the rest of the party and the attacker.

Blocking the road was a big samurai in box-shaped, many-plated leather armour, mounted on a black roan horse. In one hand he held his longbow-a bow that must have required three men to bend it for stringing. Beside him stood three tsuibushi, each holding the foot soldier's favourite weapon, the long-handled naginata.

Jebu estimated that the samurai was not quite as tall as he was. Bare headed, he wore his greasy hair pulled back tightly and tied in the round black knot of hair by which the samurai identified themselves. His beard was raggedly trimmed. He had the pink eyes and permanent flush of the heavy sake drinker. Jebu recognized the type at once: a rustic bully, too in love with fighting and drinking to settle down to farm work. Doubtless the terror of the neighbourhood when young, enjoying his pick of the girls. One who might easily have become an outlaw but who, through some accident of birth or social connection, was made a local official and could legally prey upon the peasants. Growing more cruel, more dangerous, more unpredictable as he got older and the futility and boredom of his life began to eat at him. At bottom, most samurai were like this man, though some were born to greater wealth, were more competent in the arts of fighting, travelled farther and did better for themselves than others. The samurai saw themselves as noble and redoubtable warriors. The Zinja saw them as destructive, dangerous and stupid, like small boys whose parents have foolishly permitted them to play with knives.

Jebu reined up Hollyhock a short distance from the samurai and his men and said, "You have murdered an unarmed man. You will answer for it to the oryoshi of this district. We will demand justice."

The samurai laughed and struck his leather-armoured chest with a gauntleted fist. "Then you must demand it from me. I'm the oryoshi here. I enforce the law in this place."

The words and the man's bearing made it clear: they would have to fight. Jebu began to compose himself in the Zinja manner. Your armour is your mind. A naked man can utterly demolish a man clad in steel. Rely on nothing but the Self. Here it was, his first combat, the moment towards which his life had pointed for the last seventeen years. The bottom of his stomach felt hollow. Yet, for a Zinja, every

combat was the first, and the first was like every other. So they said in the monastery.

Now he would see. Now he would have to try to kill a man. He had been trained to do it. He knew ten thousand ways to kill. But could he really do it?

He heard hoofbeats on the stony road behind him. Taniko's metallic voice said, "That man you killed was a servant of Lord Shima no Bokuden of Kamakura. You will answer to Lord Bokuden and his allies, oryoshi."

Jebu kept his eyes on the samurai. "Get back, my lady, back behind everyone else."

"I am responsible for my father's servant."

"And I am responsible for you. Back. Now." He admired her courage. It was what he expected, having seen her confront her father.

The samurai smiled broadly. Several of his front teeth were missing; others were yellow. "Your father's name means nothing here, my lady. This is Muratomo territory, and I am their ally. We are the only true warriors in the land, living and dying by the sword. We're not effem inate courtiers like the Takashi. How typically Takashi for your father to send you this way with no more escort than a monk armed with a sewing needle. Armed monks are fit only to clean fish. I'll kick this monk into the sea where he belongs, and then I'll take charge of you, little lady."

Jebu said, "If you force me to fight, one of us will die. Perhaps both of us. Perhaps others, too."

"Either kill him or be killed yourself," Taniko said. "That's what my father hired you for. Don't sit there and argue."

"I'm obliged by the rule of my Order to warn him."

The samurai laughed, threw out his chest and squared his shoulders, his armour creaking and rattling. "Warn me? Warn me? I am Nakane Ikeno, son of Nakane Ikenori, who put down the Abe in the land of Oshu and slew Abe Sadato, their champion. I am the grandson of Nakane Ikezane, who fought against Takashi Masakado, captured him and sent his rebellious head back to Heian Kyo. I am the great-grandson of-"

Jebu, sitting easily in his saddle with his reins loose and his fists on his hips, interrupted. "You are an ape and the son of an ape and the grandson of an ape. As for me, I am nothing. I have no family name. My father was an unknown in the Sunrise Land. I have done nothing. I come from nowhere and I go nowhere." Jebu touched the Zinja emblem on his chest. Ikeno's eyes flickered to the blue and white circle of silk and widened slightly. Jebu went on, "I want nothing and I fear nothing. If you kill me you will have accomplished nothing, and no one will care. Let us pass."

"Am I supposed to be terrified because you're a Zinja, boy? The Zinja are cowards who kill by stealth. And you're a coward, or you'd challenge me like a man. Why should I give way before someone who calls himself nothing?"

"Air is nothing. Yet a windstorm can destroy a city. Stand aside, ape." Even as he spoke, Jebu repeated to himself the sayings that quieted his mind and filled his body with the power of the Self. Rely on nothing under heaven. You will not do the fighting. The Self will do the fighting.

Ikeno bellowed, "You dare call me an ape and insult my ancestors? I'll see you die a shameful death. You will not be burned or buried.

Your body will lie above ground to be eaten by dogs, and your bones will be bleached in the rain and the sun."

"The lickspittles of the Muratomo can kill only unarmed porters." Now Jebu was deliberately goading Ikeno.

Ikeno's long, heavy sword flashed out of its scabbard with a hiss, and he spurred his horse. Jebu remained where he was until Ikeno was upon him. Then, as Ikeno's sword came around, he threw himself flat on Hollyhock's back, hugging the horse's neck, and the samurai sword whistled through the air above him. Jebu heard the screams as Ikeno's horse hurtled on towards the remaining porter and the three women, who all turned their horses and fled from him. Ikeno was far down the narrow path, still waving his sword over his head, before he could stop his horse, turn around and come back for a second try at Jebu.

Jebu glanced at Ikeno's three tsuibushi. They stood open-mouthed and staring, showing no interest in joining the fight.

With a rattle of hooves Ikeno was on him again. Jebu jerked his horse to one side and Ikeno thundered harmlessly past, the sword slashing through empty air. I told you I was nothing, thought Jebu.

Cursing, Ikeno jumped down from his horse and threw the reins to one of the tsuibushi. He ran at Jebu, reaching with leather-gloved hand to pull him down from the saddle. Without any prompting from Jebu, Hollyhock reared back on his hind legs, and Ikeno had to halt his rush and jump back to avoid the flailing front hooves. Jebu felt waves of pleasure rising within him and radiating out to Hollyhock, to Ikeno, to the mountain, to the ocean. They were all part of one stately dance, and time seemed to slow so that he was able to turn his head and look for Taniko. As he expected she was looking at him at the same instant, just as Hollyhock had known exactly when to rear up

and check Ike-no's attack. Taniko's eyes, wide with awe and fascination, looked straight into Jebu's, and he saw what Taitaro meant when he said that the eyes are more beautiful than any jewel. And he knew that the Self was looking at the Self. They both turned away at the same moment and he found himself looking into Ikeno's bloodshot eyes, full of anger and befuddlement. Jebu felt compassion for Ikeno. You do not know who you are, he thought.

He drew the short Zinja sword, which Ikeno had called a sewing needle. It was small indeed, compared to Ikeno's sword. He swung his leg over the saddle and dropped lightly to the ground. Ikeno gripped his sword with both hands, holding it before him in the samurai attack stance, and took a step towards Jebu.

"I'll slice that smile off your face and your head from your body, monk."

Ikeno lifted his great sword over his head to bring it down on Jebu. At that same moment, taking three quick steps towards Ikeno, Jebu drew his own blade back, one-handed, then whipped it around in an arc completed so quickly the sword seemed at one moment to be poised over Jebu's right shoulder and at the very next to be beside the left. Jebu relaxed, dropping his hands to his sides. He knew he had killed Ikeno.

Ikeno stood silent and motionless, the long, gleaming blade raised to shoulder height, still tightly gripped in his gloved hands. The anger in the samurai's face faded, became horror, then agony. The mouth fell open. The eyelids fluttered. The sword fell from the hands with a clang, and the hands dropped limply. The whole body began to lean forward, falling from the feet. A thin ring of bright red appeared around the dirty brown neck.

Then, suddenly, the head separated from the shoulders and fell to the

dirt and stones of the path. Blood fountained up, hissing, from the stump of the neck. The body stood like a pillar for a moment longer, then collapsed with a crash of steel and leather on top of the severed head.

The three tsuibushi dropped their naginatas, screamed and ran. Unhurriedly, Jebu strode back to Hollyhock, took his small bow from its saddle mount, nocked an arrow with a willow leaf head and fired. One of Ikeno's men fell with the arrow between his shoulder blades. Jebu dropped a second man with another willow-leaf arrow. The third man turned at the edge of the pine forest, fell to his knees and raised his hands in supplication.

Jebu took a coil of hempen rope from his saddlebag and strode up the hill to where the trembling man knelt.

"Please don't kill me, shike," the man quavered. He was cross-eyed, and Jebu couldn't hold either eye with his own. What would Taitaro say about these jewels?

"Come over here." Jebu motioned towards a big maple. When he stood under the tree, he cut off a length of rope with his sword and tied the man's hands behind him.

Taniko rode over to them, her horse's hooves thudding softly on the mossy hillside. "What are you going to do to him?"

"Cut his head off."

The man screamed and fell to his knees again. "Oh, no, shike, don't kill poor Moko. I have five children. I meant you no harm. Ikeno made me come with him. Moko's no soldier. He's just a poor carpenter."

"A cross-eyed carpenter?" said Taniko. "I'd like to see what sort of houses you put up."

Moko tried to grin. His two upper front teeth were missing. There was a rare beauty in his ugliness, Jebu thought. In the space of a minute he had gone from thinking of this man as just another enemy tsuibushi to seeing him as a likeable person. I'd really rather not have to kill him at all, Jebu thought.

"I'd surprise you, my lady," Moko said. "I'm a good carpenter. Please ask this great shike to have mercy on me. Compassionate lady, you wouldn't want my six children to starve."

"Do spare him, Jebu. He's harmless."

"Harmless? He'll be back tonight with a gang of cut-throats." Good, she's on Moko's side, too, he thought. I'll let her talk me out of it.

"No, I won't, shike. Lord Nakane Ikeno was the only real fighter around here. That's why he was the oryoshi. He forced the rest of us to follow him. None of us men would go out to fight if he hadn't threatened to kill us. I promise you, nobody will come to avenge Lord Ikeno, may his soul inhabit a nightsoil jar-begging your pardon, compassionate lady."

"Jebu, I'm going to be married. I don't want the memories of my wedding marred by an act of cruelty."

"I thought you considered your marriage to the prince a cruelty in itself," Jebi said dryly.

"You are impertinent, monk. I do not want this man's ghost haunting me."

"Why should he haunt you? You will not do him any harm."

"You are my escort. Therefore I am responsible for what you do."

"I am impressed by your sensitivity, my lady. To spare you any pain, I shall spare this man's life." He turned to the kneeling carpenter. "All right. You may live. But you must transport Lady Taniko's baggage to Heian Kyo, replacing the porter that samurai murdered. If you run away, I'll track you down and kill you."

His hands still bound, Moko threw himself flat on his face at Jebu's feet. "Thank you, shike, thank you. I'll go anywhere you say. To China, if need be."

Taniko said, "What about your five children? Or is it six? Surely they would starve if you went to China."

Moko raised his head and gave Taniko a gap-toothed, cross-eyed grin. "No children, my lady. I'm so ugly no woman would have me. So, no children. A man like me, a mere carpenter of no honour, will say anything to save his life."

Jebu kept his face severe as he cut Moko's hands free with his sword. This man was going to be a blessing from the kami. A man who could be amusing in the face of death was bound to be a better travelling companion than any of the members of the Shima party had so far proved to be.

Thanking Taniko and Jebu many times over, Moko ran off to join the surviving porter and the maids.

"I hope your kindness doesn't bring trouble down on us later on," Jebu said to Taniko.

Jebu was so tall and Taniko so tiny that even though he was on foot and she on horseback, their eyes met almost on a level. She smiled at him for the first time.

"You are a remarkable fighter, Jebu. I've never seen anything like the way you killed that Muratomo lout. When you were fighting him your eyes met mine and I felt something-I cannot describe it. Perhaps some day I will be able to express it in a poem. For now, I want to apologize for my rude words to you. I didn't want you to spoil my new appreciation of you by killing a helpless man."

Jebu was pleased, but he kept up the pose of the stern warrior. "An egg is helpless, but it may hatch a deadly serpent."

"One thing the Zinja taught you well."

"What?"

"How to be a windy bore." She whirled her bay gelding and rode off, calling mockingly over her shoulder, "Shike!"

Chapter Five

Sliding back down the hillside, Jebu stopped at the body of one of the tsuibushi. He rolled it over and studied the young face, tough and stupid-looking even in death. Yet this commonplace countenance had been in life a marvel of intricately co-ordinated parts. The most skilful artist in the world could not create a statue that could duplicate the delicate and complex movements of that mouth, now slack. And the miracle of beauty that had been this country ne'er-do-well was now ended by a single crude blow from a feathered stick with a metal point. That exquisite structure, its movements ceased, was now already beginning to turn back into slime. Jebu squatted beside the body, his hands hanging limply between his knees. I did this.

In his mind he recited the Prayer to a Fallen Enemy. I am heartily sorry for having killed you. I apologize to you a thousand times and ask your forgiveness a hundred thousand times. I declare to all the kami of this place who witnessed our encounter that I alone am to blame for your death, and I take upon myself all the karma stemming from killing you. May your spirit not be angry with me. May you find happiness in your next life and may we meet again as friends.

He said the same prayer to the other tsuibushi and then to the headless, leather-and-steel-clad body of Nakane Ikeno, the first man he had ever killed.

The safest thing to do with the bodies, Jebu decided, was to dump them into the sea. If the waves cast them up on shore again, it might be days or weeks from now, by which time Taniko and he would be far away from this part of the country. And with luck the bodies would be eaten by fish and never seen again.

As if reading his thoughts, Moko came to stand beside him and said,

"I make bold to tell the shike, this oryoshi stood well with the Muratomo. If it became known who killed Ikeno, the shike would have powerful enemies."

"You give me a reason to kill you."

"You already have reasons, and you have decided not to kill me. My life is in your hands at all times."

Jebu led Moko and the porter in prayers over each body. Then they rolled the bodies down the hill and dropped them into the white foam.

Ikeno was the last. The porter protested. "This armour is worth a lot."

"It was worthless to him," said Jebu, even as he admired the pattern of orange silk lacings that lashed together the leather and steel strips of armour. "And it is easily recognized. If we were found carrying Ikeno's armour, it might be embarrassing for us."

"At least keep the sword, shike," said Moko. "A sword is a thing of beauty. It has a soul. The art of a master swordsmith has gone into forging it, and the Fox Spirit has presided over its creation. It would be a shame, a blasphemy, to throw it into the sea to rust."

"You are almost a poet, Moko. Very well, I'll keep the sword." Moko unbelted the scabbard and gingerly picked up the shining weapon that lay where Ikeno had dropped it. Jebu took the sword from Moko and examined it.

A shadowy temper line ran along the blade where the hard steel of the edge met the flexible steel of the core. The swordsmith had worked the temper line into a decorative pattern reminiscent of bamboo leaves. There was writing engraved on the blade as well.

"There is nothing between heaven and earth that man need fear who

carries at his side this magnificent blade."

Jebu shook his head. Foolish. Such words taught the samurai to rely on his sword and throw away his life. Far wiser was the Zinja maxim: rely on nothing under heaven. He handed the sword to Moko. He might send it, he thought, to his mother and Taitaro.

"I'll pack it in the baggage for you and no one will see it till you want it again," said Moko.

And so Ikeno, his armour, his bow and his head, but not his sword, all went into the sea. Jebu slapped Ikeno's black roan on the rump and sent it galloping up the Tokaido Road to the north-east, away from Ikeno's village.

The three men and three women hurried down the coast, riding as rapidly as they could, avoiding houses and villages and hiding in the forest whenever there was a chance of meeting someone on the road. Still not sure whether Moko might betray them, Jebu did not give him a watch to stand, but divided the night between himself and the Shima porter.

The day after the fight with Nakane, they were riding over grassy hills when Taniko drew alongside him.

"The company of those women has become such a trial. They have been my servants all my life, and there is nothing they can say that I have not heard a hundred times before."

"You have mentioned that I, too, can be boring."

"At least you say things I haven't heard before."

Jebu smiled at her. "I sympathize. I've had no one to talk to but myself since we began this journey. And I know myself better than you know

your maids. I find myself even more tiresome company." He and Taniko had warmed towards each other. It was obviously the killing of the samurai that had won her over to him. Well, what of that? Some good must come from every act that harmed someone.

He recalled that moment in the heat of battle when their eyes met. He doubted that he would ever forget it. Today she looked more beautiful than ever, and knowing her better, he now saw that the seeming ruthlessness in her eyes was simply a candid intelligence coupled with a clear certainty about how she felt and what she wanted.

She said, "You are reminding me of my rudeness to you on the first part of this journey. I'll make amends. We'll keep each other company. What bores you in yourself might intrigue me. And you might find me interesting, though I believe myself to be quite ordinary. Just as the bodies of men are of no interest to other men, but are quite fascinating to women."

How bold of her! "I am sure that you are too young and too modest to know anything about the bodies of men, my lady."

"Even so, I can talk to you about such things without fear of seeming foolish. You are young also, and a monk."

"The Zinja take no vow of celibacy." Jebu looked her in the eye. Just because I may not touch her, I need not hide from her that I am a man.

Taniko turned pink. "Oh, I see that I am in great danger. I'd better ride back to the protection of my ladies." Her laughter tinkling in the warm air, she rode off through the high, yellowing grass. He felt such an ache of desire for her that his stomach knotted itself. Was there, perhaps, some way he could manage to lie with her without shaming

her, endangering himself and dishonouring the Order?

Next day, after their midday meal of rice cakes, seaweed and dried fish, she was back again, riding beside him.

"How old are you, Jebu?"

"Seventeen. I was born in the Year of the Pig of the previous cycle."

"And I was born in the Year of the Hare. You are four years older than I. That isn't a great difference. I am old enough to be married, it seems."

"I didn't mean to suggest that there was anything childish about you, my lady."

"Quite right. There is nothing childish about me." The secretive smile and the sidelong look left him in no doubt of what she meant. "And since you Zinja are such lusty men, at what age do you marry?"

"Usually not until we are over thirty. If a Zinja can stay alive until he is thirty, he is considered a safe prospect to take a wife. Monks over thirty are given the less dangerous work to do. They are inducted into one of the inner circles of the Order, the teachers or the abbots." Jebu smiled and met her eyes. "But when I said the Zinja are not celibate, I wasn't talking about the fact that we eventually marry."

Her wide mouth, the lips carefully painted a bright red, parted momentarily, and she turned pink again under the light dusting of white face powder. This one had a real problem with blushing. She gave herself away. Then that hard, intelligent look was back, the look that had surprised him the first day he met her.

"In your case I should think paying for a woman's services-if she were that sort-would be the only way you'd get to lie with her."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you are the ugliest man I've ever seen. You're not deformed, but you are strange-looking. Like a demon mask. Everything is the wrong colour. For instance, your skin is like the belly of a fish."

"The very colour you try to make yourself with your face powder, my lady."

"Yes, but my face powder is beautiful because my skin is not that colour, do you see?" Jebu did not, but let her continue. "Your hair looks as if your head is on fire, and your eyes are the colour of the sky on a rainy day. The whole effect is grotesque and frightening. I've never seen anyone who looks like you. And then, you're so big-you're huge, a monster. If you came anywhere near me, I would run away screaming."

There was a time, a few years ago, when what she said would have hurt him. But Zinja training had taken hold, and he was able to respond with amusement. "All men are the same colour in the dark. And as for my size, some women have found it pleasant."

"You're vulgar, too. There is nothing more repulsive than a lecherous monk. What riff-raff the Zinja must be, if you're any example. I declare, I would sooner make love to Moko the carpenter than to you." It did not escape Jebu that it was she who brought up the subject of love-making.

"Doubtless Moko could construct a tower tall enough to please you."

"You disgust me." She rode away.

A moment later Jebu heard Taniko telling something to the maids,

and all of them broke into peals of laughter.

Riding alone and in silence, he thought about Shima Taniko. Her small face with its mobile, expressive mouth attracted him. She was not really beautiful, but then, all beautiful women looked exactly alike. Hers was the beauty of a crooked tree, of an earthenware teacup, of an oddly shaped cloud. A sudden thought flashed through his mind: might he not possess, for some beholders at least, the same sort of rough, strange beauty? He wondered if this were a genuine Zinja insight.

He thought about the look that passed through Taniko's eyes from time to time, a look that suggested something strong and sharp and flexible as a sword blade. Her position might be that of third daughter in a provincial house, but in her own right her strength and wit might rank her first in the empire. He entertained himself with visions of making love to her. His daydreams became so vivid he could feel her small hands scratching his back, her slim legs twined around his hips.

Moko, drawing up beside him, interrupted his thoughts, which somewhat relieved him because the fantasies had begun to cause distinct discomfort. Moko grinned at him, and Jebu wondered whether the cross-eyed, gap-toothed carpenter could be said to have the same beauty of the non-symmetrical, the natural, the stark that Taniko and perhaps he himself possessed. Once again he was grateful to whatever kami supervised his destiny that he had not killed this man.

"Shike, I wanted to tell you, since we're going to Heian Kyo. I've been there before. I wondered if you have."

"No, Moko. My travels are just beginning. How did you come to visit the capital?"

"My mother's family lives there. It was the custom among her people for a pregnant woman to stay with her parents, so she went there and took me with her when my young sister was about to be born. I do not think she wanted to get pregnant again for a while, so she stayed there for three years."

"What is Heian Kyo like? I'm so anxious to know."

"Very big and very old. But you would think carpenters designed it. The streets are not winding and narrow as they are in other cities. They are straight and cut across each other to form squares, and they are very wide. Some are so wide you could put a whole village in the middle of the street and still have room left over on the other side. A hundred thousand people live within the city's walls."

Moko went on to describe Heian Kyo in detail and to tell Jebu tales of life there. Jebu decided he had guessed right about Moko. The man made a more interesting travelling companion than anyone else in the party. Except, of course, for Taniko.

The next day Taniko was riding beside him again.

"Please don't distress yourself out of kindness to me," he said. "It must be painful to ride next to one as hideous as I am."

She shrugged. "The maids are more boring than you are hideous. Actually, I find your appearance interesting. Tell me how you come to look as you do."

"I am my father's son."

"Well, then, why does your father look like that? Come, come, don't draw things out."

"My father is dead. He was murdered a year after I was born. He was a foreigner. His eyes were green, not grey as mine are." "Who killed him?"

"He was murdered by a tall, red-haired foreigner like himself, who came here to kill him."

Taniko stared at Jebu. "You mean that while I've gone almost mad with boredom for nearly a dozen days as we creep down the Tokaido on this unhappy journey, you could have been regaling me with the mysterious story of your life? You are too cruel!"

"I thought you would find the slaying of the samurai Ikeno entertainment enough." She was the one who was cruel; didn't she realize it was his life, the story of his murdered father, she wanted to be regaled with?

But a Zinja did not own his life. He owned nothing. He passed through this world without leaving a trace. If she wanted his history for her amusement, he would unfold it for her like a paper fan, and when she was through with it, she could throw it away.

"I'm not the kind of person who gets pleasure out of seeing people die," she said. "But a story, that's different. Where did your father come from? Who murdered him? How did you come to be born?" Like a little girl, she jumped up and down on her sidesaddle with eagerness. "Please! Go ahead! Start at once!"

"My father's name was Jamuga. He told my mother that his people came from a desert place far to the west."

"From China?"

"North of China. They were wandering tribesmen, like the Ainu, who live on our northern islands. They raised cattle and fought among

themselves all the time. They were so poor they had no houses, and instead lived in tents made of animal skins. They had no family names."

"No wonder your father came to the Sunrise Land."

"No, he came here against his will, in a way. He was fleeing from something. He came on a trading ship from Korea, and my mother said that he paid for his passage with a jewel worth enough to buy a whole fleet of ships. He carried a dozen jewels like that with him, sewn into his clothing."

"It's a wonder the Koreans didn't kill him and throw him overboard and take the jewels. It is well known that the Koreans have no honour and would not be above doing such things."

"They wouldn't have dared. My father was the sort of warrior who could easily kill a whole ship's crew. He was a huge man, bigger than I am, but swift as the wind and master of every kind of weapon. It was only his honour that required him to pay for the voyage. For a barbarian he was an unusually good man, so my mother says. Anyway, he landed at Mojigaseki and set out for the countryside near by. There he presented himself to one of the local landowners and bought, with another jewel, an estate with horses. With a third jewel he purchased my mother, and the most beautiful woman in the area, to be his wife."

"Where did he get the jewels? You said his people were poor.

"They made war on other, richer people and won. The jewels were my father's share of the loot."

"It is against the law to sell land to a foreigner. And how could any man sell his daughter to such an outlandish creature as your father

must have been?"

"The ink in which the laws are written fades rapidly, the farther one travels from Heian Kyo. And this landowner took the jewel my father gave him for some grazing land too poor to grow rice on, and turned around and bought a huge tract of rice land. That one jewel made him rich. As for my mother's father, he was a poor farmer, and his daughter, pretty as she was, was only another mouth to feed. Now he's the richest rice merchant in the province. A few of the wild young men in the area-some who had courted my mother-resented my father's coming and he had to fight them. He was careful not to kill any of them, which shamed them utterly and forced them to move away from the village. He was a master of the arts of war."

"But someone killed him."

"Someone who was a better fighter than he. I wish I knew who it was. And why."

"You said it was a red-haired foreigner like himself."

"Yes. There was a Zinja monastery, the Waterfowl Temple, in the neighbourhood. As soon as my father moved into the area, he visited the monastery and became friendly with the abbot, Taitaro. He would go frequently to the monastery and spend many hours drinking sake and talking with Abbot Taitaro. One day he heard that a giant Buddhist monk from across the sea was coming up the road from Mojigaseki, asking about a certain Jamuga the Cunning."

"The Cunning?"

"Apparently he was called that by his people because he was more intelligent than most. When my father heard that name, he said that an old enemy had come to claim his life. He took my mother and me

to the monastery and commended us to the protection of Abbot Taitaro. If he were killed that night, we and his land and the remaining jewels were to belong to the Zinja.

"Then my father went back to the farm he'd worked for the past two years. He saddled his best horse, put on a suit of samurai armour he'd had especially built for himself, and took out a bow and arrows and a sword he had brought with him from his faraway desert country. He waited. After nightfall the monk from across the sea came riding up the road. My father went out on horseback to meet him. The stranger threw off his monk's robe. Underneath was a huge warrior wearing a red surcoat over his armour. They shouted at each other in a strange tongue none of the peasants, who were watching from hiding places, understood. They fired arrow after arrow at each other, and when their arrows were all used up, they rode towards each other and slashed at each other with swords. Both were men who preferred to fight on horseback. At last the stranger got past my father's guard and drove his sword into his throat. My father fell, and his enemy cut his head off. He wrapped the head in cloth and put it in his saddlebag."

Jebu stopped speaking, seeing in his mind, as he had many times before, the scene of his father's death. It did not make him sad. It puzzled and fascinated him. He wanted to know everything about who his father really was; it was more important to him than being a Zinja. One day, he would learn everything, even if he had to travel to that desert land across the sea.

At last Taniko said, "Your father must have been a brave man and a great fighter. Did the warrior in red ride away and vanish, then?"

"No. He had asked many questions before he encountered my father, and he knew that Jamuga the Cunning had a son, and the son was at the Waterfowl Temple. He climbed the mountain to the temple

that same night, stood outside the gate and demanded that I be turned over to him. He said it was his mission to execute Jamuga and all of his lineage."

"To kill a baby? How cruel!"

"He didn't know what the Zinja are, and I suspect he must have thought he was dealing with ordinary, harmless monks. Eventually Taitaro got tired of arguing with him and sent three of the brothers out to kill him. He may have been surprised by the attack, but he surprised the Order, too. He killed two of the monks and escaped. Rarely has an ordinary warrior bested a Zinja in combat, and for one warrior to defeat three Zinja is unheard of."

"My father told me one Zinja is the equal of ten samurai. After seeing what you did to Ikeno, I believe it."

"Yes, but this red warrior is not a samurai. I believe that somewhere in the world he still lives and still wants to kill me. Some day I will meet him. I will defeat him. That is one reason why I've given my life to the Zinja training. To prepare myself for him. Before I kill him, I will force him to tell me why it all happened."

Taniko looked at him, her red-painted lips parted in awe. "For a monk, you are quite an exciting person, Jebu." Then she turned pink and wheeled her horse to leave him. Her gelding brushed, seemingly by accident, against Hollyhock, and her small hand, seemingly by accident, stroked the back of Jebu's hand.

Chapter Six

The next morning, when Jebu awoke, he found a pale green paper among the arrows in his quiver. The paper had been folded into a narrow strip and the strip knotted around a small sprig of pine. When he opened the paper he found inscribed on it, in beautiful brushstrokes, a poem:

The red fire consumes the desert pine, But the wings of the young waterfowl Soar above the flames.

In the silence around him Jebu heard a redbird singing and his heart hammering. She had made this beautiful thing for him, for him alone. He rode over to her and looked at her and said nothing. As she watched, he refolded the .poem carefully and put it inside his tunic, against the bare skin of his chest.

They rode side by side that day, sometimes talking casually, much of the time in silence. That night they reached Miya and stayed at the mansion of a Takashi lord. Jebu asked a servant for ink stone, brush and paper, and in his best handwriting wrote a poem the way Taitaro had taught him, going into meditation first, then writing whatever words came, without trying to think and without criticizing afterwards.

The young waterfowl tries to fly

But a snare hidden in the lilac branch Holds him fast.

The paper the servant had given him was violet. He found a fallen maple leaf of a shade that seemed to suit the paper well, and folded his poem around it.

The next morning he slipped the poem into a box of provisions their

host had given Taniko for that day's journey. At Miya the Tokaido was cut off by the sea, and they spent the day travelling by boat to Kuwana, where they could resume the journey by land. From the bow of their boat Jebu watched Taniko walk to the rail, unfold the violet paper and read the poem. Their eyes met and she quickly looked away.

The days that followed felt like a slide down an ever-steepening hill. With each passing moment their party seemed to move more swiftly towards Heian Kyo. The closer they came to the capital, the better the road, the easier the journey, and the more Jebu wished they would never get there.

When he was a child his mother had told him stories of the wonderful city of the Son of Heaven and of the adventures of the lords and ladies of high lineage who lived there. For years he had dreamed of the capital as the centre of all that was noble, wise, ancient, beautiful and rich. To see Heian Kyo had been a lifelong wish. Now it was the last place in the world he wanted to see, because seeing it would mean the end for him and Taniko.

At last they came to the mountains surrounding the Imperial city. That night they would leave the Tokaido and stay at the Zinja Temple of the New Moon on Mount Higashi, overlooking the capital. It was one of the largest Zinja enclaves in the Sacred Islands, housing over four hundred monks. The Imperial officials of Heian Kyo lived in mortal fear of the Zinja monks dwelling on Mount Higashi. More than once the monks had descended into the city to punish some noble who had offended them. The Imperial troops were no match for monks trained in the Zinja arts of combat. Once or twice the Zinja could even have seized control of the capital, but the rule of the Order forbade them to hold political power.

Jebu sensed something wrong as soon as he glimpsed the temple.

Where there should have been stone walls and towers there was a heap of broken rocks. No rooftops were visible above the jumbled stones. Telling the others to wait, he rode on ahead.

"Earthquake," one member of a group of monks seated on the tumbled-down monastery walls told him. "Two nights ago the kami of this mountain shook us as a wild horse shakes off a man who tries to ride him. Then it took the form of a shark and opened its mouth and swallowed us by the hundreds."

"By the hundreds?"

"These brothers you see here are all who are left." The monk raised an admonitory hand. "You look shocked. Do not be. It is not our way to let disaster overwhelm us. We pass through life leaving no trace. This is as true for hundreds as for one. What happened was neither good nor evil. It simply happened. We will move on."

"Will you try to rebuild?"

"Perhaps. We will await word from the Council of Abbots on whether to rebuild or simply to join another community. I am sorry we cannot offer you and your party hospitality, but you will be more comfortable sleeping under the stars. And safer. The god of the mountain may shake us again at any time. There is a lovely shrine to the Emperor Jimmu down the road. There you will be protected by the Emperor's spirit. And there is a view of Heian Kyo. Let me direct you to it."

Their path took them out of the forest and to the edge of a cliff. Suddenly all of Heian Kyo lay spread out before them on the gently sloping plain below. The sun was low over the mountains in the west, and it bathed the city in the golden glow of late afternoon. The dark rooftops of the city and the trees from which they emerged, stretching into the distance, took on a purple colour and seemed to float in a

violet haze.

Jebu recognized the Nine-Fold Enclosure, the grounds of the Imperial palace, from the many descriptions of it he had heard. It was a town in itself. The gigantic Great Hall of State, with its elaborate roof of green glazed tiles, towered over the other buildings. South of the palace enclosure was a spacious park with a large lake, a hill and a thatch-roofed pavilion.

From the centre gate of the palace grounds an avenue as wide as a river, paved with black stone, swept all the way to the southern wall of the city. Other streets running north and south and intersecting with avenues running east and west subdivided the city into many squares, each a park, each dotted with palaces.

The sunlight glinted on two rivers that ran on either side of the city and on canals and reflecting pools shaded by willow trees. The huge black towers of the gates rose massive, complex and ornate at intervals along the low city walls. In and out of the eastern gates flowed endless streams of people on foot and in sedan chairs, litters, ox-drawn carriages and on horseback.

There was very little traffic through the western gates. The half of the city west of the central avenue seemed deserted and overgrown with trees. Only a few buildings scattered here and there poked their rooftops above the greenery.

Moko reined up beside Jebu. "Beautiful," he said. "As always. That great street running south from the palace is Redbird Avenue. It is so wide that a hundred men could march down it abreast. And the gateway at the south end of Redbird Avenue is the Rasho Mon. That's where you find the thieves and beggars and spies. I used to slip away from my mother whenever I could, to go down to the Rasho Mon to talk to the wicked ones. It was haunted by a ghost a long time

ago, you know. A hideous demon that used to make people disappear. But Muratomo no Tsuna cut her arm off with his famous sword, Higekiri, and drove her away."

"Why is the western half of the city so empty?"

"It has been that way for hundreds of years. The ground is soft and swampy and thieves haunt the area, frightening away the good citizens. Everyone prefers to live on the east side of the city. Do we go down there now, shike?"

"No. It's still a long way off. We'd never reach the gates before nightfall. And from what you tell me of demons and thieves, I'd rather not sleep outside the gates. We'll rest here and go down the mountain tomorrow." Jebu dismounted and bowed to the near-by grotto in a grove of pines where a small, worn figure carved in pale stone, Jimmu Tenno, first Emperor of the Sunrise Land and descendant of the sun goddess, stood guard over Heian Kyo. The Emperor was portrayed as a warrior in full armour, wearing .a bowl-shaped helmet and a ferocious expression, and holding a short, broad sword more like a Zinja weapon than the long sword of the samurai.

The chill of autumn was in the night. Wrapped in a heavy robe borrowed from Taniko's baggage, Jebu lay near the cliff edge and watched a full moon rise like a white lantern and touch the rooftops and canals of Heian Kyo with silver light. Poets, he knew, proclaimed the moon of the Eighth Month the most beautiful of the year, but sad and bitter feelings gathered like a dark pool in his chest. Tomorrow he would lose Taniko for ever. Just because he was young and a nobody and Prince Sasaki no Horigawa was a man of rank. He was not a very good Zinja, he told himself. Those monks up the road could take with calm the loss of hundreds of their brothers and the destruction of their monastery. He should be able to forget Taniko

the moment his back was turned on her.

He wondered if he would forget her.

At last he fell asleep.

He woke suddenly and instantly. In the Waterfowl Temple the boys were encouraged by rewards and punishments to steal from one another during the sleeping hours, or to try to catch one another stealing. By the time he was eight Jebu had been trained to awaken the instant he sensed an intruder, but to remain motionless and to continue breathing as if he were asleep. Now he lay, opening his eyes just a slit, all his Zinja-trained senses focused on the person stealthily moving towards him. A small, light person, scarcely disturbing the grass. A rustle of silk, shallow breathing. A flowery scent.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

"Saisho."

"Who is Saisho?"

"My lady Taniko's maid." By this time the woman had crept so close he could feel her breath on his cheek. The moon was high in the sky, but her head and face were shadowed by the hood of a travelling cloak.

"What do you want?"

"My lady Taniko talks of nothing but you. She makes you sound quite interesting, Jebu. Why should she have you all to herself?" Jebu laughed and reached out to stroke a soft cheek.

"Tell me, Jebu, are you as valiant in the flowery combat as you are in

battles with arrows and swords?"

Jebu threw back her hood. The face in the moonlight was Taniko's. "The lilac branch," he whispered.

Sighing, he put his arm around her and they lay for a long time in silence, listening to each other's breathing and gazing down at moonlit Heian Kyo. After a while their bodies began to move, their fingers reaching to touch each other under their garments. Jebu gasped as his fingers grazed her smooth warm skin. He pressed himself against her.

"No. Stop."

"What if I can't stop?"

"You must, or my life is ruined."

"Forget the future. There is only here and now."

"The Zinja are said to be magicians. Can you magically restore the gate of this castle if you batter it down?"

"What if I batter it down even though I can't restore it?"

"Then I will be forced to kill myself. And you will be executed as a rapist. And your Order will pay dearly to my father."

"I will not break through your castle gate. The Order commands me to deliver you safely to Prince Sasaki no Horigawa. The Zinja do not betray their Order."

She giggled. "Is your hair red here, too?"

"Yes."

"Then I am glad I can't see you in the dark." She giggled again and her fingers teased him.

He drew in a sharp breath. "Why do you tempt me?"

"There are other pleasures we can share without your breaking into my castle. You can picnic in the castle garden."

She continued with what she had been doing. The lightning would flash at any moment. It had been so long since he'd lain with a woman. The ground under him seemed to tremble a little. Was it the kami of the mountain, or was it his body?

The lightning flashed. They sighed together.

When he was breathing normally again he said, "You are very good to me."

"I did that for my own protection. Now your battering ram is no threat to my castle gate."

"The threat may arise again in time."

"Until it does," she arched her back and wriggled her hips against him, "you may perhaps enjoy the repast in the garden I spoke of."

The lore preserved and transmitted by the Zinja included more than the arts of combat. Through the study of books from across the sea and with the help of the women who lived with them, each young Zinja became adept in the arts of the bedchamber. The Order treated these arts with the deepest devotion, as vehicles for the achievement of illumination. Even before he was old enough to participate, Jebu had been permitted to observe others in the practice of those arts.

The flesh is holy, Taitaro said. No act of the flesh is base or trivial. To fan the flames of desire is to heighten the power of the mind. To invoke the forces of life is to touch directly the light and wisdom of the Self. Taitaro taught Jebu a ritual and a prayer for his moments with women.

Now Jebo's lips and tongue performed the ritual while his mind recited the prayer. I enact this mystery in honour of the Self. I ask the Self to enter into me with its power. Let the Self enter my body through the body of this woman and fill both of us with light.

Taniko started to cry out, then put her hand over her mouth.

They lay holding each other under the heavy robe, his lips against her neck, looking down at the squares of the city under the full moon.

Jebu whispered to her. He felt that the words were not his, but that some powerful kami spoke through him. "I am yours for the rest of my life and the rest of your life. As I belong to the Order, so I belong to you. Wherever you are, call me, I will come. Whatever you need, command me, I will do it. All things pass, all things die, but this oath which I take on your sacred body will not die."

"Oh, Jebu, whatever words are said to bless my union with Prince Horigawa, those words will be dry and dead as autumn leaves. The lilac branch will always be waiting for the waterfowl."

Jebu felt tears come to his eyes. He pictured years and years to come, a desert of time in which he would wander, separated from Taniko.

He must have fallen asleep. When he awoke again Taniko was gone and the ground was cold. The moon had set, and he could see someone standing near by looking over the edge of the cliff. He

stood up. There was a pink glow in the east, the glow of dawn. But there was a red light nearer at hand that sent a chill down the back of his neck.

Heian Kyo was on fire.

Looking closely, he saw that banners of flame were fluttering above certain scattered palaces while others, though brightly lit, remained untouched. In the dawn's glow and the firelight Jebu could make out figures milling in the streets and around the gates. Screams and faint war cries reached his ears.

Moko came to stand beside him and turned frightened eyes up to him. "Shike, there is war in the streets of the capital. A little while ago I heard sounds that made me uneasy. I got up and looked over the cliff edge. I saw palaces burst into flames, men fighting in the streets. Shall I wake the others? What shall we do?"

"We will do nothing until we know exactly what is happening. Let the others sleep. You and I will watch." Jebu squatted down at the cliff edge. He looked over to the dark, silent shape of the tent Taniko shared with her maids.

By the time the warmth of the sun woke the others, a pall of smoke hung over Heian Kyo. Motionless figures could be seen lying in the broad streets and avenues while riders on horseback raced up and down.

Tears streamed down Taniko's face. "Oh, Jebu, it was so lovely last night, and now it is being destroyed." The sunlight sparkled in her tear-filled eyes. Perhaps the eyes are most beautiful when wet with tears, Jebu thought. He felt his own eyes grow hot and wet, and her face blurred. But he was not weeping for Heian Kyo. Her fingers touched the back of his hand.

"You were beautiful last night," he said, "and you are still beautiful in the sunrise."

She shook her head. "For me the sun is setting."

She turned and walked away to join the two maidservants, who were standing before the statue of Emperor Jimmu in the dark green grove of pines. What Jebu felt, he had no name for. A woman gave you pleasure, and you remembered her fondly. That feeling was pleasant. That feeling was no bigger than a forest pool. What he felt now was pain, a pain that almost made him forget the strange and terrible sight of Heian Kyo's agony. This feeling was an ocean. It seemed, at that moment, that life was over for him, that he was already dead. Taitaro was forever saying that we should live as if already dead. If this was what he meant, he was wrong. This was unbearable.

To ease the pain he forced himself to consider the immediate problem. "Moko, you know Heian Kyo. Go down there and try to find out what has happened. Find the house of Prince Sasaki no Horigawa and make sure all is well with him. See whether it will be safe for us to bring the Lady Taniko into the city. Then meet us here."

The cross-eyed carpenter came back after the midday meal. He shook his head sadly. "The beautiful streets of Heian Kyo have become a battleground for samurai. Such things did not occur when I was a child."

"Tell me exactly what has happened, Moko-san."

Moko waved his hands in distress. "It was all over nothing. A street-corner brawl between Takashi and Muratomo samurai. But hundreds joined in. Then bands of samurai took to attacking people's houses. The Takashi samurai burned the houses of Muratomo families and

killed their servants. The Muratomo did the same thing to the Takashi."

"What of Prince Horigawa?"

"It was hard to find out anything about him, shike. If you ask too many questions, people look upon you as a suspicious person, and suspicious persons don't live long in Heian Kyo today. The Takashi have put a heavy guard around the prince's house, though. He is safe enough."

Jebu recalled that Taniko's family was a branch of the Takashi. "Is Lady Taniko's family in any danger?"

"Shike, everyone who lives in Heian Kyo is in danger today. But the Shima mansion is not among those I heard were burned."

Jebu felt a momentary panic as he realized he was uncertain what to do next. The only thing about this journey he had never questioned was its unchanging destination.

Rely on nothing under heaven.

Now he had to decide whether to take Taniko into a city torn apart by warring samurai or whether to seek uncertain refuge somewhere in these hills. Perhaps he should defy her father and the Order and flee with her in the hope that they might find a life together in hiding somewhere. Just as his father fled his people.

He looked at smouldering Heian Kyo. Whatever he decided might bring swift death to himself and Taniko.

Chapter Seven

Taniko joined Jebu at the edge of the cliff. Looking around quickly to make sure she was not observed, she took his hand and smiled up at him.

"If you are trying to decide what we should do, please let me help. As you know now, I prefer to make up my own mind."

Jebu squeezed her hand with such passion that she winced, but she did not pull away from him. "What is your wish?"

"That we go forward. We will all go together to the nearest gate. You will wait there with the women and me, and you will send Moko and the other porter to my uncle ryuichi. Moko will tell my uncle to send a carriage for me, so I can enter the capital in proper style. It is too bad that Moko has to make two trips into the city, but if you had asked me the first time you sent him, this is what I would have told you."

They descended from the mountain and returned to the Tokaido. This close to the capital, it was a broad, well-travelled highway. Here on the city's east side, buildings had spread beyond the walls. Temples, mansions and humbler dwellings encroached on the rice land surrounding the capital.

The party passed a park surrounded by a stone wall twice the height of a man. Within it stood three fortified towers, taller than any buildings Jebu had ever seen. Red banners flew just below the protective dolphin sculptures on the peaked roofs of the towers.

"That is the headquarters of the Takashi clan," said Moko. "It is called the Rokuhara. Sogamori lives there with his sons and thousands of samurai. They have added many buildings since I saw

it last."

Now they rode over a long wooden span, which Moko called the Gojo Bridge, arching over the Kamo River. The bridge and the gateway to which it led were a continuation of Gojo Avenue, one of the ten principal east-west thoroughfares of Heian Kyo.

As they approached the city's walls, Jebu saw that many of the large stones had fallen out of the pounded earth core of the ramparts which, unprotected, were eroding. He remembered what Taitaro had said about Heian Kyo's having seen better days.

Sending Moko on through the Gojo gate, Taniko and Jebu and their party settled down in a field outside the city wall. Jebu stood guard atop a large stone, his back resolutely turned to Taniko. There was nothing more that could be said between them. Anguish lay like a crushing weight on his chest.

The sun had nearly set when Moko returned leading a handsome ox-drawn carriage, its roof thatched with palm leaves. Five samurai walked beside it. Clearly her Uncle Ryuichi was not as miserly as Taniko's father.

Taniko and her two maids rode in the carriage. The samurai kept their hands on their sword hilts, their eyes darting warily from side to side.

Moko walked solemnly beside Jebu, pulling his wheezing, baggage-laden horse. He had promised Jebu and Taniko that he would remain with her as part of her household.

"I will be the link between you," he said.

At the Gojo gate the party identified themselves to a lieutenant of the Imperial police, a nervous, pale man carrying an ivory baton. He

looked incapable of dealing with so much as a band of mischievous boys. Smiling politely at the Shima family samurai, the police officer waved the party through.

"It's a wonder that man was at his post at all," said Taniko's silvery voice through the orange-tinted blinds of her carriage.

To ease the pain of the imminent parting from Taniko, Jebu focused his attention on the sights and sounds of the capital. He had never seen so many people in his life; crowds filled the wide avenue like a river about to overflow its banks. People on foot dodged samurai on horseback and ox-carts piled high with bales and boxes. Every so often handsomely dressed men carrying small sticks would push through the throngs shouting, "Make way!" and then, slowly, an ox-drawn carriage, like the one Taniko was riding in or even grander, would roll through the cleared pathway. People would bow or peer curiously into the carriage, trying to see the great lord or lady within; usually the passenger's silhouette was visible through the screened sides. Frequently these passengers would let the long sleeves of their many-layered costumes trail out through the rear doorways. Jebu heard knowledgeable comments from the crowd, not only identifying the carriage riders but commenting critically on their choice and matching of colours. The people of Heian Kyo talked much and rapidly, seemed to run rather than walk, and often talked and ran at the same time.

Gojo Avenue was lined with willows, the leaves on their trailing branches turning to autumn gold. The mansions along the avenue were surrounded by low walls of white stone, a token hindrance to intruders. But, a sign of troubled times, many of the mansions had new, high bamboo palisades built around them. Others looked abandoned, as if their owners had sought safer places to live. Each estate consisted of numerous one-storey buildings connected by covered corridors and surrounded by gravelled courtyards and

landscaped gardens.

Twice they passed mansions that had been burned during the night. The grounds of one were completely deserted. Nothing was left but smouldering ruins. Burnt trees stood like black poles.

The second burnt mansion was surrounded by samurai, who greeted Taniko's escort familiarly. Servants combed through the ashes for valuables and loaded whatever they could find in an ox-cart.

"That was the home of a noble who supports the Takashi," one of the samurai with Jebu explained. "The Muratomo dogs burned it. Tonight we will burn some Muratomo mansions."

Stupid, thought Jebu. People spent years of their lives building these homes and the beautiful things that went into them. Centuries had gone into the making of this lovely city. All to be destroyed in one night by some idiot with a torch. What prize could be worth such a loss?

Taniko's uncle, Ryuichi, stood on the veranda of the main house of the Shima family's Heian Kyo residence, waiting to greet his niece. He resembled his older brother, Bokuden, but was stouter in body and rounder in face, as if life in the capital had softened him. The look he gave Taniko as she stepped down from her carriage was kindly. His manner reassured Jebu as he prepared himself to leave her.

Covering her face modestly with her fan, Taniko said, "Uncle, this Zinja monk single-handedly killed a band of three samurai who were threatening to kidnap me. He faithfully escorted me all the way from Kamakura and brought me safe to your door. I hope you will reward him appropriately."

"How awful that my lovely niece should have been in such danger," Ryuichi exclaimed. "With respect to my elder brother, I knew the Tokaido was dangerous and I believed you should have had a large escort of samurai. But, thanks to the prowess of this monk, you are safe. I will speak to him in a moment. Taniko-san, it is not proper for you to display yourself in the open air before a group of men, even when the occasion is important. You must learn the manners of the capital, my child. Come into our house. Your aunt, Chogao-san, will make you welcome and comfortable."

Without a backward look at Jebu, Taniko was gone. Ryuichi followed her. Jebu turned towards the street. He did not dare look after Taniko. What was between them must remain secret for ever. He felt a hand on his arm. It was Moko. Jebu looked into the crossed eyes and found them bright with tears.

A moment later Ryuichi returned to the veranda. "You have done well, shike. You have earned the gratitude of the Shima family. How may we reward you?"

Jebu could imagine Lord Bokuden's rage if he knew his brother was offering a reward. "The Order has been paid for my services, my lord. I may not accept a reward for myself."

"Nothing at all?"

Then Jebu remembered. "There is one thing. I took a sword from a samurai I had to kill, protecting Lady Taniko. It is in her baggage. I would like to keep it as-as a memento of the journey."

Beaming, Ryuichi clapped him on the shoulder. "Of course. And you shall have that horse as well. You may turn it over to your Order if you wish, but at least you won't leave here on foot."

Smiling to himself at the thought of Lord Bokuden's annoyance, Jebu accepted.

A row of white stones, intended to represent the Shima trading fleet, crossed the centre of the pond in the mansion garden. Jebu sat cross-legged looking at the women's pavilion on the north side of the garden. The pavilion stood on pilings half the height of a man that kept it well off the slightly damp ground. Taniko was in there, probably being prepared for her first encounter with Prince Horigawa.

Silently Moko stepped down from the veranda of the women's building, bringing the sword and scabbard. They bowed to each other as Jebu took the sword, and Moko turned away, wiping his eyes.

At the eastern gateway of the mansion a servant was holding Hollyhock for Jebu. He opened his travelling case to pack the samurai sword. Under the lid of the case there was a piece of folded, red-tinted paper. Jebu's heartbeat speeded up. He opened the paper and read the poem in Taniko's hand.

The autumn leaves fall,

But the pine tree's green lives on.

In a spasm of anguish Jebu's hand crushed the poem. He wanted neither poems nor pine trees. He wanted the living woman behind the Shima walls.

He smoothed out the poem, folded it again and tucked it into his tunic. He mounted Hollyhock, sadness weighing down his shoulders. He waved to Moko, who had followed him to the gate.

Slowly, feeling that he was riding away from life itself, he rode out of

Heian Kyo.

Chapter Eight

Prince Sasaki no Horigawa made his first courtship visit to Taniko the very night of her arrival in Heian Kyo. Taniko's Aunt Chogao warned her to expect him and helped her bathe and dress in her finest gown and jewels. She washed and combed the softly glowing black hair that hung to Taniko's waist. All the while Taniko protested, trying not to cry and feeling as ill from the loss of Jebu as if one of her hands had been chopped off.

"I have been travelling for twenty days. I'm worn out. Can't he give me one night to rest before he sees me?"

Aunt Chogao shrugged. "He told your uncle that he is extremely busy with matters of state. He is an Imperial adviser, don't forget. Besides, he has waited a long time to meet you. You are lucky to have such an eager lover."

Taniko made a face. Her aunt added, "Of course, he is lucky to get such a beautiful young woman. When he sees you, I'm sure he'll be even more eager."

How will I ever get through this? Taniko wondered. I was sickened before at the thought of spending the rest of my life with the old bloodsucker. But before I met Jebu, I never knew the kind of beauty that could exist between a man and a woman. Now that I do know, how can I give my life to something that is so much less?

For hours after she had dressed, Taniko, her aunt and the two maids waited for Horigawa's visit. Taniko insisted on writing in her pillow book, despite her aunt's protest that she might get ink stains on her fingers or her Chinese jacket. Taniko declared that she had never splashed ink on anything in her life. She offered to stop writing if her

aunt would bring her a book to read, but the few books in the mansion, it seemed, were in Ryuichi's quarters, and her uncle was not to be disturbed. So Taniko wrote by candlelight.

At last there was a commotion in the garden. Chogao scurried to the blinds and peered out. "It's him. It's him," she whispered and waved the maids out of the room. She set a tall screen of state with flowered curtains in front of Taniko. For centuries it had been the custom at the capital for women of noble birth to remain concealed at all times from men other than their husbands or fathers. They received gentleman callers from behind portable screens of state. So significant a barrier was the screen of state that a man who got past it usually had no further difficulty in gaining his desire with the lady behind the screen.

Chogao snatched the pillow book out of Taniko's hand and shoved it into the pillow drawer, seized the ink stone, ink stick and brush, and hurried out of the room.

"Pretend to be asleep," came her voice through the sliding door.

There was a scratching outside on the veranda, and suddenly the blinds were raised and a short man with a powder-whitened face stepped into the room. His eyes stood out like two shiny black beans. He ducked his head to keep his tall black lacquered hat of office from being knocked askew.

Ignoring her aunt's advice about feigning sleep, Taniko peered through the screen of state at her future husband. Prince Horigawa's face was small and square, reminding Taniko of a grasshopper's head. A wisp of black beard decorated his bony chin. He fanned himself briskly with a black and white fan, as if climbing into the room had been a great exertion.

"Are you back there?" he said, directing his dry, raspy voice at the screen of state. Yet he spoke only slightly above a whisper. Not very gallant language for a prince come courting, Taniko thought. The sight of him made her heart sink. He was as unattractive as she had imagined. In his beady eyes there was nothing but nastiness and calculation.

"I am here, Your Highness," she said softly.

"Ah, very good, my dear. Let me join you behind your screen, where I can see you and make myself more comfortable." Without waiting for her reply, he skipped around the screen, seating himself beside her and seizing her hand. She had to restrain herself from pulling free of his clawlike grip. Had her aunt left them alone together? Taniko wondered.

The prince patted her hand. "Do not be frightened by my impetuosity, my dear," he whispered and grinned. At first it seemed to her that he was toothless, then she saw that his teeth had been dyed black in the Court manner. His grin faded as, still holding her hand tightly, he stared at her. Starting with her face and hair, his eyes travelled over her jacket and her many layers of skirts and dresses. He pursed his lips as he considered her selection of ornaments and her matching of colours.

"You appear to be as satisfactory as the matchmaker claimed," he said. He gestured at a jar of sake Taniko's aunt had left standing over a charcoal warmer, with two cups carefully placed on either side of it. Taniko poured sake, first for him, then for herself. Perhaps sake would help.

His cold fingertips scratched the nape of her neck. She could not help herself. She shuddered.

"The trapped bird trembles," he murmured. He drew a deep breath and threw himself upon her.

Taniko gave a little shriek as he clawed at her jacket, his face reddening. He seemed almost frantic as he plunged his hands under her skirts, trying to undo his gold-splashed black robe at the same time. Taniko had seen sparrows mating, and this flurried, furious assault reminded her of that.

"Your Highness," she gasped, out of breath. "This haste is inelegant." Recalling one of her mother's bedchamber books she added, "Permit me to unfold the pleasures of my body to you in more leisurely fashion, I beg you. To an inexperienced maiden, the charms of so handsome and distinguished a lord are irresistible, but do not press me so quickly."

"Your notion of the arts of the bedchamber are countrified," Horigawa panted. Inexorably he peeled away the layers of her clothing. In the flickering candlelight she caught a glimpse of his aroused body. It sickened her. She squeezed her eyes shut.

She reminded herself that she should not resist him. Custom demanded that she let the prince have his way. Keeping her eyes shut, she tried to relax. She remembered how, during their night together, Jebu had told her many things about the Zinja and the arts they practised. He said they could take their minds out of their bodies and go on long mental journeys, leaving their physical selves behind. She made herself think of the great white mountain, Fuji-san, that she had passed with Jebu at the beginning of their journey from Kamakura. This ugly little prince had doubtless never seen Mount Fuji.

He was hurting her. He had no consideration for her feelings, no tenderness for her virginity. From his grunting and his hard, sharp

movements she sensed that he was aware only of his own need for relief.

There was a searing pain. She gritted her teeth, but she could not stop herself from screaming aloud. It felt as though she had been stabbed in the bowels with a samurai dagger.

Horigawa opened his eyes and grinned at her, showing his blackened teeth again. "Your scream gives me pleasure," he whispered. He threw back his head, the cords in his scrawny neck stood out and his body convulsed momentarily. Then panting heavily, he stopped moving. He pressed his brow, covered with cold sweat, against her cheek, then pulled away from her. She felt wet and soiled. She pulled her skirts down to cover herself. Would she have to spend the rest of the night with this man?

And there was worse. She was expected to spend the rest of her life with him. There would be countless nights like this one. Despair overwhelmed her, and she wanted to cry, but with the little man still lying beside her, duty to her family forbade any show of her real feelings.

"That was very pleasant, my dear," Horigawa said with a small, false smile. "It has been some time since I have lain with a woman. I have simply been too busy. My work at the Court, in these difficult times, has allowed me no leisure. But it is not healthy for a man to abstain for too long. It puts the forces of yin and yang out of balance in the male body. You have made it possible for me to return to my work with renewed vigour."

Taniko felt a flicker of curiosity. "I am pleased to have been of help to you, Your Highness. Your work must, indeed, be very demanding." She added what good manners required her to say. "I cannot imagine that such a vigorous man would wish to abstain for very

long."

"Quite right," said Horigawa smugly. He began to draw his dark robes together. "And for that reason I came to you tonight, even though, as you say, my work is very demanding. Although it pains me not to spend the night with you, I must leave you now."

"Will the streets be safe for you tonight, Your Highness? I saw the fighting last night and the burning of houses, and I was frightened." Actually, she had not been that frightened, but she hoped Horigawa would shed some light on what was happening in the capital.

"I appreciate your concern, my dear, but I am quite safe. My friend Sogamori, the Minister of the Left, has provided me with a samurai guard, both for my house and for my person when I go abroad. These disturbances are the work of rebellious elements who refuse to yield to the will of the Emperor. But they will soon be crushed, and you will have no further need for fear."

Taniko knew how meaningless was Horigawa's accusation that his opponents were rebels against the Emperor. All sides in any major political dispute claimed to be doing the will of the Emperor and charged their enemies with treason. Actually the Emperor had no power of his own, and his will was the will of whichever faction controlled him at the moment.

"These rebels, Your Highness, are they the Muratomo?" Taniko asked. "You must forgive my country ignorance, but I do not know."

"Women are not expected to know anything, my dear," said Horigawa.

Taniko resisted an urge to throw her candle at him. Instead she said, "But I find you so fascinating, Your Highness, that I cannot help but be

interested in the world in which you move." The fact was that it was only his connection with high places and great political matters that made the thought of marriage to him at all bearable.

"Very nicely put," said Horigawa, rising to his feet. "On future visits I shall explain as much of matters of state as your female intelligence seems capable of grasping. Meanwhile, be assured that we are doing everything necessary to maintain the safety of the realm. More blood will have to be shed. We must deal mercilessly with rebels. We must be as fierce as were our ancestors of old Yamato. Many, many heads will fall."

A chill went through Taniko. She sensed that this pompous creature's feeble frame harboured a thirst for blood almost unnatural in its intensity. As a daughter of samurai she had known many professional fighting men, and none of them had spoken as lovingly of mass slaughter as did this scholarly government official.

She placed her hands on the floor and bowed. "It is an honour to be courted by a man of such greatness."

Tying his tall black hat under his chin, Horigawa turned and let Taniko raise the blinds for him so he could step out on the veranda and thence into the Shima garden, thus preserving the ritual secrecy of his visit.

When he was gone, Taniko turned to find her aunt was already back in the room with towels and a pot of hot water. Taniko sank to her knees and put her face in her hands. Her body shook with racking sobs. Aunt Chogao knelt beside her and put her arms around her.

"Was it that bad for you, my dear?"

"Aunt, I can't go through with it. I can't."

Chogao patted her shoulder. "You have to. Your father commands it. Your family needs this marriage." She stroked Taniko's hair. "I know it's hard. What you have to do is harder than anything I've had to do. I was married to a man with whom it is very easy for me to live. But you, because you must do the more difficult thing, will be the nobler person."

"I can't. I don't want to."

Chogao moved so that she was facing Taniko, her normally cheerful features suffused by burning seriousness. "You are samurai. What you feel does not matter. If you were a man, you would go to war and die. It would not matter that you were terrified of death, that you wanted to live. It would be your duty to your family. Do not women have as much courage as men? We give our lives, too, by marrying as we are required and bearing the children that are needed. Didn't your mother teach you these things?"

"Yes," said Taniko in a small voice.

"Then never forget them. If you do not live your life as a samurai, it is not worth living. Now lie back, my dear, and let me wash you. That miserable man. He should have spent the whole night with you and left at dawn. What sort of lover does he think he is? Oh, well, I suppose, considering his age and all the work he does, that's the most you can expect. He certainly doesn't have much fire left over for women, does he?"

Closing her eyes, grateful that Horigawa had left her as quickly as he did, Taniko said, "I want nothing more from him."

"Good, my dear. Be content with your lot. That, too, is the way of a true samurai."

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

My future husband's next-morning letter was cliched and perfunctory, and his love poem was copied straight out of the Kokinshu. The prince must think we have no books in Kamakura. Even my aunt, who keeps trying to persuade me to accept this marriage, made a sour face when she read his effort. But the letter and the poem mean he intend to continue courting me, and that is what the family wants.

In the bleakness of these days my greatest pleasure is my conversations with Moko. I have convinced my aunt and uncle that Moko is an expert carpenter whom I brought with me from Kamakura at my father's suggestion. My father will never know the difference. Fortunately, there are plenty of repairs needed around this house, and every day, pretending to give Moko instructions, I learn the news he has picked up in the street.

Samurai crowd the streets of Heian Kyo, swaggering about with their long swords. They accost people and demand to know if one is a supporter of the Takashi or the Muratomo. Such encounters lead to blows and sometimes to bloodshed, though both the Takashi clan chieftain, Sogamori, and the Muratomo clan chieftain, Domei, claim to deplore all disorder. There has not been any rioting as bad as that of the night I arrived here.

It was as though the riot in my soul that night was reflected in the streets of the city.

There was a full moon, too. That may have had something to do with it.

Moko reports that Domei has been heard to repeat the old Confucian saying, "A warrior may not remain under the same heaven with the slayer of his father." Since Prince Horigawa appears to be

chief among those responsible for the execution of Domei's father, it is possible that I may find myself a widow soon after I am married.

The grounds of the Imperial palace are kept bare, but in winter certain herbs flourish in concealment under the snow.

-Eighth Month, twenty-first day

YEAR OF THE DRAGON

Ten days after Taniko's first night with the prince, her aunt warned her to be ready for his second-night visit.

It was all she could do to restrain herself from laughing as the spidery little man carried out the ritual pretence of slipping into her bedchamber. The blinds knocked his tall hat off his head, leaving it dangling from his neck.

But there was nothing laughable in the way he fell upon her, first blowing out the candle to thwart spying members of the Shima family. This night his lust was tainted with cruelty. Taniko discovered that there is a kind of man who is aroused by inflicting pain on others. None of the small torments to which Horigawa subjected her left any mark, but she was frightened and revolted. He must know, she thought, that my family will insist on my marrying him. Otherwise he wouldn't treat me this way.

After he had worn himself out on her body, Horigawa ordered her to relight the candle so he could dress himself. Embarrassed by the ugliness to which she had just submitted, Taniko kept her face turned away as the room filled with yellow light and flickering shadow.

Horigawa laughed and said, " 'She lifts the lute, and I can see but half her face.' " He spoke in Chinese.

Recognizing the poem, Taniko replied in the same language. " 'The music stops, but the player will not speak her name.' " The line seemed a subtle way to express the shame she felt at what she had undergone. Like the woman in Po Chu-i's poem, she felt she had known better days and had now sunk to a low status.

But Horigawa reacted, not to her line of verse, but to the language in which it was uttered. "Do you know Chinese?"

Taniko answered him in that language. "Our family is involved in trade. My father has seen to it that all his children are educated in the skills that are useful in commerce. Knowledge, he says, can be wealth."

Horigawa pulled his robe around his spindly limbs. "Who would have thought that a child-woman from the provinces would possess such a valuable skill?" He was still speaking Chinese. "Mine is a family of princes and scholars, and Chinese has been our other language for centuries. Do you read and write it as well?"

"Better than I speak it." Actually, she surprised herself by being able to carry on the conversation.

"Excellent. When you are my wife you will serve me as secretary. The trade with China is a great source of wealth for the Takashi, and with my own knowledge of things Chinese, I humbly endeavour to help them. As Lord Sogamori's authority continues to grow, we shall see a re-opening of closer relations with China, which our rulers have long neglected, to our cost. The communications I undertake with China are delicate and require secrecy. It is difficult to acquire servants who have the necessary education and are also trustworthy. You will be very useful to me."

"Thank you, Your Highness," said Taniko, trying not to grind her

teeth.

The thought that Horigawa was already planning her future appalled her. She tried to remind herself that many of the women in the Sunrise Land had husbands as repulsive, or worse. It did no good.

As before, Horigawa excused himself from spending the night with her, citing the pressure of his world in the service of the nation. After he was gone, Taniko sat in the dark, crying softly. To refuse the marriage her family had decreed for her was unthinkable. But the prospect of a lifetime tied to Horigawa filled her with such despair and dread that she was almost ready to kill herself to avoid going through with it.

Almost, but not quite. Even in her anguish she felt a deep certainty that she wanted to go on living. And she was as strong as Horigawa; in time she could put a stop to his horrid little practises. He was more than forty years older than she; he could only grow feebler and easier to manage with the passage of time. And in the fullness of time she would be rid of him. She had only to endure; to do her duty as a samurai, as Aunt Chogao put it.

The prospect of working on Horigawa's Chinese correspondence was fascinating. The little she knew about China was information over a hundred years old that had been taught to her and her sisters by monks. How wonderful it would be to learn what was happening to China now.

Five nights later a messenger came from Prince Horigawa, and Ryuichi ordered the third-night rice cakes placed in Taniko's bedchamber. After sunset the prince's ox-drawn state carriage drew up before the western gateway of the Shima mansions without even a pretence of secrecy, and the prince, wearing his usual tall black hat and a scarlet and white cloak, more festive looking than the black

and gold one he had worn previously, strode through the lamplit gate, while the Shima family peered at him through screens and blinds.

His performance with Taniko was as brief as at their first encounter. This time, though, he bit her breast at his moment of supreme pleasure. This left teeth marks, which he looked at with satisfaction afterwards.

As was expected of her, Taniko paid him a pretty compliment on his manly strength. Inwardly, she was quaking. They were now committed. She was bound to him. It was his third-night visit, with the ceremonial eating of rice cakes, which actually sealed their marriage. It was all over, and now that it was done she could see no future for herself. She felt a sensation of sinking into a bottomless black pool. She had done her duty as a samurai woman, yes, but might duty not be easier for a man, who died only once and quickly, than for a woman who had to die a little bit each day for years and years?

Horigawa nodded in acceptance of her compliment. "You are fortunate to have a well-born man of the capital as a husband. Think how miserable you would have been in the arms of some rough country man smelling of the rice paddies."

Remembering Horigawa's role in the executions of four years ago and his talk about massive bloodshed, Taniko thought, I would prefer the smell of the rice paddies to the stink of the execution ground.

Horigawa reached into the sleeve of his robe and drew out a scroll. "This is a report I received from a monk in China. I intend to present it to Lord Sogamori. You will translate it into your language and write it out in your best hand. I trust your handwriting is acceptable?"

"My handwriting has been praised," said Taniko, "but it is, of course,

only the poor effort of a girl raised in a rustic fishing village."

The sarcasm escaped Horigawa. "Lord Sogamori is a man of some discernment, even though he is merely the chieftain of a samurai family. You must be sure to form your characters as beautifully as you can."

Taniko put the scroll in the drawer of her wooden pillow. She could hardly wait for some time to herself, to read the letter from China.

Horigawa ate the ritual rice cakes with her, honouring Izanami and Izanagi, progenitors of all the kami and creators of heaven and earth. She almost wished her own cake were saturated with poison. Then Horigawa removed his hat of office and lay down, resting his head on the wooden pillow she had placed beside her own. With a wave of his hand, he indicated that she was to blow out the candle.

They slept in the same clothing they had worn all day, as was usual. Side by side they lay in the dark on quilted futons. Horigawa was a restless sleeper who mumbled and moaned as if bad dreams troubled him all through the night. Bad dreams might portend future disasters for Horigawa. The possibility pleased her, because her only hope was that he might not live long. Perhaps he was haunted by the ghosts of those whose executions he'd demanded.

Taniko lay awake most of the night. As she had tried to do on her first night with Horigawa, she sent her mind on a journey-this time to Mount Higashi and the night she had spent there with Jebu.

In the morning the Shima family, led by Uncle Ryuichi, Aunt Chogao and their eldest son, five-year-old Munetoki, burst in on them with the expected cries of joy and congratulations. Having spent three nights together and partaken of the sacred rice cakes they were now officially married. However, Taniko would remain in the Shima

household, as was the custom among people of their class, and Horigawa would visit her as often as he chose to bestow his princely favours. Taniko hoped lust would provoke him infrequently. She would go to his house when needed there for ceremonial and social occasions.

Taniko's uncle and aunt each picked up one of Horigawa's shoes. By taking the shoes to bed with them that night, they would try to ensure that Horigawa would never leave Taniko. Each sign that the world wanted this marriage to be permanent made Taniko's heart sink a little lower.

Horigawa imperiously handed Ryuichi a scroll. "This is a list of the guests I wish you to invite to the wedding feast. You will hold the feast on the thirteenth day of the Ninth Month, four days after the Chrysanthemum Festival. My diviners tell me that will be the last auspicious day for quite some time." He took another scroll from his sleeve. "I have also included a set of instructions on how the feast is to be conducted. It is essential that every detail be both correct and fashionable. I prefer not to rely on the judgment of a provincial family in such matters."

After Horigawa was gone, Ryuichi raged and wept. He was furious at the prince's contempt for his family, and appalled at the cost of the wedding feast, which, he claimed, would wipe out the family fortune if he followed Horigawa's instructions.

"Why did you have to marry that leech?" Ryuichi howled at Taniko.

Taniko bowed to hide her amusement. "Forgive me, Uncle. I regret that he causes you such pain. My father commanded me to marry him for reasons that seemed wise to him."

Ryuichi subsided. "We expect the marriage to do us good. But if my

esteemed older brother had only let me arrange a match for you, instead of doing it by himself from such a great distance-" He smiled suddenly. "You, also, might have been happier with the result. You're a good daughter, Taniko, to put up with marriage to such a repulsive person."

"I intend to do more than put up with it, Uncle. I have always wanted to live in the capital and be part of the doings at the Court. I have never wanted the lot of an ordinary woman. If Horigawa is the price I have to pay to live here, I accept that price. Perhaps I will do well for myself despite the match my father made."

Her little cousin Munetoki stared at her, his eyes shining with admiration.

Chapter Nine

On the day of the wedding feast some of the best-known names in Heian Kyo came to see the mating of a major councillor of the Fourth Rank to the daughter of an unknown, but reputedly wealthy, family of the provinces. Taniko had studied the guest list carefully. As the presiding priest, the abbot of the huge Buddhist monastery on nearby Mount Hiei intoned blessings and purifications, and the guests clapped their hands ritually. Whenever she dared, Taniko glanced here and there among those present, trying to match faces and costumes with the names she knew.

Many members of the Sasaki family and their principal wives had come to sit behind Horigawa to represent the clan. And another old and powerful family was there in large numbers-the Fujiwara. While they were not Emperors themselves, the Fujiwara had held supreme power in the capital until recent times. So many Fujiwara daughters had married Emperors that, among those who dared to be irreverent, the Imperial house itself was sometimes described as a branch of the Fujiwara.

In recent times, though they still enjoyed great prestige, the real power of the Fujiwara had declined. Their strength lay in courtly intrigue rather than force. But these days, with the rise of the samurai families, force counted for more.

Among those supplanting the Fujiwara in national importance were the Takashi, also heavily represented at this wedding feast. They sat in the front row of guests facing the abbot and the altar. Sogamori, chieftain of the Takashi clan and Minister of the Left, was a round-faced man whose partially shaven head was hidden under his black hat of office. He wore a red cloak embroidered with gold and lined with white satin. He looked as florid and petulant as Taniko had

expected, given his reputation for bad temper.

The man in a similar scarlet robe beside Sogamori must be Kiyosi, his eldest son. Taniko's heart beat a little faster when she saw him. There was a family resemblance to Sogamori, but Kiyosi was lean, vigorous-looking, and square of jaw. Oh, to marry a young man like that, instead of a spider like Horigawa. Such a young man, she thought, might almost help me forget Jebu for a time.

Kiyosi sat proudly upright as befitted a military man of noble rank. Yet there was kindness and intelligence in his face as well. She suspected that, like Jebu, Kiyosi could be frighteningly violent, gently compassionate or overwhelmingly ardent.

She wondered, will I spend the rest of my life comparing every man I meet to Jebu?

She wondered too what might have happened if, that night on Mount Higashi, she had suggested to Jebu that they run away together instead of going on to Heian Kyo. He was dedicated to his Order, but he was young and passionate. He might well have broken his vow of obedience for her. But she had not asked, and he had not been tested. Why? Because she did not want to give up her way of life, any more than he would want to give up his.

Just as he would not want to betray his Order, she did not want to betray her family. It was as Aunt Chogao had said: she was samurai just as much as any man of the Shima, and if war was the duty of men, marriage was the duty of women. If the men of her family could face the naked swords of their enemies, she could face the bitterness of a life with Horigawa.

The wedding banquet was long, and some of the guests left early while others stayed late. Much sake was drunk, but many of the

guests were intrigued by a beverage from China called ch'ai. It was not new to the Sunrise Land, but drinking it had only recently become fashionable. As a wedding gift the Takashi lord, Sogamori, had had nine large metal boxes full of ch'ai bricks sent from one of his ships recently landed at Hyogo.

Sogamori and his son Kiyosi, sitting beside Horigawa and Ryuichi, were among the late stayers. Each banqueter had his small, individual table for food and drink, and each had several attendants hovering behind him. Taniko sat behind her husband and served his food and kept a sake jar and a pot of water for ch'ai warm for him. Horigawa ate and drank little, and most of the time Taniko sat with her eyes downcast and her face hidden behind her fan, with nothing to do.

"I notice you're careful to drink mostly ch'ai, Horigawa," Sogamori said in his deep, hoarse voice. "That's very wise. You wouldn't want to be too drunk to enjoy the night with your new wife."

"I must keep my mind alert to converse adequately with the distinguished Minister of the Left," Horigawa said in a voice as sweet as a plum. "Ch'ai sharpens the wits."

"I'll bet the lady is dozing behind her fan," Sogamori laughed. "This banquet and .all this men's talk is putting her to sleep, Horigawa. If I were you I'd take her to bed and wake her up."

"I'm sure you would, if you were I," said Horigawa. "The minister's exploits in the flowery combat are as well known as his valour in war."

Kiyosi laughed. "As well known, but not as successful, eh, Father? You may have more authority and honour than Domei, but he's bested you in the bedchamber."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sogamori growled. "Neither do I," said Horigawa.

Kiyosi said, "Your Highness is so conscientiously devoted to affairs of state, you pay no attention to affairs of the heart. I'm referring to my father's impetuous wooing of Lady Akimi."

"You ought to have more respect for your father than to mention such things in public," said Sogamori irritably.

"You should have more respect for your clan, Father, than to make us a laughing-stock at Court." Kiyosi's tone was light, but there was a barely concealed edge in his voice.

Taniko was surprised that Kiyosi would needle his father in front of herself, Horigawa and Ryuichi. She knew quite well what they were talking about. All the Shima women were laughing over Sogamori's rude attempt to seduce Akimi, the beautiful lady-in-waiting who had been Domei's mistress for many years.

Like most of Heian Kyo's aristocrats, Sogamori had many women in his life. Besides his principal wife, Kiyosi's mother, he had a number of secondary wives, each of whom had her apartment in the Rokuhara. Gossip also attributed one or two mistresses to him at any given time. But, just as he was always reaching for more power in the realm, so he was always pursuing new women. Taking advantage of the Muratomo lord's temporary absence from the capital, Sogamori had laid siege to Lady Akimi with flute-playing, poetry, dancing and flowers, as if he had but to display his interest to win her. All this despite the fact that Akimi already had a son by Domei. Akimi adamantly ignored Sogamori's advances and he eventually had to give up. The Court, which had come to fear him, enjoyed the opportunity of ridiculing him. When Domei returned and heard about the incident, he was enraged at first, but ended up

laughing along with everyone else.

"The lady showed poor taste," Ryuichi ventured. "How could she prefer a rough, ill-mannered warrior like Captain Domei to a polished gentleman like Lord Sogamori?"

Sogamori looked at him sourly, obviously unimpressed by the flattery.

"With respect, Ryuichi-san," said Kiyosi. "Warriors are not to be sneered at. We Takashi, are we not a clan of warriors?"

Taniko couldn't help but look directly at Kiyosi, drawn by the strong, pleasant voice. She knew it was shameful for a woman to look into the eyes of any man other than her husband, but her growing fascination with Kiyosi, fed by her dislike for Horigawa, drove her to stare directly at him for the briefest of moments. The large, dark eyes held hers, enchanting her. She gave a little gasp and then looked down at the charcoal warmer she was watching over.

Kiyosi held his sake cup out to her to cover the look she had given him. She quickly raised the white porcelain jar and filled the dainty cup.

"Neither gentlemen nor warriors should concern themselves with idle Court gossip," said Horigawa sententiously.

"You need not interest yourself in women of the Court," said Sogamori. "Your own wife far outshines Akimi in beauty." He raised his sake cup towards Taniko and drank. She felt a chill of fear at the undertone of lechery in his voice.

Horigawa said with faint contempt, "She is merely a young girl of provincial family, not used to the ways of the capital."

"She is of good family, related to the Takashi," Sogamori retorted. "You forget yourself at times, Horigawa. Or else you forget who I am. Your wife will learn the ways of the capital. The courtiers laughed at my father for his clumsy dancing when he visited the great temples, but I was born here in Heian Kyo and my father saw to it that I studied under the finest dancing masters. Now, when I dance before the gods, no one laughs at me."

"No one would dare," said Kiyosi wryly. "You'd have their heads." "Is it not this little wife of yours who translated the letter from

China for me?" Sogamori asked. "Her handwriting is exquisite." Horigawa bowed as if he himself had been complimented.

He squints like an old ape, Taniko thought. She screened her face with her fan, conscious of Kiyosi smiling at her.

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

Old Squint-Eyes has arranged for me to be appointed a lady-in-waiting to the Empress, a unique honour for a girl born and raised so far from the capital. I am to be presented at Court on the first day of the Eleventh Month, as soon as the inauspicious Tenth Month, during which the kami are absent, is over. Uncle Ryuichi is tearing his garments over the cost of my new wardrobe, but I have promised that whenever I can I will pass on secrets of the China trade. One good investment will repay the cost of my Court robes many times over.

I have already learned a number of fascinating things about China, just from the three letters I have now translated for my husband. For one thing, there are two Chinas, a northern China, also called Cathay, which is ruled by ferocious barbarians, and a southern China, which is governed from Linan by an Emperor of the Sung dynasty.

The barbarians, known as Mongols, who rule Cathay have conquered many kingdoms to the north and west of China. They were making war on the Sung Emperor, but they stopped three years ago, when their own Emperor, whom they call Great Khan, died. When their Great Khan dies these Mongols immediately cease all warfare until they have chosen a new ruler. They choose their Emperors at a great council of the Mongol chieftains. A strange and frightening people.

As for me, I cannot wait to take up my duties at Court.

-Ninth Month, twentieth day

YEAR OF THE DRAGON

Used to the bustle of a provincial family devoted to war, land and trade, Taniko found life within the Nine-Fold Enclosure very different and very elegant, but frequently dull. Ladies-in-waiting lived most of the time in the Empress's residence, the Wisteria Hall. Nothing ever happened except when the diviners declared the day auspicious or when the calendar called for the performance of some age-old rite. There were endless stretches of idle time during which the ladies-in-waiting entertained one another by playing games such as go and backgammon or holding contests in poetry-writing, flower-matching or incense-comparing.

One afternoon in early spring a commotion in the Empress's chambers caught Taniko's ear-barks and growls, mewings and hissings, the shrieks and screams of the Empress and other women. Taniko rushed into Her Imperial Majesty's bedroom.

The Empress's favourite cat, Myobu, a beautiful creature with long orange hair, was perched atop a tall mahogany cabinet, screaming feline imprecations and batting its claws at a brown dog no bigger

than itself. The dog kept up a ferocious, high-pitched bark and bounded into the air, trying to get at the Empress's cat.

Empress Sadako, normally a placid woman, was as frightened by the dog's frenzy as her cat was, and was weeping with anxiety. She and the other ladies in the room were rendered helpless by their distress.

"Oh, Taniko-san, rescue Myobu. Please, please hurry."

With a bow to the Empress, Taniko seized the dog and tucked him under her arm. He squirmed and barked furiously. He was of a Chinese breed and looked to Taniko like a giant furry frog. Taniko recognized the dog at once. He was called Li Po and belonged to Lady Akimi, Domei's mistress. Akimi had been away from the palace for several days. It was customary for ladies-in-waiting to retire to their homes during their unclean time of the month.

Taniko knew Akimi as well as she knew most of the Empress's attendants, but there was something that set her apart from the other women, a calm nobility of manner that made Taniko want to get to know her better. But Akimi was reserved with Taniko. After all, Taniko was married to one of the Muratomo family's worst enemies. Akimi could not know that Taniko heartily approved of Akimi's lover. She had seen the dashing, moustachioed Captain Domei riding in the grounds at the head of the palace guard. How could the bear-like Sogamori imagine that he could compete with such a man for Akimi's favours? She had heard how the previous Emperor, now retired, had ill-treated Domei, how he had repaid Domei's loyalty to him during the insurrection by ordering him to execute his own father, how Domei had been neglected while that Emperor and his successor showered favours, offices and honours on his Takashi rivals. Her heart went out to Domei.

Empress Sadako floundered over to the cabinet, her skirts and underskirts billowing around her, and held up her arms to the cat. "Come down, my precious, come to Mother." Myobu jumped into the Empress's arms.

Her Imperial Majesty turned to Taniko. "That dog has terrified my poor Myobu. Animals like that should not be permitted to run loose in the palace. Have him punished."

Taniko was about to point out that the dog belonged to one of Her Imperial Majesty's senior ladies, but she realized that the Empress probably knew that and preferred not to acknowledge it. Did Sadako want the dog destroyed? Taniko decided it would be best to get the animal out of sight and not to ask any more questions.

But, she thought as she hurried out of the Wisteria Hall with Li Po in her arms, if she had Akimi's dog killed, she would make a permanent enemy of Domei's mistress, who already, regrettably, had reason to dislike her. Besides, she liked the little dog. He lay in her arms calmly and trustingly. At the foot of the Wisteria Hall's steps, she looked about her. In the distance a group of officers of the palace guards were playing football in front of the Hall of Military Virtues.

The game was an ancient favourite with male nobles. A circle of men tried to keep a soft leather ball in the air as long as possible, solely by kicking it. Taniko approached them. She knew a few of the guard officers slightly, and one of them might have an idea about what to do with the dog.

Once again Taniko thanked her karma that she was serving at the Court, where she was permitted to go and talk to anyone, man or woman, face-to-face. It must be maddening to spend all one's days and nights hiding behind a screen or fan as noble ladies who lived at

home did.

One of the football players was Domei. That gave her an idea.

Domei must have been at least ten years older than any of the other men playing, but he had the greatest energy and enthusiasm. He played competitively, trying to keep the ball to himself, kicking it out from under the noses of the other players, aiming his kicks so close to their heads that they were forced to back off. The men playing with him laughed heartily at each new display of Domei's aggressiveness.

Taniko waited until there was a break in the game, then diffidently beckoned Domei. The captain came to her at once and bowed.

"Lady Taniko, how may I serve you?" If he felt any hostility towards her because of her husband, he didn't show it.

His breath steamed on the winter air. Muratomo no Domei was a tall, broad-shouldered man with the dark complexion of one who spent most of his time outdoors, an unfashionable colour at a Court where men and women powdered their faces to make themselves even paler. His forehead was high and bulging. All his hair was shaved away except for the lock on top neatly tied in the samurai topknot. His large head gleamed with perspiration. His big moustache drew attention to his most unfortunate feature, protruding front teeth.

Taniko explained about the Empress's wish to punish the dog. She didn't bother to point out that it was Akimi's pet. She was sure Domei recognized it.

"Frightening Her Imperial Majesty's cat is a grave offence. I will take charge of the prisoner." He took the dog from her hands and held him, stroking his head.

"What are you going to do with him, captain-san?" Taniko asked uncertainly.

"Well, the palace guards use stray dogs for archery practice." Shocked, Taniko put a hand to her mouth.

"Would you like to witness the execution, my lady?"

"No, no."

Taniko's impression of the Muratomo was still coloured by the uncouth oryoshi Jebu had killed last year on the Tokaido. But that man wasn't a member of the Muratomo family, just one of their paid supporters. Domei seemed pleasant and kindly enough, although his manners did lack the refinement one found in members of the old families of the capital. Taniko didn't believe Domei would really kill Akimi's dog.

Everyone said the Muratomo were dreadfully crude, but Domei was undoubtedly an excellent choice for the post of captain of the palace guard. He was obviously a born fighter, as different from the stout, moon-faced courtiers as a falcon is from a partridge.

When it came to military glory there were more legends about the Muratomo family than any other. They had migrated to the eastern provinces centuries before to build up their fortunes. There they spearheaded the opening up of the rich rice lands of the Kanto plain, driving the savage hairy Ainu before them. Their patron kami was Hachiman, god of war, and one Muratomo general who won dazzling victories was called Hachiman's Oldest Son.

In the last century the Muratomo had quelled two of the most dangerous rebellions ever raised against the crown, the Early Nine Years War and the Later Three Years War. Ill-mannered the

Muratomo might be, but they were peerless warriors.

Lady Akimi returned to the Wisteria Hall a day later. Her eyes were red with weeping, and several times she burst into unexplained tears in the presence of the Empress.

Sadako was a kind-hearted woman who couldn't stand to see any of her ladies unhappy. But try as she could, it was almost impossible for her to persuade Akimi to tell her what was wrong.

Only when the the Empress herself began to cry did Akimi answer her insistent questions. "Oh, Your Majesty, I've heard that the captain of the Imperial bodyguard has shot my little dog, Li Po."

The Empress looked away uneasily. "I had not heard that."

"Oh yes, Your Majesty. But what really makes me weep is that Li Po displeased you. Killing him was the only thing to do."

"I didn't order your dog executed, Akimi-san," the Empress said pleadingly. She turned to Taniko. "Please send for Captain Domei."

Domei came quickly and prostrated himself before the Empress. She asked him what happened to the dog.

"As I told the Lady Taniko, Your Majesty, I felt that the only proper punishment for a dog that frightened Your Imperial Majesty's cat was to let it be used as a target for mounted archery practice."

"Barbarous," the Empress exclaimed. "You have caused great pain to one of my most esteemed ladies. I am very angry with you, Captain Domei."

Domei lowered his head. "I ask that Your Imperial Majesty order me beheaded in expiation."

Sadako winced. "Please, Captain Domei. There has been quite enough killing. Just leave us now. There is nothing more you can do."

Domei left. But later in the day he returned and presented the Empress with a little brown dog that looked to be Li Po. He insisted, however, that the dog wasn't Li Po.

"I believe this to be the reincarnation of Li Po," Domei said. "By a special blessing of the kami we have him back among us." Akimi hugged the dog.

"How can this be the reincarnation of the other dog when it is obviously the same age as that dog?" the Empress asked.

"I wouldn't pretend to know, Your Majesty," Domei said. "I'm not a very religious man." Seated in a corner of the room, Taniko hid her smile behind her fan.

The Empress said, "Might it not be simpler to say that this is that dog and that you did not kill it?"

"But that would mean I had disobeyed Your Majesty," said Domei. "As it is, the dog has been disposed of as you ordered, but we have another dog and the Lady Akimi is happy."

"Do the two of you imagine you are tricking me?" Sadako asked sternly.

Akimi immediately fell to her knees and pressed her forehead against the floor. "No, Your Majesty, never. We regret that we have disturbed your harmony with this matter of the dog. Dogs."

The Empress dismissed them. The new dog, which Akimi called Tu Fu, was accepted as a resident of the Wisteria Hall.

The next day Akimi came to Taniko's chamber. She was about ten years older than Taniko and one of the most beautiful women Taniko had ever seen, with large eyes and a face shaped in a perfect oval.

"Domei and I want to thank you for your kindness. If you had given my little Li Po to anybody but him, I might have lost him for ever. Li Po is a favourite pet of our son, Yukio, and he would have been heartbroken if anything had ever happened to him."

Taniko bowed. "I was very grateful for the opportunity to be of service to you, Lady Akimi. May I say also that you are a marvellous actress?"

Akimi laughed. She held out a package wrapped in silk. "I would like you to have this. It is a small gift, compared to the life of a beloved pet, but I hope you will enjoy it."

Taniko unfolded the silk cloth and found a book bound in red leather.

"This is the first volume of a very long story called The Tale of the Hollow Tree," said Akimi. "It was written about two hundred years ago by an official of the Court. This particular copy was presented to me by my mother. Both the calligraphy and the illustrations have always given me much pleasure."

"Thank you," said Taniko, opening the book and admiring a delicately tinted painting of a weeping woman. "I don't deserve this."

Akimi looked grave. "Domei and I believe that you wanted to show friendship for us. We do not have many friends in the Court, and none among the members of your family. Forgive me for mentioning it, but there is undying enmity between Domei and your husband."

"I know," said Taniko. "And of course, I have a duty of absolute

loyalty to my husband. But where duty does not compel me, I believe I can pick my friends as I choose. I should be deeply honoured to be counted among your friends, as far as that is possible."

Akimi looked at her gravely. "Karma brings many surprising turns to our lives. We will think of you as a friend. Whatever happens."

Later, reading the book Akimi had given her, Taniko let her eyes wander from the page. She was happy that her gesture of friendship had been accepted, but there was an ominous note in Akimi's voice when she said, "Whatever happens." Domei was obviously a proud man, and he had lived a long time with heavy grievances. Was the apparent serenity of the Court, Taniko wondered, actually the heavy silence that comes before an earthquake?

Chapter Ten

For Jebu, the world had come to seem like a desert after he parted from Taniko. He returned to the ruins of the New Moon Temple on Mount Higashi, overlooking Heian Kyo, where he waited with his brother monks for a new command from the Order. A month later a monk arrived with a message from the Zinja Council of Abbots. The site of the New Moon Temple was to be abandoned, and the survivors of the earthquake were to move to the Autumn Wind Temple at Nara, two days' journey from Heian Kyo.

Three months after Jebu took up residence at the Autumn Wind Temple, a new abbot arrived. He sent for Jebu.

"Your father, Abbot Taitaro of the Waterfowl Temple, sends you greetings and congratulates you on the performance of your first task. You sent him a samurai sword which you took in battle. He wanted to know why you did that."

"I sent it to him as a gift, to honour him," said Jebu. "And I had some notion that treating a samurai sword as a trophy might chasten the arrogance of the warriors."

The abbot looked thoughtful. "One captured sword would not have that effect, but a large collection might. You're a big, strong lad. You might live long enough to collect a hundred samurai swords." "I'll try."

"You'll have plenty of opportunities. You're now commanded to enter the service of the Muratomo. Your father urged the Order to be guided by your initiation vision. You will work for various members of the White Dragon clan, but your orders will ultimately be coming from the head of the family, Domei."

Jebu carried messages from Domei to the eastern provinces and to the northernmost reaches of Honshu. He travelled to the southern end of Kyushu, where the people retained some of the barbaric customs of the Kumaso, those cannibal tribesmen long ago conquered by the founders of the Imperial family.

Often there was fighting to be done. Whenever he defeated a samurai he would send the long sword to the Waterfowl Temple. The collection of swords grew to ten, then twenty. Jebu recited the Prayer to a Fallen Enemy so many times that it required intense concentration for him to maintain awareness of its meaning.

When he was not travelling, he remained at the Autumn Wind Temple, seeking insight through the practice of swordsmanship, archery and various kinds of hand-to-hand combat. He helped to teach the few aspiring monks who lived at the temple and even participated in two initiations.

He never met Domei. The Muratomo chieftain transmitted his messages and orders through others. Jebu preferred it that way. He wanted to avoid Heian Kyo; he had no wish to see Taniko or hear anything about her. But not an hour passed that he did not think of her.

News from the capital reached the Autumn Wind Temple often, though. Power and honours flocked to Sogamori as birds gather on a temple roof, while Domei was repeatedly slighted and passed over. Bitterness between the two clans continued to grow.

In the Twelfth Month of the Year of the Horse, two years after Jebu had escorted Taniko to Heian Kyo, the abbot of the Autumn Wind Temple handed Jebu a message signed with Domei's cipher. Jebu was to come to the Imperial Palace immediately, prepared for combat.

The abbot's eyes were alight with excitement. "This morning Domei seized control of the Nine-Fold Enclosure and placed Emperor Nijo under guard in the Serene and Cool Hall. Domei has been planning this for some time. Five days ago the Takashi clan chieftain, Sogamori, and his son, Kiyosi, left on a pilgrimage to the family shrine dedicated to the kami known as Beautiful Island Princess on Itsukushima island. With the Takashi leaders out of the capital, Domei chose his moment to strike. He remembers the many missions you've performed for him and wants your services now."

On the afternoon of the following day, Jebu rode to one of the three gates in the eastern wall of the Imperial Palace grounds and identified himself to the guards. Captain Domei, they said, was at the Hall of Military Virtues.

Over his grey robe Jebu wore the standard black-laced battle armour of a warrior monk. It might be true, as the Order taught, that a man's armour was his mind and that a naked man could utterly demolish a man clad in steel, but the Order also taught that for stopping arrows there was nothing like metal and leather. The armour of the warrior monks was lighter and closer fitting than the box-shaped armour of the samurai. Instead of a helmet Jebu wore a grey cowl tied around his head and covering the lower part of his face and the back of his neck. In addition to his sword and his bow, he carried a naginata with a long blade.

The walls of the Imperial Palace enclosed a park and a collection of buildings which constituted a city in itself. Some of the halls were huge and heavy, set on stone bases with roofs of green glazed tile supported by white walls and red lacquered pillars. Other buildings, though also large, were built in a style more familiar to Jebu, of plain wood with wattled roofs. All the halls were connected by a maze of colonnades. In the north-east corner of the enclosure was the simple

wooden residence of the Imperial family, surrounding a landscaped garden. The rest of the grounds were strewn with finely raked white gravel.

On the parade ground before the Hall of Military Virtues, a tile-roofed pavilion which was headquarters for the palace guard, a hundred men, deployed in extended order to form a square, were practising sword drill. Off to one side lines of men with tall samurai bows were waiting their turn to shoot at targets shaped like warriors. In the distance lines of horsemen galloped back and forth firing arrows at fleeing dogs released by attendants. Domei was keeping his tense fighting men busy with drill and more drill.

Domei stood in the centre of a group of samurai, all wearing armour with white lacings. Jebu bowed and presented himself. Domei's men eyed his grey cowl and black-laced armour with curiosity.

"Ah, the Zinja I sent for," Domei said. "Shike, are you prepared to fight and die to rid the empire of criminals and traitors?"

Jebu was prepared to fight and die, and he didn't particularly care for what reason. His Zinja training encouraged him to view the purpose of life as action, and life and death as equally acceptable. His meeting with Taniko and his loss of her made the Zinja philosophy even more congenial.

"I do as my Order bids," he said.

"I have His Imperial Majesty in my safe-keeping, I have control of the Imperial Palace, and I have most members of the Great Council of

State. There are two things that must be done now. The first is to kill Prince Sasaki no Horigawa, the man who brought about my father's death."

Jebu was startled to hear the name of Taniko's husband. He should have realized, he thought, that Horigawa would be one of the first targets of any Muratomo coup. He must not involve himself in Horigawa's death. Taniko must have nothing to reproach him for.

He was relieved when Domei continued, "My son Hideyori here will lead men to hunt down Horigawa." Domei rested his hand on Hideyori's shoulder. Hideyori had the same high forehead as his father, but he was very young. "This one is only fifteen," Domei said with a smile. "We have just cut his hair and tied it in the samurai topknot. At first I wanted him to stay home like his younger brother, Yukio. But all my other sons are with me, and Hideyori insisted that he, too, must share in restoring the glory of the Muratomo. So I relented." Hideyori looked at Jebu without smiling. He had the coldest eyes Jebu had ever seen.

"The other task is to take the Retired Emperor, Go-Shirakawa, into custody. At the moment he is at his Sanjo palace, guarded by his own men. That's what I want you for."

Jebu's training had included a grounding in politics. He understood that for hundreds of years the office of Emperor had been a ceremonial one, without power. It was the Regents, always members of the Eu-jiwara family, who were the real rulers. But recently the Emperors had found a way to assert themselves-by retiring. A Retired Emperor was free of time-consuming ritual duties. He was not under the control of the Regent. He lived in a palace of his own, away from the Imperial Palace grounds. And he retained the prestige of having been an Emperor. To make themselves even more revered, many of the Retired Emperors entered the Buddhist priesthood. The Retired Emperors were thus a new centre of power, and were even able to name their successors on the throne.

To hold the Emperor in captivity, while valuable, was not as useful to

Domei as having the Retired Emperor in his power. That would give him virtual mastery of the realm.

"Once we have His Retired Majesty, Go-Shirakawa," Domei went on, "we will require the Great Council of State to meet. They will proclaim Sogamori and Kiyosi rebels and outlaws. They will appoint me Minister of the Left in place of Sogamori. And they will appoint a new Regent chosen by me."

"You want me to take Go-Shirakawa for you?" Jebu asked.

"Yes. As a Zinja you are two things a samurai is not. You are a monk and you are capable of stealth. I want you to lead a party of men to the Sanjo palace tonight. We could make a frontal attack during the day, but it would take too many men away from here, and I must hold the Imperial Palace at all costs. And seeing us attack the Retired Em peror's palace might stir up the people against us. I want this done quietly and quickly, with as few men as possible. You will have the honour of scaling the wall first and opening the gate for my samurai. Then you will handle Go-Shirakawa. Since he is a priest, most samurai would be reluctant to touch him. Being an ordinary monk, you will, I hope, feel no hindrance. Are you up to all that?"

"I think I can do it, Lord Domei." A wave of exhilaration swept through Jebu. What he did tonight might well determine the future of the empire. And it would allow him to use his powers to the fullest and to risk his life. Eor the time being Taniko seemed unimportant. This was what he had been put into the world for.

Long after sundown Jebu and a small body of mounted Muratomo samurai were on their way to Go-Shirakawa's residence, the Sanjo palace. Behind them was an ox-drawn carriage.

When they were close to the palace, Jebu signalled a halt and crept

towards the building on foot, taking one samurai with him. The palace was a two-storey building surrounded by a bamboo palisade twice the height of a man, and it, in turn, was protected by a wide moat.

Jebu handed his bow and quiver to the samurai accompanying him. Thinking of a shadow, he crept along the street to the edge of the moat and slipped soundlessly into the water. Swimming in armour was one of the many skills stressed in the training of a Zinja. The water was ice-cold, almost paralysing him. Without hesitation he plunged his head under the surface and, relying on his sense of direction, swimming as a frog swims through the blackness, he touched the opposite bank of the moat.

There was a low stone wall on-this side, behind which the bamboo palisade had been built. Clinging with his fingertips to the wall, Jebu drew a strong, light silk cable and a grapple out of a bag at his belt. The grapple was weighted in the centre, and its four hooks folded together for compactness in carrying. Jebu snapped the grapple open, drew back his arm, and threw it to the top of the palisade.

Pulling himself hand over hand, he was up the palisade in two breaths. On the other side there was a newly built gallery for archers; Go-Shirakawa had evidently feared an attack.

Dripping cold water and smelling of rotten weeds, Jebu tiptoed along the gallery towards the gate where a guard armed with a naginata stood, relaxed. Jebu drew an eight-pointed shuriken out of his robe and scaled it at the guard. The whirling blades bit into the man's throat, spraying blood as he fell.

The man was making gurgling sounds, trying to give an alarm as he died. Jebu dropped down from the gallery, picked up the fallen guard's naginata and stabbed him in the chest, muttering the Prayer

to a Eallen Enemy under his breath. He straightened and pushed up the bolt that fastened the wooden gate.

He heard heavy feet rushing at him. Whirling, he swung the naginata with all his strength and sliced the attacker's right leg off below the knee. Even as the man's screams woke the defenders of the Sanjo palace, Jebu finished him with a naginata thrust into his mouth.

Repeating the Prayer to a Fallen Enemy, Jebu pushed the gate open. The Muratomo samurai who had come with him were through the gate and fanning out in the courtyard. A line of Go-Shirakawa's servants formed to block the way to the Retired Emperor. Jebu felt sorry for them. They were not true samurai, only armed servants. Beyond the defenders, in the main hall of the Sanjo palace, Jebu could hear the screams of women and the cries of courtiers.

Some of the retainers fell with falcon-feathered Muratomo arrows in their chests and bellies. Others were cut down by slashing samurai swords. Jebu ran up the steps of the pavilion. He stabbed one of the Retired Emperor's guards with his short Zinja sword. Another guard lunged at him, holding a long, thin courtier's sword in both hands. Jebu darted aside and stabbed his attackerthrough the forearm. The man came at him again, one-handed, chopping. This time Jebu cut off his sword arm, and the guard screamed and fell.

Then Jebu was in the presence of Go-Shirakawa. The Retired Emperor sat cross-legged on a high pile of cushions on a dais, his pendulous lower lip jutting out as he frowned severely at Jebu.

"Truly we have entered an age when the teachings of Buddha are forgotten, if an aged monk in his retreat can be attacked by bandits."

I can posture as well as you, Jebu thought. Glancing around quickly to make sure no one was about to attack him, Jebu fell to his knees

and knocked his forehead on the cedar floor. "Oh, Holiness, this miserable monk has come at the command of the captain of the palace guards. Captain Domei believes that you are in grave danger here and respectfully urges that you take the carriage he has provided to the Imperial Palace, where he can better protect yourself and His Imperial Majesty."

Go-Shirakawa settled himself rock-like on his dais. "The Zinja are murderers masquerading as monks. Be warned: to lay hands on me is to insult the very flesh of She Who Shines in the Heavens. I will not go."

Jebu heard a cry behind him. He whirled. A courtier brandishing a dagger was leaping at him. Jebu grabbed the man's wrist, tripped him and threw him to the floor. He knelt on the courtier's back and used the man's own knife to cut his throat. He stood back, wiped the knife on the dying man's robe, and stuck the blade in his belt, stepping away from the widening pool of blood on the polished floor.

"Indeed, these are unsettled times, Holiness."

Go-Shirakawa looked thoughtful. "The red of his blood contrasts with the pale green silk of his robe. Clearly if such things as this can happen at my very feet I am not safe here. You may escort me to the Imperial Palace."

Jebu preceded Go-Shirakawa through the doorway of his palace. Outside, the pitiful courtier guards, who knew next to nothing about swordplay, lay scattered on the ground, so many butchered corpses.

The helmeted samurai prostrated themselves when Go-Shirakawa in his orange Buddhist priest's robe appeared on the steps of the pavilion. Jebu snapped his fingers and the ox-drawn carriage was brought around to the steps. A samurai knelt and presented his back

to the sacred feet as Go-Shirakawa climbed into the carriage. Another warrior slid the door shut, and the Retired Emperor was alone with his meditations.

"Mount up," Jebu ordered. "Eorm a circle around the carriage." They had not lost a single man. That pleased him.

The last person to leave the Sanjo palace was a samurai with a bloody sword in one hand and a torch in the other.

"No!" Jebu called, even as the man's arm snapped forward and the torch flew through the air. Flames leaped up to engulf the palace.

Domei had given strict orders that the taking of Go-Shirakawa be smooth and quiet. But no discipline seemed strong enough to contain the samurai lust for destruction. The samurai, thought Jebu angrily, why were they such brutes? Supposedly in arms to serve and protect the empire, they were reducing it to ruins.

Go-Shirakawa had said something about this being an age when the teachings of Buddha were forgotten. Jebu had heard other Buddhist priests speak on the same theme, calling these times the Latter Days of the Law. The Buddha, they said, had predicted that the day would come when his laws would be broken and the world sink into chaos. It did seem, thought Jebu as the bonfire of the Sanjo palace roared into the sky, that everything old, everything beautiful, everything wise was gradually vanishing. Perhaps, indeed, these were the Latter Days of the Law.

Chapter Eleven

At sundown on the day the Muratomo seized control of the Imperial Palace, Horigawa and a small contingent of bodyguards stopped at the Shima residence. Horigawa sent for Taniko.

"I got your message. You are a dutiful wife. But by the time it reached me I had already learned of the Muratomo coup. How did you escape from the palace?"

"I was able to slip out through the north-east gate before Domei's men had complete control of the palace. The palace grounds and buildings are so complicated; they're hard to guard and easy to escape through if you know your way around."

What Taniko did not add was that a frightened Akimi had awakened her before dawn. "You are in danger. You must leave the palace now, by the north-east gate. It isn't guarded yet."

"What's happening, Akimi-san?"

"Domei is about to seize the palace and take the Emperor and Empress prisoner."

"Why? He must be mad. It's his duty to protect the Emperor."

"He's been abused for too long. He wants to take control of the government and avenge himself on his enemies. His men are ready to move at sunrise. This is your last chance to get out. Hurry and dress."

Taniko's mind was racing. "It's my duty to stay here with the Empress."

"No one will hurt the Empress. But you are Horigawa's wife. Even though he likes you, Domei will have to use you as a hostage to try to get Horigawa. We know that Horigawa won't put himself in Domei's hands to save you. That means Domei may have to hurt you. You must get out now."

"I must warn the Empress."

Akimi's beautiful face was grave: "I won't let you do that. I'll turn you over to Domei's men."

"Do you approve of what Domei is doing?"

"Approve? I have loved him for twelve years. I'm part of his family. My son is a Muratomo. I saw Domei's father beheaded. I watched the Takashi seize every opportunity to insult him, to grind him into the dirt. Yes, I approve. If he did not fight back he would not deserve to be chief of the clan."

"Yes, I see." Taniko was dressing quickly with Akimi's help. "Of course he must try to win back all that his family has lost. But to seize the Emperor is unheard of. What if Domei can't hold the palace? The Takashi have tens of thousands of men over at the Rokuhara. I don't trust this way of doing things. It's too simple and too violent. It makes Domei look like a rebel."

Tears glittered in Akimi's large eyes. "I know, Taniko, I know. I'm terrified for all of us, for Domei, for my son, for Domei's other sons. He's wild-desperate. He has to do something. He isn't cunning, as the Takashi are. He thinks he can cut through the net they've woven around him with a single sword stroke." She sighed. "There's no turning back now. It's in motion. Our karma will decide what happens."

Hurriedly, wrapped in a heavy cloak, Taniko followed Akimi out of the Wisteria Hall. In the distance, before the Hall of Military Virtues, she could see dark, square masses of men gathered. The clink of weapons and armour carried clearly through the cold, still, pre-dawn air. She followed Akimi along a winding path through the twisted trees planted in the north-east corner of the palace grounds. They came to an ox-drawn carriage held by a servant. The women said goodbye and Taniko got into the carriage. The guards at the north-east gate were apparently not involved in the plot. They didn't question Taniko and let her through. Soon afterwards she was at the Shima mansion.

Now Horigawa said, "As soon as Domei feels he has the palace under control he'll send men after me, and I don't intend to give him the pleasure of catching me. The Muratomo may attempt to take you as a hostage. Take your carriage and follow me to Daidoji as quickly as you can. We'll be safe there until Sogamori returns to the capital."

"There's no need for me to take a carriage," said Taniko. "I can ride as well as you. Perhaps better."

"Thank you for reminding me that I married a rustic wife," said Horigawa.

Taniko looked at him levelly. "You married a samurai wife."

Heavily cloaked against the cold of the last month of the year, Horigawa, Taniko and their party, riding without stopping, took half the night to reach Horigawa's country estate, the manor called Daidoji. The samurai and peasants on the estate had heard nothing of the events in the city and were amazed to see their lord and his lady suddenly appear at the gate.

"Dig a pit deep enough to bury a man behind the guards' quarters,"

Horigawa ordered the steward, "and cut a length of bamboo that will reach to the bottom. Post a lookout above the pass. I want to know at once if armed men ride this way." Without another word to Taniko or anyone else, he disappeared into his quarters. A moment later Taniko heard the steward's angry voice commanding servants to take lanterns and shovels down to the guards' quarters and begin to dig.

It was the hour of the ox, the blackest part of the night. Taniko went to her chamber in the women's house, tended by sleepy maidservants she had come to know on -previous visits to the manor. She had a charcoal brazier brought in to warm the room and wrapped herself in as many robes and quilts as she could find. But she could not sleep. She lit an oil lamp and settled down with The Tale of the Hollow Tree given her over a year ago by Akimi.

Strange, she thought, that of all the women she had met at Court her closest friend should be Akimi, Domei's mistress. It had begun with the incident of the dog, and after that, as they talked, she had found she could share thoughts with Akimi as she had never been able to do with another woman. Although Taniko would never have said so, the Empress was a rather dull person, the other women of the Court even more so. Taniko's career as a lady-in-waiting would have been unbearable without Akimi.

And now, thought Taniko, I am in flight from Domei with Akimi's help, and comforting myself with a book Akimi gave me.

It was two years since her marriage to Horigawa. She found the prince as repulsive as ever, but his conjugal visits were, happily, infre quent. He seemed to want a wife mainly because a man in his position was expected to have one or more wives. While it must be bad karma that had afflicted her with a husband like Horigawa, she had learned not to consider herself uniquely unfortunate. Many other

women had unappealing husbands. Perhaps most did. Rebirth as a woman was probably a punishment for misdeeds in a previous life.

Still, there was much pleasure in her life. Living in the Imperial Palace most of the time, serving the Empress, she felt close to the centre of things, where she had always wanted to be. The letters she translated for Horigawa brought her news of the fabled land of China. Horigawa's close ties with the Takashi enabled her to watch Sogamori's rise to power and also afforded occasional glimpses of the splendid Kiyosi. All in all, it was an exciting life for a young woman of fifteen.

There was, of course, the horrid possibility of her becoming pregnant by Horigawa. But she faithfully followed the precautions her mother had taught her, and anyway, she doubted that Horigawa's seed had any life in it. Neither of his earlier wives, she learned, had ever conceived.

One thing was missing, though. In dreams and in waking reveries there would often appear a very tall young man with red hair and strange, grey eyes. In a way, the memory was sweet. It was good to know that once in her life she had held the strong body of such a man in her arms. But it was unbearably sad to think that she would never know such joy again.

If only she had fully given herself to Jebu. Horigawa had hardly seemed to notice or care whether she was a virgin. Now she might never know what it was like to have such a beautiful man inside her. And Jebu had seemed to know so much about a woman's body. What exquisite pleasures he might have given her if she had permitted him the final intimacy. What marvellous memories she might have now.

When she thought of what she had lost, apparently for ever, tears

filled her eyes.

The river that flowed through the hills above the manor was frozen, and she missed the sounds of the waterfall and the mill wheel, which usually furnished a background for her reading. Instead, from a distance rose the ringing sound of shovels biting into hard, cold earth. She and Horigawa and the others on the estate were simply waiting, waiting for the Muratomo. She wondered what he meant the pit for. Was he going to kill himself?

Reading by lamplight tired her eyes, and she blew out the lamp and tried to sleep. She lay awake on her futon, frightened, wondering what danger was coming their way, wondering what was happening in Heian Kyo. Was Jebu involved? Thinking of Jebu, she imagined herself in his arms. She thought about him and talked with him in her mind. Calmed by the fantasy, she fell asleep.

The lookout, half-dead from a freezing night spent in the hills, rode into the yard shortly after sunrise. A party of armed men was on the way. Horigawa emerged from his hall wearing an old black kimono. Summoning Taniko, he headed for the guard building. Behind the building, where it could not be seen from the main houses or the gateway to the estate, two men had dug a deep, square hole. Puzzled, Taniko watched as Horigawa ordered a ladder lowered into the pit and then climbed down.

Looking up from the pit at his bewildered servants, Horigawa said, "Any of you who reveals my whereabouts will wish you had never been born." He glared up at Taniko. "Any of you." Taniko felt her face grow hot with anger. The offensive old toad.

He lay down in the pit. Taniko peered over the edge. He had the bamboo tube in his hand, holding it to his mouth. He drew a white silk cloth from his kimono sleeve and spread it over his face.

"This is madness," Taniko said.

"It is a device others have used. I am certain they will never find me. Eill the pit. Bury me."

The pit was filled in long before the Muratomo riders came to the gate. Eollowing Taniko's directions, men spread gravel over the surface to hide the freshly turned earth. Only the tip of the breathing tube showed above the gravel, unnoticeable unless one were aware of it.

We have no way of knowing whether the other end is in his mouth or not, thought Taniko. He may be dying even now. She suppressed the thrill of hope that thought gave her. She wanted, as best she could, to do her duty to her husband.

The head of the guards came up to her. "A party of twenty-four samurai is approaching," he said. "If they are Muratomo, shall we fight them?"

"That would be an utter waste," said Taniko. "His Highness has hidden himself so that it will not be necessary for you to fight to protect him. Resistance would only tell them that he must be somewhere on the manor. Let them in, be hospitable. Send their leader to my quarters."

Going to the women's building, she ordered her maidservants to arrange the wall screens to create a spacious audience chamber. At one end of the room they set a screen of state whose curtains were decorated with a design of snow-covered mountains.

She heard horses and cries in the courtyard, and a moment later a warrior's heavy tread on the steps of the women's house. A young man's voice spoke to her maidservants.

A moment later the samurai leader strode into Taniko's chamber on stockinged feet. He made a low bow. "Am I in the presence of Lady Shima no Taniko, wife of Prince Sasaki no Horigawa?"

The blinds and screens around the room were pulled tight to keep out the winter air, and little light came into the room from outside. Taniko had arranged the lamps so that the light was on the intruder, leaving her screen and herself in the shadows. Through tiny apertures between the screen's hangings she studied the Muratomo leader. In the palace, on the Empress's business, it was occasionally permissible for her to be seen by men. In her own home, and especially meeting with an invader, she was required to shield herself behind a screen of state.

The samurai was a boy. His face was smooth. His forehead, surmounted by the samurai topknot, was high. When he was fully grown, she thought, his face would be strong. As yet it had a boy's smoothness.

"I do not know who you are," said Taniko, "but you appear by your dress and bearing to be a well-born warrior. Your arrival is sudden and surprising to us, but we will make you welcome as best we can."

His eyes were alert, suspicious, unfriendly.

"I am Muratomo no Hideyori, son of Muratomo no Domei, captain of the palace guards and chieftain a the Muratomo clan. I have come at my father's order, seeking His Highness, your husband."

To kill him, thought Taniko. She said, "The prince would certainly wish to meet you, were he here. Alas, he left us last night. His destination, he said, was a temple on the northern shore of Lake Biwa."

"He began a journey at night?"

"So must you have, to reach Daidoji from the capital by morning. In His Highness's case, a diviner warned him that north would be an unlucky direction for him today." The nobility of Heian Kyo frequently planned their movements on the basis of lucky and unlucky directions.

"Staying at home might have been unlucky for him as well," said Hideyori. "In spite of what you tell me, I feel I must seek the prince here at Daidoji, in the hope that I may present him with my father's greetings. Do I have your permission to look for him?"

"Of course, Hideyori-san," said Taniko. "You will have every assistance from His Highness's servants."

Hideyori bowed, turned and left her. He had his father's commanding manner and good looks, she thought. A few moments later she heard his voice shouting orders. She moved two lamps closer to where she sat, settled down again with The Tale of the Hollow Tree, and waited, wondering what it must be like for Horigawa in his pit and how long he could live under the weight of all that earth. It did not matter that she loathed the man. He was her husband, and it was her duty to do everything in her power to preserve his life.

After a time Hideyori returned. Taniko quickly withdrew behind her screen. "You are correct, my lady. Prince Horigawa appears to be gone. If you will permit me now to search the women's house, I will accept what you've said, that Prince Horigawa is not here, and I will leave you in peace."

"Surely you would not distress my ladies by searching their quarters. Prince Horigawa is a man of noble birth. He would not hide among women."

The young Muratomo looked at her gravely through the screen. "You are of a samurai family, my lady. Do you give me your word as a samurai that Prince Horigawa is not here?"

"He is not in the women's quarters. You have my word."

"Then I will leave your ladies undisturbed if you will grant me one favour."

"What is that?"

"I have heard that the wife of Prince Horigawa is one of the most beautiful women in the capital. I would like to see for myself. Come out from behind that screen and let me look at you. Then I will go."

He was bold, for one so young. She studied him through the screen. His eyes were a fathomless black. He was staring back, trying to see past the hangings, but his expression was one of unabashed interest, with nothing corrupt, nothing cruel about it. It was not the look she had seen in Sogamori's eyes when Lady Akimi was mentioned, or for that matter when the Takashi chieftain looked at her. There was something straightforward and likeable about the Muratomo men.

"Very well." Daintily, drawing her kimono, patterned with red flowers, more closely about her, and taking an ivory fan from her sleeve and opening it, she stepped out from behind the screen and stood before Hideyori. She stood partially turned away from him with her eyes downcast. She held her fan so as not to hide her face, but to shield and reveal it at the same time.

There was a very long silence. At last, Taniko could stand it no longer. She looked up and allowed her eyes to meet his. He sighed. "Well?" she said with a touch of impatience.

Young Hideyori bowed. "They lied, those who said you were one of the most beautiful women in the capital. There is none more beautiful than you."

"Your mother is more beautiful than I am."

"My mother?"

"Yes. Lady Akimi is a good friend of mine."

Hideyori's face hardened, as if turned to stone. "Lady Akimi is not my mother."

Taniko turned away, mortified by her mistake. Hideyori must be Domei's son by one of his official wives. She knew that Akimi had a young son by Domei and had simply assumed that this must be he.

"Please forgive me. My error was stupid beyond belief. I meant no offence."

Hideyori shrugged. "No doubt I have offended you greatly by coming here. Eorgive me for bringing trouble to your house. May the kami show favour to you, my lady. I take my leave of you now." He bowed again and was gone.

What a marvellous young man, she thought. When there are men in the world like him and Kiyosi and Jebu, why must I be married to Horigawa? Of course, this one is a bit young, even for me. But those black, penetrating eyes.

She lit a one-hour stick of incense. In an hour Hideyori and his party would be far away. It would be time to dig up old Squint-Eyes, if he were still alive.

Chapter Twelve

Jebu had been placed in charge of the guard over the Retired Emperor, who was installed in the minor palace, one of the residential buildings in the north-west section of the palace grounds. Go-Shirakawa had remained in seclusion except for the previous evening, when there had been a meeting of the Great Council of State. Jebu heard the meeting had not gone well for Domei. In spite of the presence of armed Muratomo samurai, a major councillor had made a speech denouncing Domei as a rebel against the crown. Encouraged, the council had avoided approving Domei's demands. This delaying tactic could be as disastrous for Domei's cause as outright rejection.

In addition, Hideyori and his men had returned, and Jebu heard that Horigawa had eluded his pursuers. Jebu felt a pang of disappointment, and realized he had been hoping to learn that Taniko had been made a widow.

Domei's forces, the thousand samurai of the palace guard, augmented by six thousand Muratomo samurai called in from around the country, continued to drill and to stand guard over the walls surrounding the palace grounds. The White Dragon banner over the main gateway flew just as bravely in the cold winter air. But there was a feeling of tension and uncertainty among the samurai. They needed action, but there was nothing for them to do.

At noon on the third day of Domei's seizure of the palace, a young samurai came to Jebu, who was meditating on the veranda of the minor palace.

"Captain Domei wants you at the south-centre gateway."

Domei and other Muratomo leaders were standing on the parapet of the palace wall overlooking Redbird Avenue. Domei appeared tired and discouraged.

"You did well bringing in His Retired Majesty, shike."

"I should have prevented the burning of his palace."

Domei shrugged. "Just another old building. The main thing is, we got Go-Shirakawa and we didn't lose a man." He lowered his voice. "I'm speaking to you now because you're not one of us. You're not a samurai, nor a member of the Muratomo clan. Perhaps you won't be as affected by the news. I've tried to keep it a secret. This morning Emperor Nijo escaped."

"How?"

"Some Takashi infiltrated the palace grounds, disguised the Emperor as a lady-in-waiting, and whisked him out one of the side gates in a carriage. What's more, Sogamori and Kiyosi have returned to the city. We can expect an attack at any moment. When it comes, I want you to guard my son."

Jebu knew that Domei had five sons, but he had only met Hideyori. "I presume you mean your youngest son, Hideyori?"

Domei smiled. "I have a son younger than Hideyori. He's eleven and he's safe at his mother's house. I do mean Hideyori. He's a proud devil. He wants to prove himself better than his older brothers. But he is young to be in the thick of the fighting that will come. The greatest casualties are always among the youngest. Stay close to Hideyori. Try to protect him. But also, try not to let him know you're doing it."

Jebu was touched. He remembered Taitaro's care-worn face the morning after his initiation as a Zinja. Eathers loved their sons, but

had to send them into danger.

A cry of alarm came from the near-by Muratomo officers. "Here they come."

Jebu looked over the wall. The Takashi were advancing. Led by a small group of mounted samurai, the Takashi marched a hundred abreast, their ranks filling the entire breadth of Redbird Avenue. The sun glittered on their armour and the ornamental horns on their helmets. Their hundreds of red banners looked like a sea of poppies. Their war taiko thundered a relentless, triumphant rhythm.

Their leader, riding down the middle of the avenue, wore a helmet with a red-lacquered dragon. His black armour was decorated with gold butterflies and orange-tinted lacings. He rode a chestnut stallion with white mane and tail, and his saddle was inlaid with mother-of-pearl in willow and cherry designs. In his hands he held a long sword curved near the base, the haft decorated with gold and silver mountings.

"That magnificent one," Domei snarled. "That's Kiyosi, Sogamori's son. Look how he's got himself up. The Takashi are all so vain. We'll spoil their looks for them today. That sword in his hand, that's Kogarasu." He drew his own sword. The winter sun glinted on its long, almost straight blade. "I, too, have my heirloom sword with meHigekiri, the sword that sliced off the arm of the demon of the Rasho Mon. We'll see whose sword has more power today."

These samurai deceived themselves into thinking their blades had magical power. "A sword has only as much power as the man behind it," Jebu said.

Domei shook his head. "Any time a man believes he has power, he has it. This is one of the secrets of warfare, shike. Go now, and find

Hideyori."

At that moment Kiyosi broke into a gallop, pointing Kogarasu at the little band of Muratomo standing atop the wall. With a roar, the Takashi warriors ran behind their mounted leader, their heavy sandals drumming on the pavement of Redbird Avenue like a stampede of wild horses. Thousands of long swords stabbed the air. The sea of poppies had become a wave of steel.

Scaling ladders sprang up from among the flashing swords, and the Takashi wave crashed against the walls of the Imperial Palace. Over the din Domei shouted orders to his men on the grounds below, and archers sprang to the walls to loose their arrows into the mass of Takashi warriors.

Forcing down his urge to join in the fight at the wall, Jebu hurried down the steps leading to the palace grounds. He ran across the white gravel to the inner wall surrounding the main buildings of the palace. A long line of defenders had formed between the two ancient trees, the Cherry Tree of the Left and the Orange Tree of the Right, which stood before the Ceremonial Hall. Jebu found Hideyori among them. The young man's fingertips nervously tapped his sword hilt.

"Have you ever drawn blood with that?"

Hideyori shrugged. "I tried it out on a slave. But you heard what my father said. I just had my topknot ceremony. I've never been in real combat. Why do we have to stay here? I'd rather be on the outer wall."

Jebu looked through the gateway leading out of the compound. He saw a Takashi banner wave briefly on the outer wall, then fall. "Erom the look of it, the Takashi will be coming to us," he said. In his mind he was repeating the Zinja sentences to compose his mind for battle.

Arrows flew through the air, but none of them fell near the Muratomo line within the palace compound.

There came a rush of Muratomo defenders from the outer wall to join the line between the two trees. Right behind them the Takashi burst through and streamed into the palace compound like a long ribbon of red silk unwinding. Jebu unslung his bow and took aim at Kiyosi, but the scion of the house of Takashi changed direction suddenly, and the arrow flew past him and disappeared. Make every arrow count, Jebu reminded himself with chagrin. He wanted Kogarasu, which he could see slashing like a great silver scythe, too badly. He was infected with the lust for success. He resolved just to act and to forget about Kiyosi's sword. The Self doesn't collect swords, he thought.

"Stay close to me," Jebu said to Hideyori. The young Muratomo had his sword out. Jebu stood to his left and slightly in front of him, acting as a shield. Other Muratomo samurai, seeing their leader's son in their midst, crowded around him protectively.

Jebu wished Domei were more of a planner. The Takashi, at least, seemed to have some sense of direction, and it was working for them. The Muratomo fought as samurai usually did, every man for himself, and they were being driven back.

A big Takashi samurai drove his naginata straight at Hideyori's chest. Jebu brought his Zinja sword down in a chopping swing and broke the naginata pole. But the broken end of the pole struck Hideyori and threw him, stunned, to the ground.

"We have Domei's son," the Takashi samurai shouted, drawing his sword against Jebu. Jebu swung his sword at the Takashi's legs. The Takashi brought his sword down to block the swing. Jebu drew his sword back and struck again, but this time as the attacker's sword came down to block him, Jebu turned his blade and struck

upwards. The force of the Takashi's blocking motion brought his right forearm down on the Zinja blade. Only by quickly letting go of his sword was he able to save his arm from being severed. As it was, Jebu's blade had cut through muscle and sinew right to the bone. The big samurai, bellowing in pain and anger, fell back among his comrades.

Jebu stood over Hideyori, his short sword cutting and thrusting this way and that. An empty circle formed around him. Slowly Hideyori got to his feet and the Muratomo samurai closed around them.

Domei, recognizable, in spite of his face plate, by the white horsehair plume on his helmet, came riding towards Jebu and the other men near the Cherry Tree of the Left. Domei leaned down and patted Jebu on his shoulder.

"I saw that. My son would not be alive now if it weren't for you. You're a marvellous swordsman. In battle, the Zinja are devils. You must train my sons."

The Zinja are devils. But Jebu did not have time to think about that now. Domei wheeled his horse and began rallying his men. In a moment the Muratomo had steadied their line between the two trees.

Domei gave the command, and the Muratomo counter-attacked, those at the far right end of the line running at full tilt, spearheaded by horsemen, slashing wildly with their swords, thrusting with their naginata. Nearer the Cherry Tree the Muratomo line advanced more slowly. Jebu and Hideyori stayed at the left side of the line to hold the samurai there to a slow, inexorable walk controlling the pivot. Many white banners were waving in the air now, and the Muratomo taiko drummers pounded wildly to spur on the attack.

It now appeared that the Muratomo had the Takashi on the run. The

southern half of the inner palace compound was swept clear of Takashi, and the pivoting advance of the Muratomo became a rush as the Takashi began a headlong retreat.

A flash of gleaming red caught Jebu's eye. It was the dragon on Kiyosi's helmet. Waving his sword, the Takashi leader was calling his men to fall back before the onrushing Muratomo. He was leading the retreat.

But a Takashi retreat made no sense. Kiyosi should be rallying his warriors to make a stand. The Takashi outnumbered the Muratomo three to one. They had managed to overwhelm the outer defences. They had only to keep on and they would grind the Muratomo down. But so rapidly did the Takashi fall back that there was no time to pin them against the Ceremonial Hall, the aim of Domei's counter-attack. Instead, the fleeing Takashi and the charging Muratomo circled the Cherry Tree a second time, swirling like a whirlwind.

And now Kiyosi's red helmet and dazzling sword could be seen leading the Takashi out the gate they had broken in through. A cheer went up from the Muratomo as they rushed out of the palace grounds in pursuit of their foe.

"Stop!" Jebu called. "Stop! Close the gate and hold the palace." But the samurai flooded past Jebu as if he were just another ornamental tree on the palace grounds. The Muratomo vanguard, led by Domei's white plume, was already far down Redbird Avenue. Jebu and a handful of Muratomo samurai remained behind. In a moment the walled park was nearly empty.

A strange silence fell. The screams and shouts and clatter of battle faded in the distance. All that remained, besides Jebu and the few samurai, were hundreds of armoured bodies scattered over the white gravel of the outer grounds and the inner compound. Here and

there lay a severed head, arm or leg, a dark lump of leather-wrapped flesh surrounded by a puddle of blood. Blood was everywhere, in pools, splashes and streams, as if the palace grounds were white paper on which a giant calligrapher had been writing with red ink. The white of the Muratomo and the red of the Takashi, thought Jebu. Together they have inscribed their poem of war on the most sacred ground of Sunrise Land.

The realm would never be the same again. This palace had been built four hundred years ago by Kammu, the ancestor of the Takashi. Since then it had been the centre of harmony and serenity for the whole empire. Now it was splashed with blood and littered with mutilated bodies. The Emperor would undoutedly survive these great changes that were shaking the land, but he would not govern, nor would his ministers. Whoever governed in the future would govern with the sword.

Men screamed for help, other men begged for a quick death, while some groaned in half-consciousness. The few Muratomo samurai who had stayed behind walked about identifying their dead comrades and trying to help the wounded. Others systematically went from one wounded Takashi to the next, slitting throats, spilling more blood on the white stones. Some performed the same service as a mercy for the badly injured Muratomo. Jebu looked down at his armour, dappled with blood.

Young Hideyori came up to him, wiping his sword clean with a white cloth. "We had better get these men together, shike. The Takashi will be upon us at any moment."

"You saw that? Good, Hideyori-san. You'll make a good general."

Hideyori smiled, his eyes as remote and cold as ever. "You saw it and I saw it, but my father didn't see it. My father-" He broke off,

shaking his head.

"There'll be too many of them for us to fight," said Jebu.

"We can hold the inner compound. Or at least the Ceremonial Hall." "Yes, and the last of us to die can set fire to it."

"Why not?"

"Nonsense. I'm going to deliver you to your father alive." "A foolish promise, impossible to keep."

At that moment the lookout on the inner wall gave a long, shrill cry of alarm, and the storm was upon them again. There was no stopping the Takashi who swarmed up their scaling ladders, planted their blood-red flags on the parapets, and dropped from the walls to the ground like a swarm of beetles falling upon a mulberry tree.

"This way," Jebu called. Eollowed by about fifty Muratomo samurai, he and Hideyori burst through the unguarded gateway leading to the northern part of the palace grounds. Takashi samurai raced after them.

Half the Muratomo samurai, forced to act without orders, stopped, turned and formed a defensive line to hold back the Takashi. Jebu could see Kiyosi's dragon-crowned helmet as it passed through the gateway through which they had just escaped. A mass of Takashi fell upon the Muratomo line. Then Jebu could see no more.

They ran past the Imperial residential buildings surrounding the little park in the north-west section of the grounds. A samurai beside Jebu took an arrow in the back and fell into the ornamental pool. Erightened maidservants and ladies-in-waiting peered out at them. Some were supporters of the Muratomo and called out frantic questions, which Jebu and the samurai ignored.

Beyond the residential buildings Jebu saw a stable. There was no time to saddle the horses. Panting, their breath steaming, the men threw themselves on the animals' bare backs. There were only a dozen horses. Those samurai who were left without horses turned and lined up to hold off pursuers.

They rode for the north-west gateway in the outer wall. A Takashi humming-bulb arrow shot past Jebu's head with a piercing whistle. Jebu decided that if the Takashi caught up with them he would turn and fight them at the gate, giving Hideyori time to escape.

They were through the gate and galloping wildly down the city streets. A startled ox pulling a carriage lumbered out of their way and crashed into a near-by wall. What was anyone doing on the streets on this day? Arrows splintered against the pavement behind them. Jebu jumped, his horse over the low wall against which the ox had just blundered, followed by Hideyori and six other mounted samurai. They rode through the gardens of a nobleman's estate past screaming, terrified servants.

In a short time they had lost themselves among the houses of Heian Kyo aristocrats. Pursuit seemed to have been called off. Eor the moment the Takashi had what they wanted, the palace.

Hours later, circling cautiously through the streets, they found the main body of Muratomo warriors. Domei was sad and tired. His force had been greatly reduced, not only through casualties but because of men getting lost in the streets, wandering away or, discouraged, fleeing.

While Jebu and Hideyori had been looking for Domei, he had realized too late that the Takashi were doubling back for the palace. His men had reached the main gate only to find a much larger army

than their own in possession. Then they had marched across the city in the hope of mounting an attack on the Rokuhara, but the Takashi stronghold was occupied by Sogamori with an even larger force of samurai. Domei estimated that between the men stationed at the Rokuhara and the Takashi allies who had come in from the countryside, there were forty thousand Takashi samurai in the city.

"They hold the Imperial Palace against us. They have the Emperor and the Retired Emperor in their hands. Both Their Majesties have proclaimed the Takashi their defenders and us outlaws. Everything has turned out exactly opposite to my hopes." Suddenly he lifted his head and smiled, almost gaily. "Many times the falcon stoops and comes up with empty claws. Then he must fly away to try again."

Jebu glanced at Hideyori. The fifteen-year-old boy was staring at his father with an appraising look that was almost contemptuous.

A few hours later the Muratomo army was streaming out of Heian Kyo by one of the western gates. The weary samurai glanced over their shoulders from time to time, expecting a Takashi pursuit. Jebu rode with Domei. One of Hideyori's older brothers lay in a horse-drawn carriage, his right leg almost severed. Jebu had attended him with Zinja remedies, a powder to clean the wound and a tourniquet to stop the bleeding.

When they reached the heavy woods at the base of the mountains north of Heian Kyo, snow began to fall.

Domei said, "We must scatter. My older sons must go with me. But, Hideyori, I want you far, far from Sogamori's reach. Since Jebu brought you safely through the battle, I will entrust you to him."

Domei turned to Jebu. "Lord Shima no Bokuden of Kamakura is a secret ally of mine. He is not a very good ally-he feigns friendship for

both sides. But he should be able to see that Hideyori can be valu able to him, and only he is far away enough and powerful enough to protect Hideyori from the Takashi." Domei sighed heavily. "My youngest son, Yukio, is in the capital. I can't save him. Hideyori may be the last of us. He is the future of the Muratomo clan."

Jebu nodded, astonished at the revelation that the calculating Lord Bokuden, Taniko's father, was in league with the Muratomo. Perhaps that was the reason he had relied on one inexperienced Zinja to escort his daughter through Muratomo territory to Heian Kyo. And the reason their party was attacked only once. But Jebu agreed that Bokuden could not be considered a very trustworthy ally.

When Hideyori had walked away, leaving Domei and Jebu alone, Domei let his head drop.

"I have been a fool, shike. I helped the Takashi destroy my father and now I have ruined myself and my sons. I have done everything wrong. I would welcome death now."

Jebu said, "In my Order we are taught to see that all is one. Victory or defeat, life or death, it is all the same. The act is everything, the result nothing."

Domei shook his head. "It would comfort me to believe that. But I can't. Go now, Jebu."

Chapter Thirteen

Eive days after the Muratomo defeat at the Imperial Palace, Moko brought Taniko the news that Domei had returned to Heian Kyo. Taniko was again at the Empress's Wisteria Hall, Horigawa having rushed back to the city as soon as he heard that the Muratomo had been driven out of it. Empress Sadako was prostrate in her chambers, still not recovered from the fright Domei's insurrection had given her. Lady Akimi was conspicuously absent.

Moko knelt on the veranda outside Taniko's room and spoke to her through the screen, shaking his head.

"It was very sad. Domei and his older sons were attacked by a party of Takashi samurai. They fought their way through, but all their escort was scattered. Domei and his three sons found themselves alone in the mountains in a blizzard, with their enemy in hot pursuit. One son was wounded and could not keep up. He begged his father to kill him, rather than allow him to fall into the hands of the Takashi. Einally Domei gave in and stabbed his son in the heart. At least the boy did not cut his belly open, as some samurai do when they want to kill themselves."

"Horrible," said Taniko. "And Domei still couldn't escape?"

"He tried, my lady. He and his two remaining sons dug a grave for the dead young man and struggled on through the falling snow. They stopped at a farmhouse to rest, not realizing how close behind them were the Takashi samurai. The peasant who offered them hospitality betrayed them. Domei was bathing when his enemies burst in upon him and captured him. The two sons were also unarmed. The Takashi took all three prisoner and brought them back by order of Sogamori, to be publicly executed here. They even dug up the body

of the dead son and brought his head back to the capital. Many other Muratomo leaders are to be beheaded as well."

"How sad. What of Domei's two younger sons?"

"One of them, Yukio, is here in the capital at the home of his mother, the Lady Akimi, whom you know. They are both under house arrest. The other-this is very interesting, my lady."

Taniko leaned forward and peered through the screen. She could see that Moko was smiling, revealing all the gaps left by his missing teeth. "What is it?"

"You might not have heard this, because you had fled the capital with your honoured husband when the fighting was going on, but a huge Zinja monk with hair of a fiery colour is said to have performed prodigies in the battle for the Imperial Palace."

Taniko's heart beat faster. "That can only be one person."

Moko nodded. "So I thought, my lady. I have also heard that this same monk escorted Domei's other young son, Hideyori, into the north-east."

The north-east, Taniko thought. She would have to send a secret message to her father to watch for them.

"When are the executions to take place?"

"In three days' time, in a pit beside the prison at a place called Rokujo-ga-hara, where Rokujo Avenue crosses the Kamo River. All around the execution ground poles have already been set up, and the heads of a dozen of the better-known rebels who were killed in the fighting look down on passers-by. Truly, as I heard a monk say, we must be living in the Latter Days of the Law."

"Yes," said Taniko. "Moko, I want to know so much more about the world than I do. All I can see is what happens within this Nine-Eold Enclosure. It is a great pity that Captain Domei and his sons must die. I, knew and like him. But the power of men to execute other men in the name of the Emperor is what holds this realm together. If I want to know the world, I must know this. Will you go to the execution and be my eyes, Moko? Will you see them for yourself and me?"

"I've seen a good deal of killing in my life," said Moko. "And I'll probably have to see much more before I myself step into the Great Void-or am pushed. The last thing I want is to go look at killings that I don't have to see. But if it will help you, my lady, I'll go, and I'll tell you about it."

Moko went to the execution ground early to find the best possible vantage point. The place where the condemned were to die was a wide, circular depression, somewhat deeper than the height of a man, beside the Kamo River. Court attendants in shining, light green robes had already roped off the area nearest the pit for the noble witnesses. Moko saw that if he joined the crowd of common onlookers on the riverbank he would be too far from the edge to see anything.

But there was a huge, old cherry tree beside the prison which had long been used for public floggings. Erom its topmost branches a man would have a fine view. Used to working on buildings, Moko had no fear of heights. In a moment he was securely perched on a high, but strong, limb that would allow him a good view of the proceedings.

It was only after he was settled on his perch and could look around a bit that he saw a pair of dead eyes staring at him. A pole bearing the head of a rebel killed in the fighting at the Imperial Palace had been set close to the cherry tree. A bit shocked, Moko took a deep breath

and winked at the head.

"Good morning to you, my lord, whoever you are. I trust you are not suffering?"

Just think, this could be the head of the shike Jebu. But they probably wouldn't bother to set a monk's head up on a pole, any more than they would his own.

Gradually the area around the pit filled up with spectators. Carriages brought the men of rank, who were admitted to the best positions, close to the edge of the pit. Erom his cherry-tree limb Moko could see along Rokujo Avenue, which was filled with ox-drawn carriages-wickerwork carriages, palm-leaf carriages, and the towering, elaborate Chinese carriages with their green-gabled roofs, whose use was restricted to the Imperial family and the highest officials of the Court. The carriages blocked one another's way, and Moko watched with amusement as three fights broke out among forerunners of rival noblemen.

The confusion was rendered worse when a mounted troop of Takashi samurai, their gold ornaments gleaming in the morning sun, forced their way down the centre of the avenue, carriage attendants scurrying out of the way of their horses' clattering hooves. In the distance Moko saw a blaze of gold, and as it came closer he recognized the gold roof of the Emperor's palanquin, an enormous, magnificently decorated portable building carried by dozens of men and surmounted by a golden phoenix. The Takashi horsemen must be substituting for the palace guard, destroyed in Domei's insurrection. People fell to their knees as the Emperor passed. Moko was awestruck as he watched the palanquin pass near his cherry tree and settle on a commanding spot on the riverbank.

Sudden horror froze Moko. In his excitement at these splendid sights

he had forgotten the age-old rule that no one's head may be higher than the Emperor's. If anyone saw him up here now, he would be dragged down, and the Emperor's guards would chop him to bits. It was too late to climb down. The sacrilege had been committed. He must remain absolutely still. His only hope was that no one had seen him climb up here and that no one would see him during the executions. He might, he realized with increasing dread, have to remain in this tree until nightfall, and even then he would be in terrible danger when he tried to climb down.

The curtains of the Emperor's palanquin were opened. In spite of his terror, Moko studied the Emperor curiously. Nijo wore a high, jewelled head-dress and a massive diamond necklace. His silk gowns, worn one over the other, were so voluminous that he seemed like a bodiless head resting on piles of magnificent fabrics. His cloak was of plum red lined with scarlet, chosen, Moko suspected, because the colour matched the mood of this occasion. The young Emperor's face was powdered white and was without expression-almost without features. It was perfectly round, with a tiny mouth, nose and eyes, and a wisp of a beard on the point of the chin.

Smiling triumphantly, Prince Horigawa, Lady Taniko's repulsive husband, sat on a bench below the palanquin along with a number of other nobles in violet Court cloaks. Beside Horigawa sat a heavy-set, balding man whom Moko had also seen before-the Takashi clan chieftain, Sogamori. His broad face was alight with relish, as if he were about to sit down to a fine banquet. He and Horigawa were like a pair of swollen toads, on the verge of bursting with pleasure over their victory.

Now the condemned men, wearing only fundoshi, loincloths, were marched out of the prison and down a ramp into the pit. There were twenty of them. The famous Muratomo chieftain, Domei, was the first to enter the pit. Moko had seen him before, riding through the city on

horseback. How sad, Moko thought, that this splendid man's life must be cut short, while the ugly and poisonous Horigawa lived on and on.

Eive executioners stood across the pit, facing their victims. One of them was Kiyosi, scion of the house of Takashi, dressed in red-laced armour decorated with black lacquer and gold ornaments, and an underrobe of red brocade. He held a long, deeply curved sword.

The first to die would be five of Domei's lieutenants. They stepped forward. A courtier in a light green robe read off the list of their crimes, concluding with treasonous uprising against the Emperor. The Emperor's face remained blank. The five turned and bowed, first dutifully to the Emperor, then loyally to Domei, finally politely to their executioners. They knelt.

Moko wondered, are they thinking about what is going to happen to them? Are they fully aware of it? Or are they trying not to think about it? Moko remembered how he had felt when Jebu said he was going to behead him. His whole body had gone ice-cold and he had thought he was going to lose control of his bowels. It was the worst feeling in the world. And these men had endured that feeling for days, ever since they had learned they were going to be executed.

The five executioners, including Kiyosi, stood over the condemned men, their blades flashing in the sun. They swung their swords up at the same time.

Eive blades fell, full force, on five necks. The blows propelled each head a short distance, and the kneeling bodies collapsed like sacks of rice. Erom each headless neck a bright pool of blood spread on the sand, which was as white as a snowdrift. There was a murmur of mingled excitement, approval and horror from the onlookers.

Moko's stomach heaved violently. As he had told Taniko, he had seen men killed before, but had never seen a public execution. It must be, he thought, the first time for many of the people below him as well. In his revulsion he almost forgot the danger of his own position, that he might, at any moment, be discovered and join the dead down there.

Several courtiers fainted, one almost falling into the pit but saved when his attendant grabbed his arms. The unconscious men were carried out of the crowd by their servants. Another courtier suddenly vomited all over his beautiful lavender cloak, to his great embarrassment and to the amusement of several of his fellows. How shameful to vomit in the sight of the Emperor, thought Moko, once again forgetting his own precarious position. Sogamori, from his position near the Emperor, smiled scornfully.

Slaves dragged the bodies out of the pit by the ankles while foot soldiers drove a sharpened pole into the base of each skull and raised the heads up so that even people in the distant parts of the crowd could see. Moko held his breath, realizing that now he was in the greatest danger because people would be looking upwards. He prayed to the ghost of the warrior facing him- to turn the eyes of the living in any direction but his.

The ritual of execution was repeated twice more, each time with five victims. Domei was being saved till last, Moko realized. He would have to see his followers die, then his sons' heads hoisted on poles before he himself could find the release of death. What cruelty.

Before Domei's two elder sons knelt to be executed, they stood and looked long at their father. Were they accusing him of having led them to their deaths, or were they exchanging one last, affectionate look before going into the Great Void? Moko hoped it was the latter.

Domei's expression did not change as he saw his sons beheaded.

Now it was his own turn. He knelt and spoke. "The clan chieftain of the Muratomo dies proclaiming his unswerving loyalty and that of the Muratomo family to His Imperial Majesty. He begs His Imperial Majesty to remember that the Muratomo are ever the teeth and claws of the Emperor."

Kiyosi was to execute Domei. He raised his sword, its gold and silver mountings glittering, high over his head, then brought it down with a loud, "Ha!" While Domei's body was still shuddering in death, Kiyosi turned his back on it and bowed to the Emperor. The Emperor's face remained as soft and empty as bean curd in a bowl. I'll bet he's never seen a public execution before, either, thought Moko, and I'll bet he wishes he could look away, or even vomit. But he doesn't dare, because he's the Emperor. Odd, that the Emperor is less free than anyone else.

To his surprise, Moko noticed tears sparkling on Kiyosi's face. Even this enemy of the Muratomo is moved by these deaths, he thought. Then Kiyosi happened to glance upwards. His eyes met Moko's.

Moko's heart stopped beating, and he almost let go of the tree limb. Be merciful, Buddha, he thought, and tried to prepare himself for death. He could not help shutting his eyes.

Eor a long moment nothing happened. Then Moko slowly opened his eyes again. Kiyosi was still looking at him, the dark brown pupils burning into him. In his terror, Moko saw Kiyosi's square, chiselled face with a luminous clarity, as if it were the face of a Buddha or a kami. This great lord must defend the sanctity of the Emperor. It is his duty to kill me.

Kiyosi smiled ever so slightly, and looked away.

It was a long time before Moko was able to breathe normally again. It began to look as if the great lord were going to spare his life. Of course, he might be waiting until the executions were over, so that the dignity of the occasion would not be spoiled by the skewering of one as lowly as he. But somehow Moko doubted that. There had been kindness in the smile. All Moko had to do was stay put until dark and hope that nobody else saw him. Which was quite a lot to hope for. He recalled the shike telling him the Zinja had been trained to hide in trees for days. Moko would have a tale to tell the shike now-if he ever saw him again.

Sogamori, rather than the Emperor, gave an imperceptible hand signal and two courtiers closed the curtains of the Emperor's palanquin. The multitude of men who carried the Emperor leaped up and raised the gilded palace on poles to their shoulders. The troop of Takashi guards formed their mounted ranks before and behind the palanquin. The forerunners raised their batons and began shouting.

Behind the Emperor the high nobility walked to their waiting carriages. Moko watched Kiyosi, the man who had spared his life, as the lean young man walked away with his short, heavy father, Sogamori. Sogamori climbed into a Chinese-style carriage, while Kiyosi mounted a chestnut horse and rode away.

Eor Moko, the remainder of the afternoon was the worst ordeal of his life. The major executions were over, and the Emperor and the great lords had left, but there were still nearly eighty rebels who had to kneel in the bloody pit and die. Trapped in the cherry tree, his arms and legs slowly growing numb, Moko had to watch all of it.

At last darkness fell. There was no moon that night. When he felt safe, Moko somehow managed to get his limbs working and he half-climbed, half-fell, down from his perch in the tree. He was barely able to walk.

He found his way to a wine shop in a side street and revived his aching body with the help of a jar of warm sake. Amazing, he thought, that the young Takashi lord, who had not hesitated to chop off men's heads with his sword, had let a sacrilegious little carpenter live. Moko remembered the tears running down Kiyosi's cheeks after he beheaded Domei. There was compassion in the young samurai such as Moko had seen in only two other people-the Lady Taniko and the shike, Jebu.

Thinking of his lady, and still shaken from the horror and pain of what he had seen and endured that day, Moko forced himself to his feet, paid for his sake, and set out for the Imperial Palace.

Chapter Fourteen

It was early spring when Jebu and Hideyori stood in the presence of a trembling Shima no Bokuden.

"Does Domei reach from beyond the grave to destroy his friends? This house has always been known as a Takashi house. How could I shelter you here?" Lord Bokuden demanded.

"What do you mean, from beyond the grave?" Hideyori said quickly. "Is my father dead?"

"Yes, of course. And your brothers. Had you not heard?"

Jebu felt a pang of grief at the thought that the brave, strong Domei, in whose service he had spent two years, no longer lived. He looked at Hideyori, whose face was without emotion.

"How did they die?" Hideyori asked.

"One of your brothers was badly wounded, and your father helped him to die. Domei and the other two were captured, taken back to Heian Kyo and publicly executed."

"What of Yukio, my half-brother?"

"I have heard nothing," said Lord Bokuden, waving away these family griefs as if he were trying to drive away a mosquito. "But you can see that your family's cause is hopeless. Erom now on the Shima must be thoroughly Takashi."

"I understand," said Hideyori. "I ask you in the name of whatever bond existed between you and my father to give me shelter for a few days. I think I will continue to travel north. I need time to make plans

and to send out messages."

Standing beside him, Jebu turned and looked at Hideyori. It was a serene profile that bore the mark of authority. There was an unbelievable calm and strength about this fifteen-year-old boy, Jebu thought. Another youth might have prostrated himself before Lord Bokuden, blubbering for mercy.. Hideyori might be the last living male in his family, but he was absolutely controlled. Jebu remembered The Zinja Manual: "He who does not feel fear is dead." What was the price of Hideyori's control?

After the monk and his charge had left the room, Lord Bokuden took Taniko's letter out of his desk and re-read it. The letter was in Chinese.

Honoured Eather,

This is to warn you that Hideyori, the heir to the chieftainship of the Muratomo clan, is said to be headed in your direction. I have never questioned your dealings with these warring clans, but neither am I unobservant. I have reason to think, therefore, that Hideyori may come to you for help.

At this moment the Takashi are in the ascendant, and you may be tempted to display your loyalty by sending Hideyori's head to Heian Kyo. I suggest that this young man may be worth more to you alive than dead.

As the Takashi grow more powerful they grow more arrogant and make more enemies. If Hideyori is alive, he will be the natural person for those enemies to rally around. Whoever has protected Hideyori will then hold the key to the future.

These suggestions are offered in all humility and in gratitude to you

for having placed me here, where I can observe great events.

Your loving daughter, Taniko

Lord Bokuden grunted. What possessed this daughter of his to think she could advise him in as perilous a matter as this? Still, there was sense in what she said. But he had to assure the Takashi of his loyalty.

Taking up his brush, Bokuden began a letter to Sogamori.

Esteemed Minister of the Left,

I have Muratomo no Hideyori. What shall I do with him? I shall hold him until I hear from you.

Tears formed rivulets in the white powder that coated Akimi's face. It is not pleasant to see a woman of the Court cry, thought Taniko.

"I loved Domei," Akimi said. "He was a warrior of force and fire, but he was a gentle, simple man as well. I loved him so much I went through the agony of going to see his head displayed at the execution ground. Now all I have left is Yukio, my sweet, beautiful boy. I fear his father may have condemned him to death."

"How?" asked Taniko.

"Domei's legacy to his family is a blood feud with the Takashi. The only way the Takashi can protect themselves is to kill all his sons. And Yukio is in their power."

Taniko put her hand on her friend's. "What can I do to help?" She understood how Akimi felt about Domei. She had only to compare the feeling with her own for Jebu. It could have been Jebu's head on a pole overlooking Rokujo-ga-hara.

Akimi said, "If you will permit me to speak of your husband."

"Of course." Be careful now, Taniko told herself. In this house anyone could be hiding behind the panels, listening. So far I have said nothing to endanger myself.

"Your husband has great influence with Sogamori. And I believe-excuse me for saying it, but fear for my son's life makes me bold-when blood might be shed, Prince Horigawa is in the forefront of those who call for shedding it."

"I do not think Prince Horigawa would deny that," said Taniko dryly. "He would speak of the need to strengthen the power of the Emperor and to protect the government from treasonous factions."

Akimi bowed her head. "Of course. Only-my son is not a danger to the Emperor and he does not think of treason. He is a child. His only thoughts are of watching the wild birds on Mount Higashi and playing the flute. His flute-playing is-beautiful to hear-" She broke down in sobs.

Taniko felt tears fill her own eyes to overflowing. She pressed Akimi's hand in both her own. "I have no influence whatever with my husband, dear Akimi-san. But I will do what I can."

Akimi looked up. Weeping had destroyed her painted face. "Believe me, Taniko-san, I will do anything-anything at all-to save the life of my son."

The scowling, florid face of Sogamori appeared in Taniko's mind. She recalled his look of frustrated lust when his son, Kiyosi, had ridiculed him for attempting to woo Akimi. Sogamori, she thought, might do anything-anything at all-to have Akimi.

"I believe you can win Sogamori over," Taniko said, "if you are willing to pay the price. I can say no more now. Don't give up hope. I'll send word to you when the moment seems right."

On the fifteenth day of the Fifth Month of the Year of the Horse, Horigawa held a winding water banquet. Such affairs were a tradition that went back centuries. Horigawa chose the evening of the full moon, so that the silver disk would be reflected in the stream that wound through his garden. Eor seven days before the banquet Taniko resided at Horigawa's house to help oversee preparations.

She sent Moko to Akimi with a special message. The chances that

Horigawa would find out what she was doing were all too good, she realized. If he did find out, he would undoubtedly punish her severely. But Akimi had lost nearly everything. To lose her son would kill her. Something inside Taniko-perhaps it was what Jebu called the Self-would not let her abandon her friend.

The evening of the banquet, the landscaped gardens around Prince Horigawa's mansion were bright with lanterns. Carriages pulled by oxen bedecked with ribbons and flowers rolled up before the main gateway. Servants ushered each guest to a designated place along the twisting banks of the stream. To enhance the beauty of his artificial brook Horigawa had added a few bridges, ponds and small waterfalls, as well as a number of new plants along its edges.

The guest of honour was Sogamori. He arrived last of all and was seated approximately at mid-point along the stream's course, so that he need be neither the first nor the last to recite a poem. His son, Kiyosi, who had already arrived, was seated a few paces downstream from his father. The other guests included courtiers, ministers and high-ranking Takashi.

Unknown to Horigawa, one other person was present. Lady Akimi had left her carriage some distance from the Shima mansion and, cloaked and hooded, had come the rest of the way on foot. Taniko let her in by a side gate.

Taniko was painfully aware of the risks of her plan. She might have misjudged Sogamori. Meeting Akimi at this banquet could have the opposite effect on him from what she intended. He might even be provoked to take action against the boy Yukio and against Akimi as well. As for Horigawa, even if the plan were successful, only the kami knew what that cruel and bloodthirsty man might do. Taniko sent Akimi to a vacant chamber in the women's pavilion, promising to come for her at an opportune time.

When the guests were seated, Horigawa gestured to Taniko, who filled a round-bottomed wine cup with hot sake and set it adrift at the head of the stream. As host, Horigawa began the recitation of poetry by picking up the cup, sipping from it and declaiming:

Straw dogs turn to ash

Under the Red Dragon's breath.

There was laughter and applause. No one doubted that the sacrificial straw dogs referred to the defeated Muratomo. Erom some courtiers, however, Taniko heard a murmur of distaste. Eor hundreds of years the best people of the capital had looked on fighting and bloodshed as activities fit only for savage beasts, certainly nothing to write poetry about.

The next guest along the stream bank took the cup out of the water, sipped the sake and said:

That pale cloud in flight-White smoke or a dragon's tail?

Most of the guests laughed, Sogamori loudest of all. Taniko looked beyond him at the handsome Kiyosi, who was staring pensively into the stream.

Horigawa had set the tone for the banquet, and most of the guests followed with poems on the martial theme, many of them ancient Chinese ballads of war. A few who disapproved recited poetry on subjects more traditional for a winding water banquet: flowers, the seasons, the moon. Whenever this happened, Taniko noticed, Sogamori glowered at the offender. Clearly, he wanted to celebrate his triumph.

After one elderly doctor of literature had recited, in a stately, old-fashioned style of declamation, a poem about the moon's reflection on the water, Sogamori suddenly rose. As the noble next to the doctor of literature drank and began to recite, Sogamori quietly stepped away from the stream and drew a small, dark object shaped like a cherry from his sleeve. He went over to a lamp and set fire to the stem of the cherry, then tossed it within a few feet of the learned doctor.

There was a noise like a thunderclap and a blinding flash. The old scholar leaped to his feet and nearly fell into the stream. Taniko was shocked and frightened. A harsh, powerful stench filled the garden. A puff of smoke drifted past the dwarf pine trees. It was as if Sogamori had unleashed an ugly, vicious demon.

A horrified silence had fallen over the banquet. It was broken at last by Sogamori's laughter.

"There's a new subject for poetry," he said loudly. Taniko glanced at Kiyosi and saw that he had his head down, staring resolutely at the stream, his expression a mixture-of embarrassment and disgust.

Horigawa, who should have been outraged at the disturbance, strolled over to Sogamori and said, "Most remarkable. Has the esteemed Minister of the Left taken up sorcery?"

Sogamori laughed and sat down. "Nothing magical. It's only a Chinese toy. I have a new man in my service, a barbarian from across the sea. He brought me a box of these little thunder balls. An amusing novelty, is it not?"

Taniko wondered about Sogamori's barbarian. Could he be from the same land Jebu's father had come from? Jebu had said nothing about these horrid fireballs.

Now it was Sogamori's turn to recite. He stood up, thrusting out his chest, and boomed out a Chinese poem about a battle that had been fought over a thousand years before:

His chariot horses draped in tiger skins,

Duke Wen charged the lords of Ch'en and Ts'ai.

The Right Division of Ch'u collapsed, Its battle flag dragging in the dust.

This was greeted with appreciative murmurs. Taniko observed that the old scholar who had been Sogamori's victim had left the banquet. After a few more poems, it was Kiyosi's turn to recite. Would he try to match his father in belligerence? Taniko wondered. Kiyosi remained seated, a thoughtful, faraway look in his eyes. He spoke in Chinese, so softly Horigawa's guests had to strain to hear.

Erontier war drums disrupt all men's travels.

I am fortunate enough to have brothers, but all are scattered; There's no longer a home where I might ask if they're dead or alive. How

terrible it is that the fighting cannot stop!

There was total silence after Kiyosi had finished. He set his wine cup adrift and gazed after it as if he were quite alone. All eyes turned to Sogamori. If he had been annoyed by poems that neglected warfare, what would he do when his own son recited a poem that deplored it? The man on Kiyosi's right took the cup out of the water and held it in a trembling hand, afraid to begin speaking.

"Who wrote that?" Sogamori asked in a low, hoarse voice.

"Tu Eu, honoured Eather," said Kiyosi. "One of the great poets of the T'ang dynasty."

Sogamori nodded. "What compassion. What depth of feeling. Truly, a poet who understands the sufferings of a war-torn land." With a lugubrious expression Sogamori reached for a wine cup and drank deeply.

Suddenly he grinned at Kiyosi. "My son's taste in poetry is flawless," he said proudly. "Just as his victory at the Imperial Palace shows that he has no peer in war."

Taniko could hear breaths being expelled throughout the group. An unpredictable man, Sogamori, she thought; a changeable man. There was no telling how he would react when she lured him to a secluded part of the garden to encounter Akimi.

The servants brought food, and the recitations resumed. Another cup of wine was launched down the stream, and another. The formality of the occasion began to dissolve.

People stood up and moved about. The flirtations constantly being conducted by courtiers took their toll on the guests, as this man or that woman slipped discreetly away from the stream to rendezvous in

the safe seclusion of the trees. Among the guests who stayed in their places, conversation gradually took the place of recitation.

Taniko quietly left Horigawa's side, motioning to a maid to take over waiting on the prince and those near him. She hurried to the room where she had secreted Akimi.

"Now is the time."

"Taniko-san, I'm terrified. What if something goes wrong?" "I'm terrified, too. What else can we do?"

"You did not have to do this much. I'll always be grateful to you, Taniko-san."

Returning to the banquet, Taniko unfolded the fan she had had painted especially for the occasion and took up a dish of sweetened fruits. She carried the dish to Horigawa, Sogamori and Kiyosi, who were deep in discussion.

"Nits make lice," Horigawa declared flatly.

"Twice in recent years the Takashi have been responsible for public executions," said Kiyosi. "Many think this scandalous. We have lost the goodwill of many important men, many families, and the people in general, because they view these killings with horror."

Taniko offered Sogamori an orange slice skewered on a sliver of wood. The heavyset Takashi chieftain smiled broadly at her. Taniko could see he must have been a very handsome man twenty years ago.

Smacking his lips after the orange slice, Sogamori said, "What have those executions to do with this question?"

"The Takashi are already called butchers," Kiyosi said. "It is your advice that has got us that name, Prince Horigawa." The young man's dark eyes blazed at the prince. "Do you want us to be known as child murderers, too?"

"Nits make lice," Horigawa repeated. "Let Hideyori and Yukio live, and they will trouble the Takashi for years to come. Kill them now, and they will be forgotten tomorrow. To kill a grown man sometimes takes a war. To snuff out the life of a child is quite easy." He snapped his fingers.

Her heart pounding, Taniko chose that moment, when Kiyosi and Horigawa were glaring at each other, to reach out, squeeze Sogamori's hand and place in it a slip of green-tinted paper, folded, with twisted ends. On it Akimi had written:

All must surrender

To the Red Dragon's power And none disobey.

In the forest he may work

His will on her whom he meets.

The meaning should be plain enough, Taniko thought.

When he noticed the paper in his hand, Sogamori turned to look at her, startled. Then his round face beamed knowingly.

Taniko hid behind her fan, letting him see the painting on it. It was unmistakably a representation of the shrine of the Beautiful Island Princess on Itsukushima, built and maintained by the Takashi family. Sogamori and Kiyosi had been on pilgrimage to that shrine when Domei raised his insurrection. Taniko stood, bowed to the three men and withdrew into the shadows. She hoped Horigawa was too intent

on his argument to notice her departure.

When she was among the trees on the edge of the garden a hand caught her arm. It was Akimi. Taniko looked back over her shoulder. Sogamori was reading the poem, holding it so Horigawa and Kiyosi could not see it. He slipped it into his sleeve and stood up. Squinting into the shadows, he tried to see Taniko.

Taniko handed her fan to Akimi and withdrew behind a tall stand of bamboo. Sogamori said something to Horigawa and Kiyosi that made them both laugh. He stretched and strolled towards the trees with an elaborate show of casualness.

Holding the fan before her face, Akimi stepped into Sogamori's path. As he approached her, she drew him deeper into the darkness.

"The painting on your fan shows exquisite taste, dear lady," he said, reaching out for her.

"Thank you, my lord," said Akimi with a light laugh.

"You do not sound like-I must see you," said Sogamori, taking Akimi's wrist and pulling the fan away from her face. He gasped when he recognized her.

"Is this some trick?"

"You may call it so if you wish, my lord. It was my poem that my friend Lady Taniko gave you. It was I who wished to meet you here."

Still holding Akimi's wrist, Sogamori looked down at her. "I was struck by your radiant beauty the first time I saw you at Court. I have never dared hope. You were always his. How can you come to me now, when it was I who destroyed him?"

"A woman can admire more than one man, my lord. The enmities of men do not mean so much to women. Because of him, I could never approach you. Now he is gone, and nothing stands between us, if you still deign to look upon me."

"You will be mine, then?" Sogamori was fairly panting.

Taniko felt tears burn her eyes as she thought of what her friend was sacrificing.

"My lord, I fear his angry ghost. But there is a way that we can set his spirit at rest. Then I can give myself to you fully."

"What is that?"

"That you promise to spare his children."

A few days later Horigawa came to the Shima mansion in a rage. Alone with Taniko, he seized her arm and twisted it violently until she pulled away from him.

"I have done nothing to deserve this treatment, Your Highness."

"Lord Sogamori has announced that he will spare the lives of the two Muratomo brats. An example of samurai benevolence, he calls it. The tenderness of a warrior. As if the samurai could know anything of ethics. It is like dressing a monkey in a courtier's robes. It is his lust for Lady Akimi that drives him to this foolishness. She beds with him now. This is your doing. Akimi came to visit you before my banquet. She met Sogamori at the banquet, even though she was not invited. I detect your hand in all this, my clever young lady of Kamakura." He advanced on her, his eyes narrowed to slits, his nostrils flaring, his face pale.

Taniko bowed her head. "As Your Highness says, I am just a child

from the provinces. How could I possibly have any influence in these high matters?"

Horigawa turned from her, pacing the room. "That young dog who came to kill me at Daidoji-he is to live. In the care of your father. Your father! After Domei was defeated he disappeared, and when he reappears it is in Kamakura, at your father's house."

"Do you think I sent him to my father, Your Highness? There is no way I could have done that. Doubtless, the young Muratomo was passing through Kamakura, and my father, being a loyal supporter of the Takashi, stopped him and held him."

"Oh, doubtless, doubtless. How do I know what passed between the two of you while I lay buried alive? When I think of the hours I spent under all that weight of dirt-well, you shall see what it is like to be buried alive." He stared at her with such hatred that Taniko, despite her contempt for him, was terrified.

"What do you mean?"

"You will not remain in Heian Kyo to thwart me again. As your husband I command you to move to my house at Daidoji. You will live there. I am not free to deal with you as I truly wish, because I need the support of your family. But I will keep you from tampering with my affairs. Prepare yourself. I expect you to be ready to move by tomorrow morning."

Oh, merciful Buddha, no, thought Taniko. He takes from me the only thing that makes life bearable. To leave the capital, to go into exile, no. If I can't be here at the centre of things he might as well kill me. I'll die there at Daidoji, of grief and boredom.

She knew it was useless to plead with him. Any sign that she was

suffering would please him and confirm him in his decision. Two women had virtually thrown their lives away to save Akimi's son, Yukio. She could only hope he would grow up to be worth it.

Chapter Fifteen

The Muratomo were finished, thought Jebu. Almost all the leaders of the clan were dead. Hideyori was as much Lord Bokuden's prisoner as his ward. Jebu himself could do no more for Domei's family. He worked his way southward towards the capital, still serving the Muratomo as the Order commanded. But the wings of the White Dragon had been clipped. Any lives lost now were being lost for nothing.

He was trudging over terraces of harvested rice. Behind him was another lost battle, if it deserved to be called a battle. The Takashi had ambushed a dozen hungry Muratomo samurai with whom Jebu had been riding. Jebu had warned them it might happen, but the Muratomo warriors had insisted that no true samurai would attack another samurai without proper warning and challenge. Whoever was leading the Takashi apparently didn't care about such niceties.

Outnumbered many times over, the Muratomo samurai had thrown away their lives. What good had their sacrifice done the dead Domei?

Jebu reminded himself to think as a Zinja. To a Zinja there was no good or evil, failure or success, life or death. The Zinja simply threw his energy into the task at hand and did not concern himself about the outcome. Erom that point of view, his Muratomo comrades, alive a few hours ago, now dead, had lost nothing. At the very least, they no longer suffered the pangs of hunger.

A rider emerged from the woods behind Jebu, galloping directly across the rice stubble. There was no point in trying to outrun him, and no place to hide. Jebu quickly slipped off his bow and arrows and laid them at his feet. He nocked one arrow and laid it across the bow. He drew his sword and waited.

The samurai approached to within ten feet of Jebu and stopped. He looked sleek, strong and prosperous, like a well-cared-for war-horse. Quite different from the ragged, half-starved Muratomo samurai Jebu had been riding with. The laces holding together the many small plates of his armour were dyed a deep magenta.

"I saw you riding with that pack of Muratomo dogs we jumped, and I saw you sneak away when the battle went against you. I will not tell you my name and lineage because you do not deserve the courtesy. You are merely to be exterminated, like vermin." He unslung his huge bow and positioned an arrow.

Jebu stood silently. The instant he saw the samurai's fingers twitch to release the bowstring he threw himself to the ground. The ordinary warrior always gives a warning-a movement of the hand or fingers, a tensing of the arm muscles-when he is about to move. He consciously commands his movements, unlike the Zinja, who acts as the Self directs.

As the thirteen-hand-span samurai arrow whistled overhead, Jebu had his own ready. He stood up and fired. The point of his willow-leaf arrow struck the samurai in the left eye and buried itself deep in his head. Jebu felt no pleasure as he watched the samurai slide out of his saddle. It was a bit too much like killing a duck sitting in the water.

Jebu seized the horse's reins. Holding the horse with one hand and speaking gently to it, he set his foot on the dead man's forehead and pulled the arrow from the crushed eye. He wiped the arrow and re turned it to its quiver. He took the man's sword and scabbard and strapped them to the saddle. Then he asked forgiveness of the samurai he had killed and looked around, trying to decide which way to ride.

Erom horseback he could see further. Behind him was the forest where they had been ambushed. All around him were rice fields. Before him were the hills and mountains, and beyond the mountains was Heian Kyo. It was the first time he had been this close to the capital since last winter when he had ridden out of it with the defeated Muratomo army.

Now it hardly mattered where he was. The Takashi controlled everywhere. Any place he went for food and a night's shelter would be the home of Takashi adherents or people who now claimed to be. He would have to say he was a Takashi man as well. A good thing about being a Zinja was that you could present yourself as serving one side or the other as you chose, or else you could pretend to be a simple monk minding his own business. Unless, of course, someone recognized you, as the now-dead Takashi samurai had.

But he had not eaten in over seven days. His Zinja training had inured him to going without food and even water for long stretches of time, but he could feel himself growing weaker. At this rate, soon he would no longer be able to draw his bow. He would have to stop somewhere. If we did not have to eat, he thought, all of us would be safe and free. It is when the bird lands on the ground to peck at seeds that the cat pounces.

Riding south towards the hills he caught sight of a manor house overlooking the rice paddies. Whoever owns that house is undoubtedly lord of this land, he thought. An important landowner would have to take one side or another. But this close to Heian Kyo and undamaged, it must be a Red Dragon house. The huts of peasants were clustered around the base of the hill on which the manor stood, and more huts climbed the hill behind it, where a high waterfall turned a mill wheel three times the height of a man.

He decided against asking the peasants for their hospitality. It would

endanger them, and they had little enough to share. No, the thing to do was ride boldly in through the gate, present himself as a Takashi messenger on an important mission, and demand shelter, food and provisions. While he was at it, he might get some news of the Muratomo and find out where he could rejoin them.

He rode through the rice fields and up to the gate of the mansion. A group of guards stood by it.

"I am Yoshizo, a monk of the Order of Zinja," said Jebu, using the name of a brother he knew was working for the Takashi. "I am on my way to Heian Kyo with a message for His Excellency, the Minister of the Left from-" Jebu said the first name that came to him "-his kinsman, Lord Shima no Bokuden of Kamakura. I require a night's lodging and food."

The guards didn't move. "That's a samurai sword and a samurai saddle," one said, gesturing with the naginata. "I didn't think Zinja monks used such fancy equipment."

"Quiet," said another guard. "He can kill you so quickly you'd be dead a minute ago. We'll find out soon enough if he's from Lord Bokuden. Come on in, monk."

The first guard brightened up. "Yes! Come in, monk." He grinned, stepped aside and waved the long-handled naginata towards the open gateway.

The manor house was old, Jebu saw, perhaps a hundred years old, built at a time when there was no need for fortifications. Both the stone wall around it, twice the height of a man, and the gate were new. A gang of workmen was putting up a wooden guard tower at one corner of the wall.

Jebu dismounted. One of the guards said, "I'll take your horse down to the stables, monk."

"Very good," said Jebu. There would be no easy escape now. He was angry with himself for the vanity of his sword-collecting project and for not getting rid of the saddle, or disguising it. If the samurai he killed were a local personage, the sword, the saddle and the horse might be recognized. But it was now too late to do anything but keep walking onwards.

The other guard took him into the courtyard and slammed and barred the gate. "Chief of guards!" he called. An armoured man wearing a sword immediately stepped from a building to the right of the manor house, trailed by a group of men carrying naginatas. This household had its own little army, Jebu thought.

"Chief Goshin," the guard said, "this monk claims to be from Lord Bokuden on a mission to the Minister of the Left in Heian Kyo. But he has a samurai's horse and equipment. I thought to myself, we've got a way of testing whether he's really from Lord Bokuden."

"Of course," said Goshin. He was a squat man with a frog-like face, huge eyes, flat nose, and wide mouth. "I'll go see her." He turned to his men. "Keep this monk at the ends of your naginatas. If he makes a move, skewer him at once. Don't hesitate, or you'll be dead. I've run up against these Zinja before." He spat out "Zinja" as if it were a foul word. Goshin turned and strode into the manor house.

Jebu stood in the centre of a ring of levelled naginatas. He looked at the guards calmly and kept his hands away from his swords and his bow. What kind of test did they have in mind, he wondered.

The sound of hammering distracted him. He looked over at the men building the guard tower. One of the carpenters, a short man who

gestured and shouted orders to the others, looked familiar, but he was too far away for Jebu to see his face.

"All right," said Goshin. "There he is, my lady. Do you recognize him?"

Jebu turned from the guard tower to the veranda of the manor house. Through the blinds he could just make out a shadowy figure.

Then he heard a light voice, like the chiming of temple bells. "I have seen this monk visit my father. Who could forget that hideous red hair?"

Jebu felt himself go cold and then hot. He wanted to laugh and call out to Taniko, run up the steps, push his way into the manor house and put his arms around her. He forced himself to look coldly in the direction of her voice as if he had never seen her before. He reminded himself that he was a monk named Yoshizo.

She went on, "Of course, he could know my father and still be working for the Muratomo. It is my father's custom to give his messengers a password to identify themselves to any members of the Shima family they might meet. Did Lord Bokuden give you such a word, monk?"

Jebu played along. "He did, my lady, but it is for your ears alone. I must take the liberty of whispering it to you."

"Come up, close to these blinds, then," came the icy voice.

"Careful, my lady," said the frog-faced Goshin. "He might just be trying to get close enough to you to seize you as a hostage."

"Goshin, I command you now, if he takes me hostage you are to kill both of us immediately." She paused significantly. "I'm quite sure

Prince Horigawa would want it that way."

Jebu slowly and carefully laid his bow and arrows and his two swords on the raked earth of the courtyard.

"It would be rude of me to approach you armed, my lady," he said. Then he looked coldly at the guards. "But let no one touch my weapons."

"A Zinja is armed even when empty-handed," a guard muttered.

Jebu strode forward, climbed the steps and stood beside the screen that hid Taniko. A faint scent of lilac came to him, and his head reeled. He feared the pounding of his heart must be visible to all. Goshin stood close to him, and Jebu gave him the same hard stare he had given the guards.

"This man is not authorized to hear the word," he said.

"Goshin?" said Taniko.

Grunting angrily, Goshin took a few steps away from Jebu. He drew his sword and stood poised to spring.

Leaning towards the screen until his lips were almost touching it, and looking into the bright eyes he glimpsed in the shadows beyond the screen, Jebu whispered, "The waterfowl is still snared in the lilac branch." He heard a faint sigh from within.

"Goshin," Taniko called, "this monk has given the correct password. He is a genuine messenger from my father. Since he is travelling to Minister Sogamori, he will see my husband. I have a message for my husband which I will give this monk."

Goshin glowered. "My lady, I still don't trust him. There are many

ways he could have learned this password. And there is the business of the samurai equipment he was-carrying."

Jebu turned to Goshin. "You are quite correct. Now that I have been identified as, I hope, a friend of this house, I can admit that I did steal the horse. Not far from here a party of Muratomo samurai was riding through the forest. I was with a Takashi band waiting in ambush. One of the enemy tried to escape on his horse. I jumped from a tree, and took his horse away from him. He seemed so unhappy about losing his horse that I killed him to spare him further grief."

Taniko greeted this story with her tinkling laughter, and soon all the servants and guards near by joined in. Only Goshin stood unsmiling, his bulging eyes filled with anger.

"Did you not already have a horse?" he demanded.

Jebu laughed. "Clearly you do not know Lord Shima no Bokuden, or you would not have asked that question. Lord Bokuden is not the most generous of employers. He felt my legs were strong enough to take me to Heian Kyo."

Behind the screen Taniko laughed again.

Goshin broke in. "You do not behave as Prince Horigawa would want you to, my lady. You are too familiar with this monk."

"Be silent, Goshin!" Taniko snapped. "My husband did not appoint you to teach me manners. I am mistress of this house, and in my husband's absence I rule here. You are dismissed. Monk, wait there. A maid will take you to my chamber when I am ready to receive you."

"May I collect my weapons, my lady?" Jebu asked.

Goshin said, "I will keep them for you, monk. You don't need

weapons here, since you are such a great friend of this house. Ask for them when you are ready to leave."

Reluctant to entrust his bow and arrows and his swords to this man, Jebu saw that he had no choice. He bowed. "Thank you."

Shortly afterwards, a maid led Jebu to the women's quarters and down a series of twisting corridors. As he had long ago been taught to do on entering a strange house, Jebu constructed and committed to memory a mental map of everything he could_ see.

At last he entered a large, dim room with a sleeping platform in the centre. On the platform was a screen of state whose curtains were painted to depict snow-covered mountains. Overcome with excitement, Jebu strode straight for the screen, meaning to step around it and see Taniko.

"Stop," she called from behind the curtain in a warning tone. Of course, Jebu thought, they must be under surveillance. He had allowed himself to be carried away by emotion, just the thing a Zinja was not supposed to do.

In a low voice Taniko went on, "We can be watched, but if we speak softly enough we cannot be heard. Sit down and talk to me. I am so happy to see you, my heart is like a butterfly just burst from its cocoon."

"When we parted I told myself I must never expect to meet you again," said Jebu. "Yet I knew I would think of you for the rest of my life. Not a day has gone by that I have not remembered that night on Mount Higashi overlooking the lights of Heian Kyo."

"I have not forgotten either. There has been nothing in my marriage to replace the memory of that night. I have known nothing but horror

and sorrow and ugliness since we parted."

Jebu felt as if a hand were crushing his heart. "How sorry I am to hear that. It would be like death to know that you had forgotten me, but I would accept it if it meant you had found happiness. We should have run away together instead of letting you go to that man. Tell me about the prince."

"He is cold and ugly and cruel. Let us not speak of him. Why are you travelling under a false name? Are you really working for the Muratomo?"

"Yes. The cause of the White Dragon is collapsing, but the Order has commanded me to stay with it."

"It is unfortunate that you said you were going to Sogamori," Taniko said. "He is well known in this house. Eor you to claim a connection with him raises suspicion. Horigawa is with Sogamori now."

At that moment Jebu heard bare feet on the wooden floor behind him. He whirled.

"Shike!" It was Moko, scuttling towards them and bowing from across the room.

"You do not know him, Moko!" Taniko snapped from behind her screen. "He is dead if they find out who he really is."

Moko stopped where he was, his face pale. He threw himself down on his knees.

"Eorgive me, mistress. Eorgive me, shike. Moko is so stupid-" Jebu smiled and patted him on the back.

"You can speak to him, but try to seem as if you are speaking to me,"

said Taniko. "Supposedly I am giving you instructions about the new guard tower."

Moko said, "I am so happy to see you, shike. I have missed you so much. But if you want to do the sensible thing you will run out of this room, through the garden and over the wall and across the rice paddies and not stop until you reach the woods. These guards will not rest until they kill you."

"They have no reason to kill me."

"These are men who need no reason to kill."

"I will not leave here-not yet."

"I understand, shike." Moko nodded towards Taniko, behind her screen. "She is the reason I stay in this hellhole with Horigawa and his bandits."

"We can safely talk no longer," said Taniko. "Go now, Moko." Moko bowed first to Taniko, then to Jebu. "My lady. Shike." He hurried away.

Taniko said, "You will have to leave me now. But I hope you can remember the way to my bedchamber. You will come here tonight." The words were more a demand than a request. Through a small opening at the top of the screen Jebu could see brown eyes looking into his.

"You must be silent as only a Zinja can be. I am watched constantly."

Smiling, Jebu stood and bowed. "As my lady commands." He turned and left the room, once again imprinting on his mind a picture of the corridors through which he passed.

Outside the women's quarters, Jebu found himself in the garden. He wished for brush and ink so that he might bring a poem to her tonight. The thought of the night to come filled him with a powerful yearning. Men whose constant companion was death needed women in a way most men couldn't understand, he thought. He wondered what Prince Horigawa had been doing to her. The thought that Horigawa might have hurt her filled him with rage. He hoped he could be tender enough with Taniko to wash away all the anguish she might have suffered.

The winter sky was empty and grey. The garden seemed bare and sad. How could a man such as Horigawa have a garden that would look anything but sad? Jebu stood awhile, letting pebbles drop through his fingers into the brook, then turned to leave.

The unseen sun was setting and the early winter evening was coming on, the empty grey sky turning to a cold black. Jebu walked through the main yard of the estate just as the gate was being shut for the night. He went into the building that housed the manor's guards.

The men lounging in the guard room eyed him closely. He saw his bow and arrows and his two swords-his. own Zinja sword and the sword he had taken from the samurai who tried to kill him-hanging on the wall where all the other weapons had been gathered. He asked one of the men where he could get something to eat, and provisions for his departure in the morning.

"Just go to the kitchen and tell them you're a guest of the manor. There are so many people here, they're always cooking. If you have any trouble, just tell them you're a friend of Lady Taniko."

"Thank you." Jebu smiled at the man and left. In the kitchen a cook served him a meal of bean paste, rice, soup, cucumbers and slices of fish. The man seemed used to cooking for military men and

transients, Jebu noted. With practised swiftness the cook packed a box with enough provisions for a two-day journey.

"That's more than enough to get you to Heian Kyo, even if you travel slowly," he said.

Back in the barracks, Jebu settled down in a corner to meditate. He wanted very much to take his weapons from the wall, but knowing the guards probably had orders to stop him, he resisted the urge. He looked around for Goshin, but did not see him.

"Hey, monk!" It was the man who had directed him to the kitchen. "Want to share some of our warmth with us?" He pointed to a jar of sake being heated over a brazier.

"Monks don't drink sake, fool," one of the other men said.

"Thank you," said Jebu. "I'm not used to sake. I'm afraid it would go to my head."

The men talking around the brazier smiled and nodded to Jebu and went back to talking among themselves. Jebu sat cross-legged against the wall and closed his eyes. With Goshin gone, the atmosphere seemed much more friendly. One could even walk into this room and be unable to tell whether the samurai here fought for the Takashi or the Muratomo.

Chapter Sixteen

Jebu had deliberately chosen to sleep in a corner beside a crack in the screen. A stream of chill air came through the opening, but he ignored the discomfort, and as the long winter evening wore on he pushed the screen open by imperceptible degrees until there was a space about as wide as his hand. There were extra quilts scattered around the room for protection against the cold, and Jebu unobtrusively gathered several of these and carried them to his spot. The lamps burned out and one by one the men went to sleep.

When the room was dark Jebu bundled the quilts together on his futon so that it would look as if he were sleeping there. Then, glancing around the room to make sure he was not being watched, he pushed the screen open. On his hands and knees he slipped through and partially closed the screen again.

Looking around the darkened compound, he waited until he had spotted the spear-carrying guards walking their posts. Then, bent low, running silently on his bare feet and keeping to the shadows, he circled around the rear of the main house. Now he was in the garden. Neither moon nor stars shone tonight. He crept through the garden, making use of each small tree and shrub for cover.

At last he crouched by a corner of the women's house. He reviewed Taniko's directions as he searched the outer screens of the house for one that, as she had promised, was left partly ajar. When he found his opening, he thought of water and flowed up the steps and past the screen. Inside the women's house it was totally dark. He stood perfectly still for a moment, listening to rustlings and soft breathing coming from all directions. There was a strong scent of flower petals. After a few moments his eyes adjusted to the darkness in the building and he began to see where the walls and screens

were. If he made a mistake and entered the wrong room, the guards would be on him instantly. He counted the doorways and turnings, re-creating his mental map of the building.

Small fingers seized his arm. He stopped moving instantly, stifling the impulse to attack. He peered at his captor, putting his face close to the pale face that looked up at him. It was Taniko. He stood motionless for a long time, revelling in her closeness, the light touch of her breath on his cheek. He tangled his fingers in her unbound hair and, at last, pressed his face against hers. He let her lead him the rest of the way to her chamber.

Taniko's form was a slightly darker shadow against the general darkness of the women's house. Most of the fires were out, and there was a chill in the air. Together they mounted the sleeping platform, and Jebu lay down, his head resting on her single wooden pillow, while she drew curtains around them. She lay down beside him. The long years they had been apart, the danger of their coming together, roused him and made him eager to touch her, but for the moment he held himself back.

Taniko's arm went around him, and her cheek brushed his. "I have longed for you every night since we parted," she whispered. "The hope that I might spend another night with you has kept me alive. I have never forgotten Heian Kyo in the moonlight."

"Nor I," said Jebu. "I weep when I think of what you must be suffering." His fingertips stroked the nape of her neck.

Taniko drew back from him a little. Even in the almost total darkness he could see the glitter of intelligence in her eyes. "I will live. And I will learn. And some day, perhaps, I will use the knowledge somehow. I am learning what power is, and how men struggle for it."

"Taniko. Run away with me tonight. We won't stop running till we reach Hokkaido. We'll live on a farm on a mountainside unknown to everyone."

"Do you really think you could give up being a Zinja and become a farmer?" she whispered. "I know I could not give up the world I am discovering, even though every day of my marriage to Horigawa is torture. I will escape Horigawa somehow, but it will not be to hide in the north."

Jebu felt his eyes grow hot and wet. Her life was so wretched that she was deceiving herself with wild dreams. But he knew she would remain firm about not running away with him. Tonight was all they would have. He put his hand under her robes, found her breast and held it gently, feeling the nipple tickle the palm of his hand. He made himself touch her as lightly as autumn leaves fall on a forest floor, even though he was raging inside to spring upon her as a tiger seizes a deer. He waited until she had warmed to him, till the insistence of her movements told him her eagerness matched his. Then he pressed himself upon her and she drew him in. Their bodies were fully united for the first time. In total silence they climbed a mountain of pleasure together, leaped together from the summit, and drifted down together like falling snow.

Jebu felt a pang of regret that it should be over so quickly. But he held her, his hands exploring her body, and he discovered that their union was not by any means over. This time he silently guided her into the position favoured by the Zinja, she sitting on his crossed legs with her own legs locked behind his back. This time there was a whole mountain range of pleasure for her, while his own peak took exquisitely long to reach.

Eor most of the night they lay together, sometimes talking in whispers, sometimes joining their bodies. Jebu discovered energy

and desire in himself surpassing all previous experience.

At last Taniko said, "I heard a bird call. It will be dawn soon. You must go now while the night still protects us."

"I would stop the sun from rising if I could."

"That is not possible, Jebu. Least of all in the Sunrise Land." She laughed softly. "You will live, and I will live, and we will do what we must, and other nights like this will be ours again."

Tiptoeing on bare feet, she led Jebu through the dark corridors of the women's house to the open screen where he had entered. Again avoiding guards, Jebu crept back across the compound and pushed his way in through the space in the guard-room screen. He lay down on top of the bundle of quilts he had used to represent himself. Pleasantly exhausted, he dozed.

He heard footsteps. The entrance screen to the guards' quarters slid back and the blaze of a torch filled the room. He sat up, then sprang to his feet as he saw Goshin and Horigawa enter.

"That one!" Goshin cried.

Horigawa's small, square face turned in Jebu's direction. The narrow eyes seemed to glow as he nodded.

"I know who this man is. He is a monk named Jebu, who fights for the Muratomo. He was hired by Domei himself. Who else could possess such outlandish looks?" He smiled and turned to Goshin. "Please kill him at once, Goshin-san." He stepped back to watch, with a look of relish on his face.

Goshin was accompanied by three samurai in full armour, but he roared, "Every man to arms! Get your weapons down off the walls

and kill the spy!" The sleepy guardsmen scrambled for their swords, spears, and naginatas. Jebu saw his own bow and sword, untouched and unnoticed, still hanging on the wall.

If he must die, there would never be a better day than today, after the night with Taniko. To die now would simply spare him any more of the suffering of being parted from her.

A half circle of men came at him, spears levelled. He waited until they were at the right distance, then threw his body into a handstand, delivering a stunning kick to the jaw of one of the spear carriers, then somersaulted past the group. This put him among Goshin's three armoured men, who were caught by surprise. Jebu drove his stiffened fingers into one man's throat and plucked the long samurai sword out of the suddenly strengthless hand.

Jebu whirled the sword in a huge, whistling arc, and the three men backed away. This left Goshin exposed. With a backhanded sweep of the sword, using all the strength in his right arm, Jebu beheaded the chief guard.

Now he was face-to-face with Horigawa. But beyond Horigawa he saw his weapons. The men in the room were recovering from the initial attack. By the time he killed Horigawa they would be upon him. If he went for his weapons he had a chance of getting out alive. He did not care that much for saving his own life, but something-the Self perhaps-told him he had a duty to go on living.

Horigawa cringed away from Jebu, not even drawing his sword to defend himself. Jebu darted past him to the weapons that hung unguarded on the wall. Into his belt he thrust the sheathed sword he had brought with him. He leaned the sword he had just taken from Horigawa's guardsman against the wall. Slinging his quiver over his back, he drew his bow and fired a volley of arrows into the crowd of

guardsmen.

Make every arrow count. Demoralized by the death of one leader and the cowardice of the other, the guardsmen milled around uncertainly, and four of them died as Jebu's arrows struck home. One of them was the man who had offered him sake.

He took the Zinja sword down from the wall and buckled it around his waist. Slinging the bow over his shoulder, he drew the Zinja sword with his left hand and with his right hand picked up the samurai sword he had set down a moment before. Brandishing a blade in each hand, he advanced on the remaining guardsmen. Staring up at him, they started to back away, stumbling over the bodies on the floor.

"Protect me!" Horigawa screamed. "Protect me! He wants to kill me!" The guardsmen formed a ring around the prince.

Again Jebu saw that he could either attack Horigawa or escape. He praised the Zinja training that enabled him to keep anger and vindictiveness out of the fight. He bolted for the screen in the corner of the room where he had slept, smashed through the oiled paper and out into the pre-dawn cold.

As he ran he slid the samurai sword into his belt beside the prize he had taken earlier, and sheathed his Zinja sword. Running still, he drew the grapple out of his inner pocket, unfolded it and threw it at the top of the wall. He pulled himself hand over hand up the silk cable, dropped down the other side and ran for the stable. There it was, a low building, black against the purple sky.

A guard stood at the entrance to the stable. "Get away," Jebu snarled. "I'll kill you if I have to." The man ran, shouting loudly for help. Looking after him, Jebu could see lanterns bobbing around the gate

of the manor and he heard shouts of alarm and command.

He entered the stable, breathing in the strong, warm smell of horses. It was too dark to find the horse he had ridden here. He looked into the first stall and saw a big, dark shape. There was a row of bridles hanging on the stable wall. He took one down, went into the first stall and threw it on the horse, buckling it in place quickly and pulling the horse firmly out of the stable. The horse whickered fearfully and tossed its head.

"I know you've never met me before," said Jebu, "but you can save my life if you will." Hoping the horse would be strong, fast and obedient, Jebu scrambled on its bare back and dug his heels into its sides. The horse sprang forward and broke immediately into a gallop, as much from fright as from Jebu's command. Jebu slapped its neck encouragingly and over the wind shouted, "Good! Good!" into its ear.

He looked over his shoulder. The lanterns were streaming towards the stable. He would have a long start on them, though. He would be all right if he could make it into the wooded hills north of Heian Kyo. He might even find Zinja monks who would shelter him.

It was foolhardy to ride this fast through unfamiliar country in darkness, but he had no choice. He was glad he'd had to fight his way out of Horigawa's manor; it had taken his mind off the agony of leaving Taniko. But what was he leaving her to face? He could only hope that, whatever happened between her and Horigawa, she would live through it.

Sword drawn, Horigawa shoved aside the screen to Taniko's bedchamber and strode in. Taniko had heard the commotion at the guards' quarters and the men running across the compound. To quiet her pounding heart she insisted to herself that Jebu must have

escaped.

Horigawa lit a lamp. His black eyes glowed at her in its reflected light.

She yawned and said, "You are discourteous to me, Your Highness, bursting in and waking me at this hour. I am not prepared to receive you properly."

"It appears you have had other guests this night," Horigawa rasped. "Why do you come here with sword drawn, my lord? Do you expect to find enemies here in the women's quarters?"

"Yes. He might have fled to you. He killed Goshin and four other men."

He was still alive! He had escaped. Wonderful news! Goshin was the ablest of Horigawa's men. With him dead it was unlikely the others would be able to catch Jebu.

"The loss of Goshin, especially, is a great blow to me. It was he who rode to intercept me as I was returning here from Heian Kyo, and who persuaded me to speed my return to catch this deceitful monk."

Taniko could not resist taunting Horigawa. "It occurs to me that none of your men would be dead if you had not insisted on ordering them to attack a Zinja monk. The monk would have come and gone quietly without harming anyone."

Baring his teeth, Horigawa snarled, "You are to blame for those deaths. You knew who he was. You permitted him entry into this house under a false name."

"Yes, I tried to protect him. He is the man who brought me safely to you from Kamakura. He fought and killed to protect me. Your men

would have executed him on the spot if I had revealed his identity."

"He fights for the Muratomo. It was your duty to order the death of any Muratomo supporter who entered this house." He glowered at her. "Just what is your interest in this monk, that you were at such pains to protect him? Is he your lover?"

"My conduct has always been correct, Your Highness."

"Has it? We shall see." Suddenly Horigawa lunged at her and threw her down on the bed platform. She felt helpless, and in a momentary panic she pushed and kicked against him. He was trying to part her robes.

"Don't fight me," he gasped. "If you've done nothing wrong, you have nothing to fear." He had exposed the lower part of her body now, and he was peering at her and probing at her with his nasty, skinny little fingers. How lucky that she had cleansed herself after being with Jebu. It was a practice her mother had taught her, explaining that it was a wise precaution for women who didn't want to have too many babies. Men, said her mother, knew nothing about such things.

"No sign," Horigawa muttered, releasing her and stepping back. "If I had caught you with this Jebu last night, I would surely have killed you. Perhaps I will kill you anyway." He seized her hand. "He was here in your chamber yesterday talking to you. You and that carpenter, that cross-eyed fool. What were you talking about? Are you spies for the Muratomo?"

"If anyone in this house has secret dealings with the Muratomo, it is not I or the carpenter, my lord," said Taniko pointedly. This cruel hypocrite would have killed Jebu as a Muratomo spy and was constantly howling in the councils of the Takashi for the deaths of all leaders of the Muratomo faction. But she knew that messages had

passed between Horigawa and Muratomo no Hideyori, the young man who had come to kill him, who was still in exile at her father's house in Kamakura.

Horigawa turned white at her words. "How dare you?" he sput tered. "You could cost me my life if anyone believed- I think I will kill you!" His fear turned to rage, and he seized her little finger and bent it back, grinding his teeth. The finger broke, and she screamed. Without thinking she brought her fist around and drove it into his small, round belly. Gasping, he threw down her hand and backed away from her, holding his middle.

"You little snake!" he screamed. "I should cut you to pieces. I would have every right to. But I still need your father's goodwill. One day you will pay a high price for the indignities you have heaped upon me. And you will go on paying, for the rest of your life. That"-he pointed to the finger which she held tightly to ease the pain-"is only the beginning. Now I'm going to get that carpenter. He won't get off as easily as you have. He will suffer more than you can imagine, until he tells me all he knows about that Muratomo spy."

"He knows nothing. Spare him, please!"

"If his suffering causes you pain, then he shall surely suffer."

"If you plan on hurting me again," Taniko gasped, "you'd better bring your guards with you next time. You won't get near me by yourself."

"I have no wish to be near you," said Horigawa. "I will have my revenge in due time."

Chapter Seventeen

Early the following summer, Jebu was trudging up a mountain road on Kyushu, a road he had come to know very well as a boy. He reflected on the strangeness of perceived time. It had been three years since Taitaro sent him to Kamakura, but so much had happened to him, and he had done so much, that- it seemed more like six. But also it seemed as if it were only this morning that Taitaro and he had stood before the steps of the Waterfowl Temple and said a final goodbye to each other.

The monastery buildings had never been visible from the landward side. One climbed towards what appeared to be an empty hilltop for hours before any of the outlying buildings became visible through the pines. The Zinja preferred seclusion. Still, it seemed to Jebu he should have seen the farm buildings and the gatehouse before now, even at this distance.

When he had climbed a little further, he was shocked to find that the wooden wall around the monastery was gone. The gatehouse was gone. Only the gateway itself, with its tall pillars and crossbeams, was still standing. A gateway in a non-existent wall.

Now through the shrubbery he could see the foundation stones where the granary had stood. He walked to the gate. The bell that visitors used to announce themselves was still hanging from the gate way, along with the hammer for striking it. The Zinja had never bothered to guard the gate, but they were wary of trespassers. To enter without ringing the bell was considered a hostile act. Jebu struck the bell a resounding blow with the hammer and walked on in.

He passed the granary. It was not a ruin. There was simply nothing left of it, no scrap of burnt or broken wood, just the foundation stones.

Shrubs were growing where the floor had been. The path turned, and he was out of the pine forest that covered the hillside. Now he was shocked to see that all the buildings-the stable, the men's quarters, the women's quarters, the guest house, the library-all were gone. Only the temple itself, a simple, square building with a peaked, slightly curving roof of thatch, still stood.

As Jebu stood there, trying to guess what had happened, Taitaro emerged from the temple.

"Jebu."

"Sensei."

They ran to each other and embraced. Then they separated, still gripping the other's arms, and looked at each other. Taitaro's hair and beard were neatly trimmed, but a good deal greyer. His eyes were older and more tired, the lines in his face deeper.

"Well," he said, "you've seen a lot. I can tell that. Your face doesn't look as much like a blank sheet of paper as it did when you left. Experience has written on it."

"What happened here, Eather? Where is everyone?"

"You've travelled a long road, Son. You must be tired and hungry. Come. I've built myself a little hut at the edge of the cliff. You can rest, and I'll give you something to eat."

Jebu looked around, perplexed, as he followed Taitaro. His father seemed smaller and thinner than he remembered. Taitaro's hut, made of cedar frame, paper walls, thatched roof, and dirt floor, was barely large enough for the two of them. His sword, bow, and quiver of arrows hung from pegs on a beam; he pointed to empty pegs where Jebu could hang his own weapons.

Taitaro had dug a square hole in the floor for a fire. Now he lit the fire and set a pot of water on a brazier over it.

"The Order has kept you hired out to the Muratomo. You will remember, I told you that your vision of a white dragon meant that your destiny would be bound up with that of the White Dragon clan."

Jebu shrugged. "I came back here to have done with the war. I hoped to find refuge where I could refresh myself and perhaps make a new beginning."

"You must be sorely disappointed to find the place so desolate. I rather like it this way. That's why I willingly stayed behind when the others left."

"But why did everyone leave?"

"About two years after we sent you away, we were attacked by surprise at night by a troop of samurai. The fact that we could be taken by surprise at all shows that we were getting soft and did not deserve the name of Zinja. In any case, they killed our guards and rushed the monks' quarters. Of course, they made so much noise that we were awake and arming ourselves by the time they got here. They set fire to all the buildings. We lost most of our horses in the fire. A group of samurai attacked the women's quarters, and the women fought bravely and ferociously."

"Is Mother all right?"

"Yes, she's fine. After a short, fierce battle we drove off the samurai attacking the monks' quarters and killed many of them. Then we went to the aid of the women, who had fought their attackers to a standstill with sticks, needles, pots, boiling oil, and kitchen knives. We finished

off nearly all of those samurai. I'm afraid we let our emotions get the better of us. They had killed some of the women and wounded many more. The remaining samurai retreated beyond the wall. Stupidly, they tried to besiege us, perhaps thinking that they could eventually starve us off the mountain-top. We gave them a few days to relax their guard, then went down the mountain through the tunnels and came up behind them. This time we gave a better account of ourselves, even though we had to fight uphill. We lost fewer and they lost more. When they started to run for it, we opened ranks and let them go."

"Were they Muratomo or Takashi?"

"Takashi. Now that the Muratomo clan is defeated and scattered, Sogamori intends to stamp out any other force in the land that does not submit to him utterly."

"But we work impartially with Takashi and Muratomo alike."

Taitaro shook his head. "That does not satisfy Sogamori. He distrusts us deeply because many of our brothers, such as you, have worked for the Muratomo. Also because our Order has connections with branches in other lands. He questions our loyalty to the Emperor. By which, of course, he means our loyalty to himself. He has eliminated nearly all the Zinja in the Takashi employ. Thus his suspicion that we side with the Muratomo is fulfilled."

"Did he himself order the attack on this temple?"

"No, we believe it was the governor of Eukuoka province, an appointee of Sogamori. The governor would have had no trouble finding samurai eager to go up against us. There are many who hate the Zinja. They fear our fighting skills and our stealth. They despise what they know of our child-rearing practices and the free relations

between our men and our women. And they've heard rumours that we hoard vast treasures in our temples."

"So, it's war between us and the Takashi."

"Not at all. Our relations with Sogamori, even with the provincial governor, are officially cordial. This attack was a probe, to see how easy it would be to destroy one of our temples. We hope we convinced them that it would be too costly. But it was costly for us, as well. Many urns were emptied and refilled in the crypt the day after the battle. Many trees on this hillside were cut down for funeral pyres."

"Is that why the monastery has been closed?"

"We could have stayed here, but other Zinja monasteries around the islands have suffered great losses as well, both from raids and in this War of the Dragons. The other abbots and I met at Yamatai and decided to combine several of our communities in temples nearer the more important cities."

"Where is Mother?"

"After the decision to close this temple, the remaining monks and women cleaned up the debris, rebuilt the temple building, and left. Your mother went with them to the Teak Blossom Temple near Hakata."

"Why didn't she stay here with you?"

"I wanted to be alone."

"I don't understand. Why would you want Mother to leave you?"

"You cannot understand until you are as old as I am. Men and women

go through stages in their lives. Each stage carries one on to the next, and all lead to the ultimate insight, to final realization of the Self. At one stage it is appropriate to lead the life of a young warrior, as you do. At another stage one marries and lives quietly and cheerfully with a spouse and carries out duties of leadership in the community, as your mother and I have. But then there comes the stage when one must sit alone on the brink of the infinite and contemplate one's impending leap into the dark. One can no more hold back or prevent these changes than a caterpillar can stop itself from becoming a butterfly. Indeed, not only do people pass through stages, but so do communities, nations, orders like the Zinja. As I sit here alone on this mountain it becomes more and more apparent to me that the Zinja are entering some final stage. It may be that the light of the Order is going out. I fear that this Sunrise Land is moving into a time of darkness. I believe that this temple will sooner or later be destroyed. The war will go on, and the marauders will come back."

"I will stay here with you and defend it, Eather."

"No. Spend the day with me, and tonight if you will. This evening I wish to show you certain things that will be of value to you. But you are too young, there is too much for you to do, for you to dedicate your life to caring for the ruins of a temple and of a Zinja abbot."

That night Jebu and Taitaro went into the temple and seated themselves on the polished stone floor before the altar, facing each other just as they had after Jebu's initiation ordeal. Taitaro reached into a pocket hidden inside his robe and took out something small and round that sparkled in the candlelight. He leaned forward and held it up so that Jebu could look at it.

"Look deep into this jewel," said Taitaro. "Eix your gaze on it. Concentrate on it. Think only of it and nothing else."

Jebu saw that the surface of the transparent crystal was covered with an intricate maze of fine carved lines, made many times more complex because he could see through the jewel to the pattern on the other side. Taitaro held the sphere in his fingertips, turning it this way and that to display the tracery. In the depths tiny fires, hot red flames and hotter blue flames, twinkled and sparkled.

"As you look at the jewel, you will feel yourself getting drowsy," said Taitaro. "You will feel yourself falling asleep . . . You will sleep . . . You will sleep."

Jebu was no longer in the temple. He seemed to be floating in midair through a dark forest. No dragon or bird bore him up, he was drifting as if swimming through the air. Ahead of him, in the blackness of the pines, there was light. It glowed, cool and white. He drifted towards the light.

He found himself in a clearing, about half-way between the top and the bottom of an enormous tree. Light came from the tree, and a strange, continuous murmuring. As Jebu drifted closer to the tree, he saw that the murmuring came from soft sounds made by thousands of living creatures. The creatures seemed to grow, like fruit, out of the tree's branches.

On the lower branches were the smaller animals, the worms, the insects, the fish, the lizards and snakes. In the middle branches, nearest Jebu, were birds, horses, monkeys, cats, dogs and the like. A magnificent striped tiger with glowing green eyes looked at him solemnly, the sort of beast he had seen once or twice in a painting. There were many animals that he did not recognize, many that amazed him. There was one huge creature with flapping ears, a nose as long as a rope that moved with a life of its own, and two white pointed teeth, each as long as a man, that protruded like spears from its mouth. There was a fish that was even larger, as big

as a castle, with a mouth big enough for a man to stand upright inside it, yet somehow it seemed comfortably nestled in the branches of this tree. Eloating upwards, Jebu saw in the topmost branches men and women of all kinds, some a normal colour, others as black as ebony or as white as snow, some richly dressed, others naked. And above these were beings who glowed as if they were arrayed in jewels, a glow so intense that it hurt Jebu's eyes to look at them and he could not clearly see their shapes. These must be the kami, he thought.

It came to him with great surprise, awe and joy that all life is one, that living things are not separate from one another but-just as all leaves are part of a tree-all animals, men and gods were one mighty living thing, the Self, manifested in many forms. He laughed aloud at the wonder and simplicity of it, and even as he did so the light from the tree began to dim and he began to move away from it, till he could no longer see the individual creatures in the tree, but only the tree itself, a glowing mountain of light. Then he drifted further away, back into the forest, and the light was only a tiny spark, far in the distance.

The spark became the spherical jewel Taitaro held up before him. "You are awake now," Taitaro said. "Look at the jewel again."

The pattern of lines with its rising and falling movement somehow suggested the shape of the tree he had seen in his vision.

"This is called the Jewel of Life and Death," Taitaro said. "It is a shintai, the dwelling place of a kami. And now, Jebu, it is yours. Take it." His eyes glowing with a fire almost as bright as that in the jewel, Taitaro held the crystal out to Jebu, who took it in the palm of his hand.

"This is one of the jewels your father brought with him from far away," said Taitaro. "I do not know where he got it. He never had time to tell

me. He gave it to me the night he was killed."

Jebu's eye would follow a particular line for a few of its twists and turns, then lose it again in a network of other lines.

Taitaro said, "The pattern carved on the Jewel is called the Tree of Life. It has a special influence on the inner life. When Jamuga, your father, brought it to me, he told me that while contemplating this Jewel he suddenly saw that he had to rebel and that he would have to flee from his homeland. As for me, after your father's death I looked at the pattern on this Jewel daily. When I took you and your mother in I was still a man with many illusions. I mourned your father, but I secretly rejoiced that his death had brought me a lovely woman for my wife and a fine son. I wanted to be first among all the Zinja abbots in the land. Over the years, as I kept looking steadily into this Jewel, day after day, my illusions faded. And when the time came, as it did after you left, I was able to decide that I no longer wanted to be a Zinja abbot but could happily spend my days living as a hermit and caring for this temple. In a few years, perhaps I can even cease congratulating myself for making such a wise choice." His deep-set brown eyes twinkled, and Jebu laughed.

Jebu said, "My father came from a land of barbarian cattle herders. Such people could not have carved this Jewel."

"Oh, certainly not. Undoubtedly your father or one of his comrades looted it from its original owners. But it changed him. It changed me, and it will change you, as well, if you let it. I do not know who made the Jewel, or how. I think it must be the work of great sorcerers, such as lived on the earth in the distant past. I know that if you will spend a little time each day focusing your awareness on this Jewel, concentrating on its design, trying to absorb it into your mind, each day you will become a little more aware of your true Self. You will discover that, as we have always taught you, you are a man of

insight, perfect just as you are."

Tears flooded Jebu's eyes, blurring the fires of the Jewel. This was a gift that had come from both his natural father and his spiritual father. He held the Jewel in trembling hands and stared into its shifting, multi-coloured depths as if, with the sheer pressure of his gaze, he could penetrate to the answers to all the questions that had plagued him ever since he was a boy. He was half-native of this Sunrise Land, but what was the other half? Who was his father? Who was the man who had killed his father? Who am I?

The vision of the Tree of Life Taitaro had shown him had already moved Jebu profoundly. Now he was shaken to the very core as he held the Jewel in his hands, turning it slowly and, in his mind's eye, superimposing on its design a memory of the Tree of Life. He would never let go of this Jewel, he resolved, unless to pass it to another as Taitaro had given it to him. Perhaps to a son of his own. And every day he would spend some time contemplating it.

A faraway look came into Taitaro's shadowed eyes. He turned away from the altar and looked through the temple entrance into the darkness outside. He hurried around the temple, blowing out candles until they were almost in darkness. One small candle remained in his hand.

"A group of mounted men just passed through the gateway. Hide yourself. I will meet them."

Chapter Eighteen

Taitaro pressed down on a small block of stone in the floor, tipping it upwards to expose an iron ring. Pulling on the ring, he raised a slab covering a chamber under the floor.

"Down there you'll be able to hear everything. There is an entrance to a tunnel leading from that chamber to what used to be the monks' quarters. Slip down the mountain and go to the Teak Blossom Temple at Hakata, where your mother and your old friends are."

"I don't want to hide. I will not abandon you."

Taitaro laughed. "Jebu, I have been a Zinja abbot for twenty-three years. Do you really think I'd have any trouble escaping from a party of samurai? No one can hurt me unless I permit it. Now, get down there."

It was so dark that Jebu could not see the floor of the chamber below. He jumped into the blackness and fell further than he had expected to, his feet striking stone with an impact that stunned him. Taitaro closed the slab over him, and Jebu was in darkness. It was so like. the night of his initiation that it brought back all the memories of that ordeal. He felt his way to a corner of the room, sat down and waited in total darkness.

Carrying his candle, Taitaro slowly crossed the temple to the entrance. He questioned himself, wondering why he had bothered to hide Jebu. The two of them could easily defeat or escape from a group of samurai.

It was because he was tired of bloodshed. He wanted to see if he could deal with these samurai quietly and send them away in peace.

If Jebu were with him, there would inevitably be fighting.

The mounted warriors galloped up to the temple steps and stopped. Taitaro held up his candle to get a better look at the horsemen. They had Red Dragons embroidered on the breasts of their surcoats.

A deep voice addressed Taitaro. "Old monk, I remember you. You are the Abbot Taitaro." The voice spoke in Chinese.

With the aid of the candle Taitaro peered at the man who had spoken. Taitaro recognized him instantly, with a shiver of mingled anticipation and dread.

The huge man wore a fur-trimmed iron helmet topped by a single spike that came to a needle-sharp point. The collar of his red cloak was edged with silver-grey fur. His silk surcoat was a bright scarlet. His eyes were ice blue. His reddish-brown moustache hung in long strands on either side of his mouth. His cheekbones were broad and prominent, his face deeply lined and scarred, his skin tanned to brown leather by sun and wind and sand. He was wide through every part of his body-shoulders, chest, arms, legs.

"I know you, as well," said Taitaro, answering in Chinese. "But I do not know your name."

"I am Arghun Baghadur." The big man jumped from his horse, handing the rein to a samurai beside him, and climbed the steps of the temple with the rolling gait of one who has spent a lifetime in the saddle.

Taitaro said, "As you see, this temple is undefended. You and your men are welcome to enter and rest yourselves."

Eollowing Taitaro into the temple, Arghun said, "We need not waste time, Abbot Taitaro. I seek the monk called Jebu. I have followed his

trail all over Honshu and Kyushu. I know he came here." Arghun spoke Chinese heavily, gutturally.

Taitaro was delighted. This was a splendid stroke of good fortune for Jebu. With a little skilful prodding it might be possible to get this barbarian to tell the full story of Jebu's father, for Jebu's benefit.

Taitaro pointed to the Red Dragon on Arghun's surcoat. "Do you seek him on behalf of the Takashi, or for some other reason?"

"While in this Land of the Dwarfs it suits my convenience to ally myself with the Takashi clan. But I pursue my own ends. I have come here, as you must know, to slay the monk Jebu. Where is he?"

Taitaro sighed and seated himself, gesturing that Arghun should do the same. He positioned himself at one side of the slab under which Jebu was hiding.

"I felt chilled and sent Jebu out into the forest to cut firewood for me."

Arghun strode to the temple entrance. He wore felt riding boots and his tread was soft, despite his size.

He called out to his men. "Search the woods around here for a tall, red-haired monk. Bring him to me unharmed."

Taitaro said, "Let the will of heaven be done. I can do no more to protect Jebu. But I do not understand. This young man was a baby when you came here last. He had done nothing to you then. He has done no harm to you now. Why do you want to kill him?"

"It is a sacred obligation I have undertaken, and I may not rest until I fulfil it. Surely, as a warrior monk you can understand that. Genghis Khan is dead now, but his command binds me: Let Jamuga and all his seed be slain, let his blood vanish from the earth."

"Ah, yes," said Taitaro. "Jamuga told me of his people. Herdsmen living in the cold, dry plains north of China."

Arghun laughed. "We Mongols are no longer tent-dwelling cattle herders, old man. We are conquerors, and we live in palaces."

"It is a cruel thing to put a man to death for his father's offence."

"At the will of Genghis Khan whole cities have been wiped out. Every man, woman and child has been killed, every building levelled. Now riders can pass over the spot and herdsmen graze their cattle without ever knowing there was a city there. It was a small matter for Genghis Khan to decree the destruction of one family. When the Great Khan is offended, expiation must be made throughout heaven and earth."

Standing below in the darkness, Jebu felt himself trembling. It had taken him a few minutes to recall the spoken Chinese he had learned in the temple years ago. But he understood enough. This was the slayer of his father. Now this warrior hid come across the sea again, hunting him. It was dream-like, in a way. It was hard to believe they were actually talking about him.

There were still unanswered questions. Who, exactly, was Jamuga? Who was Genghis Khan? What had Jamuga done to call down upon 'himself such relentless vindictiveness? But Jebu felt he had heard enough. It was time to act, while Arghun was still talking to Taitaro, before the Mongol became restless.

Mongol. Whatever a Mongol is, I'm partly one, too.

When he burst up through the temple floor, Arghun would be taken by surprise. That, plus his Zinja training, should be enough to enable

him to kill the man who had killed his father. In the darkness he reached up to move the stone slab.

He found he could not touch the ceiling. He paced the room from wall to wall, reaching above his head as high as he could. His fingertips touched empty air. He felt the walls for a handhold. Except for the low opening to the tunnel Taitaro had told him about, the walls were smooth. He was caught like a cricket in a jar. There was no way to climb out.

Jebu clenched his fists and growled to himself. Taitaro had known about this. The old devil had planned it this way, to protect him.

Promising himself he would have a word with Taitaro, Jebu crouched and crept through the low tunnel. In total darkness, he had to feel his way. The tunnel was lined with stones which formed a vaulted roof to prevent collapse. It must have taken many months to build it that well, even though it was only about fifty feet long. But the tunnels under the temple were bored through the solid rock of the mountain. How long had they taken? The Zinja were patient.

Now the tunnel began to slant upwards. Jebu's fingers touched rough stone. He pushed gently. The stone moved easily. A crack of light appeared, and he cautiously raised the stone a little more.

He heard the crackling and crashing of Arghun's samurai stumbling around the brush-grown temple grounds searching for him. He raised the stone enough to be able to see his immediate vicinity. There was no one near by. He pushed himself out of the tunnel, creeping flat along the ground, and dropped the stone back into place.

Through weeds and shrubbery, Jebu snaked towards the temple. He darted up the steps. Cautiously, he peered into the temple entrance. He could see two dark, seated figures, one small, the other a bulk

like a mountain, facing each other near the altar, a candle on the floor between them. Erom this distance he could not see Arghun's face well. But the Mongol had his profile to Jebu and might detect a movement out of the corner of his eye if Jebu rushed him.

Thinking of shadows, Jebu edged around the entrance-way and crept along the back wall of the temple to the rear corner. He drew the collar of his hood up over his nose and mouth to muffle the sound of his breathing. At last he was behind Arghun.

Your armour is your mind. A naked man can utterly destroy a man clad in steel. Rely on nothing but the Self

Slowly, silently, he worked his way along the side wall of the temple. Taitaro would probably see him, but the abbot would give no sign. Jebu drew his Zinja sword. A further soundless progress towards the altar, and he was facing Arghun's broad back.

Rely on nothing under heaven. You will not do the fighting. The Self will do the fighting.

The ritual sentences of preparation for combat were swept aside by an overwhelming urge to kill the man who had killed Jamuga. Jebu poised the Zinja sword, aiming the point at Arghun's red-cloaked back. Then he sprang away from the wall, launching himself at Arghun.

Just before Jebu reached Arghun, the Mongol rolled to one side. Surprised, Jebu dived past him. Suddenly he was driving the point of his sword at Taitaro's heart.

"No! Eather!" Jebu screamed. He heard Arghun laugh in the shadows.

Jebu's Zinja-trained reflexes came to his aid and he swung the

sword wide. Taitaro also moved quickly, springing to his feet. But they could not help falling into each other.

"Idiot! He saw you reflected in my eyes," Taitaro snapped as the two of them went down together, disentangled themselves and quickly stood. Jebu was furious at himself. He had been taught about eye reflections and had forgotten.

Jebu saw that when Arghun evaded the sword thrust he had also seized the candle. It was on the altar now, and the Mongol was standing beside it. His sword, long and curved though not as long as a samurai sword, gleamed in his hand.

Arghun and Jebu stood looking at each other. Jebu could read nothing in the narrowed blue eyes. They were fierce and empty as the eyes of a falcon. The Mongol's hair was hidden under his helmet, but the red moustache was a surprise. It was the same colour as his own hair. Why, he looks like me, Jebu realized.

Arghun grunted. "I knew if I kept the old man talking, you'd come sneaking around. You are Jamuga's son, no doubt of that. You are as big as he was. But I think you will be easier to kill than he was. You're just a child."

Jebu was stung by the contempt in Arghun's voice. "A very-welltrained child, Arghun. Who intends to kill you this night."

Arghun shrugged. "There is training, and then there is experience."

Without warning, Arghun leaped at him, bringing his sabre down in a stroke that would have cut Jebu in two had he not leaped backwards. Arghun kept charging him, thrusting and slashing.

Jebu ducked around the hanging hollow log that served as a temple

gong, keeping it between himself and Arghun, slowing down Arghun's rush. Jebu took a crouching attack position, his short sword held before him, waist-high. He was swept by a wave of exhilaration. This man had taken his father from him. Now he would pay with his life.

Jebu darted around the log, slashing at Arghun. He expected the big man to duck back, but Arghun stood firm, parrying Jebu's sword with a clang. They were almost chest-to-chest, and Jebu thought how unusual to be fighting someone as big as himself.

Arghun put his boot behind Jebu's bare heel and tripped him. Jebu saved himself by turning his fall into a somersault, rolling away from Arghun's thrust. Part of Jebu's anger turned against himself. He was fighting poorly tonight. He was making mistakes, letting himself be taken in by obvious tricks. He told himself that he must get the better of the Mongol. Otherwise he would be failing himself, his father and the Order. Not only his life but the meaning of his life depended upon it.

Jumping to his feet, Jebu wondered when the rest of Arghun's men would join in. Surely they could hear the ringing of sword on sword. Why didn't Arghun call them? Probably because he wanted to kill Jebu himself. What was Taitaro doing? Jebu dared not take his eyes from Arghun for an instant.

The Mongol was moving in on him again. Unlike the Zinja, who frequently fell back or feigned retreat in order to draw their opponents off-balance, Arghun stayed constantly on the attack, his blade slamming again and again into Jebu's. Jebu knew Arghun was trying to wear him down, overwhelm him with his strength. To break the momentum of Arghun's attack, Jebu crouched and swung his short sword at the Mongol warrior's legs.

Arghun leaped into the air, bringing his sabre down on Jebu's blade with all his strength. Jebu lost his grip under the force of Arghun's blow. The Zinja sword went spinning across the room. Still crouched, reaching for the lost blade, Jebu saw Arghun poised over him, his sword upraised for the death blow.

Rolling himself into a ball, Jebu hit Arghun's legs. The Mongol started to topple, then caught himself with a dancer's grace and whirled to strike at Jebu again. Jebu felt the impact of the sword's point and edge biting into the flesh of his upper arm.

Then the candle went out.

Arghun's blade, seeking him again, rang on the temple's stone floor. Jebu realized instantly why Taitaro had been standing near the candle. He had given Jebu his chance, and had blown the candle out when he thought Arghun was going to kill him.

Now Arghun was roaring for his men. "Get in here and bring light! The monk I'm after is here!"

Jebu remembered where his Zinja sword had struck the far wall. He ran for it and snatched it up, then turned to look for Arghun.

"Jebu, you fool! Here!" Jebu felt Taitaro's powerful fingers on his arm. Taitaro propelled him around to the back of the altar. Jebu heard stone grind against stone. Then Taitaro was pulling him again, and he squeezed through the opening and heard the stone door slide shut behind him.

Taitaro lit a candle and beckoned Jebu. Soon they were in the tunnels in the mountain, far below the temple. Taitaro turned on him angrily.

"I told you precisely what to do, but you wouldn't listen. If you had,

you'd be safely on your way to Hakata. Now you're wounded, and you've still got to walk to Hakata. Let me see that arm. You're bleeding heavily." He helped Jebu clean and bind the wound.

"You'll have a scar there. I hope you're proud of it."

"Sensei, you're angry because I put myself in danger. But what else could I do? The man who killed my father, sitting there talking about killing me- He has been hunting me, sensei. And you were in danger, too. I had to attack him."

"I don't want you to be killed by that man."

"I won't be. I will kill him some day."

"Jebu, he killed you tonight, on the plane of combat skill. You did not fight as a Zinja should fight. You were angry and vengeful, and therefore you were conscious and controlling at every moment. You did not let the Self fight. You hungered for revenge on Arghun as an ordinary man hungers for a beautiful woman. Think back on it."

Jebu remembered. He had entered the temple composing himself for battle in the usual way, but somehow when he had launched himself at Arghun he had forgotten all that. More than anything in the world he had wanted to kill the Mongol giant. Throughout the fight he had incessantly been telling himself what to do. And he had always been wrong. Remembering, he was crestfallen. Truly he had fallen far short of the Zinja ideal. Perhaps it was his Mongol blood.

"You are right. I am humiliated."

"Humiliation is our best teacher," said Taitaro. "It is as kind to us as an old grandmother. I wanted you to know this man. An empty space in your life was filled up tonight. But now you should forget the tale of

your father and Arghun as you would forget yesterday's meal. It does not matter how you came to be born or where you came from or what men did injuries to your father. Until you can go against Arghun stripped bare in mind, he will always be able to get the better of you."

Shame was a leaden weight in Jebu's chest. "I am afraid, sensei, that I am a bad student. I hunger for beautiful women, like any ordinary man. I haven't learned not to care about winning and losing. With Arghun, the man who killed my father, the wish to win became my master."

"You are young, Jebu. The Zinja teachings aim at perfection, but you are not expected to be perfect. We hope you will learn to apply the teachings often enough at this stage of your life that you can live long enough to apply them still more."

The weight in Jebu's chest felt lighter. He smiled gratefully, looking into Taitaro's weary, kindly eyes.

"I will try to care less."

"Consult the shintai, the Jewel of Life and Death, every day. It will help you to see things more clearly."

Together, in silence, they made their way downwards through the tunnel system. At last they were on the beach under the half-moon and the stars. Another light caught Jebu's eye and he looked up in horror. The Waterfowl Temple was burning.

The temple had always reminded Jebu of a bird. Now the tongues of flame were like feathers and wings, and the temple was, not a waterfowl, but a great bird of fire poised for flight.

Rage followed shock. "I wish I could run back up the mountain and kill them all."

"They are stupid men, and burning the temple is a futile act." said Taitaro. "It doesn't matter. We set no great store by temples. They're just so much firewood in the end."

They embraced, and Jebu turned his back on Taitaro and on the blazing Waterfowl Temple and started walking down the beach towards Hakata.

Chapter Nineteen

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

One hears very little from the capital these days. Once in a while Akimi manages to slip me a letter or a present by way of a trusted servant. I can only guess how it makes her feel to be Sogamori's mistress. Poor Akimi-san. Her son Yukio is now a novice monk at the Buddhist temple on Mount Hiei.

Sogamori has had himself appointed chancellor. This is an ancient office, long left vacant, and is considered higher than the office of Regent. Eujiwara no Motofusa, who is now Regent, must be grinding his blackened teeth down to stumps. With the office of chancellor and with tens of thousands of Takashi samurai ready to spring to do his bidding, Sogamori is the real ruler of the Sunrise Land.

According to Akimi, Sogamori was recently heard to say, "Anyone who is not a Takashi is not a human being." That remark has been repeated all over the capital. People follow the Takashi fashion in everything from the way men wear their ceremonial hats to the style of the family crest on one's clothing. Anyone who wants to be in fashion must study and copy the way things are done in the Rokuhara.

A strange and frightening thing happened yesterday. A troop of Takashi samurai visited Daidoji. Their leader was a giant barbarian who spoke our language very poorly, with a thick accent. He questioned all the guards who fought with Jebu, then came to see me.

Arghun Baghadur, he said his name was. What sort of an outlandish name is that? He would tell me nothing of himself, save that he does

the bidding of Sogamori and had old Squint-Eyes' permission to question me. He asked me many questions about Jebu, to most of which I answered that I did not know. Having been told by Horigawa that I speak Chinese, he conversed with me in that language, which he spoke passably well.

I made one stupid mistake. After he had asked me many questions I declared that I had no interest in Zinja monks, especially those of barbarian descent. He pounced at once.

"Then you know of his descent. He must have told you about himself."

I had only intended to make an insulting reference to this Arghun Baghadur's own barbarian background. Led on by my wish to hurt,

I forgot myself and made a serious error. It was as Jebu once told me: the warrior who acts out of anger or hatred is simply seeking his own defeat.

I answered that I had guessed Jebu's barbarian ancestry from his appearance. Suddenly I realized that Jebu had told me his father was killed by a giant barbarian with red hair and blue eyes, and that the barbarian wished to kill Jebu. Instantly I felt sure this was the very man. If only there were some way I could warn Jebu.

The barbarian pressed me with questions for an hour more. I pray I told him nothing else that might help him. After he left, I fainted. Compassionate Buddha, help Jebu.

-First Month, eighth day

YEAR OF THE SHEEP

Arghun Baghadur's visit brought her last meeting with Jebu vividly

back to her. Einally she forced herself to accept a fact she had only suspected in the months since she had seen Jebu. She was pregnant.

Compassionate Buddha, she whispered to herself, help me.

She waited another month to be sure, before telling Horigawa the news on one of his infrequent visits to Daidoji. She asked his permission to go to Kamakura for the lying-in. Any place was better, she thought, than this god-forsaken country rathole. And once she got away from Horigawa, she might be able to find excuses to avoid returning to him.

"Out of the question," said Horigawa.

"But a woman of good family returns to her home to give birth."

Horigawa smiled and tapped his fingertips together. "Not, I think, when the home is as far away as Kamakura. It would be entirely too dangerous to your health. What would your honoured father think of me, if I let you journey so far? He who takes such good care of every passing traveller, such as the Muratomo boy."

Taniko's heart sank. "Then send me to my uncle's house in the capital."

"Oh, no. Never again will you go to the capital. You disgraced me there once. It will not happen again."

"I did not disgrace you."

"There are many there who know that you were the go-between for Akimi and Sogamori. Now Akimi acts the great lady as Sogamori's mistress. People know that you thwarted my efforts to have the Muratomo brats eliminated. Among those people I am a laughing

stock because of you. Now, when you arrive in the capital with your belly swollen, there will be rumours that the child is not mine. I will not be laughed at because of you."

"Why should anyone think the child is not yours?"

"None of my wives has ever had a child. And the story of the armed monk who came here and killed my guards has made its way to the capital."

"That has no bearing on whether you are the father of my child."

"You will stay here. You will bear the child here at Daidoji." He smiled at her. "It is really best for you. Pregnant women should not travel. The custom of a woman going home for the lying-in was followed when all the best people lived right in the capital. Besides, there are excellent midwives here in the village. You will be very comfortable."

"You are holding me prisoner."

"Only for your own good." He stood up and left her.

Taniko felt more alone than she had at any time in her life. She read The Tale of Genji: a beautiful illustrated copy which Akimi had sent her. She liked it better than The Tale of the Hollow Tree. As her stomach started to bulge, she carried herself straighter and tried to hold it in.

"That is good," said the midwife from the village of rice farmers who worked the paddies around Daidoji and paid sixty per cent of their harvest to Horigawa. "Girls who have husbands and are proud of their babies always let their bellies stick out. They have a bad time when they give birth. Girls whose babies have no fathers are ashamed. They try to hide their bellies, suck them in. And always, they have an easy delivery, because all that holding in makes them

strong through here." She laughed and stroked her hands over her pelvis. "Keep holding your belly in, my lady. But why are you ashamed of this baby? You have a noble prince for a husband."

Having no one else to confide in and liking the midwife's smiling, moon-like face, Taniko said, "I do not know whether this baby has a noble prince for a father."

Taniko considered the notion of going to the Shima house in Heian Kyo without the prince's permission, but it seemed impossible. Erom the way his dozens of samurai watched her, she was sure they had orders to keep her on the estate. And even if she were able to slip away, it was unsafe to travel on foot or on horseback. How could she get a carriage and driver? And how could a carriage escape the mounted samurai who would inevitably come after her? No, she decided, she would only distress herself by trying to run away.

The midwife came to examine her once a month. She told Taniko the baby would probably be born in the Seventh Month. Taniko noticed that when not talking to anyone the midwife would constantly mutter under her breath, the same words over and over again. At first Taniko thought the woman was mad. It would not surprise her at all if Horigawa had provided her with a demented midwife. But the woman was pleasant and made so much sense most of the time that Taniko dismissed that explanation.

"What is it you keep saying to yourself?" she finally asked.

"Homage to Amida Buddha."

"Ah, a prayer."

"It is more than a prayer. If you repeat it with sincerity, you are saved for all time. When you die your spirit will be reborn in the Pure Land

far to the west, where it is possible for even the weakest of us to attain enlightenment and achieve Nirvana."

"Is that why you say it over and over again?"

"Yes. Also because it is such a great comfort. When I invoke the name of Amida Buddha over and over again, it feels as if I am carrying Buddha within me, just as you are carrying that baby inside you. Try it some time, my lady. When you are feeling sad or in pain, just say, `Homage to Amida Buddha' over and over to yourself until you feel better."

One particularly beautiful day in the Seventh Month, as she sat reading under a parasol, Taniko found herself thinking back to her ride with Jebu down the Tokaido Road to Heian Kyo. When she realized that those were very nearly the last happy days of her life, a great sadness swept over her. Eeeling foolish she said, "Homage to Amida Buddha." She repeated it. After she had said it about twenty times the sharp edge of the sadness seemed blunted. It was as if she had drunk sake, but with none of its after effects.

The next time she tried the invocation was when she began to feel labour pains. She sent a servant to the village for the midwife, then went to the chamber that had been prepared as a lying-in room and lay on her futon, saying, "Homage to Amida Buddha."

The midwife came, and they recited the prayer together. Taniko was in labour all the rest of that day, all the night and most of the following day. Holding in her belly did not seem to have helped.

Taniko awoke to see Horigawa leaning over her. His sour breath made her feel sick, and she turned 'her head aside. He grasped her under the chin and forced her to look at him.

"Taniko, your baby has been born."

"Yes."

"It is alive. It is a daughter."

"Good."

"Taniko, it has red hair and grey eyes."

Taniko felt her heart turn to ice. Eeebly, she said, "Many babies are born that way-"

"No, Taniko." Horigawa bared his teeth in what almost seemed a smile. "It is his. The monk's." He turned abruptly.

Taniko, her whole pain-racked body trembling, raised herself up on her elbows. "What are you going to do?"

Horigawa snatched the infant from the midwife's arms, held the little, red naked body up as the baby squirmed and squalled. "Look, Taniko. Behold the living proof of your faithlessness." The baby's eyes were shut and the hair looked light brown to Taniko. She reached for her daughter. Horigawa laughed at her helplessness and ran from the lying-in room. Swaying, staggering, knocking over the one feeble oil lamp that lit the room, Taniko forced herself to get to her feet and follow him.

"What are you going to do? What are you going to do?" She ran after him through the rooms of the women's quarters.

On the veranda the midwife caught up with her. "My lady! You'll hurt yourself. You must lie down." She held Taniko.

"Help me! He's going to kill my baby!" Taniko fought free of the

midwife. With a rapid stride Horigawa was crossing the front yard of the manor to the gate, the naked baby clutched to his chest. Samurai came out of the guard house to stare at him.

Heedless of the way her single robe flapped open, revealing her nakedness, Taniko ran after Horigawa and seized his arm. Horigawa whirled and knocked her to the ground with a backhanded slap. The midwife came and knelt by the gasping Taniko. She started to help Taniko rise, and Taniko gripped her hand.

"I'm too weak. I can't stop him, Help me." The midwife stared fearfully at Taniko, then scrambled to her feet and caught up with Horigawa. Blocking the prince's way, she fell to her knees.

"Please, my lord, give me the baby." She held out her arms.

Holding the baby with one arm, Horigawa drew his dagger and lunged at her.

"Homage to Amida-" she screamed, but the invocation ended in a horrid choking sound. Horigawa stepped daintily around her, wiping his dagger on his sulphur-coloured robe before sheathing it. Blood splashing her kimono like the petals of a giant scarlet peony, the midwife toppled forward and fell face-down in the dust. Taniko's scream was as much for the woman who had helped her as for the baby.

Again she dragged herself to her feet and ran after Horigawa. He stopped and called his samurai.

"Hold her till I return."

Tentatively at first, then more firmly as he saw that the prince was watching him, the guardsman nearest Taniko gripped her arm. With a nod, Horigawa turned and walked out the front gate as the two gate

guards saluted with their naginatas. The guards stared after the little man holding the crying infant in his arms. A strange stillness fell over the manor.

Another samurai removed his obi and tied it around Taniko's waist. "You should go inside and lie down, my lady. A woman in your condition should not be up and about."

Suddenly, through her tears, Taniko was filled with rage. "What kind of samurai are you? You're nothing but worms! You tell me to lie down when my baby has been ripped from my arms? You let him take my baby. You let him kill a defenceless woman. You are the ones who should lie down. You're not men. No real men would stand by and let these things happen."

"The prince is our lord, my lady," said the man who had given her the sash. "We are sworn to obey him in all things."

"You call yourselves samurai. Where is the courage and the kindliness samurai are supposed to have? You are only samurai on the outside. You have the hearts of maids. I have the only samurai heart here." She glared at the men standing in a half-circle around her. They looked at the ground. She turned to the man holding her. "Let go of me."

Still he held her. The samurai who spoke to her said, "Let go of her. Let her do as she wishes. This thing will bring bad karma on all who are part of it." Taniko felt the man's hand fall away. She raced for the gate. The guards with naginatas stepped aside.

What she saw made her scream in anguish. Horigawa was half-way up the stone steps that led up to the mill on the hilltop. Like a huge spider, he climbed rapidly.

Taniko ran to the mill and started to climb. Horigawa was far above her.

"Don't! I beg you, don't," she screamed at him. "I'll do anything you want. I'll be whatever you want me to be. Take the baby away from me. Sell her if you want. I'll be obedient to you. Don't hurt her!"

The sound of the waterfall and the creaking of the mill wheel drowned out her voice. She struggled on up the stone steps, feeling weaker each time she raised a foot. She felt blood running down the insides of her legs. Clawing at the steps, using her hands to drag herself upwards, she climbed on.

She was screaming, but she did not know what she was screaming. She could not think. She could not hear herself above the roar of water tumbling over black rocks. She could no longer see Horigawa. She was almost at the top of the hill. -

Horigawa was standing upstream. As she caught sight of him, he lifted her daughter up over his head with both arms and hurled the screaming baby into the middle of the stream.

The baby howled in terror as she struck the black water. That was the last sound Taniko ever heard from her child. She plunged into the water. Vainly she reached out as the little body swept past her and over the edge of the fall. She felt the current pulling her. She let herself fall forward into the cold water, wanting to be carried to her death with her daughter.

Just as she neared the edge she felt strong hands seize her and pull her out of the water, powerful arms carry her over to the bank of the stream. It was the samurai who had tried to help her. Without looking at Horigawa, who stood panting by the edge of the rushing stream, he carried Taniko slowly down the steep flight of stone steps.

At the bottom, Taniko raised her head weakly. She saw peasants standing around a morsel of dead flesh lying on the grass beside the mill pond. They stared at her, horror-struck. Then all of them knelt, and one covered the little body with a blanket. Taniko was silent. She closed her eyes. She could not comprehend what she had seen.

A man emerged from the gateway of the manor carrying the body of a woman in his arms. Some of the peasants went over to him and formed a small procession to follow the woman's body to the village at the base of the hills.

A puff of smoke rose from the women's quarters of the manor. Taniko suddenly remembered knocking over the oil lamp in her room. Soon the smoke became a thick, black cloud reaching to heaven. Crackling red flames leaped up after it.

Some of the servants tried to throw water on the fire, but it was useless. A strong breeze was blowing, and the flames quickly spread from the one building to all the others. Broken beams blackened in the fire, and torn paper walls turned to ashes and flew skyward like so many crows.

Within minutes the entire manor had burned to the ground.

The samurai standing with Taniko said, "It is a sign. The kami are angry at the prince for what he has done. They have destroyed his house."

Some peasants overheard him and made the gesture of warding off demons.

"Homage to Amida Buddha," Taniko said.

Immediately, those near her echoed it: "Homage to Amida Buddha."

A peasant woman touched Taniko on the arm. "Your home is gone, my lady. You are ill. If you will be so kind, come to my miserable cottage and we will care for you."

Taniko said, "Homage to Amida Buddha." The samurai and the peasant woman led her away.

Chapter Twenty

His estate levelled, Prince Horigawa had no choice but to return Taniko to Heian Kyo. She was desperately ill, and he told her he hoped the carriage journey back to the capital would kill her. But she survived, and by the beginning of the new year her body had recovered. Her mind did not recover as quickly. He tried for a time to keep her in his palace, but her presence in his home unnerved him, and her bewildered manner and constant muttering of the invocation to Buddha disturbed the servants.

Finally, Horigawa took her in his state carriage to the house of Taniko's uncle Shima Ryuichi. He decided that shame would keep her from telling anyone what he had done to the baby, and that no one could blame him for casting off a wife who had become so obviously useless.

In the slow ride through the streets of the capital she crouched on the straw mat across the carriage from him, staring at him and whispering to herself, while he directed his gaze out through the blinds, so as to avoid looking at her.

"Unfortunately, her baby was born dead," he told Ryuichi. "She is upset. Possibly she has succumbed to the influence of an evil spirit. I think it best she remain with her family for a while." He left abruptly, while Ryuichi looked in helpless horror at the dishevelled, murmuring Taniko.

Sometimes Taniko found herself trying to imagine what her daughter would have been like. She had red hair and grey eyes. Would she have been strange looking? Would everyone have thought her ugly? Would she have been unable to get a husband? It would not have mattered. Taniko would have loved her daughter. She would have

called her Shikibu, after the author of The Tale of Genji, the book she had enjoyed while she was with child.

Gradually, Taniko once again became an accepted member of the house of Shima Ryuichi. She remained something of a recluse and spent her days reading, embroidering and incessantly reciting the invocation to Buddha. It appeared a foregone conclusion that she would not return to her husband.

Word of what had actually happened at Daidoji filtered back to Heian Kyo through the gossip of servants and samurai. Shima Ryuichi heard the story and accepted it because it was hard to believe a strong girl like Taniko could be reduced to this state by a stillbirth, a misfortune that happened to many women. He considered writing to Lord Bokuden about Horigawa's behaviour but decided not to. Against so powerful a man as Prince Horigawa there was nothing to be done, and Bokuden might take it into his head to hold Ryuichi somehow to blame for whatever had gone wrong.

One day in the Eifth Month of the Year of the Ape Taniko was reading when a maidservant burst into her room. "You must prepare yourself, my lady. A great man has come to call upon you."

Puzzled, Taniko slowly laid down her book. "What great man has come?" A picture of Jebu rose in her mind.

"Lord Takashi no Kiyosi, Minister of the Interior and General of the Left, is waiting in the great hall."

Kiyosi. The image of a brown, handsome face with a small moustache replaced that of Jebu. Suddenly, she was frightened.

"I cannot possibly receive him. He cannot see me like this, and I don't have time to prepare myself."

"Be calm, my lady," said the maid. "No gentleman expects a lady to receive him at once, especially if she has had no advance warning that he is coming. You have time to prepare yourself. Your esteemed uncle told me to tell you that he would consider it a great favour if you would greet Lord Kiyosi courteously."

"Of course."

In less than an hour Taniko had changed all her robes and dresses, found her favourite hair ornament, a mother-of-pearl butterfly, and chosen a screen painted with green shoots of young rice just emerging from pools of water, an appropriate selection for the season. In her chest of personal ornaments she found the fan with the painting of the Takashi family shrine, which Lady Akimi had long since returned to her.

She was seated comfortably, the screen was placed before her, and she sent her maid for Kiyosi.

Through the top of the screen Taniko was able to see that Kiyosi was wearing what was known at the capital as a hunting costume-a long green cloak with a yellow plum blossom print, full tan trousers and a pointed black cap. Coming from the provinces as she did, Taniko always found the term "hunting costume" laughable. Any man who actually attempted to hunt in such cumbersome clothing would soon find himself eating dust. She had heard that Kiyosi was a splendid sight in his samurai armour. She hoped she might see him that way, some day.

To control her nervousness, Taniko whispered the invocation. "What was that you said?" Kiyosi asked. "Were you speaking to m?" e

"Nothing, my lord." Then, feeling she was betraying both Amida and the midwife who taught her, she explained. "I was reciting a prayer to

the Buddha."

"Ah, yes." The light in the room was dim and it was difficult to see Kiyosi through the screen, but he seemed to be smiling kindly. "I have heard of such prayers. This is the teaching of the Pure Land school, is it not? Invoke Amida and you will be reborn in the Western Paradise?"

"I have studied under no school, my lord," said Taniko. "I learned the prayer from a very kind woman who helped me in an hour when I needed help badly."

"I hope you will forgive my presumption in coming to visit you, Lady Taniko. If I may say so, having met you on several occasions I have most pleasant memories of you. I heard that you were back in the capital at your family's house. I notice that your screen depicts sprouting rice. Perhaps in this month of rice-sprouting a new friendship might begin to grow between us."

"I am most grateful for your thought, my lord. I am overwhelmed by your kindness." It must be pity that had brought him here, she thought. I am old. My baby was killed. I am unattractive. Many people must think me mad.

They talked through the screen for a long time. Taniko found herself again becoming interested in the affairs of Heian Kyo and Kiyosi seemed happy enough to tell her about them. He was modest, almost embarrassed, about the rise to power of the Takashi. Under Taniko's tactful questioning he acknowledged that his father was now virtually unquestioned ruler of the Sacred Islands.

"How fortunate you are to have such a mighty father," said Taniko.

"How fortunate is my father to have such a family," Kiyosi answered.

"I do not speak of myself, but of the many ancestors who have paved the way for his rise to greatness-of his father, my grandfather, who wiped out the pirates on the Inland Sea, of his uncles, his brothers, even his cousins, who help him by holding high offices in the land. In a mountain range one peak always stands taller than the others, but it is all the mountains together that help the tallest stand."

"Not least among the peaks is the samurai general who defeated the Muratomo at the battle of the Imperial Palace," said Taniko. "But sometimes a man cannot achieve greatness unless he thinks he stands alone."

Kiyosi slapped his thigh and laughed softly. "How true! I worry about the destiny of my family, and I do not think my accomplishments will ever match those of my father."

He stood up suddenly. "I must leave you now, Lady Taniko. You have been most kind to receive me. I will call on you again, if I may. I-I am married, of course, and I know many women. But the conversation of women does not usually interest me. I find you fascinating to talk to."

"You are always welcome here, Lord Kiyosi."

A few moments after he was gone, Ryuichi hurried into the room. "This is splendid! To be quite frank, my dear, I thought your usefulness to the family had ended when Prince Horigawa cast you off, but Kiyosi is a hundred times more important than the prince. I shall write your father at once. He will be proud of you."

"The Takashi general is not going to marry me, Uncle." "But he will come back?"

"He said he would."

"That is as much as we could hope for. That is far, far better for you

than mooning about the house reading old books and mumbling prayers. You are a young woman. Even if he only makes you his mistress, you can do something for the family."

"Any small contribution I could make would be an honour, of course," said Taniko tartly. "But I think you are selling the rice when it hasn't even been planted."

"That's done all the time," said Ryuichi with mild surprise. "Here in the capital, people barter future crops on land they own to get what they need today. Your father has neglected your education in trade."

"Well, no seeds have been sown in this field yet."

"Only a matter of time," said Ryuichi with an airy wave of his hand. They both laughed.

Taniko realized it was the first time she had laughed since Shikibu's death. It was the first time since then that she had felt fully alive. She whispered her thanks to Amida, the Lord of Boundless Light.

Chapter Twenty-One

Like the Waterfowl Temple to the north, the Teak Blossom Temple of the Zinja stood at the crown of a hill overlooking the sea, which was here contained within Hakata Bay, a great, circular inlet with the small fishing town of Hakata at its head. Hakata could have been a major port, being an excellent harbour and close to Korea and China. But the wealthy families involved in foreign trade lived mostly at the capital, and it was more convenient for them to conduct their shipping from Hyogo on the Inland Sea.

Many of Jebu's friends from the Waterfowl Temple were now living at the Teak Blossom Temple. Weicho, the short, rotund monk who had so impressed Jebu with his wickedness during his initiation, was the abbot. No longer required to pretend to play at being a bad Zinja, Weicho was now free to be his true self, a genial, simple man with only one vice, an inordinate fondness for eating.

"What's become of Eudo, your partner in wickedness?" Jebu asked him.

A shadow crossed Weicho's face. "He's left the Order."

"Left the Order? I can't imagine anyone leaving the Order."

Weicho shrugged. "Many strange things happen these days. Others have broken with the Order as well. In Eudo's case his duties-the pretence, the cruelty, the occasional need to kill an innocent young novice-became too much for him. He's converted to Buddhism. The last I heard, he was in a monastery in the eastern provinces, sitting on his arse day and night, trying to find happiness by meditating. He's a cripple. He wasn't strong enough to be a Zinja. Eorget him." Weicho waved the irritating memory away. Strange, Jebu thought,

but Weicho almost reverted to his old role of sharp-tongued cruelty when he talked about Eudo.

Most important of all, Nyosan, Jebu's mother, lived at the Teak Blossom Temple. Jebu had not seen her since his initiation, and whenever the busy routine of the temple permitted, mother and son spent hours in conversation.

Nyosan had charge of Jebu's collection of swords. There were now over sixty. Many of them were the lower-grade sort turned out quickly by the swordsmiths to serve poor samurai in combat. Others were magnificent creations signed by such legendary sword makers as Yasatsuna, Sanjo and Amakuni, heirlooms whose capture by Jebu was a tragedy for the families of the samurai who had carried them. It was four years since Jebu had first vowed to undertake the project.

It was evident to Jebu that Nyosan deeply missed Taitaro. It seemed to him a cruelty that Taitaro should deliberately cut himself off from his wife and choose to live alone, but Nyosan herself never questioned his decision. Erom hints in her conversation, Jebu gathered that her life was not without its compensations. Indeed, it seemed the older men and women among the Zinja enjoyed their own sort of unions with one another, which were bound by no rules except that of secrecy from the younger members of the Order. So Nyosan apparently did not lack for whatever comfort might be drawn from the joys of the body. She was not alone, though she might be lonely, and she never complained. Still, Jebu resented the way Taitaro had left her. Could he not find whatever insight he sought within his union with Nyosan, rather than off in the woods by himself?

During his stay at the Teak Blossom Temple, Jebu followed the usual routine of a Zinja monk at home base-up at dawn, meditation and exercises before breakfast, practice in the military arts until noon, manual labour in the afternoon, study of Zinja lore in the evening.

Each day he spent some time staring into the flickering depths of the Jewel of Life and Death. He found that it really did seem to enhance his peace of mind. The obsession with his father and Arghun, the longing for Taniko, were still there, but he accepted them, as a veteran samurai learns to live with the pain of old wounds.

He entered into a liaison with one of the temple women. It was pleasant and gave him a feeling of greater completeness. Together they studied and practised sexual magic, following ancient books from India and China. It was a fascinating pursuit. But more than once when he and his partner had devoted themselves to the sexual yoga for hours and the moment of supreme bliss should have been a moment of profound insight into the Self, instead he seemed to make contact with Taniko. At such times her face would appear in his mind as clearly as if she had supplanted the partner who sat with him in ecstatic union. Sometimes she spoke to him: "The lilac branch will always be there for the waterfowl." Once Jebu asked his partner if she had spoken. "I don't remember," she answered. It remained a mystery.

One afternoon while Jebu was weeding the vegetable garden, a monk approached followed by a small, ragged figure carrying a travel box. The man had a heavy, untrimmed black beard that almost covered his entire face. Jebu did not recognize him.

"Shike!"

Now Jebu saw the gaps in the teeth and the crossed eyes, and he knew who it was. "Moko!"

"Shike, it has taken me this long to find my way to you. I have been over a year on the road, going from one Zinja temple to another, begging for my meals, hiding from samurai and bandits. Luckily I was able to escape with my dogu box. With my Instruments of the

Way of Carpentry I was able to earn my living as I travelled. Every place I went, you had been there, but you were gone. Where you seemed to travel on wings, I followed on wooden feet."

Jebu threw his arms around the little man and led him to the edge of the garden, where they sat on a pair of boulders. "Tell me all the news you can. Is Taniko-san well?"

Moko's face fell and he was silent. Jebu seized his arm. "What is it?"

Moko hesitantly put his hand on Jebu's. "Shike, after you found us at Horigawa's estate, I had to flee as well. The prince discovered I was your friend. I hated to leave the Lady Taniko alone with him, but I felt that my ghost would afford her small protection, so I went on my way."

"Did he hurt her?"

"Whatever I know is only what I've been told by others." And Moko told the story of the red-haired baby born to Taniko, its death, the fire and Taniko's return to Heian Kyo. Tears streamed from Jebu's eyes. When Moko's story was over, Jebu sat covering his face with his hands.

Suddenly he stood up, gave a great cry of anguish and rushed to the edge of the sea. There he threw himself on the stony ground and wept. A dark cloud covered his mind. At first he felt no more than a blackness and numbness within, as if a naginata blade had cloven his chest. Gradually, images rose within him: Taniko, the baby he had never seen, Horigawa.

If only she had listened to him. They could have run away together. Waves of sadness swept through him like the surf below in Hakata Bay. Two lives were in bondage to sorrow and the third snuffed out because Taniko refused to give up her status, to forget this marriage

that had been made for her by fools, and run away with him. Their daughter was dead. How Taniko must have suffered. Jebu wept for the drowned child and for Taniko's agony.

He would go and kill Horigawa. He had never hated anyone this way before, not even Arghun. His enmity towards Arghun was a matter of principle; it was only right to hate the man who had killed his father and who wanted to kill him. But even though he had fought with Arghun, he felt he hardly knew the man, and from what little he did know, he felt a degree of respect for the Mongol.

With Horigawa, it was different. Horigawa had used and abused Taniko's body. He had killed their baby. The thought of Horigawa made his stomach churn and his fingers clench, aching to be wrapped around the man's scrawny neck. He hated the cruelty, the waste, the stupidity of Horigawa's act. It was Horigawa, too, who had egged on the Takashi and thereby set the great samurai families at each other's throats. Because of Horigawa thousands of good men were dead and much of the land lay in ruins. If Horigawa were to die, how many lives might be changed for the better?

If only he had killed him when he had the chance at Daidoji. He had been a fool to let him live. Some of the hatred he felt for Horigawa was directed at himself as well. It was because of his error that Horigawa had lived to kill Jebu's daughter.

The spasm of hatred recalled him to himself. He reached inside his robe to the secret place sewn into it, and he took out the shintai. Sitting up, he held the Jewel in both hands before his face, staring into the shifting planes of colour and light in its depths. For a moment he seemed to see the great glowing Tree of Life and some of the creatures that grew from it.

Peace spread slowly through his body. The grief was still there, a dull

ache, but the hatred was gone.

Horigawa and I are one, he told himself. For me to kill him in hatred, thinking that I am ridding the world of evil, is as mad as cutting off my left hand with my right hand. Horigawa acts according to his nature and I act according to mine. If I kill him some day, it will be because it is necessary, not because I hate him and desire his death.

That, he thought with surprise, is the deepest level of insight I have achieved since Taitaro gave me the shintai.

He stood up and walked back to Moko, who was staring at him. "Shike, what is that precious stone?"

"It is a gift to me from my fathers. Both of them." He put his hand on Moko's shoulder. "I'm all right now."

"Shike, I want to stay with you. Let me be your servant, your Bannerman, your foot soldier-anything."

"A Zinja monk does not normally have servants. But these are not normal times. Yes, from now on you will travel with me."

A few days later Abbot Weicho called Jebu into his chamber. "You will continue to serve the Muratomo. The Council of Abbots is convinced that there is a doom hanging over the house of Takashi. It is important to the Order that Zinja be fighting on the winning side. When the Muratomo do win, we may see the revival of the Order for which we have long hoped."

Jebu was sent to the island of Shikoku to help a band of samurai besiege the castle of an oryoshi who was oppressing the countryside in the service of the Red Dragon. Jebu proposed to assassinate the oryoshi and was contemptuously told that it was impossible. The castle was so impregnable that a mouse could not

get into it, and the oryoshi was guarded in shifts by samurai who even stood over his bed and watched him while he slept.

"He does not even send his guards away when he takes a woman," the local Muratomo leader said.

"Assassination is a Zinja speciality," said Jebu. "Leave this to me." Jebu infiltrated the castle by way of a sewer outlet into the moat around it. He hid in the castle privy for a day and a night, using Zinja meditative techniques to remain motionless and silent. When his intended victim came to relieve himself, Jebu ran his sword into his bowels and escaped by the same route he had entered. Leaderless, the castle fell to the Muratomo samurai, who looked on Jebu with superstitious horror. Moko helped him to wash his clothing and equipment, and would not let him out of the bath, which he constantly replenished with fresh, steaming water, for an entire day.

Jebu fought along with one band of samurai, then another, staying at one castle for a night, at another for a week, at a few for months. He besieged and was besieged, ambushed enemies in the forest and fought pitched battles in the streets of cities and villages. It was a way of life he had grown used to after Domei's insurrection, and one to which Moko quickly adapted.

But in spite of the Council of Abbots' hopes, the Muratomo leaders who held out against the Takashi were, one by one, captured or killed. The insurrection came to seem more like the scattered depredations of outlaw bands than an organized rebellion. The two surviving sons of Domei remained under guard in the hands of the Takashi. The elder, Hideyori, was still under the watchful eye of Taniko's father, Lord Shima Bokuden. His half-brother, Yukio, remained in Sogamori's custody in the Rokuhara, the Takashi stronghold in the capital. Both publicly disavowed any warfare conducted in their family's behalf, declaring it to be the work of

bandits. They repeatedly swore their loyalty to the Emperor and to Sogamori.

Jebu's collection of swords grew month by month. After a battle, with Moko's help, he would find the swords of any samurai he killed, and Moko would carry them to the nearest Zinja monastery. Eventually the swords would make their way to the Teak Blossom Temple. Months later a message would arrive from Nyosan by some circuitous route, telling Jebu that the swords had arrived, and giving him the current tally.

Jebu continued his daily practice of contemplating the Jewel of Life and Death. Carefully secluding himself so that his samurai companions would not see and covet the Jewel, he would lose himself in the maze traced on the transparent sphere's surface.

Moko felt that the Jewel must be magic, and he feared its power over his master. Jebu had told Moko the whole story of Jamuga, Tai-taro, Arghun and the shintai. The Jewel was beautiful, Moko thought, but why did the shike spend so much time staring at it?

Chapter Twenty-Two

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

Sogamori has commanded that the young Muratomo no Yukio be moved from the Buddhist monastery on Mount Hiei to the Takashi palace, the Rokuhara. Sogamori claims he has heard of threats on the young man's life, but everyone agrees that the main threat to the Muratomo heir is Sogamori himself. Akimi, it is said, no longer has much influence on Sogamori, who has fallen foolishly in love with a sixteen-year-old white rhythm dancer from Kaga province named Hotoke.

I wonder what Eather would do if Sogamori ordered him to execute Hideyori.

-Seventh Month, eleventh day

YEAR OF THE APE

Kiyosi's visits had become the high points of Taniko's life. He now came in the evening and brought his lute with him, and while he played, they sang together. Eirst, though, they would spend an hour or two discussing the gossip of the day. Kiyosi found that nothing concerning the intrigues at the Court was beyond Taniko's comprehension, and he had even fallen into the habit of asking her opinion on difficult affairs of state in which he was involved.

"Father is beside himself with glee," he said one evening. "He says he has finally matched the accomplishment of the greatest Eujiwara."
"How so?"

"He has arranged for my sister, Kenreimon, to marry the Imperial

Prince Takakura. And he intends to have Takakura succeed to the throne when Emperor Rokujo retires."

The year before in the Year of the Sheep, Emperor Nijo, whose Empress, Sadako, Taniko had served as a lady-in-waiting, had died after a short illness. Sogamori, the Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa, and the Regent, Eujiwara no Motofusa, had agreed that the new Son of Heaven should be Nijo's son, Rokujo, who was now only four years old. Next in succession were two sons of Go-Shirakawa, Mochihito and Takakura.

Taniko pointed this out. "Prince Mochihito is next in line for the throne after Emperor Rokujo."

"He will be persuaded to step aside." Kiyosi looked away uneasily. Eor his visits, Taniko sent the servants away and put aside the screen of state. They had long since been conversing face-to-face. The Shima family had no fear of scandal. Indeed, Ryuichi was frankly hoping for something scandalous to occur.

"Kiyosi-san, this is a mistake. Your father is now tampering with the Imperial succession. His appetite is boundless. He is like the frog in the peasant tale who puffs himself up until he bursts. As you know, I hear things from people who would never talk to you or to a member of your family. People are afraid of the Takashi, and some are growing to hate them. What will they think when they learn that Sogamori intends to put a Takashi on the Imperial throne?"

"Just to marry the Emperor, not to be Emperor-"

"That wouldn't fool the stupidest street sweeper, and it doesn't fool me. Obviously Takakura and your sister will have a child, quite possibly a son. That child will be Sogamori's grandson. And as soon as that happens Takakura will conveniently abdicate and the

Emperor will be a Takashi. Sogamori's ambition is as plain as Mount Hiei. I tell you, he overreaches himself."

"What Eather intends is not unheard of," said Kiyosi. "The Eujiwara married their daughters to the Imperial heirs many times. The Imperial house today is as much descended from the Eujiwara as it is from Emperor Jimmu. And besides, we Takashi have Imperial blood. We are all descended from Emperor Kammu."

"It's not the same," said Taniko. "The Eujiwara were as close to the throne as a river to its banks when they intermarried with the Imperial house. Emperor Kammu lived a long time ago, and since then the Takashi have been provincial landowners, traders and samurai. People see you as rustic upstarts. And what's more, the Eujiwara themselves are among those you should be concerned about. They are envious of the power of the Takashi. Your worst enemy at Court is the Regent, Eujiwara no Motofusa."

"Motofusa is no danger to us."

"The Eujiwara still have enormous influence in the country."

"Influence. What difference does that make? You speak of people fearing and hating the Takashi. Why should we be concerned? The day of the Eujiwara, the day of the nobility, is over. They had authority, and we respected and obeyed them. They despised us, the samurai, because we did the fighting, we shed the blood. The nobles of Heian Kyo were above all that. When Go-Shirakawa's brother tried to overthrow him, and later, during Domei's insurrection, we discovered that it was our arrows and our swords that decided events. It is from the sword that authority springs. And now that the Muratomo have been crushed, every sword in the land does the bidding of the Takashi. My father holds the country in the palm of his hand."

Taniko shook her head. "You are talking like your father now. I think you know better. You cannot rule this land with swords alone. If the nobles, the priests, the landowners great and small, the peasants and the people in the streets all turn against the Takashi, they can bring you down. The swords that serve you today will turn against you, if your enemies seem to have right on their side."

Kiyosi said nothing for a moment. Then he spoke in a wondering voice. "You offend me."

Taniko bowed her head. "I have overstepped myself with the august Minister of the Interior."

"No one says such things to me any more."

"I ask your pardon."

"You don't understand. I need someone to remind me that the world still looks on the Takashi as uncouth butchers. We deceive ourselves.

Only you, Taniko-san, of all the people I know, speak to me of things as they really are." He did something he had never done before in all the times he had visited her. He moved across the floor until he was sitting beside her. He took her hand.

Taniko's hand felt as if she had put it close to a fire. A warmth spread through her arm to her entire body. It was a sensation she had felt many times on looking at Kiyosi, but never had it burned like this. She sighed with the pleasure of it.

"Have you nothing to say now?" he whispered.

"Words are not the only language." She put her hand on top of his. "I

only came close to you. If that silences you, you are easily silenced."

"It has been very long since I was silenced so, Kiyosi-san," she said, letting her head fall against his chest.

Delicately his hands found their way into her robes. With the sure touch of a very experienced man his fingers penetrated the many layers of dresses and skirts she wore and found the recesses of her hungry body. She melted with joy at the sensation, and reached up to stroke his cheek again and again with an almost frantic insistence.

They undressed each other, not stripping away all their garments, but peeling away the layers of silk just enough to reveal each to the other, like a partially unwrapped gift. With a pang of regret Taniko thought fleetingly of Jebu, only to say to herself, as the samurai often said, that the past was the past and the present was the present, and this shining lord was someone she desperately needed and could not deny herself.

His face shadowed in the lamplight, he looked at her intently, seriously, his nostrils flaring as he drew deep breaths. Always, before now, she had seen him fully dressed in the clothing of a courtier. Now, for the first time, she saw and felt the power in him-the solid, broad neck, the wide, square shoulders, the great, flat muscles across his chest. She stroked his arms delicately with her fingers. These were the thick forearms of a swordsman, strong as tree trunks.

This was the body of a man trained from childhood to kill. He was, and would always be, a samurai, a man whose way of life was death. To such a man, who faced death constantly, a moment like this must be very precious. Each time he was with a woman he must know that it might be the last time, and this knowledge must give the union a painful sweetness which no man but a samurai could ever know.

With Kiyosi she shared that poignancy, that transience.

This beautiful man might be cut down tomorrow, like a flower in a field. Shuddering with pleasure, she gave herself to him.

Eor the first time, Taniko experienced what it was to spend night after night with a man she loved. Her days passed with a honey-warm delight she had never known before. It was as if she had gone hungry all her life and was only now discovering the taste of good food.

Examining her body in privacy, she found her hips and breasts growing rounder, fuller, though her waist and legs were still slender. She had the figure of a woman now, no longer the body of a girl. Her mirror told her that her cheeks were a healthy pink, which, of course, she had to hide with white powder when she dressed. Her eyes sparkled and her hair was thick and glossy. How far she had come from the wraithlike creature invoking Amida Buddha in the corner of her chamber! How far Kiyosi had taken her! She had never been more beautiful.

They began to travel together. Kiyosi took her for carriage rides through the city and on visits to nearby shrines. During the autumn they went several times to one of the Takashi country estates, where they spent the day riding and hunting with falcons. They sailed the length of the Inland Sea from the port of Hyogo, which the Takashi virtually owned, to Shimonoseki Strait, opening into the great western sea.

Since she was no longer connected with the Court, and since their relationship had no official status, she was unable to accompany him to any of the great state banquets and festivals he frequently attended. But she was always with him at smaller, intimate dinners and parties he and his close friends gave for one another. Kiyosi

was the centre of a circle of young nobles and courtiers who wrote poetry, patronized sculptors and painters, talked and drank and played the flute and the koto and the lute until dawn and went on long rollicking visits to one another's country houses.

Taniko found the young Takashi men to be brilliant, evanescent creatures. A few years ago these young men would have been going to war instead of reciting poetry or riding after their falcons. One day war might strike Heian Kyo again, and some of these young men might fall. In their poems, the samurai often compared themselves to cherry blossoms, beautiful but blown away by the first strong wind. Taniko thought the comparison apt.

She knew that Kiyosi had a principal wife and two secondary wives, as well as sons and daughters. In matters involving affairs of state, this was the family to which Kiyosi was responsible. She did not resent them, and she hoped they did not resent her. They had possessed Kiyosi long before she knew him, and they would have him back long after she lost him. Somehow or other she would lose him, of that she was sure. All joy, she had learned, lasts only for a moment. Cherry blossoms. She wrote a poem for Kiyosi.

Many are the nights

We sleep in each other's arms.

In years to come

We will think these nights all too few.

Kiyosi didn't like it. It was depressing, he told her, to dwell on the instability of life. Such matters should be left to monks. As for himself, he intended to live for ever.

We have slept together

And your long black hair is tangled in the dawn. We will remain together

Till your black hair turns white.

Sogamori, Kiyosi's awesome father, approved of her. They had met several times at Takashi banquets, and the stout chancellor had smiled benignly and spoken pleasantly to her.

Aunt Chogao beamed and little Munetaki peeped, awestruck, as the Takashi hero strode through the Shima galleries. Uncle Ryuichi was beside himself with delight and sent glowing reports to Lord Bokuden in Kamakura about the way Taniko had charmed herself into the highest circles of the Takashi. Bokuden wrote letters back praising Taniko and mentioning in passing that Muratomo no Hideyori was growing up to be a dutiful subject of the Emperor and was no danger to the social order.

He was already fully grown when I met him five years ago, Taniko thought, even if he was only fifteen.

She managed, while being honest with Kiyosi, to be of help to her family. She told Kiyosi in a straightforward way that she wanted to do things for the Shima, and he gladly supplied her with information and sometimes with more tangible gifts to pass on. Several times he told Taniko where Chinese trading ships were going to land their goods secretly to avoid the Emperor's tax officers. Though the Takashi held the highest government offices in the land, much of their wealth was based on tax avoidance.

It amused Kiyosi to help the fortunes of what seemed to him a smaller and poorer branch of his own family. He persuaded Sogamori to double the allowance sent annually for the maintenance

of Muratomo no Hideyori in Lord Bokuden's household. Grants of tax-free rice land descended on the Shima family unexpectedly.

Kiyosi smiled when she thanked him for his benevolence to her family. He said, "There are certain small fish that attach themselves to a shark, and when he feeds, they enjoy the morsels that fall from his mouth."

Taniko laughed. "That is a disgusting comparison, Kiyosi-san." "Not at all. The small fish are said to help the shark find his way. It is my hope that your family will similarly be helpful to us."

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

This has been a good year for me, but a bad year for the realm. Famine and pestilence are laying to waste both the capital and the countryside. Every day carts piled high with the bodies of those dead of disease or starvation are taken out through the Rasho Mon to be burned. People are robbed on the streets in broad daylight. Crowds of beggars surround the mansions of the wealthy. The Shima house has its regular contingent, who appear at our door every morning like a flock of sparrows. Uncle Ryuichi lets me feed them, because he feels I have brought good luck to the family. But I tell the beggars not to let it be known that I am giving them anything, or the flock will double in size, and I will be sent out into the street to join them.

The Takashi seem unable to do anything about these steadily worsening conditions, or perhaps they do not care. But they permit no criticism of themselves. They have over three hundred young men between fourteen and sixteen who cut their hair short, wear robes of Takashi red, and patrol the streets. Let someone whisper a word against the Takashi, and before he knows what is happening he is whisked off to the dungeon in the Rokuhara and beaten almost to death. More than once the bodies of men and women have been

found in the Kamo River. It is said officially that they were killed by robbers. But often the last time these unfortunates were seen alive was when they were dragged into the Takashi stronghold. In past times, when the people complained, the rulers tried to improve conditions. The Takashi have found a cheaper way to stop complaints.

Although my young lord likes me to be frank with him, we do not talk much about these things. He knows about them. He often seems troubled when he talks to me, and he is silent for long moments. When we do talk of matters of state he pours out his fears for the future of the land, his unhappiness over the suffering of the people. But his father will have things as they are, and my young lord can do nothing but try to advise him. I hear that Sogamori's rages are becoming more frequent and lasting longer. Just the day before yesterday he smashed to pieces a precious vase from China because Motofusa, the Eujiwara Regent, made a speech criticizing him in the Great Council of State.

I yield myself to my young lord because he is noble and strong and beautiful. He possesses everything that my husband has not at all and that only Jebu has in greater abundance. I yield myself because life is short and I cannot sit in lonely sorrow. I need the arms of a strong man around me. I know Amida Buddha sees, and has compassion on me. But-oh, Jebu! Where are you?

-Tenth Month, sixteenth day

YEAR OF THE APE

In the Eleventh Month Taniko discovered that, as the ladies of the Court sometimes put it, she was not alone. She was surprised that her immediate reaction was joy. She had not thought that she would ever care about having a child, after the loss of her daughter. Eor

over two months after she was sure, she concealed her condition from Kiyosi. She was not sure whether he would be pleased or displeased when he learned.

One night he touched her bare belly with his fingertips. "I think you are attending too many banquets and drinking too much sake. You seem to be getting rounder in the middle."

Taniko smiled, then laughed outright. Kiyosi sat smiling at her.

At last she said, "Can't you guess why my belly is fuller?"

"Spoken like a true country wench. Yes, I suspected. I sensed something different about you. Ah, Taniko-san, I am glad. I had hoped that some day you would tell me this news."

"You're glad? Why? You already have many sons and daughters." He smiled. "I have wanted to give you a special gift."

She held out her arms to him, and they drew together.

The voluminous clothing worn by the well-born women of Heian Kyo concealed pregnancy until the very last moment. Taniko was able, as she wished, to accompany Kiyosi on short journeys, to go to banquets and other celebrations and to venture out in public by herself from time to time. The physician who attended the Takashi in war and peace, a man who had watched over Sogamori's health for thirty years, came to examine and prescribe for Taniko and promised that he would be there when she delivered. Taniko hoped that this childbirth would not be as long and as painful as the last.

Her hope was fulfilled. She felt the first labour pains at dawn on the fourteenth day of the Eifth Month in the Year of the Rooster. By midmorning the Takashi physician and a midwife under his direction were with her in the Shima lying-in room. Early in the afternoon

Taniko gave one last, agonized push' and the midwife drew the baby out of her body.

"He will be called Atsue," Taniko said when the physician held the baby up for her to see.

Kiyosi came to see her and the baby at sunset. Surprisingly, his father was with him. Through the blinds of the lying-in room Taniko could hear the clatter of Sogamori's mounted samurai attendants. Ryuichi was beside himself with delight and apprehension. Sogamori's presence filled the house as if Mount Hiei itself had come down to the city and was walking among them.

"There cannot be enough of us," he declared. "The boy Atsue is Takashi on both his mother's and his father's side. He will learn the arts of war, but he will also learn poetry, musicianship, calligraphy, and the dance. He will be able to appear before the Emperor without concern." He looked sternly at Taniko. "You will see to it. Eor now he will remain with you. No expense will be spared for his education."

Taniko looked at Kiyosi who stood beside his father. In Sogamori's presence the younger man seemed diminished, a youth without a mind of his own. Taniko saw that Kiyosi might well be the wiser of the two, as many people said, but it was the strength and will of Sogamori that made the Takashi all-powerful.

She felt a chill at Sogamori's ominous words, "for now." Kiyosi smiled reassuringly at her. Tomorrow, she thought, he would come, and they would talk as they always had.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Early in the spring of Jebu's twenty-third year, he and Moko were camped near the Rasho Mon gate of Heian Kyo with a group of samurai disguised as silk merchants. They had been commissioned by the surviving Muratomo leaders to attempt the rescue from the Rokuhara of Muratomo no Yukio, who, it was rumoured, was in grave danger of being murdered by the suspicious Sogamori.

"The boy is a constant reproach to Sogamori," said Shenzo Saburo, the leader of Jebu's band. "He reminds Sogamori that the Takashi murdered his father and grandfather and his older brothers. The tyrant will not rest easy till he has killed off all the generations of Muratomo."

None of the samurai, it turned out, had ever been in Heian Kyo except for Jebu and Moko, and none of them had seen the Rokuhara. Holding a council, the samurai agreed that Jebu would go into the city first, a scout.

"Dress as a Buddhist warrior monk, a sohei, Jebu," said Shenzo Saburo. "Go into the city and enquire about Lord Yukio. Observe the Rokuhara and report back to me how strongly guarded it is and how we might get Lord Yukio out. And shave your head, Jebu. It's your red hair that makes you conspicuous. There are plenty of tall monks and peasants in the world."

As Moko shaved his head, Jebu drew his tally scroll out of an inside pocket in his robe. "I have collected ninety-nine swords. Only one to go." "Shike, this sword collecting of yours is madness."

"Yes, it is foolish. But in an impulsive moment I made a vow. When I collect one more sword I can stop."

After several hours of wandering the broad avenues and smaller side streets of Heian Kyo with his naginata over his shoulder, Jebu was frustrated. He found it difficult to approach people on the streets and in the wine shops, and the people he did speak to were terrified of talking to a stranger. He had only to mention the name "Muratomo" and the conversation would abruptly be broken off. The red-robed young men who patrolled the streets for Sogamori had terrorized the whole city. Several times Jebu encountered groups of them, and like the other citizens of Heian Kyo he prudently crossed over to the other side of the street.

No one would tell Jebu anything useful about Lord Yukio's condition, his whereabouts in the Rokuhara, how well he was guarded, or the strength of the Takashi samurai. But the Takashi were so unpopular that his guarded questions aroused no hostility, only warnings that he was broaching matters better left alone. Jebu decided that he would go and look at the Takashi stronghold for himself and report back on its apparent defences. That would give him something to show for his journey into the city.

Then it appeared that his one-man expedition might produce another result. At the darkest hour of the night, Jebu, wandering westward towards the Kamo River to get to the Rokuhara, heard the music of a flute. Someone was playing an air of the eastern provinces. There was something almost magical in the pure, sweet sound carrying on the still night air. Jebu smiled appreciatively.

He stepped on to the bridge called Gojo, over the Kamo River. This was the very bridge on which he had first crossed into Heian Kyo with Taniko. In the moonless dark he could faintly make out the three towers of the Rokuhara on the far side of the bridge.

Then he saw the flute player strolling towards him from the other end

of the bridge. It was a man dressed in a green and yellow hunting costume, with his long sword hanging from his belt. He was small and slender and looked very young. His long black hair hung unbound below his shoulders. He had no samurai topknot, but he wore a samurai sword. He must be very young, indeed. Strange that such a boy should be out so late.

To fight and perhaps kill this flute-playing lad would be a shameful way to collect his last sword. But an armed man in Heian Kyo must be on the Takashi side. Perhaps this was one of Sogamori's young bullies, off duty and out of his red robe. If so, it was time he was taught some humility.

Swinging his naginata down from his shoulder, Jebu fell into, an atthe-ready stance, barring the young man's path across the bridge. "You play very well."

"Thank you, sohei," said the boy politely, raising his eyebrows ever so slightly as his glance fell on the long pole arm in Jebu's hands. "Can I be of service to you?"

"I want your sword. Give it to me and I'll let you pass."

Calmly the young man sheathed his flute, drew a fan from his sash and snapped it open. It was white, with a red disk painted on it. What on earth did he intend to do with that? He was a good-looking boy, Jebu saw, though the eyes under his high forehead were larger than normal, which gave him a somewhat feminine prettiness. When he smiled, he displayed slightly protruding teeth.

"My sword is my most valuable possession, sohei. I find it rather an insult for you to suggest that I give it up without a fight."

"Do not force me to attack you, young man. Do you intend to defend

yourself with that fan?"

"If you are a well-trained sohei, you must be acquainted with the art of the war fan. I'll use this until I see the need for a more puissant weapon. It is always better to use too little force than too much, don't you think?"

Jebu laughed. "So young and such a sage?"

"I have given some thought to military matters. Are you going to stand there talking, sohei, or are you going to come at me?" The youth crouched slightly, the absurd fan held out before him.

Very well, Jebu thought. He would try to subdue the young man without hurting him. Waving his naginata from side to side, he took a few menacing steps forward. Suddenly, he swung the naginata at the boy's feet, trying to knock him down with its long pole. At the last possible second the youth stepped quickly backwards, and the naginata's sword blade sliced into the railing of the bridge. Jebu pulled the weapon free and stepped back, trying to draw his opponent into an attack. But what sort of attack could he make, armed with nothing but a fan? The flute player simply stood his ground, eyeing Jebu intently.

Once again Jebu lunged, whirling his naginata in a great arc that was intended, not to hurt, but to force the boy off-balance in evading it. This time, instead of stepping back, the young man made a prodigious leap into the air. Jebu's naginata whistled harmlessly through the space where he had been.

Jebu considered himself to be faster than any swordsman he had ever met, except for some Zinja teachers he had fenced with. But this lad's bursts of speed were absolutely blinding. Erom a position of perfect stillness the young man could move so quickly as to make the

movement seem invisible. Jebu repeatedly attacked places where his opponent had been an instant before, only to realize that the young man was now six paces away.

Then the boy darted in past Jebu's guard, the fan thrust into Jebu's face, blinding him. Then, folding the fan, the youth stabbed its rigid ribs into the backs of Jebu's hands. The pain was excruciating, and it was all Jebu could do to keep his grip on his naginata. The boy beat him about the head and face with the folded fan, the blows coming as fast and furiously as the hammering of a woodpecker's beak on a tree trunk. Growling like an angry bear, Jebu managed to shove the boy away.

To be so discomfited by a lad fighting with a fan-this was humiliating. He must defeat him and take his sword.

No, Jebu thought then. Why must he defeat the young man? His opponent was excellent, he himself was excellent. They were brothers in the warrior's arts. It didn't matter which of them won.

Satisfied to fight now for the pleasure of using his skill, Jebu found himself doing much better. He was driving the young man back. He had him pinned against the railing of the bridge. He looked into his opponent's large eyes and saw there a slight amusement, and deeper than that, he saw the Self looking at him.

The young man leaped to the railing and stood there, balanced on the balls of his bare feet. He was laughing. Jebu slashed at his ankles and the young man jumped into the air, letting the blade pass under him. He landed and danced backwards along the railing, parrying Jebu's thrusts with his open fan. His agility was awe-inspiring. Jebu remembered Moko's legend of the demon of the Rasho Mon, and suddenly wondered if he were fighting with a spirit.

Enough of this, he thought. He stopped fighting and lowered his naginata. He chuckled, then started to laugh aloud. He stood there on the bridge, roaring with laughter and delight.

"You are the best opponent I have ever fought! The best! Who are you?"

Smiling, not even out of breath, the young man dropped lightly to the planks of the bridge, folded his fan with elaborate care and tucked it back into his green sash.

"Who are you?" Jebu asked again.

"The samurai ask who their opponents are before a fight, but you ask afterwards. I have known all along that you are Jebu, the Zinja shike."

"How do you know me?"

"Eor years I have been hearing tales of a large brute of a monk, who goes up and down the countryside attacking samurai and collecting their swords. He is said to have red hair. Your head is shaved-I suppose you consider that a disguise. How many swords in your collection now, Jebu?"

"Ninety-nine. I vowed to collect a hundred. Yours would have been the last. But meeting you means far more to me than collecting another sword."

"I am glad of that. You fought beside my father and my brothers. I want to be your friend."

"Who are you?"

"I am Muratomo no Yukio."

Jebu fell to his knees and pressed his forehead against the wooden planking. "I have been seeking you."

"You have? Tonight I just escaped from the Rokuhara."

"And you stopped to fight with me? What if the Takashi were pursuing you? You should have simply given me the sword and hurried on."

Yukio laughed. "I could not miss the chance to learn the outcome of a contest with the great Jebu."

"How did you learn to use a fan like that? I heard you were being educated for the Buddhist priesthood."

"I was tutored in the martial arts by the tengu. Every night I used to slip out of the monastery to fence with them."

"The tengu?"

"Little creatures, half man and half bird, who live in the mountains. Very skilled with all weapons, including the war fan and the tea kettle."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

Yukio laughed. "The monks of Mount Hiei did. Monks are generally very superstitious."

"Not Zinja monks," said Jebu. "Lord Yukio, I am part of a band of allies of your house who came here with the hope of rescuing you from Sogamori before he could harm you. We are camped outside the city near the Rasho Mon. I am delighted to see that you have rescued yourself, but we must get away from the city at once. Having fought you, I know that you are truly worthy to lead the house of

Muratomo."

"The leader of the house of Muratomo is my elder brother Hideyori," said Yukio. "He is in exile at Kamakura, but he will come forward at the proper time."

"As you say, lord." Jebu bowed again. "No more sword collecting for me. This night I make a new vow. Because Lord Muratomo no Yukio has prevented me from fulfilling my vow of collecting one hundred swords and because he has shown me what the art of swordsmanship truly is, I vow to serve him faithfully and constantly as long as both he and I shall live. I swear it on the honour of the Order of Zinja. In token of this vow, I offer him my sword." Drawing his Zinja sword, he held it out to Yukio. The handsome young man extended his hand over the sword without touching it-the customary samurai gesture to indicate acceptance of an offer of service.

"I accept your sword and I am deeply honoured. As a son of Muratomo no Domei, I expect many men to swear fealty to me as time passes. You are the first. I know that this is the sword that was presented to you by your Order at your initiation, and therefore it is a precious symbol of your holy calling. In the name of the house of Muratomo I accept your offer of service. I pledge you and your Order the same loyalty you offer me." He handed the sword back to Jebu, who sheathed it with tears in his eyes.

"And now," said Yukio, "let us go to join our friends at the Rasho Mon. Perhaps whoever shaved your head can perform the manhood ceremony for me. Eor some reason, even though I'm already fifteen, Lord Sogamori never would allow it."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Surprisingly, for a trio as unusual in appearance and easy to recognize as Jebu, Yukio and Moko, the three continually managed to elude the samurai sent out by the Takashi to hunt them down. Sometimes they were barely out one door when their pursuers entered through another. Sometimes they enjoyed long periods of peace under the protection of one or another friendly local lord. Sometimes the idleness of safety grew boring, and they were almost happy when word came that a group of samurai flying the Red Dragon pennon was riding their way.

Yukio's main objective was to survive and wait for the Takashi to make a mistake. They had risen so high, they must come down eventually. There was no possibility of the house of Muratomo's accepting the permanent supremacy of the house of Takashi. During his captivity Yukio had tried to remain on good terms with Sogamori, but still Sogamori had been on the verge of having him killed when he escaped.

Yukio finally explained to Jebu that he had secretly taught himself the martial arts and devised his own exercises for practice. Jebu was almost inclined to believe Yukio's tengu story. Somehow Yukio had made discoveries in the fighting skills that were not likely to occur to anyone who had learned in the usual way from a recognized teacher. Jebu and Yukio practised together constantly, and Jebu was quite willing to admit that in this youth he had met his master. Together the two men progressed to unparalleled accomplishments with their weapons. When, on occasion, they were forced to fight, legends were born.

Yukio was also interested in the theoretical side of war, and when he learned that a landlord in the land of Oshu, at the far northern tip of

Honshu island, had a copy of the Chinese classic, Sun Tzu's Art of Warfare, he could not rest until he had read it. The owner of the book being a Takashi adherent, Yukio could not simply present himself at the gate and ask permission to read the book. He had to gain entry to the household by stealth.

The landlord also had a beautiful daughter named Mirusu. Each night Yukio positioned himself outside her bedchamber and wooed her by playing the flute, so softly as not to wake the rest of her family. After he had charmed her for six nights with his flute-playing, Mirusu invited him in. He spent the following nights making love to her, and when he had pleased her sufficiently, reading the thirteen books of Sun Tzu.

Yukio was also fascinated by ships. He had studied books on naval warfare and examined the records of the old battles with pirates that had won the Takashi renown in the last century. Yet he had never been on a ship. He questioned Jebu closely about his few voyages and asked Moko what he, as a carpenter, knew about shipbuilding.

"Ships are the key to Takashi power," Yukio declared one day. They were far to the north, enjoying the protection of the lord of Oshu, Eujiwara no Hidehira, who owed old debts of gratitude to the Muratomo and who bitterly hated the Takashi.

Yukio went on. "Half the Takashi wealth comes from overseas trade. My family can never defeat them as long as we are landlocked. We, too, must take to the sea. You may not know that the patron kami of the Muratomo, Hachiman, was once called Yawata and was a kami of the ocean. So our heritage is of the ocean, and in the ocean we will win the final victory over the Takashi."

"We should go to Kyushu," said Jebu. "It's time we left here, we've imposed on Lord Hidehira long enough. My mother and my stepfather both live on Kyushu, and it has been years since I've seen

them. My mother lives at the Zinja Teak Blossom Temple, and this is what will interest you-the temple is on Hakata Bay. There are fishing boats and a few bigger ships there, and you can study the sea and talk to seamen to your heart's content. Hakata is a small port, and the Takashi have no forces there. We can live there unseen for as long as we like."

"Might it be possible to cross the ocean from there?"

"Korea is very close."

"I was thinking of China," said Yukio pensively. "In China the arts of shipbuilding and navigation are advanced far beyond ours."

Disguised as yamabushi-wandering Buddhist monks - Jebu, Yukio and Moko worked their way down the west coast of Honshu, crossing to Kyushu at Shimonoseki Strait.

"This is a short run, but it's tricky," said the captain of the fishing boat that weaved a twisting course past hilly islands. "In mid-morning at this time of year, the tide shifts and runs westwards through the strait at eight knots, and we have to navigate across it."

"You see, that's the sort of thing I want to know," Yukio said to Jebu.

"You can't expect to pick up every bit of seafaring lore in all the land," said Jebu.

"We must learn as much as we can."

The three made their way down Kyushu towards Hakata. Jebu insisted on a side trip to the Watefowl Temple, but though the temple had been rebuilt, it was deserted. His heart sank, wondering if anything had happened to Taitaro. Einally, they climbed the hill to the Teak Blossom Temple.

"Is there any news of my father?" Jebu asked roly-poly Abbot Weicho.

"The great Taitaro has left these Sacred Islands. He came to visit us here a year ago. His teachings on the Zinja way of life were incomparable. Unfortunately, though, he only stayed with us a few months. Then his Zinja insight told him that it was time for him to cross the great water. There are things to be learned in China, he said, that will be lost in another few years."

"I have been thinking of making the voyage to China myself, holiness," said Yukio.

Weicho nodded. "If Lord Yukio goes, Jebu, you must go with him. The Order has decreed that your task now is to accompany him, to serve, protect and fight for him."

Yukio joined with pleasure in the daily routine of the monks. Moko was set to work repairing the monastery's granary, which was old and about to fall down. He found occupation for his free time, he told Jebu with pride and pleasure, in the company of a woman of the village, who thought his tales of adventure more than adequate compensation for his odd appearance.

Jebu spent a day visiting with Nyosan. "I can't understand why Taitaro does this to you," he said to his mother. "This pursuit of insight without concern for others is a kind of spiritual greed."

Nyosan patted Jebu's hand. "I am pleased that you are indignant for me. But my life has given me three of the most splendid men I have ever known-my husband, Jamuga the barbarian, a giant of a man and a magnificent warrior, and my husband Taitaro, a giant of the spirit. And it has given me a son who combines the best of both. I am

well content."

"You may be content, Mother, but you have not got all you deserve."

"If each of us got what we deserve we would have to be in both heaven and hell at the same time. The way things are makes more sense."

One afternoon Abbot Weicho sent for Jebu and Yukio. They met in a cryptomeria-shaded grove at the base of the path leading to the peak overlooking the temple.

Weicho had a visitor with him, a round-faced, shaven-headed monk in a black robe. "Normally," Weicho was saying to the visitor, "our temples are placed at the very tops of mountains. But here the peak is too sharp, so we built the temple down here and put a small hut for meditation up there instead."

The visitor smiled and nodded. Since the Buddhists wore saffron, the Shinto monks white and the Zinja grey, Jebu wondered what way this black-robed man followed. His eyes, as he looked at Jebu and Yukio, were somehow at once warm and stern. He seemed an inconsequential fellow, just another monk in a land where there were tens of thousands until Jebu looked into his face. There was a rock-hard strength in the directness of his stare, the firmness of his lips and the set of his jaw. He looks at me as Taitaro did, thought Jebu.

"I am called Eisen. I bring a Buddhist teaching back from China. It is called Zen. In Chinese, Ch'an."

Weicho chuckled. "You will not convert Jebu. He's the most stubborn Zinja in the land. And Lord Yukio is too interested in fighting to care about religion. But I thought you might tell them something about China, since they are considering going there. And in repayment

they will escort you to the top of the mountain, since I'm too lazy to take you myself."

"A soft Zinja is no Zinja," Jebu quoted The Zinja Manual.

"You are also the most sententious Zinja in the land," said Weicho. "May I remind you that the Manual also says, 'On occasion the soft serves better than the hard. Where the sword cannot cut, the pillow may smother or the silken cord strangle.' You may escort Eisen-sensei to our meditation hut while amusing him with your borrowed wisdom."

As they began to climb, Jebu said, "What does the word Zen mean? I never heard it before."

Eisen laughed. "Some of us have _spent years asking ourselves what Zen means. It comes from an Indian word, dhyana, which means meditation."

"So you teach meditation," said Jebu. "On what do you meditate?" Eisen smiled. "Some of us meditate on a question, such as 'What is Zen?' Others, like myself, meditate on nothing at all."

"To what end?" Jebu asked.

"We meditate to meditate, that's all."

"I don't understand."

"It's very simple. That's why it's hard to understand." They were half-way up the stone steps leading through the small pines that grew on the mountain. Though Eisen was a stocky man, he was breathing easily and seemed to have no difficulty with the climb.

They took up the conversation again, Jebu and Eisen doing most of

the talking. Yukio, having spent his boyhood practising the martial arts secretly at night and sleeping during the day when he was supposed to be studying philosophy, had little to say. Jebu doggedly argued that spiritual practises had to produce results of some sort, even if only rebirth in the Pure Land. Eisen sidestepped all his arguments with amusement, much as Yukio had evaded his sword thrusts on the Gojo Bridge. At last they reached the top of the mountain, where there was a small straw hut sheltered by pines that had dug precarious footholds among the boulders. Beyond the hut and the pines the shoreline stretched encircling arms out to the horizon to form Hakata Bay.

Eisen said, "Long ago men whose names we no longer know went into the forests and up to the tops of mountains and thought about why people are not happy. And they came to the same conclusion: we should seek happiness in nothing at all. The Brahmans of India learned from those original sages. The Buddha and Lao Tzu both restated their teachings. The same wisdom is the heart of the lore of Zinja and Zen monks. I find there is much similarity between our two paths. Only, if you will forgive my saying so, we part company on the matter of warfare. We students of Zen believe that violence is an obstacle to enlightenment. The Zinja do not hesitate to kill or injure others."

"Like you, we seek enlightenment," Jebu said, "but we do it through the practice of the arts of warfare. We learn to be forgetful of the conscious mind. We learn to love our opponents and not to fear death. Even the samurai, if they learned the Zinja principles of fighting, could aspire to the same sort of enlightenment you teach, sensei."

"Perhaps I am wrong about the military arts," said Eisen. "If any samurai should come to me for teaching, I will not turn him away."

He sat down before the entrance to the hut, facing out to sea. Jebu and Yukio sat with him.

Yukio said, "Tell us about China, sensei. I hear the Emperor of China is fighting barbarians. I am thinking of taking fighting men over the water to serve the Chinese Emperor. There are many of us whose lives are forfeit if we stay here, many who have lost everything to the Takashi. Perhaps we will find better fortune in China."

"Too bad you are not going, as I did, to learn from the Chinese. But if the Central Kingdom, as they call it, is not saved from the barbarians, there will be nothing left to learn."

"Who are these barbarians?" Yukio asked. Jebu knew these barbarians were his father's people, but he wondered what Eisen would say about them.

Eisen said, "There are many peoples who live in the grasslands north of the borders of China. They are called Cathayans, Kin, Manchus, Tartars-and Mongols. They spend their lives on horseback, herding cattle and other animals. They live in tents and have no fixed abode. Erom time to time they make war on the farming people to the south. Ages ago a Chinese Emperor built a Great Wall to keep them out, but as with all walls its promise of security was false. A hundred years ago people called Cathayans crossed the Wall and took the northern half of China for their own. Then a people called the Kin conquered the Cathayans. They seized all the riches, settled in the cities and learned Chinese ways. Now the Mongols have come. They have utterly destroyed the Kin. They threaten the native rulers of China, the Sung dynasty, who still hold the southern half of the country."

Yukio said, "I have heard of these Mongols. I have heard that they have no human law and are more ferocious than tigers or bears."

Eisen shrugged. "You know how men will exaggerate when describing their enemy. Actually, their laws are very strict, and among them many transgressions are punished by death. They are a fearless, energetic, intelligent people. They are capable of enduring incredible hardships. What they have achieved in recent years they owe to a leader called Genghis Khan. In their language his name means Mightiest Ruler. He wrote their code of laws, which is called the Yassa."

He was the ruler who sent Arghun to kill my father and me, thought Jebu. He who commanded the obliteration of whole families, of whole cities.

"This Genghis Khan was a master of warfare," Eisen went on. "Other barbarian horsemen from the grasslands simply swarmed like locusts, overwhelming the civilized peoples with their numbers and ferocity. But Genghis Khan shaped the Mongols into a well-organized, well-drilled army. That is why their conquests extend beyond all others. Even though Genghis Khan died many years ago, long before I went to China, his successors have continued to use his methods of making war to extend the Mongol territories even further. Genghis Khan was a ruler more awesome and brilliant than any Emperor of China or Japan has been in the last thousand years."

Yukio looked shocked. "You would compare a barbarian warlord to our Emperor?"

Eisen raised a placating hand. "Not at all. Our Emperor is a manifest kami. He is the child of the sun goddess. But there are times when clouds obscure his light. At present, I think, the clouds are thick and numerous in this Sunrise Land."

Yukio nodded. "Eor many of us the clouds are too thick. That is why we are willing to seek service with the Emperor of the Land of

Sunset."

"I wish you a safe journey, and may you return some day to a happier country." Eisen pulled himself into a more rigid sitting position, crossing his legs and hooking his feet over his thighs, then folding his hands in his lap.

He said, "I know the Zinja do not use any special position when they meditate. But I have found that once you have assumed this position, it is impossible to lose your balance and fall over, even if you drop off to sleep." And he rolled from side to side like a doll with a weighted bottom that cannot be tipped over. Jebu and Yukio laughed as they bade him goodbye.

"My mind is made up," Yukio said at the bottom of the hill. "I am going to China. Come with me only if you want to. I don't care that your Order says you must accompany me. I don't want you with me unless you want to come."

"Please let me come with you. I want to go to China for many reasons."

"Eine. I intend to send out a message secretly to our friends in all the provinces - Muratomo no Yukio is going to China and calls for every samurai who supports the Muratomo cause to come with him. Normally it would not be proper for me to issue such a call without the permission of my brother Hideyori, our clan chieftain. But Hideyori is a prisoner in exile in Kamakura and cannot speak freely. His captors might even force him to denounce me for doing this. But I know that in his heart he will be cheering me on."

Somehow, Jebu could not picture the grim, controlled Hideyori cheering for anything that did not benefit him directly.

Yukio went on, "There is nothing left for us now in these islands. The Takashi rule everywhere. Those who have been loyal to the Muratomo have been stripped of their lands, many of them hunted as outlaws. All the wealth of the world is in China. We can help save the greatest civilization in the world from the barbarians. And the day will come when the Takashi will be weaker than they are now, and we may perhaps return when fortune favours us, and take back what is rightfully ours. Meanwhile, we will gather men and hire ships, and we will present ourselves to the Emperor of the Sung as a fighting force. You and I will lead."

That night, when Moko was through working on the granary, Jebu told him of Yukio's decision. Moko smiled broadly.

"Long ago, shike, when we first met, I told you I would go to China with you if need be. Now, even though I have found the joys of love here in Hakata, I am ready to prove that I mean what I promised."

Chapter Twenty-Five

The ox-drawn carriage rumbled down the rocky road from Mount Hiei. Before it walked ten unarmed samurai, while six more brought up the rear. In the front of the procession walked an ageing banner-man, an honoured veteran of the rebellions of past years, many times wounded. He carried a red Takashi banner. The dragon portrayed on the banner was at rest, indicating that this was not a war flag, but one to be displayed peacefully on family occasions.

In the carriage Atsue, aged nine, blew idle notes on his flute. He and Taniko were returning from his regular music lesson at the temple on Mount Hiei.

"I wish the koto was small enough to carry with us so I could practise on it now," he said.

"Some of the country folk play a little stringed instrument called the samisen," said Taniko. "I could get one of those for you."

"I don't want anything from country people," said the boy. "Country people are stupid and ugly and rude. I don't want to be anything like them."

"I'm from the country."

"No one would know it if you didn't tell them, Mother. You're a fine lady."

Smiling, Taniko peered through the curtained window of the palm-leaf carriage. The procession had already entered the great gateway in the north wall of the city. The small group of Imperial police officers guarding the gate saluted the Takashi banner as the veteran carried

it through. Now the carriage passed into the shadow of the gateway.

Suddenly, someone shouted at them to stop. The voice was angry, peremptory.

"Remove this carriage from the gate. Make way for the Imperial Regent, His Highness Eujiwara no Motofusa." The carriage came to a halt.

Taniko looked through the front curtains. The shouting man was wearing rich, orchid-coloured chamberlain's robes. Eour other men in black silk robes, wearing the long, slender swords of the Court in black and gold scabbards, had seized the head of the ox and halted its slow forward pace.

The bannerman, holding his staff as if there were a naginata blade at the end of it instead of a square of red cloth, cried, "This carriage carries Shima no Atsue, son of the esteemed Takashi no Kiyosi, commanderin-chief of the Imperial army, and grandson of the noble Takashi no Sogamori, Imperial chancellor and victor over the Emperor's rebellious enemies." The bannerman made it sound as if all those august personages were riding in the carriage with the child Atsue, Taniko thought.

More armed men in black silk surrounded the bannerman. The unarmed Takashi samurai moved closer to the carriage. Looking out the other window, Taniko saw that another carriage, this one three times the height of a man, ornamented with elaborate scrollwork and magnificent black and gold lacquer panelling, and drawn by two white oxen, was moving majestically towards the gate. Taniko's carriage was right in its path, and one or the other would have to give way.

She knew what was going to happen. It was inevitable. A carriage

brawl. Heian Kyo had been notorious for these incidents for hundreds of years. Some of them even took place on the palace grounds.

"The family claims of the occupant of this carriage are ridiculous," said the chamberlain who had stopped them. "Prince Motofusa is the Regent and a Eujiwara."

The Eujiwara. So civilized and so old. And now so envious of the rising, vigorous Takashi who were shouldering them aside, who had cut off the heads of two Eujiwara princes during the rebellions and who even had adopted the old Eujiwara tactic of marrying into the Imperial family. The two most powerful men in Heian Kyo these days were Eujiwara no Motofusa, the Regent, with his high office, his wealth and his ancient family, and Takashi no Sogamori, the chancellor, with his high office and tens of thousands of samurai at his back. Perhaps Motofusa had chosen this moment for a test of strength.

"Come here," Taniko called to the bannerman in the strongest voice she could muster.

The old samurai limped over to Taniko's carriage. The Regent's chamberlain squinted at the curtains to see who else was in the carriage with Sogamori's grandson.

"Under no circumstances are you to back down," said Taniko firmly. "The Regent holds a higher office than this boy, but we are already in the gateway, and it would be unseemly and dishonourable for Lord Sogamori's grandson to back out of the gate. Tell the chamberlain that we would yield place if we had arrived at the gate at the same time as His Highness, but under the circumstances we respectfully beg leave to continue through. Tell him that."

"They're going to fight us, my lady, no matter what we say." "Then the disgrace will be upon them. Remember, the honour of the house of Takashi is involved."

The bannerman went back to the Eujiwara chamberlain and repeated the message.

"Nonsense!" the chamberlain retorted. He turned to the men holding the oxen. "Push the carriage out of the gateway."

The four men in black were now joined by others carrying naginatas. At the sight of the deadly blades a chill went through Taniko. The police who had been guarding the gate had long since disappeared. Taniko looked over at Motofusa's carriage, which was still slowly advancing. There were at least fifty men in Motofusa's entourage. They were not samurai, but armed courtiers, the remnants of the old army of aristocrats and conscripts that had policed the empire before the rise of the samurai. They didn't really know how to fight, but they knew how to hate, and the small band of Takashi men they faced was unarmed.

The courtiers pushed against the head of the ox, while the bannerman and the Takashi samurai tried to hold the animal where it was. A shoving match broke out. One of the courtiers fell. He rose up shouting curses, his black robe spattered with brown mud. Now the men with naginatas moved forward, holding the long poles with the blade ends sheathed and towards themselves, like fighting sticks. Taniko felt a little relief at this. At least they were not prepared to kill, though it might later come to that.

One courtier swung his pole and caught a samurai on the side of the head. Taniko winced at the thud of the pole against the man's skull. The samurai slowly sank to the ground.

"Kill them! Kill them!" Young Atsue had stuck his head out through the curtains and was cheering the Takashi samurai. Taniko pulled him back. The child had never seen bloodshed, but he was full of stories of glorious Takashi victories over pirates and the Muratomo, and he was wild with the excitement of his first battle.

But the courtiers' naginata poles rose and fell furiously, doing brutal work on the samurai. Several of the samurai were wrestling with the courtiers, trying to get the naginatas away from them. If they did, they would surely start to use the blades.

Then stark terror seized Taniko as, with a sudden rush, the courtiers attacked the carriage itself. A pale face, distorted with rage, shoved itself through the window curtains.

"You will make way for Prince Motofusa, Takashi garbage!"

Atsue struck at the man with the only weapon he had handy, his flute. The man jumped back as the flute thumped against the bridge of his nose.

The carriage began to rock and topple. Taniko screamed and took the boy in her arms as she felt the world giving way around her. She had never known such panic since Horigawa had snatched her newborn daughter from her arms and run off to kill her. Now another child of hers was in danger. She and the boy and all the rich furnishings of the carriage were falling, falling. With a crash that knocked the breath out of her, she landed on a side of the carriage that had now become its bottom. The wooden frame creaked and broke in several places. She looked at Atsue to see if his arms and legs were all right. The boy stared back at her, terrified. He was no longer enjoying the adventure.

The carriage shook under heavy blows. Taniko screamed as she

saw a naginata blade bite through the wood. Scrambling to her feet and pulling Atsue with her, she made a dive for the door of the carriage.

She found herself in the centre of the Maelstrom. The courtiers were hysterical with rage now, and one seized her and tore at her clothes.

"Here is the bitch who cuckolds Horigawa and-whores for Kiyosi," he screamed. The courtier flung Taniko from him so that she fell into the mud. Others were flailing at the carriage with their naginatas. Eeet trampled her. Wildly she tried to find Atsue.

The boy was struggling with a black-robed courtier, the same man he had struck with his flute. The man was tearing the flute out of Atsue's hands. Getting it away from the screaming child, he broke it over his knee.

"Look!" he shouted to the other courtiers, holding Atsue by the shoulder. "Dress the little rustic bastard in fine clothes and give him lessons on the flute and he thinks he lives above the clouds. Go back to the rice paddies, you vermin!" And he kicked the sobbing Atsue into a mud puddle.

Taniko sprang at the man. She saw a little ceremonial dagger dangling from his black sash by a gold chain. She pulled it loose and drew her arm back to stab the courtier.

Someone seized her from behind and pushed her to one side, firmly but gently. It was the bannerman.

"Don't dirty your hands, my lady." Still unarmed, he gave the courtier who had kicked Atsue a chop against the side of the neck that send him rolling in the dirt, unconscious.

Taniko pulled Atsue into her arms, grabbing him up as she saw a

naginata blade slice into the veteran's belly. The old man gave a grunt of pain and fell into the dirt, his blood pooling the ground.

The violet-robed chamberlain who had stopped them stepped forward with a grim smile. "Get out of the way, the rest of you bumpkins, or you'll share his fate."

The overturned carriage was a heap of kindling now. Even its wheels had been chopped to bits. The ox had run off. Contemptuously the courtiers pushed the wreckage to one side of the gateway as the carriage of Regent Motofusa continued its lordly advance.

Taniko knelt in the dirt beside the bannerman. She gagged when she saw his wound. Through his rose-coloured tunic his stomach had been slashed across. There was blood everywhere.

"Don't distress yourself, my lady," the bannerman said. "Don't spoil your pretty cloak with an old man's blood."

The man had survived two great rebellions, a hero, only to die in the mud after a sordid little carriage brawl. "I"m sorry," said Taniko. "I'm so sorry." She pillowed his head on her lap.

"Don't feel bad about me, my lady," the old man said, trying to smile. "I've got the same sort of wound I'd give myself if I'd tried to kill myself in the samurai way."

Taniko raised her head at the rumble of wooden wheels. Ear above her the Regent's state carriage lumbered past, a rolling palace. When it went by, she saw Motofusa himself looking out the rear window at her. With his thin, small face and sparse moustache he looked very much like Horigawa. He wore the tall black hat of office. He looked at her with a faint, superior smile.

Defiantly, Taniko met his gaze. By your courtiers' standards it is shameful for me to look you in the eyes, Motofusa, she tried to say with her gaze. But I want you to see the hatred in my eyes, and to show you that your courtiers' world is passing away.

In response to her stare Motofusa's grin broadened, showing teeth dyed black after the fashion of the Court. He closed the curtains of his carriage.

Many of the Takashi samurai lay on the ground, badly beaten. A few appeared to be unconscious. Those on their feet looked angry, frustrated and ashamed, all at once.

Taniko turned to one of them. "Go to Lord Kiyosi. Tell him what has happened, and tell him we will wait for him here."

She looked down at the old samurai whose grizzled head lay in her lap. "Are you in great pain?"

He gave her a smile that was really a grimace. "Of course not, my lady. But I shall not live. You could-do me a great service." "Anything."

"None of the men is armed. Except you."

"I? I'm not armed." Then she looked down at her hand that was still holding the dagger she had taken from the courtier. "I'll give this to one of the men and he can help you."

The deep-set eyes looked into Taniko's. "I would like you to do it, my lady, if you can bring yourself to. My lord Kiyosi is not here. You stand in his place. It is much to ask, I know."

Taniko hesitated. I must do it well. He must not suffer. I cannot say no. "Yes. You must tell me what to do."

His fingers feebly tapped a spot below his rib cage. "Strike here. As hard as you can. Drive upwards towards the heart."

Taniko raised the gold-hilted ceremonial knife high, gripping it with both hands. Slowly she lowered it till the point touched the place he had indicated. Then she raised the knife again. Am I strong enough?

She said, "Say with me, 'Homage to Amida Buddha.' "

"Homage to Amida Buddha," the old man whispered.

With all her might, not thinking, letting the Self do it, as Jebu would say, she brought the dagger down. She felt it meet flesh, but the force of her thrust and the sharpness of the blade pierced the flesh, and her fists struck against his chest.

She looked down. Please be dead. His eyes were open, and they did not blink. She had done it. She had given him what he asked for. She had stopped his heart. She said again, "Homage to Amida Buddha." Gently, with the index finger of her right hand, she pulled each of his eyelids down. Slowly she eased the grey head to the ground and stood up.

She looked around. A small group of Takashi samurai were standing around her in a circle. When she looked at them, they bowed deeply from the waist. She handed the dagger to one of them and looked around for Atsue.

He was standing beside one of the samurai, clinging to the man's leg. When she turned to him, he took a step back. She held out her arms, but he did not move. She started to go to him.

Terror filled his eyes. "You killed him. There's blood all over you."

She looked down. Her bright yellow cloak was speckled with blood. She hadn't realized the old samurai had bled so much. She felt that she must wash the fear of her from Atsue's eyes, or it would remain there for ever. Determinedly, she strode over to him, took the whimpering boy in her arms and lifted him up.

Kiyosi himself came soon in one of the Takashi's finest Chinese-style carriages. It was surrounded by a hundred Takashi samurai in full armour. Kiyosi gave orders that the body of the bannerman was to be borne in state on a cart to the Rokuhara. He helped Taniko and Atsue into the carriage, climbed in himself, and sat Atsue on his lap. He patted Taniko's hand.

"You and the boy suffer because my father must have more and more power," Kiyosi said sadly. "Motofusa is our enemy because he wants Prince Mochihito, rather than my sister's husband, Prince Ta kakura, to succeed to the throne. Now we must avenge Motofusa's insult to our family. So it goes on and on."

He was not angry, Taniko saw, just sad and tired. "What is wrong, Kiyosi-san?"

"I have come to realize that I will never know peace. All my life I've been fighting my father's battles, and still there are more battles to fight, and there will never be any end to it as long as I live."

"Give Motofusa a chance to apologize. When he realizes what his people have done, he will probably regret it." Actually, remembering the smug face at the window of the carriage of state, she could not imagine Motofusa apologizing for anything.

Kiyosi shook his head. "My father would accept no apology from Motofusa. And it's not just he. Yukio, the youngest son of Muratomo no Domei, has reappeared. He is raising an army in Kyushu. Our

spies say he wants to sail across the sea to fight for the Emperor of China. My father is sure Yukio wants to raise another Muratomo rebellion. So I must go to Kyushu and crush Yukio at once."

Still shaken by the carriage brawl, still stunned by the realization that she had killed a man, Taniko felt a new fear clutch at her heart. "Must you go?"

"I am commander-in-chief of the army. I have advised my father to let Yukio go. All the malcontents in the Sacred Islands would flock to his banner, and we'd be rid of them once and for all. We wouldn't have to lose a man. But my father will not be satisfied unless blood is shed. No victory is real to him unless men die for it." The anger in his face faded and was replaced by a deep weariness.

"Oh, Taniko, I remember Yukio so well-that bright-eyed boy who used to play in the gardens of the Rokuhara. Every time I looked at him I felt a pang, knowing it was I who beheaded his father. I wondered if he knew it, and I wondered what he thought of me. He wasn't much older than our Atsue is now, the first time I saw him. And now my father commands me to bring Yukio's head back to Heian Kyo."

Taniko held his hand while the carriage trundled along and he, in turn, patted Atsue's head. "I'm so tired, Taniko. So tired of it all. How terrible it is that the fighting cannot stop."

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

Last night my lord Kiyosi came to me and told me, with no great satisfaction, that the carriage of the Regent Motofusa was attacked by a troop of samurai as his procession was on its way to the Special Eestival at Iwashimizu. The samurai killed eight of Motofusa's retainers, cut the oxen loose from his carriage and drove them off.

Motofusa's carriage was too heavy for his remaining men to pull. He could have waited for more oxen or a palanquin to be brought, but he was afraid for his life, and so he walked home through the streets like any commoner and missed the ceremony. He has thus been publicly shamed.

Since Iwashimizu is one of Hachiman's shrines, and Hachiman is the Muratomo patron, Sogamori thinks that in some obscure way he is hurting the Muratomo. By offending the god of war? This seems to me a dangerous way to get at one's enemies.

Kiyosi brought a new flute for Atsue, a family heirloom called Little Branch, which has been his own favourite flute until now. At least, Kiyosi says, the Regent has paid many times over for the death of our bannerman and the fright he gave our little Atsue. Even the Regent, formerly the most feared official in the land, who once controlled the words and actions of the Emperor, can be chastised by the Takashi.

Each night before I fall asleep, even when I lie in Kiyosi's arms, the face of the man I killed appears in my mind. His dead eyes seem to look at me and not to look at me. And in the darkness and silence of my bedchamber I feel a horror in the pit of my stomach. I have done a dreadful thing. Killed a man. There is blood on my hands and they will never be clean.

More than that, every night I see the look that was in the eyes of my little Atsue after he had seen me stab the bannerman to death. He knows now that his mother can kill. A nine-year-old boy should not have to live with such a memory. I see my own horror at what I have done reflected in his eyes. It is as Jebu told me. We are all part of one Self.

If that is so, the bannerman was I, and I was killing myself. Indeed, he

asked me for death. The samurai often kill themselves or ask others to kill them, to avoid capture, mutilation and shame. What I did was not horrible. It was a mercy. Yet, the fact that I have killed another human being fills me with terror, because it is such a vast thing, such a final thing. Whether I have done it for right reasons or for wrong ones, it is taking for myself the powers of a kami. Such an act should be approached with fear, as one approaches a very holy place.

My Jebu-is he still mine after all these years?-has killed and killed again. By now he must have lost count of the numbers he has killed. I was there the first time Jebu killed a man. I remember how he stood looking down at the bodies of those he had killed for a long time after the fight was over. What was he thinking? I wish I could talk to him now.

I've asked Kiyosi how he feels about killing, but he doesn't want to talk about it. He says the part of his mind that thinks about killing is sealed off when he is with me.

How lonely I will be when Kiyosi is gone campaigning in Kyushu.

-Third Month, twelfth day

YEAR OF THE HORSE

Chapter Twenty-Six

One night in the Eourth Month of the Year of the Horse, Yukio, Jebu and Moko sat together in the monks' quarters of the Teak Blossom Temple and said farewell to the members of the Order who had been their hosts for so many months. In the morning their little fleet would embark for China.

Down in the town of Hakata over a thousand men were drinking, coupling, sleeping, writing or pacing about, waiting for dawn to come. At Yukio's summons they had come from all the Sacred Islands, the last, dogged supporters of the Muratomo cause in a realm in which everyone bowed to the Takashi. There were wild men, half Ainu, from northern Honshu; there were hard-bitten warriors from the eastern provinces; there were Shinto and Buddhist military monks from the temples around Heian Kyo; there were near cannibals from southern Kyushu. All of them saw Yukio's summons as a last chance to recoup the fortunes they had lost when the Takashi plundered the realm.

Eor the farewell to Jebu and Yukio, Abbot Weicho had ordered a hearty meal-the closest the Zinja ever had to a feast. There were raw fish, steamed vegetables, an abundance of rice, and a small jar of heated sake for each of the brothers and their guests. Though the women of the temple did not usually eat with the monks, Nyosan was also present.

They were half-way through the meal when one of the monks escorted a samurai to Yukio. He was one of the guards Yukio had posted some miles from the town.

"Perhaps this should be for your ears alone, Lord Yukio," the samurai said. He was out of breath and clearly tired.

"If it is bad news, tell it to all of us. The more we know, the better prepared we will be."

His calm manner seemed to reassure the samurai, who nodded and said, "It seems the Takashi have learned of your plans, and they mean to prevent you from going. An army of ten thousand men crossed over from Honshu two days ago. They are now less than a day's march from here. They'll be here tomorrow for certain."

"Then they'll arrive too late," said Jebu. "All they'll see will be our ships sailing out of the harbour."

"They may revenge themselves on the townspeople and the monks for helping us," said Yukio.

"Don't worry about that," said Weicho. "We'll protect our own. If need be, we'll teach them that the Order is still to be respected, even if we have lost a few members."

Yukio stood up. "There are still things to be done. I thought something like this might happen, and I have given some thought to pre paring for it. I apologize for leaving this feast, Holiness, but there are arrangements I must make in town." With a smile and a bow, the slight figure turned and strode to the door, where he buckled on his dagger and sword and went out.

Before sunrise the next morning the quays of Hakata were alive with the thump of bales and boxes, the clank of weapons and the shouts of young male voices as Yukio's men assembled. In a few hours, according to word from scouts Yukio had sent out, the Takashi army would be upon them.

The warehouse workers sweated in the cool dawn air as they raced to load each ship with provisions for a voyage of ten days. The ten

ships were oceangoing galleys designed to carry both passengers and freight. Eight had sails stiffened with bamboo battens to catch any favourable wind that might help the oarsmen. At stem, stern and masthead the ships were bedecked with white Muratomo banners and pennants and streamers bearing the crests of other samurai families joining in the expedition.

As the sky above the hills around Hakata turned a paler blue, the samurai began to board the ships. Some of them bade goodbye to sombre little family groups that had accompanied them this far on their journey. Others, reeling drunk, were half carried to the docks by the women with whom they'd spent their last night on shore.

Long before dawn Nyosan and Jebu made the long downhill walk from the Teak Blossom Temple. Now, dressed in the ankle-length grey robe and black cloak of a woman elder of the Order, Nyosan gazed up at Jebu with shining eyes. Jebu had to bend almost double to put his arms around her and kiss her.

"That such a great, huge man should have come out of a tiny creature like myself," she laughed.

"I will miss you, Mother."

She shook a finger at him. "We have said goodbye too many times in too many ways to feel sadness now. Perhaps you will find your way to the land of your father. I hope, if you do, that it sets your heart at rest."

Jebu looked out past Shiga Island, a sandspit at the tip of the northern arm of the bay, as if trying to see the fabled land that lay to the west. As he looked, a long, dark shape slid past the island. It was followed by another.

A silence fell over the quays. Then a murmur rose as ship after ship appeared in the entrance of the bay. The murmur grew as, oars sweeping rhythmically through the waves, the vessels sailed closer. The bright banners that bedecked the ships became visible. The banners were blood-red.

"We're trapped," said a man near Jebu.

"Might have known the Takashi wouldn't let us leave," said another.

The crowd parted and Yukio strode down to the edge of the water. Eor the occasion he wore his finest suit of armour, silver-chased with white laces. A silver dragon roared defiance from his helmet. The men watched him closely.

He smiled when he saw the Takashi ships. "They honour our departure with an escort." Some of the men laughed hesitantly.

Yukio stepped to the edge of the pier and raised his arms. Silence fell over the assembled samurai.

"0 Hachiman-Yawata, my great-grandfather was known as Hachiman Taro, your firstborn son. Now, in my family's hour of greatest need, I call upon you to give us your aid. Bless our journey across the great water. May we find the good fortune we seek in China. May we return one day, victorious, to this land of the gods."

"May we escape from Hakata Bay to begin with," said Jebu in a low voice, eyeing the Takashi sails.

Hastily, bidding last farewells to those who had come to see them off, the samurai trooped up the gangplanks of their assigned ships. In every man's mind, Jebu thought, there must be the same question: am I really embarking for China, or am I going to die today? Jebu held Nyosan's hand for a moment, and their eyes locked; then he

turned abruptly and went to Yukio's ship. On the quay Moko bade a tearful farewell to a woman holding an infant in her arms. At last he tore himself away. Carrying his precious box of carpenter's tools, his Instruments of the Way, he followed Jebu up the gangplank.

Yukio stood on the deck atop the after cabin of his galley. Beside him was his pilot, a grey-haired man in a black tunic who had made the voyage to China and back many times. Around him gathered his armoured captains, each of whom would be responsible for one shipload of samurai. Of them all, Yukio was the smallest figure. Jebu joined the group.

"I've prepared myself in case of an attack by sea," Yukio said. "I have consulted with the local fishermen on the winds and tides in Hakata Bay. I am certain that we can evade the Takashi and escape them."

A growl of dissent came from the other samurai. "Evade them?" said Shenzo Saburo, the samurai who had long ago been in charge of the expedition to rescue Yukio from the Rokuhara. "We don't want to evade them. We want to fight them. Why don't we attack immediately?"

Yukio laughed, a laugh of scorn that reddened Saburo's face. "Oh, well, if you want to fight and die, why go to the trouble of boarding these ships? There are ten thousand more Takashi warriors marching overland against us. If we wait here we can die fighting on our feet instead of floundering in the water."

The commanders shifted uneasily and fingered their sword hilts. Ei nally Saburo said, "Why not attack the Takashi ships at once and try to break through?"

Smiling, Yukio shook his head. "Our aim is to take this army overseas and win our fortunes in China. I am not going to allow the

expedition to be destroyed before we are even out of sight of the Sacred Islands."

The meeting broke up, and the commanders went to their respective ships. Yukio grinned at Jebu and clapped him on the arm. Still smiling, he turned to his pilot and gave the order to sail.

There was a moment of expectant silence. Then the cries went up from the pilots, and the mooring ropes were cast loose. On each ship a drummer raised his wooden sticks and brought them down thunderously on the monkey-leather head of his big taiko. The long white oars flashed through the green water at dockside.

Yukio stood on the afterdeck between the pilot and the two steersmen. Crouched near the rail was a signalman with a bundle of flags. Orders were relayed from Yukio to the pilot to the steersmen. Waving his multi-coloured flags, the signalman passed Yukio's orders to the other ships.

A brisk, salt-smelling breeze blew in from the sea, and a rising tide lapped against the quays. The advantage was with the ships sailing towards shore. The sails of the Muratomo ships were furled and only the arms of the rowers propelled the ships forward.

His bow slung across his back, Jebu leaned against the rail and stared across the wide expanse of water at the dark hulls and yellow sails of the Takashi. How far away they were! How large this bay was! It could hold thousands of ships. It would be a long time before the Muratomo came anywhere near the Takashi. In warfare on land, your enemy was sometimes upon you before you even saw him. At sea he might be visible for hours before the two of you drew close enough to fight.

The taiko on the ten ships rumbled, and Yukio watched the fish-

shaped wind vane on the masthead. It pointed inexorably towards Hakata. Huge, puffy clouds sailed eastward across the sky like a fleet of heavy-laden trading vessels. Moko crouched at Jebu's feet, his back to the rail, and closed his eyes, his dogu box in his lap. The samurai drowsed at the rails. Only the men at the oars worked, rows of bare, brown shoulders rhythmically rising and falling. Gradually the Muratomo fleet drew into the centre of the bay. The Takashi ships, their red banners fluttering, were much plainer now, but they had not left their position at the mouth of the bay. Jebu counted thirty of them.

Suddenly Yukio snapped out an order. At the sound of his voice heads turned all over the lead ship. The pilot spoke to the steersman, the signalman and the rowers' overseer. The right bank of oars held steady, while the left bank worked at double the rhythm. A green flag flapped over the signalman's head. The steersmen braced their feet against the rail and pushed at the tiller. Within a few moments the Muratomo fleet had changed course and was steering for the little fishing village of Hakozaki, northernmost of the three towns around the bay.

One by one the Takashi ships changed direction and formed a pursuing column. Everything seems to be happening so slowly, Jebu thought. First we change course, then they react and some of them change course. And we're still hours apart. But every advantage gained at this distance could mean life or death for thousands of men.

He might die today. He sat down on the deck with his back to the rail, took the shintai out of his robe and stared into its fiery core. Slowly he felt strength and calm flow into his veins. The power of the shintai worked as ever. Sitting nearby, Moko watched him.

Jebu stood up to look over the rail at the Takashi ships. A long way off, fifteen of them, a tight little group, came after the Muratomo fleet.

Their sails were up, as were the Muratomo sails now, but they were drawing little wind and the oarsmen were still pushing the ships. The Takashi were far behind. The Muratomo oarsmen were fresh, while those rowing for the Takashi had been working for days.

Breakers thundered ahead on the rocks between Hakozaki and Shiga Island. Here and there black boulders jutted up like fangs in the white water. Yukio ordered another change of direction. The Muratomo were sailing parallel to the shore, past Hakozaki and back towards the town of Hakata. The sails of the Muratomo ships boomed, swelling with wind. Now the onshore wind was pushing them. Yukio ordered the oarsmen to rest.

After a time, Yukio gave a whoop and pointed. One of the Takashi ships was slowly toppling over on its side, its sail folding, its mast crashing down, the red banner drooping into the water; soon the crew and fighting men were black dots in the green and white waves. Another of the pursuing ships had come to a dead halt, simply sitting in the waves as its companion ships left it behind, stuck on a sandbar.

"Our pilots know these waters," Yukio laughed. "Their's don't."

Now he snapped another command to his signalman, who leaped to his feet and began waving a red flag and a yellow flag at the other ships. The two steersmen leaned into the tiller. The town of Hakata was still a long distance down the shore when Yukio's fleet changed course again and headed out towards the centre of the bay.

Jebu watched once again the delayed reaction of the enemy craft as one by one they altered their course to continue the pursuit. Then cries from the other side of the ship drew him across the deck.

Through the green, terraced hills behind Hakata, streams of

horsemen and foot soldiers were pouring into the town. Red pennons were fluttering on the town's ancient wall. Masses of men were gathering along the quays. The high sun of noon glittered on helmets, armour and naginata blades. Smaller contingents of Takashi appeared on the docks of Hakozaki on the north and Imazu on the southern side of the harbour.

"Now they're going to take fishing boats and come out after us," Yukio said. "I expected this, too."

Even as they watched, Takashi samurai were crowding into every boat along the shore. Doubtless they would force the fishermen to row the boats out. Many of the fishing boats were overcrowded and low in the water.

The thousands of Takashi samurai left behind on shore waved their red banners and shot angry futile arrows into the water in the direction of the Muratomo ships. The waste disgusted Jebu. Samurai had no sense of the value of things.

Now there was no way the Muratomo could land again. They were cut off, committed to fight, to live or die on the water. Eifteen Takashi warships still blocked the harbour's mouth. Thirteen more pursued the Muratomo ships around the bay. And dozens of small craft from Hakata, Hakozaki and Imazu, their gunwhales bristling with Takashi samurai like teeth in the mouth of a shark, formed a long sprawling line cutting across the Muratomo course.

The pilot spoke to Yukio and pointed upwards. The wind vane on his ship had changed direction. Now the fish's head was pointing straight at the mouth of the harbour and beyond that to the open sea.

Yukio turned to the pilot. "Is the tide running out?" The grey-haired pilot grinned and nodded.

"Then Hachiman is with us," Yukio exulted. "It is time to say goodbye to our Takashi friends. We've shown them the beauties of Hakata Bay long enough. Now we leave for China. Up all sails. Rowers, row your hearts out. Head for the open sea!"

The signalman's flags blossomed on the afterdeck. In a moment the Muratomo fleet had made another course change. Now they were charging at top speed directly at the Takashi blockade.

The Takashi vessels, so distant for so long, now loomed larger. Eaint cries came from the men on their decks. A few impetuous arrows arched towards the Muratomo ships and fell short, into the waves.

Yukio shouted to the captain in the nearest Muratomo ship, "Aim for the steersmen and rowers only! Don't bother with samurai! Pass the word!" He gripped Jebu's arm and pulled him to the rail.

"Come on. Our men think it's unworthy to shoot anyone lower in rank than a samurai. Let's set an example."

The column of Muratomo ships aimed for the head of the Takashi line. Takashi vessels were pulling out of formation and rushing to crowd in upon the Muratomo as Yukio's ship raced across the bow of the leading enemy galley. Yukio drew back on his samurai bow, as tall as himself, and a fourteen-hand arrow with a humming-bulb head screamed through the air to strike the throat of a steersman on the lead

Takashi ship. Yukio had used the noise-making arrowhead to call the attention of his men to the target he had chosen.

Jebu's bow twanged and the steersman's companion collapsed over the tiller. A shame to kill unarmed seamen, but it would mean less bloodshed in the long run.

Yukio loosed two more arrows among the Takashi rowers. Out of control, the ship began to roll and flounder. Arrows fired by the Takashi samurai whistled over Jebu's head.

One armoured man on the other ship was leaping over the oarsmen, scrambling for the foredeck, holding his long bow high over his head. Standing in the bow of the ship, he braced himself, legs apart, and aimed an arrow at Yukio. The man was bare-headed. In the instant that it took Jebu to jerk a blunt-headed armour-piercing arrow from his quiver, he saw a darkly handsome face with a small moustache. The arrow struck the Takashi samurai square in the chest. He dropped his bow, toppled slowly over the railing of the ship and fell into the sea. When the splash subsided, he was gone.

"I told you not to bother with samurai," Yukio shouted. Jebu started to explain that the warrior had been about to shoot Yukio, when a wail from beside them interrupted him. It was Moko, clinging to the railing, staring at the place where the Takashi samurai had gone down. He turned tearful eyes to Jebu.

"Accursed am I, that I should have seen this. Years ago that man saved my life. I will never forget his face. He was the only man in the world besides you, shike, to whom I could truly say I owed my life. And now you have killed him."

"He was aiming at Lord Yukio."

"I do not reproach you, shike. I only say that war is the evillest thing I know, and I hate it."

They were past the Takashi line now. The ocean, blue-grey and limitless, lay ahead. Behind them, two more Muratomo ships were pushing through the blockade. More Takashi ships closed in. Elights of arrows whistled in both directions. Again the Takashi ships

wallowed, disabled, and the Muratomo ships shot by them.

Moko told Yukio and Jebu of the day Domei was executed, and how Kiyosi had seen him hiding in the tree above the Emperor's head and had not denounced him.

"Of course," said Yukio. "I would have recognized him if I'd been looking in his direction. I saw him often, especially during the years I lived at the Rokuhara. How strange karma is. On the very day that Kiyosi spared your life, he beheaded my father."

"I saw him do it," said Moko. "But also, Lord Yukio, I saw him weep after he did it."

"That doesn't surprise me. He was always kind to me. He never said he was sorry that he killed my father; it would, not have been proper for us to speak of that. But somehow I knew he did it because it was his duty, and I never held it against him. Just as it was his duty to aim an arrow at me just now. I hold others to blame for my father's death. Sogamori, Horigawa."

"So that was Kiyosi," said Jebu. "Years ago I shot at him, but it wasn't his karma to die that day. I have heard nothing but good of him. I am sorry that he died by my hand." Gripping the rail and bowing his head, Jebu mentally recited the Prayer to a Eallen Enemy with greater fervour than he had felt in years.

A Takashi vessel slammed up against the side of a Muratomo ship trying to break through the blockade. Takashi samurai leaped over the rails. Swords clashed. The decks of both ships were a jumble of fighting men. But two more Muratomo ships cut through to the open ocean.

Yukio gave orders to his signalman. In a few moments the Muratomo

craft that had broken the blockade were sailing parallel to the line of Takashi warships, arrows devastating the enemy crews. More Muratomo ships came through. Clouds of arrows fell on the Takashi ships while their samurai, shouting challenges and insults, stood at the rails, futilely waving their swords.

Jebu looked past the crumbling blockade. The other Takashi ships and the commandeered fishing boats from Hakata had joined forces and were sailing towards the harbour entrance in hot pursuit of the Muratomo.

A bright flash caught Jebu's eye. Elames leaped up on a fishing vessel. The men on it were jumping overboard. Ribbons of fire sprang up all over the fishing boats. The flames spread to the Takashi warships.

"What's that? More of your planning ahead?"

Yukio nodded. "It was easy to foresee that the Takashi would commandeer boats to come after us. So, aboard the boats today were, not the local fishermen, but Muratomo samurai dressed as fishermen. When the fishing boats were mixed in with the Takashi fleet, my men set fire to them and jumped overboard."

A few of the Takashi ships seemed to have escaped, but the mouth of the harbour was now blocked by a great ball of fire, as if a piece of the sun had fallen into it. Takashi samurai splashed briefly in the water before their armour pulled them under. One of the fishing boats, manned by Muratomo men, darted here and there, pulling the unarmoured Muratomo survivors out of the water. When they had all been pulled in, the boat followed after the Muratomo fleet. Yukio's ship fell behind to meet it.

Yukio ran amidships and helped pull wet, naked men from the fishing

boat. "Marvellous!" he shouted. "Splendid! Let sake be brought for these men at once. They're cold from their swim."

Looking aft, all Jebu could see was rolling clouds of black smoke and a jumble of burning ships. Then his eyes narrowed. Two ships were coming after them. One, judging by its lines, was a Muratomo transport, while the other appeared to be a Takashi warship. He caught Yukio's arm.

"Look."

Yukio laughed wildly. "Look again." There were white banners waving from both ships. Jebu remembered the two ships that had come together and the masses of samurai locked in hand-to-hand combat. Evidently the Muratomo had won.

"We have eleven ships now instead of ten," said Yukio. "A gift from the Takashi." He suddenly seized Jebu violently by both arms and shook him with a strength surprising for such a small man.

"China, Jebu! China! A whole new world for us! Let the Takashi perish in the nine hells. The future is ours."

Yukio laughed again. "Out to sea," he called to the pilot. "Take us to China." The signal flags flapped, and the Muratomo vessels turned away from the mouth of the harbour and set their course westwards. All sails were up, and all rattled as the strong wind from the east took them.

Yukio's feverish gaiety subsided. "If only we hadn't killed Kiyosi. That takes some of the joy out of this victory for me, Jebu-san. He was the wisest of all the Takashi, the best fighter, the noblest lord. In killing him we've dealt the Takashi a blow from which they may never recover. Still, I would rather he had lived, if karma allowed it."

Jebu shrugged. "It was his day to die. I'm sure he was as ready and willing as you and I are. And he was trying to kill you."

"You saved my life. Again. I am in your debt for ever." Yukio gripped Jebu's upper arm, hard. "But it's a great sadness, not just for Kiyosi's sake. His death harms others for whom I care. There was a woman, Kiyosi's woman. She was very good to my mother and me. Remember I told you how my mother became Sogamori's mistress to save my life? Well, this lady acted as a go between, for no other reason than her affection for my mother. And she suffered for it. Her husband was Prince Sasaki no Horigawa, who wanted Hideyori and me dead. He punished his wife by- Why are you staring at me?"

Jebu's body went cold. Even now, he reminded himself, the secret must be kept. He made himself assume a calm expression.

"This lady. Was her name Shima Taniko?"

"Yes, that was she. Did you know her?"

"Long ago," Jebu said, waving his hand as if it were of no consequence. "I'll tell you about it some time."

"She had a baby by Kiyosi, a son, while I was at the Rokuhara. I suppose he'd be about nine by now. Another son whose father has been torn from him. Moko is right. War is an evil thing."

Yukio turned away and began to walk among the men on his ship, praising them, even talking to the rowers and patting their shoulders. Then he called for a small boat so he could visit the other ships. A dinghy was lowered over the side, and Yukio leaped into it with the astonishing, easy grace that Jebu had first seen seven years ago on the Gojo Bridge.

Jebu walked along the deck to the forecastle and stood staring into the empty blue sky. His eyes burned and his cheeks were wet.

Why am I crying? he thought. If I hadn't killed Kiyosi my friend would be dead now.

Instead, another son has lost his father. As Yukio did. As I did.

Another woman has lost the man she loved, as my mother did.

He had never wanted to know what Taniko was doing. Only once had he asked, when Moko told him what happened at Daidoji. That had been the worst moment of his life. He had never asked about her, because it hurt too much. Hardly the attitude of a true Zinja.

What if he had known what Kiyosi was to her? Would he have hesitated to kill him? Or would jealous hatred have gone winging along with his arrow?

No, he had never wanted to invade her life. Even when Domei said he was sending men to kill Horigawa, his first thought had been that he must not go. How much less would he want to kill this Kiyosi. After all, he himself had given her nothing.

He didn't really know how much Kiyosi had meant to her. He might just have been a protector, someone to whom she could escape from Horigawa. Or he might have been a true lover, a man who had made her cry out with delight in the darkness, as she had wanted to, -but never could with Jebu.

Whatever she shared with him, Jebu had reached out from all this distance, after all this time, and destroyed it. Just by letting go of a string that propelled an arrow. Such a little thing. So easy to kill a man, end his whole life and whatever it meant, perhaps destroy many other lives at the same moment.

But even if he'd known what he was doing, he'd have done it anyway, to save Yukio.

Why was he crying? Because he'd done an evil thing? But a Zinja was beyond good and evil. A Zinja was always aware of his own perfection.

Erom a dark chamber in his memory a voice whispered, The Zinja are devils. He had not thought of the Saying of Supreme Power in years.

Was this what it meant? That in trying to do good the Zinja did evil, and then tried to tell themselves it didn't matter, that good and evil were the same thing? If war was an evil thing, as he had been shown today, and the Zinja were devoted to war, then truly they were devils.

He had hurt Taniko. Had hurt her child. And there was no way he could undo it. He couldn't even want to undo it, because the only other choice would have meant the death of his friend.

He wondered if she would ever hear a description of the man who killed Kiyosi. He wondered if she would realize that it was he.

The sun had crossed the sky and now hovered, white hot, ahead of the Muratomo fleet. It paved a road of dazzling white jewels in the sea before them. Somewhere at the end of that glittering pathway lay the land of his father, the empire of the Mongols. Perhaps he would actually see the land where his father was born and meet again his father's killer.

And perhaps, too, the great distances would help him forget for a time that small, white, lovely face that had haunted him ever since that journey down the Tokaido.

With trembling fingers he reached into his robe for the Jewel of Life and Death.

PART TWO

THE BOOK OF KUBLAI

Because men suffer, they fight and kill one another. The innocent, who begin by fighting to defend themselves against robbers and murderers, become robbers and murderers themselves. Someone must protect them, both from what happens to them and from what they become. It is our hope that we can take upon ourselves the duty of necessary fighting and killing. We think we can be trusted.

THE ZINJA MANUAL

Chapter One

Summer came to Heian Kyo. The screens and lattices of houses were opened to the air as the days grew longer and the nights warmer. Rain and sun alternated to deepen the green of the huge old willows that grew along the avenues and canals. Moon and fireflies lit the night. Taniko found that she missed Kiyosi terribly. She wanted to share this beauty with him. Unable to talk to him, she wrote poems, two or three a day, and imagined herself reading them to him.

The sun warms the wind,

The wind strokes the willows,

The willows reach down to caress the river.

She had little to record in her pillow book. She liked to write about the gossip of palace and Court, the problems of the country's rulers, the struggles of powerful men. About all this, she had heard in abundance from Kiyosi. Since he had sailed south to Kyushu her life had been one of isolation, monotony and boredom. It was no consolation to her that it was the same for almost all women of her station, except the few lucky enough to have duties at Court. She had no idea how other women managed to tolerate such lives.

Her one source of daily joy was the companionship of Atsue. The boy had quite forgotten his horror at seeing his mother stab a man to death, and the two spent hours together every day. Atsue was growing to look more and more like his grave, square-jawed father. Every fifth day she took him by carriage to the Buddhist temple on Mount Hiei for lessons on the flute and koto with a famous master. Daily she listened to his practice on these instruments. She finally convinced him the samisen was worth learning and gave him

lessons herself. Kiyosi had taught him go, saying that every samurai should play the game well, and Taniko played it with Atsue night after night. She took him for walks through the garden, teaching him the names of summer herbs and flowers. Late in the evening, just before he went to bed, they would sit and watch the moon rise. Atsue would play on his flute just for pleasure, and his playing was often so beautiful it brought tears to her eyes.

A strange silence fell over the Shima household in the middle of the Eifth Month. Taniko's maids seemed nervous and chattered less than usual while helping her dress and undress. There was something furtive in the way her aunt and cousins greeted her in the women's quarters and hurried past on business of their own. Ryuichi's oldest son, Munetoki, now a fierce young samurai of nineteen, had gone off with Kiyosi's expedition to hunt down the last of the Muratomo. Uncle Ryuichi seemed to have disappeared completely. When she asked about him, Aunt Chogao said he had gone on a long journey by sea to Yasugi on the west coast. Yasugi, Taniko knew, was a stronghold for the pirates who preyed on the Korean coast and shipping. All her life she had been hearing rumours that her family was involved with pirates; this seemed to confirm it.

One afternoon a servant announced that the first secretary to Lord Takashi no Sogamori was in the main hall and had asked to visit her. She felt a little leap of pleasure. She had not had a letter from Kiyosi in nearly a month. She hurriedly prepared herself with her maid's help, set out the screen of state in her chamber and sent her maid for Sogamori's secretary.

She immediately noticed the willow-wood taboo tag tied to the secretary's black head-dress and dangling down the side of his face. She wondered if the evil that beset him was a personal misfortune or something that had fallen upon the entire house of Takashi. It would

not be polite to enquire. It was surprising that a man under taboo would even leave his house. He must consider the visit essential.

She had never seen the man before, but she recognized the type. His prim manner and old-fashioned, slightly tattered robe and trousers proclaimed him a Confucian scholar. Doubtless a man of good family whose declining fortunes had forced him to go into service with a rising clan like the Takashi.

They exchanged greetings, the secretary peering nervously at the screen as if trying to see through it. He wants a look at the famous lady who delights Kiyosi, she thought.

At last the secretary said, "Lord Sogamori has sent me to you to inform you of his wishes."

"I am honoured," said Taniko. "But I had hoped you might have a message for me from Lord Kiyosi." Through the openings near the top of the screen she could see that the man's eyes had widened in surprise-and possibly fear-at the mention of Kiyosi's name.

"There was no message," he said hastily. "Lord Kiyosi sent no mes sage." There was something in his voice that frightened Taniko. "What is it then?" she said. "What are you doing here?" "Lord Sogamori desires that his grandson be sent to him."

The secretary's words surprised Taniko and intensified the dread she felt. "Eor how long?"

Again the secretary seemed surprised. "Why, for the rest of his life, my lady. Lord Sogamori wants to give the boy the Takashi name and adopt him as his own son."

"His son? But he is Lord Kiyosi's son. He, if anybody, should adopt him."

"My lady," the secretary said, then stopped. He seemed at a loss for words. At last he blurted out, "A dead man cannot adopt a child."

It was as if he had plunged a sword into her body. She sat paralysed, impaled on his words. At last, as the numbness of shock faded away, she began to feel pain and struggled to free herself.

"No, no, he is not dead. Someone would have told me. You can't come here and say that he is dead. I would have known about it if something had happened. You're wrong. You must be mistaken."

Even as she denied his words, it struck her with overwhelming force: Kiyosi had been killed in the fighting in Kyushu, and no one had told her.

The secretary blushed a deep scarlet. "Don't you know what happened, my lady?"

"I have heard nothing. Surely I would have heard if anything had happened to Lord Kiyosi."

Again the man seemed to grope for words. "Then I-I must tell you? How unfortunate. But seemingly it falls to me to do this duty where others have failed." He drew himself up and composed himself into a picture of Confucian rectitude. "My lady, it grieves me greatly to be the bearer of this news. Six days ago, we received word that there had been a great sea battle at Hakata Bay. The rebellious Muratomo forces were trying to escape. My lord Kiyosi was on the flagship of the Takashi fleet. During the fighting he was struck in the chest by an armour-piercing arrow. Those who were near say he died instantly. One arrow, no pain. His body fell into the sea and disappeared immediately. He is gone, my lady. He died faithfully carrying out his father's orders. You may take pride in that."

Taniko heard the man out. Then she stood up.

The next thing she knew, she was lying on the floor, her maid kneeling beside her, wiping her face with a damp cloth. She struggled to sit up. The screen was knocked over, and the Takashi family secretary was standing in a corner of the room with his face politely averted.

Then it came back to her. Kiyosi was dead.

She looked up at the maid, one of the women who had come with her to Heian Kyo years ago. The maid was crying.

"You knew," said Taniko. "You knew days ago and you didn't tell me."

"I could not, my lady," the maid sobbed. "I could not bear to be the one. Why should it have to be me?"

In spite of the shock of grief, Taniko's mind was still working. "Set up the screen." The first thing she must do was get rid of this man with his talk of taking Atsue. When the screen was raised, Taniko composed herself and sat behind it.

"Please tell Lord Sogamori that I am overwhelmed with gratitude at his offer to adopt the boy Atsue. However, with the greatest respect, the Takashi family has no obligation to do anything for either Atsue or me. Atsue is my son, and it is my desire that he stay with me."

The secretary stared. "My lady, the boy is Lord Kiyosi's son. Lord Sogamori has lost his own son, his eldest-the son he loved best in the world. He wants his grandson. You cannot deny him."

It was agony to sit upright, agony to hold her voice to a soft, polite

tone, agony to speak at all. She clenched her hands in her lap, digging the fingernails of one into the back of the other. "I am very sorry, but Lord Sogamori has other children and grandchildren. I have only Atsue. I am sure he would not want to take my only child from me."

"Excuse me, Lady Taniko, but this is most unwise. You only bring more suffering upon yourself. Lord Sogamori is the most powerful man in the Sacred Islands."

"My son does not belong to Lord Sogamori. I do not belong to Lord Sogamori. I have nothing more to say."

His mouth drawn down, the secretary left her. Taniko sat without moving for as long as she could, while her grief welled up inside her until she felt it would tear her apart. She began to gasp like a deer with an arrow in its chest. Her gasps became sobs. At last she screamed. She threw herself full length on the floor, tearing at her robes and beating upon the polished floor with her fists.

Her maids rushed in and tried to hold her. She struck them away. Drawing her body into a knot, she shrieked and wept.

Atsue came in. Horrified at the sight of his mother, he turned to the maids, who stood whimpering and wringing their hands.

"What's happened to my mother?"

Still sobbing, Taniko pulled herself to a sitting position. Thank Amida Buddha I can be the first to tell him, she thought. At least he won't get the news from some servant. She reached out and pulled the boy to her, fighting for breath, trying to get her voice under control.

"Your father has-left us. He has gone to the Pure Land. He died in battle at sea off Kyushu. I have just heard it."

"Oh no, Mother, no, no, no." The boy's arms tightened around her neck until she thought he would break it. But she endured the small pain gladly. She had only Atsue to live for.

Eor hours they cried together in each other's arms.

In the evening the maids brought food to them. Taniko could not eat. She watched Atsue pick at the small slivers of fish with his chopsticks. In his green silk tunic and black trousers he looked like a replica of Kiyosi.

Why didn't they chop me to bits with swords and be done with it? Taniko thought. How long could she feel this pain before she went mad?

"Homage to Amida Buddha." Taniko started to recite the invocation. Atsue put down his chopsticks and joined her.

After the maid took away their dishes, Ryuichi pushed back the screen to Taniko's chamber and peered in at them. His face was pale. In the dim corridor he looked like a goldfish trying to see up through the surface of a pond. Taniko, murmuring the homage to Buddha, looked back at him.

"You never went to Yasugi, Uncle."

"Forgive me, Taniko-san. I remembered how you were when Horigawa brought you here. I couldn't bear to see you like that again."

"So, instead of telling me yourself, you mercifully allowed one of Sogamori's lackeys to give me the news by accident."

"Do not torment me, Taniko-san."

"Ah, are you the one who is being tormented? I see. Well, don't stand there in the doorway like a frightened peasant. Sit down with us."

Ryuichi snapped his fingers at a maid. "Sake." Still looking apologetically at Taniko, he sat down.

Taniko said, "Atsue, go to your bedchamber. I have something to discuss with your uncle."

"Why can't I hear? I'm the head of our family now."

The words brought Taniko a renewed realization of her loss. She burst into a storm of weeping, 'While Ryuichi sat looking sadly at her. Atsue crept into her arms.

The maid brought hot sake. Taniko poured for Ryuichi and herself. "All right," she said. "You will also have to decide what you want, Atsue-chan." Atsue did not object to the term of endearment for a child. "Stay and listen." The boy sat down again, facing his mother and his uncle. She turned to Ryuichi. "Sogamori has asked that I send the boy to him. He wants to take him from me and adopt him, make him a Takashi."

Ryuichi nodded. "This afternoon I received a summons to the Rokuhara. Of course, it was worded as an invitation. What did you say to Sogamori's secretary?"

"I refused. I want Atsue to stay with me."

Ryuichi quickly drained another cup of sake. "You refused?" "Yes. But Atsue must be the one to decide in the end."

"Children do not decide their futures," Ryuichi cut in. "Of course he will want to stay with his mother. But he has no idea of what he would

lose. What can you give him that would compare with the station in life he would have as Sogamori's son?"

"Kiyosi gave Sogamori other grandsons, and Kiyosi's younger brothers still live," said Taniko. "Why must Sogamori, who has so much, take this child from me?" Tears ran down her cheeks.

Ryuichi shrugged. "Aside from the late Kiyosi, Sogamori's male descendants are a rather undistinguished lot. This boy, on the other hand, is a paragon. Perhaps it is because you and Kiyosi enjoyed some powerful bond in a former life. You must be aware that Atsue's musicianship and his knowledge of the classics are remarkable. And his face-" Ryuichi sipped his sake and contemplated the boy. Atsue, his eyes downcast, flushed a deep scarlet. That's one trait he gets from me, Taniko thought.

Ryuichi went on. "Anyone who knows anything about physiognomy can see Atsue has the face of one destined to hold a high place in the realm. In all respects, even at this young age, Atsue outshines Sogamori's other descendants. That cannot have escaped you, Taniko. Be sure that Sogamori himself is well aware of it."

Taniko turned to the boy. "Atsue-chan, what your uncle says is true. You can become an important member of the most powerful clan in the land. If you remain here, you'll merely be a fatherless boy, part of a rather undistinguished provincial family."

"I want to stay with you, Mother," Atsue said instantly. "I love you, and you love me. I am afraid of Lord Sogamori. They say he is cruel and has a terrible temper. I don't want to live in the Rokuhara. I don't like the Rokuhara."

"This is not childish prattle," said Taniko. "The boy knows perfectly well what he is saying."

"We dare not defy Lord Sogamori," Ryuichi muttered.

"If Sogamori can take a child from us, he can take anything and everything from us."

That thought made Ryuichi frown. "But there is nothing I can do. What can I say to Lord Sogamori at the Rokuhara tomorrow?"

"You are a samurai, Uncle, as much as he is. You can present the case to him and let him make what he will of it. When you go to the Rokuhara, tell Sogamori that the boy does not want to go and his mother does not want to send him."

"Madness," said Ryuichi.

"Uncle-san," said Taniko, the tears coming again, "My champion is dead. You are the only defender I have left. If you won't protect me, I am lost."

Shaking his head, Ryuichi rose. "I will do what I can. Drink more sake. It will help you to sleep."

It was a sweltering morning when Ryuichi went to the Rokuhara. Alone, sweating and trembling in his carriage, he fanned himself incessantly. Six armed, mounted men escorted him, but their presence did nothing to make him feel more secure. He was going, perhaps, to his death. What else could he expect if he disobeyed the command of Lord Sogamori, who could annihilate him as a careless sandal crushes an ant?

The Rokuhara was at once magnificent and frightening. Its three donjon towers, bedecked with proud red Takashi banners, dominated the surrounding district. Ryuichi saw them as soon as his carriage crossed the Gojo Bridge. The stone outer walls with their

tile-roofed turrets were taller than those around the Imperial Palace. The walls girdled a spacious park bounded by four avenues. Three streams diverted from the Kamo River fed the moat, itself wide as a river, and ran through the park over beds of carefully chosen pebbles, beneath tiny ornamental bridges. Interior walls divided the grounds into parade fields, gardens and gravelled courts. The main buildings of the Rokuhara were imposing structures in the Chinese style, with red and green tiled roofs. Mixed in among these were a Buddhist temple, a Shinto shrine and many stables.

The Takashi headquarters was across the Kamo River, east of the original limits of Heian Kyo, outside the city's walls. The land had been given to Sogamori's grandfather after a victory over pirates on the Inland Sea. In those days the Takashi estate was out in the countryside. Over the years, with each new acquisition of power and wealth, the stronghold grew, as a coral reef rises out of the sea. At the same time the capital spread eastwards, and now the Rokuhara was surrounded by innumerable lesser buildings, like a black rock in a swiftly moving current.

It was palace, fortress, barracks and prison all in one. Between the samurai quartered within its walls and those who lived near by with families and retainers of their own, the Takashi could call up ten thousand warriors at a moment's notice.

Even after crossing the moat and passing through the fortified western gate, Ryuichi travelled a long time through a labyrinth of inner walls before he finally came to the hall where Sogamori awaited him. Ryuichi dismounted and dismissed his outriders, who looked thoroughly cowed now that they were in the Takashi stronghold. A group of Sogamori's red-robed youths eyed Ryuichi's party with a threatening casualness.

Approached by two Takashi samurai, Ryuichi tried to appear calm

and superior, a difficult feat for a sweating, trembling fat man. Despite their deferential manner, the hard-faced warriors frightened him. The Shima were supposedly samurai themselves, but Ryuichi was more at home with ink, brush and account books than with bow and sword. He allowed the guards to lead him to Sogamori.

The chieftain of the Takashi clan, dressed in a billowing white silk robe, sat on a raised platform, a naked sword in his lap. His round skull was completely shaved; he had entered the priesthood several years earlier after a nearly fatal illness. Behind him, brightly lit by oil lamps, hung an enormous gold banner bearing an angry Red Dragon, its eyes blazing, claws extended, wings flapping, the scaly body, coil upon coil, seeming about to leap out of golden silk and destroy all in the room.

Ryuichi was grateful for the excuse to fall on his knees and press his forehead to the cedar floor. He was shaking so violently he felt he could no longer stand. Why did Sogamori have a sword in his lap? Was it for him?

"You are welcome here, Shima no Ryuichi," said Sogamori in his grating voice. Ryuichi looked up. The lines of Sogamori's broad face were deep and shadowed. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot. The man must have been weeping for days, Ryuichi thought. There were tears glistening on Sogamori's brown cheeks even now.

Below the platform, to Sogamori's right and left, sat the men of his family. The place just below and to the left, where Kiyosi had always sat, was occupied by Sogamori's second son, Notaro, his puffy, white-powdered features drooping with a faint boredom. Beside Notaro sat the third son, Tadanori, a famous dandy and poet, but not known to be good at much else. Sogamori's other sons by his principal wife and his other wives sat facing each other in two rows

leading up to the platform. Dullards, weaklings, and fops, thought Ryuichi. Other nobles, favourites of Sogamori, sat around the room. With surprise, Ryuichi recognized Prince Sasaki no Horigawa, smiling and gently fanning himself.

Sogamori took a sheet of paper from his sleeve. "We have been reading my son's poems, Ryuichi-san. This is the last one he wrote, aboard ship on his way to Kyushu.

The shadow of the sail is my palace,

These cedar planks my bed,

My host, a seagull.

"Exquisite," Ryuichi whispered, dry-mouthed. Sogamori sighed and wiped his face with his sleeve. In the silence Ryuichi thought how Taniko would love to have one of Kiyosi's poems. But it was obvious Taniko had no friends here. Horigawa waved his fan before his face and smiled his secretive smile at Ryuichi.

Sogamori raised the sword, holding it by its gold and silver-mounted hilt. The blade glistened in the lamplight. It was sharply curved and double-edged for more than half its length.

"His sword," said Sogamori. "Kogarasu. He didn't want to risk losing it at sea, so he left it behind. If he had worn it, it would have gone down with him to the bottom of Hakata Bay. Kogarasu once belonged to our ancestor, Emperor Kammu, who received it from the priestess of the Grand Isle Shrine. I gave it to my son when he cut his hair and tied it in the topknot."

Ryuichi bowed his head. "The grief of your house is the grief of my house."

A silence fell. Sogamori studied Kogarasu, turning the sword this way and that to catch the light on its shadowy temper lines. Wrapping his white silk sleeve around his hand, he polished the blade lovingly. Gently, as if cradling a sleeping baby, he laid the sword in his lap.

"I am told that your own son, Munetoki, is well and is on his way home to you," said Sogamori softly. "I hear he performed bravely in the battle at Hakata Bay. The joy of your house is the joy of my house."

Was there irony in Sogamori's tone? "A thousand years would not be enough time for me to express my gratitude to the chancellor for noticing my son," said Ryuichi, bowing deeply.

"Can the Shima not control their women?" Sogamori whispered harshly. At the sudden change of tone Ryuichi's innards froze with terror.

"Your miserable servant begs forgiveness if we have offended," he mumbled, bowing his head.

"If you have offended?" Sogamori growled. "You should be ashamed to show your face before me, Ryuichi. You should have thrown yourself into the Kamo on the way here."

"She is overcome with grief," Ryuichi pleaded. "She does not know what she is saying."

Horigawa spoke. "I have warned my lord Sogamori that the woman is both wilful and wicked."

Ryuichi was outraged. He wanted to cry out, to demand that Horigawa apologize. The Shima family was being insulted here. But he remained silent. He was too frightened to speak.

Sogamori held up the sword again. "This will belong to Atsue when he performs his manhood ceremony as a Takashi."

"We are overwhelmed by my lord's offer to adopt the boy Atsue," Ryuichi said. "Only, we plead for time. The boy's mother is so newly bereaved."

"Do you compare her suffering with mine?" Sogamori rasped. "What was she to my son but another courtesan? What right does she have to mourn? We will have the boy here today."

The realization that he would have to face Taniko drove Ryuichi to make one last effort. "But she is the boy's mother. She loves him."

"She is still married to me," Horigawa cut in. "By law I am the boy's father. I say he shall go to Lord Sogamori."

Ryuichi stared at Horigawa, astonished.

"Thus the woman is no obstacle, Ryuichi-san," said Sogamori.

"I have a further thought, Your Excellency," said Horigawa. "To ensure that she is kept under proper control, I shall take her back into my household." He turned to Ryuichi and bared his blackened teeth. "You have borne the burden of caring for her long enough."

Ryuichi was overcome with horror. She'll kill herself, he thought. "No, no, that will not be necessary."

"Let her be taken to Horigawa's house at the same time Atsue comes here." Sogamori laughed mirthlessly. "Peace will be restored to Ryuichi's household."

Horigawa said, "My journey to China on Your Excellency's behalf will be an arduous one. It may be a year or more before I return. I will

need the companionship and help of a wife. I have so immersed myself in my duties that I have not had time to seek one. On this voyage I shall have to make do with the one I-have."

But Taniko hates you, Ryuichi thought. You killed her baby daughter, now you are helping to steal her son. Merciful Buddha, she has lost Kiyosi, and now she will lose Atsue. And then to fall into the hands of Horigawa again-she will surely go mad.

"Yukio has escaped to China after killing my son," Sogamori brooded. "Well, there is one Muratomo on whom I can avenge myself. Listen, Ryuichi."

Ryuichi shrank back. "Yes, my lord."

"Send your swiftest messenger to your brother Shima Bokuden in Kamakura. Tell him the Imperial chancellor finds the continued existence of Muratomo no Hideyori a danger to the serenity of the realm. He is commanded to execute Hideyori immediately. I want the head brought back to me by the same messenger."

If only Bokuden were here, Ryuichi thought. He would know what to do. In the midst of all his anguish, the prospect of Hideyori's death troubled Ryuichi least of all. Hideyori had never brought any good to the Shima house, and Yukio had destroyed their entire little world. Ryuichi had no tears to spare for the Muratomo.

"As you wish, my lord."

Horigawa said, "The other Muratomo will not escape your wrath in China, Your Excellency. Through me, your vengeance will follow him to the Central Kingdom."

"Prince Horigawa is a remarkable man, Ryuichi-san," said Sogamori. "He is small in body, but within that small head of his is

encompassed the entire Chinese language, not only all its literary classics but all its terms of trade and warfare. The prince can equally well address the Sung Emperor or bandy words with the lowliest sailor on the docks. The messages he carries to China and the information he brings back will be precious to me. If he needs your niece, he must have her." "I understand, my lord," Ryuichi quavered.

"I will send a carriage with you for the boy, Ryuichi-san. Do not let your family trouble me again."

Horigawa rose. "I will go along myself, with my own carriage, to bring my wife back to my house." He bowed to Sogamori. "Would His Excellency be pleased to send some of his samurai with us as an escort?"

"Tell the captain of the guard to assign twenty outriders to you." Eilled with despair, Ryuichi bowed, turned and shuffled out of Sogamori's presence.

Chapter Three

Taniko and Atsue were playing go when they heard the carriages and mounted men come rumbling through the gate of the Shima mansion. Atsue's hand, about to place a white stone in a move that threatened a whole line of Taniko's black stones in a corner, hesitated in mid air. He put the white stone down slowly, and they sat and looked at each other.

The returning party made much more noise than Uncle Ryuichi and his outriders had on leaving, as if there were more horses, perhaps more carriages, with him now. The nervousness Taniko had felt all morning turned to dread. Pushing the go table aside, she took Atsue in her arms.

After a time, the shoji screen to her chamber slid back, and Aunt Chogao's tear-streaked face appeared in the opening. One look, and Taniko's fear turned to a wild, despairing terror. Her aunt shook her head helplessly.

"Your uncle wants Atsue in the main hall."

Taniko kept her arms around the boy. "If he wants Atsue he will have to come and tear him from me."

Sobbing, Chogao left. Atsue was crying in Taniko's arms. She patted the small shoulder beneath the dark green robe.

"Mother, kill me like you killed that man, and then kill yourself. We'll meet Eather in the Pure Land."

Taniko bit her lip. "You have a long life before you, Atsue-chan. I would rather lose you than harm you in any way. And even in the

worst moments of my own life I've never wanted to kill myself. Let us commend ourselves to the mercy of Amida. Homage to Amida Buddha."

"Homage to Amida Buddha," Atsue repeated.

Ryuichi came into the room. Behind him there walked a small, hatefully familiar figure wearing a tall black-lacquer hat.

"Good day to you, Taniko-san," said Horigawa, baring his blackened teeth in a broad grin.

With a scream of rage Taniko reached for the nearest weapon, which happened to be a lighted oil lamp. She hurled it at Horigawa, who stepped aside, laughing at her. Ryuichi shouted an alarm as the small, orange flames raced up a paper wall. A servant rushed in with a pot of water and threw it on the fire, and Ryuichi beat out the remaining flames with a quilt.

"I see Lady Taniko is still given to setting houses on fire," said Horigawa.

"It was you who put this idea in Sogamori's mind," said Taniko, wanting to spring upon her husband and strangle him.

Horigawa spread his hands. "On the contrary, I suggested to Lord Sogamori that the offspring of a woman of unsound mind and low birth could hardly be worthy of his attention. But he insisted. I am merely here to see that his wishes are carried out. By law you are my wife, and this boy is my son. He will be adopted by Lord Sogamori, and you, from now on, will be part of my household."

His household. They were sending her back to Horigawa. Her mind reeled under the shock. Eor a moment she really did want to kill herself. Everything that had given her happiness in these past years

was gone, as if swallowed by an earthquake.

She knelt and held Atsue. "We will not go."

"That man isn't my father," Atsue sobbed.

"Of course not," Taniko said through clenched teeth. "He is incapable of being anyone's father."

Ryuichi was pleading with Horigawa. "You don't want her as a wife, Your Highness. I'll see to it that she doesn't trouble Lord Sogamori."

A change came over Horigawa's face. His cheeks reddened under his courtier's white powder. His eyes narrowed and his thin lips drew back from the black teeth. In a voice choked with hatred he said, "She is my wife. Mine. I will dispose of her as I see fit. Do not interfere in this, Ryuichi." Horigawa turned away from Ryuichi and called through the shutters to men standing on the veranda.

"Taniko," said Ryuichi, "perhaps if you let the boy go without making a scene, we could persuade Prince Horigawa to allow you to stay with us."

"Don't deceive yourself, Uncle," Taniko said coldly. "The prince has old scores to settle with me. As for you, you failed me when I needed you most. Now I don't want to stay with you."

"Try to understand, Taniko. All the world bends before Lord Sogamori as grass before the wind. I can't withstand him."

"I thought a samurai could withstand anything."

Two men in red silk jackets and shin-length trousers, their long swords hanging from their belts, tramped into the room. They looked somewhat sheepish at entering the chamber of a lady unprotected

by a screen. Standing against the wall, they kept their eyes averted from Taniko and looked questioningly at Horigawa.

"Really, Your Highness, this is unnecessary," Ryuichi said. "You insult me by bringing your samurai into my house."

"You have already shown yourself unable to make the members of your household obey the commands of Lord Sogamori," said Horigawa. He turned to the samurai. "Take the boy from her and put him in Lord Sogamori's carriage."

Taniko remained kneeling with her arms around Atsue. Ryuichi held out his hands to her.

"Please, Taniko. Do not disgrace us like this."

"It is you who disgrace yourself, Uncle."

"Take the boy," Horigawa snapped at the samurai.

The elder of the two men stepped forward and stood over Taniko. "Excuse me, my lady. Will you give us the boy?"

"I'm sorry," said Taniko, "but I cannot do that."

"We know you, my lady. It was you who helped one of our comrades into the beyond. You are held in great esteem by all samurai. But we must obey orders. Do not force us to shame you."

Taniko closed her eyes and bowed her head. "Eorgive me." She tightened her grip on Atsue.

"It is you who must forgive us, my lady." The samurai bent over and took hold of her arms. Atsue screamed. Ryuichi stood moaning and wringing his hands.

Suddenly Taniko let go of Atsue and leaped at the younger of the two samurai, grabbing for his sword. She had it half-way out of its scabbard when the samurai's open hand smashed down on the side of her head. She fell, stunned, unable to move.

"She must have been a warrior in a former life," said the older samurai.

"Mother!" Atsue cried. Taniko opened her eyes and saw her son in the grip of the younger samurai. She held out her arms to him and he struggled to free himself.

"Get the boy out of here," Horigawa said. The man dragged Atsue from the room.

Shutting Atsue's screams out of her mind, Taniko turned to the older samurai. She had to speak very slowly to keep the sobs from breaking through.

"Before you leave, ask the servants to give you his flute, koto and samisen and take them with you to the Rokuhara. The flute, Little Branch, is a Takashi family heirloom given Atsue by his father. The boy's practice should not be interrupted. He is a very fine musician." She remembered years ago when Lady Akimi had said of Domei's son, Yukio, "His flute-playing is beautiful to hear." Yukio, because of whom Kiyosi was now dead. Yukio, whose life she had helped save.

Until this moment that had not occurred to her. Now the realization of it stunned her.

"Homage to Amida Buddha," she whispered. Only the Lord of Boundless Light could understand the tangled karma that made her somehow responsible for Kiyosi's death.

Taniko stood, turning to Horigawa. "Take me and do what you will."

Walking with the small steps of a lady, holding her back very straight, Taniko left the weeping family of Shima Ryuichi. She realized that she might never see any of them again, but she walked silently past them without saying goodbye. Her family had failed her once too often.

Horigawa commanded one of the Takashi samurai to get into the carriage with himself and Taniko. As they trundled through the streets of Heian Kyo, Taniko said, "Will you always have a guard present when you are with me, Your Highness?"

Horigawa smiled at her, a smile full of hatred. "You cannot possibly imagine the fate I have in mind for you. It will be most interesting to see how a delicate, well-bred lady, used to life in the capital, withstands the rigours of a journey to China."

Taniko stared at Horigawa, open-mouthed. China? But if Yukio had fled to China, as she had heard, Jebu might have gone there, too. It was almost impossible to believe this was not some strange dream.

"Yes, my dear, China," Horigawa said. "But that is only to be the beginning of your journey. Before you come to the end you will find yourself in hell."

She was treated rather like a guest at Horigawa's house. The women's building had been unused for some time. It was dirty, and the roof leaked. But Horigawa's servants, evidently on orders from the prince, worked hard and quickly and had it put right the day Taniko arrived.

She was completely cut off from the rest of the world. The servants avoided conversation with her. She longed for just a word about

Atsue. Sometimes, when she woke from a night's sleep, it would be a moment or two before she remembered that Kiyosi was dead and that Atsue had been taken from her. Then she would cry for hours before she could gather her strength to dress and take her morning meal. At night she would cry until she fell asleep.

There was absolutely nothing to do. She tried to write poetry, but she had no heart for it. She tried to write in her pillow book, which had followed her here from the Shima mansion along with her wardrobe and other personal- possessions, but she had nothing to write about. Sometimes she thought about the tortures to which Horigawa might subject her, the kinds of death he might inflict on her, and she felt terror. But the realization of what she had lost, and how hopeless her future was, numbed her to fear. Whenever the sadness and the fear seemed unbearable, she found comfort in invoking the Buddha.

More than once it occurred to her that by slitting her throat she could put an end to her suffering, once and for all. But empty as her life seemed, dreadful as Horigawa's plans for her might be, she was sustained by a feeling that somehow she would overcome all, that she still had a destiny to fulfil. Then, too, it would give Horigawa too much satisfaction to look down on her corpse and think he had driven her to kill herself. Nor could she bear to leave this world while Jebu was still part of it. As long as he was alive, she had not lost everything.

Einally, there was the thought of China, that fabulous country across the sea, from which came all beauty, all wisdom and all law. She could not die without seeing China.

One day a maid came to her. "His Highness says that you are to pack your very best robes and gowns, because you may be presented to some great lords of China."

Strange, Taniko thought. Why would he present her to great lords, when he loathed her? With the help of Horigawa's maids she began to make a list of the things she wanted to take with her. Eear rose in her mind, and she tried to quell it with "Homage to Amida Buddha."

There had not been an official mission from the Sunrise Land to the Land of Sunset in over two hundred years, and Horigawa's visit was not an embassy from the Son of Heaven to the Emperor of China either. But when he set out the prince visited the retired Emperor GoShirakawa and Chancellor Sogamori and even paid a ceremonial visit to the young Emperor Takakura, Sogamori's son-in-law. These conversations took most of a day. In the late afternoon Horigawa, along with Taniko, his samurai and- his servants, protected by a hundred Takashi outriders, set out through the Rasho Mon.

They followed the Sanyodo Road through pleasant plains divided into flooded rice paddies. They spent the night at the estate of a Takashi lord and continued south in the morning. The road led south tc the coast and then west along the Inland Sea.

Through the screened window of her carriage, which she sharec with three maids, Taniko could see islands sparkling on the sea like emeralds scattered on blue silk. Eishing boats and other small craft plied their way among the islands and along the shore.

At last they came to Hyogo. The Takashi banner was everywhere fluttering on the tops of warehouses and the tall masts of ships in the harbour. The harbour itself had been specially dredged by Sogamor to admit fully loaded ocean-going vessels. The party rode along the stone wharves past staring dock workers.

Three Takashi war galleys were docked in the harbour, their sail down, their oars at rest. It was from here, thought Taniko, that Kiyos had embarked on his last voyage. Perhaps it was in one of these

very ships that he had sailed to his death. Now, for part of her journey, she would be following the same route he had, seeing the same sights he had seen.

She remembered her own voyage on the Inland Sea with Kiyosi. That time, too, they had left from this same port. She recalled the islands they had stopped at, the flowers they had picked, the shrines and temples they had visited. Tears filled her eyes, blurring the sights of the harbour.

The maids were both excited and terrified at the thought of leaving their country, but had kept their conversation subdued throughout the journey because of Taniko's presence in the carriage. Now they burst into excited chatter. They had seen the ship on which they would be sailing.

It was a Chinese sea-going junk, standing alone and majestic, tied to the end of a long stone wharf. Taniko's first impression, as she pressed her head against the carriage screen beside the maids, was of a floating castle. The ship had five masts. Taniko had to twist her neck to see to the top of the tallest one, where a gleaming, golden fish trailing red pennants swam through the sky, veering this way and that with the wind. Eight-sided charms, looking like round, glaring eyes, were painted on either side of the prow. In the centre of each was the yin-yang symbol. The sides and stern of the ship were decorated, mostly in red, black and gold, with scenes of warfare, with birds, fishes, flowers and dragons. As the carriage approached closer to the huge junk, she read a verse of good omen in Chinese on the stern: "Water that sleeps in the moonlight." This enormous, gaudy ship was like no vessel built in the Sacred Islands. When she stepped aboard, she would already be in China.

She was carried up the gangplank in a small sedan chair, preceded and followed by maids. Around her rose the murmurings of the

Chinese crew as the sedan chair bearers hurried along the deck. She was hastily whisked to a cabin in the stern. The presence of women on the ship must greatly increase the danger of disorder, she realized.

The cabin which she would share with one of her maids was small but reasonably elegant. There was a window and, one above the other, two wooden shelves were covered with mats and quilts for sleeping. Her travelling boxes would take up the remaining space.

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

We have been at sea five days now. Since we left Shimonoseki Strait behind, we have been in sight of land most of the time. We stopped at Tsushima Island, then at Pusan on the coast of Korea. I saw both places only through my cabin window.

Once a day we women are permitted to walk the deck for our health. The rest of the time we are confined to cabins which get tinier and smellier each day. When I see Horigawa he smiles at me in his ugly way. I wish I could push him overboard, but he is always surrounded by guards.

Since we entered the China Sea I have been sick. The ship rises and falls constantly and sometimes rolls from side to side. It is not so bad when I am on deck and can look out at the horizon, but when I am in my cabin and the sea is rough I cannot keep food in my stomach and ardently wish I could depart this life.

There must be over two hundred passengers on board. I can't imagine that there is enough room for them below decks. Some of the more important passengers, including Horigawa and myself, have cabins in the stern. Besides Horigawa's party there are priests, monks and merchants aboard. There are Chinese and Korean

travellers as well as our own people. The crew, one of the maids told me, consists of about a hundred men.

The Chinese are much taller than we are, and lighter of skin, except for the sailors, who have been tanned a dark brown by the sun.

Sick and unhappy and frightened as I am, the adventure of crossing this vast ocean and the prospect of seeing the Central Kingdom fill me with excitement.

-Sixth Month, fifteenth day

YEAR OF THE HORSE

Chapter Four

Two flags emblazoned with white dragons flew from the battlements of Kweilin. The larger was the ancient flag of the city, the smaller, the Muratomo family crest. When Yukio and his men arrived at Kweilin, dispatched there by the Sung Emperor's chief councillor, both they and the people of the city had been amazed by the coincidence of symbols. All considered it to be an auspicious omen.

Jebu, Yukio and Moko stood at the parapet on the south side of the city's wall, watching the coming of the Mongols. Like a storm moving in from the sea, the Mongol advance was heralded by a blurring of the horizon. The line between the distant blue hills and the blue sky vanished into a ribbon of grey. Gradually the grey blanketed the nearer hills. Dust clouds reared into the sky like giants.

There had been plenty of advance warning. Refugees had been streaming up from the south for days, by land and on the rivers near the city. Eor the past day and a half, on orders of the city's governor, the landowners, artisans and peasants living in the surrounding countryside had moved within the walls. They brought with them every scrap of food, including live animals-oxen, goats, pigs, sheep, chickens and horses. Nothing was left behind for the Mongols. It had amazed

Yukio and Jebu that Kweilin could feed its huge population in normal times. Though not one of the larger cities in southern China, it was still many times more populous than Heian Kyo.

Now there would be no more refugees. The Mongols themselves had arrived.

Out of the billowing dust clouds came roars and rumblings, the

booming of drums, the blare of horns and shouts of command. The Mongols' standards rose above the dust-poles decorated with horns, spearheads, the wings of large birds or the fluttering tails of animals. The first riders appeared, dark figures advancing at a jog trot in silence.

"Do they frighten you?" Yukio asked Jebu with a smile. "There must be tens of thousands of them. The wings of their army spread from west to east."

"I am not frightened," said Jebu, "but I am amazed."

"I'm frightened," said Moko. "Even one warrior frightens me. Here there are as many warriors as there are raindrops in a tai-phun."

"We will try to blow this tai-phun back where it came from," said Yukio. He was his usual cheerful self, but Jebu suspected he spoke with more confidence than he felt.

On and on the Mongols came. The thunder of their horses' hooves filled land and sky. Their advance guard was now a short ride from the two lakes, Rong hu and Shan hu, that formed the southern side of the moat around Kweilin's walls. They were heading straight for the Green Belt Bridge, the one bridge that Yukio had left standing. The wooden bridge divided the two lakes and led to the fortified south gate of the city. All the other bridges had been destroyed and the other gates, except for the river gate, walled up.

As he watched the Mongols, Jebu remembered a day years ago when he had stood with Yukio's father, Domei, on the wall of the Imperial Palace in Heian Kyo, watching the glittering advance of the Takashi. Would this day end as disastrously as that one had? He hoped not, and reminded himself that a Zinja does not hope.

Jebu felt a special excitement that he could not share with his comrades. These were his father's people. Until now the only Mongol he had seen was Arghun Baghadur. He strained his eyes to capture every detail of the dress, appearance and manner of the warriors swarming over the hills south of Kweilin. His first impression was one of fur and leather, slitted eyes and brown faces that preserved, as they rode, an implacable silence.

Jebu said, "I would advise that, for the spirits of our men and the spirits of the people of this city, we ride out and attack the Mongols before they get into position."

Yukio nodded. "Let's give them a taste of what they can expect from us."

Yukio called his samurai together at the base of the city wall. Eour times the height of a man, the wall was built of yellow rock quarried from the limestone hills around Kweilin. The gates consisted of an inner and outer set of doors made of huge logs reinforced with iron bands. Square stone towers guarded either side of the gateway.

Besides the thousand men he had brought with him, Yukio had been placed in charge of two thousand Chinese troops. Twice that many civilians could be armed from the city's arsenal and pressed into service if need be. Yukio called only the samurai for this first sally, directing the other troops to man the walls. All mounted, all in full armour, the samurai crowded into the paved staging area behind the south gate.

Observers on the walls reported that the Mongols had reached the two lakes and were lining up facing the south wall. Yukio ordered the gates opened. With Yukio and Jebu leading the way, followed by a bannerman bearing the White Dragon, the samurai rode five abreast, at a trot, on to the bridge. Their taiko drummers beat out a

rising, angry rhythm.

As he looked at the line of warriors facing him, Jebu could not see the Mongols-his people-clearly. They were mostly heavy framed, bigger than the samurai. Their faces were dark, burnt by sun and wind. They all wore moustaches with drooping wings, and their hair, where it protruded from under their helmets, was braided. Most of them had black hair, but here and there Jebu saw a red beard and moustache. Their eyes were narrow, the eyes of men who had spent their lives squinting into the sun.

Yukio drew his long, gleaming sword and spurred his horse to a gallop. Jebu did the same, and the wooden bridge quivered as the samurai behind them picked up the pace. The samurai shouted their battle cry, "Muratomo!," at the motionless Mongols. Jebu looked over his shoulder and saw a thicket of steel blades behind him. But about half of Yukio's men were still inside the city gate.

Jebu heard three notes of a horn, a Mongol signal. Now, he thought, they would attack. But those facing him wheeled in unison and rode away from the edge of the lakes, leaving a broad open space on the far end of the bridge to invite Yukio's warriors.

Over the clamour of the samurai charge, Yukio called, "Try to set fire to their siege engines."

Jebu was remembering that other battle, long ago, when he watched the retreating Kiyosi lead the Takashi out of the grounds of the Imperial Palace, pursued by the Muratomo.

"Yukio," he called. "It's a trap."

"I can't stop them now."

Jebu whipped his horse to a burst of speed that carried him to the

end of the bridge well ahead of Yukio. He pulled the big brown Chinese stallion to a sliding stop and swung him athwart the path of the charging samurai. He stood in his stirrups so Yukio's men could see him, and held up his arms in a halting gesture. A Mongol arrow shot past his neck.

Crying out to his men to stop their charge, Yukio pulled his horse up short. The riders immediately following him responded to his command, and the word was relayed in shouts back along the bridge. But the milling mass of leading horses and men crashed into Jebu's stallion, and Jebu fell to the wooden planking.

There came two long blasts on the Mongol horn. Almost at once arrows were raining down. The Mongols, still riding away from the moat, had turned in their saddles and were shooting back at the samurai. Jebu's horse screamed and reared as a dozen steel-tipped arrows thudded into its side.

Jebu grabbed Yukio's arm and pulled him out of his saddle. Using the dying horses as cover, they watched the slaughter of their men. Three Mongol arrows had embedded themselves in Jebu's armor. He broke off their shafts. The Mongols had stopped and turned to face the city. Again and again they fired volleys at the men on the bridge from their short, powerful, double-curved bows.

The man carrying the White Dragon banner had fallen. Even though it made him a special target, Yukio picked up the banner and ran with it back over the bridge to the gate. Seeing the banner, the samurai began to fall back. Jebu and Yukio stumbled over dying horses and men. The two lakes were stained crimson and filled with bodies. The arrows fell upon them in clouds. Now all the surviving samurai were rushing pell-mell for the south gate.

One mounted man galloped past Yukio and Jebu in the opposite

direction, his eyes wild, his face a furious red. Yukio tried to stop him, but the warrior didn't even notice his leader as he charged by.

The Mongol horn sounded a single note, and the arrows stopped.

Standing up in his stirrups, the lone samurai shouted into the sudden silence, "Ho! I am Sakamoto Michihiko of Owara, descended in the tenth generation from Abe Yoritoki, the renowned warrior."

Yukio had paused to watch Michihiko. Pushing him fiercely, Jebu got him moving again.

The next Mongol signal was a braying fanfare. In spite of his Zinja training Jebu felt a shudder of fear at what happened next. Like an avalanche the Mongol cavalry rode at full gallop towards the Green Belt Bridge. Silent before, now they screamed like madmen, their faces distorted into masks of fury. Waving their sabres, they bore down on the lone samurai.

With as much deliberation as if he were at archery practice, Michihiko drew his bow, which was taller than a man, and fired a fourteen-hand arrow at the first Mongol in the wedge. The nomad fell from his horse, pierced through the eye. Michihiko fired one arrow after another at the charging warriors. He was a good shot, and soon fallen men and riderless horses were slowing the Mongol rush.

But now the Mongols were on Michihiko. Throwing down his bow, he had drawn his long sword. The blade rang against the curved swords of the Mongols. Jebu saw a Mongol sword break in two. At least our swordsmiths are better than theirs, he thought.

The Mongols encircling Michihiko drew back. One of them spun a looped rope over his head and with a flick of his wrist snaked it at the samurai. Another rope dropped over his head. He was trussed, his

arms pinned. He was trying to cut himself free when the Mongols yanked him from his horse and he fell heavily to the bridge. Their shrill laughter rang out over the two lakes. They closed in, and a dozen lance points stabbed Michihiko's writhing body.

Yukio kept his eyes fixed on the scene. "An indecent death for a brave warrior. Barbarian butchers."

Most of the samurai were safely within the city wall. Inside the gate Moko was waiting with a lighted oil lamp. Jebu took it from him and went back to the bridge.

A Mongol raised Michihiko's head on the end of a spear. They shouted triumphantly, high-pitched war cries, as if killing this one man had been a great victory.

"They probably think he was our mightiest fighter," said Yukio. "They don't know he was just one samurai who thought today would be a good day to die."

Like the Zinja, the samurai had learned to see death as no evil, Jebu thought. But unlike the Zinja, some of them actually saw it as good. They rushed to embrace it.

Now the Mongols were galloping across the bridge, racing to stop the gates from being closed. "Stand back," Jebu said to Yukio.

Into the oil lamp's flame he plunged the end of a string that had been rubbed with the explosive black powder of the Chinese. A hissing spark ran down the string and branched out in several directions along the bridge. Jebu and Yukio darted behind the great wood and iron doors.

The instant the gates boomed shut there came a tremendous thunderclap. Too late, Yukio put his hands over his ears. Jebu, his

own ears ringing, beckoned, and the two of them ran up the stone stairs leading to the parapet.

"Look what we've done," Jebu said.

A grey cloud of stinking smoke hung over Rong hu and Shan hu. The Green Belt Bridge, except for a few smouldering, blackened stumps of pilings, was entirely gone. The water was full of Mongols and their horses, many of them dead or badly wounded, a few struggling to swim to shore.

"That repays them," said Jebu.

"No, it doesn't," said Yukio. "They can lose all those men and not miss them. For us, to lose two hundred men is to lose one out of every five. And we've lost that many, I'm sure, in our very first battle." He laughed bitterly. "I ought to cut my belly open to make up for it."

Jebu said, "It was my suggestion to launch an immediate attack."

Yukio's large eyes were liquid with sadness. "I gave the order. And if you had not stopped our charge when you did, the Mongols would have annihilated us. You also suggested using the thunder-andlightning powder to destroy the bridge."

"Moko learned about the powder from the Chinese engineers." Jebu found that he had no regrets about the disastrous attack, but he wanted to help his friend. He put his hand on Yukio's armoured sleeve.

"We Zinja say that to act is within the power of every person. To guarantee the success of an act is not under anyone's control. So, if you are victorious, do not be elated. If you are defeated do not be downcast. A warrior who cares too much about winning or losing is

worthless. I have thought several times today of your father and the last day of his uprising in Heian Kyo, when you were still a child. He was defeated and forced to retreat from the city, but he was not discouraged. He said that the falcon stops and sometimes comes up with empty claws, but flies on to hunt again. He was a joyous samurai."

Yukio smiled, showing the slightly protruding teeth that gave his face a boyish look. "I will try to be- a joyous samurai."

Chapter Five

Across the two lakes the Mongols set up their camp and their fortifications. In their numbers, energy and discipline they reminded Jebu of the fierce red ants that built their nests in the forest around the Waterfowl Temple and viciously attacked any trespassing creature, from insect to man. Once, as a child, he had unknowingly stepped on a red-ant hill. Instantly, his legs had been covered with a swarm of tiny, biting insects. He had run screaming to an elder monk who laughed and rescued him by throwing him into a horse trough.

Yukio summoned his men and called the roll. Their losses were as he had predicted, over two hundred. Yukio announced that he was keeping a written record of every battle. The slain would be listed carefully, and all meritorious deeds would be recorded. Eeats of sublime valour like that of Sakamoto Michihiko would be memorialized in full. Yukio promised that whatever befell them, even if they all died defending Kweilin, he would get the record of their deeds through to the Emperor's Court at Linan, and from there it would be sent to the Sacred Islands. Thus, their families would remember their heroism for ever. Had he promised his men riches and long life, he could not have done more to win their loyalty. To die was nothing to a samurai, but to die unnoticed would be a calamity.

Their cheers for Yukio echoed against the high limestone walls. If they had any doubts about his leadership, those doubts were resolved for the time being. The Chinese spectators, unable to understand the language of Ge-pen, as they called the Sunrise Land, wondered how the strange warriors could be so happy after such terrible losses.

Kweilin lay along the west bank of the Kwei Kiang River, a wide, deep, swift-running stream bordered by blue hills riddled with caves

and sinkholes and eroded into fantastic shapes. The river was not only a natural moat but also provided the city with an easy supply route and escape route. Any relief troops that might be needed could sail up the Kwei Kiang from Canton.

The besiegers pitched their camp on the west and south sides of the city. Every hill, all the way to the horizon, was covered by round grey felt tents arranged in regular rows. At night the campfires twinkled, as innumerable as the stars.

After several days of watching, Yukio estimated that there were seventy thousand fighting men in the army camped around Kweilin. Thirty thousand were Mongols, organized into three tumans, divisions of ten thousand. The rest were auxiliary troops drawn from the various peoples the Mongols had conquered, mostly Kin Tartars, northern Chinese, Turks and Nan Chaoans. Accompanying these warriors was a host of camp followers, women, servants and slaves.

The Mongols were far from being the ragtag horde of savages Jebu and Yukio had imagined. They were better organized and more carefully equipped than many armies of civilized nations. They wore leather helmets, sometimes topped with spikes or other ornaments, and trimmed with felt and fur. Their armour was of fire-dried, black-lacquered rawhide, which, Jebu knew, was as strong as steel. Each rider carried two bows and two quivers of arrows in saddle cases, a curved sabre in a scabbard slung across his back, a lance, an iron mace, and a round leather shield. Each warrior had at least six remounts-compact steppe ponies about the size of samurai horses, much smaller than those of the Chinese. The Mongol ponies had powerful necks, thick legs and dense coats. Their manes and tails hung almost to the ground. They foraged for themselves in huge herds in the hills near Kweilin.

Life in the city of felt domes seemed quiet and orderly, amazingly so,

considering that these were supposedly barbarians whose only interests in life were conquest, killing, looting and rape. Jebu remembered what the Zen monk Eisen had said about the strict laws of the Mongols.

The head of Sakamato Michihiko remained on a pole at the spot where he had fallen, a trophy to be pecked at by birds, gradually changing from the head of a comrade to an anonymous skull. And close to the two lakes was an even more wretched sight. A huge corral had been built. Thousands of tattered, woebegone Chinese were penned within it, mostly men but with many women and even some children among them. They sat or lay on the ground without shelter from the hot sun and the frequent summer rains; the more energetic paced like caged animals. They were fed once a day. Every day parties of these prisoners, each herded by a single mounted warrior, would trudge out to the hills and return pulling cartloads of brush which they laid in a huge pile beside their stockade.

Jebu, Yukio and Moko spent hours every day watching the Mongols. In his few moments of leisure Jebu contemplated the play of light in the flashing depths of the Jewel of Life and Death. Even though he and his comrades had gone, seemingly, from certain death in their homeland to certain death in a foreign country, he felt calm and cheerful.

Across the moat from the city walls the besiegers built a wooden counterwall, with towers higher than those of the city. Behind it they deployed mobile towers, large and small catapults, giant crossbows, rams and the long-barrelled iron firethrowers the Chinese called hua pao.

Moko studied the many different kinds of siege machines, explained their uses to Yukio and suggested how they might be countered.

"They will send miners to dig under the moat and try to blast our walls with the black powder," he said. "They have contingents of engineers among their auxiliary troops. We must have men constantly posted along the base of the walls listening for sounds of digging."

Kweilin had hua pao of its own, which Yukio ordered positioned on the city's towers, to be manned night and day by shifts of Chinese. Pots of oil were set up along the walls, to be ignited and dropped on the wooden Mongol machines. Within the city people gathered barrels of water on every street, buckets of water in every house. Fire was the worst enemy of a city under siege.

They were as ready as they could be, but there were certain aspects of their situation that mystified Yukio and Jebu.

Jebu said, "We know nothing of siege warfare, we know nothing of these fire-throwing tubes. We are ignorant of Mongol tactics. A wise man would have placed us under a Chinese general, so that we could learn and be used according to our skills. Instead we have been put in command of this city. The Chinese officers here resent us. Is Chia Ssu-tao a fool, that he would risk a city in this fashion?"

Yukio shrugged. "Perhaps he was overly impressed by us. People are often respectful of the strange, and contemptuous of the familiar."

"Or perhaps he wants this city to fall," Jebu said.

"But he is of the war party at the Sung Emperor's Court. It was he who provoked the Mongols by breaking a treaty with them."

Jebu nodded. "What if the Mongols desired that provocation?"

Yukio's large eyes opened wider. "Are you suggesting that .Chia Ssu-tao is a traitor? And that we are being sacrificed to his designs?"

"All we can do now is play the game out," said Jebu. "We are learning more quickly than those who sent us here may have expected us to."

At the time of their meeting with Chia Ssu-tao, it had seemed like the beginning of days of good fortune. Eor ten days, longer than it took to cross the China Sea, they had sweltered aboard their galleys in the almost tropical heat of the southern Chinese capital, Linan. Chinese troops guarded them. Yukio gave a port official a flowery letter to the Chinese Son of Heaven, offering the services of one thousand samurai, to be used as His Imperial Majesty saw fit. The letter had been written at the Teak Blossom Temple with the help of the Zen monk Eisen. After a time Yukio began to despair of receiving an answer. They would have to choose between rotting aboard these ships, setting sail for some other land where they might be more welcome, or breaking out, to become outlaws in the Chinese countryside.

Then a reply came. A huge red and gold palanquin borne by a dozen men and accompanied by a squad of clanking Chinese soldiers was set on the stone quay beside Yukio's ship. A Chinese officer invited Yukio and three of his officers to ride in the palanquin to the palace of His Celestial Majesty's chief councillor, the venerable Chia Ssu-tao. Yukio gaped at the palanquin.

"Back home, only the Emperor would be allowed to ride in a conveyance like that."

"Things are different here," Jebu said. "Get your best kimono on and let us visit this venerable councillor."

Yukio, Jebu and two other samurai leaders rode in the palanquin. Linan seemed to them a city of giants. Its many-storeyed buildings

towered over innumerable canals and elaborate stone bridges. Each city block seemed to hold as many people as all of Heian Kyo. The Zinja were taught to memorize landmarks, but before they had gone very far, Jebu realized he was completely lost. It was all too strange.

Chia Ssu-tao's residence did not cover as much ground as the Rokuhara or the Imperial Palace back in Heian Kyo. Land was obviously precious in Linan. But the buildings were bigger and heavier than those of the Sunrise Land. Chia Ssu-tao's palace was surrounded by vermilion columns resting on the heads of painted stone dragons. He was guarded by huge soldiers in silver armour. The halls of his palace were covered with heavy carpet, so that not a footfall could be heard.

Chia Ssu-tao received them seated on a throne painted with gold leaf. He was a man in his early forties, tall and lean with a large nose, a pointed chin and a small mouth. He wore a round hat topped by a ball of red coral, the mark of his high office. His welcoming smile was cold.

"Your command of Chinese is good," he began, "but you write in the style of over three hundred years ago."

Yukio blushed. "Eorgive my blundering efforts, Your Excellency.

There has been so little contact between your land and mine that we have not kept up with the progress in your manner of writing."

Chia Ssu-tao nodded. "The last official embassy from your Emperor visited our Son of Heaven near the end of the T'ang dynasty. I presume you have heard of the T'ang dynasty?"

"Of course, Your Excellency," said Yukio. "Our system of government is modelled on that of the T'ang. Our capital, Heian Kyo, is a copy of

the T'ang capital of Changan."

"Your people have a gift for aping their betters," said Chia Ssu-tao with a patronizing smile. "However, it is time you visited us again to acquire a few new skills. The Central Kingdom is always pleased to aid the struggles of barbarian nations towards higher civilization."

Yukio was good at masking his feelings, but Jebu knew from the tightness around his mouth that he was furious. "It is to help protect your great civilization against the barbarian invaders that we have come here, Your Excellency."

Chia Ssu-tao nodded. "You show the virtue of filial piety, since our civilization is the father of yours. I shall ask the Ministry of War what role can be found for you. We will provide you and your men with quarters. By the way, do you hold cricket fights in your country?"

"Our children keep crickets in cages as pets, Your Excellency."

"Indeed your people are backward if they consider such a sublime sport a pastime for children. Here we pit crickets against each other. They strive together like tiny dragons. We place bets on the outcome. You must attend my next evening of cricket fights."

In the days that followed, Chia Ssu-tao introduced Jebu, Yukio and other high-ranking samurai to the aristocracy of Linan. They even had a brief audience with Sung Emperor Li-tsung, a stout, motionless figure seated on a jade throne. They attended several cricket fights, an obsession with Chia Ssu-tao that preoccupied him more than his duties as the Son of Heaven's chief councillor. On all these occasions Jebu felt that they were being paraded as curiosities, not taken seriously as fighting men.

So it was a surprise when, after a short stay in Linan, Yukio was

given an Imperial appointment as military commander of Kweilin, the chief city of Kwangsi province on the western border of the Sung empire. The Mongols had invaded the independent kingdom of Nan Chao and taken its capital, Tali. Kweilin was their next likely target. If Kweilin fell, the nomads could move on to Changsha, the strongest city in the central region. The fall of Changsha would open the way to Linan. The Chinese rulers had given Yukio a crucial post.

After the Mongols had been camped outside the city's walls for, three days, they sent an unarmed officer across Lake Rong hu in a sampan. Yukio said, "Let's behead him in front of the gateway, where his countrymen can see it. That will encourage our people and teach the enemy that we are resolute."

Jebu, who had a strong distaste for unnecessary bloodshed despite his years of combat, was surprised at Yukio. "The governor of the city might want to decide how to deal with this envoy," he suggested mildly. "Let's not antagonize our Chinese friends further."

Governor Liu Mai-tse, an aged scholar, received Yukio, Jebu and the Mongol emissary in his marble hall of state. After bowing to the governor, who was seated on an ivory chair, Yukio addressed him in Chinese.

"I wanted to behead this Mongol at once, Your Excellency, without even hearing what he had to say. This weak-spirited monk who accompanies me persuaded me to bring the enemy to you instead. If it is your wish, though, I will gladly execute him now."

For the first time Yukio spoke in a language the envoy understood. He showed no fear, but glowered angrily. Despite his age-his hair and moustache were grey-he had the powerful build and quick movements of a young warrior.

Governor Liu smiled. "I am not familiar with the humour of Gepen, but I believe you are joking about this monk. I observed him from the wall the day you fought the Mongols, and he is anything but weak-spirited. His advice to you is wise. The Mongols consider the person of an ambassador to be sacred. To slay this man would be an unforgivable offence."

Yukio shook his head. "I'm sorry, Your Excellency. I was under the impression we had already offended the Mongols."

Liu raised a slender hand in admonition. "You will admit the possibility that they might eventually take this city?"

"With reluctance."

"Of course. If we had slain their ambassador they would assuredly put all the people of Kweilin to the sword. That is their custom. You do not have the right to condemn every person in this city to certain death. If we do not embark on a course that drives them to do their worst, there is hope. The Tao is infinite and infinitely surprising."

Now the grizzled officer turned to Jebu. "Are you a Mongol?" he demanded angrily in Chinese. "How can you serve the degenerate Chinese and fight against your own people?"

"I am not a Mongol, though my father was," said Jebu. "I was born of mixed parentage in the Sunrise Land and was raised there."

The Mongol looked surprised and curious. He squinted at Jebu closely and seemed about to ask another question when Liu interrupted.

"If you are through quizzing this monk, tell us who you are and what you have to say to us."

The Mongol drew himself up and addressed the governor. "I am Torluk, a tuman-bashi-a leader of ten thousand. I come from the corn mander of the army outside your gates. He does not wish to waste men or destroy a valuable city. Therefore he gives you an opportunity to surrender now. Open your gates to us and all will be spared-even the warriors from the Land of the Dwarfs."

Land of the Dwarfs. Jebu had heard that expression once before, when he had listened in secret to Arghun's conversation with Taitaro. Was it true that his people might be ridiculed for their stature? Perhaps it was so, for had he not always been the butt of jokes because of his height?

"I see." Governor Liu stood and beckoned to Yukio and Jebu, drawing them to a corner behind a gilded pillar and leaving his pikeman to watch the envoy.

In a low voice he said, "This commander who offers mercy is only second-in-command of the army outside. The tarkhan who leads all the Mongols in this region is in Szechwan conferring with their Emperor Mangu. The temporary commander has made many errors by Mongol standards. In the battle at the Green Belt Bridge his orders were delayed, and too many warriors died. Discipline in the camp is poor. The movements of his army are behind schedule. Now he fears that the tarkhan will punish him for his mistakes. He wants to take the city without a fight and present it to the tarkhan as a great conquest."

"How do you know so much about what the Mongols are thinking, Your Excellency?" Jebu asked.

"I have agents who are able to get in and out of their camp with ease. I know also that even though you suffered great losses at the Green Belt Bridge, the Mongol commander fears you. You are strange to

him, and you seem fiercer than the Chinese he has encountered. And he doesn't know how few of you there really are."

"Your Excellency wishes us to fight on?" Yukio asked.

"I do."

Yukio nodded. "We will teach them that the men of the Sunrise Land are not dwarfs but dragons."

Jebu was pleased that Yukio did not promise victory. Perhaps he had begun to absorb some of the Zinja teachings.

Governor Liu returned to his throne. "We reject the terms offered us. We will fight on against the barbarian invaders who would steal our lands, our cities and our lives." He motioned his guards to escort the ambassador back to the south gate.

The grizzled tuman-bashi started to turn away, then swung around and said, "You will regret your stubbornness. You should surrender now, while you have the chance. There will be no mercy for Kweilin when our tarkhan, Arghun Baghadur, resumes command."

Chapter Six

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

The barbarians who have invaded southern China are said to smell so bad that the very stench of their approach forces their foes to retreat. They are described as hideous creatures, hunchbacked and twisted of limb. I have even been told that they bite off the breasts of women. Somehow, I suspect that those terrifying reports are spread to excuse the absence of Chinese victories. Jebu is sprung from the barbarians, and surely he is not twisted of limb. And he bites women only with the best of intentions.

The Chinese also have many strange notions about us. They believe that we eat human flesh and worship gods with the heads of animals. It makes one wonder if the things they say about the Mongols are any more true.

From one of the Chinese serving-maids I have heard the tale of a band of warriors from across the China Sea, short-statured and ferocious, who came to fight in the Sung Emperor's service. That could only be Muratomo no Yukio's men, and Jebu must be with them. They are now at a city called Kweilin, further from here than the Sacred Islands. I thought if I came here I would be closer to Jebu. We are in the same country, but this one country is as big as twenty countries. I am told they were in Linan a few months ago. Lord of Boundless Light, will I ever meet him again?

-Eighth Month, twenty-sixth day

YEAR OF THE HORSE

At its southern end, the brick-paved Imperial Way-which was to Linan

what Redbird Avenue was to Heian Kyo-curved past the Imperial Palace and the base of Phoenix Hill. Aristocrats and rich merchants built their palaces on Phoenix Hill, and it was here Horigawa took up residence. The gateway of his mansion led into a formal courtyard surrounded by three imposing pavilions with blue and gold pillars. The window of Taniko's room on the second storey of the women's pavilion looked towards a lagoon covered with lily pads. The weeping willows and peach trees around it were green. At home this would have been the beginning of autumn, but here in Linan there was no autumn.

Horigawa's negotiations with officials in the Chinese Court dragged on for months. He had arrived in Linan with the names of a few people who might be useful-mostly merchants who traded with the Takashi-and he used these like the rungs of a ladder to reach higher personages. But frequently there were waits of many days between his appointments with various great men. Hardest of all to arrange was an audience with the most important official in Linan, the Emperor's chief councillor and the real ruler of southern China, Chia Ssu-tao.

Taniko remained in isolation, in effect a prisoner. As happened wherever she went, she quickly made friends with the servants, both her own people and the newly hired Chinese. Horigawa had instructed the household staff to keep a close watch on her and warned them that she was not to be trusted. But, consciously employing charm, candour and kindness, she eventually won them all over. Through the servants she was able to make contact with the outer world. An elderly Chinese secretary was especially helpful.

Erom him she learned some of the history of the Sung Emperors. Their dynasty had been founded almost three centuries earlier by a general who seized the throne. A hundred years ago they had lost northern China, first to the barbarian Cathayans, then to the Kin

Tartars. And now the Mongols, having in turn overrun the Kin, had decided to unite the two halves of China under their rule. They had pierced the Sung territories from three directions with three armies; their Emperor, the Great Khan Mangu, in the far west; Mangu's younger brother, Kublai Khan, in the west nearer the capital; and a famed and feared general, Arghun Baghadur, in the south. She thought she had heard of Arghun Baghadur before, but she could not remember where or when.

At first it seemed to Taniko that all Chinese were tall, grave and silent. Then she met several who were short, passionate and talkative. She thought the Chinese greedy, then heard tales of poor scholars and met beggar monks at the mansion kitchen. Gradually she realized that her quickly formed beliefs about the Chinese were as foolish as the Chinese notion that her people ate human flesh, and she settled down to studying the Chinese one by one.

One of their customs was utterly strange to her. She did not meet any upper-class women, but the servants assured her it was quite true that the feet of wealthy and well-born Chinese women were tightly bound when they were small girls, to keep them from growing. The deformed results, which looked something like the hooves of horses, were known as lily feet, and the Chinese women were proud of them. Taniko could not imagine why, nor why the Chinese men would find such feet attractive, as they evidently did. Only a man like Horigawa, she thought, would want a crippled woman.

Towards the end of the Year of the Horse, the prince's Chinese secretary told her that Horigawa had finally made contact with Chia Ssu-tao. Because of the chief councillor's passion for sponsoring cricket fights, Horigawa had scoured the ten major marketplaces of Linan and all the lesser ones till he found a truly formidable fighting cricket, for which he paid one hundred bolts of silk. He sent the cricket to the great minister in an ivory cage, with the compliments of

one who served the Emperor of Ge-pen in the same capacity that Chia served the Sung Emperor. It was an exaggeration, but there was no way Chia Ssu-tao could discover that. Chia sent for Horigawa. What they had discussed, precisely, the secretary had no idea.

Horigawa was invited to Chia Ssu-tao's celebration ushering in the Year of the Sheep. The chief councillor entertained his guests on Linan's great Western Lake, chartering a fleet of flower-bedecked pleasure boats, crewed by women and heavily laden with casks of spiced rice wine. Horigawa was among the most favoured guests, those who accompanied Chia Ssu-tao himself on the dragon barge that led the fleet. Not long after this, Horigawa sent a sealed dispatch on a trading junk to Takashi no Sogamori.

Taniko passed the days writing in her pillow book, embroidering, and playing mah-jongg with a Chinese maid who taught her the game. The elderly secretary taught her the art of painting in the Chinese manner. She compared languages with him, both of them fascinated by the way Taniko's language was written in Chinese characters, but with the characters standing for completely different words. The old man explained that China was known as the Central Kingdom because all the other nations of the earth must come to China to learn.

One day in early spring of the Year of the Sheep, Horigawa came to her. His small, squarish face was alight with pleasure and triumph.

"I have come to advise my honoured wife to prepare herself for a long and arduous journey by land. We leave in three days' time."

"Where are we going?" Taniko asked coldly.

"West." Horigawa waved expansively in that direction.

"There is war in the west."

"Yes. Are you afraid?" He watched her keenly. Perhaps he hoped that the long months of suspense and confinement would have broken her down.

"I am not," Taniko said firmly-. "Wherever we are going, if you are not frightened, I can be quite certain I will not be frightened." "You have more to fear than I do."

Once again Taniko carefully packed away her silks, jewels, combs and the other belongings she had brought with her from Heian Kyo. She had not yet worn any of her finery.

The day before they were to leave she sought out the old secretary to say goodbye. He prostrated himself before her and looked up with tears in his eyes.

Taniko smiled. "I hardly deserve such an outpouring of feelings. Perhaps if you knew me better you would weep less at this parting."

He shook his head. "Escape, honoured lady. Run away. Do not go with the prince."

"How can I escape? Where could I go?"

"You are being taken to your destruction. To think that I should advise a wife to defy her husband-it is a great wrong I do. But the evil he contemplates is greater."

He would say nothing more. She passed that day and night in dread. Of course, she had always known Horigawa had some cruelty in store for her, though the uneventful voyage and the quiet months in Linan had lulled her into a feeling of safety. There was danger in the

west.

How could she run away from Horigawa in an utterly strange land? Could she find her way to Jebu? How would she eat? Where would she sleep? She would either be returned to Horigawa or fall into the hands of criminals. She could only escape if she. had help. She decided to ask the secretary, since he had warned her, to help her get away.

After a sleepless night she dressed quickly. As she finished, Horigawa swept into the room.

"We depart at once."

"I-I am not ready."

"That is unfortunate. I'm sorry, but we leave in any case." The little man beckoned, and two large Chinese serving-women came into the room.

"I am not going with you."

"I suspected as much. Rumour of our destination has somehow reached you. One can appreciate at such times the usefulness of the Chinese custom of binding women's feet."

"I am sure the idea of torturing and deforming women appeals to you."

Horigawa nodded to the two large women. With blank faces they stepped forward and reached for Taniko. She remembered her samurai training. She stepped towards the maid on her left, tripped her and sent her sprawling on her back. The other big woman threw her arms around Taniko from behind. Taniko drove her elbow into the woman's stomach.

Horigawa tried to block the doorway, but Taniko thrust the heel of her hand into his chin. He fell back against the wall of the corridor.

She ran out of the room and into the arms of a steel-helmeted guard with a three-pointed sword swinging from his broad belt. He picked her up off her feet in a bear hug and held her impassively while she kicked against his massive body.

"Take her to the carriage and lock her in," said Horigawa, panting as he picked himself up off the floor with the help of one of the maids. He bared his black-dyed teeth at Taniko. "I might say I will make things worse for you, to repay you for this. But your fate cannot be made any worse."

Chapter Seven

They set out that morning escorted by a clanking company of soldiers carrying long spears and shields painted with fire-breathing dragons' heads. The prince rode in solitary splendour in a vermilion and gold official state carriage of the Sung Emperor's Court, drawn by a pure white ox. His entourage followed in less ornate vehicles, their belongings packed on the roofs of the carriages. Eive big carts, each pulled by three oxen, carried bales of silk, boxes of silver bars and other valuables.

Taniko rode with three Chinese maids, the two she had knocked down and another, grim-looking woman taller and broader than either of the others. All were strangers to her. When she tried to speak to them, they silently looked away.

The caravan rode north on the Imperial Way, passing canals and bridges and vast marketplaces. Around the market squares stood tall buildings, some as high as five storeys, a necessity in this overcrowded city. They passed through a fortified gateway and crossed a wide moat, and Taniko looked back at walls so thick, chariots could be driven along their tops.

As they travelled slowly westwards, they passed flooded rice paddies, whose green shoots were just beginning to break through the water's surface, alternating with woodlands full of leafy trees. At night they stayed at inns, places that intrigued Taniko. People paid in silk, silver coins or the paper money issued by the Emperor, and were given food and sleeping quarters for the night. How much easier it would make travelling in her own country if such establishments existed there.

She decided that whatever was to happen to her, she must meet it

looking her best. Each morning she selected a set of her finest robes and dressed in them, layer on layer, folded back one on the other at throat, sleeves and skirt to show their variegated edges. She combed and arranged her hair and adorned it with jewelled combs and pins. She powdered her face and painted her lips, carefully making her mouth, her worst feature in her opinion, look smaller than it actually was. Horigawa had taken none-of the maids from their homeland on this journey, but she was able to teach the Chinese women to help her dress in the style of a great lady of Heian Kyo.

They began to pass long lines of refugees, bundles on their heads, trudging east along either side of the road. Horigawa was heading directly for the war zone. Taniko refused to give in to fear, knowing that was just what Horigawa wanted. She remembered Jebu's telling her that once she made direct contact with the Self, she would no longer feel fear. "There will be no necessity for it," was the way he put it. She tried to reach the Self by invoking Amida Buddha. Perhaps Amida was the Self.

They encountered a Chinese army, its yellow and black silk tents dotting the spring-green hills, its general a tall figure in gilded armour mounted on a splendid black charger. Horigawa showed the general a scroll which he took from a carved ivory case.

They went on, but now the Chinese guards who had accompanied them from Linan were no longer with them. They had no protection whatever. This was madness, Taniko thought. Yet she knew Horigawa would never risk his person unnecessarily.

Drowsing as their carriage bumped westwards, Taniko was awakened by the screams of the Chinese women. "Mongols!"

She looked up. Pale with fear, the maids were staring out the carriage window. Taniko pushed in among them.

They were on a road running through green young wheat fields. Nearby were the burnt ruins of a cluster of houses. In the distance she could see the walls and pagoda towers of a city above which hung a cloud of grey smoke. And across the empty fields, riders were galloping towards them. Horigawa stepped down from his carriage and stood waiting for them.

They skidded to a stop with shrill cries. Their faces were very broad and a dark brown. Eor the first time Taniko was seeing Jebu's people. They looked nothing like him. Then she noticed that two of them had moustaches the exact shade of red of Jebu's hair. That was a shock to her, making real something she had only half believed, as if a kami should suddenly appear to her in the living flesh.

Horigawa addressed the riders in Chinese and showed them something. He was too far away for Taniko to hear what he was saying. She hoped they would ride him down and impale him with their lances. She would be content to die, if she could first see that.

Several of the warriors dismounted and began to walk down the line of carriages, looking in the windows. Would they really smell as bad as the Chinese claimed?

A round face with a long black moustache, surrounded by a felt headpiece, thrust itself in at the window. The Mongol's eyes widened, and he exclaimed in his harsh tongue. Pulling the rear door of the carriage open, he seized the maid nearest him by the arm and yanked her out of the carriage. It was the biggest of the women. The Mongol was tall, but she was a bit taller.

The bowlegged warrior pulled the stout, pleading woman away from the road and into the knee-high green wheat. He threw her down on her back as his comrades, laughing and calling to each other, rode

over and climbed down from their ponies. Taniko could hear Horigawa call out a protest, but the Mongols ignored him. Chattering gleefully, they tore the screaming woman's robes from her body. Two of them pulled her legs apart. The one who had taken her from the carriage threw himself upon her.

Her stomach churning, Taniko watched while the Mongols proceeded to take turns raping the woman. Her cries and groans brought tears to Taniko's eyes. The other two maids crouched on the carriage floor and covered their ears with their hands. Horigawa, his back turned, was talking to the leader of the Mongols, some distance away.

The last of them was through with the woman. He stood, drawing up his leather trousers, while she lay on her back sobbing. With a snarl the Mongol reached down and pulled her to her feet by the hair. He drew the sabre slung over his back, stretched her neck by pulling downwards on her hair, and in one swift motion struck off her head.

Taniko bit down on her fist to stifle her scream. If they heard her, they might come back. "Homage to Amida Buddha," she whispered. Sickened and grief-stricken, she fell back into a corner of the carriage, turned her face to the wall, and cried in anguish.

Horigawa's voice came to her from the carriage window. "I regret the loss of a useful servant, but perhaps this spectacle has given you an inkling of what is in store for you."

Taniko's pain turned to rage. "If I should die today, I will die happy, knowing I no longer have to walk in the same world with you."

Horigawa laughed, inclined his head mockingly and turned away.

With the scouts riding in a loose circle around them, the caravan

began to move again. Taniko looked back. The raped woman's body lay partly hidden in the tall grass, her severed head a pale blur beside it. The undulations of the plain were gentle, and Taniko was able to see the body for a long time. Even after she could no longer see it, she continued to tremble.

Why couldn't he let the poor woman live? Wasn't it enough to have raped her? She was no more than a used receptacle, to be destroyed as one might smash an empty wine cup. And to Horigawa, Taniko was no more than an unruly slave who must be made to suffer. She thought of the baby Horigawa had murdered. Shikibu, a girl. But her son, Atsue, was so valued that Sogamori had torn him from her side. Her protest, the protest of a woman, was worthless. She had been powerless to stop Sogamori and Horigawa. Always, to be a woman was to be something less than a man.

And now I, too, shall be destroyed. All I can do is meet death with courage.

"Homage to Amida Buddha."

Now they entered the Mongol camp. It smelled of woodsmoke, horses, and roasting meat. The soldiers sat before their round tents and looked up calmly and somewhat curiously as Horigawa's procession passed. Beyond the rows of felt tents the besieged Chinese city smouldered in the dusk.

"What city is that?" Taniko asked a maid.

"Wuchow."

The camp was quiet. She had seen these barbarians rape and murder a woman, but among themselves they seemed orderly enough. She had often heard the Mongols compared to wild beasts,

but the men she saw working, cleaning their equipment, currying horses, and repairing tall wooden siege machines had a busy, purposeful air. They were human, even civilized in their own way. That could only make them more dangerous.

Taniko had been carrying with her a box containing a mirror and paints and powders. She set about restoring her make-up.

The carriages came to a stop in the centre of the camp. Before a large white pavilion on the crest of a small hill, Horigawa got out of his carriage. A group of Mongol officers wearing red and blue satin coats, gold medallions and silver-hilted sabres, approached him. Horigawa held up the same object he had shown the scouts. Now Taniko saw that it was a rectangular gold tablet. The Mongol officers inclined their heads courteously.

An aged Chinese official emerged from the large tent. He and Horigawa conferred, then the official gave orders. A group of servants, closely watched by a warrior, began to unload the valuables from Horigawa's carts.

The old Chinese man came over to Taniko's carriage. "I am Yao Chow, the khan's servant," he said. "You will please come out now." The two maids hesitated.

"Go on," said Taniko. "We're safe in this camp, I think. Unless you annoy them." That thought impelled the big women to scramble from their carriage.

Taniko had carried a carved ivory fan all the way from Heian Kyo. Now she stood poised in the doorway of the carriage, drew the fan from her sleeve and opened it with an imperious snap. Her outer robe was of orange silk with dazzling gold embroidery. She wore her favourite hair ornament, a mother-of-pearl butterfly. Her lips were

scarlet, her face white as a snow-covered field.

Eor a moment all motion stopped in the centre of the Mongol camp. Out of the corner of her eye Taniko saw, with satisfaction, several barbarian mouths open in wonder. Perhaps it is only that I look strange to them, she thought, but I know I look beautiful. The maids helped her down the carriage's steep ladder.

Swift as a spider, Horigawa was beside her. "A grand entrance, Taniko-san," he whispered in their own language. "You could have been a grand lady in our land, had you not been so foolish as to betray me. Now, however, you are among those who can teach you to respect and fear a man."

Taniko tossed her head. "It seems they respect me well enough."

"That is because they do not know what you are," he spat. "I intend to tell them. I will tell them you are no high-born lady, but simply a courtesan sent by my lord Sogamori as a gift to the Mongol warriors. They will use you and throw you away like rubbish, Taniko. Your fate will be the same as that Chinese maid's, only it will take much, much longer. At first, perhaps, you will be the plaything of the generals. But even now you are no longer as young and attractive as you once were. They will tire of you and you will be cast off to the lesser officers. Eventually, you will be kicked like a football back and forth among the dirty, greasy men in the ranks. At last you will be worn out and old before your time, diseased, toothless. You will end your days among strangers who cannot speak our language, who neither know you nor care about you, far from home, forgotten. Can there be a more miserable end for a gently reared woman of the Sacred Islands than to live out her life in exile as a slave of filthy barbarians?" Grinning, he reached out a long-fingered hand and stroked her cheek softly. She turned away.

I will not give in to despair, she thought. Not in front of him. Later, perhaps, I will weep for all that I have lost and I will fear for my future. Later I will decide whether now, at last, I ought to kill myself. But now I will show him that he cannot hurt me.

She turned back to him with a faint smile. "You forget, Your Highness, that while I lived with you as your wife, my lover was a man of the same blood as these filthy barbarians. Perhaps I shall be quite happy here."

Horigawa laughed. "Ah, yes, I had almost forgotten your warrior monk. He and the rebel Yukio are at large in this country. Indeed, it was their escape that put an end to the noble Kiyosi and placed you back in my power again. Kiyosi, with whom you publicly dishonoured me before all of Heian Kyo. Dinner for fishes now. Poor Kiyosi." He stopped and eyed her with a gleeful hatred.

She would show no feeling. "If Lord Sogamori heard you speak that way of his son, you yourself would be dinner for dogs."

"But through me, Lord Sogamori will be avenged for the death of his son. I come to the Mongols as a secret envoy from His Excellency, Chia Ssu-tao. As a neutral, I have been asked to tell the Mongols that His Excellency recognizes the futility of resistance. He intends to make it easy for them to defeat the Sung, in return for which he asks high office in the empire of the Great Khan. I have already persuaded Chia Ssu-tao that Yukio, the monk and their men are traitors and outlaws in their own land and a potential danger to him. A Mongol army now besieges Kweilin, the city in the south-west which Yukio and his samurai are defending. Now, to rid himself of these undesirables, and to prove his good faith to the Mongols, Chia Ssu-tao intends to let them take Kweilin. The city cannot hold out without reinforcements. None will be sent. Kweilin will be overrun, and the surviving samurai, in accordance with Mongol practice, will be put to

death. So your beloved Zinja, my dear, will die. Think of that while the Mongols are using you for their pleasure."

Taniko raised her head, her long fingernails poised to rake his face. But she held herself back.

"Please strike at me." Horigawa smiled. "It would give me such pleasure to knock you into the dirt before these barbarians who imagine you to be such a great lady."

The wrinkled Chinese who served the Mongols called out, "Your Highness. Our lord the khan is prepared to see you now."

Horigawa nodded. "Goodbye, Taniko. I shall never look upon you again, but I shall always revel in the thought of your utter degradation."

As Horigawa accompanied the Chinese official into the presence of the Mongol overlord, another Chinese ushered Taniko to a smaller tent, where, with the rest of Horigawa's retinue, she awaited her fate.

Chapter Eight

The day after tuman-bashi Torluk's mission to Kweilin, the drums in the Mongol camp began to beat in the late afternoon. The Chinese prisoners were herded out of their pen and set to pulling the siege machines to the edges of the moat. Dismounted, the Mongol troops marched in rows to the attack. The three white horsetails of their battle standard moved forward. Yukio ordered all available men in the city to the walls. His drummers struck up a rhythm to inspire the defenders.

Shortly before sunset the Mongols' portable bridges crashed down across the west side of the moat. The hua pao at the base of the Mongols' wooden wall boomed in unison. Iron balls smashed into the ramparts of Kweilin. Catapults flung explosive balls and huge stones into the streets of the city.

Kweilin's hua pao replied, blowing holes in the Mongols' wooden wall. The samurai dropped pots of burning oil on the enemy bridges and set them afire before more than a handful of men could cross the moat.

The Mongols forced their Chinese prisoners to lead the attack as human shields. The prisoners were slaughtered by volleys of arrows from the walls fired by men who pretended not to know whom they were killing.

All that night the Mongols kept coming. Using horses, siege machines, cartloads of earth and human bodies to bridge the moat, they fought to get at Kweilin's walls. They seemed determined to press the attack unceasingly until they took the city. Such a lust for victory, Jebu's Zinja training had taught him, often led to failure.

But he was awed by their sheer energy. Growing up on Kyushu, he had been through many of the great storms the Chinese called tai-phun. The Mongols attacked like a tai-phun, threatening to destroy all in its path. Even as he fought them off with arrows, with naginata and with sword, Jebu recognized in himself a contrary pride that these demons in human form were his people.

At last, at dawn, the assault waves stopped. The few troops remaining on the strip of ground just below the walls scrambled back across the moat, chased by samurai and Chinese arrows. The hua pao stopped spitting fire. The Mongol catapults kept hurling stones and fire bombs over, but less frequently. The many fires throughout the city were under control.

There was no sunrise. Thick grey clouds rolled in from the south and, to Yukio's satisfaction, it began to rain heavily. Rain would protect the city from fire and greatly hamper the besiegers.

Jebu and Yukio sat by the parapet and wiped blood from their swords to keep them from becoming pitted. "We lose so many each time we fight the Mongols that soon there will be none of us left," Yukio said wearily. "What a poor leader I am, having brought these men this far, for them all to die in a strange land."

Governor Liu came down from his ivory chair of state and gripped Yukio and Jebu by the arms. "You should be sleeping, not wasting your time talking to this old man."

Jebu smiled into the governor's red-rimmed eyes. "I doubt that His Excellency has slept this night."

Yukio reported that two hundred Chinese troops and over a hundred samurai were dead or badly wounded. But the two white dragons were still flying over Kweilin.

The governor said, "My scouts say the Mongol tarkhan, Arghun Baghadur, is on his way with reinforcements of two more tumans, twenty thousand men, which his master, the Great Khan Mangu, has assigned to him. With a general like Arghun leading them and outnumbering us so greatly, the Mongols will surely take Kweilin. We are entering the season of heavy rains, and that may slow them down, but the end is still inevitable."

"We have been promised that if we need reinforcements they could be sent here by way of the Kwei Kiang from Canton," Yukio said.

"It is time to send for them," said Liu. He beckoned to his son, an officer of high rank among the Chinese troops. The younger Liu's armour was nicked and battered. He stepped away from the wall of the governor's audience room and knelt at his feet.

"You will go to Canton, my son. You will sail tonight from the river gate."

Eive of the nomads, men too badly wounded to fight to the death, had been taken prisoner, and Jebu managed to convince the samurai that these men would be more useful to them alive than dead. Each day he spent some time visiting the prisoners in the stone building near the governor's palace, doctoring their wounds and conversing with them.

At first they talked in Chinese, which most Mongols knew because northern China had been part of their territory for almost a generation. It was hard for Jebu to understand their dialect, almost a different language from the southern Chinese he was used to. Among them selves the nomad warriors spoke Mongolian, and Jebu learned some of the words and used them when he talked to them. In time their conversation was more and more in Mongolian.

The Mongols distrusted Jebu. Aside from the suspicion of prisoners of war towards any captor, they recognized, as Torluk had, his Mongol features. They assumed he was a traitor, captured in an earlier battle, who had agreed to serve the Chinese in order to save his life. They guessed he had been sent to persuade them to do the same, and they offered to kill him if he would only come close enough.

To the distress of the Chinese guards, Jebu selected the biggest Mongol and fought him barehanded in the courtyard of the prison building. His opponent was the only one of the prisoners who had not been seriously wounded; he had been found unconscious on Kweilin's wall, where a rock, apparently catapulted from his own side, had struck him. It was traditional, bone-cracking, Mongol-style wrestling against Zinja unarmed combat techniques. Jebu threw the big Mongol five times.

Once he had earned their respect and convinced them he wanted no military information, the Mongols grew friendlier. They came to realize that Jebu really did not know Mongolian and therefore could not be a turncoat from their own side.

Eor his part, Jebu soon felt a certain affection for his near countrymen. These five, four of them wounded and sitting in a prison cell, bored and apprehensive, seemed far from being the brutal warriors of legend. Jebu found them simple, illiterate, young, quick to laugh, courageous and kind to one another.

He also discovered that they were fond of drink. He ordered a few jars of rice wine sent into their cell. Within an hour it was gone and they were calling for more. Their appetite for wine was bottomless, and Jebu had to limit their ration to prevent them from being drunk all the time. In their cups they tended to be merry, not belligerent. The language lessons went better with the help of a little wine.

He was starting to understand the Mongol way of life. These young Mongols had grown up enjoying the ease and wealth of the empire Genghis Khan had created, but their parents and grandparents had told them of the older times when not a season went by without at least one death in every family. The world of ice and desert and steppe never relaxes, never gives a second chance. The laws and customs of the Mongols were modelled after the laws of nature, or as the Mongols themselves called it, Eternal Heaven.

Days of inactivity passed behind the wooden wall of the besiegers and the stone walls of Kweilin. Jebu acquired a smattering of Mongolian. Yukio and Governor Liu directed repairs to the city and its fortifications. Everyone watched the river for signs of transport junks bringing a relief expedition.

Twelve days after the unsuccessful assault on Kweilin, word came from Governor Liu's scouts that Arghun Baghadur had returned from his visit to Mangu Khan in Szechwan province.

"Do we launch another attack on them to demonstrate how much we are to be feared?" Yukio asked Jebu as they stood on the wall watching the two additional tumans Arghun had brought with him set up camp.

"Suppose I toss you off the wall into their midst. That should frighten them."

Moko, who was on the walls with them, watching the arrival of the Mongol reinforcements, said, "I have been trying to design a catapult that would toss me out of this city and safely across the Kwei Kiang to the opposite bank."

After setting up their yurts, as they called their round felt tents, the new arrivals remounted their horses. They formed up in squares of a

hundred mounted men, a whole tuman containing a hundred such squares, ten across and ten deep. The five tumans that made up the army besieging Kweilin formed in a semi-circle wider than the city itself on the southern shore of the two lakes. Eifty thousand cavalrymen faced the city. Beyond them, drawn up in parade formation, were new siege machines and masses of auxiliary troops from the nations the Mongols had conquered.

Jebu felt a chill go through his body. Even for a Zinja-a Zinja hardened by fifteen years of almost continuous combat-the Mongol army was a terrifying sight. He had never seen an army this large. He doubted whether all the samurai in the Sunrise Land, gathered together, would present a spectacle like this. No wonder men were so terrified of the Mongols that some of them surrendered at the first news of their approach.

Yukio, beside him, let out a deep breath. "How foolish I was to think my little band could stand against something like this." He shook his head sadly.

A bannerman rode out before the massed Mongol troops, carrying the three-horsetail battle standard of the army. Now Jebu noticed that each tuman had a standard of its own planted in the ground before the massed squares of cavalry. The banner carrier drove the pointed base of his standard pole into the ground in the centre of the field, just by the joining of the two lakes. How many battles, Jebu wondered, had these six standards seen? Over how many nations had they triumphed?

Eive more horsemen rode into the open centre of the field, one from each tuman. They formed a semi-circle behind the battle standard.

"The tuman-bashis," Yukio said.

The army before the city and the spectators on the walls seemed to hold their breath. A horn blared. Down from the hills beyond Kweilin rode a single horseman on a steppe pony.

He could have his pick of any horse in the conquered territories, Jebu thought. He could ride a huge black stallion or a white charger.

He could have a horse worth a kingdom. But he chooses, when he shows himself to his army and to his enemy, the same sort of pony he has ridden all his life, the sort his ancestors have ridden for thousands of years before him.

The only sound was the clatter of one horse's hooves. The rider's red cloak streamed out behind him, showing his red lacquered armour.

It's strange, thought Jebu. I'm seeing the man who murdered my father, and yet he makes me think of my father. My father must have been a man very like him, and so he restores my father to me.

Arghun Baghadur rode out before the battle standard of his army. The five generals facing him got down from their horses, ceremoniously unbuckled their belts and draped them over their shoulders, took off their helmets and put them on the ground.

Arghun spoke to them and acknowledged their submission with an inclination of his head. The tuman-bashis stood up and remounted. Arghun turned to face his troops. Again there was a moment as if the world held its breath. Then a roar went up from fifty thousand throats.

Arghun stood in his stirrups and addressed his tumans. His voice boomed across the parade ground, but he was too far away for those on the walls of the city to hear him.

"We'll find out later what he is saying," a voice said beside Jebu. "My scouts will tell us."

Yukio bowed to the governor. "Your Excellency need not expose yourself to danger in order to see what is happening among the barbarians."

Liu smiled. A party of Chinese guardsmen and silk-robed city officials stood behind him. Jebu saw that he had been carried to the top of the wall in a sedan chair.

"When those who govern refuse to go out and see for themselves, the country is lost," said Liu.

Across the two lakes Arghun raised his arm in a signal. A hill in the distant camp seemed to move. It lumbered down towards Arghun, followed by another gigantic grey shape, then another. Eor a moment Jebu could not understand what he was seeing. Einally he recognized that four enormous animals, the largest creatures he had ever seen, were moving towards Arghun. They were covered with brightly coloured cloths under which armour gleamed. High on the back of each animal was a rider who occupied a little castle. The beasts were fantastic under their armour-a, high, domed head; a nose as long as a tree limb, with a serpentine life of its own; two white spears, each the length of a man and the thickness of a leg, jutting out from either side of the mouth.

Jebu had seen such a beast before. After a moment he remembered where. It had been one of the strange animals he had seen in his vision of the Tree of Life, when Taitaro first gave him the shintai. He reached into his robe and rubbed the Jewel with his fingertips.

"Is it some kind of dragon?" Yukio whispered.

"It is a creature that is as terrible for the fear it inspires as for the damage it can do," said Liu. "They are much used in warfare by the

nations of the south of us. I had heard that the Mongols acquired some war elephants when they invaded Nan Chao and Annam some years ago."

The elephants formed a line before Arghun, and the Mongols cheered the beasts with a roar. The elephants answered with a sound as of trumpets blown by giants.

Jebu felt an impulse from deep within, perhaps from the Self. "We have been tame spectators of Arghun's parade long enough." Drawing a willow-leaf arrow from his quiver, Jebu nocked it and took aim at the centre of Arghun's back.

"That little bow will never carry that far," said Liu.

"That little bow may surprise you, Your Excellency," said Yukio.

Jebu fired. A gust of wind sweeping down the river valley deflected the arrow. It arced over the counterwall and landed at the feet of Arghun's horse.

Immediately the Mongol dismounted and picked up the arrow. He examined it for a moment, then turned and looked up at the wall. A great distance separated them, but Jebu could see clearly the upturned face, the deep-set eyes, the rock-like cheekbones, the thick red moustache. He could not see Arghun's eyes, but he knew the tarkhan must be looking right at him.

He realized now that he had wanted Arghun to know that he was here. That was why he had shot at him. He had no wish to kill Arghun from this distance. Some day Arghun must die by his hand and must know that it was he, Jebu, son of Jamuga, who had done it.

Across the gulf that separated the walls of the Chinese city from the Mongol camp, the two men stared at each other.

Yukio took his longbow from the wall where it had been leaning and sent an arrow winging at Arghun. Other samurai followed his example. A hail of arrows fell around the Mongol leader.

With their bodies, the tuman-bashis shielded Arghun from the flights of arrows. They led him under the wooden wall of their encampment. A line of Mongol heavy cavalry, mounted archers with powerful crossbows, trotted out into the parade ground and returned the fire from the city. A hua pao mounted on a wooden Mongol tower boomed; then another. An iron ball crashed into the parapet, sending splinters of rock flying in all directions, and a man fell with a head wound.

Jebu positioned himself in front of the governor. "This is too dangerous a place for you, Your Excellency."

Liu waved away Jebu's words with a slender hand. "I am the least important person on these walls." But he allowed Jebu to hurry him to his sedan chair.

The duel of arrows had turned into a general battle of archery and artillery. Across the lake the Mongol formations were moving aside as the auxiliary troops and siege machines, shielded by civilian prisoners, began to advance: The battle for Kweilin had begun in earnest. It would not end, Jebu thought, until the city had fallen.

Chapter Nine

"Until yesterday, I had not seen Arghun again since that night," Jebu said. "He did not continue to pursue me but left the Sacred Islands."
"When was that?" asked Governor Liu.

"In the last Year of the Ape, Your Excellency."

"Eleven years ago," said Liu. "That was when the Great Khan Kuyuk died. Whenever a Great Khan dies, the Mongols stop whatever they are doing, wherever they are, and return to their homeland to elect a new Great Khan. Kuyuk was the grandson of Genghis Khan. He was the third of the Great Khans. Mangu is the fourth."

A Chinese officer entered the governor's audience chamber. "The Mongol commander has sent another emissary, Your Excellency. He asks for a meeting with the governor and the military commander of the city."

Liu turned to Jebu. "You have met this man before. Your observations might be valuable. Please come with us."

"I would be honoured," said Jebu.

Yukio said, "He has been determined to kill you since you were an infant. If we cross the moat to parley with him, he might very well have you assassinated on the spot."

"We will not cross the moat," said Liu. "We will meet with him on the temple island in Lake Shan hu. He will not have his men with him, and he will be covered by our archers on the walls."

"If I come as an envoy he will not harm me," said Jebu. "That is the

Mongol law."

On an island in the centre of Lake Shan hu stood a small, exquisite Buddhist temple built centuries before. Neither the Mongols nor the Chinese cared to damage it, and the octagonal stupa with its copper ornament had miraculously escaped accidental harm despite the many rocks and fire missiles that had flown over it. Still, the Buddha taught the Middle Way, neither self-indulgence nor self-destruction, and the monks of the temple were not foolhardy. In accordance with the Middle Way they had long since abandoned the temple. Liu and Arghun now agreed on it as a site for their meeting.

A gold and red boat with a dragon figurehead, brought around through the moat from the river gate, carried Liu, Yukio and Jebu to the island. Two flag bearers, a Chinese carrying the White Dragon of Kweilin and a samurai with the White Dragon of Muratomo, made up the rest of the party. They disembarked and stood before the gateway of the low wall around the little temple.

Arghun and an officer carrying the standard of the three white horsetails were borne from the opposite shore in a sampan. Arghun's only adornment was the square gold medallion of rank, which he wore on a chain around his neck.

His face had changed little since Jebu had last seen him, eleven years ago. The long wings of his red moustache hung below his beardless chin. His eyes, narrow and icy blue, stared implacably at Jebu. Jebu stared back and heard Yukio draw a breath and move defensively closer to him.

He tried to control his emotions as he had been taught. He admitted to himself that he was afraid. He could not visualize himself defeating Arghun in battle. At the same time, he could not forget the old saying, "A man may not live under the same heaven with the slayer of his

father." Sooner or later, he must kill Arghun.

But that was not a Zinja saying. As a Zinja, he was not the son of Jamuga, he was not the person Arghun wanted to kill, he was not the person who had a blood debt to kill Arghun. He was simply a manifestation of the Self, and the Self was everywhere, in Arghun as well as in Jebu.

Still, he could not resist addressing Arghun in a Mongol speech he had learned and memorized. "Greetings, murderer of my father."

Arghun stopped walking towards them and stared at Jebu with his cold blue eyes. In Mongol he said, "So you have learned the language of your father. Yet you fight against your father's people."

"I fight my father's murderer."

"There is no place for you in the world. You will not find your home on earth until you lie in it."

Liu spoke. "Have you come to exchange threats with this monk or to meet with the rulers of Kweilin?"

Arghun bowed politely to the governor. "This monk is the reason I called this parley," he said in Chinese. "I have a duty to fulfil. The spirit of Genghis Khan will not rest until this monk is dead."

"It appears that your Great Khan demands death for all of us," said Yukio. "That you harbour a particular hunger to take vengeance on our comrade is nothing to us."

Arghun's hard mouth curved in a faint smile. "You are wrong. It is important to you. It may save your lives. Were the decision mine, I would kill all of you when the city falls."

"You insult us," said Yukio. "You speak as if the outcome were already decided."

Arghun nodded. "I merely say what is so. I do not think that it will be difficult to take this city. I have conquered fourteen cities since the Great Khan graciously made me one of his tarkhans. Some were larger and better defended than this one. I do not think a handful of men from the Land of the Dwarfs will trouble us for long."

"You know better than that, Arghun," said Jebu. "You have been to our land. You have seen samurai fight. You have fought alongside them."

"Do you, half Mongol and half dwarf, think of it as your land?" Arghun spoke the very thought that sometimes darkened Jebu's life when he was alone-his feeling of being a stranger everywhere. There were moments when even the Zinja doctrine, even the contemplation of the Jewel of Life and Death, was not enough to drive away the sadness. He reminds me of this now, Jebu thought, because he wants to weaken me by discouraging me, to make me easier to kill. I must remember that I am the Self, and that is all I need to know.

Arghun turned to Yukio and Liu. "The men of the Land of the Dwarfs are fierce fighters, but they are ignorant of siege warfare."

"We will give them the benefit of our knowledge," said Liu.

"Even so, I will take your city. When I do, unless you agree to one condition, I will level it to the ground and execute every soul living in it."

"What condition?" said Liu.

Arghun pointed at Jebu. "Let me take the monk back with me when I return to my camp. He will die an honourable death. He is related to

our ruling family. According to the law, the Yassa, the blood of such a person may not be spilled. He will be strangled with a bow string. It is a death reserved for those of high birth."

"Let me defend myself with my sword, and you may attempt to kill me with a bow string," said Jebu.

"You jest, but you have it in your power to save the lives of these men here, of your samurai comrades and of all the people of the city." "We will not consider it," said Liu quietly.

It is my death we are discussing, Jebu thought. I find this hard to believe.

"Suppose we surrender the entire city here and now," Liu said.

"Surrender the city and the monk, and you will continue as governor. The dwarfs we will take prisoner, but they will be treated well. The Great Khan Mangu's younger brother, Kublai Khan, has expressed a desire to see them."

"But Jebu will die?"

"The monk must die."

"And if we permit him to escape and then surrender?" Liu persisted.

"The city will be destroyed and its people put to the sword."

Liu said, "Because you have a yearning to kill this monk, you are willing to sacrifice the lives of thousands of your men, who will surely die trying to take this city. And you will throw away the city and the lives of all in it."

Arghun raised his gauntleted hands in an appeal to heaven. "They

have understood nothing." He shook his head at Liu. "It is the command of Genghis Khan that all those of the blood of Jamuga be slain. Any Mongol would die happily to carry out his command."

Jebu had a sudden overwhelming conviction of what he must do. He saw it so clearly, he knew it must be what Taitaro called a Zinja insight.

He stepped forward. "Give us your oath that you will spare the city, whether it is surrendered to you or whether you take it by force, and I will go with you now."

He hoped that none of them would hear the slight tremor he himself detected in his voice. It was absurd that Liu and Yukio should think his life worth the lives of all the people of Kweilin and the warriors who defended them. They might believe it dishonourable to yield a comrade to death at an enemy's hands. But if so many lives could be saved in that way, it made no sense to protect one life.

"No," said Yukio. "I forbid it."

"I also," said Liu. "You would die for nothing. He would simply find another excuse to destroy the city."

"I believe that he will abide by his word."

Liu said, "Let me speak with you." Taking Jebu by the arm, he led him to the rocky shore of the island. Yukio and Arghun waited in silence.

Jebu said, "I am a Zinja monk, Your Excellency. I do not cling to anything, even life."

"Here in our land your Order is called Ch'in-cha," said Liu. "I know something of its teachings. If you did not offer to die to save so many

thousands of lives, you would not be a true Ch'in-cha. But for you actually to sacrifice yourself would be foolish. And it would show you lack the Ch'in-cha wisdom."

Jebu studied the old man's calm face curiously. Liu's black eyes seemed to give off a radiance.

"I am prepared to listen," Jebu said.

"If you accept Arghun's view of things, he has already imprisoned your mind, and he can kill you whenever he chooses. The future is closed to you. But as a member of the Order, you should know that no single view of anything is true, that the number of gates we face is always infinite. If you choose to go on living, many things might happen. You might be killed anyway, in battle. The Emperor might send reinforcements and drive the Mongols off. Arghun might be killed in battle and his accursed quest for your death would perhaps die with him. A plague might strike and wipe out all of us, besiegers and defenders. Or the Mongols might suddenly decide to lift the siege and go away."

"That will never happen. The Mongols never give up."

"You are quite an authority on Mongols, young monk. But I forget you are part Mongol yourself. Withdraw your offer to give yourself up to Arghun. I believe that life has more to teach you, and that this is not your time to die."

"I see nothing ahead of me." Jebu had tasted the sweetness of life and now life seemed altogether bitter. He had known Taniko and lost her. He had known victory in battle and then had been driven from his homeland in defeat.

Liu said, "The Ch'in-cha finds his happiness in nothing." "You know

that?"

Liu smiled. "And the Ch'in-cha believes in nothing. Yet, you believe it is right for you to sacrifice yourself. But you have been taught that there is no right and wrong. The Ch'in-cha do not believe in good or evil." He paused, and his black eyes held Jebu's. "The Ch'in-cha are devils."

Jebu did not think, after all he had seen and done, that he could ever be greatly surprised again. But this moment left him voiceless. He could only stand and stare at Liu in wonder. He did not know if he dared say anything at all.

"Not all of us wear grey robes and live in monasteries," said Liu. "Have I convinced you not to throw away your life because of Arghun?"

Jebu bowed. "Eor now, Excellency, you have. I do not know why you have spoken to me as you have. I do not know if there is any reason why I should listen to you. I have no way of knowing if you are truly one of us or simply a person who has learned some of our secrets. But your words convince me, and I must follow my convictions."

"That is all I hoped for."

They went back to where Yukio and Arghun were standing, Liu walking first, Jebu a respectful distance behind.

"The young monk has decided that you have no right to demand his life," Liu said to Arghun. Yukio shot a relieved grin at Jebu.

Arghun's expression did not change. "He condemns your city to death."

"If you do conquer the city and kill all who live here," Liu said, "the

guilt will be upon you. Nothing requires that you put so many people to death but your own thirst for blood."

Arghun turned to his standard-bearer and beckoned. The warrior went back to their sampan and took a large mahogany box from the bow. He carried it back to Arghun and laid it at his feet.

"I have brought this gift for you, Governor Liu Mai-tse," said Arghun. "You have been expecting reinforcements to help you withstand the siege. Understand now that you are doomed." Arghun bent down, undid the catch on the box and stepped back.

Yukio looked questioningly at Liu. Jebu held his breath, a terrible suspicion of what the box contained sweeping over him. Governor Liu signalled to Jebu to open the box.

Within it lay the pale, bloodless head of Governor Liu's son, on a bed of straw.

Chapter Ten

"I will not let them crush me," Taniko told herself over and over again. Not Horigawa and not the Mongols. They might rape and kill her, as they had that poor woman on the road. They might, as Horigawa predicted, enslave her and grind her down until she ended her life as a ravaged old woman. But there was that within her, that which was not Shima Taniko, the vulnerable woman, which no one could destroy. That could be what Jebu meant by the Self.

After she had waited a long time in a felt tent with the other members of Horigawa's party, two Chinese men beckoned her and escorted her a short distance to another tent. She heard the voices of men singing around the campfires. She couldn't understand the words, but the songs were plaintive and moving. The Chinese men left her alone.

The tent was dark and reeked of smoke and sweat. It had a cylindrical latticework wall and a flattened conical ceiling whose spokes, radiating from two central poles, reminded her of a parasol. There were layers of thick, soft rugs on the floor, woven in intricate patterns, and she sat on silk cushions. So this was the sort of place in which Jebu's people lived. Thinking of Jebu reminded her of Horigawa's prediction that Jebu would be killed by the Mongols. Horigawa had tried to kill him before and failed. She prayed to the Buddha to help Jebu live.

Unable to keep track of the time, she brooded, circling again and again through boredom, fear and hopelessness. She would probably never see the Sacred Islands again. Or Jebu. She threw herself down on the cushions and wept.

She had had chances to kill Horigawa. Why had she never. done it?

She decided that if she ever met him again she would cut his throat without a word of warning and take the consequences. What a fool she had been to imagine that some good might come of this journey to China.

She sat up. The pillow on which her head had rested was soaked with tears. Her face was ruined. She found a pitcher of water and a basin and washed her hands and face. Her make-up box had been taken from her along with all her other clothes. There was no mirror. She desperately wanted a bath. The air in the tent was warm and close, and she could feel herself sweating. These Mongols probably never bathed. Just as the rumours foretold, they did stink abominably. The entire camp smelled of the greasy, unwashed bodies of meat eaters.

One small oil lamp struggled vainly with the shadows around her in the circular room. Through a round opening in the centre of the tent roof she could see a patch of black sky with a single star in it. It was a warm, windless night.

As the oil lamp flickered lower, she lay in the near darkness and called upon the Lord of Boundless Light. "Homage to Amida Buddha." After a while she sank into the long, heavy sleep of the despairing.

In the morning one of the Chinese men brought her food, coarse cakes and wine, and put more coals on the fire. She tried to ask him questions, but he would not answer her.

The tent was provided with a porcelain pot for her to relieve herself. She had fresh water now, and she took off all her clothes and washed herself thoroughly. The cool water refreshed her.

After dressing, she went to the doorway of the tent and opened the

low wooden door. Bright sunlight and dust assailed her. All around her she had heard the bustle of men and horses. She had not realized until now how quiet the Mongol tents were.

A guard in a silk coat snapped at her in his language and waved her back into the tent. She went back and sat down, and considered how she might escape.

She had as much chance of eluding the Mongol horsemen as a baby rabbit trying to escape a falcon. And even if she did, how could she survive in an unknown, war-ravaged countryside? She was even more likely to meet injury or death if she ran away from here than if she stayed.

She had lost everyone and everything she loved. It scarcely mattered what the Mongols did with her. Again she sat down and buried her face in her hands and cried.

After a time, though, the tears stopped flowing. She was doing precisely what Horigawa would want her to, letting herself be ground between the millstones of monotony and despair until she had no power to resist her fate. She reminded herself that she was samurai. She remembered that she had resolved not to let them crush her. She stood and clenched her fists.

A Mongol woman's round face appeared in the doorway.

"May Eternal Heaven send you good fortune," she greeted Taniko in Chinese. "I am Bourkina, servant of our lord Kublai Khan."

Bourkina might be anywhere from thirty to seventy years of age. She wore a yellow Chinese silk robe and a heavy necklace of gold and jade that hung down to her waist. Her stride was long, her gestures commanding, almost mannish. She reminded Taniko of peasant

women she had seen, women who worked constantly and lacked the delicate manners of well-born ladies. She might enjoy silk and jade now, but she had surely been born in poverty. Her hair and eyes were dark, and Taniko could see in her no resemblance to Jebu.

Bourkina was solicitous. Was Taniko comfortable? Did she need anything? All Taniko's belongings would be delivered to her later in the day, as soon as they could be located. Bourkina asked what sort of food Taniko preferred and said she would do her best to see that she enjoyed her meals. In all this concern Taniko sensed little warmth. It was as if Bourkina had been placed in charge of a valuable horse and were seeing to its needs. With the advantage, in this case, that the horse could talk. But this horse wanted to do more than talk.

"May I have writing materials?"

Bourkina looked astonished. "What for?"

"I like to write down what I see and think."

Bourkina looked at her as if she had suddenly sprouted wings. "How did you learn to write?"

"In my country all people of good family are taught to read and write. Women, of course, write a language different from that of men, but it serves our purposes quite well."

"Among our people women do not read or write at all, and only a few men do. Our Great Khan Mangu and our lord Kublai Khan and their two brothers are all considered scholars. But they are most unusual men."

"You speak Chinese. That is a mark of learning in my country." Bourkina smiled proudly. "It is a necessity for us Mongols. How else

could we give orders to our slaves?"

"What has become of Prince Horigawa and his party?"

"Your master delivered his message from the Sung Emperor's Court to Kublai Khan and left."

"He is my husband, not my master." Since Horigawa had told the Mongols she was a mere courtesan, she must try to show that she was a person of consequence.

"Your husband left you with us as a gift?" Bourkina's face showed mingled shock and disbelief.

"A husband and wife can be enemies."

Bourkina shrugged. "It does not matter what you were before you came to us. My task now is to determine your present value."

Taniko felt her face grow hot. "I know what my value is." I will not be treated like a sack of rice, she thought.

The Mongol woman thrust her face into Taniko's. "Listen, those who can't live with us, die. You must realize, if you want to live, that Eternal Heaven has given my people the whole earth to rule as we see fit. Eorget what you were before. You will find your proper place among us."

Taniko sighed and nodded. This woman's talk might sound like wild boasting, but it was simply the truth as the Mongols saw it. Unless Taniko chose to die at once, she would have to learn the ways of this new world.

"I simply meant that I do not want- I want to be something more than a woman for your men to use."

Bourkina smiled. "Our lord Kublai Khan requires us to be most careful in determining the value of each person and thing." "How will you determine my value?"

Bourkina sat down on the cushions and gestured to Taniko to sit beside her. She snapped her fingers and a Chinese boy hurried in with a lacquer tray bearing blue and white porcelain cups and a pot of Chinese ch'ai-the same beverage the Takashi had been importing into the Sacred Islands.

"Tell me about yourself," Bourkina said.

Sipping the steaming green liquid, Taniko began the story of her life, not in any orderly way, but taking each fact as it came to mind. She realized that, pleasant as Bourkina seemed, it was her task to pass judgment on the strange woman from across the sea. Therefore, like a calligrapher, concerned as much with the beautiful appearance of each word as with its meaning, Taniko tried to shape each part of her story to present herself to Bourkina in the best possible light. She stressed her breeding and learning, her association with the great men of her own land, her marriage to a prince.

"He said nothing about your being his wife."

"What did he say of me?"

"In China there are many women who sell their bodies for gold or silver-or for a bowl of rice. The prince said that in your land you were such a woman. He said you were the concubine of a nobleman in your country. The nobleman was killed, and you threatened to make a scandal because he left you no part of his wealth. As a favour to the family, the prince took you away with him on his journey to China."

Taniko shut her eyes. She felt herself about to cry, remembering Kiyosi and Atsue. But this Mongol woman would only despise her for her tears. She masked her feelings.

"I was, as I told you, a woman of noble family married to Prince Horigawa. He and I were estranged and I did, indeed, become the consort of a man who was not simply a noble, but the heir of the most powerful family on our islands and commander of all our warriors. I had a son by him. When he was killed in battle, I wanted none of his wealth. I only asked to keep our son, but he was torn from me by his father's family. I was taken out of the country so I could not protest."

"How many children have you had?"

"Two. I had a daughter, and Prince Horigawa killed her because she was not his."

Bourkina said, "Among my people the penalty for adultery is death. Eor both the man and the woman."

Taniko was astonished. "Death? If that were the law in my land, all the best families would be wiped out." Instantly she wished she had not said so. If the Mongols considered it a great crime to couple with someone other than your spouse, perhaps Bourkina would think Horigawa's low estimate of her to be accurate.

"The prince despised me long before I lay with any other man," she said. "He married me only because my family is wealthy."

Bourkina patted her hand. "I have seen the prince. He is not much of a man. And he is a fool to have given away a woman as clever and pretty as you. You have every reason to have strayed from his pasture." She stood up. "Now let me help you undress."

"Undress? Must I?"

"We have talked for a while now, and I know something of your life and your mind. But you are not being considered for a post as a general or an ambassador. I want to see whether your body is beautiful and without blemish."

Taniko sighed and stood. "Then it is true that I am nothing more than a vessel to be used by men."

There was a note of irritation in Bourkina's voice. "You know too much of the world to talk that way. A woman's fortune is founded on her beauty, just as a man's rests on his strength. It is obvious enough, though, that your worth does not end with your body. If you were merely to be given to the troops for their pleasure, do you think I would have spent this much time with you?"

It took Taniko some time to undress. She removed robe, jacket, skirts and dresses. She had bound her hair up for convenience while travelling. Now she let it fall to her waist, and the Mongol woman's thin eyebrows went up. Einally Taniko undid the last robe and handed it to Bourkina, who let it fall to the cushions as she appraised Taniko.

Taniko had never been embarrassed by nudity, especially in front of other women. When a man and a woman came together, they did not desire complete nakedness. The most attractive way was to open your clothes just enough to permit glimpses of your body and to give your lover access to yourself. But complete nudity for practical reasons, such as when bathing or changing clothes, was commonplace, and in her own household Taniko often saw women and men naked.

No one, however, had ever examined her as closely as Bourkina did.

Without a word the Mongol woman walked all around her, squinting at her from the crown of her head to her toes.

"You do not bind your feet like the Chinese. That is good. We find that custom ugly."

Now Bourkina began to touch her. Taniko shrank from the Mongol woman's rough hands, and Bourkina ordered her sharply to stand still. Taniko felt like a melon being probed by a household cook. Bourkina peeled back her lips and poked her teeth. She smelled her breath. She kneaded Taniko's breasts, pinched her nipples and felt her buttocks. She ran her fingertips over Taniko's belly.

"Not bad. Only a few stretch marks. You had two children, you say? How old are you?"

Taniko quickly decided that she could have lost five years in the China Sea. "Twenty-three."

"You are between twenty-five and thirty. But your small size and light weight have kept your body young. To a man, you might pass for even younger than twenty-three. Now lie on your back and open your legs."

Taniko knew better by now than to protest., She lay back on the cushions, turning her head away and gritting her teeth as the Mongol woman peered and probed inside her.

"Good. Childbearing has not made you slack. You appear to be free of disease. Put some clothing on." Bourkina beamed, the round, brown face stretched by a broad grin. "May I presume that you are as expert in the arts of the bed as a married woman who has also had two lovers should be?"

"I suppose so," said Taniko.

"Are you prepared to use those arts with enthusiasm, in order to live well among us?"

"What is to become of me? You must tell me that."

Bourkina held up her hand. "I don't yet know for sure. I have to make my report. Then it will be decided. Meanwhile, your clothing and possessions will be brought to you. You will bathe. You will array yourself in your finest robes, as for your wedding night. Make yourself as beautiful as you know how to. You have until sunset." Bourkina moved to the doorway of the yurt, her yellow silk robe swirling about her.

"You come from a land so different from our own that I find it hard to see it in my mind. Yet there are qualities in you I like. You are strong. You are quick-witted, and you have lived long enough to acquire some wisdom. I will give you a little advice. Do not try, because you are among Mongols, to appear beautiful in the Mongol manner. Make yourself beautiful according to the custom of your land, no matter how strange you think you might seem to us. You are a woman of experience. You understand men and you have attracted great ones to you. Do not be frightened. Try to be calm and cheerful. Behave as you would in your own home among friends and family."

"Why do you assume that I am calm and cheerful in my own home?" asked Taniko. Bourkina laughed.

"I understand your advice," Taniko said. "You are kind. Thank you." Remembering that Bourkina was one of Jebu's people, Taniko felt a sudden surge of affection for the big woman.

Bourkina smiled at her again. "I am always happy to help a woman who deserves it. Prepare yourself now, little lady."

"I will. Please remember to send paper, ink and brush."

Taniko asked the Chinese maid holding the large mirror to circle her slowly. She held a small mirror in her own hand, and when the maid was behind her, she swept her long black hair to one side and studied the nape of her neck. Pure white, slender, defenceless. As it should look.

Red, she felt, was her most seductive colour, so she had chosen a costume built up of layers of red. Outermost, though, was a richly embroidered over robe of light green. It made her look young and innocent. The innocence would cover passion, a dark red robe. The sleeves of an unlined dress of deep red damask peered from beneath the two outer robes. Beneath these she wore three under robes of different shades of plum red, all visible at her throat, sleeves and skirt.

When she was fully dressed, only her fingertips and her face were visible in the midst of the flowing silks. The two Chinese women who were helping her dress tried to keep blank, impassive expressions, but Taniko caught them darting curious looks at her. Would she be laughed at tonight? She could imagine how the courtiers at Heian Kyo would make fun of a Mongol woman trying, in her native clothing, to make a good impression.

But she knew that she had not beautified herself this much since Kiyosi died. Horigawa might hope for her degradation, ,but she would thwart his hopes. She would not let them crush her. She called on the Lord of Boundless Light.

She had one of the maids tuck a cloth into her neckline to protect her outer robe. She seated herself on cushions and drew her box of make-up to her, asking one of the maids to hold up the mirror. She applied a layer of white paint to her face. Erom this moment her face

must remain frozen. She could neither smile nor weep. She dipped a brush into a jar of red pigment and painted her lips, a bow shape for the upper lip, a narrower red line for the lower; her natural mouth was too wide for perfect beauty. With rouge she filled in a circle of pink on either cheek. Now her face was no longer that of an individual. It was the face of ideal Woman. It might as easily be the face of the sun goddess or the Empress or a peasant girl as that of Taniko.

She glanced up at the two Chinese women. They were not laughing; they were awed, looking at her as if they were seeing a statue in a strange shrine.

Now she opened her jewellery box. Horigawa was a fool to have left me all this, she thought. With these weapons I will conquer. Eor a pendant she selected a jade necklace with an image of the seated Buddha. And of course she would wear the mother-of-pearl butterfly in her hair.

Now she was finished. She looked up at the circular smoke opening in the ceiling of the felt tent. The sky was indigo. The sun must be setting. Bourkina had told her to be ready by sunset.

She seated herself on the cushions and waited. She remembered the writing materials and pointed to the writing box, adorned with a land scape of trees and mountains, set on top of her clothes chest. "If you get ink on your robe-" one of the maids protested. "I never do."

She did not want to write for her pillow book. That could come later, when she knew what was going to happen to her. She would attempt a poem. She began rubbing the ink stick on the stone. One of the maids offered to do it for her, but she waved her away. By the time the ink was made she had her poem. She dipped the brush and wrote:

Eire warms all who come near. Only the light of the Buddha Can warm the fire.

She sat back, wondering what the poem meant. The two maids sat humbly against the wall of the tent to Taniko's right so she would not have to look at them unless she wanted to. They, at least, see me as a great lady, she thought.

But how would she be treated tonight? Was this all some trick? she wondered. The interview with Bourkina, the opportunity to make all these elaborate preparations, was it all preparation for a band of Mongol officers to make sport of her at a drunken feast? No, Bourkina appeared, though a hard woman, to be honest enough. Probably some officer of the khan, some commander of a thousand or ten thousand men, would enjoy her tonight. Or perhaps he would find her dwarfish and freakish and would contemptuously send her away or throw her to the brutes in the ranks.

Now she could really feel how Jebu must have felt, living among people to whom he looked strange.

She must not lie to herself. Even if this Mongol general should find her pleasing, what would she have gained? A man she did not care for would enter her body and use her. Like those first years with Horigawa. Disgusting. And she must feign delight. And this, just so she could eat and sleep and be allowed to live. She still did not want to kill herself, but how much shame was she willing to endure just to stay alive?

And sooner or later this great one of the Mongols would tire of her, just as Horigawa said, and would cast her off. What affection could there be between people of nations so different?

Sooner or later she would begin the slow descent through the ranks

of the Mongols. It could only end one way. Horigawa would have his revenge.

She sat, looking at her fingertips peeping from beneath her sleeves. The maids were silent, she was silent. The bleak thoughts kept pursuing one another through her mind. She brooded back over the course of her life. She had never been permitted to decide on a course of action for herself and by herself. She had always been subject to the whims of one man or another.

She wanted to weep, but held back her tears. She dared not spoil her make-up, or the great Mongol would not want her. She must take her mind off these thoughts.

She knew only one way to distract herself. In her mind she said, "Homage to Amida Buddha," over and over again. She did not want to recite the invocation to the Lord of Boundless Light aloud. She did not want to be the object of the maids' idle curiosity. And besides, she might end up hoarse before Bourkina came for her.

After a time she found it easiest to let the mental recitation fall in with the rhythm of her breathing, and she repeated the invocation each time she breathed out, just as if she were saying it aloud. Whenever she found her mind wandering to her wretchedness, she gently drew it back to the invocation.

She began to see Amida Buddha seated in his paradise. His face was round and golden, like the sun. His expression, bearing the faintest of smiles, was one of infinite peace. Gradually she was able to see all of him, sitting in the clouds, his hands touching together in his lap, surrounded by circling flocks of angels and seated bodhisattvas.

A vast peace filled her. She forgot all her sorrows. She forgot the

passage of time.

The face of Buddha was replaced by the deeply tanned face of Bourkina, peering into hers.

"I'm sorry you have had to wait so long. There is always so much happening here."

Taniko smiled. "It is quite all right."

Bourkina peered at her. "What has happened to you? Have you been using the Arabian drug?"

Still smiling, Taniko shook her head. "Drug? No. I simply have tried to take your advice. I'm not frightened any more."

Bourkina nodded; "I sensed you had possibilities. Good. Well, then, let us go."

In spite of what Taniko said, she did feel a faint twinge of fear as she rose smoothly to her feet. What would happen to her now?

Bourkina looked at her appraisingly. "We have only a short way to go. I hope you won't be too warm with all those robes you have on. You look very lovely, though strange. I've never seen a woman dressed as you are. But that's all to the good."

The two Chinese maids sat like statues as Bourkina and Taniko walked out into the warm night. At first Taniko was unable to see. She hesitated, and the big Mongol woman reached down and took her hand.

When Taniko's eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see the round tents on all sides. The fear was gone again. She had discovered that she carried the paradise of Amida Buddha within

her and could enter it, without having to die, any time she wanted to. No longer could anyone harm her. She could always escape.

They were walking towards the large white pavilion in the centre of the camp where Horigawa had gone the day before. Though it was only a tent, it was as large as the house of a noble in the Sunrise Land. It covered the top of a low hill. Before it stood two standards, one the horns and tails of some great beast, the other a silk banner inscribed with the Chinese word Yuan, "a beginning."

There was a front entrance facing south, the most auspicious direction, protected by six warriors armed with lances. Bourkina went around to the side of the felt-covered tent, where there was another, smaller entrance guarded by only one huge man with a broad, curving sword in his belt. He bowed to Bourkina.

"Now you must know," Bourkina said, suddenly turning to Taniko. "I did not want to give you time to be frightened. You must not be afraid now. You are about to enter the presence of one of the greatest among us. If you please him, your future happiness is assured. Prepare now to meet the grandson of Genghis Khan, the brother of the Great Khan Mangu, the overlord of China, the commander of this army and the favoured of Eternal Heaven, Kublai Khan."

Then Bourkina took Taniko by the hand and led her through the entrance of the tent. Within, all was cloth of gold, and it seemed as if hundreds of hanging lamps were blazing. Taniko was momentarily blinded as she entered the dome-shaped chamber filled with dazzling light.

Chapter Twelve

The clouds that rolled across the night sky reflected red light. Missiles poured over Kweilin's walls, while bands of Mongols and their Kin Tartar and Turk auxiliaries pressed forward with siege towers and ladders. Eour war elephants smashed a stone-filled battering ram against the south gate, arrows glancing off their armour like raindrops off a sedge hat.

Jebu expected the city's defences to crumble at any moment, but he stood on the walls, smiling. There was beauty in war, the fire, the colour, the flow and ebb of human waves, the enormous power of the elephants and siege artillery.

"No wonder this people has conquered half the world," Jebu called to Yukio over the roar of battle.

"You admire them?"

"I simply find it remarkable what human beings can do."

He did not admire the Mongols for their conquests, but he was impressed by their ability to throw all their energies into action, by their discipline and by the carefree way they faced hardship and death. These qualities reminded him of the Zinja. Now that he saw Arghun among his people, no longer a mysterious assassin from an unknown world, he was able to understand him better.

Kweilin had held out much longer than it had any right to. The Mongols had arrived before the city in the Eourth Month of the Year of the Sheep. It was now the Seventh Month, and the city remained unconquered. Rarely, since Genghis Khan first led them out of the steppes, had the Mongols found a city so troublesome.

Rain had helped Kweilin's defenders. The timing of the siege was bad for the attackers. The monsoons began just about the time Arghun arrived to direct the siege. The rain slowed down the Mongol assaults, dampened their explosive powder, put out the fires they started, and provided the people of the city with plenty of fresh water.

Disease helped too. The Mongol camp quickly turned into a steaming swamp. Inured for generations to a chill northern climate, they were an easy prey to the fevers of this almost tropical country. By order of the governor, the human waste of the large population of Kweilin, which in peacetime would have fertilized the rice fields around the city, went into the moat and the Kwei Kiang River. Some of it, as Liu intended, poisoned the Mongol drinking water. Thousands of the nomads were felled by dysentery.

But the rain and the sickness had only slowed the Mongols down. It was the samurai who held them off. Eor the first time since they had emerged from the steppes, the Mongols were encountering warriors as tough, as energetic, as ferocious as themselves. Without help the samurai could not hold out much longer, but they had already wrecked the Mongol schedule for the conquest of the Sung empire.

Daily during those months Jebu looked into the heart of the Jewel of Life and Death. Taitaro, who had given him the Jewel, was somewhere in this land. They would never meet, though, because the city would fall at any moment, and soon after that he would be dead.

He found he could face the prospect with serenity.

But now a strange thing was happening. The noise that had been deafening Jebu for months was slowly dying down. A silence was spreading almost visibly like a blanket of snow. The boulders came hurtling over the walls less often. A single fire pot tore through the air like a shooting star. No more followed it. The hua pao were silent.

At the base of the wall where thousands of prisoners had died filling in the moat with stones and brushwood and human flesh, a detachment of Kin Tartar foot soldiers was rushing forward with a long ladder. A volley of samurai arrows fell among them. The ladder dropped to the ground. In response to a shouted command from across the moat, the surviving Tartars turned and ran back to the Mongol camp.

The sun had started to rise above the Kwei Kiang. In the pale light the elephants' handlers were unchaining the battering ram. It fell with a crash. Now the elephants turned and lumbered over the stone causeway the Mongols' prisoners had built across the junction of the two lakes. Elights of arrows followed them, leaving the armoured elephants unharmed but killing several of the men with them.

In the full light of morning the samurai and the Chinese watched, dumbfounded, as the Mongols broke down their camp and made preparations to withdraw.

"They expect us to throw open the gates as soon as they disappear over the horizon," said Yukio. "Then they'll come roaring back and catch us off guard."

"But they would have had the city today or tomorrow anyway," Jebu said. "And they could hardly take us by surprise if we sent scouts after them."

Governor Liu picked his way over the broken stone covering the top of the wall. "So, what I heard is true. They do seem to be leaving."

Jebu watched the Mongols mount some of their larger yurts on carts, while they stripped the felt covering away from the wooden poles of the smaller ones and packed them away on wagons. The Kin

engineers were untying the ropes and knocking out the pegs that held the siege machines together. Others were digging out the bases of the hua pao.

Yukio remained convinced that the whole withdrawal was a deception. Liu suggested that there might be a Chinese relief army on the way, or perhaps this army had been called away to meet a Chinese counter-attack in one of the other war zones. Jebu thought that only some requirement of their own law could draw the Mongols away from an almost certain victory.

"It can only be something that affects them in the most profound way," he said.

The besiegers had stationed a protective screen of heavy cavalry across Lake Rong hu, not far from the pen where the thousands of prisoners who had survived the siege sat on the bare ground. The prisoners, Jebu thought, were probably rejoicing that they were still alive and might return home soon.

A high voice shouted a command to the riders on guard. They formed a long line and began to trot in a circle around the pen. Another shrill order and they were firing arrows into the prisoners. Jebu shut his eyes momentarily and clenched his fists as the screams and pleas for mercy stabbed his ears. The Chinese soldiers on the wall shouted curses at the enemy and prayers for the dying. They tried to shoot at the Mongols, but their arrows would not carry that far. Eor Jebu, the pain of seeing the killing of so many innocents was like a barbed arrow in his own chest.

Again and again the Mongols circled the slave corral, shooting at any movement.

"They will have their massacre, one way or the other," Yukio said.

Jebu saw that Liu had turned his back on the slaughter and stood with tears trickling down his pale cheeks.

"I do not know which is worse," he whispered, "to see the severed head of my own son, or to see my helpless people slaughtered."

Now the Mongols had dismounted and were walking in a line through the pen. They had their sabres out and were inspecting the bodies, beheading or stabbing to death any who were still alive. Auxiliary troops moved behind them, retrieving arrows from the corpses.

Yukio also turned away. "There is no need for this. No need at all," he said hoarsely. "It is true that the Mongols are less than human."

And if they are, Jebu wondered, what am I? These are also my people. But I was not reared in their ways. I would sooner die than do what they are doing. To kill poor peasants is bad enough, but how can they kill women and children by the hundreds?

Genghis Khan, Arghun's master, had commanded the death of all Jamuga's seed, and Arghun had tried to kill Jebu when Jebu was a baby. That would not seem a task repugnant to a man who could shoot an arrow into a screaming child clinging to its mother's skirts.

Yukio, his face crimson with rage, said, "We have our prisoners, too. Let us show that we can be as merciless as these Mongols." In the months of the siege, the defenders had captured over a hundred Mongols and nearly three hundred auxiliaries.

"No," said Jebu. "I will not shame myself by killing those who cannot fight back."

"The Mongols always kill their prisoners," said Liu. "Perhaps, if we were to let our captured Mongols live, even return them to their people, it would show them there is another way. Our Master

Confucius said, 'Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you.' If we do not kill Mongols today, perhaps they will spare Chinese lives tomorrow."

"We always execute captured fighting men in our land," said Yukio. "To let men live so that they may attack you again is foolish."

"The few hundred Mongols and their auxiliaries that we captured are no great danger to us," said Jebu. "I will personally conduct them to Arghun."

"I'm sorry, Jebu-san," Yukio said, "but you must be completely mad."

"I will go as an envoy. The life of an ambassador is, sacred to them." Liu said, "You put too much temptation before Arghun."

"He has spent years of his life and made long and dangerous jour neys to try to kill me. His very fidelity to his law is my protection."

Yukio stared at Jebu, large-eyed. "I can forbid you to take those men back to Arghun. I can order you to execute them."

Jebu nodded. "Yes, Lord Yukio, you can."

Yukio turned away. "Go ahead. Do whatever foolish thing you like."

When Jebu entered the Mongol camp, he was able to address an officer in the barbarian language, presenting himself as an envoy from Kweilin and requesting a meeting with Arghun Baghadur. His language practise with the prisoners had served him well.

The tarkhan sat astride a barrel-chested grey steppe pony, one gauntleted fist resting on his hip. His eyes were the colour of a cloudy winter day.

"An envoy, are you? You are viler than a diseased dog to mock the laws of my people."

"I mean no mockery, tarkhan," said Jebu, looking back at him calmly. Arghun's reaction did not surprise him. He must hate me as much as I have been hating him, Jebu thought.

"So, you've learned a few more words in the language of your father," said Arghun with an ironic smile. "Perhaps you'd like to become one of us. Unfortunately, if you submitted yourself to our law, you'd die at once." His face darkened. "If you are an ambassador as you claim, approach me properly. Off your horse. Down on your face."

Jebu hesitated. But Arghun was within his rights to demand obeisance from an ambassador. And did not The Zinja Manual say, "Whatsoever role you play, manifest your inner perfection by acting it perfectly." Jebu climbed down from his horse. The muddy ground had been churned into a brown soup by thousands of hooves. He knelt and pressed his hands and forehead into the mud. He waited there.

At last Arghun said irritably, "Get up, that's not what I want from you."

Jebu stood up, wiping the mud from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Will nothing less than my death satisfy you, tarkhan?"

"Nothing less will satisfy the spirit of Genghis Khan. I cannot take your life today, but I will have it one day. Why did you come here?"

"Eirst, to propose, since you seem to be leaving us, a treaty of eternal peace between the Mongols and the City of Kweilin."

"That is an absurdity. We make peace only with those who surrender. What else?"

"Also, to return to you the men we captured. We do not consider it necessary to murder helpless prisoners."

Arghun shrugged. "Then you are fools." Arghun turned to an officer beside him. "Have those men taken away." The officer shouted orders, and guards led away the men brought by Jebu. The returned prisoners walked with pale faces and downcast eyes.

"It may interest you to know that they will be strangled with bowstrings before we leave here," said Arghun, smiling.

Jebu's heart sank. "They don't deserve punishment. They are brave men. They were all wounded or unconscious when we captured them."

"It is not a punishment. We must send a detachment of warriors to the next world to serve the Great Khan. It is an honour to be chosen. These men will be part of the Great Khan's spirit. We have our ways of mourning, monk, which you could not possibly understand."

Amazed, Jebu saw at once what was happening. "Your Great Khan is dead?"

"He is." Arghun's rough-hewn face was bleak. "Eor now, our war with Sung China is ended, by our own choosing. It is our unalterable law that when a Great Khan dies, all of us shall return to the homeland to bury him and to choose his successor. Tell the people of Kweilin to thank Eternal Heaven for granting them this respite. But let them remember that it is only a respite."

He fixed his strangely empty eyes on Jebu. "For you also, son of Jamuga, this is only a respite. Three times now I have tried to carry out the command of Genghis Khan that you die. Each time you have been saved, but never by your own power. A man who must rely on

others or on chance events to protect him is a poor creature.. Destiny will bring you and me together again, and the next time I will surely kill you."

Chapter Thirteen

Jebu and Yukio stood on the broken western parapet of Kweilin and watched the Mongols depart, as they had come, in a dust cloud that obscured the sunset.

"You see?" said Yukio. "You may have saved those prisoners from my anger, but they were fated to die. It was their karma."

Jebu shook his head. "Not karma. Arghun's ruthlessness."

Yukio shrugged, "Karma put him there to end the lives of those men."

"What do you foresee as our karma?" Jebu asked, recognizing that the argument was like a ko situation in go, where players endlessly repeated the same move, taking and losing the same stones again and again.

Yukio laughed. "We have little choice. We'll simply stay here at Kweilin until we get new orders from the Sung Emperor."

"If the Mongols have called off their war with China, perhaps Chia Ssu-tao will decide that he doesn't need us."

Yukio shook his head. "The chief councillor may not be a very wise man, but he must know that the Mongols will be back once they have a new Great Khan."

But judging by the news brought back by Governor Liu's intelligence network, it might be some time before the Mongols returned. Eactions were forming behind two of the late Great Khan's younger brothers, Kublai Khan and Arik Buka. Supporters of Arik Buka declared him a true Mongol, untainted by the Chinese influences that

surrounded Kublai Khan. Arghun Baghadur had thrown his weight behind Arik Buka. The opposing party claimed Kublai Khan was far better fitted to rule the vast empire than Arik Buka, whose name in Mongol meant Little Man because he was the youngest of his family. Kublai's backers frequently quoted the words of Genghis Khan, who said, when his grandson was but eleven years old, "Heed well the words of the boy Kublai. They are full of wisdom."

If the Mongols chose peaceably between Kublai Khan and Arik Buka, China would feel the weight of a new onslaught in a year or so. But if the divisions were deep enough to lead to war among the Mongols, the Central Kingdom might be safe for generations.

Throughout the city which all summer long had heard nothing but the crash of stone and the roaring of fire and the screams of the dying, the most noticeable sound now was the rapping of hammers. Moko joined in the rebuilding, learning the Chinese methods of carpentry, suggesting economical ways of doing things from his own practice and spending hours down by the docks watching the building of new river-going junks.

Less than six hundred samurai had lived through the siege. Day by day, as it became clearer that the Mongols were really gone, Yukio eased them down from a war footing. Even though they heard nothing from Linan, much less received any payment for their services, the warriors were well fed and comfortable. Governor Liu gave Yukio whatever he asked. Weapons were repaired or replaced. The precious swords of the fallen were distributed among the living. With the governor's help Yukio obtained three horses for each of his men.

After the samurai had rested for about a month, Yukio reintroduced discipline and training. Each day bands of mounted warriors rode through the beautiful blue hills around Kweilin, practising Mongol-

style cavalry. tactics. About a hundred of the Chinese soldiers garrisoned at Kweilin who had come to admire the samurai and their way of fighting asked permission to join them. Since idle troops could be a problem, Governor Liu persuaded the soldiers' commander to release them to Yukio. Yukio put Jebu to work bringing the new recruits up to samurai standards of fighting skill.

"You're the best trained among us, Jebu-san, and you're always practising."

"That's because I don't spend as much time in the Quarter of Ten Thousand Delights as you do."

"I said you were well trained, Jebu-san. That doesn't mean you're as much of a man as I am. Though more than once my arrival in the

Quarter has been greeted with mournful looks because I haven't brought the red-haired giant with me."

Jebu mulled over his education as a Zinja and his current practises and put together a basic course of exercises that combined physical and mental discipline. He chose the most competent samurai to help him conduct the training. The recruits took up the work eagerly, and after they had studied some days under Jebu, more Chinese soldiers were asking to join the group. After a month some of the samurai themselves were coming to Jebu to ask whether they could take the training as well, "to brush up their skills."

"Clearly you are a great master," Yukio said. "Everyone is clamouring to study under you."

"Clearly I must be doing something wrong," said Jebu. "If I were teaching as I should, I would be driving them away."

Two months after the Mongols left, Jebu and Yukio heard that a

Chinese army of five thousand was marching towards Kweilin. Their general sent word ahead that he had been dispatched there by the Emperor, to restore order in the regions invaded by the barbarians. Governor Liu had gone forth to greet them.

Jebu was in the great hall of the compound where the samurai were quartered, presenting the Chinese recruits who had survived his training programme with swords, when a samurai entered and called Jebu.

"Eorgive my interrupting you, shike, but Lord Yukio requests that within this stick of time, you have your men ready in full parade armour to honour the Chinese general."

Acknowledging the disruption as a problem set for him by the Self, Jebu finished the sword presentation ceremony quickly and set the recruits to polishing and donning their armour. He had hardly finished giving this order when Yukio sent for him.

Yukio was in a small room on the second floor of the samurai hall, which he used as a headquarters. A White Dragon banner hung on the wall behind him. Yukio sat cross-legged on a flat cushion, his face flushed with anger. A tall, grave-looking mandarin knelt before him.

"What would you say of a chief minister who repaid all the fighting we did for him by ordering us arrested and brought to him in chains?"

Jebu's chest contracted. "I'd say he was a fool. But a fool such as many rulers have been."

"If such behaviour is customary for rulers, then fighting men are the fools, to give their lives for them. We are betrayed, Jebu."

The mandarin had come with a message from Liu. The general said he had orders from the Emperor to disarm and arrest the samurai and bring them back to Linan in chains. Chia Ssu-tao had accused Yukio of coming to China to overthrow the Son of Heaven and make himself

Emperor of China. He accused the samurai of ending the siege of Kweilin by making a secret pact with the Mongols.

"Such charges are incredible," said Jebu. "Why do they really want to destroy us?"

The mandarin shrugged. "Someone has convinced the Emperor's chief councillor that you are a danger."

"We may have been fools to fight for the Sung Emperor, but we would be greater fools to surrender," said Jebu. "We'll have to fight our way out. Do we try to escape overland, or should we take some junks and sail down the river to Canton?"

"No," said Yukio. "This gentleman tells me that Governor Liu intends to help. If the governor's plan works, we'll leave Kweilin without losing a single man."

Jebu stood beside Yukio as six men pushed open the iron and wood outer doors of the double gateway. Solemn faces peered in at him. The people of Kweilin had cleared away the causeway built by the Mongols and had constructed a new wooden bridge at the juncture of the two lakes, calling it once again the Green Belt Bridge. There was a line of people along each rail of the bridge, leaving a broad aisle through which the samurai could ride. At the far end Jebu could see Governor Liu in his vermilion robes of state.

Beyond Liu, on the far shore of the lakes, were thousands and

thousands of people crowding the land where the Mongols had been camped two months ago. Past the people, Jebu could see the long, gleaming spears of soldiers. The Chinese army.

"Are we sure this isn't a trap?" said Yukio beside him.

"Nothing is certain," said Jebu. "But I trust Liu. And I trust our horses, our swords and our bows."

The sun, low in the south-west, sparkled on the silver dragon on Yukio's helmet. He and Jebu mounted their horses. Behind them, the samurai followed suit. Yukio raised his arm.

"Forward."

Holding their mounts to a walk, Jebu on Yukio's left, they stepped out on to the bridge. Jebu wore his black-laced armour with his sword at his side and his bow in a saddle case, the long pole of a naginata held in his right hand and resting on his shoulder, the reins in his left.

The bridge shook as the horses of the samurai stepped on it. As they crossed, the people on either side were speaking softly to them.

"Goodbye. Thank you."

"The gods be kind to you."

At the far end of the bridge, Liu held up his arms to them. "If my son were alive, he would be marching with you today."

Yukio held out his hand in appeal. "Why have the rulers of China turned against us?"

"Perhaps someone has poisoned Chia Ssu-tao's mind against you," said Liu. "But perhaps it is simply that the Court is afraid of you. At

first it was thought you were ignorant barbarians. Now it is known that you are formidable fighters. Victorious generals have always been a menace to the throne. This Sung dynasty was founded by a successful general who overthrew his Emperor. Many times before and since, generals who fought too well have been imprisoned and executed."

"I am ashamed to accept the protection of unarmed civilians," Yukio said. "And you, Honourable Governor, are risking your career and your life for us."

Liu pointed over the heads of the crowd. "There are five thousand soldiers there, sent to arrest you. You could fight them, of course, and you would kill many of them. But what a waste of lives on both sides."

"We are grateful to you," said Yukio.

Liu beckoned to Jebu. "A word with you." Jebu dismounted from his horse and followed Liu a little way along the shore of Lake Rong hu.

"Head north and west, towards Szechwan and Tibet," Liu said softly. "The Order has temples in that direction. You will be contacted."

"Thank you," said Jebu. He looked into Liu's eyes and saw a warmth like a distant fire on a cold night. That sense of remoteness, he realized, was the remoteness of the Self, communicating with him from deep within Liu.

They returned to Yukio. "You will have to live off the land," said Liu. "Which means you will take what you need from the peasants. In your baggage train you will find a cart carrying as much gold as I could spare from the city's treasury. Pay the peasants as much as you can. They suffer abominably when any army passes through." He reached into his sleeve and took out a scroll. "Here is a map of some of the

lands through which you will pass." He reached up and took each man's hand. "I doubt that I will ever see you again, but you are sons to me. You saved the thousands of lives that were in my keeping."

"The fortunate death of the Great Khan of the Mongols saved them," said Jebu.

Liu shook his head. "Only because you held out so long did the death of the Great Khan make any difference. You fought like-" he smiled up at Jebu-"like devils."

Liu turned and gestured to the people around him. A hundred red-robed officials of the city grouped themselves in front of the samurai leaders. Liu nodded, and the procession of samurai and their unarmed protectors started off.

The Chinese troops were massed west of the city. Between them and the samurai stood almost the entire population of Kweilin. Led by Yukio and Jebu, like a river flowing between steep banks, the mounted samurai moved slowly along a road that led north-west, the direction Liu had suggested.

In the distance, people were parting to let through a single chariot drawn by two horses. They pressed close around it, and then closed ranks behind it. In the chariot stood a stout man wearing a flowing scarlet cloak. His cuirass was shaped to cover and protect a huge pot belly, and it was plated with gold and decorated with a peacock design worked out in precious stones.

"The general who's come to take us back to Linan in chains," said Yukio.

The general drew up his chariot before Liu. The procession of samurai and their protectors stopped.

The general smiled. "A most impressive demonstration of public feeling. I imagine you, esteemed Governor Liu, arranged it?"

Liu shook his head. "I am but one of the thousands who wish to be here. Eor over three months these men defended us with their lives. Now we protect them with our bodies."

"Such heroism," said the general. He smiled at Yukio. "Are you their commander?"

Yukio bowed. "I am."

"As one military man to another, I'm sure this is all a mistake. Come with us now, and the governor and some of the distinguished citizens of Kweilin can travel with you and testify to your worthy deeds. Doubtless the charges against you will be dropped."

Yukio smiled back. "We agree to come, as long as we are not disarmed and do not have to wear chains."

The general looked sorrowful. "I wish I could allow that, but I am forbidden to do so. Your arms will be kept safe and will be returned to you as soon as this unpleasantness is settled. And the chains will only be token chains-children's toys, nothing more."

Yukio bowed. "I'm sorry, but we must decline your offer."

The general turned to Liu, his face darkening. "If you continue to protect these men, you will certainly lose your post and probably your head as well."

Liu shrugged. "I am disgusted with my government. I am resolved to give up my post. And I may very well end my own life as a protest against this vile treatment of faithful warriors."

"Good for you," said Yukio.

"You must not," Jebu said at almost the same moment. They looked at each other.

"I can command my troops to cut their way through your people," the general blustered. "Will you let them be destroyed just to protect these ridiculous dwarfs?"

Yukio reddened, and Jebu put a restraining hand on his arm.

Liu said, "I do not know where you and your army were when we desperately needed reinforcements here. Doubtless you have never seen a Mongol. If you cut your way through my people to attack these brave men, a Chinese general will have done what the Mongols could not do. You will have massacred the Chinese people of Kweilin. You will dishonour your ancestors and shame your descendants."

Yukio said, "We dwarfs, as you call us, will fight to the death, and we will take five of your troops with us for each one of us you kill."

"And I will make it my business to see that you yourself do not survive, esteemed general," Jebu added.

The general looked at Jebu, Yukio and Liu for a long, silent moment. His pudgy face was set in a stern military mask, but Jebu could see indecision in his eyes.

He got down from his chariot and approached Liu, saying in a low voice, "It could be reported to the Emperor that the dwarfs got word of our coming and fled before we arrived."

"The saviours of Kweilin are not to be called dwarfs."

"Of course. I do not want to fight these warriors. I do not want to kill your people. But I cannot simply let the foreigners go. Chia Ssutao would have my head."

"What tale you tell back in Linan doesn't concern me," said Liu.

"But you must swear to support my story, otherwise I might as well cut my throat here and now." The general thought a moment. "Yes, and you must agree to come to Linan with me, otherwise I will not be able to trust you."

"No," Jebu said before Liu could agree. "It is too great a sacrifice. This actor in general's clothing will take you to Linan to blame you for letting us escape. Chia Ssu-tao will have you executed. Remember, you stopped me from giving up my life for your people."

Liu shook his head. "If you escape, this general is in as much danger from Chia Ssu-tao as I am. Whether it is my lot to live or die, I am content."

"If you are not afraid of death, no one has power over you," said Yukio.

"If you understand that, you understand everything," Jebu said to Yukio, and Liu nodded.

Again Yukio gave the order to march, and the samurai and the people of Kweilin moved off together, leaving Governor Liu standing i beside the general from Linan. Jebu turned n his saddle and made a gesture that was part wave, part a reaching back. He felt he was leaving a father behind, never to see him again, and sorrow filled him.

Chapter Fourteen

Laughing, Taniko kicked her pony into a gallop and quickly left Seremeter behind. Ahead there was a creek still swollen with melted snow. Spring came late to this northern country. Taniko raced her horse through the water, splashing her riding skirt. Behind her, Seremeter dashed through the creek, wincing at the spray.

"How dare a mere consort try to outrun the wife of the khan?" Seremeter had ivory-white skin and fathomless brown eyes. She had bound her long black hair up under a jewelled cap.

"The wife of the khan encourages familiarity by her own undignified behaviour," said Taniko sweetly.

Erom the hills through which the creek ran, they could look back at Kublai Khan's city of Shangtu, newly built on a fertile plain beside a slate-grey river. Shangtu had been erected on territory that had always belonged to the nomadic tribes, about two days' ride north of the Great Wall of China. The city's raw wooden palaces were little more than warehouses built to contain the loot gathered from below the Great Wall. Around the permanent buildings clustered the round tents of Kublai Khan's army. Kublai's command was called the Left Wing and included one-third of all the Mongols under arms.

Taniko and Seremeter heard the hoofbeats of other horses and turned to see Hotai, a Mongol woman of the Chestnut Horse tribe. She was followed by a servant carrying a wicker cage in which the dark, hunched shaped of a hooded falcon brooded.

"It's a shame to waste our good Mongol horses on foreign women," Hotai sniffed. "You treat them like toys. You know nothing about real riding. I cannot imagine what charm the khan finds in women like

you."

Taniko stared at Hotai. She was not joking, as Taniko and Seremeter had been. Kublai Khan's Mongol wives and consorts deeply resented his interest in women of other lands.

"Perhaps the khan likes us because you Mongol women, being such marvellous riders, are all bowlegged," Seremeter said.

Hotai's broad cheeks flushed a dull red. "You have a sharp tongue, but my dagger is also sharp. Take care." She and her servant rode away.

"Your answer to her was splendid," Taniko said. "I wouldn't know how to talk like that to anyone."

"In my country that would be considered a passing pleasantry," said Seremeter. "When the people of Persia really insult each other, the earth shakes."

"In my land men are polite even when they are about to kill each other. Especially then."

It was amazing, Taniko thought, the freedoms people of other countries allowed themselves. One of the delights of living among the Mongols was the liberty she enjoyed. She did not have to stay cooped up in her house, hiding behind a screen whenever a man appeared. The Mongol women came and went as they pleased in Shangtu; indeed, throughout the Mongol empire women went about without fear. So rigorously did the Mongols enforce their laws that it was said a virgin with a sack of gold could ride from Korea to Russia without being molested. Warriors might rape and loot in newly invaded territories, but where the Mongol peace was established, it was absolute.

Taniko made full use of her freedom. There was so much to be seen. The Persian princess, Seremeter, ten years younger than she and eager for good company, followed Taniko eagerly as she explored the city Kublai Khan was building as headquarters and resort on the edge of the steppes.

Seremeter had been sent to Kublai by his brother Hulagu, campaigning far away to the south-west in the lands of peoples called Persians, Turks and Arabians. She traced her lineage back to Cyrus the Great, founder of her country, but her family was Zoroastrian, she explained, not Moslem. These were two religions, Taniko gathered, but in the West religions did not blend with one another as Buddhism and Shinto did in the Sacred Islands. The Moslems ruled Persia, and families like Seremeter's, who belonged to a rival religion, had been stripped of their position. Seremeter's family welcomed the Mongols as deliverers and gladly married their daughters to the family of the Great Khans. Seremeter had lived with the Mongols for three years now and spoke passable Chinese.

"Look." Seremeter pointed to a procession of mounted warriors winding slowly towards the palace, through the rows of tents. Crowds gathered along the way to cheer them.

"That must be Bayan of the Hundred Eyes," Taniko said. "I heard that he arrived this morning from Shensi. He and Uriangkatai, the son of the great general Subotai Baghadur, are the best generals in Kublai's service. But Bayan is much younger than Uriangkatai, and-"

"How do you know so much?" Seremeter interrupted her.

"I ask a lot of questions, princess."

They turned their horses and started riding back towards Shangtu. "Perhaps that's why Kublai sends for you so often," Seremeter said.

"Most of his women don't understand what he does. He can talk to you about it."

"Oh yes," said Taniko. "That must be it. I can't imagine why else he would want to spend time with a withered hag like me."

Seremeter waved Taniko's mock modesty away. "In my country we have a story about a sultan who used to behead his wives after spending one night with them. One wife kept herself alive by telling him stories that were so good, he couldn't bear to kill her. You are somewhat like that. Kublai doesn't behead his women, but he does forget them. Of course, it is important to be beautiful, too, and you are. But Kublai has his pick of all the beautiful women in the world. Yet you are among the women he sees most often."

They were closer to the city now, and Taniko noticed a woman coming towards them, riding out on the road they had taken. "He hasn't sent for anyone in days and days," Taniko said.

Seremeter nodded. "The kuriltai."

"Most of the officers and nobles seem to think a kuriltai is a fine time for sport with women," said Taniko.

"Some men, at times like this, are overwhelmed with excitement and must lie with a woman before they can sleep," said Seremeter. "If they can sleep at all. Other men put all their powers into thinking and acting. They have no interest in women at such times. Kublai is that kind of man. Once the succession is settled, he'll wear us all out with his demands."

Bourkina, lightly dressed in bright blue coat and trousers, galloped up to them. "Ladies, there is to be a great gathering today, starting at the Hour of the Rooster. Everyone will be there, including the wives

and consorts of Kublai Khan. You will want to return to our quarters and begin dressing now, if you are to be ready on time."

"What has he decided, Bourkina?"

The round-faced woman shrugged. "I don't know. He whispers his secrets to you ladies under the quilts, if he tells them to anyone at all."

"He will have himself proclaimed Great Khan tonight," said Seremeter. "I'm sure of it."

"I'm not," said Taniko. "If he makes himself Great Khan, he may wreck the empire of the Mongols. If he doesn't, whoever becomes Great Khan may destroy him. If I were he, I could never decide what to do."

"His enemies are many and powerful," said Seremeter. "What will happen to us if there is a war and he is defeated?"

"You know what will happen," said Taniko, thinking that if such were the case, Horigawa would have his vengeance on her after all.

"It's better not to talk about it, ladies," said Bourkina briskly. "Let's ride back to the city."

Taniko and Seremeter sat on silk cushions in a gallery overlooking the great hall Kublai Khan had built for the kuriltai. The hall smelled of newly cut wood and fresh paint. There were hundreds of Kublai's women in the gallery, including the great lady herself, the principal wife, Jamui Khatun, a serene women who looked a good deal like Bourkina.

Hotai and several other young Mongol women sat near Taniko and Seremeter. Hotai sighed loudly. "These are strange times indeed,

when we must share our places with a cannibal and fire worshipper."

Taniko, who as a good Buddhist had never eaten meat, could not understand how the story had started that her people were cannibals. She wondered what Seremeter's reply to Hotai would be. To disparage Hotai's Mongol background would hardly be politic, especially at a

"You know as much about the customs of our lands as a lump of camel dung knows about the sea," said Seremeter, tossing her head.

Poetry, thought Taniko, sheer poetry. I wish I could teach Seremeter to write tanka. But first she'd have to learn our language.

She turned her attention to the main floor of the hall. In a space as vast as a public square, men from three-quarters of the world were gathered-Kin, Cathayans, Tibetans, Manchus, Koreans, Annamese, Kampuchans, Burmese, Nan Chaoans, Turks, Persians, Arabs, Alans, Kipchaks, Armenians, Bulgars, Russians-, and men of many other nations whose names Taniko had not yet learned. Lording it over all were those of the many northern nomad tribes who now called themselves Mongols-dark Kiraits, broad-shouldered Merkits, talkative Uighurs, tall Kankalis, silent, secretive Reindeer People. The most splendid, in furs, silks and jewels looted from half the kingdoms of the earth, were those whose grandfathers had been Yakka Mongols, the tribe of Genghis Khan himself.

On a raised dais under a cloth of gold canopy was the place, still empty at this hour, where Kublai Khan and his chief advisers would sit. They were meeting elsewhere, Taniko knew, deciding what this gathering of leaders of the Mongol empire should proclaim as its collective decision.

Besides those who had a vote in the kuriltai, there were many who came simply to be present and to observe. There were lamas in red; black-robed monks from the lands of the Eranks, the white-skinned people to the west; men with turbans and long white beards from the Moslem countries where Seremeter's people lived. There was even a sohei from the lands of the Eranks-a warrior-monk with yellow hair who wore a white cross-shaped crest on one shoulder of his black cloak. He reminded her a little bit of Jebu.

The kuriltai was the knot that held together the Mongol empire. At the kuriltai all members of the house of Genghis Khan, all Mongol nobles and generals, all the princes of the kingdoms that had submitted to the Mongols came together in council to vote on great decisions. At a kuriltai, Genghis Khan had proclaimed one government for the warring tribes of Mongolia with himself as its head. At kuriltais his successors, Ogodai, Kuyuk and Mangu had each in turn been elected Great Khan. At a kuriltai the Great Khan Mangu had reopened the war against China that had ended in his untimely death.

Now Kublai Khan, Mangu's younger brother, had called a kuriltai to choose the next Great Khan. Whoever was elected would lay claim to all the lands from Korea in the east to Russia in the west, from Siberia in the north to Burma and Annam in the south. He would rule not only the largest empire in the world, but the largest empire mankind had ever known.

There was a blast of horns and a rumble of drums. Hangings parted, and Kublai Khan, surrounded by noyans, orkhons, and tarkhans, entered the hall. The assembled chieftains, most of whom had been seated on the carpeted floor eating, drinking and talking, rose to their feet.

When Kublai opened his mouth to speak, a total silence fell. "Ten

months have passed since my brother, the Great Khan that was, died of his illness at Hochwan." His voice, deep and powerful, carried to the furthest parts of the hall. "Thirty days ago the summons went out to this kuriltai. Four days we have been meeting here. There has been time for all to come to this kuriltai. The Ancestor said, 'All they who do not come to a kuriltai shall be as arrows shot into reeds. They shall disappear.' So let it be with all those who have not come to this kuriltai."

Though Taniko had by now spent many hours with Kublai Khan, the sight and sound of him appearing before this group of powerful men was breathtaking. He wore robes heavy with gold embroidery, and his shoulders were draped with collars of gold and jade and precious stones; on his head was the jewelled headdress of a Chinese Emperor, making him look even taller than he was. But he would have dominated this gathering physically even without such a display of magnificence. He was a huge man, towering over the Mongol commanders who stood at his side. He was heavy as well, with the build of a wrestler. His broad face was swarthy, his eyes so black they seemed to draw light from the room-light radiated again by his glittering robes.

"I demand the right to speak."

All heads turned to look for the source of this new voice. Taniko saw a man pushing his way forward, striding from the centre of the hall towards Kublai's dais.

"I am of the Yakka Mongols, 0 Khan, and I have served the Golden Family all my life." The descendants of Genghis Khan were known as the Golden Family.

An orkhon beside Kublai called, "Be silent now, Torluk, if you want to be able to speak tomorrow."

"This is no true kuriltai if we cannot make our voices heard," the grey-haired Mongol answered back. Taniko heard a murmur of agreement from other Mongols in the crowd.

Kublai Khan raised a large hand. "The tuman-bashi Torluk is quite right. All men may speak freely at the kuriltai. Torluk's years of service are three times my own, and his words deserve our respect."

Torluk walked up to the dais with the rolling gait of a Mongol horseman and turned so that all in the room could hear and see him.

"I urge the Khan to call an end to this kuriltai at once. This meeting has no right to choose the next Great Khan."

Now there was a shocked murmur. Taniko could see those who did not understand Chinese asking others near them what the tuman-bashi Torluk had said. The orkhon beside Kublai who had spoken before cried, "Treason!"

Taniko felt a chill of fear. Torluk clearly spoke with the voice of those who were in league against Kublai. Everyone in the hall was watching the khan now, waiting to see how he would meet this challenge.

Chapter Fifteen

Taniko had come to know Kublai well, but she had never before seen him presiding as a khan among his chieftains. Always when they met he had been alone, or at most with a few other people, in his chambers.

She had been utterly terrified the first time she had met him. He seemed, at first sight, a monstrous man. Since she expected that he would want to lie with her, she thanked the Buddha that she had known Jebu as a lover; at least she knew it was possible to couple with a man so tall and heavy and not be hurt.

"Sit here beside me," he had said in a rumbling voice, patting a cushion with a large hand. "Will you have wine?"

"Thank you, my lord," she murmured. Wine might make this easier. He picked up a beautiful silver drinking vessel from a low table before him and poured dark yellow wine into an alabaster cup. She took the cup and then held it out to him with her right hand, the left hand underneath to steady it; this was the proper way for a lady to offer wine to a man of rank.

"You must let me serve you, my lord. It is the custom in my country." He took the cup from her, smiling, and drank. She poured a second cup for herself.

His eyes were very narrow and very black-splinters of ebony. The bones of his face were heavy, like the bones of a horse. It was a strong face, but the alertness of the eyes, the mobility of the mouth, suggested an acute intelligence.

"Your country, the Land of the Dwarfs. You may have heard that I-

what is your name?"

"Taniko, my lord. I am the daughter of Lord Shima Bokuden of Kamakura."

"You may have heard that I am a very inquisitive man, Taniko. I know nothing about the Land of the Dwarfs, and I would like to know everything."

There could only be one reason why he would ask questions about the Sunrise Land. If she told him anything, she might betray her people. But she dismissed the fear. To get through this night she would have to laugh at everything and be serious about nothing, not even about herself, not even about the Sacred Islands.

"Perhaps, my lord, I can begin by correcting some of the fantastic tales you may have heard. Eirst of all, we are not dwarfs. You and the Chinese are giants. And we do not worship gods with heads of ani mals. Nor does our Emperor live in a palace made of solid gold. Nor are we cannibals."

"Not cannibals?" Kublai's eyebrows went up. "What a pity. I had a fine, fat Chinese sage especially roasted for you. Now I will have to feed him to my hunting dogs. My people are also the subject of many false reports. The stories say we also eat human flesh. They do not say we worship gods with the heads of animals, they say we ourselves have animal heads. We are supposedly not even human, but devils spawned to scourge mankind for its sins. But tell me what is true about your country. What sort of palace does your Emperor really live in?"

The questions went on long into the night. Uneasy about Kublai's purpose, she stressed that hers was a poor land compared to China. The Emperor's palace in Heian Kyo would look small and bare

beside the house of any rich man in Linan. Always Kublai pressed her for details of law, of custom, of daily life, details that most people would consider too obvious or trivial to notice. Three times during the evening he struck a small gong with a hammer, and the wine was replenished by a Mongol guard armed with a huge scimitar. Kublai showed her a silver table at the entrance to the tent laden with fruit and meat and pitchers of milk.

"Eat what you want," he said. "No one goes hungry in the khan's tent." She helped herself daintily, never forgetting that this giant had the power of life and death over her. His manner might be gentle and pleasant, but his questions assaulted her mind with the relentlessness of a Mongol army storming a city.

But, she reminded herself, knowledge is the one thing I can still possess, even after another has taken it from me. And I am discovering that I know things about my own land that I never thought were important or did not even realize I knew. Her country reshaped itself in her mind under his questioning. She saw its people and events through the eyes of a master of strategy.

After she explained the complexities of the feud between the Takashi and Muratomo, he commented, "How like my own people yours are. Both peoples live on the edge of China. Both learn from China, both are poor compared to China. Both peoples breed fierce fighters, so fierce that we weaken our nations by fighting among ourselves. With us, the feuding was stopped by the Ancestor, my grandfather Genghis Khan. Perhaps this orkhon Sogamori will do the same for your people."

He stood up, towering over her. Hastily she rose to her feet. He patted her shoulder with a large, brown hand.

"I have had much wine, and I have worked long and hard today. I will

sleep now. One of my guards will escort you back to your yurt."

Taniko was startled. No rape of the body to follow the rape of the mind? Perhaps he thought her unattractive.

He seemed to notice her surprise. "That's another tale they tell about us, that we take women brutally, without ceremony. It's not true. Please believe that I find you most attractive. You are an exquisite little creature."

"Thank you, my lord," she said, bowing with apparent shyness and seething inwardly at "little creature."

"If you were to lie with me tonight, you would do so as my prisoner. I know that you are not a courtesan, despite what Prince Horigawa told me when he presented you to me. Bourkina told me your version of the story. It amuses me greatly that giving you to us was the most horrible fate your husband could imagine for you. Tonight, talking to you, I became convinced that you are a lady of rank, as you say. I find you a beautiful and singularly interesting woman. I intend to give you time to become accustomed to me. Go now."

She had seen him about once a month after that. Since there were over four hundred women in his household, and new women were constantly being sent to him, for him to send for her that often was a mark of high favour. He continued to question her about her homeland, but gradually the range of their topics broadened. She had begun to counter with questions of her own. Kublai's answers revealed to her the landscape of a world staggeringly larger than she had ever imagined existed. And much of that world, she learned, was ruled by the family of Genghis Khan.

The Ancestor, Kublai told her, had had four sons by his principal wife. These were his heirs. Each son had been given a separate

domain within the empire. Genghis Khan had indicated that he wanted Ogodai, the third son, to reign after him as Great Khan. After the death of Genghis Khan, Ogodai had been elected Great Khan at a kuriltai. The orkhons, tarkhans, noyans and baghadurs swore that the Great Khan would always be a member of the house-of Ogodai. Ogodai commanded the Banners to ride westwards, where they completed the conquest of Russia begun by Genghis Khan and overran lands beyond called Poland and Hungary. The campaign ended when Ogodai died.

Kublai's own father was Genghis Khan's youngest son, Tuli. He was a brilliant, daring and merciless warrior who had inherited something of his father's strategic genius. He was known as the Master of War. The portion of the empire given him to govern was the Mongol homeland, and with it the title Keeper of the Hearth. Tuli died nine years before Ogodai.

Eor five years after Ogodai's death, his widow ruled as Regent. She was a proud and foolish woman, and she made many enemies. She was rude and overbearing to members of the Golden Eamily and veteran commanders. She demanded excessive gifts from vassals and allies, showed favouritism to the Nestorian Christian religion, and threatened to impose it on the whole empire.

Einally a kuriltai elected Ogodai's son, Kuyuk, Great Khan. He was sickly and a heavy drinker. He died after reigning a little over two years.

Kuyuk's widow was rumoured to be a witch. Together with Ogodai's widow she ruled the empire for two years. Then they put forward Ogodai's grandson as their candidate for Great Khan.

The two widows of the house of Ogodai never suspected that yet another great lady would bring about their downfall-the widow of Tuli,

Kublai's mother, Princess Sarkuktani. She was as wise and discreet as the women of Ogodai's house were headstrong and arrogant. Like Genghis Khan himself, Tuli had four able sons. Princess Sarkuktani saw to it that the four young men were trained in the Chinese classics of statesmanship and philosophy as well as in the Mongol arts of warfare. She quietly made alliances with the leading men of the empire.

When the kuriltai to elect Kuyuk's successor was finally convened, the Mongol leaders ignored their promise that the house of Ogodai would always rule them. Instead they elected Mangu, the eldest son of Tuli.

A year after his election Mangu discovered a plot against his life led by the widows of Ogodai and Kuyuk. The Mongol law forbade shedding the blood of any person of high rank. So the bodily orifices of the two women were sewn shut to prevent the escape of evil spirits, and they were tied up in leather bags and thrown into a river. Mangu commanded the execution of hundreds of other members of the house of Ogodai and their supporters.

Mangu then set out to extend the Mongol empire further. He sent his second brother, Hulagu, westwards to invade the Moslem lands of the Middle East.

Kublai invaded China on Mangu's order, and then Mangu decided to go to war himself. Under Kublai Khan, the Great Khan Mangu, and Arghun Baghadur, three armies invaded southern China.

A chill went through Taniko when she heard the name Arghun Baghadur on Kublai's lips. At once she remembered the giant red-haired warrior who had come to Daidoji looking for Jebu. Could this be the same one, or were there other Mongols of that name?

Mangu left his youngest brother, Arik Buka, behind at Karakorum, the Black Walls, the Mongol capital built by Genghis Khan. Just as Tull, the youngest son of Genghis Khan, had been Keeper of the Hearth, so now Arik Buka, Tuli's youngest son, was given that title. He was ruler of the homeland and commander of the army of the Centre.

The Sung empire was a more populous land than any the Mongols had ever invaded, and its cities were bigger and better fortified. Kublai frankly admitted to Taniko that the invaders had bogged down. Arghun was besieging Kweilin in Kwangsi province, Mangu's army was before Hochwan in Szechwan, and Kublai was here in Hupeh, trying to take Wuchow. The war had been going on for two years.

"By the way, a number of your countrymen are making the war more difficult for us," said Kublai with a smile. "Arghun reports that a contingent of warriors from the Land of the Dwarfs is in command of the defence of Kweilin. They fight like devils, almost as well as Mongols. They have considerably delayed Arghun's capture of the city."

Taniko carefully kept her face expressionless, though her heart was pounding like a taiko drum. What strange karma brought Jebu and his enemy together at a remote city in China?

"I did not know there were any warriors from my country in China," she said.

Kublai's broad face creased in a smile. "Didn't you? Prince Horigawa knew about them. They are members and supporters of that warrior family you told me about, the one on the losing side."

"The Muratomo?"

"Yes. They won't delay Arghun much longer. Through Prince Horigawa we have made an arrangement with a Chinese statesman that will lead to their being overrun shortly." He was watching her closely, searching for a reaction.

Taniko smiled. "My lord, my country may seem small to you, but it is full of people I don't know, whose karma is of no interest to me. My family is related to the Takashi, and I have always been close to them, rather than to the Muratomo."

Later, in her yurt, she wept for herself and Jebu, who must be with the samurai at Kweilin if he were alive at all. She remembered Horigawa's saying the samurai would be sacrificed by the Sung Emperor's chief councillor as part of a secret peace offer. They would be destroyed. at Kweilin, and the Chinese, whom they had come to help, would not lift a finger to save them.

Her heart was a pit of ashes. It would be with Jebu as it had been with Kiyosi. One day, almost casually, someone would tell her that he was dead.

A few days after that conversation with Kubali came stunning news of another death. On the eleventh day of the Seventh Month of the Year of the Sheep, the Great Khan Mangu, Kublai's elder brother, had died of dysentry at Hochwan. Bourkina told her to prepare for a long journey.

"It will take us at least a month to get to Shangtu."

"Who besides us is going there?"

"All of the khan's household that is not there already. His advisers and ministers. And the entire left wing of our army."

"What will we do there?"

"We will wait and watch what the other great ones of the empire do- the khan's brothers, the survivors of the house of Ogodai, the members of the other families descended from Genghis Khan, the noyans, the orkhons, the tarkhans.

"What about the siege of Wuchow?"

"That's over. It's of no importance now."

"What about Kweilin? Has Kweilin fallen?"

Bourkina smiled. "Ah, that's where the men from your country are, isn't it? It will take awhile for a messenger from the tarkhan Arghun to reach us, but at last report Kweilin still held out. There is no more war with China, lady. We have a more important question to settle now, one that will decide the future of Mongolia and China and the whole world. To say nothing of your future and my future. Who is to be the next Great Khan?"

Chapter Sixteen

Now Taniko sat in the gallery of the great hall at Shangtu with the wives and consorts of Kublai Khan, watching as he met an open challenge from those opposing his election.

Kublai seated himself on an ivory chair that had once belonged to the Kin Emperor who reigned in Yenking. His manner was casual, rather than ceremonious, as if he were making himself comfortable in his yurt with a few close friends.

In the same easy manner he said, "You mystify me, Torluk. It has been ten months since my elder brother was taken from us by the will of Eternal Heaven. With great tasks to perform, we stand like tethered horses. How long would you have us wait?"

Torluk, a commander of ten thousand troops, had a voice that carried through the hall. "This is the first time a kuriltai has not been held in our homeland, by the waters of the Kerulan," he said. "All members of the Golden Eamily have been present. Why does this kuriltai meet in a pleasure city in a conquered land? And why are there so few of the blood kin of Genghis Khan here? Where is Birkai, khan of the Golden Horde of Russia? Where is Kiadu, Ogodai's grandson? Where is your brother Hulagu? Where is Arghun Baghadur, the great genera] of the south-west China campaign? Why are you counselled only by your own officers of the Left Wing, Bayan and Uriangkatai, and by foreigners-Chinese, Turks, Tibetan lamas? Can these men of small account rightfully elect a Great Khan? Will the Mongol nation accept their choice? Above all, where is your brother Arik Buka? It is out Mongol custom that the youngest son inherits. Arik Buka is the youngest son of Tuli, ruler of the homeland, Keeper of the Hearth. Let him call a proper kuriltai in the homeland, 0 Khan, and you will be keeping faith with the Ancestor."

One of Kublai's generals shouted, "The voice is yours, Torluk, but the words are those of the khan's enemies."

"Peace," said Kublai. "Many will attack what we do here for the reasons Torluk gives. It is good that we have this chance to answer."

Kublai stood up. Most of the Mongols were big men, but he was one of the biggest among them. Taniko had heard that his grandfather, Genghis Khan, was also very tall.

"As to the place of the kuriltai. We are north of the Great Wall here. This country has always been part of the homeland. We were fighting in the south when the news of my brother's death came. Erom here we can return to that fighting more quickly than if we go all the way to Karakorum. Let any who would have a voice in ruling the empire come here, where we are building the empire."

His deep voice, calm at first, grew fiercer as he spoke. When he paused, the assembled leaders cheered until he raised his hand for silence.

"As for those who are not here. The khans of Russia have not attended a kuriltai since my grandfather's day. They will have to support whomever we choose. My brother Hulagu is just as far away, fighting in the lands of the Arabs. The Mameluks of Egypt press upon him, and he cannot disengage without the loss of everything we have gained in thirty years of fighting there. Hulagu has sent me permission to cast his vote as I see fit. As for Kaidu, Arghun and my brother Arik Buka, perhaps you can tell me where they are, Torluk. Why have the elderly dung eaters who advise my young brother persuaded him to remain in his yurt by the Gobi when he could be my guest, enjoying the delights of Shangtu?"

There was laughter, which died away when Torluk replied, "Let me remind the khan that those who dwell in yurts have always triumphed over those who live in palaces. And this is no true kuriltai while your brother remains in Karakorum."

A young tarkhan beside Kublai, whom Taniko recognized as Bayan, stepped forward and drew his sabre. Taniko held her breath. In the Sacred Islands when a warrior bared his sword he could not honourably sheathe it again until he had drawn blood. But Kublai rumbled softly to Bayan, who put his sword away and sat down.

"I am at home in both yurts and palaces, Torluk," said Kublai with a smile. "But I advise you now to have a care." The smile fell away and the broad, dark face was as stern as the visage of a carved god. "You come close to saying that you will not accept the judgment of this kuriltai. That would be treason."

Torluk remained on his feet but stood silent, while Kublai stared him down. At last he turned away from the khan and pushed his way through the crowd. Kublai began speaking quietly to the councillors around him. Gradually the huge room filled with the roar of many different conversations.

What a strange way to conduct the business of an empire, Taniko thought. She had never been to a public gathering in which men talked all at once to one another and ignored their leaders, while their leaders ignored them and also talked among themselves. She tried to imagine what it would be like if the Son of Heaven were elected at a meeting conducted by the great men of the realm. It was unthinkable, sacrilegious. But the Emperor of the Sacred Islands, of course, was a god.

Now the tarkhan Bayan was calling for silence. He made a long speech in Mongolian. Taniko had lived with Mongols long enough to

understand the drift of it. He called upon the kuriltai to choose Kublai as Great Khan. He gave many reasons. The reasons were all obvious. They added up to one reason: that there was no one else in the world who could govern, maintain and expand the huge Mongol empire. She wondered why Arik Buka and those around him couldn't see that.

The chieftains responded to Bayan's speech with a roar of assent. Now Kublai was protesting that he was not worthy. He held out his hands in a gesture rejecting the honour offered him. Bourkina had told Taniko exactly how this part would go, so that even though she understood little Mongolian, she could follow what was happening. Shouts went up from the crowd. They were demanding that he accept the Great Khanate. How rude and strange, subjects shouting orders at the man they had chosen to be their ruler. No more rude and strange, though, than the very idea that people could choose their ruler.

The roar became insistent, even frightening in'its intensity. Some of them were chanting his name, "Kublai, Kublai," over and over. Still he shook his head and tried to make his refusal heard above their clamour, ludicrous behaviour for a man wearing crown jewels and sitting on an Emperor's chair of state. But it was expected of him, as Bourkina had explained.

At last Kublai stood up. He held out his hands again, but this time the gesture was one of yielding. He bows to accept the supreme power, Taniko thought, still bemused by it all.

The shout of the leaders of the Mongol empire was deafening.

Bayan and an older general-she supposed it was Uriangkatai-held up a long strip of dark grey felt. This, Bourkina had told her, had been traditional for Mongol khans from the days when their tribe was

created by the spirits of snow and ice. The two generals draped the felt over the seat and arms of the throne. Slowly Kublai Khan sat down.

So simple, thought Taniko. A man plants his buttocks on a piece of felt and becomes lord of the world.

The cheering redoubled in volume, then died away. One by one the men removed whatever head covering they wore-fur hats, steel helmets, Chinese-style caps of office, turbans, burnouses. As a silence fell over the room they unbuckled their belts. Swords and daggers thudded to the carpeting. The standing men draped their belts over their shoulders. Thus they made the traditional submission to the new Great Khan.

One by one the chieftains moved forward to greet Kublai and to make individual pledges of loyalty to him. Servants bearing large por celain wine jars and silver platters laden with smoking roasts of beef and mutton began to move through the crowd. Taniko saw the tumanbashi Torluk pushing his way out of the hall. His felt hat was on his head and his sword buckled at his side, but nobody seemed to notice him.

In the gallery Bourkina called out, "Ladies, it's time we were leaving. It won't be long before the level of feasting and rejoicing here passes what is safe. Each of us will surely have her opportunity to congratulate the Great Khan in her way and in her own time." There were cries of protest.

Hotai said, "That may be well enough for foreign women, but I've grown up attending Mongol feasts. I will be quite safe and comfortable, and I will stay."

"Indeed, she's safe enough," Seremeter said quietly to Taniko.

"What man would look twice at that cow?"

One of Kublai's Chinese consorts smirked. "Cows are what the Mongols like best."

Taniko stared at the Chinese woman. "You could lose your head if any Mongol heard that."

The woman laughed. "Not at all. To call a woman a great cow is regarded a high compliment among the Mongols. Didn't you know that?"

Except for Hotai and several of the older and more prestigious Mongol wives, such as the principal wife, the lady Jamui, Kublai's women permitted themselves to be shepherded by Bourkina down the gallery stairs and out of the place. Across a wide courtyard with a fountain in its centre was the women's palace. Though it was the Eifth Month, the beginning of summer, the wind was from the steppes of the north, and it was cold. Taniko could see why Kublai had chosen Shantu for his summer residence.

The women crossed the courtyard in a group. Like a flock of geese, Taniko thought. A monk approached them, one of the many who had come from the furthest corners of the world to observe the kuriltai and see what these new world conquerors portended for the various religions. This one was only slightly taller than Taniko, with white hair and a white beard. He wore a grey robe.

"Stand aside," Bourkina called loudly. "No man is permitted to approach the Great Khan's wives."

The elderly monk chuckled and stood his ground. "Surely, my lady, one my age and wearing the robe of a monk is harmless enough."

"Many a monk's robe has concealed a pestiferous weapon," said

Bourkina in a slightly more pleasant tone.

"The range of my weapon is not so great these days, lady," said the monk with a smile. "I assure you, you're well beyond it." Taniko wondered about him. Erom his size and general appearance he looked neither Chinese nor Mongol, but as if he might come from her own country. Immediately after that thought came the shocking recognition that on his robe was the same Willow Tree symbol she had seen on Jebu's. The old man was a Zinja from the Sacred Islands. She was sure of it.

She had no idea until that moment how much she had been missing her country and her people. She wanted to cry.

"What do you want, old monk?" Bourkina snapped. "If it weren't for your white hair, I'd have had the guards take your head by now."

The old man bowed as only the men of the Sacred Islands knew how to bow, with respect and yet dignity.

"I realize that I may not speak directly to one of the Great Khan's consorts," said the monk. "But I see among you a lady whom I recognize as a countrywoman of mine." He looked directly at Taniko and his eyes twinkled. "I have news for her."

"Indeed," said Bourkina. "I should have recognized from your imposing stature that you are from the Land of the Dwarfs." Several women snickered, and Taniko glared at them. She wanted to rush across the courtyard to the old monk and throw herself at his feet, but she dared not even speak to him directly.

The monk said, "Last year a small band of our dwarfish warriors succeeded in holding off a huge army under Arghun Baghadur equipped with siege engines, elephants and all, at the city of Kweilin.

When the Great Khan Mangu died, the siege was lifted, as you know. Since Arghun is no friend to your newly elected Great Khan, I'm sure Arghun's lack of success will please all the ladies. But what may especially please the lady from my land in this. Were she to read a list of the dead, she would recognize none of the names."

Bourkina eyed Taniko narrowly. "Once one has become a subject of the Great Khan, she leaves old attachments behind. Is it not so, Lady Taniko?"

"Oh, certainly," said Taniko, her heart beating furiously. "But I would like to know the name of this monk who has been kind enough to pass on this interesting news."

"I am Taitaro of the Order of Zinja," the old monk replied. "I was once abbot of the Waterfowl Temple."

The Waterfowl Temple. Jebu's temple. He had said once that the abbot was his stepfather. This was the man who had raised Jebu. Dangerous or not, she had to talk more with him. But the old monk was gone.

Her head reeled. She thought she was going to faint and put her hand on Seremeter's arm to steady herself. Jebu was alive. He was alive, and she had just talked to his father. It was as if Jebu had just reached out and touched her himself. In this land where she felt so far from home, forsaken by the gods, Jebu and his father had been able to find her. The surge of joy and longing within her made her gasp for breath. Bourkina was still looking at her. She had to hide her feelings.

She managed to smile at Bourkina and they started walking again towards the palace of the women.

Bourkina said, "I told you once that we are making a new world. The world you came from will only cause trouble for you."

Seremeter said, "She has a lover among those warriors from her country, is it not so, Taniko?"

"Certainly not," Taniko said, angry at Seremeter for harping on a subject she wanted dropped. Didn't any of these people know the value of silence?

"She'd best put him out of her mind if she does," said Bourkina. "She belongs to the Great Khan now."

"Along with how many hundred other women?" said Seremeter. "At the last count, four hundred and fifty-seven. When the Great Khan spreads his attentions so widely, a woman can't be blamed for at least thinking of a former lover."

"I wonder who will receive his attentions on this night of nights," said Taniko to change the subject.

Bourkina chuckled shortly. "I wouldn't want it to be me. These Golden Eamily men, when they win a victory, they're like bulls in springtime. His father and grandfather were that way."

"Do you speak from personal knowledge, Bourkina?" said Seremeter sweetly. Before Bourkina could answer she went on, "Bulls in springtime. I think I'd like to experience that."

Bourkina shook her head. "He'd tear you apart."

"Taniko, I really do believe Bourkina has bedded all three, Genghis Khan, Tuli and Kublai Khan. Tell me, wouldn't you like to see our lord like a bull in springtime?"

Taniko was embarrassed to admit that Kublai had yet to take her to bed. "I'm thoroughly pleased with him as he usually is." Bourkina looked at her shrewdly. She probably knows, Taniko thought.

They had arrived at the women's palace. Guards admitted them and they went up to their chambers. Music, shouts and laughter from the hall of the kuriltai reached them even here. Taniko undressed with the help of a maidservant and lay down to rest. The events of the night had been so exciting that she found it hard to drop off to sleep. Her last thought before drifting into dreams was, Jebu is alive.

Bourkina awakened her suddenly.

"Is it morning? How long have I slept?"

"No, you've been in here just a few hours. You must get up, my child. He has sent for you."

"Eor me? Why me?"

"It is not your place to question. You are to attend the Great Khan in his chambers. Don't keep him waiting."

Chapter Seventeen

She entered Kublai Khan's chambers with as much fear as she had felt at their first meeting. The pale green silk hangings suspended from the ceiling and covering the walls gave the room a dome-like shape. The floor was covered with thick Chinese carpeting. He's managed to make it look like a yurt, she thought.

Hidden musicians played wind and string instruments. A pleasant tang of incense floated on the air. In the centre of the room stood a silver swan on a marble pedestal.

A circular dais guarded by porcelain lions took up half the room. Heavy brocade curtains gathered above would drop down at the pull of a cord, to form a yurt within a yurt, screening Kublai's bed from the rest of the room.

There were no windows, therefore there was no way to tell whether it was night or day outside. A man living in a room like this could make his own time.

Kublai sprawled on the cushions on the dais. He was wearing a simple dark green robe, belted at the waist. The embroidered garments and jewels that had adorned him earlier in the evening were gone. Taniko bowed to him.

"Well, my little lady, what did you think of tonight?" he said in his deep voice, rising to his feet with a smile. She would have thought the question casual except for the way his black eyes glittered. She found herself at a loss for words, and the terror at being in his presence persisted. Uncertainly, she bowed again.

"Do speak," he said. "Try to think of me as just an ordinary man." He

walked towards her slowly. She wondered again, why me? Of all those four hundred and more women, why me?

She tried to smile back at him. "It's no use, my lord. Your Majesty. The ways in which you are not ordinary shine out too brightly. There is nothing I can say that can possibly match the event I witnessed tonight. I feel foolish. I can't imagine why you should have sent for me, when there are many women more beautiful and more clever than I who might have shared this moment with you."

Kublai shrugged. "There may be a few as beautiful. None so clever." "If cleverness is what you want, there are a thousand sages here in Shangtu able to talk much more cleverly than I can."

"Yes, and some of them may even be honest men. But there are only a few as clever as you, and none at all are beautiful. Tonight I want the company of a woman. Women are very important in my family, you know. In many ways, it was the women of the house who shaped us."

"I don't understand, Your Majesty."

"We were raised by our mothers. My grandfather, Temujin, whom we call Genghis Khan, was eleven years old when his father was poisoned. His mother ruled over the tribe until Temujin was of age. And my grandmother had to care alone for all four of the sons of Genghis Khan, while my grandfather was gone campaigning.

"When my father, Tuli, died, we were still young, my brothers and 1. I was sixteen. We were in great danger, because the house of Ogodai feared us as possible rivals. My mother, Princess Sarkuktani, guided us through those dangerous years. She engaged Yao Chow to teach me to write and to read the Chinese classics. She taught my brothers and me to show deference to the ladies and princes of the

house of Ogodai and to bide our time."

Taniko said, "It's all so different from my land. Here women can be powerful. The grandson of a destitute orphan can be ruler of the largest empire that has ever been."

"A destitute orphan, yes." There was a faraway note in his voice. She sensed that having made his claim to the supreme place in his world, he wanted to talk about who he was and where he had come from.

"My grandfather was the lowest of the low," he went on. "He had nothing, nothing at all. His tribe was scattered. When the Taidjuts caught him, they didn't even think him worth killing. They put a wooden yoke on his neck and made a slave of him. He was strong and resolute, but he was as far down as it is possible for a man to be. He did not even own his body. Could he have foreseen then that he would one day make his name feared among all nations, that men would call him Genghis Khan, the Mightiest Ruler? With all the powers of his mind, he could not have predicted that.

"What he intended at the beginning will always be a mystery. I do not think he knew what he could accomplish. After he escaped from the Taidjuts, he just set out to fight back. He was like a man climbing a mountain who does not think of what he has left behind or where he is going, but simply takes the next step, climbs over the next rock. Suddenly, to his surprise, there are no more rocks to climb. He has reached the summit, and he looks around and down and he sees all at once what he has become, and he is full of joy in himself and his achievement."

Taniko wondered if that was how it was for Kublai this night when he was proclaimed Great Khan.

Kublai walked over to the sculptured swan in the centre of the room

and beckoned her. He held a goblet under the swan's beak and struck a bell with a small hammer. After a moment a pale stream of wine spurted from the beak and splashed into the cup. Taniko laughed as he handed the cup to her and tapped the bell for another goblet for himself.

"It's almost like magic, Your Majesty."

"No need to have servants running in and out, disturbing us. In his palace at Karakorum my brother Mangu had a tree of silver with four serpents twining up its trunk. Erom the mouth of each serpent came a different kind of wine, and at the top was a silver angel that blew a trumpet whenever the Great Khan drank."

Kublai reached out a hand to stroke the silver swan. "Drinking has destroyed many members of my family. Every one of the four sons of Genghis Khan died an early death. My grandfather died at seventy-two, but none of his sons reached the age of fifty. The eldest, Juchi, died before Genghis Khan did, a gout-crippled wreck, in Russia. My father, the youngest of the four, was the next to die, at forty. He was addicted to wine. Chagatai and Ogodai died a year apart. Ogodai was only forty-six. I never saw either of those uncles sober. Once one of Uncle Ogodai's ministers showed him an iron jug that was corroded because wine had been standing in it. Ogodai promised to drink only half as often as he had been. Then he had a goblet made for himself that was twice as big. My cousin Kuyuk, the third Great Khan, was a drunk. He was already a dying man when the kuriltai elected him. He reigned less than two years."

Taniko sat on a cushion, looking down at the golden wine in the silver goblet. "But a man getting drunk is nothing to worry about. Men need to get drunk once in a while to relax."

"That was so among my people before the victories of Genghis

Khan. That still seems to be so for my brothers and me. We have escaped the family curse. But in the old days Mongols drank kumiss, fermented mare's milk, which is not as strong as wine. They drank when they could spare the time, which was not very often. After the wars of Genghis Khan, wine went through our people like a plague. We had nothing else to do. We had servants or slaves to do our work for us. We were forbidden by the Yassa to fight among ourselves. We could not spend all our time with the women. What is left, if you can't read or write, if you are more ignorant of civilization than the poorest Chinese dung carrier? Water flows downhill, and men prefer to do what is easy. The easiest thing to do is drink. It makes life seem interesting. Now we drink from sleep to sleep. We poison ourselves by the hundreds and thousands, we lords of the earth."

Again Taniko looked down at the wine. Astonishing, that it should be the death of so many of these hardy Mongols, that they should be, in their way, such vulnerable creatures. Like wild flowers that withered instantly when plucked and brought indoors.

"There are other reasons why many of us drink too much," Kublai went on. "We've seen too much. Often, when we take a city, we kill all its people. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, sometimes."

Taniko looked at him in horror. "I've heard that. I always thought it was just one more of the lies your enemies spread about you."

He looked at her sombrely. "No. It's true. I myself haven't done it, and I don't intend to do it. It's stupid and wasteful. We did it more often in my grandfather's day. We saw no use in cities then. When my grandfather sacked Yenking, the capital of northern China, it burned for more than a month. I was born a year after the destruction of Yenking, and one day I will build my own capital there.

"We felt no regret for the thousands of lives we ended, but neither did

we enjoy the killing. It was simply work that we did, as one would butcher sheep, because it seemed necessary. Usually victims would be divided up among the warriors. Give each man five people to kill, and an army of twenty thousand can exterminate the population of a city in moments."

A city just the size of Heian Kyo, Taniko thought.

"We killed conquered people because we didn't know what else to do with them," Kublai said. "Then, too, the policy of annihilating whole cities struck such terror in our enemies that they often gave up in despair. Of course, we had to destroy the cities of those who slew our ambassadors. In Khwaresmia, where they murdered our emissaries, my father directed the storming of Mery from a golden throne set up on the plain before the city. When Mery fell, he ordered all the people brought before him. They were divided into three herds, men, women and children. People submit to death more easily when families are broken up. They were told to lie down, and my father's troops beheaded every one, to make sure that none might survive by feigning death. The heads of men, women and children were stacked in separate pyramids. Even the dogs and cats were killed. Then the city was burned to the ground and stones pulled down. A few thousand people survived by hiding in the cellars. Later my father sent some of his horde back to hunt them down. In the end there was no life left in that place. So it went with many other cities of Khwaresmia and Persia.

"My father did not escape unscathed, however. He used to have nightmares about Mery and other places where he had ordered massacres. Many of the men who took part in the killings suffered from it later."

Taniko drained her goblet. Her hands were trembling. Did he actually expect her to feel sorry for his father and those like him? The picture

of her baby being swept over the waterfall at Daidoji forced its way into her mind.

"Why the children?"

Kublai took the goblet from her cold hand. She made an effort to get up and pour wine for herself, but he waved her down. As he handed her the full goblet, she looked up at him and thought he seemed like an enormous tree.

He said, "If we let the children live they would only have starved to death."

She laughed shakily. "So you killed them out of your overflowing compassion."

Kublai looked irritated. "I have already told you that I never ordered such massacres. Besides, in every country it is the law that when one person commits a misdeed, the whole family is punished, including the children. Is that not so, even in your land?"

"Yes." She recalled the many questions he had asked her about her country on other occasions, and fear took hold of her. "Why do you go on and on? How many lands must your people conquer before you say you have enough?"

"Our ambitions change. My grandfather did not set out to conquer the world. He wanted to take horses and cattle and women from his enemies and force them to submit to him, to protect himself. But each time he won a war, he made new enemies, who feared his increasing strength. So he had no choice but to go on and fight again. By the end of his life, though, we had won so many wars that we began to feel we had a special destiny. The Ancestor often said, 'There is only one sun in the sky and one Power in Eternal Heaven.

Only one Great Khan should be upon the earth.' He and those who succeeded him sent messages to rulers all over the world demanding that they come to Karakorum with tribute and offer their submission to the Great Khan.

"Grandfather in his day dreamed of reshaping the world so that all of it would be one enormous pasture. Even so, he didn't talk, as Arik Buka and his councillors do, of preserving the old ways. He never cared whether a way of doing things was old or new. He cared only for what would make the Mongols great and powerful.

"In the end my Ancestor realized that destroying all cities and killing all their people, reducing farms and manors to wastelands, these things would not keep the Mongols powerful. He saw that there is a power that comes from the cities, from knowledge and wealth, that could be greater than the war-making strength and skills of the Mongols.

"Now the cities are a part of our empire, with the knowledge they hold. When my grandfather's generation took cities, they were like men who have starved a long time and are suddenly given meat rich with grease. They could not digest it. It made them ill.

"I and my generation are Mongol enough to be able to conquer cities, but civilized enough to know what do with our conquests. To be a nomad is not to be uncivilized, after all. I have read the history of China and its endless wars with my people, and I know what we Mongols are. Eor as long as men can remember, we have lived on the edge of the civilized world, hounded and harried by its armies, learning from it, sometimes stealing from it, an unrecognized part of it. We did not spring full-grown from the steppes. It was civilized men who first learned to ride horses and camels, to herd cattle and sheep. They developed the law, and it is law that binds our nomad world together like the leather thongs that hold together the frame of

a yurt. They invented warfare. Civilized men moved slowly northwards from the fertile plains of China, building their houses, raising their crops and their animals. They came to a land not so fertile, the land where I was born, poor for crops but good for their herds. They cut themselves loose from the land and began to follow their herds with the seasons. They taught the hunters and forest people who already lived in the north, and they intermarried with them. That is how my people came to be.

"When the Emperors of China were strong, they warred on my people. When the Emperors were weak, my people took lands and tribute from them. The herdsman and the farmers are not different kinds of men, they are right hand and left hand. Through their constant warfare, each developed new weapons and new strategies.

"Now, for a time, perhaps for all time, we Mongols, are bringing warfare to an end. We have united the cities, the farmlands and the steppes in peace, prosperity, and order. There is no reason why all men cannot dwell under one government, even as the Ancestor said. Combining the foundation my Ancestor laid in the Yassa with the Imperial wisdom of China, we can create a perfect government, a government based on Mongol strength to guarantee that it will endure for ever. We will use the old Confucian system of examinations to find the most talented administrators. It is the best system of government in the world-appointment of the most fit. Of course, we must never let the Chinese get the upper hand. We will take their ideas, use their skills, but never let them rise to positions of power. I will bring in able men from all the countries of the earth-Turks, Arabs, Eranks, and Mongols, of course-to rule over the Chinese and humble them. If we allowed the Chinese power, they would corrupt us, weaken us, make us forget who we are, until there were no Mongols left, only decadent Chinese whose ancestors had once been Mongols. I am often accused of wanting to deliver the Mongol empire into the hands of the Chinese, but I am not so stupid

as that. I will devour China, China will not devour me.

"After all of China is ours, we will turn west again. With the wealth and wisdom of China, we will go on to the conquest of the Eranks. It will not be difficult. We would have swept through Europe twenty years ago, had my uncle Ogodai not died at the wrong moment. You asked me how far we mean to go. Once we have China and Europe, how much of the world will be left?

"We will be the herdsmen of nations. There are many kinds of riches besides animals, besides precious stones and metals. There is the wealth of beauty, the wealth of wisdom, the wealth of comfort. We will possess and enjoy all of it, all the goods this world has to offer."

"The kind of wealth you speak of is only accumulated in time of peace," Taniko said.

Kublai eyed her with amusement. "Those islands of yours have never been invaded. There must be a great deal piled up there."

"You would be surprised at our poverty. Having seen China, I re alize that our people have no idea what wealth is." Don't overdo it, she warned herself.

"You fear me. That is why you keep telling me how poor your country is." She realized that he had been sitting beside her for quite a while now.

"Your Majesty is the most powerful man in the world. How could I not fear you?"

His dark eyes impaled her. "You know me better now than you did when we met. Why still fear me?"

She saw what was happening to him. His eyes were heavy-lidded,

his breathing quicker. A slight flush crept into his cheeks. Like a bull in springtime, she remembered. Amazingly and almost instantly, she felt a warmth between her thighs in response to his stare. She had not known a man in the two years since Kiyosi's death.

He is such a big man. I could close my eyes and pretend I'm with Jebu. If he lies on me, though, he'll crush me.

"Your elephant trainers know their elephants, Your Majesty, but still-and wisely-they fear them."

"Stop calling me Your Majesty. It reminds me of things I would like to forget for a while."

"What shall I call you?"

His body lay across the bed like a boulder. He smiled up at her. She put her hand on his silk robe and let it rest there, feeling the beating heart of the most powerful man in the world.

"You must think of your own name for me," he said. "One that we will share with no one else."

He is so big, so strong. "I shall call you Elephant."

Kublai laughed and pulled her down so that she lay on his chest. His hands plucked at her clothes. Gown by gown he stripped her. She was surprised when he didn't stop until she was completely undressed.

"You are exquisite," he said. "But you are blushing. Does it bother you to be naked? I prefer it this way." His thick fingers gently explored her body.

"It's strange to couple with a man in complete nakedness," she said.

"I don't like or dislike it." Then she gasped. "I like what you are doing now. Very much."

She had forgotten her fears of how he might crush her if he lay on top of her. He never did. When she was ready for him he clasped her waist in his huge hands and lifted her into the air with an easy heave of his muscular arms. Lying on his back, he slowly lowered her over his loins.

She was awakened by the sound of voices arguing.

"I don't care what you think is proper. If you don't wake him right now, your head will go the way your stones have already gone."

A softer voice protested.

She opened her eyes and thought for a moment that she was in a Mongol tent. Then she remembered he had drawn down the curtains around the dais before they fell asleep amid the tumbled cushions and quilts. There was a pleasant ache in her groin, where muscles long unused had been overworked last night. Kublai lay beside her, an enormous dark bulk. Even though he was motionless, she could tell from his shallow breathing that he was awake.

The curtains parted and a fierce young Mongol face framed by braided black hair thrust itself in. Taniko shrank back and pulled a quilt around her. Kublai sat up quickly.

The man spoke an urgent sentence in Mongolian, in which Taniko caught the word Karakorum. She recognized him now. It was the tarkhan Bayan. The general didn't look at Taniko but stared at Kublai, who asked him a question in the same tongue.

Kublai sighed at Bayan's reply. He stood up on the dais, naked, towering, and the household eunuch who had tried to stop Bayan

from waking him brought a him a robe. He looked down at Taniko.

"What I feared and expected has happened. Even while this kuriltai was electing me Great Khan, Arik Buka's people were claiming the title for him at Karakorum. Now there will be two Great Khans, and it will be war. It will be years before we can proceed with the conquest of the Sung."

And even more years before you can threaten my homeland, Taniko thought with faint satisfaction.

Lying with a quilt pulled around her to cover her nakedness, she said, "I grieve for your people, Your Majesty. A civil war is a horrible thing."

"It's a wasteful thing," said Kublai. "To avoid it, I'd almost be willing to yield the empire to Arik Buka and his people. But they wouldn't know what to do with it."

The Great Khan and his tarkhan strode out of the bedchamber, deep in excited conversation. It's a game to them, Taniko thought. They relish it.

Chapter Eighteen

Jebu stood with his back to a willow tree as four Chinese pikemen closed in on him warily. The cries and clash of battle were loud and near by, but the mist was too heavy for him to see anything. They had been fighting almost blind for hours. He was exhausted and panting heavily.

The burble of a river sounded at his right, through the mist. He feinted with his sword, driving the four Chinese back. He raised both arms over his head, crouched and sprang. He almost didn't make it.

The rough bark of the willow tree scratched the palm of his left hand. Eor a moment his left arm was pulling all his weight. Then he managed to hook the right arm, which held the sword, over the tree limb. A willow can't fail me, he thought.

He hauled himself up, climbing like a monkey. The four pikes thrust through the space he had occupied. He swung into the lower branches of the tree and ran out along a limb towards the river. When the branch would no longer hold his weight he dropped off and landed feet first in the water. The current carried him away from the shouting pikemen.

Even near the shore the river was deep. Encumbered by his armour, Jebu swam with difficulty. This was one of the many channels that irrigated the Red Basin. Jebu heard voices speaking his own language and swam to the riverbank. Clambering over the big boulders that held the river in its man-made bed, he called out to two near-by samurai.

"We've won, shike," said one of them. "They're running away."

"He can't tell," said another. "Eor all we can see in this fog, we may be running away."

"Where's Lord Yukio?" Jebu asked.

"Somewhere," said the second samurai. "I don't even know where I am."

Jebu walked along the riverbank calling for Yukio. At last he found him sitting on a boulder, his dragon-crowned helmet in his hands. Jebu looked around. There was a thick white wall of mist in every direction. Near Yukio's feet three bodies lay.

"Did we drive them off?" Jebu asked. He sheathed his sword and sat next to Yukio.

"Do you think I'd be sitting here with my helmet off if we hadn't? In a little while I'll get up and order a roll call, and find out how many we lost this time. I'm sick of this. I still say we should go south to Nan Chao."

"We'll find what we're looking for if we keep going north," said Jebu.

"Eor eight months we have wandered in this land of mists and rivers and rice paddies, looking for what? Only you seem to know. I'm tired of you playing the mysterious shike with supernatural knowledge who keeps insisting we should head north but won't tell us why."

Jebu sighed and shook his head. "I've told you everything I know. Governor Liu advised me strongly that our best prospects lay in this direction. That's all. He didn't tell me any more. I have no mysterious knowledge. If you consider my advice faulty, give the order. We'll march south and offer our services to the King of Nan Chao against Annam. Or is to the King of Annam against Nan Chao?"

"I have the burden of deciding the future of all of us, and you mock me."

"You make a burden of it."

"We're nothing but bandits. The Chinese have put a price on our heads. Every so often they send an army after us and we kill a few of them and they kill a few of us. Our silk and silver have run out and we have to steal food and fodder from the peasants. Everybody hates us."

Jebu snorted. "And you can't stand to be among people who don't worship you as the people of Kweilin did."

Yukio stood up. "Are you laughing at me?"

Jebu remained seated. "Yes."

Yukio's fingers tapped the hilt of his sword. "I am Muratomo no Yukio, son of Muratomo no Domei, chieftain of the Muratomo, the most illustrious warriors in the Sacred Islands."

"That means nothing here."

"You are goading me. I'm a better swordsman than you are."

"Possibly." He's right, Jebu thought. I'm goading him. These last six months have been as trackless as this white mist we're in. It bothers me as much as it does him. It puts me at the mercy of my feelings. I have no direction, no purpose. I'm lost. There's nothing to hold to.

Moko suddenly appeared, looking comical in a broad, flat Chinese helmet. "I beg of you, masters, don't quarrel. The only thing the men have left is their faith in your leadership. And as for me, if either one of you hurt the other, I would kill myself."

"You're more liable to be killed by one of us," said Jebu gruffly, glad to see him, "if you wear that Chinese helmet."

"Anyone who can get close enough to kill me can get close enough to recognize me," said Moko. "And I have no right to wear a samurai helmet." On their long march Moko had become a sort of quartermaster for samurai. He led the baggage train, kept track of stocks of food and trading goods, and saw to the welfare of the women and servants. He negotiated with the peasants whose rice and vegetables they took, giving promissory notes and persuading them that the samurai might actually return one day to pay for what they took. Honest or not, it made it easier for the peasants to give and the samurai to take.

"These troops you've just defeated were sent out by the governor of Hochwan," Moko said. "He doesn't know whether he's subject to the Sung Emperor or the Mongols. Like most of Szechwan, he hasn't had a message from either overlord in six months. But he knows that both sides consider us an enemy, so he thought he'd perform a service to his masters, whomever they turn out to be, by eliminating us from the countryside."

"How do you know all this, Moko?" Yukio asked.

"Our warriors took some prisoners and they brought them to me for safekeeping. They were quite willing to talk to me."

"Good, now kill them."

Jebu's stomach contracted. "Why not let them go?"

"We are samurai. We do not suffer from confusion about whether we are fighting men or monks. Moko, round up the first six samurai you meet and tell them they are ordered to behead the prisoners." He

turned to Jebu, his rounded eyes blazing. "Don't argue with me." Jebu held his tongue and turned away, his shoulders sagging.

Shaking his head slightly, Moko bowed. "One more thing," he said. "There is an old monk who came along after the battle looking for both of you. He is short, white-haired and wears a grey robe, like a Zinj a."

Jebu felt his heart beat faster.

"Einally," said Yukio.

"Shall I bring him to you?" said Moko.

"At once," said Jebu.

The old man emerged out of the mist looking little changed from the night, years ago, when Jebu had left him on the beach below the burning Waterfowl Temple. His beard had grown almost to his waist, hiding the white rope around his neck. Age was thinning his white hair.

He and Jebu looked at each other a long time in silence. Droplets of water dripped from a tree branch to a puddle on the ground. "Why did you not come to me before, sensei?" Jebu whispered. "I had other things to attend to."

Jebu turned to Yukio, whose eyes were big with awe. "Lord Muratomo no Yukio, I present my father, Taitaro, former abbot of the Waterfowl Temple."

Yukio bowed deeply. "Sensei."

Taitaro bowed in turn. "Lord Yukio, your fame has spread throughout the Sacred Islands and a good part of China. Euture generations of

Muratomo, when they go into battle, will proudly claim you among their ancestors."

"You are too generous, sensei," Yukio said, bowing again to express his reverence for Taitaro's attainment. "I have been hearing of the great Abbot Taitaro ever since I met your son."

Jebu and Taitaro embraced. Jebu felt happy and at peace for the first time in many months. Affection surged up within him like a spring bursting out of the ground and spread to Taitaro, to Yukio, to Moko. Moko, who had never met Taitaro before, stood to one side, his bowl-shaped helmet in his hands, tears running down his cheeks.

"Did Governor Liu tell you how to find us, sensei?" Yukio asked.

"The word was passed from him to me through the Order," said Taitaro. "I must tell you, though-that good, wise and strong man is gone. Both he and the general who was sent to arrest you were executed by Chia Ssu-tao for letting you escape."

Grief was a great weight in Jebu's chest. "I warned him not to go back to the capital with that general. I mourn him."

"He was one of us, Jebu," said Taitaro. "He is no more to be mourned than the ashes of our dead which we scatter on the wind. He would not want it."

"Chia Ssu-tao would have let Kweilin be overwhelmed by the Mongols," said Yukio. "He tried to punish us for defending it. Now he has slain one of the finest officials in the land. He is a poison at the heart of the Sung empire. How can it survive with such as him ruling it?"

"I am more concerned about how you are to survive," said Taitaro. "I have come to invite you to accompany me to a temple of the

Ch'incha, where this little river forks away from the Min. It is a day's ride from here. There I hope to be granted a vision that will help to guide you."

"Just you, Jebu and I?" asked Yukio. "This countryside is hostile." "It only seems so to you. Now that you have driven off the troops of Hochwan, you need fear no further attacks."

"Perhaps only Jebu should go," said Yukio. "He is your son and a member of your Order."

"But-" Jebu started to say. A motion of Taitaro's hand silenced him.

"You are the leader of these samurai," said Taitaro. "It is not fitting that a monk who serves you should have any special knowledge that is not fully known to you as well.'.'

It was almost as if Taitaro knew what had been happening between the two of them, Jebu thought.

Chapter Nineteen

The temple of the Ch'in-cha was near the top of a steep, forested hill. They were exhausted when they got there. The journey began before sunrise, continued through a pleasant summer day, and ended with their horses climbing a steep mountain path long after dark with the aid of the seventh full moon of the Year of the Ape.

That night, for a change, there was none of Szechwan's usual mist. Tall pine trees concealed the temple until they were almost upon it. It was dug into the side of the hill, the only external structure a carved stone entrance with a tiled roof.

Taking a tinder box and an oil-soaked pine-knot torch from his saddlebag, Taitaro made a light for them. Inside the temple entrance was a surprisingly large room, carved out of solid rock. It was five-sided, and in each side there was a triangular opening to chambers beyond. Taitaro led the way to the further opening on the left side of the entrance. They entered a tunnel.

"This temple was here when the ancestors of the first Emperors of China were village overlords," Taitaro said.

"Is it deserted?" Yukio asked.

"At the moment, yes."

"What happened, did the Mongols sack it?"

"No," Taitaro said. "The Mongols respect the holy places of all religions. In this land the Ch'in-cha have long since given up living in communities of their own. The temple is used only when there is a need for it."

Jebu had to crouch to walk through the tunnel, though the rounded roof was high enough for Yukio and Taitaro. The cool air around him had the pleasantly dank smell of a cave.

The chamber at the end of the tunnel was spacious. The scraping of their footsteps echoed from the dome-shaped ceiling. Looking down, Jebu saw that there was a mosaic design in the floor. Taitaro placed himself in the centre of the design. The intertwining lines were worked out in the six colours of the rainbow, against a background of concentric rings of black and white. So rich were the colours that the entire design seemed to vibrate under Jebu's torch.

He noticed something on the wall of the room opposite to where he was standing. It was an eye painted on the rock wall of the chamber, the paint fading with age. In the centre of the eye was a red and white version of the yin-yang symbol. A bunch of wilting flowers was set in a small jade vase on a pedestal before the painted eye. Someone had been here a day or two ago.

Jebu looked back at the mosaic on the floor. Now he recognized it. It was the Tree of Life, the intricately knotted maze he had seen in a vision with Taitaro, a version of which was carved on the precious stone he carried concealed in his Zinja robe. This version of the tree seemed to radiate from the centre of the circular room, as if one were looking down upon it from above its many-coloured branches.

Taitaro seated himself on the floor in the centre of the mosaic, dropping down easily and gracefully despite his age. "Do you know how to meditate, Lord Yukio?"

"I spent a good many years in a monastery, sensei. Though I never could see the point of sitting on one's buttocks and thinking about nothing."

"I understand," said Taitaro. "But there is a point tonight. Please seat yourself and try to meditate. Jebu, give me the Jewel of Life and Death."

Jebu set his torch in a holder beside the entrance and reached inside his robe for the Jewel. He walked slowly to Taitaro, holding it out before him.

"What is that?" whispered Yukio.

"A shintai," said Jebu.

"Have you been carrying it with you as long as I've known you? Why haven't we had better fortune?"

Taitaro took the stone from Jebu. "It is the belief of our Order that fortune is neither good nor bad, Lord Yukio, and that in any case neither prayers nor spells nor deeds can affect it." He held the Jewel up between his thumbs and forefingers and gazed into it.

After a moment he said, "Put out the torch." Jebu stamped out the torch in the tunnel outside the room.

The chamber was not totally dark. Jebu noticed a shaft of soft, white light falling from the ceiling, striking the mosaic floor near Taitaro. It was moonlight, entering through a small circular opening in the centre of the dome. The moments when the moon was in precisely the right position to send its light through the opening must be rare, Jebu thought.

The three sat in silence until Jebu lost track of time. Erom long habit, he kept his eyes fixed on the Jewel in Taitaro's lap, feeling that he could see its intricate pattern even though it was across the room. He seemed to be floating in a sea which had no surface, no bottom and no shore in any direction.

Gradually the shaft of light changed position as the moon moved across the sky. It struck Taitaro's knee, then his forearm. At last the light fell upon the Jewel, which seemed to blaze up instantly like a newly kindled fire. A cool, green radiance filled the room. The eye painted on the wall was fixed on the back of Taitaro's head. Taitaro's eyes were fixed unblinkingly on the Jewel.

Jebu expected the Tree of Life to spring up before him in all its glory. But he saw only the burning seed in Taitaro's palm. At last, as the light moved on with the passage of the moon from east to west, the Jewel ceased to glow.

Taitaro spoke, and his voice was calm and pleasant, but Jebu felt that he was hearing the voice, not of his father, but of the Self.

"You will go into the north, where the Wise One contends with the Keeper of the Hearth. You will join the Wise One, who has gathered men from many lands to serve him. You will fight for the Wise One, then you will return to the Sacred Islands. One of you will be betrayed by his own blood. The other will seem to die but live. The jewels created by Izanami and Izanagi shall be protected by the Hurricane of the Kami. Each of you will be worthy of his father."

Taitaro's voice died away. The three sat in silent meditation again for a long time.

"Take the Jewel again, Jebu," Taitaro said. Jebu stood and took the Jewel from Taitaro's hand. Taitaro rose fluidly to his feet and stretched himself casually, as if he had only been napping.

"Come," he said, "let's camp outside for the night."

Their horses tethered to a pine tree, they sat on the ground a short

distance above the entrance to the temple. Eog was beginning to fill the valley below their hill, so that they seemed to be on an island rising out of a pearly sea.

"What happened to you in there?" asked Jebu.

"It was as if I were dreaming," said Taitaro. "The words I spoke were not mine. They came to me."

"Who are the Wise One and the Keeper of the Hearth?" Jebu asked.

"Two members of the Mongol ruling family are preparing to claim the title of Great Khan-Kublai Khan and his brother, Arik Buka. Kublai Khan's grandfather, Genghis Khan, called him Sechen, which means the Wise One. Arik Buka is ruler of the Mongol homeland. His title is Keeper of the Hearth. The first part of the prophecy means that you will serve Kublai Khan. He gives high place to foreigners and has adopted many foreign ways. You will be welcome among his Banners. One wing of his army is moving westwards, south of the Great Wall. You can meet them at Lanchow, directly north of here."

"How kind of the gods-or whoever it is who prophesies with your tongue, sensei-to arrange things for me," said Yukio bitterly. "I need only get to Lanchow and there join the army of this Kublai Khan. How simple."

"What is it, Yukio?" asked Jebu softly.

Yukio shook his head. "Only twice in my life have I felt in control of my own destiny. Once when I escaped from the Rokuhara. The other, when I decided to lead this expedition to China. Whatever mistakes my father made, they were his mistakes. He was no one's plaything. I did not know what a glorious feeling that could be until the night I went over Sogamori's wall."

"And now?" said Taitaro.

"Since we left Kweilin, sensei, I've been following your son blindly. And now I am following you. Jebu decided that we must wander through Szechwan. Now you tell me I must go and fight for this Kublai Khan."

"Not must, Yukio. The path has been suggested to you, nothing more. You will find Kublai Khan a wiser and more generous lord than the Emperor of China."

"To serve Kublai Khan now is simply the best choice open to me, as you see it?"

"I thought so before," said Taitaro. "But I could not be entirely sure of it until tonight, when I had the opportunity to read the Jewel of Life and Death in this temple. Now I know. If you choose this path, Lord Yukio, it will ultimately lead you back to the Sacred Islands and to glory."

Yukio's large brown eyes seemed to glow in the moonlight. "That is the road I want to travel, sensei. I left the Sunrise Land only with the thought that I might return one day to avenge my family and overthrow our enemies. I may die on that path, but as long as I know I am on the path, I don't mind. These past months I felt I had lost my way."

"My vision tonight tells me you are on that path."

Yukio shook his head. "And yet my father told me that a military commander who pays attention to the flights of birds or the cracks in a tortoiseshell is sure to lose. He used to tap his forehead and say, 'The only auguries worth listening to are in here.' "

Taitaro nodded. "But you came to China not only to escape the

Takashi and make your fortune, but to learn more about the art of warfare. In today's world the Mongols are the masters of war. Of Kublai Khan, the Mongols say he has the military genius of his grandfather, Genghis Khan. How could you learn more than in the service of Kublai Khan?"

Yukio smiled wryly. "How foolish you make my notion seem, of getting involved in the wars between Nan Chao and Annam."

Taitaro patted Yukio's arm. "You are no man's plaything, Muratomo no Yukio. You're only twenty-five years old. You'll be a great general."

"Eorgive me, sensei, for not being more grateful to you for your efforts in my behalf." Yukio went over to the horse he had tethered near by and said, "I think I want to be alone for a while." He took his ivory flute out of his saddle case.

They watched him climb to the top of the boulder where he could see the moon sink towards the western horizon. It was the yellow moon of midsummer, not the great lantern moon of autumn. But it was beautiful enough in its way. To Jebu, the sight of Yukio seated on his boulder was reminiscent of a stone on top of a stone. Yukio raised the flute to his lips.

The tune he played was a simple country air, such as one might hear greeting the fishing boats as they sailed into Hakata Bay late in the afternoon. Yukio had not played his flute in a long time. Jebu felt his eyes grow moist. The melody made him think of home. And that reminded him of Nyosan.

"Sensei. Eather. There is something I have to ask you."

Taitaro said, "I hear the note of an impending quarrel in your voice. Couldn't you at least wait until he's finished playing?"

They were silent as Yukio's melody soared over the pines, then dipped its wings like a crane and glided to a landing. Jebu waited a moment more out of respect for the music and Taitaro's appreciation of it. Then he plunged in.

"Sensei. Many years ago you sent Mother away while you remained at the Waterfowl Temple to pursue your studies in solitude. Later you saw her at the Teak Blossom Temple, then left her again to travel to China. You have abandoned your wife, my mother. I know you to be a good man, if there is any such thing. I don't see how you could leave her alone and lonely."

Taitaro was silent for so long that Jebu began to think he was not going to answer. Einally he said, "I have had word from the Sacred Islands. Erom the Order. Your mother is dead, Jebu."

"What?" He must have mistaken Taitaro's words.

"Whatever I should or should not have done for your mother, it is too late. She is gone, my son. The best woman I ever knew."

"Did she know you thought that?" Jebu asked bitterly. He felt the tears starting to come. There had been a moment when he couldn't believe what Taitaro was saying, a moment when it seemed the old man must be posing one of his philosophical problems. But he heard the sadness in Taitaro's voice and he knew it was real. He felt as if the bottom had dropped out of his heart.

"Yes, she knew it," said Taitaro. "There wasn't much we didn't talk about."

"Except during these last years," said Jebu. "What did you have against her, that you could leave her like that?" His voice broke as he said the last few words. He put his hands to his face and sobbed.

"She and I were very close after our parting. We believed-I believe-that each of us is a manifestation of the Self. We felt that we could never be separated. I saw her in everything around me, and she, I believe, saw me in the same way."

"Monk's talk. She would have called that monk's talk. She knew the difference between a flesh-and-blood man and a manifestation of the Self."

Taitaro sighed. "She lives in you, Jebu, as she does in me."

"Yes, but that's not her, don't you see? What did she die of?"

"It is going to hurt you a great deal to hear this." Taitaro moved closer to him and spoke in a lower voice. Even though Jebu knew Nyosan was dead and nothing could hurt her any more, he felt frightened. Taitaro rested his forehead on his hand.

"Jebu, when Yukio and his army sailed from Hakata Bay it was a terrible defeat for Sogamori. His son, Kiyosi, was killed."

"I know. Kiyosi was in the bow of the lead ship, aiming an arrow at Yukio. I didn't know who it was until after I had shot him in the chest and he had fallen overboard. Moko told me."

"I had no idea it was you who had killed him."

"I suppose no one except Yukio and Moko and I know."

"Had Sogamori known it was a Zinja who killed his son, he would have felt even more justified in what he did."

Jebu's body went cold. "What did he do?"

"All that summer of the Year of the Horse he was secretly sending

infiltrators disguised as monks, merchants, and landless peasants into Kyushu. Then in the Ninth Month he sent a huge armed force across Shimonoseki Strait. Before word could reach the Teak Blossom Temple, his agents had cut off all communications and all escape routes. Ten thousand samurai surrounded the monastery buildings. Those who tried to escape were pushed back into the flames. Of course, the monks fought back, and over two thousand Takashi died, I am told. Weicho, the abbot, went down fighting. A master of the naginata, that one. The women and children took refuge in the temple building itself. They all died in the flames. It's said their screams could be heard all over Kyushu. When the fire was cold there was no one left. Every person in the temple perished."

Jebu was unable to speak for a long time after Taitaro finished. He sat there gasping, his thoughts incoherent. He felt as if someone had thrown him to the ground and beaten him with a club.

At last, he said, "My mother was burned to death?" It was both impossible to put the half-formed picture out of his mind and impossible to see it clearly. The packed bodies. The screams of women and children. The towering golden flames.

Taitaro gripped his arm. "Listen, Jebu. This world kills people in all manner of horrible ways. You are not the only person who has lost a parent by violence. You must bear this. You are a Zinja."

Jebu tried to see into Taitaro's eyes, but the moon was behind the old man's head, and his voice was in shadow. "Two parents, sensei. Two." He started to sob brokenly. He had not cried like this since Moko had told him of the death of his and Taniko's baby.

"I hate this world," he said suddenly.

"There is only this world."

"Then better to be out of it. The samurai are right to pursue death." "Neither your father nor your mother sought death. If you turn to death because they died, you'll be betraying them."

He remembered Nyosan at the Waterfowl Temple so many years ago saying, "Live, Jebu." He burst into sobs again.

"Some day I'll go back there. I'll leave a flower in the ashes of the temple. And then I'll go and kill Sogamori."

"You've already killed his son. Perhaps you can feel, a little, how Sogamori must have felt about that."

Jebu stood up, towering over Taitaro. "Oh, you're so wise, sensei. Why can't your wisdom show you how to weep for my mother?" "I have wept for her, Jebu."

Jebu wanted to kneel beside the old man and put his arms around him. But he was still angry.

"Can your wisdom tell me why you were on the other side of the world when my mother was killed? And why she had to pine for you for so many years before that?"

Taitaro spoke in a sad, yielding voice. "When you scold me for giving a higher place to monkish wisdom than to human feelings, I can almost hear your mother's voice. You are so very much like her. One day, Jebu, you will come to understand the separateness of beings. We Zinja teach the openness of all beings. Because we understand that oneness, perhaps we are able to grasp separateness better than most."

"You did love her. I know you did."

"I do love her."

"Then how could you leave her?"

"I feel I have a mission. I have had an insight, if you will. There are certain things I am called to do. The world is entering a new age. The years of solitary meditation were my preparation. My being here in China is part of my task. I know you can understand this, my son, because you have followed the same path yourself."

Jebu slowly sat down again beside Taitaro. "What do you mean?"

"My son, when last we met at the Waterfowl Temple, I didn't know everything you had been doing, nor did you have time to tell me. I always wondered if there was a woman who meant as much to you as your mother meant to me. On my brief visit to the Teak Blossom Temple before I left for China, I learned about you and the Lady Shima Taniko."

"What did you learn?" Jebu's face felt hot.

"That the very first task I sent you on, so many years ago, is a task you have never completed. That your life and the life of Lady Taniko have been linked together ever since. And yet, my son, both you and she decided long ago to go your separate ways. I suspect she means more to you than any other woman in the world does, and that you mean more to her than any other man. Yet each of you feels a destiny drawing you that makes it impossible for you to be together."

"That may be true," said Jebu.

"But she is closer to you than you realize, my son."

"More of your Zinja wisdom about seeing everybody everywhere,

sensei?"

"Not at all, Jebu-san. I mean that the Lady Taniko is here in China. She is in the household of Kublai Khan."

Chapter Twenty

The hot south wind that blew over the steppes of Mongolia all through the night wailed mournfully. The long grasses barely stirred. Eternal Heaven, worshipped by the Mongols, was utterly black, adorned with innumerable stars. Men who had wandered these wastes all their lives, as the Mongols and their ancestors had for generations beyond memory, read the stars easily.

The portents were good. "When the Northern Fish comes near the Great Dog," said Kublai's astrologers, "the khan will be mighty and his enemies overwhelmed." Tonight those two wandering stars were the closest they would be this year.

The wind's keening was barely audible above the drumming of tens of thousands of horses' hooves. Birds sleeping in the grass, alarmed by the approaching thunder, took flight. Their cries were the only voices raised over the rumbling of the oncoming horde.

The faces of the riders were bound with cloths against the wind and dust. Officers shuttled back and forth before the long lines of horse men, checking the order of the formations and passing whispered commands.

Behind the riders, ox-drawn wagon trains groaned along in the darkness, the solid wooden wheels creaking, each wagon bearing its mushroom-shaped yurt. In the centre of the rolling city of yurts lumbered black, enormous shapes. The war elephants padded over the grass, crushing it underfoot, moving more silently, despite all their bulk, than the horses or the oxen.

The host of Kublai Khan was marching northwards towards the Gobi. It was the Tenth Month of the Year of the Rat, four years since the war

between Kublai and his brother Arik Buka had begun.

Countless times over thousands of years, armies had clashed on these grassy plains. Hsiung-nu, Yueh-cheh, Turks, Tartars, Mongols, as well as races and tribes whose names were for ever lost, had battled here with one another and with the chariots and legions of China. The steppe grasses had been watered with warriors' blood and fed with their flesh. The earth was enriched with their bones.

The first pink of sunrise shone in the east. Scouts rode back to the advancing front ranks to report campfires beyond the hills to the north. Coloured lanterns, shielded so they could only be seen from one direction, signalled the Banners to halt.

Arik Buka was caught. His back was to the desert.

The yurts stopped rolling, holy men stepped forth. Shamans sacrificed sheep, Buddhist lamas spun their prayer wheels, Nestorian Christian priests chanted half-forgotten Latin over portable altars, and muezzins called their faithful to prayer. Men of every faith and of no faith at all, men of every nation from the rising to the setting of the sun, prepared their minds and bodies for battle.

In the left wing, so far across the steppes from the centre of the arm that they could not see it, rode the samurai under the command of Muratomo no Yukio, beneath the standard of the orkhon Uriangkatai. As the first sliver of crimson broke the flat line of the horizon, the samurai dismounted and bowed deeply from the waist towards the sun, towards the Sacred Islands, towards the Emperor. Glancing at Yukio, Jebu saw that his friend's eyes were glistening with tears.

Some groups of samurai performed Shinto rites of purification while others listened to the chanting of Tibetan lamas, whose words meant nothing to them but whose ceremonies gave comfort.

For those who wished, Taitaro held the Zinja equivalent of a service. It was more a philosophical discourse than a religious ritual. Taitaro repeated the sayings that had given the Zinja courage since the founding of the Order. "Your armour is your mind . . . Act, and do not concern yourself with results . . . Death is neither good nor evil."

Yukio and Jebu went to confer with the general, Uriangkatai. The orkhon was a big man, as tall as Jebu and broader. He had gathered his tuman-bashis under his standard, an iron spear with a collar made of long white horsehairs.

"Our wing will attack first," said Uriangkatai. "We face their right wing, commanded by Arghun Baghadur."

Jebu and Yukio looked at each other.

"What is it?"

"We fought Arghun at Kweilin four years ago," Jebu answered, "when we were serving the Sung Emperor."

Uriangkatai grunted. "Now you fight for a better master and he for a worse. The Great Khan has chosen to try the tulughma, the standard sweep. It's a tactic Arik Buka knows as well as we do, but he may be drawn to attack us anyway, because he has the desert behind him and nowhere to go but forward. Also, we've taken him by surprise, and he may not be aware of how strong we are. Our right wing under Bayan will lie back while the centre under the Great Khan will strike at Arik Buka's centre. The Great Khan will retreat, seemingly driven back by Arik Buka's resistance." Suddenly Jebu was reminded that Uriangkatai, ten years older than he, was the son of Subotai Baghadur, a companion of Genghis Khan's youth who became his greatest general, a master of strategy second only to the Conqueror himself.

A tuman-bashi asked, "What if Arik Buka's right attacks the Great Khan?"

"It's our job to keep their right wing occupied. When we attack Arghun, we can expect him to retreat. Remember, they're heavy cavalry. Their bows will have much longer range than ours. We'll take a lot of punishment before we can give any back. Get them moving away from us, then turn and run yourselves. Get them to chase us. That's all we have to do. Meanwhile, if Arik Buka's centre and left wing advance against the Great Khan, Bayan with all the heavy tumans will sweep around Arik Buka's flank, envelop it and crush it. Then Kublai Khan will hit them with all the strength of his centre, war elephants and all."

Jebu remembered a battle long ago at the Imperial Palace in Heian Kyo when Kiyosi's Red Dragon helmet led the feigned retreat.

"The Great Khan has promised that all the treasures piled up in Karakorum will be divided among his horde," Uriangkatai said. "That's more than fifty years' accumulated loot. If we win this, each man will be a khan in his own right."

"Generals always make everything sound easy," Yukio said as they rode back to their own ranks on their Mongol ponies. Most of the big Chinese horses on which they had left Kweilin had long since been lost, but Kublai Khan had issued them new horses from a seemingly endless supply. The steppe ponies could cover more ground, faster, than any horses in the world.

The sun was well above the horizon now. The samurai were in the vanguard of the left wing. Uriangkatai always put them in the vanguard. It was where they wanted to be. Yukio had tuman-bashi status even though he commanded far fewer than ten thousand men.

Of the original thousand samurai who had come with Yukio to China only about half were left. But there were over two thousand men fighting under Yukio, the balance made up of Chinese as well as Turks, Tartars, Tibetans, Koreans and Arabs who had joined them in the last four years.

Jebu felt the hollow sensation in his stomach that always preceded a battle. He took his position out in front of the first rank of riders. Yukio rode up and down the line, saying cheerful things, making everything sound easy. To Jebu's right rode a standard-bearer holding up a square of gold silk on which was painted a White Dragon.

The horns brayed, the saddle drums rumbled, and the samurai began to move forward. Jebu tested his mount's responsiveness to knee pressure as they trotted over the tall grass, letting the reins dangle and making the pony veer to the right, then the left as he drew his bow from his saddle case and checked its tension, pulling lightly on the string.

He mounted a rise and drew in his breath sharply. A vast carpet of white flowers with red centres filled the shallow valley before him. In the morning sun the flowers were dazzling. He had often wondered why a day of battle would sometimes be so beautiful that it was hard to think of killing or of facing your own death. Why was the world of men not more often reflected in the world around them? Today would then be a gloomy, foreboding day. Or contrariwise, why were men rarely as beautiful as the world of sun and flowers?

His horse glided through the white field and up the other side of the valley. There was the enemy. At first they were only a dust cloud on the horizon, then a long black line of horsemen brandishing lances. Rank after rank of mounted men poured towards them over the rolling meadow. Jebu felt his body bracing itself for the shock. These were heavy cavalry, and they were not retreating.

The arrows began to fly. Jebu heard screams from behind him. Some arrows whistled overhead from his side, but they fell far short of the oncoming riders.

Somewhere in those mounted ranks coming towards him was Arghun. Maybe they would meet today and settle what was between them.

"Forward at the gallop," called Yukio, riding on Jebu's right. The horns transmitted the order, and Jebu's pony and all the others along the line picked up the pace. It was the only way to get within range quickly.

But, inevitably, the attackers wheeled and began riding off in the opposite direction. In his frustration, Jebu wanted to try a shot, but he remembered the Zinja maxim, make every arrow count.

Now Arik Buka's heavy cavalrymen turned to their saddles and shot at the samurai over the rears of their horses. Men and ponies fell, screaming, all over the rolling grasslands. The devastating volley tore huge gaps in the samurai ranks.

An arrow thudded into his horse's chest. The animal fell to its knees, and Jebu flew over its head. He pulled himself into a ball in mid air. He hit the ground on his shoulders, his armour rattling, and lay on his back for a moment, stunned. Then he rolled over on his stomach and raised his head cautiously, peering through the grass.

The enemy had turned again and were coming back. Six horsemen were coming directly at him. He could feel the beat of their hooves through the soft earth under him. There was no place to hide. He decided to play dead, rolling on his side so he would be able to see.

He was surrounded by a rampart of tall grey-green grass. One of the

white flowers hung directly over his head. It had no smell. They were upon him. Through half-closed eyes he saw one rider coming at him, lance lowered. To make sure he was dead.

Jebu grabbed the lance and jammed its point into the earth, hard and fast. The rider, still holding tight to the lance, was vaulted out of his saddle. He hit the ground with a crash of his steel breastplate, while his riderless horse ran on, following the others.

The man was lying on the ground, groaning. Jebu crawled over to him and smashed his windpipe with the edge of his hand. He muttered the Prayer to a Eallen Enemy while looking around wildly to see where the other horsemen were. They were wheeling around now to see what had happened. Crouching, Jebu ran to his dead horse and pulled his bow out of his saddle case. He fired an armour-piercing arrow at one rider, who took it through the breastplate and pitched out of the saddle. Another arrow caught a man in the right shoulder, making him drop his lance and ride off. Now the three remaining warriors had their heavy crossbows out and were shooting at him. He lay behind the body of his horse, using it as a shield.

A pair of riders galloped to either side of Jebu's dead horse. Mongols never jumped their horses. Two lance points stabbed at him. He rolled away from one, but the other caught him on the unprotected inner side of his arm and tore through his left bicep. Jebu grabbed the lance as he had before, but this rider brought his horse to an instant stop. He pushed the lance point deeper into Jebu's arm, tearing through muscle, trying to pin him to the dirt.

Jebu reached into his armour-robe. Luckily the blow gun was on the left side. One dart was already in place. Jebu flicked the plugs at either end away with his right thumb, put the tube to his lips, and sent a poisoned dart into his enemy's throat. The man clawed at the dart, letting go of his lance. He had barely pulled the dart out and thrown it

to the ground when the poison began to take effect. He toppled out of his saddle and went into convulsions.

The dying man's pony danced nervously but did not run away. Jebu was in the saddle in two jumps and had the Mongol's bow out of its case, while his eyes searched the field for the two other cavalrymen. They came at him together, charging him with wild, warbling cries, sabres waving. His left arm was too badly hurt for him to draw the bow. He decided to try to outrun them.

He had no choice but to head in the least promising direction, north, towards the Gobi. A cold wind bit into his face, a strangely cold wind for midsummer. Round yellow and purple clouds towered above the horizon. Dust stung his eyes. He pulled his headcloth around to cover most of his face. The two horsemen pursuing him were gaining on him. The dust blowing in the air got thicker as he galloped northwards. Soon it was all around him in a seething yellow cloud. He could no longer see. But his pursuers couldn't see him, either.

He turned his horse to the right, heading for where he thought the centre of Kublai's army should be. He didn't want to come out of the storm in the middle of Arghun's wing. Riding with the wind blowing on his left side, he gritted his teeth against the searing pain in his arm. It hurt all the way from his fingertips to his shoulder. Blood was dripping from his hand. He slowed the pony down to a walk, ignoring the dust, and used his short sword to cut a strip from his grey cloak. He bound his arm with the strip of cloth. There would be a lot of sand in the wound, but he could wash it out later.

He turned to the right again, so that his back was to the wind. He wondered if the dust storm had brought the battle to an end. His eyes were sore, his teeth full of grit, his throat so dry it ached.

At last the wind died down, and he found himself on a stretch of

steppe that looked just like the place he had been when the dust storm arose. A Mongol would know the difference, no doubt. Riderless horses grazed over the plain or ran about in frightened confusion. Half-hidden in the tall grass, bodies lay everywhere.

A flourish of trumpets, drums and gongs reached him. A tower, gold and white, was moving northwards over the grassland. A dark host of mounted men topped a row of hills near Jebu. Mongol cavalry were advancing at a walk. He spotted Chinese war chariots, each drawn by four horses and carrying three men, and Arabs with scimitars on nervous, prancing stallions.

The moving tower came up over a ridge, revealing that it rested on a wooden platform which, in turn, was carried on the broad backs of four elephants. Jebu had seen the structure before, so it was no surprise to him. War elephants usually carried towers from which soldiers fought or commanders observed the course of battle. This one, like many things the Mongols did, was not really different, only bigger.

Erom a gilded chamber at the top of the tower Kublai Khan watched the progress of the battle. Jebu wondered how a man could stand atop a thing like that and not imagine he was a god. Perhaps Kublai did think he was a god. He seemed larger than human in his glittering helmet and armour, standing in the midst of his officers and a guard of archers.

Kublai passed on to the north. Jebu stopped an officer and asked the whereabouts of the left wing. The officer waved to the west. It was still on the left, where it would never be by this stage in most Mongol battles.

Jebu's arm no longer pained him. He had sent his mind to the wound and quenched the fire that burned there. But he needed treatment at

once. He rode to find the samurai.

Chapter Twenty-One

Most Mongol campaigns ended in a season, but this was a war between two veteran Mongol armies. It was now in its fourth year.

After proclaiming himself Great Khan in the Year of the Ape, Kublai had moved westwards from Shangtu, taking his army through the rich, pleasant countryside south of the Great Wall. Yukio and his samurai were waiting for the Mongols at Lanchow, and Yukio presented himself to the orkhon Uriangkatai as Taitaro had suggested. Kublai Khan made it a policy to have contingents from many different nations in his army, and the samurai were welcomed and attached to the left wing.

Kublai and his brother circled each other around the edge of the Gobi Desert, like samurai duelling with swords, patiently, silently moving, poised to strike instantly at the right moment. Neither of these sons of the brilliant Tuli, grandsons of the immortal Genghis Khan, could outmanoeuvre the other. At last, with winter coming on, Arik Buka withdrew to a camp far to the north of Karakorum.

Kublai left a garrison to occupy Karakorum and moved the bulk of his army south into China for the winter. With the spring floods in the Year of the Rooster, Arik Buka fell upon Karakorum and took it back.

Kublai charged north to drive his brother out of the capital. The two armies clashed on the northern edge of the Gobi and Arik Buka fled. They met again ten days later and parted after a ferocious battle in which each side suffered heavy losses. They went back to their war of patience and manoeuvre.

In the Year of the Dog, Kublai returned to China. Arik Buka turned west, invading Central Asia, where he tried to overthrow the local

khans appointed by Kublai and replace them with his own men. During that year and the Year of the Pig, Kublai let his brother deplete his strength against the many enemies he made in Turkestan, Transoxiana and Kashgaria. When Arik Buka and his army returned to Mongolia in the Year of the Rat, Kublai began to move north again.

All through the battles around the Gobi, Jebu had thought of Taniko. He would find some way to spirit her out of China. They would be together at last. But during the years of the Mongol civil war there had been no way for Jebu to get near Taniko. "Kublai Khan does not take most of his women to war with him," he had told Taitaro sadly.

Taitaro had pieced together the story of how Taniko had fallen into Kublai Khan's hands, and he had told Jebu what had happened.

Jebu sat with his fists clenched, staring at the carpet of his yurt. "Horigawa and Sogamori," he said. "One killed my child and tried to destroy Taniko. The other killed my mother. I vow that when I return to the Sacred Islands both shall die by my hand."

"That is not the attitude of a Zinja," said Taitaro. "Spend more time with the Jewel. Have you noticed how much the designs in these Persian carpets resemble the Tree of Life?"

Even when there was no fighting, Jebu was nowhere near Taniko. Eor a time Kublai Khan stationed the samurai in Suchow, south of the Gobi. During the two years that followed, Jebu and Yukio and their men, along with various Mongol tumans and other auxiliary units, were shifted from city to city in the north-west marches of Kublai's territory, wherever Kublai thought his younger brother might strike next.

Taitaro travelled with the samurai, counselling them as individuals

and in groups and helping them with their training. He took to meeting with teachers of other religions and engaging in long discussions with them. The Mongols had opened up vast territories to missionaries of all sects. No longer could a local ruler forbid preachers of a disapproved cult to enter his lands. The Mongols tolerated all religions and required their subjects to do the same. Taitaro enjoyed discussions with Moslems, Buddhists, Taoists, rabbis of the ancient Jewish community of Kaifeng, Nestorians and Roman Christians, as well as holy men of many other sects. Sometimes, as word of the religious arguments spread, they would attract large audiences.

Staging such debates was one of Kublai Khan's favourite amusements, and on one occasion the old Zinja was invited to Shangtu. The discussion held before Kublai and his entourage lasted several days, and representatives of various sects put forth their claims to possessing the only true religion. Taitaro took a position of absolute scepticism, rejecting the existence of all beings, dogmas and rules asserted by the other teachers, disproving the proofs his colleagues offered and pointing out the contradictions and absurdities in their mutually exclusive claims. His exasperated opponents frequently resorted to threatening him with a horrifying variety of painful fates in this life and the next.

One day an angry Nestorian challenged him. "You're not a priest, you're not a prophet, you're not a theologian. What the devil-and I use that word deliberately-are you?"

Taitaro spread his hands and said blandly, "I am a religious jester." Kublai Khan, present in the audience, laughed uproariously.

On occasion Taitaro met with other figures more mysterious and, to Jebu, more interesting than religious missionaries. But the old man had nothing to say about his meetings with Christian knights in black

cloaks adorned with white crosses, Moslem sages who spoke in whispers and did no preaching, and red-robed Tibetan lamas.

"It is the business of the Order," he said.

"Who are they?"

"Knights Templar, Ismaelites, Tantric lamas. And others." "Those names don't mean anything to me."

Taitaro laughed. "There is no reason why they should, Jebu-san."

When Jebu arrived at Taitaro's cart-mounted yurt at noon on the day of battle, there were wounded men crowded around it. The fame of the Zinja medicine and treatments, which Taitaro would dispense to any wounded man who came to him, had spread. Even Mongols, who would normally go to their own shamans with serious injuries, were among those clamouring for attention whenever Taitaro showed his face in the doorway. Jebu moved into the back of the crowd and waited his turn.

The men around him were talking about the battle. It was going badly. Arik Buka's left had attacked Kublai's centre and scattered it. Thousands of men and six war elephants had been killed. The Great Khan himself had nearly been captured. Arik Buka's right wing, under Arghun Baghadur, had done even more damage to Kublai's left.

"It's foolishness to attack an enemy who's as strong and cunning as we are," an old Mongol said. "At best we'll come out of this with a third of our men gone, as we did three years ago. And how many men can we afford to lose before the Chinese revolt against us?"

A younger man said, "Genghis Khan subjugated the Chinese with a far smaller army than we have now."

"The Mongols of Genghis Khan's day were worth ten of today's breed." The old Mongol sniffed contemptuously.

When Taitaro finally went to work on Jebu he asked, "What happened to the man who gave you this?"

"I got him in the throat with a poisoned dart." Jebu looked around the tent. There were Tibetan and Arab doctors helping Taitaro and watching him work. The old Zinja commanded Jebu to cut off his wounded arm mentally from his body, a technique for controlling pain. Then he poured hot water from an iron kettle into the hole the lance point had driven into Jebu's bicep. He sprinkled a mixture of finely ground herbs into the wound, then bound it tightly with a linen bandage.

"Are you going out to fight again? You shouldn't. One wound like this is enough in a day."

"Excuse me, sensei, but it's insignificant. I have heard the battle is going badly."

Taitaro shrugged. "If you live, I must change the bandage tomorrow."

It was mid-afternoon by the time Jebu found the samurai position at the end of Uriangkatai's left wing. Jebu took a horse from his string of remounts and rode out to find Yukio. His left arm throbbed and dangled uselessly at his side, though the medications Taitaro had put into the wound eased the pain.

The samurai were formed in squares, the men standing or sitting by their horses. Yukio and his officers were gathered in a circle in front of the formation, in the shade of a cart. The dust floating in the air made Jebu's throat dry and his teeth gritty.

"I thought we'd seen the last of you," said Yukio sourly. "Why don't

you stay back with your father and treat the wounded? You're no good to us if you can't pull a bow."

"After I got this wound I killed the man who gave it to me, without bow and arrow," said Jebu. "I may yet be of some use to you."

"The way this battle is going, we'll need every man we can get," said Yukio in a lower voice.

A messenger rode up. "Uriangkatai wants the samurai tuman ready for an immediate attack."

Another message came from Uriangkatai a moment later. "You are to move forward now towards the enemy's right wing. The direction of the battle has shifted. Arghun Baghadur is directly west of here, and the enemy centre is to the north-west. Advance regardless of what happens and make no feigned retreats."

"Arghun was north of us," said Yukio. "Now he's west of us. They're trying to circle around us and sweep down on us. It's his turn to try a tulughma."

The samurai surged forward in a tight line, horses shoulder-toshoulder, at Yukio's command. Looking back and gauging the distance from one end of the line to the other, Jebu could see that the line was not as long as it would have been this morning. They must have lost at least a third of their men.

The grassland over which they rode was littered with the bodies of men and horses, motionless and dust covered, as if they had been dead a long time. As they lay, dark lumps in the tall grass, it was impossible to tell whose side they had fought on.

They saw the enemy ahead, a black mass on the horizon, lances

waving in the air like blades of grass. Jebu squinted. It hurt his eyes to look at the opposing line. They were riding into the sun now. That gave them an advantage. He readied himself for the killing rain of arrows that would come from the long-range, heavy bows of Arghun's cavalry. Yukio called an order to his own men to load and prepare to fire. The order was transmitted by horn signal down the samurai line.

How different is the way we fight now, Jebu thought. No more individual samurai riding out to find somebody of good family on the other side to challenge to single combat. We manoeuvre in masses with all the precision of the Mongols themselves. We've learned from them-those of us who are still alive.

He kicked his horse into a fast trot. The distance between Arghun's line and their own had halved since they first saw the enemy. The arrows would start flying at any moment now. They were almost within bow shot.

The enemy horsemen wheeled and began riding away. Now would come the deadly flight of arrows fired while retreating. How many battles had these mounted archers won while seeming to run away? Unable to use a bow, Jebu drew his Zinja sword and waved it in the air above his head, yelling wordlessly, just to do something. The dust was so thick, his shout ended in a cough.

Still no arrows, except a few random, accidental ones that hit no one. The dark body of Arghun's riders had turned and were leading the samurai and the rest of the left wing-Jebu could see Uriangkatai's Banners stretched out over the plain to his left-to the north. Supposedly Arik Buka's centre lay that way.

The grass thinned out and the dust grew thicker. The rolling plains turned into waves of dunes stretching towards the northern horizon. The horses' hooves slid in the sand. They were in the Gobi itself now.

There were more bodies than ever on the ground. This must have been where the fighting was heaviest this morning. Jebu had to whip his pony to keep it trotting straight ahead. It kept trying to change direction to avoid stepping on bodies. Step on them, Jebu thought. They won't feel it.

"This must be an ambush," he called, forcing his mount into a neckand-neck gallop with Yukio's.

"Look at that," said Yukio. Jebu saw it a moment later, gleaming white and gold in the afternoon sun, looming above the undulating horizon. Kublai's elephant-borne tower. Before the tower came line after line of horsemen, sweeping over the desert, their ranks slightly curved like the sabre blades.

"It's Arghun who's in a trap," Yukio cried. "Kublai's centre is going to fall upon him."

But Kublai's horsemen did not attack Arghun's cavalry. Both groups formed into two wings and thundered together over the horizon.

Uriangkatai galloped up, followed by a wedge of guards. "I'm delivering this order personally to make sure you understand," the heavyset orkhon said. His face was flushed with excitement. "You are not to attack any of Arghun's units. Do you understand? No fighting with Arghun."

"What's happening?" asked Yukio.

"The Great Khan has won Arghun over to our side. They're attacking Arik Buka right now. We've won. Arik Buka is finished." He jerked his reins and started to ride off in the direction he had come from.

"What are we to do?" Yukio called after him. But Uriangkatai was too

far away to hear or reply.

Jebu said, "We should join the rest of the Great Khan's forces and attack Arik Buka."

"But that means joining Arghun and his men," said Yukio. "We can't go near them."

Jebu shrugged. "It would be a shame if Arghun were in at the kill, and we, who have followed Kublai since he proclaimed himself Great Khan, were not."

Yukio nodded and gave the order to follow Arghun's Banners over the sand dunes. The standard-bearer drew abreast of Yukio and Jebu, and the samurai followed the White Dragon banner. Yukio summoned his hundred-commanders, and as they rode together he explained Arghun's defection from Arik Buka's army. He gave orders that none of Arghun's men, where they could be recognized, were to be attacked.

They crested a dune and Jebu was surprised at the sight spread below. He had expected to find butchery in progress in the valley beyond. Arghun's heavy cavalry and Kublai's centre troops engaged with Arik Buka's centre and left. Instead, there were only heaps of dead and wounded men and horses, with bands of foot soldiers going among them and sending some into the next world while aiding others. The battle had passed this way and moved on. Mongol warfare never stayed long in one place. Kublai's elephants and tower were already on the next hill, and as Jebu watched they sank below the horizon. The sun, too, was sinking.

A troop of riders came over the north side of the valley, their horses at a walk, returning from the direction of the battle. The riders were silent. More and more of them topped the ridge. It was at least a

whole tuman. Erom the look of the steel armour of men and horses, it was one of Arghun's Banners.

"Why aren't they going after Arik Buka?" said Yukio.

A leader rode out before the heavy tuman flanked by a small group of officers. A standard-bearer held up a pole adorned with yak horns and horsetails. The leader came on at a trot, as if to parley. Yukio held up his hand to halt his own men.

The leader opposite them leaned forward in his saddle. The men behind them had their bows out. A chill spread across Jebu's back. He recognized the broad face with the long grey moustache.

"It's Torluk," Jebu said to Yukio in a low voice. Even as he spoke, Torluk raised his arm and brought it down in a chopping motion. The archers behind him raised their bows and fired.

Chapter Twenty-Two

There was no time to see how many samurai, all unprepared, fell under that volley. Torluk drew his sabre from behind his back and with a wild bellow kicked his grey horse into a gallop straight at Jebu. Jebu lowered his lance, bracing it against his right side, steadying it with his nearly useless left arm.

Torluk shifted in the saddle to avoid a straight-on impact with the lance. The point slid off the curve of his steel breastplate. Roaring, the Mongol tuman-bashi swung his sabre at Jebu's head. Jebu caught the blade on his lance pole. The sabre cut the lance in two but stopped short of hitting Jebu.

Jebu gripped the front half of the lance with his right hand. Like all Mongol lances, it had a hook just behind the point. He swung the hook and caught the armhole of Torluk's breastplate. Detached, Jebu's mind observed with wonder how well the Self defended him. Torluk went one way as his horse went the other. The Mongol crashed to the ground on his stomach. Jebu let go of the broken lance and let it fall with Torluk. He drew his sword.

Momentarily unthreatened, Jebu felt one with the pattern of battle that cast a network over the valley. Everywhere he looked, horsemen were locked in single combat. The Mongols had abandoned their usual style of fighting in masses with bow and arrow from a distance, and had closed with the samurai. They're trying to wipe us out, he thought. Arghun had sent a whole tuman, ten thousand men, not just to kill Jebu, but to destroy all the samurai.

Still, he felt light, free from fear. He felt marvellous. He would act, he would fight. He didn't care whether he won or lost, lived or died. Even the pain in his arm did not bother him.

A huge warrior thundered down on him, swinging the iron ball of a mace at his head. Jebu had just time to bring up his sword. The handle of the mace cut itself in two against the edge of the Zinja sword. The heavy ball, undeflected, crashed against Jebu's helmet. He felt no pain.

Jebu felt much pain when he came to. His face was pressed into the sand, covered with dust, and more dust clogged his nostrils. Shafts of agony shot through his back and chest with every breath. He must have been trampled by horses. His Zinja training kept him motionless, barely breathing.

No light penetrated his closed eyelids. It must be night, he thought. He heard the clip-clop of hooves walking slowly, the crunching steps and low voices of men. He heard the sounds he always heard after a battle, mostly the cries and groans of the wounded. Bodies that had been young, strong and healthy a few hours ago, now ruined. The battle was either over or had moved to another part of the field.

He moved his consciousness slowly from one part of his body to another, starting with his toes and working upwards over his legs, his torso, his arms and his head. An ability to diagnose one's own wounds was a basic Zinja skill. He let himself breathe a little more deeply. He could detect no bubbling sound in his chest. He was fairly certain there were ribs broken, but they had not pierced his lungs, the most dangerous possibility.

Nearby there were screams, shouts of rage, the thunk of a sword chopping through flesh and bone. The killer squads were going through the field executing wounded enemies. A voice crazed with pain babbled in the language of the Sunrise Land. Again the chopping sound and the voice was still.

They must be Torluk's men, doing the killing. They were coming closer. His hands were empty. He had to find a weapon. Every muscle in his body ached to move. Stop this, he told himself. Stop thinking, stop wanting. Rely on the Self. With armed enemies walking towards him it was difficult, but he made his mind a blank and kept still.

Then they were standing over him. "Recognize that grey robe over the armour? It's the monk, all right. The one the tuman-bashi wants."

"He looks dead," said another voice.

Eingertips felt Jebu's neck for a pulse. Instantly, still without thinking, he grabbed the hand touching him, heaved up with his back, and threw the man forward over his head. Only then did he realize he had used his wounded left arm. He grabbed for the sword arm, sprang to his feet, and stamped on the man's arm, breaking it and freeing the sabre.

As he seized the sabre and raised it to protect himself, he let out a cry somewhere between a scream and a groan. His sudden, enormous effort unleashed hideous agony throughout his body. It was as if a dozen red-hot lance points had been driven into him from every direction. He staggered a step, and then a veil of blackness fell over his eyes. He had barely time to see three of Torluk's men facing him, sabres poised, when he pitched forward into the desert sand.

A Zinja does not faint, he told himself. I'm a dead man now, for certain.

He woke to more pain. He was lying on his back, and a flexing of his tortured muscles told him his arms and legs were bound with ropes. He had been awakened by someone splashing water on his face. He opened his eyes, blinked them against torchlight, and saw Torluk

and Arghun looking down at him.

"Is this the one?" Torluk said in Mongolian. His chest was bare except for a thick swathing of cloth strips around his middle. Perhaps he, too, had broken a few ribs when he fell from his horse.

"It is," Arghun whispered. It was almost five years since Jebu last saw Arghun Baghadur. The red of his moustache was streaked with grey. The lines in his face and especially around his slitted blue eyes were deeper. The eyes were as empty of feeling as ever.

"Did you betray Arik Buka just to get at me?" Jebu asked him.

Arghun shook his head. "I left Arik Buka's service for the same reason I am going to kill you. Because I serve the spirit of Genghis Khan. Roll him over."

Two men grasped Jebu's right side and lifted him. He groaned in spite of himself.

"Don't cause him unnecessary pain," Arghun said. "He is a brave man." They pushed him over and let him fall on his stomach. "That's why I had you awakened, Jebu," Arghun continued. "It is a bad death, to die unconscious and not know the manner or reason of your dying. I want you to know that it is I who am killing you, in obedience to the will of Genghis Khan. I told you once before that I would avoid shedding your blood." He turned to one of his men. "Give me your bow."

"Let me get up to fight you, if you want me to die well," Jebu said. Arghun laughed as he crouched over Jebu. "I'm many years older than you are."

"I'm wounded. My left arm is useless. My ribs are broken. It would be a fair fight." Why am I talking to him like this? Why don't I just let him

kill me and have done with it? Something, the Self perhaps, wanted him to prolong his life as much as possible. But a Zinja does not care whether he lives or dies.

Arghun pressed one knee into Jebu's back and slipped the double-curved, compound bow over his head. He pulled the rawhide cord against Jebu's throat and turned the bow. The string cut into Jebu's neck like the edge of a sword. The tension of the bow pulled the string tight around his neck with a strength equal to that of two men pulling on each end of it. His lungs screamed for air. His windpipe was closed. Arghun gave the bow another turn. Jebu's head felt as if it were going to burst.

Through the dizziness and the ringing in his ears he heard voices. The bowstring tightened again, viciously. Consciousness faded-and returned in moments. The merciless rawhide cord was gone from his neck. Arghun's weight was off his back. Breath, never so sweet, whistled through his tortured throat.

Someone was kneeling beside him, cutting the ropes that held him. Yukio.

"We got to you. By the favour of Hachiman, we got to you in time."

A shout made Jebu turn his head. He gasped at the sudden pain in his throat and neck. The shout was Arghun's. He was standing face-to-face with Uriangkatai. Both big men had their fists clenched and their shoulders hunched.

"You will die, I swear by Eternal Heaven, you will die for striking me," Arghun roared.

"You are twice a traitor, Arghun," Uriangkatai replied in an even tone. "Once to your lord Arik Buka, and now to your lord Kublai Khan. You

ordered a tuman of your division to attack our men from Ge-pen. By Eternal Heaven, it is you who will pay for the needless deaths of hundreds of my warriors."

"They were foreigners," said Arghun contemptuously.

"They were soldiers of the Great Khan. They were under my command. You will answer to him and to me for the loss of their lives."

"Then I will answer for one more life as well," said Arghun, drawing his sabre and turning towards Jebu. Yukio leaped to his feet and stood before Jebu's body, his samurai sword gripped in both hands, poised to strike.

Uriangkatai raised his hand. "Stop, Arghun. If I let my hand fall, the men with me will fill you with arrows." The desert ridge was lined with crossbowmen, their weapons pointed at Arghun.

The turkhan exhaled slowly, relaxed, and put away his sword. It must be enough to drive him mad, Jebu thought, to come so close to killing me after all these years, and then to be stopped short.

Arghun turned back to Uriangkatai. Pointing to Jebu he said, "Understand, Uriangkatai, it is the will of Genghis Khan that this monk die. He is the son of Jamuga, the worst enemy of the Conqueror's youth. Do you think your father Subotai would have interfered with one carrying out the yarligh of Genghis Khan?"

"It is the will of Genghis Khan that fighting among the men of the ordu be punished by death. How much more are we obligated to kill a commander who starts a war among men on his own side. That is written in the Yassa of Genghis Khan."

"Uriangkatai, tens of thousands of men have fallen today. It is foolish

for an orkhon and a tarkhan to quarrel over this one."

"If this one life is so insignificant, why did you order your men to attack my men, killing hundreds? Let the Great Khan judge the rights and wrongs of this." Uriangkatai pointed to two of the warriors with him. "Make a litter for the monk Jebu and take him to a wagon."

"Kill the monk," Arghun shouted, turning to Torluk and the men behind him. "Shoot him. Kill him now."

Uriangkatai turned to his own men and called, "Shoot any man who touches his bow."

Torluk and the men of his tuman remained motionless.

"Torluk, do you disobey me?" said Arghun wonderingly.

There were tears in Torluk's eyes. "I have followed you since we both were boys in the army of the Conqueror. But if we fire now and

Uriangkatai's men fire back it will be war. We deserted Arik Buka and went over to Kublai Khan because this war must end, or everything Genghis Khan built will lie in ruins. Now you ask me to begin the war again." Torluk knelt. "Eorgive me, tarkhan, for not obeying you. But the orkhon Uriangkatai is right. Take this question to Kublai Khan."

Arghun's eyes were those of a tiger at bay. "You give me no choice. We will go to Kublai Khan for judgment."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Two samurai lifted Jebu down from Taitaro's cart and carried him on a litter to join Uriangkatai's party before the Great Khan's tent. Taitaro walked beside the litter. Torches tied to tall poles illuminated the area around Kublai Khan's huge white yurt. The tent was surrounded by a hollow square of guards, one hundred men on a side and four deep. Eor two of the most prominent generals in the Great Khan's ordu, the guards immediately parted, but the message sent into the yurt brought no invitation to enter. Instead Kublai Khan's chief adviser, the Chinese scholar Yao Chow, came out waving his long, slender hands and shaking his head.

"A thousand pardons, son of Subotai," said Yao Chow, bowing to Uriangkatai. "The Great Khan is holding council. He desires both you and Arghun Baghadur to be present, but not to bring a quarrel to him."

Uriangkatai said, "Yao Chow, tell the Great Khan war may break out again, here and now, if this matter between Arghun and me is not settled."

Yao Chow turned a worried eye on the groups of men that had come with the two leaders. "How many of you must enter? The Great Khan's yurt is already filled to overflowing."

Uriangkatai said, "For my part, the tuman-bashi Yukio, the monk Jebu and the older monk Taitaro to attend Jebu." He pointed to Jebu, who lay under blankets in a state of deep exhaustion, barely able to stay conscious. His crushed throat felt as if he had swallowed hot coals. Each breath, each heartbeat, was agony in his chest and back. Taitaro had treated him hastily on the wagon ride to Kublai Khan's headquarters, stripping off his armour, taping his chest and

giving him a hot liquid infused with herbs for his throat. As a boy Jebu had been taught to hang by his hands for hours. The same sort of will now enabled him to cling to wakefulness.

Arghun said, "I need only the tuman-bashi Torluk."

Yao Chow nodded. "Those of you who are entering the Great Khan's tent, disarm yourselves and give your weapons to the guards. I will ask his permission again."

While they waited, Uriangkatai said to Arghun, "Look there, tar khan. See where Arik Buka kneels in surrender. When we go into the Great Khan's yurt you must pass the lord you betrayed. Can you face him?"

The wooden door of Kublai Khan's yurt was open. Above it a flap which could be fastened across the door to seal it against wind and dust was raised on two poles to form a kind of canopy. Under this canopy a man knelt. Even kneeling, he was clearly tall. His head, shaved in the centre, Mongol fashion, was a dark brown. The braids that hung down to his shoulders were black. His belt was draped over the back of his neck in token of submission. Guards with lances stood on either side of him.

Arghun glared back at Uriangkatai. "I have been obedient to the will of Eternal Heaven and the spirit of Genghis Khan. There is no man I cannot face."

Yao Chow returned with word that they were to enter the Great Khan's yurt. Uriangkatai went first, followed by Arghun. Arik Buka raised his eyes as Arghun approached.

"I kneel here thanks to your treachery," Arik Buka said reproachfully. "Of all my tarkhans you were the one I thought I could trust to the

end."

Arghun answered coldly, "My loyalty is to the legacy your grandfather left the Mongols. I believed you were best suited to be Great Khan because you upheld the old ways. But I was wrong. You are a tiger, but Kublai is both tiger and fox. I should have remembered the words of the Ancestor: Kublai is the wisest of his seed. Now I have corrected my mistake." He turned away and strode through the doorway of the white yurt. Torluk followed Uriangkatai. Jebu, carried by Taitaro and Yukio, brought up the rear.

Kublai Khan, wearing a red satin robe embroidered with jewelled dragons, sat on a golden throne in the host's quarter of his tent, which was a mobile palace, four times the size of an ordinary yurt, walls and ceiling lined with cloth of gold. In chairs around Kublai sat his orkhons and tarkhans, the officers who had won the day for him. The rest of the yurt was packed with lesser officers, some sitting on benches or cushions, most standing. Slaves passed among them with trays of meat and vessels full of wine and kumiss. It was as much a victory feat as a council. The hum of conversation died as Uriangkatai and Arghun entered.

The men made a space near the centre poles for Jebu's litter. They watched curiously as Taitaro and the other samurai set him down. The golden ceiling seemed to be rotating slowly around the centre pole. Jebu blinked his eyes hard to make it stop.

Kublai's round face was flushed, his brilliant black eyes had a wild look. This was the closest Jebu had ever come to him. The family resemblance to Arik Buka was immediately apparent, but Kublai was older and had a good deal more flesh on his bones. He wore his beard and moustache long in the Chinese manner.

"What delayed you, Uriangkatai?" he said in a resonant voice that

filled the silence. "And you, Arghun Baghadur? The battle has been over since sunset. I needed you here. And what's this about a dispute between you? Tonight of all nights I have no time for petty quarrels."

"This is not a petty dispute, my Khan," said Arghun in a voice as powerful as Kublai's. "It concerns a command of Genghis Khan himself."

"My Ancestor gave many commands," said Kublai. "Some were more important than others. He said a Mongol should get drunk no more than three times a month. That is a command every Mongol disobeys twenty times a month." He drained a golden goblet decorated with rubies and emeralds, and his officers laughed. "Do you recognize this throne, Arghun? It is the same throne on which my father, Tuli, Master of War, sat while he directed the siege of Merv. Were you at Merv, Arghun?"

"I was a boy in one of your father's Banners, my Khan."

"I found this throne in my brother's tent when we sacked his camp. What do you suppose he would have done with it, Arghun, if he had won this battle? Was he going to sit on it and watch while the vanquished were brought before him and executed?"

"Your brother loves tradition, my Khan." Some of the officers chuckled.

Arghun is getting the better of this whole discussion, Jebu thought. Why doesn't Uriangkatai speak up? If Kublai decides in Arghun's favour, Arghun will kill me, and no one can stop him. It's out of my hands now. The Self, working through these Mongols, will decide whether I live or die. Of course, that in me which is the Self will live for ever in any case. I'm so tired, I don't care what they decide, as long

as there is an end to this.

"Tomorrow I will sit on an open-air platform on this throne and my tradition-loving brother and his tradition-loving councillors and officers will be brought to me, and I will sentence them to death," Kublai went on. "Not my brother. Him I will keep beside me for the rest of his life as my-guest. But the rest of them, those who led my brother astray, will be suffocated under piles of felt. Think, Arghun Baghadur. That would have been your fate as well, had you not wisely chosen to give your allegiance to me."

"I think not, my Khan," said Arghun, standing tall before Kublai and gazing bleakly at him. "If I had not come over to your side, you would not have won this battle." A shocked, resentful murmur rose among Kublai's men. Kublai himself only smiled and nodded.

"You will find, Arghun Baghadur, that I know how to remember a friend." He turned suddenly to the orkhon Uriangkatai. "Son of Subotai, only now do you give me a chance to thank you for your part in this day's victory. What is this dispute you bring to me for judgment?"

Uriangkatai drew himself up. He was as tall as Arghun, but much heavier. "My Khan, Arghun ordered one of his tumans under Torluk here to attack your left wing today after he had changed sides, while we fought the final battle with your brother. Hundreds of your men were killed. It was treachery, murder and an utter desecration of the Yassa."

Jebu could not imagine anyone talking to the Emperor in Heian Kyo the way Arghun and Uriangkatai talked to Kublai Khan. These generals were barely polite to their Great Khan. They argued with him, bantered with him, lectured him. And yet Kublai Khan ruled a territory thousands of times larger than the Sacred Islands.

Kublai turned to Torluk. "I remember you. You came to the kuriltai at Shangtu four years ago and warned me not to accept the title of Great Khan. What was your part in this?"

Arghun said, "My Khan, at my command he attacked the troops from the Land of the Dwarfs."

"I spoke to Torluk," Kublai said gently.

Torluk said, "My Khan, it is as my commander says. He ordered me to withdraw my tuman from the fighting against Arik Buka's centre, turn back and attack the foreign dwarfs, who were following us. I was particularly to make certain that the monk, that man on the litter there, was killed."

Kublai looked thoughtfully at Jebu. "I have seen him before. He rides with the dwarfs, but he is no dwarf himself. He looks like one of us. Why did you send a tuman to kill him, Arghun?"

Arghun looked at Jebu, his fingers twitching as if he were about to leap on him and try to kill him then and there. "My Khan, this monk is the son of Jamuga the Cunning." He paused, as if this were all he needed to say. The assembled officers murmured among themselves.

"I thought Jamuga's family had long since been wiped out," said Kublai. "Monk, was Jamuga your father?"

"He was, my Khan," Jebu whispered. Kublai leaned forward on his golden throne, frowning.

Taitaro called out, "He was choked with a bowstring and finds it difficult to speak, my Khan. He admits that Jamuga was his father."

Kublai smiled. "You are the religious jester, are you not? What is your part in this quarrel?"

"I am from the Sunrise Land, may it please the Great Khan, and this monk is my foster son."

"Eascinating," said Kublai. He set his golden goblet down on the arm of his throne. "Arghun, did you order Torluk and his ten thousand to attack my warriors from the-the Sunrise Land-just to kill this son of Jamuga?"

"I did, my Khan. Three times before this I tried to kill him, and he escaped me. I had to make sure of him this time. I knew his countrymen would try to protect him. Only by attacking with overwhelming force could I make certain of carrying out your grandfather's command."

Kublai raised his eyebrows and folded his hands across his imposing belly. "Even that, it seems, was not enough. Arghun, my grandfather told me the story of Jamuga, but that was many years ago. There must be some here who never heard of him. You must refresh our memories. In what way did Jamuga offend my Ancestor?"

Arghun bowed. "My Khan, Jamuga the Cunning was the worst enemy your Ancestor ever had. At first, he was one of his best friends. Indeed, he was your Ancestor's cousin. When your Ancestor was known as Temujin, Jamuga was his anda, his blood brother. He saved your grandfather's life many times. But in the end he betrayed him.

"Jamuga lived among the people who herded sheep and goats, the poor ones of our land. Temujin was of the Yakka Mongols, the horse herders who had always been the nobility among us. When Temujin fought against the other tribes and made all submit to him, Jamuga

allied his followers with those of Temujin. But Jamuga told his people that after Temujin had united the tribes he would make a new nation in which all would be equal. The horse breeders would sit down with the goatherds and the shepherds, and all would live in peace with one another. The nations on our borders would leave us alone because we were strong and united.

"Temujin had a different vision. He did end the lordship of horse breeder over shepherd, but he replaced it with the rule of the Great Khan over all other khans, and the princes and generals over their tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands. He made war on the nations on our borders and took their wealth for us."

"If we had followed the dream of Jamuga, all Mongols would be equal but poor," said Kublai with a smile. "Because we followed the vision of my Ancestor, all Mongols are unequal but rich." There was a rumble of approval from the assembled officers.

Arghun continued. "When Temujin held a kuriltai and was proclaimed Genghis Khan, Jamuga gathered the tribes who resented Temujin and had himself proclaimed Gur-Khan, Universal Ruler, of Mongolia. He raised a civil war against Genghis Khan and drew powerful enemies, the Merkits, the Keraits and the Naiman, into war with our new nation. Temujin had not been in so much danger since the days when his father was poisoned and he himself forced to wear the wooden yoke of a slave.

"Genghis Khan and the forces brought together by Jamuga fought a great battle at Koyitan. The horde of Jamuga was destroyed, but he escaped. Genghis Khan sentenced Jamuga and all his family to death, down to the tiniest infant. Jamuga's wife and children were slain, his uncles and cousins, his brothers and their wives and children. The

Khan decreed that all the men of Jamuga's tribe be slain, and all the male children higher than a cart wheel. All the women and smaller children were sold into slavery. That tribe ceased to exist.

"Eor years afterwards Jamuga fled from nation to nation, doing what he could to turn them against Genghis Khan, warning them against the power of the Mongols, urging them to make war against his blood brother, fighting in their armies when they did. He went among the Kin of Northern China, the Black Cathayans, the Khwaresmians, the Hsi-Hsia, always hoping that at last he would find a power strong enough to defeat Genghis Khan. He never did. All those nations were conquered. Several times we learned that Jamuga had sired children in the lands to which he had fled. These were found and slain."

Taitaro knelt beside Jebu and whispered, "Now you know what sort of man your father was."

Jebu felt a lifting at the very core of his being. No one here thought well of his father, that was plain enough. But Jamuga the Cunning was indeed the sort of man Jebu could admire, one who believed that the shepherd was as good as the horse breeder and was willing to give his life to that belief. One who could not be crushed, but who tenaciously fought back against a power that seemed invincible. Were his body not so broken and exhausted, Jebu would have rejoiced.

His mind wandered with the pain and fatigue. He saw once again his initiation vision. Now, at least partly, he knew what it meant. He had seen this land of China, the Great Wall, the Mongol hordes sweeping over it. And he knew, now, who the giant was who had welcomed him as "little cousin." It was the one Jamuga had spent his life fighting, the one who had decreed death for both Jebu and Jamuga, the one Kublai Khan called his Ancestor-Genghis Khan.

Arghun went on. "After the conquest of northern China, Genghis Khan got word that Jamuga had fled to Korea. I was by this time a young man. I had served since boyhood in the armies of the Khan. I came to his attention for deeds in battle. In his generosity he honoured me with the title Baghadur, Valiant. He laid the task on me, 'Slay Jamuga and all of his seed. Let none survive.' He sent me to Korea, where I searched for Jamuga and found he had sailed to the eastern island kingdom which we call the Land of the Dwarfs. I embarked for Kyushu, the southernmost of those islands, which is nearest to Korea. Disguised as a wandering Buddhist monk, I followed Jamuga's trail. He was not an easy man for people to forget. I caught up with him, fought him and slew him. But I found out that in the five years he had been living among the dwarfs he had taken a wife and fathered a son."

Arghun's words made Jebu think of Nyosan. In those days she had been known as the loveliest young woman in that part of Kyushu. Now she was dead, burned to death by the Takashi. A stab of anguish went through him and a sob almost escaped his lips. He rubbed his eyes with his right hand. His left arm was nearly paralysed. He was so tired. If only this would end.

"Jamuga had put the son in a monastery of Zinja monks. I went there and that old man, the one standing beside the monk Jebu, had taken the infant under his protection. I was alone, and the warrior monks drove me off. I took Jamuga's head back to Genghis Khan.

"In the reign of the Great Khan Kuyuk, son of Ogodai, I went back to the eastern islands and tracked Jamuga's son, the monk called Jebu, to that same Zinja temple on the island of Kyushu, where he was staying with his foster father. We fought, but he escaped.

"The Great Khan Kuyuk died and I returned to the homeland. In his

war with the Sung empire your brother, the Great Khan Mangu, made me tarkhan over the army in the south. I found the city of Kweilin defended by a contingent of the dwarf warriors, among them the monk Jebu. I believed that sooner or later the city must fall, and I would have my opportunity to kill him. Again Eternal Heaven decreed otherwise. Upon the death of the Great Khan Mangu the siege had to be ended."

"Yes," said Kublai Khan dryly. "You were in great haste to march your army back to Karakorum to persuade my brother to declare himself Great Khan and deprive me of the title. This is an amazing story, Arghun. Eor over thirty years you have been trying to carry out this command of my grandfather's with no success. Lucky for you my Ancestor has gone to the next world. Imagine what he would do to an officer who took thirty years to carry out an order and still failed."

All the officers laughed, including Uriangkatai, Yukio and Taitaro. Even Jebu painfully managed a smile. Arghun stood still, bearing the ridicule with set face.

Kublai turned to Uriangkatai. "Now that you know of my Ancestor's command to Arghun, do you feel he was justified in attacking your foreign troops?"

Uriangkatai held his hands out, palms up in appeal. "My Khan, my father, Subotai, was said to be Genghis Khan's greatest general. I rode at his side for many years. One rule he drilled into me was never to waste the lives of your men. If Genghis Khan thought a general was throwing men away needlessly, he would break him down to the ranks. Arghun claims he had the right to attack and kill hundreds of your warriors. Many of his own men died in that attack as well. He wasted Mongol lives as well as foreign ones."

"Do you say that a yarligh of Genghis Khan may be neglected,

Uriangkatai?" Arghun roared.

Uriangkatai hesitated, frowning. "All commandments of the Conqueror must be honoured. But the price we have paid today-" He shook his head. "It is high. Too high."

In a calmer tone Arghun said, "The price is almost paid." He turned to Kublai and held up a finger. "One more life. Let me kill the monk Jebu, and your Ancestor's spirit will be appeased."

Jebu felt Yukio and Taitaro, standing above him, tense themselves. He himself had barely been able to follow the argument, but it seemed to him that Arghun had won his point. To the Mongols, what was one foreign life, more or less? Doubtless, to settle this dispute, Kublai would decree his death.

Chapter Twenty-Four

All eyes in the huge yurt were turned upon Kublai now. The big, dark man sat on his golden throne with his hands clasped across his belly, and smiled faintly. Except for his beard, he reminded Jebu of statues of the Buddha. After a long silence, he looked about him, raising his eyebrows.

"Has anyone anything further to say?" His voice was deep, pleasant. It rolled smoothly through the room like a great river.

Jebu wondered, did Taniko love this man? She had loved Kiyosi, and Kublai Khan had as many admirable qualities. I killed one man she loved, and now a man she may love is going to kill me. That is a kind of justice.

"Then hear my judgment." Kublai went on. "Arghun, there were many ways you could have carried out my Ancestor's commandment, You could simply have waited until this all-important battle was over. then come to me. Instead you chose a way that cost many lives. You ordered warriors of mine to attack other warriors of mine. This was an intolerable breach of the Yassa. It is obvious to me that you chose this surprise attack because you were not sure I would let you kill the monk Jebu. You did not trust me."

Arghun opened his mouth, and Kublai held up a hand. "Be silent. You are going to say that you acted in good faith to fulfil the commandment of Genghis Khan. Let me remind you that Genghis Khar has been dead for thirty-seven years." A surprised murmur arose it the room, and Kublai allowed it to die down before he continued.

"I ask you, Arghun-I ask all of you-are we to obey the last word

Genghis Khan spoke on every subject? Might he not say another word if he were alive? He was my grandfather. I sat on his knee. I rode before him on his horse. I knew the very smell of Genghis Khan. One thing I remember about him, even if no one else does. It was impossible to guess what he was going to do next. He was loyal to friends and he never broke treaties. But he was never bound by his past ideas He was able to learn and change. Now that he is dead, are we to stop learning? Is every man who says he has a word straight from the lips of my grandfather to make himself my master? My grandfather woulc have been the first to laugh at such foolishness. If Genghis Khan were alive today I would bow down before him and obey him. But he is not alive, and I will not bow down before any man who tells me he knows what Genghis Khan would have commanded. If I did that I would be a fool and not worthy to be Great Khan. If he were alive, would my grandfather think it good that hundreds of men were killed today so that Arghun could take one life- or try to? We do not know, so I must ask myself what I think about it.

"My brother, Arik Buka, raised his standard against me because he knew that if I were made Great Khan, many things would change. Arghun, you were one of those who encouraged Arik Buka to rebel against me, because you, too, were against change. You brought your Banner over to me, but you do not truly submit to me as Great Khan. You still want me to do what you think my grandfather would have done. I tell you, Arghun, that the Great Khan can take orders from no one except the Great Khan.

"This is my judgment. It would be right for me to order your death, Arghun, for causing warfare among my troops. If you stood before any of the Great Khans who preceded me, I am certain they would have had you taken out and strangled. But I will not order your death because you are valuable to me. You brought me a host, and you turned the tide of battle today. I told you I know how to remember a friend."

Kublai turned to Uriangkatai. "You could, like Arghun, have mistrusted my justice and sought redress for your grievances on the battlefield. If you had done that, we would have lost everything we gained in today's victory. I uphold all your accusations against Arghun. I give you the power of life and death over him. The men he killed were under your command. You have the right of vengeance if you want it. You know that I do not wish to have Arghun killed. But I give you final say in the matter, Uriangkatai. Shall Arghun live or die?"

Uriangkatai was silent for a long moment before he replied. "I owe it to my men who were killed and to their families to have justice. I, too, believe Arghun deserves death. But the Great Khan's wisdom surpasses mine. If you wish Arghun to live, my Khan, so be it."

"You have acted wisely and well again and again today, Uriangkatai," said Kublai delightedly. "You are a worthy son of your illustrious father." He paused, and cheers rang through the yurt. Uriangkatai's broad face reddened, and Arghun stood stolid, expressionless.

"Now we come to this monk," Kublai said. "He is the son of Jamuga, and Arghun says Genghis Khan decreed death for all Jamuga's seed. This monk is the son of Jamuga by blood, but he never knew Jamuga. His true father is the old monk who stands there with him, one who has lent his wisdom to my religious debates. Eor over four years this Jebu has served me faithfully and well along with the little band of his countrymen under the tuman-bashi Yukio. Eor that I owe him the same loyalty and protection any of my warriors deserves from me. Eurthermore, he is a man of religion, and the Yassa forbids us to injure holy men of any faith.

"I decree that my grandfather's order condemning the family of

Jamuga is rescinded. The monk Jebu is to live. Arghun, you are forbidden to harm him. I issue this command to show the world that I am Great Khan and take orders from no one, not even my most illustrious Ancestor, and certainly not from Arghun Baghadur."

Kublai Khan's assembled officers greeted his judgment with a mixture of murmurs of approval and mutterings of disagreement. Arghun stood silent, his head, adorned with greying red braids, held high, his shoulders back. Kublai fixed his penetrating black eyes on Arghun,

waiting for the tarkhan to speak.

At last Arghun said, "I have done no wrong, my Khan. Eor more than thirty years I have kept faith with the Conqueror."

Yukio whispered to Taitaro, "He should cut his belly open. He has no other choice."

Taitaro shook his head. "They don't do that here."

Kublai said, "Let it be understood that your long and relentless pursuit of Jamuga's sole surviving offspring is altogether to your honour, Arghun."

Arghun said, "The spirit of Genghis Khan resides in the banner of the nine yak tails. Who will appease his spirit? He once said, 'My sons and their sons with clothe themselves in embroidered gold stuffs. They will eat sweet foods and meats, and will ride splendid chargers. They will press in their arms young and beautiful women, and they will forget that they owe all these desirable things to us.' He spoke truly."

Kublai Khan shook his head. "You have understood nothing I said, Arghun Baghadur. The spirit of Genghis Khan that lives in the standard of our nation will be appeased because the Mongols have

a living leader who does not submit to dead words. I wish I could trust you to serve me faithfully as you served my grandfather. But you turned on Arik Buka, and I know you will turn on me if I fall short of your expectations. Your only loyalty is to the empire itself, not to any man, but to a vision. In that way you are like Jamuga, the man you killed so long ago. That makes you a dangerous man. Perhaps I should have you killed, but I think that I may yet find a way to use you. Eor now, stop scolding me and get out of my sight."

Arghun turned, his eyes shining with a cold light, like the sun reflected on ice. He did not look at Jebu, but Yukio and Taitaro tensed themselves as he went by them.

"Bring the monk forward," Kublai Khan said. "I want to talk with this remarkable Jebu."

Yukio reached down to grasp the litter, but Jebu held his arm. Sick, exhausted, wounded as he was, Jebu had conceived a plan that pumped new life into his pain-racked body. He would ask the Great Khan to release Taniko.

It might mean death for both of them. It was likely, at the very least, that Kublai would refuse. But Jebu would never have a better opportunity to get her away from the Great Khan than now.

"Help me up," he whispered to Yukio. He could not approach Kublai Khan as a weakling on a litter. He had to face him standing on his feet.

"You can't stand up," said Yukio. Jebu turned to Taitaro who looked back at Jebu and said nothing.

"Help me up, I said." He pushed against the litter, gritting his teeth against the pain in his broken ribs. Seeing that he was determined,

Yukio crouched down, threw Jebu's right arm over his shoulder, and lifted him to his feet. Taitaro moved in quietly on Jebu's other side and put his arm around Jebu's waist. With the man in the middle towering over the other two, they moved forward together.

Erom the men around him Jebu could hear grunts of approval and words of praise. The Mongols admired strength and endurance.

Kublai Khan's face wavered in Jebu's sight. The glitter from the golden throne, lit by hanging lamps, hurt his eyes. To walk the few steps from the litter to stand before the Great Khan seemed as painful an ordeal in its way as Jebu's initiation into the Zinja, years ago. He started to bend to prostrate himself. Taitaro and Yukio thought he was fainting and caught him. Kublai looked into his eyes and held up his hand.

"No need for you to bow, monk. Come back when you have healed, and you can prostrate yourself nine times, as is our custom. You are a strong, brave warrior. I can well believe your father was a Mongol. If I could not tell it just by looking at you, I would know it from your deeds." The men around Kublai and Jebu rumbled their agreement.

"If I stand before you alive tonight it is the training of my Order I must thank, as well as my Mongol blood," said Jebu hoarsely.

"Your Order interests me," said Kublai. "We Mongols need better answers to the everlasting questions about life and the world and the gods than our shamans can give us."

Jebu shrugged. "We Zinja do not worship, my Khan." The torn muscles of his left arm throbbed without respite.

"No gods at all? What a bleak existence. I wonder how you can be such fierce fighters without any gods. The most ferocious warriors

we've encountered have been the believers in one god, like ourselves and the Moslems and the Christians. But we will discuss religion, perhaps, when you're better. Tonight I tell you I am sorry I've failed to render you full justice."

"In sparing my life you have been amply just to me, my Khan," said Jebu. But Kublai Khan's words gave him hope that the Khan would listen with favour to his petition. Jebu's heart beat faster.

"Yukio," said Kublai Khan. "How many men did you lose before Uriangkatai stopped the fighting between your men and Torluk's?" Yukio bowed. "Nearly three hundred, my Khan."

"You will be paid in gold from my treasury for each man. And I shall place six hundred men from Torluk's tuman under your command. You will train them in your way of fighting."

Torluk, who had been silent for the most part since he entered the Great Khan's yurt, spoke up. "My Khan, with all respect to your wishes, Mongols will be unwilling to serve under a foreign officer."

Kublai turned his depthless black eyes on Torluk. "You will pick the six hundred yourself. Some of your best had better be among them. You will make it clear that any who fail to serve loyally and obediently under the tuman-bashi Yukio will have their left hands cut off and be cast out of the ordu."

Torluk's eyes went blank. "Yes, my Khan."

"Now," said Kublai. "What of Jebu here? You do me honour to stand before me, but I must not keep you on your feet longer. You have suffered greatly at Arghun's hands."

"Arghun was simply obeying the laws of your people, my Khan," Jebu rasped. "You owe me nothing. You have lifted the condemnation of

my family and me, and I am content." He framed his words carefully, fighting down waves of dizziness and nausea that threatened to hurl him to the floor of the yurt. To make no claim on justice, to appeal only to the Great Khan's generosity seemed, in its nakedness, most in keeping with the Zinja way. He knew that to want anything as badly as he wanted to be reunited with Taniko was not the Zinja way, and perhaps he was doomed to failure because of that. But whether he succeeded or failed, he had to act.

"What your family has suffered and what you have suffered has been at the command of my Ancestor," said Kublai. "I may change rulings of his, but I will never suggest that it was wrong of him to rule as he did. Still, you have served me well, and you have been badly hurt. I wish to reward you for your courage and steadfastness."

Now the Great Khan had formulated the issue himself. With the same certainty with which he wielded his sword in battle, and guided by the Self, Jebu spoke.

"My Khan, there is a great favour you could grant me if you are so disposed."

Kublai looked surprised, as if he had not expected Jebu to offer any suggestions. Then he smiled and inclined his head.

"If I can, I will grant your request."

Jebu's heart was pounding and the blood roared in his ears. "It is a little thing to the Great Khan, but a large matter to me. There is in the Great Khan's household a woman, not one of the Great Khan's wives. She serves him, in some small way. She happens to be a countrywoman of mine. She was someone I knew in the Sunrise Land. I ask the Great Khan to give this woman to me."

There was a moment of surprised silence in the crowded yurt. Kublai stared at Jebu. Then there were whispers around the room and laughter. Kublai glared at those who had laughed, and the silence fell again. Kublai's face was dark and sour. I've failed, thought Jebu. I've only brought his wrath down on Taniko and me.

"What is this woman's name?"

Jebu tried to bow, sending pain blazing through his chest and back. "Her name is Taniko, my Khan. She is of the Shima family of Kamakura."

There was another long silence, while Kublai contemplated Jebu.

"You dare ask me for one of the women of my household?"

"The Great Khan has many," Jebu blurted. "I thought he would not miss one." This time there was laughter in spite of Kublai's black looks. Even though the brash reply seemed foolhardy, Jebu saw that the Self had guided him right. The Mongol officers now sympathized with him.

"You abuse my generosity," Kublai rumbled. "How do you know this woman is in my household? Has anything passed between you?"

Jebu shook his head. "No, my Khan. I happened to hear of her presence with you. I do not know if she remembers me at all."

"You had better not be prowling around my women, monk. Eternal Heaven knows that monks are the most perverted, lecherous, degenerate creatures alive." Kublai looked pleased as this brought laughter from his generals.

"If the woman means so much to my Great Khan, I will withdraw my request," said Jebu boldly. Kublai looked thunderstruck.

"Ask him for a horse instead, monk," an officer behind him guffawed. "With four hundred women he doesn't have time to ride horses." The laughter and jests were quite out of control now.

Kublai reddened. "I forbid you to speak any more to me of this woman. Go away now and tend to your wounds."

Uriangkatai spoke up. "A warrior has a right to ask one great favour of his lord, my Khan."

Kublai's dark eyes darted to Uriangkatai. "He has asked," he said with finality.

Amid laughter and friendly advice, Jebu was carried from the yurt by Taitaro and Yukio. "Pardon me for saying it when you're so badly hurt," said Yukio, "but you're a fool."

Sinking into exhaustion, Jebu said nothing. It was hopeless. He had tried to win Taniko away from Kublai Khan and only succeeded in infuriating the Mongol ruler. No one knew better than Jebu how vindictive the Mongols could be. Doubtless, he would feel Kublai Khan's wrath. Probably Taniko would, too.

Perhaps it would have been better if Arghun had managed to kill him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

I have not seen Elephant since he went away to fight Arik Buka three months ago. He had more time for his women during the war than he does now that he has won. No one has mentioned to me the troops from the Sunrise Land, who must have fought in the great battle against Arik Buka at the edge of the Gobi. I wish the kami would send that white-haired monk to me again with news of Jebu's safety. Or Jebu himself. I seem to have spent most of my life wondering if Jebu is alive or dead.

Kublai spends most of his time moving his armies about on his western frontier. He may have new wars to fight soon. His dream of a universal empire is fading. When his brother Mangu was Great Khan he ruled unchallenged from the China Sea all the way to Russia and Persia. But during the civil war between Kublai and his brother Arik Buka, the empire started to break up. A cousin named Kaidu, who rules a desert khanate north-west of here between the Tarbagatai mountains and Lake Balkash, refuses to acknowledge Kublai as Great Khan and is threatening war. Another cousin, Berkai, who is khan of a Mongol nation called the Golden Horde in faraway Russia, is making war on Kublai's brother Hulagu in Persia. Kublai cannot intervene in that war because he can't go through Kaidu's territory without fighting him. So now the Mongol empire is really four separate khanates.

Perhaps because of this, Kublai has abandoned Karakorum, Genghis Khan's old capital in Mongolia. He is building a new capital beside the ruins of Yenking, which was the capital of northern China under the Kin Tartars. He calls his new city Khan Baligh, City of the Khan. The idea of a city built by Kublai himself has everyone bursting

with anticipation. Nothing he does is dull.

-Twelfth Month, seventh day

YEAR OF THE RAT

Kublai was in a strange mood tonight, Taniko thought. "Are you troubled, Your Majesty? Would you like me to play for you?" During the years of the war with Arik Buka, Taniko had learned to play the Chinese thirteen-stringed lute. She always brought it with her wher she visited Kublai.

"I am not troubled."

"I am happy to hear that, Your Majesty."

"You may play for me."

Taniko plucked out a tune called The Fisher Boy Urashima, singing in her own language, which Kublai did not understand but enjoyed hearing. This was the first time she had seen him in months. They were in his bedchamber in the Great Khan's palace in the new city, Khan Baligh. Kublai had just moved his women down from Shangtu for the winter. Taniko had been longing to see him and was delighted when he sent for her, but since her arrival he had sat sipping golden wine, staring at a painted screen and hardly speaking.

The song finished, she tried to make conversation. "Many of your people are said to be shocked at your building a new capital in China instead of reigning in Karakorum. As for me, I am happy to be in a new palace in a new city. Is it true that the buildings in Karakorum are made of mud?"

Kublai smiled faintly. "To a Mongol, a mud building is a very solid and permanent thing."

Taniko shook her head. "I cannot imagine that the Emperor who dwells here would be pleased with a mud palace." The room they were in was similar to his bedchamber at Shangtu, but larger. Green silk draperies hid the walls and made a tent of the ceiling. Most of the cushions on the bed were green. And in one corner of the room there was a screen as tall as Kublai depicting a range of golden mountains, one behind the other, topped with clusters of dark green trees.

"I am sure the houses in your homeland are all quite beautiful." He was forever teasing her about the supposed superiority of things in the Sacred Islands. It always made her uneasy. Tonight she did not feel like parrying him.

"They are mostly of wood and paper, Your Majesty. But they are very beautiful, yes."

"Do you miss your homeland very much, Taniko?"

"Yes, Elephant, I do."

"I could send you back."

Her heart stopped. She stared at him, unable to speak. What was he hinting at? Did this have anything to do with his strange manner tonight? Or was he just toying with her?

"I don't think there is any place for me in the Sacred Islands," she said. "Horigawa brought me all this way to get rid of me, and my family is doubtless thoroughly ashamed of me. Has Your Majesty grown tired of me?"

"Ear from it. But I find myself wondering how you feel towards me."

That was a surprise. How could a man like Kublai Khan ever concern himself with the feelings of just one of his hundreds of women? True, he had always been considerate. He had been careful in the beginning not to lie with her until he felt she would receive him with pleasure. She had enjoyed their occasional unions over the four years since then. She had even started to hope that she would conceive, knowing that under Mongol custom he would then have to make her a wife, improving her status among his women and guaranteeing her a secure place in Mongol society.

"If you talk about sending me away, it must be that I no longer please you, Elephant."

"I only pointed out that I could send you back to your homeland, if you wish. After all, you were brought here against your will." "Why this sudden concern for my happiness?"

"Do you know a monk named Jebu?" He was leaning forward, his face thrust so close to hers that she could feel his breath hot against her forehead.

At first Jebu's name was a meaningless sound, it had been so long since she had heard it uttered. It sounded doubly strange on Kublai's Mongol tongue. Then it penetrated her consciousness. Jebu. He was asking about Jebu. Her body went cold from head to foot.

Kublai said, "It's hard to tell under that powder you wear, but I believe your face has gone white."

Her heart was hammering and her hands were trembling. It was not only fear of Kublai. Not only that. It was Jebu suddenly becoming real for her again, when for so long he had existed in her imagination.

But it was fear of Kublai, too, that possessed her. The memory of her

first sight of the Mongols rose in her mind. The maid raped and beheaded on the road to Wuchow. Kublai's talk of massacres. The children who would only starve to death if they hadn't been killed, too. A Mongol officer had tried to kill Jebu when he was only an infant.

She stared at the huge form beside her. Cruel, unpredictable, vengeful. She was in his power, and so was Jebu. Perhaps Jebu was dead already.

"It is startling to hear a name from one's distant past," she said, trying to sound noncommittal. "Yes, I knew the monk Jebu. He is a member of the Order of Zinja. About twenty years ago, when I was a very young girl, he escorted me from Kamakura to Heian Kyo for my wedding to Prince Horigawa."

All those years I have known he was somewhere in this land of China, she thought. To protect both of us, I have been careful to avoid seeing him or even trying to find out anything about him. And what good, has it done? It has only brought us to this moment. We were probably both doomed from the moment his stepfather, Taitaro, spoke to me in front of Bourkina.

"The monk Jebu is partly of my race," said Kublai. "That accounts for his red hair and grey eyes. My grandfather, Genghis Khan, had the same hair and green eyes. I did not inherit them. Mongols who have that colouring are known as the Borchikoun, the grey-eyed men. Jebu's father, Jamuga, was a Borchikoun. He was Genghis Khan's cousin, his blood brother and his enemy."

Taniko nodded. "To while away the time on our journey to Heian

Kyo, Jebu told me a tale of a Mongol warrior who came to our islands to pursue and slay his father. That warrior was red-haired and blue-eyed."

"Arghun Baghadur," said Kublai. "Owing to several odd turns of fortune, this Jebu is now part of my army. After our defeat of Arik Buka, Arghun tried to have Jebu killed, and there was very nearly a second battle. The matter was brought to me for judgment. Jebu had served me well, and I withdrew the condemnation of his family pronounced by my Ancestor. The monk then had the colossal effrontery to ask me to give you to him." He continued to watch her closely.

Eor the first time in many months Taniko whispered the invocation to Buddha. Kublai's account of Jebu's boldness delighted her. But it sounded more and more as if he had brought disaster down on both of them.

"Were you even aware that he was in this part of the world?" Kublai asked her.

Doubtless Kublai knew everything that Bourkina knew, and the two of them had probably guessed at a good deal more. Nor was there any way of knowing what Jebu had told Kublai.

"The night you were elected Great Khan, I saw his stepfather, who told me that Jebu had been at Kweilin and was well. Elephant, Jebu means more to me than I have admitted to you. He was the father of one of my children, a girl. She was killed by Horigawa. Drowned."

Kublai nodded. "That was your husband's right." His voice dropped to an almost-gentle whisper. "Tell me, Taniko, do you wish to leave me and go with this monk?"

Her next words, she knew, might condemn both herself and Jebu to death. So hard did her heart pound that she could scarcely breathe. To deny the truth now would mean spending the rest of her life imprisoned in a lie. She had often wondered why she did not feel

drawn to suicide, as so many samurai men and women were. Even now she could never put the dagger to her own throat. But if Kublai wanted to kill her for what she said now, she was ready to die.

Still, there was no need to be rudely blunt about it. She chose her words carefully.

"Elephant-Your Majesty-I have been truly happy with you. When I was brought to you I was terrified, in despair. Eor five years you have been kind to me. You have been gracious enough to spend hours with me. You have honoured me among the women of your household. If I were to spend the rest of my life with you, I could be content. But, to be truthful, I long to see the monk Jebu more than I desire anything else in my life. If I were to be reunited with him, it would be like being reborn in the Western Paradise of Amida. I cannot imagine that such happiness could ever be mine."

She paused. Kublai sat looking at her, his dark eyes unreadable. He's going to kill us, I know it. But I must keep on talking to him anyway.

"I'm not as bold as Jebu, Your Majesty. I do not ask to be restored to him. I make only one request. You may wish to kill Jebu for daring to raise his eyes to a woman of the Great Khan's household. You may wish to kill me for the longing for Jebu that I cannot help. Let us see each other once before we die. It has been so many years since I saw him last. Grant me this one mercy, if I have ever given you pleasure."

Still Kublai remained silent. She waited for the death sentence, waited for him to call the guards to take her away. She was no longer frightened. Having spoken aloud her feelings for Jebu, she knew a vast relief and a soaring happiness. Let Kublai do what he wanted.

He reached out and took her small, pale hands in his huge brown ones. She sat beside him with her head bowed. At first he held her hands gently. Gradually the pressure increased until the pain was excruciating. She gasped. Immediately, he let go.

He crossed the room to a silver wine spout in the form of a snake's head. At his touch a pale stream gushed from the serpent's mouth into his golden goblet. He drank, walking to the screen.

"When I was eight my grandfather took me campaigning in China. Eor the first time I saw trees. They looked magical to me, like giants with their arms uplifted to Eternal Heaven. When I went back to the steppes they seemed so dry and empty that I vowed I would never live there. Or, if I had to, I would plant trees everywhere. My Ancestor had quite the opposite vision. He wanted to cut down all the trees in China and turn everything into grassland.

"I love mountains, too. The plains where I spent my childhood are so flat. They almost frighten me with their vast distances. Soon I'm going to build my own mountain here at Khan Baligh. I'll cover it with trees. I will have one of every kind of tree that grows anywhere in the world dug up carefully and transported to my green mountain to grow on it. At the top I will build a green palace for myself and those closest to me." He turned away from the screen and looked at her sadly.

"You will not see it."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a hand to silence her, and she bowed her head in submission.

"My moments with you have given me great pleasure. They have been fewer than I would wish, but I must divide myself among many women. You, I gather, would be happiest if you could spend all your time with one man. I have sometimes wondered what it would be like

to want one woman desperately, as the poets sometimes describe it. When a man has many women at his disposal, as I do, he cannot want one of them very much. At least, not for long. I have discovered a little of what it is like to want one woman all to myself, since I learned about you and the monk Jebu. Suddenly, you have become very necessary to me. It is that way with me. If I owned the entire earth except for one little patch of desert, I would not care about anything at all but that bit of land I didn't possess.

"Before this monk asked me to release you to him, you were even then one of the most interesting of my women." He paused and clenched his fists. "Now that someone else wants you, it seems impossible to let you go. Never to hear you play and sing your strangely beautiful songs for me. Never to hear your tales of the islands you call sacred. Never to enjoy your special ways of giving pleasure to a man. Never to discuss the business of governing an empire with a woman as wise and witty as you. Impossible to give these things up."

He came over and sat beside her on the bed, taking her hand gently. "I have tried, with my women, to do something like my green mountain. I want every kind of woman from every land on earth. If I let you leave me, my household will be incomplete."

Taniko felt all the exhilaration that had followed her admission of longing for Jebu drain out of her, leaving a hopelessness as barren as the steppes where Kublai was born. "I understand, Your Majesty," she whispered. In truth, she did understand, but she hated him for seeing her as an item to be collected, like a rare tree.

Kublai stood up and went back to the screen. "You may go back to the women's palace, then, Taniko."

She bowed low and withdrew from Kublai's green bedchamber. He

stood with his back to her, his hands clasped behind him, studying the trees on the gold mountains.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It was kind of the Great Khan, she thought, to let her ride. The wooded parks of Khan Baligh were lightly blanketed with snow, and the wind from Mongolia was piercing. Taniko, Bourkina and Seremeter all wore ermine cloaks and caps. Bourkina, thought Taniko, was along to guard her, of course.

She wouldn't try to escape. At least here in Khan Baligh she could hope that Jebu was somewhere near by. She could hope that the Great Khan would grant her request and let her see Jebu once before the blow fell. This was where she wanted to be.

The women rode in silence. These dark, snow-dusted cypresses were very like the painted ones on Kublai's bedchamber screen. They rode along a winding path that emerged at intervals from the trees and gave them a view of the new capital. A few months earlier the marshy plain around them had been uninhabited. Now the marshes had been drained and lakes formed. Walls were rising, encompassing an area three times the size of Heian Kyo. In the centre, wagonloads of earth and boulders were being dumped to form Kublai's green mountain. Palaces had been built, and the foundations of more were laid. A stream of carts carried lumber and stone to the building sites. Even the war elephants were pressed into work, pulling rough-hewn stone columns for the grand facades.

North of the palace grounds a hastily built town had sprung up, crammed with officials, ambassadors, artisans, missionaries, merchants, courtesans, diviners, thieves and hangers-on. To the west, stretching endlessly over the undulating plain, were the rows of yurts that housed the army guarding the capital and the Great Khan.

"That way lie the ruins of Yenking," said Bourkina, pointing

southward. Taniko did not answer. She remembered Kublai's description of the sack and burning of Yenking in the year of his birth. His were a cruel people. Right now Kublai and Bourkina were doubtless enjoying her suffering, while she wondered what would happen to her. And what had Kublai done to Jebu?

"There is an interesting new Tibetan lama temple up on the left," Bourkina said, "but I'm tired of temples. As a Buddhist, I'm sure you'll want to visit it, Taniko. We can part here. Seremeter can ride with me to see the view."

"Wouldn't you like to come with me, Seremeter?" said Taniko, a little catch of fear in her voice.

"Temples make me sad," said Seremeter. "They only remind me that there is no place here where I can pray to Ahura Mazda."

"Come, princess," said Bourkina, and they rode off without giving Taniko any more time to talk.

They're going to finish me now, she thought. That's why Bourkina brought me into the park. The executioners are waiting for me.

She hoped it would be a quick death, not some degrading fate such as being sold to a brothel keeper. There wasn't much chance of that, though. Such houses wanted girls barely out of childhood, not middle-aged women of thirty-three. It never ceased to amaze her that Kublai Khan had found her interesting, ageing as she was. That was what made it hard to understand his need to possess her, his unwillingness to let her go to Jebu.

Above the trees ahead of her towered a circular white pagoda, roofed with a flat sheet of copper from which were suspended a thousand small bells. The bells transmuted the cruelty of the wind

from the steppes into music. She could hear them even at this distance. Strange that Kublai would choose this pleasant temple as the place where she would suffer his jealous wrath.

Stranger still, as she thought about Kublai, that her years with him had been happy. Not as happy as those with Kiyosi, not even as happy as her childhood in Kamakura. She had always been aware, with Kublai, of the taint of blood on everything the Mongols did. Still, they had been fascinating years, spent close to a powerful and sagacious man whose decisions affected the rise and fall of kingdoms. She had always known that this happiness hung on a slender thread of Kublai's favour. That thread had finally snapped.

She rounded a bend in the path and saw a horseman blocking her way. Her heart gave a little leap of fear. He was a tall Mongol wearing a fur cap and a heavy grey cloak. His red moustache drooped down on either side of his mouth, giving him that look of sullen ferocity so many Mongols wore. His eyes were as grey as his cloak.

He went on staring at her without a word. Was he her executioner? Or just some officer to whom she was to be given as a slave?

At last he said, "The waterfowl circles eternally, having found no place to land."

The waterfowl? He had not spoken in Chinese or Mongol. He had spoken in the language of the Sunrise Land. Words she had not heard in years. She knew the voice. She looked again at the face, and knew it, too.

She sat on her horse with her mouth hanging open foolishly and began to cry.

"He was willing? He permits us to-"

"Yes," he said softly. "It really is so."

He gave his piebald pony a jolt with his knees, Mongol fashion, and it leaped forward, bringing him to her side. With easy power he lifted her out of her saddle and set her down in front of him. He slapped her horse on the rump to send it away, and then they were galloping down another of the paths that wound through Kublai's park.

Her heart was pounding in time to the horse's hooves. But it was also flying joyfully over Khan Baligh. She was still speechless. She ought to say something to him. So far all she had done was weep and babble incoherently. His words about the waterfowl were so beautiful. But he had had time to prepare. He had known this was going to happen.

Suddenly she was angry at him. She tried to turn in the saddle and speak to him, but he held her too firmly, and she could not turn all the way around. The wind tore the words from her lips.

"Stop, stop." He heard her and gave the pony another nudge in the ribs. It came to an immediate stop, with the perfect responsiveness the steppe horses were famous for, if you knew how to ride them. Clearly, Jebu did.

"What is it?"

"You were waiting for me. You knew long before I did. All the time I was dying over and over again for both of us, you knew." She struck her fist against his chest.

He smiled down at her. "Until just this morning, I, too, was dying again and again."

Now she was laughing, still turned in the saddle, her hands gripping his cloak, melting against him. "Jebu, I'm going mad, I'm so happy." Jebu said, "In the Order we are taught that those who pursue hap piness are pursuing an illusion. Those who think they have found it have found an even greater illusion. Now I think the Order is wrong. Eor what I feel this moment I would gladly trade all of my life up to now and all that is to come."

Taniko was faint, dizzy with astonishment and joy as she felt his body-real, solid, there for her to lean against.

"You are no illusion."

She turned completely around to him. They held each other tightly, ignoring the slight, nervous dancing of the horse. He bent down and put his lips on hers. His mouth felt strange to her. She had not expected that. The bristles of his moustache scratched her lips. Eor all these years she had been living with a memory. This was a real man, a man in many ways completely new.

They were not the same people any more. It was hopeless. She had been deceiving herself. The Jebu who had lived in her heart all these years was no more real than the Buddha of Boundless Light.

But was not the Buddha a reality? Then she should not lose faith so quickly in this man, whom she had found again after so long. She must not lose him again.

All these thoughts raced through her mind in the interval of the kiss. She drew away from him and looked up into his grey eyes. They had not changed.

"What will we do now?"

He smiled. "Whatever we like. I've had no time to plan. This morning

the orkhon Uriangkatai sent for me and told me that the Great Khan had decided to grant my request."

"The Great Khan. He never even bade me farewell," said Taniko, feeling a strange disappointment in the midst of her happiness.

"I saw, when I asked him to reunite us, that it would not be easy for him to do it. Until this morning I didn't believe he would. We have much to talk about, you and I. We can't talk very well on the back of a horse."

"No." She nestled against him. He had not changed so very much after all. He was Jebu.

"If it pleases you, we can go to my yurt. It is in the army encampment."

"It pleases me," she said, squeezing his hand tightly.

They rode slowly down the path under the cypresses. Quail hiding in the underbrush darted away with a thrumming of wings. The trees were full of birds attracted to the woodlands because they were not hunted there. Deer and smaller animals whispered through the trees. Only the Great Khan and those he invited to accompany him were permitted to kill any animals here. He had not chosen to hunt since the park was enclosed, so the birds and animals felt safe.

They spoke no more as they rode out of the woods and down the road to the army camp. Thousands of horses grazed on the gentle, grassy hills.

Riding with Jebu along the rows of yurts, Taniko remembered her first entry into Kublai's camp five years ago. There was the same quiet, orderly buzz of activity. But the camp she entered today was a

peacetime camp, and there were many women and children about. Taniko saw them staring at her. Some of the men greeted Jebu with a shout and a wave, eyeing her and turning away with small smiles.

It was hard to believe that he lived in a yurt like any Mongol warrior, but he was opening the wooden door to his round grey felt tent.

"There will be others to greet you in a while," he said. "But I asked them to give us some time alone. Please honour my miserable tent, Lady Shima Taniko."

She smiled, walking daintily through the door. She did not have to stoop to enter a yurt, as most Mongols did. When she was inside she burst into tears again. He was beside her quickly, closing the door. Lamps were already lit.

He held her in his arms. "What is it?"

"It's just that it's been so long since anyone has spoken to me in our language, addressed me so politely as we do at home. I never knew how much I missed it. I would not let myself know. And to think that of all people, the first one to speak to me in my own language after five years should be you, Jebu. It's too much of a blessing. I can't believe my good fortune. Help me to sit down. I feel dizzy."

Jebu took her arm to steady her as she dropped to her knees on the carpet. She looked down and saw that the design in the rug was as elaborate and colourful as any she had seen in Kublai's palaces.

"Let me make ch'ai for you," he said. He lit a charcoal fire and placed a cast-iron pot of water on a tripod over it. He brought a low black jade table out from the wall and set it before her. He sat across from her, waiting for the water to boil.

Taniko looked around the yurt. The floor was covered with layers of

rugs as rich as the one on which she was sitting. Silk hangings divided the domed chamber into several small rooms. A statue of a Chinese goddess smiled benignly at her. It appeared to be made of solid gold and was decorated with jewels.

"You seem to have forgotten your austere Zinja ways," she said with a small laugh.

"I had also forgotten how beautiful your laughter sounds," he said, looking at her with shining eyes. "Yes, I've accumulated a great quantity of treasure. I do not plan to keep it. The Great Khan was most generous to his victorious troops. Especially to me."

"Do you want to keep me with you, Jebu?"

"My lady, that will be as you wish."

"You asked the Great Khan to give me to you."

"I phrased my request that way because it is the only sort of request he would understand. In his world, everyone belongs to someone else. What I wanted him to do was simply to release you from captivity."

Taniko made herself look at Jebu carefully to see how much he had changed. She had not wanted to do that, because seeing the changes in him would force her to admit the changes in herself.

His face was thin, with a hard mouth and hollow eyes that could have belonged either to a wild desert warrior or a mountain holy man. The chin was sharp, the cheekbones jutting. There were innumerable tiny creases radiating from the corners of his eyes, wrinkles put there by years of squinting into the sun and wind. Thank Buddha, though, he was free of any horrible battle scars such as so many veteran

warriors bore. Deep creases ran from the corners of his nose to his mouth, partially buried by the thick red moustache. The moustache itself and the hair on his head, which was shaved in the middle and gathered in plaits behind his ears, Mongol-style, were beginning to show streaks of grey.

He hadn't aged badly. But what about her? A woman of her age was good for nothing but raising a man's first children while he went out and got some more children on younger women. He had asked for her because he remembered her and felt sorry for her. It was an act of kindness, nothing more.

Jebu said, "Do you remember, ages ago, how we looked over Heian Kyo from Mount Higashi and I swore to you that I would be yours for ever?"

"Yes," she whispered. She was crying again, but the tears were flowing gently, like a soft spring rain, not like the storms of weeping that had gone before.

"And you said to me that the lilac branch would always be there for the waterfowl," he went on.

"I remember that," said Taniko, thinking sadly how little difference those promises had made. He had not been there when she needed him. He had wandered all over the world seeking battle, after the way of his Order. And though she had not forgotten him, she had been there for other men as much as for him. There had been Kiyosi and Kublai Khan. Truly, compared with those two, with each of whom she had been intimate for years, what did this man who sat across the black jade table mean to her?

He, too, had loved a memory. He had risked all to win that memory from the Great Khan. And now, doubtless, seeing her in the timeworn

flesh, he was bitterly disappointed.

"I've just been thinking,' Jebu said, "how marvellous it is that we've managed to keep those promises in spite of everything."

"We have?" It was just then, conscious of the tears on her cheeks, that Taniko remembered she was nearly devoid of make-up. The facial paint suitable for a lady of Heian Kyo was just a nuisance on a morning ride. Not only was she aged and ugly, but he was seeing her without the protection make-up might have afforded.

Jebu said, "To think that so many years could have passed and you could be so far from the Sunrise Land, and yet I was able to find you and restore you to your people. To think that after all this time and over all this distance you still wanted to come to me." He paused and looked at her, troubled. The tea water was bubbling. He poured it into a glossy green bowl over a small heap of finely ground leaves. Setting the bowl on the table between them, he whipped the beverage into a lather with a bamboo whisk and offered it to Taniko. All this time he kept his eyes on her.

"I have wondered-there is something I have feared. I must speak of it to you and set my mind at rest. There was a sound of doubt in your voice when you spoke of how we've kept our promises to each other. The thing I fear is that you might have been happy with Kublai Khan, that you might not have wanted to come to me."

"Didn't you think that living among the Mongols was the worst thing that could happen to me? Horigawa did."

"Obviously, he assumed you would be treated as a slave. Did you truly want to go from the palace of the Great Khan to this warrior's yurt?"

"How can you doubt it, Jebu-san?" This was the first time she had called him by that affectionate term since that night at Daidoji.

Jebu shrugged. "I don't know what passed between you and Kublai Khan. He has many, many women. The day he triumphed over Arik Buka, Arghun came within a hair's breadth of killing me. The Great Khan in his triumphant mood wanted to show me some favour to compensate for my suffering. I asked for you. Perhaps he gave you no choice in the matter."

She dabbed at her tear-stained cheeks with the end of her sleeve. "He asked me what I wanted. I told him I wanted to go to you." She sobbed. A lady does not weep in front of a man, let her eyes puff up and her nose turn red. This was hideous.

Jebu poured and whisked more tea for her. She took the bowl from him gratefully.

"Why so much crying? Are you sure you don't wish you were still with him?"

"Perhaps it is you who wants that?"

"I don't understand."

"Look at me, Jebu. Do I look anything like the woman you left at Daidoji? I was sixteen then. That was seventeen years ago. I've lived another whole lifetime. You wanted me back because you remembered what I was then. Look at me as I am now."

Jebu frowned, a sadness coming into his eyes. "Are you trying to persuade me to send you back to him?"

"I don't want to go back to him," she said violently. "If only I could believe that you want me."

He put his teacup down and took her hand. "Look into the core of your being and see the Self shining there, as I do when I look into your eyes."

"You are deceiving yourself."

"Am I? When Kublai Khan spoke to you of leaving him, did he seem eager to part with you?"

"He was so angry, I thought he was going to kill us both. Jebu, he asked me if I wanted to leave him for you, and I told him the truth. I told him that I had been happy with him. And I must tell you that, too, Jebu. I was happy with Kublai Khan. I did not submit to him unwillingly. But more than anything else in the world, I wanted to be with you. I told him that. He was angry. He sent me away."

"He was just as angry when I spoke your name to him and asked him to let you come to me. Like you, I thought it might mean the end of our lives. Like you, I was overwhelmed when I discovered this morning that he was going to reunite us. Kublai Khan was deeply unwilling to let you go. We may never know why he decided to. Do you think he was deceiving himself?"

"What do you mean?"

"He saw something in you that he did not want to lose. You may think I'm just an impoverished monk whose mind is softened by too much meditation and addled by too many battles, but is the Great Khan of the Mongols such a fool? He who has his pick of hundreds of women? Or is it possible that you are a lady to be desired?"

His words perplexed Taniko. Perhaps she was thinking like a

petulant child. He was right. She did kindle desire in men. She felt a warm glow within, rising from that thought. But then another explanation for Kublai's attitude came to her, and the glow died away.

"He didn't want to let me go. He told me so himself. No matter how unimportant or undesirable a place or a thing is, if he doesn't have it, he wants it. He's' like his grandfather. He wants the whole world and every person in it." She looked down at her tea and sipped it. She did not want to look at Jebu.

"There is only one way I can convince you." A smile was in his voice. He stood and moved around the table. He took her in his arms.

At first she didn't want him to see or touch her. She felt old. Her body was used, worn.

A coldness filled her. All right, let him have his way with me, she thought. It's as he said. Everyone belongs to someone. No, that is just how Kublai Khan saw it. I was his toy, his little creature.

Jebu doesn't want to possess me. He wants to show me that I am desirable, I am wise, I am witty, I am beautiful. That's what Jebu is trying to tell me with his hands and his body. But no, it can't be, not after seventeen years. It is not me he is doing this with. He does not see me as I am. There's a vision that only he can see. He wants to find his Buddha in me. Almost always, these things of the bed are things of the mind.

In spite of herself, she was gliding, like a ship that had slipped its moorings, like a horse given its head, like a falcon unleashed. Past and present swirled together until it seemed that she was with Jebu on the hill overlooking Heian Kyo, with Jebu in the murderous, pitch-black night at Daidoji, with Jebu in the tents of Kublai Khan, all at

once. This was really happening. Why it was happening no longer mattered.

Joy filled her body and her mind. She was beyond asking any question. The delight of being with him, the only man in the world, was a happiness that consumed her entire being like fire. It was the boundless light she had so often called upon.

She heard voices, hers and his, mingling together, but could not tell what they were saying, if they were saying anything, or if they were just crying out without words. The light within her was dazzling. The yurt around her was plunged into blackness. Her body dissolved.

They lay side by side on the beautiful carpet, each listening to the other's breathing. She felt as if they were drifting across the lake on a dragon barge on a golden afternoon. She could not remember ever having known such peace, such completeness.

Then the doubts crept in again. He had proved to her with his body that he wanted her. But still he might have given himself over to illusion. She could never be sure that he wanted her as she really was.

There were scars, not on his face but on his body. He wore strips of cloth wrapped tightly around his chest. A scar, still red, completely encircled his neck. He had a hideous wound in his left arm. The skin was puckered and blackened around it, drawn together with some kind of stitching. Gingerly she touched his arm.

"What was this?"

He shrugged, looking deep into her eyes with his grey ones. Odd, that eyes of such a colour could radiate such warmth.

"One of Arghun's riders gave it to me during the battle last month." "It

was Arghun who killed your father. He was the Mongol warrior you told me about on the journey from Kamakura to Heian Kyo." "Yes, and not long after I left you at Daidoji, he came back and tried to kill me again."

"You have so much to tell me, Jebu. So many years have gone by. I have no idea of the adventures you've had in the years we've been apart. You must tell me everything, from the moment you left Daidoji. Take seventeen years to tell it if you like. We have the time."

A strangely haunted look came into Jebu's eyes. "Yes. I will tell you everything. There is so much. It will take awhile."

"What disturbs you, Jebu-san?" she smiled. "You need not tell me about the women you have known. I'm sure there have been many." He did not smile back. "I must tell you everything. In time."

A shadow had fallen. She did not know what it was, but there was something he did not want her to know. She could not imagine the Jebu she had known on the Tokaido Road wanting to conceal anything. Much had happened to him. He had changed. She had changed. Once we find out how much each of us has changed, she thought, whatever was between us before might be severed.

She was a happy woman, possibly happier than she had ever been at any time in her life. Yet even this happiness was shot through with veins of uneasiness, doubt, fear and sadness. She had not known that happiness would be like that. She must write a poem about it.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

I have known how the Great Khan lives. Now I am finding out how the warriors of the Great Khan live. Jebu has servants who cook and clean for him. Like the Mongols, he drinks mostly milk and eats cheese. The Mongols eat veal and mutton only on special occasions. Jebu says that cattle, goats, sheep and yaks are their wealth, so they prefer to live on the products of these animals, rather than butcher them.

All of us from the Sacred Islands have had to learn to eat meat, may the Buddha forgive us, but we eat a good deal less of it than the Mongols do, and we buy celery, onions, beets, beans and rice from the farms around Khan Baligh, so we can eat somewhat as we are used to.

I do not believe any woman of my country has had a chance to describe so many different places and ways of life as I have. Of course, this pillow book of mine can have no literary value. How could it, when it is written in the language of women?

This is a Mongol camp rich and at peace, located beside the capital of the empire. A very unusual state of affairs. I can see trouble for Kublai unless he embarks on a new war soon. The Mongols do nothing but hunt, gamble, chase women and get drunk. They seem to do more drinking than anything else.

I hear, though, that Kublai intends to make war once again on the Sung. That means that Jebu and Yukio and their samurai comrades will be fighting against those they formerly defended. Since the Sung courtiers betrayed them at Kweilin, I'm sure Yukio and his men have

no qualms about aiding the Great Khan. Kublai has proved himself a good master to us all.

-Second Month, second day

YEAR OF THE OX

Taniko and Jebu spent their first three days alone together. Then he took her riding to the north, where the Great Wall crossed Nankow

Pass. Even though it would soon be spring, the wind from Mongolia was bitter. They both wore fur caps, and Jebu protected himself in a heavy sheepskin coat, while Taniko wore the magnificent ermine cloak Kublai Khan had given to her.

For two nights they slept and ate at a small Buddhist temple just south of the wall, where the monks knew Jebu. They spent three days riding or walking along the top of the ancient earth and stone rampart built a thousand years earlier by the Eirst Emperor, Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, to hold back the barbarian horsemen to the north. No soldiers patrolled the wall now. China belonged to the barbarian horsemen.

"It was built to keep the Chinese in as much as to keep the nomads out," Jebu told her as he helped her over the broken and jumbled stones. "Poor farmers in northern China have a tendency to drift away from the Emperor's control. They either become nomads themselves or ally themselves with the nomads."

"Like you and Yukio," said Taniko.

Each day she felt more at ease with Jebu. They talked with pleasure and interest, but it was obvious to Taniko that Jebu preferred not to talk about what their lives had been like during the many years they were apart. Probably, she thought, he wanted to avoid mentioning

Kiyosi and Kublai Khan, to say nothing of Horigawa. A man doesn't like to think about the men who have been before him with the woman he cares for, men who may have been important to her.

She was just as happy that he kept talking about such matters as the antiquity of Chinese civilization, Buddhism and Taoism, the Great Wall, the Mongol conquests, what the world was like far to the west, what might be happening now in the Sacred Islands. These were things about which they both had thought much, and had much to say. It was too soon to tarnish the joy of their coming together by talking about their own recent past.

As for their feelings about each other, their words and acts when they were alone together said all that was needed.

After they returned from their excursion to the Great Wall, Muratomo no Yukio came to visit them. On being introduced to the young Muratomo, Taniko felt a momentary flash of hatred for this short, pleasant young man, handsome except for his bulging eyes and protruding front teeth. It was during Yukio's escape from Hakata Bay that Kiyosi had met his death. Even though Yukio doubtless had had nothing directly to do with it, she could not forgive him the death of Kiyosi and the loss of Atsue.

Yukio stood in the doorway of Jebu's yurt and bowed deeply. Taniko placed her hands on the carpet before her and returned the bow with a lower one of her own. He was, she supposed, of better family than she. Again she thought how pleasant it was to return to the formal manners of her people after knowing nothing for so long but the simple ways of the Mongols.

"Lord Yukio, I had the honour of knowing both your mother, Lady Akimi, with whom I served at the Imperial Court, and your distinguished father, Captain Domei. Also, I once had occasion to

meet your older brother, Lord Hideyori."

Yukio's face lit up in a broad grin. "You are my angel." "Excuse me, Lord Yukio? Angel?"

"My mother told me about you. It was you who helped my mother meet Sogamori and persuade him not to kill my brother and me. You are the lady who saved my life." Yukio dropped to his knees and pressed his forehead against the carpet.

Taniko sat demurely with her eyes cast down and her hands folded in her lap. "I did not save your life, Lord Yukio. Your mother, Lady Akimi, saved your life at the greatest personal sacrifice. She became the consort of a man she detested."

"I was a child at the time," Yukio said gravely. "My mother made me swear that I would never fail in my gratitude to the gracious Lady Shima Taniko."

"Sit down and have a bowl of ch'ai, Yukio-san," Jebu said. "You have all afternoon to express your gratitude."

"The rest of my life would not be time enough," said Yukio as he sat down with them at the black jade table.

Taniko remembered the morning eighteen years ago at Daidoji when she had confronted Yukio's older brother, Hideyori. She recalled the boyish charm of his wish to see her behind her screen of state and his cold anger when she mentioned this young man, his half-brother, Yukio. How sad that Sogamori had commanded Hideyori's death.

"I'm sorry, Lord Yukio, but you owe me no gratitude," Taniko said as she poured boiling water into a cup with the fine ground ch'ai leaves and whisked the green liquid into a foam. "Please forgive me for

saying so, but my family has always been an enemy of yours. We are Takashi, after all." And besides, because of Kiyosi she did not want his gratitude.

"Things aren't that simple, as you know well, Lady Taniko," Yukio said with a smile. "Not only did your intervention help my mother to make her painful bargain with the vile Sogamori, but your father, Lord Shima Bokuden, has sheltered my brother on Kamakura ever since my father's defeat and death."

"Quite true," said Jebu. "I took Lord Hideyori to Lord Shima Bokuden myself."

"Oh," said Taniko, looking down at her bowl of tea. She was tempted to remain silent, but she reminded herself that Yukio was a friend and ally of Jebu. She knew something of the utmost importance to Yukio, and it was her duty to speak.

"Please forgive me, Lord Yukio, but my father no longer shelters your esteemed brother."

Yukio narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"When I tell you, it may give you such pain that you will forget all about gratitude and will hate the Shima family."

"Please," said Yukio anxiously. "What has happened to my brother?"

"I do not know for certain," said Taniko. "Prince Horigawa kept me a prisoner before taking me to China. But I heard from a servant that Sogamori had ordered my father to execute your brother."

Yukio's eyes, wild with shock and anger, transfixed Taniko. "Why? Why, after he let him live all those years, would he kill my brother?"

Taniko looked down at her hands and said softly, "Excuse me, please, for mentioning it, but Sogamori's eldest son, Takashi no Kiyosi, was killed in the fighting when you left Hakata Bay, Lord Yukio. Sogamori was quite maddened with rage and sorrow, and I was told he ordered the death of your brother as his only means of avenging himself on your family."

Slowly Yukio turned his head and gave Jebu a long look. At last he said, "It should have been I. Better if I had died, rather than Hideyori. Now the clan has lost its chieftain."

"Now you are the chieftain of the Muratomo," said Jebu.

Yukio looked at Jebu with an agonized wonder in his eyes, like a horse wounded in battle that must be killed to spare it pain. Jebu looked back with almost as much suffering.

Yukio stood up. "I must leave. I must be alone for a time." He bowed quickly, turned and hurried out of the yurt, his hand on his sword hilt.

Good, thought Taniko calmly. Suffer a little, Yukio, as I have suffered each day, remembering Kiyosi's death.

Jebu sat looking after Yukio, then turned to stare at Taniko. There was such anguish on his hard, rawboned face that Taniko reached out and took his hand. His hand lay in hers, cold and lifeless.

"Don't reproach yourself for Hideyori's death. Sogamori is the one to blame. He gave the order to execute Hideyori. Nothing you or Yukio did need have caused that."

A light came into Jebu's eyes. "Do you really think so?"

There was a knock at the door of the yurt. Jebu was still staring at Taniko. She had been about to answer his question, but the

knocking distracted her. It came again and this time Jebu heard it and called the visitor to enter.

It was Moko. Taniko had not seen him in the seventeen years since he fled Daidoji. Her heart leaped at the sight of the crossed eyes under a red Mongol cap with long ear flaps.

Moko threw himself full length to the floor and kissed the carpet in front of her. He was sobbing and wailing loudly. He looked up at her once, shook his head and then fell into a fresh paroxysm of weeping.

"Eorgive me, my lady," he choked out at last.

"I would be weeping, too, Moko," said Taniko gently, "except that I've used up all my tears in the last few days."

"Oh, my lady, you have suffered so. But now you and the shike are together at last."

Taniko took Moko's hand and guided him to the place Yukio had just vacated. "So you're still with him, Moko. I wonder how a useful citizen like yourself could find employment wandering about with this monk who is little better than a bandit."

Moko laughed. "The shike has made my fortune for me, lady. The Great Khan has been most generous. We are all rich." His face fell suddenly. "Those of us who are left alive." He bowed his thanks as Taniko handed him a bowl of ch'ai, then turned to Jebu. "Shike, I saw the Lord Yukio come out of your yurt a moment ago with a face like the sky before a tai-phun. What's wrong?"

"Lord Yukio has learned that his elder brother is probably dead," said Jebu.

"It means he is the last of his line," said Taniko. "Think of it. Captain

Domei had five sons. One would have supposed the future of the Muratomo to be quite secure. Now only Yukio is left. How quickly war can destroy a family."

How quickly war had destroyed her own family. Odd, that Yukio had said no word of sympathy to her about Kiyosi's death. He had known Kiyosi at the Rokuhara, and had known that she was Kiyosi's consort. Perhaps Yukio felt too ashamed to speak to her about it.

"It is difficult for me to feel sorry for Lord Yukio," Taniko said suddenly. She realized at once she had said more than she wished to. To explain the remark would mean telling Jebu just how much Kiyosi meant to her.

"He has just learned that his last living brother was killed," said Jebu.

Taniko thought quickly. "Yes, but I once met Muratomo no Hideyori. He made it quite clear to me that he felt no love at all for his younger brother. He was at pains to point out that he and Yukio did not have the same mother, and that Yukio's mother, my friend Lady Akimi, was not married to Captain Domei. Since Hideyori had so little liking for him, I'm surprised that what happened to Hideyori matters so much to Lord Yukio."

"However Hideyori may have felt about Yukio, Yukio always looked up to him," said Jebu. "He admired Hideyori, and always reminded us that Hideyori was the true chieftain of the Muratomo clan."

"My remark was foolish," said Taniko. "Eorgive me." But she saw Jebu eyeing her closely. One day, Jebu, I shall tell you how much Kiyosi meant to me, she thought. How, in some ways, the loss of him was more painful than the loss of you. Because for ten years Kiyosi and I were nearly husband and wife. We had a son together, Jebu, a beautiful boy. Then one day an arrow flew and all was lost.

She must change the subject before Jebu asked her any more questions. She turned to Moko, and noticed something she hadn't seen before.

"Moko. Your teeth."

Moko smiled broadly. Where there had been dark, empty spaces in his grin, there were now white teeth that gleamed like peeled onions. Proud of his new smile, he held it for Taniko.

"Is this some sort of magic?" Taniko laughed.

"When one is part of a conquering army, my lady, rich with the spoils of war, one can purchase anything, even new teeth. These were made of ivory for me by a Chinese sculptor. I thought of having him carve me a set from black jade, but I decided that would be getting above my station."

Taniko peered more closely at Moko's mouth. "Ivory. Yes, I see now. They're a little too perfect to be real. Are they comfortable? Can you eat with them?"

"Better than I could without them. There are various minor problems, but on the whole I am a better man. The ladies who know me think so as well."

Taniko smiled. "So, Moko, you have followed Jebu to China, just as you once promised. Have you had much chance to exercise your skills as a carpenter?"

Moko nodded happily, pouring himself another cup of ch'ai and whipping it to a froth. "Lady, I now know more about carpentry than any joiner on the Sacred Islands. Everywhere we have travelled I've studied buildings and talked to the members of the local carpenters'

guild. I've even learned how they build their mud-brick palaces in Mongolia. And I don't just know about houses, my lady. I've studied junks and sampans from one end of China to the other. I believe I could build you anything from a Nan Chao dugout canoe to a Linan sea-going merchant vessel with sixteen masts."

"Or a warship," Jebu remarked.

"Of course," said Moko. He looked uneasily at Taniko. "But I have no desire to build warships. Useless things, except for destruction and killing."

He's remembered that Kiyosi died aboard a warship, Taniko thought. A memory came to her. Long ago she had sent Moko to the Rokujoga-hara to see the executions of Domei and his followers. Moko had come back with a tale of having been seen by Kiyosi in a tree above the Emperor's head and having been spared by him. Yes, Moko, too, has reason to mourn Kiyosi, she thought.

"I've also performed many services for our samurai," Moko went on. "I was in charge of food and supplies. I learned to bargain with Chinese traders and get the most and best for the least money. I also helped the shike's father, the holy man Taitaro, to treat our sick and wounded."

Taniko said, "Your honoured father, Jebu, yes. Why have I not had a chance to pay my respects to him?"

Jebu shook his head. "He's on another one of his mysterious journeys. He said he was meeting with members of the Chinese and Tibetan branches of the Order."

"I owe much to the shike and to you, my lady," Moko said. "I'm going to do something for you now that will speak my gratitude in a small

way."

"Moko," said Jebu softly, "you owe us no debt. Your companionship has been treasure enough."

"Yes, Moko-san," Taniko agreed. "You have saved my life many times over."

The little man waved his hands. "No, I'm going to build a house for you. I'll design it, I'll provide the materials. I'll hire the workers. It will be the most beautiful house in Khan Baligh. Not the biggest or the most costly, but I think that with what I know about building it will make the Great Khan himself envious."

Taniko was torn. She knew how much giving such a gift would mean to Moko. She could not refuse it. But it seemed to her too grand a gift to accept.

"You will shame us with such a gift," said Jebu.

"You will shame me if you do not take it," said Moko, his eyes glistening with tears.

"Excuse me, but I don't think there will be time for this gift. Perhaps, Moko, it would be best for you to plan to build this house in Heian Kyo." It was Yukio who spoke.

They turned and stared at him. He was standing in the doorway of Jebu's yurt, a grim smile on his face.

"Eorgive me for entering without knocking," Yukio said. "I have been walking about, thinking, since I left you. I have accepted my karma. I am now clan chieftain of the Muratomo. I am the last of my line. If the Muratomso are to be avenged on Sogamori, it must be through me. These wars in China have prepared me for the task. There are less

than three hundred left of our countrymen who followed us here, but we have over two thousand warriors in all, and many of them will follow me for battle and for pay. I will not waste myself fighting the Sung, when I could be fighting my real enemy, Sogamori. When we return home, we'll find a whole new generation of samurai waiting for us. Those Muratomo who were boys when we left will be men now, and ready to follow the White Dragon. 'A man may not remain under the same heaven with the slayer of his father.' It is time to go back and settle accounts."

"But how do we know this is the right time to launch a war in the Sacred Islands?" Jebu said.

Yukio waved a hand in dismissal. "There are many such questions still to be answered. We will talk long into the night for many nights to come. We will have to get permission from the Great Khan to leave at all. But our course is clear. Muratomo no Yukio and his samurai are returning to the Sunrise Land. Erom this moment the Takashi are doomed."

Jebu, Moko and Taniko stared at Yukio, overwhelmed by the announcement that had fallen among them with the impact of a Mongol fire bomb. Sadness and dread swept through Taniko. Must Jebu and I lose each other again as he goes off to another war? Her dread was not only for herself and for Jebu, but for the Sacred Islands. When she thought of the bloodshed and destruction that would follow Yukio's return, she wanted to weep. In a few months many women would have more cause to weep than she did now.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It was late afternoon. The distant ruins of Yenking and the new parks and palaces of Khan Baligh were enveloped alike in a golden haze. Erom this height in the Western Hills, Jebu and Taniko could see the entire plain on which three dynasties had built their capital cities.

"Khan Baligh is strange-elaborate and gaudy," said Jebu. "They don't have our sense of beauty."

Taniko smiled up at him and raised an eyebrow. "They, meaning the Mongols? Then you don't consider yourself a Mongol?"

Jebu shook his head. "By upbringing I am a man of the Sunrise Land."

"Now that I know something about the Mongols," said Taniko, "I know that you are a child of the sun goddess, the same as I." She rested her small hand on his as they leaned together over a low wall around one of the terraces of a half-ruined temple.

A cloud descended on Jebu's spirits when she mentioned her knowledge of the Mongols. Long before their reunion he had wondered what Kublai Khan meant to her. Now, except for oblique references like this, she had told him no more about the subject. She had voluntarily left Kublai Khan to be with him, of that he was sure. Why wasn't that enough for him?

Hand in hand they walked away from the wall and into the violet-shadowed inner chamber of the temple. This had been a temple to the Reclining Buddha, the soul of the Buddha sleeping in heaven before beginning his life on earth. Mongols had destroyed it fifty years earlier, when they first swept through the plain of Yenking under

Genghis Khan. Kublai Khan was planning to rebuild it, along with all the other ruined temples in the area. At the moment it was still abandoned.

The central chamber of the temple was empty. The bronze statue of the Buddha that had lain there had long since been broken up and melted down. Dust-covered frescoes showing the Enlightened One at various stages in his life were unharmed. The destruction of the temple had been an act of war, not of desecration. The Mongols respected Buddhism, just as they respected all religions.

Jebu spread a blanket he had brought with him on the marble pedestal where the statue had lain. He took Taniko's hand and drew her down beside him. How beautiful you are, he thought. How beautiful my life is, that it brings you to me.

"You're not thinking of lying with me here, Jebu-san? This is a holy place."

"That's precisely why I chose it. The union of bodies is the height of holiness. I see that I still have not fully explained the teachings of our Order to you." He reached around her to undo the obi at her waist.

She put her hands inside his robe, caressing his chest. "Explain later."

When they returned from the Western Hills, a few days later, they found that Taitaro had come back. He was waiting for them in Jebu's yurt.

"Of all the pleasant sights I've seen in my life, I can think of none that brings me more delight than the two of you together."

Taniko looked down at the intricately patterned carpet of the yurt. Jebu said, "One day we will ask you to bless our wedding."

"But not yet," said Taniko. "Unfortunately I have another husband still living."

"I promise you I will attend to that when we return to the Sunrise Land," Jebu said.

"A Zinja is not vindictive," Taitaro warned.

"I know," said Jebu. "You're going to tell me to spend more time with the Jewel."

"What is the Jewel?" Taniko asked.

"One of the thousand all-important things I haven't yet told you about," Jebu said. "Have you heard of Yukio's plan, sensei?"

"Yes, and I've come here to take you to Yukio's yurt. He says he has something important to discuss with us. You'll recall I was granted the vision of Yukio returning to the Sacred Islands in glory."

"Then you approve of our going back?"

"We must drink the happiness of each moment, not mixing it with the unhappiness of the future."

Jebu was about to say that he didn't understand when Taniko spoke up. "I live in horror of the day Yukio sets foot on the Sacred Islands, Taitaro-sensei. The war he will bring upon our land will make the battles the Takashi and the Muratomo fought before look like children's games."

"I agree with you, daughter," said Taitaro. "Eor hundreds of years my Order had hoped gradually to put an end to the bloodshed in our land and other parts of the world. Now that I've seen the wars of the

Mongols-the kind of war Yukio will fight when he goes home-I think that was a vain dream."

The thousands of hammers at work in Khan Baligh rang incessantly through the warm spring air. The building of the new capital began at dawn and continued until sunset every day, and some of the labourers worked on into the night by torchlight.

Nearer at hand, smoke rose from the centre-hole cooking fires of the long, disciplined lines of grey yurts. Children ran up and down the streets playing games. A band of older boys on ponies galloped down the centre of the street with wild whoops, forcing Jebu and Taitaro to jump to one side. Herds of shaggy steppe ponies, the mounts of the Khan Baligh garrison, grazed without fence or tether in the near-by hills.

All these sights have become so familiar to me, Jebu thought, that the land where I was born will seem strange when I first set foot on it. There are no prairies for grazing there, no warriors in felt tents. How small our islands seem in comparison to the vast spaces of China and Mongolia.

Taitaro broke in on his thoughts. "It pleases me to think I might become a grandfather."

Jebu sighed. He decided that Taitaro was the one person to whom he might confide his problem. He unfolded what he knew of the story of Taniko and Kiyosi and then told how he had killed Kiyosi in the battle of Hakata Bay.

"How much did this Takashi heir mean to her, do you think?" Tai-taro asked him.

"I can't be sure, sensei, but she probably cared for him greatly. When

her life must have seemed over to her, he brought her a whole new life. She does not know that it was my arrow that killed Kiyosi. How can I tell her?"

"You must eventually come to it," said Taitaro.

"Only Yukio, Moko and I know that I killed him," said Jebu. "Taniko need never know."

"Quite true," said Taitaro. "But if she never knows, what is between you and her will be a lie. Remember that both you and she are manifestations of the Self. The joining of male and female in body and mind is one of the most effective ways of breaking through the illusion of separateness. If there are barriers of deception or concealment between mind and mind, the union will fail. Illusion will be kept alive. You will be depriving her, as well as yourself, of the highest joy of which human beings are capable."

Jebu watched two young men wrestling on the ground in front of a yurt while a crowd cheered them on. "Perhaps it is not necessary to achieve such supreme joy."

Taitaro stopped walking, turned to Jebu and smiled, his long white beard fluttering in the breeze from the northern steppes. "You have the right to make that decision for yourself. Do you wish to make it for her as well?"

Yukio's yurt was twice as large as most of those in the encampment. The entrance faced south and was covered over with a canopy. An honour guard of two samurai stood before it, and the White Dragon of Muratomo fluttered above it. He has always been a great commander, Jebu thought. Now he is beginning to assume the trappings of one, as well.

Recognizing Jebu and Taitaro, the guards ushered them in. Jebu stopped inside the door to give his eyes a moment to adjust to the lamplight. Yukio sat on cushions in the host's quarter of the yurt. A large, hunched figure sat on a bench facing him. Both men turned.

The man with Yukio was Arghun Baghadur.

Arghun rose to his feet and bowed to Jebu and Taitaro. Jebu stood still, speechless with surprise. Yukio broke the silence.

"The Great Khan's decree has ended the enmity between Arghun and Jebu, and therefore between Arghun and the rest of us."

"I hope this is true for you as it is for me," said Arghun, fixing his blue eyes on Jebu.

Jebu's head spun. How could Arghun dare visit Yukio's yurt, decree or no decree? How could Yukio bring himself to receive him? He was certain Arghun's eyes held no friendship. They were, Jebu was convinced, incapable of expressing anything but cold ferocity.

Finally he said to Yukio, "The Great Khan rescinded the order of his Ancestor which obliged Arghun Baghadur to hunt me down and kill me. I do not recall that the Great Khan required me to forgive Arghun for killing my father or for trying again and again to kill me, to trust Arghun or to sit in friendship with him. Not long ago you yourself were saying, Yukio-san, that a man may not live under the same heaven with the slayer of his father. Even if I do not seek vengeance on Arghun, since we're under the Great Khan's law, how can I sit in the same yurt with him?"

"What if I ask you to?" said Yukio quietly. His eyes were watchful.

Jebu could not believe what was happening. "Can you forget that this man caused the slaughter of hundreds of our samurai? Can you

forget how he treacherously sent ten thousand men against us under the pretence of being on our side?"

"I have not forgotten that the tarkhan Arghun has been a dedicated, tenacious and nearly invincible foe. Nor have I forgotten that it is the duty of a general to listen to all points of view. I ask you and your wise father to listen to what Arghun has to say. Please do me that courtesy."

"Of course," said Jebu through tight lips.

"Please sit down."

Jebu drew over an ebony stool inlaid with mother-of-pearl horses. Taitaro sank to a cross-legged position on the floor.

Arghun said, "Some years ago you and your men found yourselves unable to live as samurai on your islands. You decided to go abroad and offer your services as fighting men to the Emperor of China. You will understand, then, the position I am in. It has become impossible for me to continue as a warrior in the army of the Great Khan. Therefore, I am doing what you did. I offer my services and those of my followers to Lord Yukio."

Jebu was stunned. "You have the audacity to offer to ally yourself with us after you tried to kill all of us?"

Arghun looked at Jebu gravely. "It happens quite often that leaders in war ally themselves with those they previously were trying to kill."

"As for audacity, it is a very valuable quality in a military leader," Yukio said with a smile.

Taitaro said, "It will show a great deal of audacity on your part, Lord Yukio, if you accept this offer."

"Why would a tarkhan who commanded a whole Banner now stoop to taking orders from the leader of a people he has always despised?" asked Jebu.

Arghun held up a broad hand. "I have always admired your people, shike Jebu. I greatly enjoyed my stay among them."

"Yes," said Taitaro dryly. "During which you served the Takashi."

Arghun shrugged. "It was necessary for me to serve the Takashi. I was hunting Jebu, who served the Muratomo. Tell me, old monk. Your Order hires out its members to fight for various masters. Does a Zinja always go through life serving on one side of a conflict? Or does he change sides as his Order commands him?"

Taitaro nodded. "He may well change sides many times. But I still do not understand why you wish to change from Kublai Khan to Lord Yukio, when you enjoy rank, wealth and power as it is."

Arghun's seamed face darkened. "You do not understand my position. The Great Khan publicly disgraced me. I devoted much of my life to trying to carry out a command of Genghis Khan, and his grandson mocked me for it. I do not wish to go to war against the Sung as an outcast. When I heard that Muratomo no Yukio had received the Great Khan's permission to take his contingent of foreign troops back to the Sunrise Land, to renew his war against the Takashi, I decided that I wanted to join him. I helped Kublai Khan become Great Khan, but I no longer wish to serve him." He lowered his voice. "I do not respect him. I would sooner fight in a foreign land and even die there than watch our empire turn into something I loathe."

"Jebu, if I were to take Arghun into our ranks, could you set aside

your enmity towards him?" Yukio said.

"Forgive me, Lord Yukio," said Jebu, "but you would be mad to accept this man's service."

Arghun shrugged his wide shoulders and stood up. "I have said what I came to say. Lord Yukio, I leave my future to you. Consult with your friends and advisers. I will wait to hear from you."

Jebu was relieved. Perhaps now he and Taitaro could talk some sense into Yukio.

"One last thing," said Arghun. "Your force consists now of about two thousand fighting men. If you accept me, I will not come to you empty-handed. There are many Mongols who are personally loyal to me. There are many who fought for Arik Buka and who do not want to fight for Kublai Khan. You could return to your homeland with considerably more than two thousand men."

There was a light in Yukio's eyes. "How many more?"

"An entire tuman," said Arghun with a faint smile. He bowed and was gone.

The three men in Yukio's yurt were silent. Jebu studied Yukio in the flickering lamplight. His eyes burned with dreams of victory and vengeance. He would be impossible to convince, but Jebu had to try. He waited for Yukio to speak first.

"Ten thousand cavalrymen," Yukio breathed.

"You should have asked," Jebu said slowly, "whether they will be the same ten thousand who tried to slaughter us at the edge of the Gobi."

Yukio leaped to his feet and stood over Jebu, his fists clenched. "Would you deprive me of victory? With ten thousand Mongols fighting for me, Sogamori won't have a chance."

"What makes you think your samurai will fight alongside the Mongols who only recently tried to kill them?"

"My samurai have fought side by side with Mongols for the last four years." Yukio sat down beside Jebu on the bench and put his hand on Jebu's shoulder. "I know how you feel. This goes back to your father. But I didn't know your father. You yourself never knew him. Look at the gift Arghun brings us. Can't you put this old enmity away?"

Jebu turned and stared into Yukio's eyes. "As easily as you could ally yourself with Sogamori."

Yukio was silent, breathing heavily. At last he stood, paced a bit over the thick Chinese carpets, and said, "Sogamori is the enemy of the realm, not merely my enemy. I fight him, not for my personal revenge, but to save the Sacred Islands from misrule."

"If you embark with a tuman of Mongols under Arghun, you will be leading a Mongol invasion of our Sacred Islands. Arghun's men will so outnumber yours that you will have no control over what they do."

Yukio sat down again. "Jebu, people were wretched under the Takashi when we left. Now they've had five more years of misery. The moment I land and raise the White Dragon, samurai will flock to me from every province. Soon Arghun's tuman will be only a part of my forces. I will use ten thousand to deliver the first blow, a devastating blow from which the Takashi will never recover." Yukio stood once more, walked to the centre of the yurt and turned to Taitaro.

"Sensei, you have not spoken. I know that to their skill in the arts of combat the Zinja add sagacity. Do you see what I can accomplish with Arghun and his troops? Or do you share your son's blind hatred of Arghun?"

Taitaro smiled. "As we say in go, I have the advantage of the onlooker and can see things that are not apparent to the contestants. Though I have, on occasion, fought Arghun, I bear him no ill will. Even so, Lord Yukio, I believe you would be mistaken to accept Arghun's services. He is one of the most dangerous men I have ever seen. I have been the channel for a vision of your triumphant return to the Sacred Islands. But believe that your victory will be marred by sorrow and defeat unless you act with purity."

Yukio frowned. "Purity? Do you mean I must land on the Sacred Islands without any foreign warriors?"

Taitaro folded his hands in his lap and looked down at them. "You have over two thousand warriors whom you have gathered yourself, trained yourself, led yourself. They are loyal to you. Most of them are foreign, but they are still a fighting force that is purely yours. They have had samurai training and samurai leadership. Arghun's ten thousand, on the other hand, are a borrowed, foreign power. They are not truly your men, and you will not be able to control them. Unleashing a horde of barbarians on the people of the Sacred Islands can only bring you infamy."

Yukio shook his head. "You think as your son does."

"On the contrary." Taitaro stood, walked over to Jebu, and looked down at him. "Jebu-san, I heard the hatred and vengefulness in your voice when you spoke to Arghun tonight. You have made no progress in your feelings about him in the eighteen years since you fought him at the Waterfowl Temple."

"Your counsels are impossible, sensei."

"They would be worth nothing if they were easy." Taitaro turned back to Yukio. "I know that you, too, find my advice hard to act upon. But if you do not follow it, all will end in ruin for you."

Yukio shrugged. "I told you years ago that a military commander who puts his stock in omens and visions is likely to lose. I'm sorry, sensei, but nothing you say has changed my mind. I will make the bargain with Arghun, and you two will learn to live with it, if you want to stay with me."

Jebu's heart sank. "Yukio, would you choose Arghun over me?" Yukio turned his back. "Yes," he whispered. "Because he brings me ten thousand warriors." He whirled on Jebu and Taitaro. "Again and again you two monks have tried to do my thinking for me. It's time you learned there can be only one commander in an army."

"When you land on the Sacred Islands with your tuman, be sure that you, and not Arghun, are that one commander," said Jebu.

"I want to be alone now," Yukio said hoarsely.

Taitaro and Jebu bowed and said good night.

As they walked under the stars Jebu said, "This is a calamity. I was hoping you could persuade him, sensei."

"I knew I wouldn't," Taitaro said. "My vision at the Ch'in-cha temple in Szechwan already warned me that I would fail. There will be a dark side to Yukio's triumph, and nothing can prevent it."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Twenty sea-going junks lined the riverfront of the city of Haitsin on the north China coast, two days' ride from Khan Baligh. Each ship was capable of carrying two hundred soldiers and as many horses. There were not enough ships available on the coast to transport Yukio's entire force at once, so the warriors had been divided into five groups that would leave different ports on different days. The first ships were to leave Haitsin on the fifth day of the Third Month.

The night before the sailing, Yukio gave a banquet for his officers at the largest and best inn in the city.

"Tell him I've gone to burn incense at the temple of Niang niang for a successful voyage," Taitaro said. "I've had quite enough of Mongol feasts." Niang niang was a local goddess who had originated as a sea-captain's daughter. The sailors of Haitsin brought models of their ships to her every spring.

The inn was a three-storey building fronting on Haitsin's largest market-place. Two Mongol officers were fighting on a second-floor balcony as Jebu approached. One pushed the other over the railing and he fell into a crowd of gaping onlookers below. One who may not make it to the ships tomorrow, thought Jebu.

The junior officers were dining and drinking on the lower floors. One of Yukio's men led Jebu to the top storey, where those of rank of hundred-commander and above were gathered. Jebu stepped through a gilded doorway and nearly choked on the smell of roasting meat. A roar of shouts and songs hammered at his ears.

Yukio's officers were seated on benches at long tables already awash with wine. Courtesans danced through the crowd, a few of

them altogether naked. The warriors reached after them, pawed them and roared with laughter.

Jebu saw Yukio at a table set on a platform at the far end of the room. Yukio was dressed as the Mongols were, in a robe of embroi dered Chinese satin. On the wall behind him hung a White Dragon banner. Shameful to display the Muratomo family insignia at a brawl like this, Jebu thought. In the Sunrise Land the room would have been quiet with, perhaps, music in the background. His host would have risen and politely escorted him to a place. Above all, there would be no stink of burnt flesh. Had Yukio forgotten all that? Was this what he wanted to unleash on his people? Jebu pushed his way through the crowd towards Yukio, and Yukio waved to him.

Just as he got to the table, two men sitting near Yukio looked up. One was Arghun Baghadur. The other was the tuman-bashi Torluk. Jebu felt his face grow hot. He expected to see Arghun here, but he hadn't known that Torluk was also part of Yukio's Mongol contingent. All he could think of was the memory of Torluk seated on his pony in front of his silent tuman, giving the signal to fire on the samurai.

"Jebu, sit by me," Yukio called.

It was past bearing. Jebu turned and began to push his way out of the room.

As he crossed the market square, he sensed that he was being followed. Port cities like this were infested with thieves. Also, there were secret societies of Chinese rebels that still harassed the Mongols. Jebu stepped into a side street and a hand seized his sword arm. Thinking he was about to be attacked, Jebu whirled with his hand raised to strike a killing blow.

The man holding his arm was Yukio. His brown eyes were furious.

"You embarrass me in public with your rude behaviour," Yukio growled.

"Is it possible to be rude in a riot like that?"

"You are determined to destroy everything I am doing. Nothing means more to you than your hatred of Arghun."

"You mean more to me, Yukio," Jebu said sadly. "I still think you're making a mistake allying yourself with Arghun."

Yukio spoke more calmly. "I realize it is worry for me as much as anything that makes you act as you do. If it reassures you, I know Arghun and his Mongols are dangerous. It's just that there is a certain kind of risk a military man must take, if he wants to win wars."

They began to walk, side by side, down to the riverfront docks. Only the red and green lanterns on the masts of the junks lit their way. Jebu walked warily, keeping his hand near his sword hilt.

"Perhaps you're too concerned with winning and losing," Jebu said.

"That's one part of the Zinja philosophy I've never been able to accept fully," said Yukio. "What is the point of fighting if you do not try to win?"

"We fight because we choose to fight. We hope to achieve a state of insight which unites us with the Self."

"Is that better than winning?"

Jebu laughed. "It's something you can get whether you win or lose. That can be very convenient, sometimes."

Yukio laughed with him. "You realize, Jebu-san, you've made me

look like a fool, running after you when I should be with my guests?" Yukio walked over to the river's edge and sat down, looking out at the water. "You are very important to me. You are so important I seriously considered giving up ten thousand fighting men, just to please you."

"You didn't consider it for a moment."

"Jebu, I've known you for fifteen years. The night I escaped from the Rokuhara, I probably wouldn't have reached the first farmhouse outside Heian Kyo without your help. You swore that night to serve me. You held out your sword to me. Ever since, you've kept me alive. You've given me strength when I was convinced the Muratomo were finished and was ready to cut open my belly. You sustained me through these years of exile. You've taught me your skills, given me good counsel, been my friend. I put all that in one scale and Arghun's tuman in the other, and you, by yourself, nearly outweigh the ten thousand men."

Jebu sat silently beside Yukio at the river's edge. He felt his eyes grow moist. The bright lanterns reflected in the river blurred. Mooring ropes creaked, and Chinese sailors called to one another.

"If you think so highly of me, why won't you listen to me?" "Because in the most crucial moments of my life I can listen only to myself."

"Perhaps that's your way of achieving union with the Self."

Yukio turned to Jebu with appeal in his eyes. "You say a man does what he thinks he must do, and the desire to succeed must take second place. That is all I am doing. I may lose this war with Sogamori if I bring in Arghun and his men. But bringing in Arghun and Torluk and their ten thousand warriors is what I must do. It is an opportunity I cannot turn away from. The Mongols may betray me, but

not until after we have conquered Sogamori. Then I will be invincible. Jebusan, if you believe I am going into danger, come with me. In the name of all that has happened between us, do not force us to break with each other. I need you now more than ever. I am on the verge of winning. My whole life has been leading up to this moment. Stay with me now."

Ever since Yukio had announced that Arghun was going with them, Jebu had been thinking about the fact that he was well past thirty years old; in fact, he was closer to forty. Zinja generally retired from the field and often married after the age of thirty. He had found Taniko again. If they could overcome the obstacle of Kiyosi's death, why couldn't he and Taniko go to a Zinja temple somewhere and live as Nyosan and Taitaro had? Except that he would never leave Taniko as Taitaro had left Nyosan.

Jebu contemplated his dream. He looked into Yukio's wide eyes, saw the call for help in his face. He reached out and took Yukio's hand.

"When I first met you, I swore to serve you and offered you my sword. I will never take back either, the promise or the sword."

The next morning the samurai were out earliest of all. No one had suggested it, but by some unspoken agreement they all came down to the wharves to watch the sunrise. A fresh, sea-scented breeze blew up the river from the coast, gently rocking the anchored junks.

Yukio stood in the stern turret of the junk nearest the sea, the one that would be first to sail. It was an awesome ship, with seven raked masts. Elat-bottomed so it could navigate both rivers and ocean, it was unpainted and undecorated, as was customary among the northern Chinese.

Jebu stood beside Yukio and looked down at the samurai, less than three hundred of them, who had survived the years of China. Most of them had long since adopted the dress of Chinese or Mongol warriors, but on this day they were all wearing the battle dress of the Sacred Islands. They must have scoured their belongings to find every helmet, every breast plate, every gauntlet and skirt they still had.

Yukio addressed them. Later he would be talking to all the warriors under his command, but he wanted to begin the day with a special word for the samurai. Gripping the railing, he leaned towards them.

"We fled the Sacred Islands five years ago, impoverished and defeated. Since then we have won victory after victory. We stopped a Mongol army at Kweilin. We helped Kublai Khan triumph over Arik Buka. We have learned new ways of fighting and the use of new weapons. We have been handsomely rewarded by the Great Khan of the Mongols, and the wealth we bring back with us will buy us power.

"We leave behind the ashes of many mighty warriors in this foreign land. Sakamoto Michihiko . . . Imai . . . Kiyowara . Tajima . . . Jomyo . . . Oba . . . Saito . . . so many others I cannot name them all. All their names are inscribed on the scroll of honour which accompanies us on our return to the Sacred Islands.

"During these years we have fought not just for ourselves but for the house of Muratomo. We now return to the Sacred Islands to overthrow Sogamori and his family, and we will call upon the brave men in all provinces to lend their efforts to the cause. We will rid the realm of Takashi tyranny. We will restore the holy institutions that have been abused or destroyed by the Takashi. We will win even greater glory for ourselves and our ancestors than we already have won by our deeds here in China. Today we sail into history."

He lifted his arms over his head, and the samurai shouted, "Muratomo!" three times in unison.

While Yukio was speaking, the rest of the warriors were gathering on the docks. Yukio came down from the ship, mounted his horse, and joined Arghun and Torluk in overseeing the assembly of their troops. Seated on the ponies that would sail with them in the holds of the junks, the Mongols formed a great half circle facing the ships. In front of each unit of a thousand men stood an officer bearing a standard on a long pole. The samurai took their position in the circle, the White Dragon banner of the Muratomo fluttering before them. To one side waited the non-combatants who would be sailing with Yukio's warriors, among them Moko and Taitaro, and, modestly hidden in a sedan chair, Taniko.

Horns sounded. An officer tied a long strip of white cloth to each standard. He brought the other ends of the strips together in the centre of the half circle. Yukio, Arghun and Torluk dismounted and stood on the ends of the cloth strips. A shaman added another ribbon to those under the feet of the leaders. He tied the other end to the thigh bone of an ox and, gesturing with the bone, began a series of incantations in Mongol.

At this moment the ceremony was interrupted. A band of riders in black sable cloaks came thundering down the street that led from the outskirts of Haitsin to the docks. Arghun, surprised, reached for his sabre as the riders swept down on them.

"Prepare! The Great Khan comes!" shouted one of the riders, an officer wearing a gold tablet.

Jebu expected to see Kublai Khan's elephant-borne tower. Instead a small group of men on horseback approached at a trot. He

recognized Kublai Khan immediately, the man in the centre of the group who was taller and darker than the rest. He had never before seen the Great Khan on horseback, but like all Mongols he rode as one born in the saddle.

Kublai Khan rode directly into the centre of the assembly. He wore a long white satin riding coat and sat astride an unblemished white horse. One Mongol tribe of famed breeders supplied him with a thousand head of these horses each year.

Yukio, Arghun, and Torluk immediately fell to their knees. In silence all the warriors dismounted. They knelt and stood nine times, paying homage in the Mongol fashion.

It made Jebu uneasy to see Yukio kneeling to the Great Khan at this moment. True, Yukio was still in the Khan's service, but he was about to become a new person by crossing the sea. No longer one of the Great Khan's warriors, but chieftain of the Muratomo clan.

Kublai Khan spoke in a voice that carried along the waterfront. "My hunting led me in this direction, and I remembered that my fierce warriors from the Sunrise Land were about to depart. I came to add my blessing to the shaman's. Let me not interrupt these ceremonies. Muratomo no Yukio, may Eternal Heaven grant you success in your war across the sea. May you crush your enemies, may you see them fall at your feet. May you know the great happiness of a conqueror."

Yukio was a tiny figure looking up at the Great Khan on his white horse. Jebu could see that his face was flushed with excitement. Bowls of mare's milk were brought to Kublai Khan and the three leaders of the expedition. They dipped their fingers in the milk and sprinkled it towards the standards. Trumpets shrilled and drums thundered. Three times the warriors-Mongols, samurai and others from many lands-raised their war shout, shaking the walls of the

warehouses nearby.

Kublai Khan waved a hand in farewell and rode his horse slowly across the open space before the assembled horsemen. He smiled and nodded as he passed Jebu, as he did to the other men he recognized.

He passed close to the sedan chair in which Taniko waited. Jebu felt his heart lose the rhythm of its beat. He heard the Great Khan ask a low-voiced question of a kneeling attendant. The man answered, and Kublai nudged his horse over to the chair, reached down and swept the curtain aside. In our land that would be an offence deserving death, Jebu thought. In a cold sweat he heard Kublai exchange a few words with Taniko. Then the Great Khan let the curtain fall.

In a moment Kublai and his escort were gone. Now the warriors climbed down from their horses and left them to servants, to be led down wide gangplanks into the bellies of the junks. The men formed files and began to board the ships.

Yukio stood again beside Jebu on the deck of the junk. "The Great Khan spoke of happiness. It was a happy day when we escaped safely from the Takashi fleet at Hakata. But this is surely the happiest moment of my life, to be going home again."

Although Yukio's men boarded with Mongol efficiency, the sun was at its zenith by the time the fleet was ready to cast off. Yukio's ship was the first to push away from the wharf. The pilot shouted commands, a drummer on deck struck up a steady beat, and oarsmen strained. Slowly the junk swung into midstream, where tide and wind could carry it out to sea. Crewmen hauled on ropes, and sails rattled into place on the seven masts.

Later, Jebu stood alone in the bow of the junk. Yukio, restless as

ever, had taken a small boat to visit and inspect the other ships in the fleet. There was a strong salt smell in the air, and sea birds glided alongside the junk. Jebu felt a presence close at hand, and turned. Taniko was beside him.

"Home," she said, her eyes sparkling. "I thought I would never taste the food of the Sunrise Land again."

"What did he say to you?" Jebu cut in.

Her eyes clouded over. "I do not like to remember what he said, Jebu." She stared, not back at Haitsin, now only a grey blur on the riverbank behind them, but ahead at the blue horizon. "He said, 'Do not forget me, little one. Tell the people of your small country what you know of me and my empire. I shall see you again.' Jebu, perhaps it is wrong for us to go back. We are carrying a flame with us. When Yukio steps on shore, he will set our homeland ablaze from end to end. We do not know whether the Takashi will destroy us or whether we will defeat them. But all the warriors in the Sunrise Land, Muratomo and Takashi together, would not make one wing in the army of the Great Khan."

He knew she was right at least in one thing: they were going from one war to another. But he took her hand and said, "We must act as our insight tells us, Taniko. We cannot avoid choice. And every action has its shining side and its shadow side."

"But, Jebu-" Beneath his hand, her own trembled. "He said he would see me again."

PART ONE

THE BOOK OF YUKIO

Government is always for the benefit of the governors, at the expense of the governed. Sages who observe this are ever beset by the question: why is it that he who is most able to rule is never he who is most worthy to rule?

THE ZINJA MANUAL

Chapter One

The little house was perched on pilings over a pool at the bottom of a waterfall. A winding pathway of great black rocks led to it from the bank. The only sounds were the prattle of the waterfall and the sighing of the wind in the pines. The site had been chosen and the little house designed for seclusion and meditation.

It had been built ages earlier by the ancestor of their host, Eukiwara Hidehira. Hidehira said his ancestor, banished from Heian Kyo, had almost died of longing for the capital until he built this meditation hut and found peace. It was kept in repair and used by every generation of these Northern Fujiwaras.

Jebu took off his clogs and set them on the mossy embankment before trying to walk across to the house. The stepping stones were wet and slippery. When he had reached the house, he climbed steep wooden stairs and stood on the porch. "Ho, Yukio."

"Come in, Jebu-san."

Yukio, seated cross-legged before a low table, was wearing a violet robe with a yellow butterfly pattern. The robe looked strange to Jebu: he had grown so used to seeing Yukio in Chinese and Mongol garments. Yukio had brush, ink and paper before him, and when Jebu entered and seated himself, Yukio handed him a scroll.

"You are the first to read this. I plan to have it sent immediately to every province."

Jebu unrolled the scroll and read, while Yukio sat watching his face. It was a proclamation whose message was familiar to Jebu. Towards the end he read, "Most sorely oppressed by Sogamori and his clan

is the illustrious family of Muratomo. Sogamori despoiled and murdered my grandfather, my father Domei, and all my brothers, as well as many other members of my family. I alone, Muratomo no Yukio, survive to avenge them. I now claim the chieftainship of the Muratomo clan and call upon all relatives and allies of the Muratomo, from the furthest provinces to the capital itself, to rally to the White Dragon banner."

Yukio urged all who read his words to rise at once and attack their Takashi overlords. He promised that all meritorious deeds would be noted and rewarded.

He concluded, "We vow to rescue the sacred person of His Imperial Majesty from the clutches of the Takashi. The Muratomo clan, always loyal to His Imperial Majesty, will sweep away the clouds that obscure the glory of the Imperial house and burnish it till it once again shines as brightly as the sun."

Yukio's round eyes were eager. "Well?"

"It's beautifully written, Yukio-san. Especially that last sentence."

Yukio bowed. "Thank you. Is there anything I've neglected?"

Jebu hesitated. Lately, Yukio had been asking his advice and then doing just the opposite. These Muratomo were stubborn, wilful men. Yukio's father, Domei, had been like that, refusing to listen to advice, gallantly leading his family and his samurai straight to disaster. Probably Yukio's grandfather, beheaded after supporting the losing side in a struggle between rival Emperors, had been the same way. Now Yukio had brought the Mongols to the Sacred Islands against the advice of Jebu and his stepfather, Taitaro. He had insisted on landing in the far-northern land of Oshu against advice. Jebu and Taitaro and many other samurai were convinced that there were

more warriors in the south ready to spring to Yukio's support. Now this proclamation. Jebu sighed inwardly. He could do nothing but try.

"By scattering copies of this declaration up and down the realm, you put Sogamori and the Takashi on notice that you're back and are going to fight them. Why throw away the advantage of surprise? They outnumber us twenty to one."

Yukio smiled. At least he had not yet lost his temper, Jebu thought, as he often had when Jebu's advice contradicted his wishes.

"We have no advantage of surprise. It has taken us most of a month to collect all our men here. By now Sogamori's agents have reported our presence. I learned my lesson when we fought our way out of Hakata Bay. If we couldn't keep the departure of a thousand samurai a secret, how can we expect to hide the arrival of twelve thousand warriors? Since the Takashi know we're here, it's best that all who might rally to our side be alerted as well. Also, as you and Taitaro warned me, there will be people who will imagine I'm an invader, because I brought Mongols with me. This proclamation will allay their suspicions."

"How?"

"It at once makes plain that I belong here and have a just cause. I want everyone to think of me as a loyal subject of the Emperor. Which I am." He looked challengingly at Jebu, as if expecting disagreement.

"You talk of rescuing the Emperor from the Takashi. When we left here, the Emperor was Sogamori's son-in-law. What makes you suppose he'll want to be rescued? Remember how your father tried to rescue Emperor Nijo from the Takashi, and His Imperial Majesty fled to the Rokuhara the first chance he got?"

"It's worse than that," said Yukio with a grin. "Eujiwara Hidehira tells me there's a new Emperor on the throne, Sogamori's grandson. When I wrote about rescuing the Emperor from the Takashi, I meant rescuing the office, not the man-or in this case the boy."

Jebu was surprised. "Don't you believe that the person of the Emperor is sacred?"

"Do you?"

"It's not a point on which Zinja teaching dwells overmuch. I certainly thought you and all samurai believed in the Emperor's divinity."

Yukio looked melancholy. "I gained much by travelling to China, but I lost much, too. I've learned that every nation declares its ruler divine or divinely appointed. In every nation it is really the powerful men who decide who the divine ruler will be. If I'm to win this war for my family, I must be a maker of Emperors, just as Sogamori has been."

Jebu stood up. "At the moment I must be a maker of Zinja. Or near-Zinja."

"Then Taitaro-sensei has given you permission to instruct some of our men in Zinja arts of fighting?"

"Yes. He says there are so few Zinja left these days that there can be no objection to sharing our knowledge with others."

"Only our own people, though. No Mongols or other foreigners."

"I'm glad you're at least somewhat wary of the Mongols."

"Of course." Yukio stretched himself and sighed. "Ah, Jebu-san, it's good to be home again, isn't it? To see landscapes that excite the eye, instead of endless, dreary wastes. To eat our good food and

get away from the infernal stink of meat. To hold the exquisite women of our islands in our arms again. No more clumsy, smelly foreign women."

"I didn't have that much to do with foreign women," Jebu said.

"You have always belonged, body and soul, to the Lady Taniko. Which reminds me." Yukio grinned proudly. "I'm getting married to the lady Mirusu. You and Taitaro-sensei and the Lady Taniko and Moko-san are invited to the feast."

Jebu climbed the hill between the samurai camp and Lord Hidehira's citadel. Yukio was right. It was a great happiness to be back in the Sacred Islands. Here, near the city of Hiraizumi, the land was hilly and wooded. To the south rose a chain of blue mountains. The hills and rocks, the trees and streams, were a delight to an eye exhausted by the bare brown plains of northern China and the steppes of Mongolia.

Yukio getting married. That was surprising news, but it shouldn't have been. Yukio always liked women around him, and he always pined for the women of home. Jebu was happy for him. Who was the woman, though, and how had Yukio found her so quickly?

If only he and Taniko could be married. It would give him much pleasure to have Taitaro-sensei bless their union. Long ago his mother had urged him to marry and raise children. It would please her, wherever she was, if Taniko and he did that.

But Horigawa lived. And Kiyosi remained dead by Jebu's own hand. Could that make a difference to her? Or did she no longer care how Kiyosi had died, now that she had Jebu?

He was afraid it did make a difference.

He reached the top of the hill and was looking down through the pines at a wide valley. The camp of Yukio's army filled the valley from end to end. The tents of the samurai, the Chinese and other foreign auxiliaries were scattered, seemingly without pattern, near at hand. Beyond them the Mongol yurts stretched in their regular grey rows. Jebu could make out a few horses grazing in the wooded hills. Eortunately there was enough uncultivated land here in the far north to provide their thousands of horses with room to forage. When they began to move towards the capital, peasants would suffer wherever they went.

He sat down on the hilltop with his back to the camp, facing the distant mountains. His students would wait awhile. He was wearing only his simple grey robe. His fingers went without conscious direction to the pocket inside the robe, the secret place grown so familiar over the years. The Jewel sparkled in the mid-morning sun. He composed his mind and held the Jewel up just far enough away from his face to focus on it. His eyes followed the knots and twists of the Tree of Life pattern etched on the crystalline surface, his fingers slowly turning the stone. Soon he was looking through the Jewel at the pattern as it appeared on the other side. The lines swam up to his gaze through the depths of the Jewel, which magnified them and gave them solidity.

He heard the beat of wings descending from the sky above. It was the White Dragon of Muratomo, the beast he had ridden in his initiation vision. He looked up, raised a hand to reach for the dragon. It hovered above him. Its eyes were Yukio's huge brown eyes. Looking at him sadly, it rose again and at last disappeared into the blue sky. Jebu felt a sad sense of loss.

Slowly, the Jewel reappeared in his gaze. After a time he put it away and stood up, sighing. His foreboding about this expedition was confirmed.

He started down the hill. Today he would teach his students how to kill with any one of thirty-four common objects to be found in any household.

Chapter Two

Taniko and Lord Hidehira's wife had worked together preparing the dinner, and together they served it to Yukio, Jebu and Hidehira. When not serving, Taniko knelt in a corner beside Hidehira's wife with her eyes downcast and pretended not to hear the conversation. At first, she told Jebu, she resented being expected to play the role of a woman of the Sacred Islands, submissive and hidden. But now it relaxed her. After the uncertainties of life in China and Mongolia, it was pleasant to know exactly what to do in every situation.

The hall they were in was built of roughhewn logs. The pillars that supported the roof were barbarously carved and painted. Hidehira liked to imagine that his palace rivalled anything in Heian Kyo, but to his visitors' eyes, it was so different there was really no comparison.

"I never forgot her," Yukio was telling Lord Hidehira and Jebu. "When I came back here after so many years I was amazed to discover that she was still unmarried. That was my fault, though. Her father had many daughters and it was difficult to find a husband for Mirusu after she had given birth to a wandering stranger's child."

"Shame, shame," said old Hidehira, chuckling and wagging a finger at Yukio. The top of his head was bald. The long white hair that grew from the sides of his head flowed together with his luxuriant white beard and moustache, all of which spread over his chest like a great river fed by its tributaries. He was a dainty eater and kept his beard scrupulously clean. He was eighty-nine years of age.

He was the tenth-generation chieftain of a clan known as the Northern Eujiwara, who had settled here in the land of Oshu hundreds of years earlier, after losing out in a power struggle with the Eujiwara branch that dominated in the capital. Like the Muratomo

and the Takashi, the Northern Eujiwara had become landowning samurai. They had been allies of the Muratomo for generations. They took part with them in joint expeditions against the barbarian hairy Ainu who had once held these northern reaches. Eujiwara Hidehira had sheltered Yukio once before, years ago, and it was while staying at Hidehira's stronghold that Yukio got the idea to go to China.

"Ah," said Jebu. "You are marrying the girl whose father owns Sun Tzu's Art of Warfare."

"Exactly," said Yukio. He recounted the story to Hidehira, of nights divided between reading the classic on warfare and enjoying the delights of the lovely Mirusu.

"Ah, the energy of the young." Hidehira laughed as he levered a prawn to his mouth with chopsticks. "Coupling half the night and studying till dawn."

"You sought the girl out again as soon as you got back here?" said Jebu. "I thought you were only interested in reading the books."

"Hardly," said Yukio. "She was an exquisite creature, pale and delicate as moonlight. She has not changed that much since we parted."

"Her father was a Takashi supporter," said Jebu. "Didn't he object?"

"It seems he lost a bit of land in Omi province to Takashi double-dealing. Now he hates them passionately. Also, he feels a son-in-law with twelve thousand troops behind him may have a promising future."

"Did you learn much from the Chinese book on warfare?" Hidehira asked him.

Yukio smiled and nodded. Taniko thought, it's too bad his teeth stick out every time he grins, and he grins so often. If it weren't for those protruding teeth and bulging eyes he'd be a handsome man. Still, his new bride was getting a marvellous man. Almost as marvellous as Jebu.

"I learned that deception is the key to victory in war," said Yukio. "A principle that was confirmed for me while riding with the Mongols."

Hidehira waved a hand in dismissal. "That is not the samurai way of fighting."

"I know," Yukio said solemnly. "I expect to beat any samurai army sent against me."

"I do not like your Mongols," said Hidehira, looking sourly down at the small table on which his food was arranged. It was a feeling, Taniko thought, which would be shared by many people of the Sunrise Land, of high and low station. Yet, Hidehira had so far allowed the Mongols to camp outside his provincial capital, Hiraizumi, had sold them provisions and was adding a detachment of his own considerable army to Yukio's.

"Our people don't like any foreigners," Yukio said with a laugh. "But we had better learn from them. Their way of making war has won them territories so vast, Lord Hidehira, that you might not believe so much land exists on the earth. To travel from one end of the territory ruled by Kublai Khan to the other takes most travellers a year. Of course, he has post riders who can do it in twenty days."

"Kublai Khan," said Hidehira. "An absurd name. What are post riders?"

Yukio looked at Jebu, raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "Couriers.

They ride the fastest horses. All travellers must clear the road for them. They ride from one post to the next, where they change mounts. They continue day and night. Being able to send and receive messages so quickly enables the Great Khan to hold his empire together."

"I'm glad we have no such thing here," said Hidehira. "The North em Eujiwara would never have been able to enjoy as much independence as we do if messages could travel with such lightning-like speed."

"Your isolation is good for you but a problem for me," said Yukio. "I need so much more information before my army can start to move."

"All you need to know is that everyone hates Sogamori," said Hidehira. "He issues whatever orders he pleases. Neither laws nor officials can oppose him. Even my cousin, the proud Eujiwara of Heian Hyo, must kiss the soles of his sandals. Eor a year now, Sogamori's grandson, Antoku, has reigned as Emperor."

Taniko remembered a conversation she'd had long ago with Kiyosi, when Sogamori was just planning the marriage of his daughter to Takakura, one of the Imperial princes. Takakura had an older brother whose claim to the throne must have been overruled if Sogamori's son-in-law, and later his grandson, had become Emperor.

Eull of eager curiosity, she blurted out, "What did Prince Mochihito do when Antoku was made Emperor?"

Hidehira whirled, his hair and beard flying, and stared at Taniko. Out of the corner of her eye Taniko could also see Hidehira's wife staring at her in shock.

"Did the lady speak?" Hidehira said in a wondering voice.

"Lady Taniko intended no discourtesy, my lord," Jebu answered. "She has just returned from an embassy of many years at the court of the Mongol Great Khan. At the Great Khan's court women frequently participate in discussions with men."

"Barbarous," said Hidehira, shaking his head.

Pompous old fool, thought Taniko, giving a little snort.

"What about Prince Mochihito?" said Jebu quickly. "Eirst he was passed over in favour of his younger brother. Now he is passed over again for his nephew. Did he protest?"

"There are rumours that he is furious," said Hidehira. "But he has done nothing in public. It is that way with everyone in these times. Outwardly, all submit to Sogamori and his relatives. Inwardly they hate the Takashi rule."

"That's what I'm counting on," said Yukio. "As my proclamation spreads, there will be a general rising throughout the country."

"The realm is ripe for it," said Hidehira. "Every province has a governor appointed by Sogamori who extorts huge taxes and imprisons anyone who fails to pay. The landlords drain the fiefs of all they produce, leaving the farmers nothing to live on. Every Takashi-appointed official abuses his power. Sogamori is once supposed to have said that anyone who is not a Takashi is not a human being. It would be more true to say that anyone who is a Takashi is a tyrant, a murderer and a thief. People are harassed in everything they do. No one is left alone. The Northern Eujiwara have always hated the Takashi. Now everyone hates them. My son Yerubutsu will return shortly from a trading mission to Maizuru, which is not far from the capital. We will have more news from him."

"Let's hope he doesn't come here with a Takashi army snapping at his heels," said Jebu.

"The Takashi are incapable of moving that fast," said Yukio. "But I would welcome their coming. If they came here I'd show you the art of warfare, Lord Hidehira. The Takashi survivors would never stop running."

"Hidehira fancies himself a great lord because he has this mountain stronghold where no one bothers him," said Taniko. "Actually, he's backward and ignorant." They were alone and lying together in their little guesthouse in the Eujiwara citadel. Her hands pressed against the hard muscles of Jebu's chest. "Not even willing to answer a simple question because it was a woman who asked it."

"Would you prefer to be back among the Mongols?"

In the darkness Jebu was no different from the man she had held in her arms so many years ago on Mount Higashi. His body was as hard and lean, his voice still smooth and quiet, with a trace of hidden power. His Zinja training included so many amatory postures that she believed that since their reunion at Khan Baligh they had never coupled in the same position twice.

"I would prefer that my people make one or two sensible changes in their customs," said Taniko. "I have spent too much of my life hovering in the background at dinners where my thoughts were far more interesting than most of the male conversation I heard."

Jebu laughed. "That's why men won't let you talk. They're afraid you'll shame them. It may well be that I'll be the only man who is aware of the full power of your mind." The laughter went out of his voice. "Taniko, we'll be on the march soon. We'll have to find a safe place for you to wait it out. Perhaps you could stay here at Hiraizumi."

"I wish I could rejoin my Uncle Ryuichi at Heian Kyo. Of all the older men in our family, he is the one I like best. I did blame him for letting Sogamori take Atsue from me and for not protecting me from Horigawa, but those things were out of his control. The moment that cruel arrow struck Kiyosi, my fate was decided."

There was a note of uneasiness in the gentle voice that came to her out of the darkness. "If Kiyosi had not died, you and I would not be together today."

"I know," said Taniko. "But the world in which Kiyosi lived and died, the world in which Atsue was born, seems to me a completely different one from the world you and I inhabit. By your thinking, I should be grateful to the man who killed Kiyosi. I could never feel anything but hatred for that man."

Jebu was silent for a long time. At last she reached out and stroked his cheek. It felt cold, hard and smooth under her hand, like a jade mask. He is thinking that he owes his happiness to the death of a good man, and he is ashamed, she thought. It isn't his fault, though.

At last he said, "You can't go to the capital. You'd be in the thick of the fighting. What do you want to do?"

"I really have no alternative," Taniko said. "If I can find a way to make the journey, I want to go back to the place where you met me, my family home in Kamakura."

Chapter Three

Eujiwara Yerubutsu, Hidehira's son and heir, arrived at Hiraizumi at the end of the Third Month, after the sun had dried up the mud of the spring thaw. There was even a summerlike dust cloud over the road along which Yerubutsu and thirty Eujiwara samurai had come, escorting a baggage train loaded with pottery and silk from the southern provinces.

A few hours after Yerubutsu's arrival, Hidehira sent for Yukio, asking him to come to the great hall of the fortress. Accompanied by Jebu, Yukio walked through the gardens between the guesthouse and the donjon. There was a different feeling in the air. Samurai who had been friendly only the day before now greeted them gruffly or pretended not to see them at all. Many more men seemed to be in armour than on the previous day.

By the time they entered Hidehira's great hall, Jebu's senses were as alert as a hunted animal's. Hidehira sat on the dais wearing a stiff black robe of state with upswept shoulders. A row of councillors and generals, similarly dressed, sat on his right and left. All wore their two samurai swords, the long and the short, the hilts thrusting out from under the robes. All were stone-faced except for the aged Hidehira, who wore an uncomfortable grin, as if trying to dispel the unpleasant atmosphere.

Hidehira began by introducing his eldest son to Yukio and Jebu. Yerubutsu was nearly seventy years of age, his topknot grey. His head was as perfectly round as an iron ball fired from a Chinese hua pao. His mouth was wide and at first glance, lipless; his eyes were slits.

Servants brought sake, and a round of polite questions and answers

concerning Yerubutsu's journey to the southern provinces and Yukio's sojourn in China seemed to Jebu to take all morning.

At last Yerubutsu said, "It's a good thing I was only in Maizuru, not in the capital, Lord Yukio. Otherwise, your proclamation could have caused me grave embarrassment. As it was, I barely had time to get out of Tango province with the goods I had acquired before a detachment of Takashi samurai arrived in Maizuru with a warrant for my arrest."

"I regret that my activities caused you distress, Lord Yerubutsu," said Yukio with a low bow. "My oversight was unpardonable."

"Nonsense," said Hidehira testily. "I knew Yerubutsu was in some danger, being so close to the capital when you issued your proclamation. I said to myself, if he can't get himself out of trouble, he's no son of mine."

"I appreciate your confidence in me, Eather," said Yerubutsu coldly. "Still, you could have lost a son. Of course, now that Lord Yukio is here again, you may feel you can spare a son."

"Lord Yukio's father, Domei, was a brother to me," said the old man sternly. "His son is my son. You have no right to resent that."

Yukio quickly interrupted the bitterness between father and son. "Lord Yerubutsu, I'm most anxious to learn what impact my proclamation had in the provinces to the south."

Yerubutsu gave Yukio a long, hostile look. "I had little time to learn its effect on others, since its effect on me was to force me to flee for my life. You can be sure, though, that now that the Takashi know you are in Oshu, a huge army will be on its way here before long."

"Let them come," said Hidehira fiercely, his white beard quivering.

"My father's generosity and his loyalty to old friends are legendary in Oshu," said Yerubutsu. "Because so many of our forefathers were comrades-in-arms, he extended his hospitality to you. Please forgive me, Lord Yukio." Yerubutsu's eyes glittered with hostility. "I fear you may have abused my father's generosity. Unwittingly, I'm sure."

A man with less self-control would have been provoked into drawing his sword. Yukio merely replied calmly, "If I thought that were true, Lord Yerubutsu, I would have to kill myself." Having lived as long with Yukio as he had, Jebu understood that this was a threat. If Yukio were to cut his belly open because of Yerubutsu's unjustified accusations, Yerubutsu would be disgraced.

"Certainly the matter does not warrant such extreme measures," said Yerubutsu, shifting restlessly on his cushion. He'd love to hack Yukio's head off and be done with it, thought Jebu. "I merely meant that by taking refuge with my father and issuing your proclamation of rebellion against Sogamori from here, you have placed us all in grave danger."

"Sogamori has always been my enemy," said Hidehira grumpily.

"I assure you, Lord Yerubutsu," Yukio said, "the forces I have are more than ample to protect your domain from the Takashi."

"We do not need your protection," Yerubutsu snapped. The polite mask was slipping away. Rage was turning the ball-shaped head a deep orange colour. What was troubling Yerubutsu, anyway? It must be that he had plans of his own, and Yukio's activities were interfering.

Yerubutsu said, "I presume by your forces you mean the swarm of barbarians camped on our land. I'm sorry to say it, Lord Yukio, but I'm

shocked that the bearer of so illustrious a name as yours would lead foreigners in an invasion of our soil. Even Sogamori would not bring foreign troops to fight against his people."

It was just as he and Taitaro had warned Yukio, thought Jebu. The Mongols would never be trusted.

Yukio continued to smile, just as if he had not been accused of treason to the realm. "The early Emperors invited Korean artisans and Buddhist missionaries to our shores. The honoured founder of your family, the Great Minister Fujiwara no Kamatari, brought Chinese law to the Sacred Islands, together with Chinese scholars to teach and administer the law. These were not invasions. We simply made use of the talents of foreigners for the greater glory of the Sunrise Land. The Mongols are not craftsmen, missionaries or scholars. But they understand one art better than almost any other people in the world-warfare."

Jebu spoke. "If the great lords will permit a comment from this humble monk, Sogamori did bring at least one Mongol into the realm to fight against his people. Many years ago the Mongol leader Arghun Baghadur acted as an officer in Sogamori's service."

"Eormerly he fought for Sogamori," said Yerubutsu. "Now he fights for you. See how little loyalty these barbarians have."

Yukio shrugged and said, "The past is the past and the present is the present." It was the slogan samurai had always used to justify changing sides in the midst of a war.

Yerubutsu took another tack. "I have heard that these Mongols have conquered half the earth. I am sorry if I seem to question you, Lord Yukio, but is it not foolhardy to bring ten thousand of them here?"

There was something to be said for the polite style of discourse cultivated in the Sunrise Land, Jebu thought. At least, Yukio and Yerubutsu were still talking. By now two Mongol chieftains would have exchanged coarse insults and been at each other's throats.

"I see that you are well informed on our troop strength, Lord Yerubutsu," said Yukio with a chuckle. "The fighting men of the Sunrise Land outnumber my Mongol contingent a hundred to one. The Mongols are masters of strategy and tactics, but I believe we can learn from them. We will have them under our control at all times."

"I do not believe my father realized how many troops you would be quartering on our lands when he gave you his permission," said Yerubutsu. "These savages take whatever they want without paying for it. They turn their horses loose to graze anywhere they choose. Several of our peasants have been injured in quarrels with the barbarians."

Yukio bowed. "As I have already assured your noble father, we are prepared to pay for everything we requisition. We have gold, silver, copper and an abundance of trade goods."

"Peasants who have lost all their rice cannot eat copper," Yerubutsu growled.

"Enough, Yerubutsu," Hidehira snapped. "I'm far from dead yet. I am still chieftain of this clan." He straightened his back, and his son and the family retainers on the dais bowed in unison.

"I was well aware that Lord Yukio was landing a huge army in our domain," Hidehira went on. "I am proud that the struggle to free the Sacred Islands from the Takashi has begun here at Hiraizumi in Oshu. Yerubutsu, you seem to have forgotten the long list of injuries

done to us by the Takashi. As for the Mongols, who but a fool would reject an army of ten thousand well-armed, experienced warriors, no matter where they came from? I'd use hairy Ainu to fight the Takashi if they'd do any good. You know perfectly well our peasants won't starve. Lord Yukio has already reimbursed us generously for quartering his army. Your complaints are nonsense, Yerubutsu. If you don't have more wisdom that that, at your age, you'll never have it." Breathing hard, Hidehira sat back and glared at his grey-haired son.

One time you don't have to be polite, thought Jebu, is when you are scolding a son. Hidehira's withered face was as red as Yerubutsu's.

"I'm sorry, honoured Eather," Yerubutsu muttered. "I'm only trying to protect our clan."

"By driving a wedge between us and our age-old allies?"

."I don't know whether Lord Yukio has a right to appeal to that alliance. His claim to the chieftainship of the Muratomo clan is false."

Yukio leaned forward, ready to spring. "Who says my claim is false?"

"Your brother Hideyori is chieftain of the Muratomo, my lord," said Yerubutsu with a triumphant smile. "I doubt that he welcomes your attempt to usurp his office."

Yukio stared at Jebu. "I thought Hideyori was dead. We had heard Sogamori had him executed." He turned to Yerubutsu with a sudden grin. "This is wonderful news."

"Your brother may not find your call for an insurrection and your assumption of the chieftainship so wonderful," Yerubutsu said sourly. "After all, the Shima family still hold him hostage in Kamakura for the Takashi."

Yukio turned to Jebu. "We must send word to Hideyori at once."

"There is something else you must do at once," said Yerubutsu angrily. "We want your army out of here, as far from Hiraizumi as you can march them, before the forces Sogamori sends against you can reach here. Eor two hundred years the land of Oshu has been virtually our kingdom. I will not allow it to be destroyed by a war not of our making."

Yukio raised a hand in a placating gesture. "The warriors I have brought with me, especially the Mongols, have little experience in mountain fighting. I would prefer to meet the Takashi somewhere south of here." He stood up. "If you will forgive me, Lord Hidehira, Lord Yerubutsu." He bowed. Jebu stood and bowed with him.

Yerubutsu held up a finger. "Before your army leaves here, I will go over the accounts my stewards have kept. You will repay us in full for all food and supplies taken from our people. I will determine the amount you owe. I have been to the Home Provinces, and I know better than any of you what current prices are."

Yukio bowed again. "I'm sure your assessment will be fair." Staring at the floor, the ancient Hidehira muttered, "Clearly, the age of noble-spirited samurai is gone."

Chapter Four

On the outskirts of Hiraizumi stood the proudest achievement of the Northern Eujiwara, the Chusonji Temple. A complex of forty buildings, the Chusonji was as richly decorated as any of the great temples of Heian Kyo. It boasted two famous statues of the Buddha as well as innumerable other works of art. Its most splendid building, the Konjikido, was coated with black lacquer and plated with gold.

Taniko and Jebu sat on a bed of pine needles on a wooded hill overlooking the Chusonji. Jebu was full of apprehension, far more frightened than he had ever felt going into battle. He had decided that today he must tell Taniko the one secret that lay between them.

"Yukio wants me to go to Kamakura to see his brother Hideyori," Jebu said. "If necessary, I'm to rescue Hideyori from your father. I'm to bring Hideyori the message that Yukio only claimed the clan chieftainship because he mistakenly thought Hideyori was dead."

Taniko bowed her head. "It was I who misled Yukio. If there is bad blood between the brothers because of this, it is my responsibility."

Jebu shook his head. "You gave us the only information you had. I warned him not to be so impulsive about sending out that proclamation."

Taniko smiled at him. This morning her beauty was as radiant as the golden temple below. Since their return to the Sunrise Land, Taniko's beauty had acquired a new vividness. She was like a plant that had been kept in a room too long and was fading, but had now been put outdoors and was growing vigorously again.

"I'd hoped all along you would be coming with me," she said.

"We'll have to travel quickly. A day's delay could mean Hideyori's death. You'll have to be ready this afternoon." He wondered if she could hear the tension in his voice as clearly as he could. He had to tell her now. With each day that passed there was more chance that circumstances would intervene to prevent him from telling her that he was Kiyosi's killer.

Now that he had made up his mind to speak, he was almost paralysed with dread. He reminded himself that, as a Zinja, he should simply speak out and let the consequences be what they would. Whatever her reaction, it would be the reaction the Self wanted, and therefore the right reaction.

"I will be ready when you want me," Taniko said with a small smile. "The Mongols taught me how to travel quickly. They consider a breakneck speed a dignified pace for a lady. We don't have to cover the whole distance overland, either. We can go by horseback to Sendai and from there hire a boat to take us down the coast to Kamakura. That would save us half the time."

"What do you think your father will do to Hideyori?"

She frowned. "Whatever he does will be decided by the situation. I know that after Kiyosi was killed Sogamori ordered my father to send him Hideyori's head. Eor some reason my father did not obey. Hideyori is worth much more to my father alive than dead."

At the mention of Kiyosi's name, Jebu felt as if he had been stabbed with an icicle. Taniko looked at him curiously, half smiling, half concerned.

"Jebu-san, you didn't bring me to this beautiful spot just to tell me you're coming with me to Kamakura."

"No, there is something I must say. It's something I would much rather forget, much rather we could both forget, but it cannot stay hidden forever." How to say it? He cast about frantically in his mind for words that would not hurt her. Einally, he gave up. Just say it as simply and plainly as possible, the Zinja way.

"Taniko, I killed Kiyosi.'

He felt a momentary relief at having at last said what, for so long, he could not say. But the look on her face turned the relief to anguish. It was a look of disbelief, one he had seen hundreds of times, usually on the faces of men he had just killed. He wanted to rush on, now that he had started, to tell her everything that had happened that day on the waters of Hakata. But he checked the impulse. Eirst, he must find out what she wanted, and needed, to know.

When she spoke, it was no help. "What did you say?"

"I killed Kiyosi," he repeated. He would have to explain. "At Hakata Bay. We were fighting from ships. He was about to shoot Yukio. I used an arrow with an armour-piercing head. He died instantly. Eell overboard. I didn't know who it was. Moko had to tell me. Yukio was angry with me at first. He had given strict orders-don't shoot at samurai. But I explained that the man I shot, Kiyosi, had been about to kill him. It was over so quickly. You know how these things happen in battle. One moment a man is alive. The next he's dead. No, you don't know what it's like. You've never been in a battle." He checked himself. This was just what he hadn't wanted to do. He had wanted to help her, not merely purge himself. He waited for her to speak. Her look was changing from astonishment to pain. Just like a wounded man, he thought.

She said softly, "I've seen people killed, Jebu. I once killed a man."

He waited for her to say more. Her lustrous eyes held his. Her mouth was slightly open. After a moment she said, "Oh, Jebu-san. Poor Jebu." Now he was surprised. "You feel sorry for me?"

"You've been living with this ever since it happened. Especially since we came together again. You've been holding this in and suffering all alone." She rested her hand on 'his. Her hand was cool and dry. She looked down at the large, brown hand under hers and slowly drew her hand away.

She whispered, "Homage to Amida Buddha. Homage to Amida Buddha." There was bewilderment on her face.

"I've learned to bear the death of Kiyosi," she said. "I can even bear the loss of my son. I don't know if I can bear this, that it was you who killed him. I looked at your hand just now and thought, this is the hand that released the arrow. I couldn't touch you any more. Help me, Amida Buddha." She was not talking to him now, Jebu realized, but to herself. Eor a moment, when she spoke of feeling sorry for him, he thought she was going to understand. But now, watching the tears begin to form in her eyes, he knew it was not going to be that easy. He had often found that his worst fears were not realized, so that it sometimes seemed that to fear a thing would ensure its not happening. Once in a while, though, exactly what he feared came to pass, and those were always the worst times of his life. Like this. His fingers strayed to his chest and felt the lump of the Jewel inside his robe. The Jewel gave no comfort, either. It was hard and cold.

She drew her index finger delicately over her eyelids. The tears that had brimmed her eyes were wiped away. She turned and looked at him, and her stare was dark, fathomless.

"Tell me exactly what happened. I didn't grasp all of it the first time."

Slowly and carefully, Jebu told her, starting with the first appearance of the Takashi ships at the mouth of Hakata Bay and ending when his galley had fought free and was on its way to China.

"All these years," she said wonderingly, "I've hated the man who killed him, without ever once suspecting that it might be you. Unthinkable that my karma could bring me that much pain."

"Taniko, there is no need for pain." She was slipping away from him. He felt panic, as if he were holding her with one hand at the brink of a cliff, and was losing his grip.

"No need to feel pain?" She looked at him in amazement. "Jebu, I don't choose to feel pain. Pain happens to me. All my life, it seems, has been filled with pain. Except for two times. One was the years with Kiyosi. The other was the last few months with you. You brought each of those times to an end."

He closed his eyes. Her words hurt past bearing. He wanted to get up and run from her, run down the hill to the golden temple. He would throw himself on the floor and lie there in the cool peace of the temple until he died. Now, at last, he yearned for death as the samurai did. Plunging a dagger into his belly and tearing his guts open could be no worse than this pain in his heart.

"The Buddha said that life is suffering," Taniko whispered.

Again Jebu tried to tighten his fingers on the wrist that was slipping over into the abyss. "The Buddha also said that suffering can end. That the poisoned arrow can be pulled from the wound and the wound can heal."

Taniko's eyes were quite dry now. "Yes. He said that the cure for suffering is to kill desire."

"Desire for what is past, for what cannot be brought back."

"All desire," said Taniko quietly. "As long as I desire you, I will feel pain, knowing that I desire the man who killed Kiyosi."

"You might as well kill me," Jebu said, "if you are going to kill your desire for me."

"Are not life and death all the same to a Zinja?"

Thinking still of the belly-cutting of the samurai, Jebu said, "At this moment, for me, death is preferable to life. If it will give you any comfort, any peace, I'll give you my sword and you can run it through me."

The look in her eyes was almost hatred. "Eor the Zinja and the samurai it's the same. Life is nothing. Death is everything. So easy. Easy for everyone except those you leave behind."

"Eorgive me. It was a foolish suggestion."

"No. Typical. Not foolish, typical of you Zinja, of all warriors. Even of Kiyosi. He was no wiser than you, after all."

"I know that Kiyosi was a man to be admired."

She was still looking at him with near hatred. "So you killed him."

He began to feel angry. If she couldn't understand how men who respected each other might fight and kill each other, she understood nothing about this matter. She had no right to hate him.

"Taniko, in battle you can't pick and choose your targets. You try to kill everyone on the other side. They are all trying to kill you. I didn't want to kill Kiyosi. I didn't even know it was Kiyosi I was shooting at.

All I knew was that I couldn't let Yukio be killed. I didn't even see it as a choice. I was guided by the Self."

"Ah, I see. It was not you who killed Kiyosi. It was your god, the Self."

"The Self is not a god. Taniko, nothing will bring back Kiyosi. Your son Atsue has been lost to you for eight years. Nothing can change that, either. Yes, my hand launched the arrow. But you must know, if you know me at all, that I felt no hatred for Kiyosi. If I had known what he was to you, perhaps I would have hesitated to shoot. I've always wanted you to be happy, and I've never been able to give you happiness."

The dazzle of Konjikido blurred and swam in his sight. He heard blackbirds calling in the cryptomerias that towered above them. Their cries sounded like the battle shouts of samurai announcing their lineage.

"The last time I cried was when Taitaro-sensei told me how my mother was killed," he said.

Taniko's face was a mask, the powdered, painted face of a noble lady of the Sunrise Land. It was unreadable. She did not answer.

"If I could restore him to life I would, knowing that it would mean losing you forever," Jebu went on. "All I've done is bring you suffering. When you found a new life with Kiyosi, I killed him. And now that we're together again, I'm destroying it by telling you this."

"It would have been so much easier not to tell me," she said, her voice a cold silver chime. "It would have saved us both so much grief. Why did you have to?"

"Because you mean so much to me that I could not go on lying to you. If the shadow of falsehood had fallen between us throughout our

lives, we would never truly have been united, body and soul. Our union would have been eternally blighted. That would have been as painful for me to live with as it would have been for us to part and never see each other again."

"Then you told me this to spare yourself pain. I might have been perfectly happy with you if you had not told me."

"Would you really wish to spend your life with me, not knowing this?"

She looked down at her small, pale hands folded in her lap. "That is a question that can never be answered. How can I say whether I would prefer not to know?"

"The man who unknowingly drinks poisoned wine enjoys it but dies all the same."

"He may die happy, perhaps not even aware that he is dying."

She had pulled her hand away from him earlier, but he had to reach for her now, to hold her hands again. It might be the last time he would ever touch her. She did not resist when he took her hands, but they lay lifelessly in his grasp.

"Taniko, you can spend the rest of your life hating me for Kiyosi's death, but that will not bring him back. You and I might be happy together, if you were able to forgive. Otherwise, you will lose me as well as Kiyosi."

She smiled faintly. "I can forgive, Jebu. I have already forgiven you. I know what you say is true-that you meant no evil when you fired that arrow into Kiyosi's breast. Once, Kublai Khan told me about the Mongols killing all the children of a captured city. He explained that, since the men and women had been killed, the children would only

have starved to death had they been left alive. The Mongols believed that killing the children was the right thing to do. You, of course, have never killed a child, but I can't help thinking how much harm men do when they mean no evil. Even so, these hands, holding mine, were the hands that sent Kiyosi to the bottom of the sea forever, that took away my son's father, destroyed my protector, left me defenceless when Sogamori took Atsue. None of it was your doing, Jebu. I realize that. I could never hate you. I can forgive you."

Again, for a moment, Jebu felt hope and relief, but there was something in her tone that warned him against hope. Slowly, gently, she pulled her hands away from him.

"What I cannot do is forget."

Jebu reached for her again, but she rose to her feet gracefully and drew away from him.

"You could not call back the arrow that killed Kiyosi," she said. "Nor can you call back what you have told me. I can never forget what I now know."

"Did Kiyosi mean more to you than I do?"

She shook her head. "That question is not worthy of you, Jebu. Kiyosi was with me almost daily for ten years. He fathered Atsue, who gave me more pleasure than any other human being ever has, including you. But in all those happy years with him I never forgot you. If what happened were reversed, if Kiyosi had killed you, I would feel towards him as I do towards you now."

Jebu stood before her with his hands dangling helplessly at his sides. If only he could break down this wall between them by holding her, by crushing her in his arms.

"How do you feel towards me now, Taniko?"

A slight frown creased the white-powdered skin of her forehead. "If I say it, I will hurt you, but since you consider the truth so important-I shrink from you."

Jebu turned away from her so that she could no longer see the tears streaming down his face. Her voice followed him.

"Years ago you killed Kiyosi. Now you have killed Jebu. The Jebu I was happy with just a few moments ago no longer exists. A stranger is there. I recoil from that stranger."

Jebu sank to the ground, his hands over his face, feeling as if a great rock pressed on his back, crushing him into the ground. The worst of it was the self-hatred mingled with despair. If this went on much longer he knew he would take out his sword and, as the samurai did, destroy himself.

Taniko's voice went on behind him, musingly, as if she were alone and talking to herself. "I've often wondered why so many of our samurai men and women welcome death, and why I do not. Even at this moment, I cling to life. It's almost vulgar, peasantlike. Perhaps I simply lack the courage to kill myself. I am tempted to suggest that you and I, since we seem to have lost everything, should die together."

"I am ready to die," Jebu groaned through his hands.

Her hand settled on his shoulder, as light as a falling leaf. "Stand and look at me, Jebu."

He saw that the tears she had dried away in her cold revulsion were now flowing freely, tiny rivulets cutting through the powder on her

face.

"Death is what brought us to this agony," she said. "Kiyosi sought death and you gave it to him. I will not add my own death to it, and I forbid you to seek death. If you care for me, if you want to atone for Kiyosi, do as I tell you. Live, Jebu."

Jebu stared at her, astonished. "Those were the very words my mother spoke to me after my initiation into the Zinja."

Taniko smiled, though her tears were still falling. "The women who care for you think alike. Even if life seems unbearable, Jebu, I demand of you, as one to whom you owe an obligation-carry that burden. It may be that death will come to you as you serve your Order and Yukio, but do not go looking for death."

"Why should you care whether I live or die?"

"Because everything you say is wise and true, Jebu. Only, I can't forget what you've done or continue to feel about you as I did. I told you that for years I've hated Kiyosi's killer. I always pictured him as a faceless samurai, a warrior in a steel mask. I never thought I would actually know who he was. The vision of you as the man who killed Kiyosi is too new, too shocking for me to bear. It's strange. I've never wanted to forget any great wrong done to me before this. I've never expected to be able to avenge myself on Horigawa or Sogamori, but I've never had to forgive such people, either, or forget what they did. I'm not very practised at forgetting. With time we may go back to what we were, or something like it. We might even have some of the happiness we had before today."

The weight crushing him seemed a tiny bit lighter. "You want to try to go on as before?"

"That is not entirely possible. I assume we will be leaving for Kamakura today?"

"We must leave at once."

"We will travel together. We will sleep in the same tent. You must not touch me." She paused and levelled her piercing gaze on him. "Do you agree?"

His shoulders sagged. "I understand. Yes."

"When we get to Kamakura, I will stay with my family, if they will accept me. After you've delivered Yukio's message to Hideyori, you'll return to Yukio. You and he will wage war on the Takashi together. When it is over, you will come back to me. Then we will see."

"I may not come back to you."

"If you are killed, I will hate the man who kills you as I've always hated the man who killed Kiyosi. I will probably never forgive myself for having sent you to war this way. But I cannot do otherwise. I can control my actions and my words, but I cannot control what I know and feel. Will you go on with me, on those terms?"

"I will go on with you on any terms you name. Tell me, though, Taniko. Was I right, do you think, to tell you about Kiyosi?"

She stood silent for a moment, thinking. "You always said the Zinja does not recognize right and wrong. Who can say which would injure us more-to have spent our lives with a lie between us, or to have our happiness smashed by the truth? It is a question I will ask myself many times as I sit alone at Kamakura."

Chapter Five

Kamakura had been growing. when Taniko left home to marry Prince Horigawa. It had now spread out into the surrounding hills until it covered almost twice the area she remembered. Most of the new buildings were the homes of wealthy families, surrounded by parks and walls. Even this larger Kamakura seemed a tiny hamlet to her, though, in comparison to the vast cities of China.

She saw at once that the Shima mansion had grown, too. It had swallowed up the estates on either side, so that its newly built earth and stone wall enclosed a park three times as great as the old wooden palisade had. Beyond the high wall was a sight that made Taniko gasp. A three-storey donjon tower dominated the estate, topped by the gilded dolphins to protect it from fire and lightning.

"Clearly my father has prospered," she said to Jebu.

The flag over the main gateway was no longer the Red Dragon that had defiantly proclaimed Shima loyalty to the Takashi in the Muratomodominated eastern provinces. Instead, the flag bore the Shima family crest, a small white triangle inverted within a larger orange triangle. My father's ties to the Takashi must be weakening, Taniko thought. He declares himself a power in his own right.

Another sign of her family's new position were the guards at the gate. No less than ten samurai stood there, looking relaxed, alert and very competent, all carrying two swords and dressed in handsome suits of full armour, the strips of steel lashed together with bright orange lacings. Their captain's helmet was decorated with a white horsehair plume.

The party with Taniko included Jebu, Moko and five samurai guards,

men who came from the area around Kamakura and who volunteered to accompany Jebu and Taniko so they could visit their homes. All rode horses, and three more horses carried their baggage.

No one would suspect from looking at them, Taniko thought, that each was moderately wealthy with spoils brought back from China, or that they were the harbingers of a powerful army newly landed on the Sacred Islands. They were tired, and their travelling robes were dusty and stained. It had taken them twelve days to get here from Hiraizumi, coming down from the mountains of Oshu by horseback, then hiring a coasting galley to make the long voyage from Sendai. The stunning scenery of the far north helped Taniko, to some extent, to forget her sorrow. The soaring crags and rushing, foaming streams, the huge rocks laced with white ribbons of falling water were wilder than any landscape she had ever seen-even a bit frightening. When their party reached the sea there were countless islands scoured into strange shapes by wind and wave, and covered by precariously clinging pines leaning at odd angles. A Heian Kyo courtier would find such sights barbarous, but having lived among barbarians Taniko could see the beauty in it. As they rode along, she and Jebu were silent most of the time. There was nothing left for them to say to each other now. Time was their best hope. She expressed the thought in a poem she gave him on shipboard, a poem inspired by the scenes through which they had passed.

To carve a hollow in the island rock, A shelter for the sea birds,

Many winters, many summers.

She handed it to him silently just before their galley docked at Kamakura, and silently he read it, nodded and put it inside his robe.

Now the captain of the Shima estate's guards was swaggering

towards them. Jebu climbed down from his horse and approached him.

"Another monk, by Hachiman," the captain snarled before Jebu could open his mouth. "Every ragged monk from here to Kyushu has heard that there are rich pickings to be had in Kamakura. Well, not at this house. Lord Shima Bokuden has given strict instructions that monks are to be sent away with their begging bowls empty. Go." The captain laid a threatening hand on his silver-mounted sword hilt.

A typical samurai of the eastern provinces, Taniko thought, blustering and rude.

Taniko watched as Jebu turned his left side towards the samurai captain, bringing the sword dangling from his belt into view without making a threatening gesture. "Excuse me, captain," he said politely. "I am escorting Lord Bokuden's daughter, the Lady Taniko, who has come a long way to visit her father. Would you be kind enough to allow us to enter and to notify Lord Bokuden that his daughter is here?" Jebu did not mention his own message for Hideyori. They must manage to find out Hideyori's situation without expressing any interest in him.

"Oho, one of those weapon-carrying monks, eh?" the captain growled. "What sort are you, Buddhist, Shinto or Zinja? None of you armed monks is either holy or skilled in the martial arts, so there is no need to fear either your curses or your swords. That woman on horse back claims to be Lord Bokuden's daughter, does she? Lord Bokuden's daughter is a great lady who lives at the capital. She would not come riding up here on a horse, like some camp follower."

"Pay no attention to him, my lady," said Moko in a low voice. "His mother was a yak." Taniko wanted none of the men with her to quarrel with her father's guards. She decided to assert herself and

spurred her horse forward. She addressed the captain in a small but sharp-edged voice, like the dagger all samurai women carried.

"The Lady Shima Taniko has not resided in Heian Kyo in seven years, captain, as you should know. As for my riding a horse, I am samurai by birth and upbringing and can perhaps ride as well as you. I advise you to change your tone and let us in at once, or you'll answer to my father when I report this to him. If, that is, you do work for my father and are not some filthy ronin who happened to be idling by the Shima gate when we rode up." There were some mild chuckles from Taniko's party, and even some from the gate guards, at this last jab. The captain blushed.

"I have my duty to perform, lady. A party of assassins might try to enter here in disguise. If you'll dismount and the men will disarm themselves I'll admit you, and you can wait inside the gate to be properly identified."

Her father had always suspected the worst of his neighbours, but he had never worried about assassins. Another change in the Shima family since she left.

Grooms took their horses through the double set of gates, leading them to the stables. Two of the guards collected swords from all the men except Moko, who did not carry one. Once inside the gate they walked single file through a maze made up of wooden walls and the sides of buildings, a maze designed to trap any attackers who might get through the gate during a siege. At last they found themselves in a courtyard full of boxes and barrels. It appeared that the Shima were still in trade, more so than ever.

"You have good horses and good swords," the captain remarked. "If you're a band of thieves, you chose victims of good quality."

This was too much for Moko. He reddened, turned to the captain and said, "Not being a man of much quality yourself, you couldn't be expected to recognize it in others."

The captain stared at Moko. Taniko's heart started pounding. Moko had forgotten where he was. He had come up in the world, had travelled with Yukio's samurai and talked with them on equal terms. Everyone, of whatever rank, talked freely among the Mongols. A commoner did not speak sharply to a samurai in the Sacred Islands, however, and Moko might lose his life for it.

Without a word the captain moved towards him, sliding his long sword out of the scabbard that hung at his left side. Moko paled, but did not try to run. The captain drew his sword back, holding it with both hands, for a stroke that would cut Moko in half at the waist. Jebu stepped between them.

"Out of the way, monk," said the captain. "No commoner can insult a samurai and live."

"I beg you to reconsider, captain," said Jebu quietly, "or you'll end by looking even more foolish than you do now."

"Out of my way, or you'll die before he does."

"Please put your sword away, captain."

Taniko was terrified. Jebu's own weapon had been carried away. He might be cut down before her eyes.

The captain lunged at Jebu, swinging his sword. Jebu hardly seemed to move, but the blade cut through empty air, and the captain rushed past him. Jebu quickly shifted position again, to keep himself between the captain and Moko. The captain swung at Jebu's legs, and Jebu leaped high into the air. Now the captain had

forgotten Moko and was determined to kill Jebu. Jebu ran up the side of a pyramid of boxes and kicked them, sending them tumbling down on the captain, who tripped and fell under the avalanche. He picked himself up and came after Jebu again.

Easily ducking and dodging the sword, Jebu led the captain back across the courtyard towards a high wooden wall. The captain brought his blade down in a ferocious two-handed swipe. The sword thumped into the hard wood of the gate. The captain was furiously trying to pull the sword out of the wood when Jebu, robe flapping, swooped down on him like a falcon on a rabbit and picked him up, leaving the sword stuck in the gate. Jebu hefted the captain into the air and hung him by his belt from an iron hook used to suspend a lantern over the courtyard at night. He pulled the samurai's shorter sword out of its scabbard and laid it on the ground, then freed the long sword from the door and laid it across the short one. Bowing to the captain, who wriggled frantically to free himself from the hook, Jebu turned and walked away. The courtyard shook with laughter. Elated by Jebu's unarmed triumph over the samurai, Taniko clapped her hands with glee.

"Taniko."

Standing at the top of the steps entering the donjon was her Uncle Ryuichi. Her heart gave a surprising little leap of gladness. She wondered what he was doing here instead of Heian Kyo. Then she remembered with a sinking feeling how she had accused him of failing her and had walked coldly out of his house seven years ago. Yet she was happy to see him today.

Ryuichi had grown fatter in the interval. His eyes and mouth were tiny in his white moon of a face. Powdered and painted like a courtier, he wore gorgeous robes that glittered with gold thread.

Taniko bowed to him. "Honoured Uncle. I have returned from China."

Ryuichi looked at her, astonished, then his expression changed abruptly to a frown. "What is happening here? Why is that man hanging there?"

The captain managed to unbuckle his belt, drop to the ground with a clatter of armour, and kneel. Taniko noted that the whole courtyard had fallen silent as soon as Ryuichi appeared. He had an air of command she had never seen in him before.

"Your captain of guards was about to kill one of my escort," she said. "This Zinja monk, who is also a member of my party, hung him up there to give him time to calm himself."

Ryuichi took immediate charge. He sent the guards back out to the gate, and looked reprovingly at the captain who had allowed himself to be disgraced. He ordered Taniko's party fed and quartered in the estate's guesthouses.

"Niece, if you will forgive me, I think we ought to talk immediately. After that you can refresh yourself. Please come with me."

Not looking back at Jebu, Taniko followed Ryuichi into the donjon. They climbed up winding flights of stairs in the dark interior. At last he drew her into a small chamber whose window overlooked the courtyard. They knelt facing each other across a low table.

"My esteemed elder brother will be astonished when he learns his daughter has returned. I am happy to see you." He looked at her uncertainly. "I hope you are happy to see me."

"I am, Uncle. Very."

Unexpectedly, tears began to roll down his whitened cheeks. "I never

thought to see you again. I was sure you would die in China, and I blamed myself. You were a daughter to me, but I could not save you. I was tormented. I felt I had two choices: to die or to try to become the sort of man who does not let such things happen. I decided I was not worthy to die. So I have tried to become a better man."

She smiled. "I noticed a difference about you, Uncle."

He nodded. "I am no longer afraid. I have learned that there is worse suffering than death. Being unafraid, I can look samurai in the eye and order them about. I dress myself as a man of the Court to further impress the people here in Kamakura. Now, you must tell me everything about yourself. These are dangerous times, and I must know what your circumstances are, so I can advise you how to act. What happened to you in China? What connection is there between you and Horigawa now? That monk who was with you in the courtyard and made a fool of our captain of guards-is he not the same Zinja monk who escorted you to Heian Kyo years ago, when you were to be married to Prince Horigawa? Did you come back from China with Muratomo no Yukio? Do you know anything about this proclamation of his?"

Taniko took out her ivory fan and briskly waved it in front of her face. "So many questions at once, Uncle. I'm tired from travelling. But I'll do the best I can." As she had already agreed with Jebu, she said nothing about her relationship with him. It would only disturb her family, and just now there was no need to reveal it. She told Ryuichi that Horigawa had left her with the Mongols, but said she had simply been a lady-in-waiting to Kublai Khan's Empress. Yukio and Jebu had been fighting for the Great Khan, and they agreed to take her back to the Sacred Islands with them when their service with the Mongols was finished. Ryuichi's eyes widened as he heard her story. Even with certain intimate parts left out, it was a remarkable tale.

"Now, Uncle. What are you doing here instead of the capital?"

"The most terrible war these islands have ever seen is about to descend on us, Taniko-san. When the clash comes, my family and I will be among those whom Sogamori will either kill or hold as hostages. So we moved back here."

"Did Eather send for you?"

Ryuichi laughed. "No. He was furious. He expected me to stay there, looking after Shima interests to the very end. Though I no longer fear death, I don't intend to sacrifice myself and my family to my brother's greed. I told him so."

A servant brought a tray of food, along with sake and two cups. Glad of the opportunity to serve sake the way she had been taught as a girl, Taniko poured a cup for Ryuichi and held it out to him. She offered him a seaweed cake on chopsticks, but he shook his head.

"You eat. You have travelled far, and you need refreshment. Let me tell you our situation here. As you can see, our family is much wealthier than it was when you left. At first we prospered because of our connection with the Takashi. But now we grow on our own. We have extended our holdings in the Kanto. Wealth and power go hand in hand. Samurai flock to us. We have built up a network of alliances all through the eastern provinces. The Shima are the first family in the north-east because we are hosts to Hideyori."

"Hosts? No longer guards?"

"Not guards for many years. Twice Sogamori has ordered your father to have Hideyori executed, but we are so far from the capital we could evade the order. Hideyori has grown stronger. He has built friendships and alliances throughout the Kanto. The husbands of your

two older sisters, who have large holdings in the north, both wear the White Dragon now. My unworthy son, Munetoki, your cousin, wears our family crest still, since he is heir to the clan chieftainship, but he worships Hideyori as much as Hideyori worships the war god, Hachiman. Meanwhile, Sogamori's problems have multiplied."

"What problems does Sogamori have?"

"Most of the nobles who are not Takashi hate him. He has forced hundreds of men out of office and replaced them with his relatives. He has quarrelled with the Retired Emperor, Go-Shirakawa. He is blamed for all the troubles of the realm, the plague, the starvation, the failure of crops, the bandits who roam the land. Many say he is pursued by the angry ghosts of all those who have died at Takashi hands. He has ruled unwisely since Kiyosi's death. Kiyosi's younger brother, Notaro, serves Sogamori as a second-in-command. But he utterly lacks Kiyosi's ability." Ryuichi paused and looked sadly at her. "Eorgive me for bringing up what must be a painful subject."

Taniko sighed. "I suffer Kiyosi's death every day anew. What has happened to Atsue?"

Ryuichi shook his head. "I know little. Sogamori is said to dote on him. He lives at the Rokuhara and spends time at other Takashi estates. Those who know him say he is a most charming and accomplished young man. I've seen him several times on public occasions. He is quite handsome. He dresses beautifully, like a young prince, as all the Takashi do. He rides well and wears his sword with grace."

"Perhaps it was best for him that Sogamori took him from me." "I will never think so. Tell me, Taniko-chan, now that you're back with us, what are your plans? Will you stay here?"

"Eor the time being, Uncle, I have no plans beyond the next few months. As you said, these are dangerous times. Now I would like you to see my father and Lord Hideyori and arrange an audience with them for the Zinja monk, Jebu."

Chapter Six

After her talk with Ryuichi, Taniko spent the afternoon in the palatial new women's house of the Shima estate, enjoying her reunion with her mother and her Aunt Chogao. She bathed and unpacked a set of robes for the night. When the time came for Jebu to deliver Yukio's message to Hideyori, she emerged from her chamber dressed in her finest silks. The older women objected. It was unthinkable for her to dine with men discussing important affairs. She brushed aside their disapproval and strode out of the women's house and over the covered bridge to the main hall.

At the doorway of Lord Bokuden's formal dining room two samurai tried to stop her from going in.

"I am Shima Taniko, Lord Bokuden's daughter, and my presence is required." The guards let her pass.

Eor the first time in twenty-one years, she saw her father. The old rage he had always provoked in her stirred within, but she kept her face composed. He stood up when she came into the room, which had been set for a small dinner. Three low individual dining tables were arranged in a semi-circle. The walls of the room were adorned with landscapes painted in green and gold.

Jebu, wearing his plain monk's robe, knelt facing Bokuden's place. He looked up at her, expressionless. She felt a pang of longing for him. The central place was empty. Was Ryuichi to join them?

Bokuden's smile of greeting faded when he saw Taniko.

"Well, Eather, since you seemed too busy to send for me, I thought I would visit you," said Taniko calmly. "I can help serve your guests."

Where Ryuichi had put on weight, Bokuden had grown smaller and thinner. His beard and moustache were longer and streaked with white. His small eyes narrowed with annoyance.

"I cannot greet you properly tonight, Taniko. Please go. I will speak to you in the morning when I have time."

"I haven't travelled all this way to hide in the women's house, Eather. I was a party to many of the decisions that led to this moment. I know what is happening in Hiraizumi. You may find me useful."

Bokuden glowered at her. "Yes, you always did imagine that I stand in need of your advice. Look about you. You see we have done rather well in the years you were gone."

"I understand Hideyori is the key to your prosperity. Who was it who advised you to take him in, in the first place?"

Bokuden flushed. "We are discussing matters of state. It would be unthinkable for a woman to be present. Please go, before Lord Hideyori arrives and you embarrass me in his eyes." He turned to Jebu. "You have been her escort. Can you not advise her to leave?"

"I have heard correctly, then," said a strong voice from the doorway. "The Lady Taniko has returned to Kamakura."

This day has brought me a whole succession of faces from the past, thought Taniko. It was hard for her to remember what Hideyori had looked like the last time she saw him. Atsue today was older than Hideyori had been then.

The Muratomo chieftain was now a handsome, big man who carried himself with the assurance of a leader who knew no superior. Taniko found herself thinking of Kublai, even though Hideyori was neither as

tall nor as old. Nor, indeed, anywhere near as powerful. Hideyori had the bulging Muratomo forehead, straight eyebrows, a hawk-like nose and a prominent chin. His moustache was small and neatly trimmed. It was when she looked into his eyes that she remembered him. Those cold, black eyes had not changed.

Taniko dropped gracefully to her knees and bowed low. Her father followed suit, and Jebu gave a short bow, as was the Zinja custom.

Hideyori bowed in turn to Jebu. "The warrior monk who brought me safely from Heian Kyo to Kamakura. I'm pleased to see you alive. A man with an occupation like yours shouldn't have lasted past his twenty-fifth year."

"Your younger brother Yukio helped me to survive, my lord," said Jebu with a smile.

"Yes," said Hideyori shortly, turning away from Jebu. "Lady Ta niko. I have never had occasion to compliment you for your clever deception at Daidoji. Had you not been such a fine actress, Prince Sasaki no Horigawa would now be nineteen years dead."

"I apologize for deceiving you, my lord. I have had cause to regret it," Taniko said with a wry smile.

"I do not regret it," said Hideyori, kneeling behind the table in the place of honour. "The prince has been very useful to me." In what way? Taniko wondered. Horigawa, the Takashi toady, helping the Muratomo chieftain?

"Well, now that you have paid your respects to Lord Hideyori, you may leave us, Daughter," Bokuden said. He glared at her, his wispy grey beard trembling.

"Must you go, Lady Taniko?" Hideyori asked.

Laughing inwardly at her father, Taniko said, "I am yours to command, my lord."

"I understand that you, like the monk Jebu, have just returned from China with my brother and his army of barbarians. Perhaps you can tell me things about Yukio's adventures that may have escaped his holy friend's attention."

The implication was clear; he doesn't like Yukio, she thought, or trust him. He doesn't trust Jebu very much, either. Perhaps I could be the link between the brothers. They need someone to draw them together if they're to have a working alliance.

"I'll be happy to tell you anything you want to know, my lord," said Taniko. After all, Yukio had no secrets from Hideyori.

Hideyori turned to Jebu. "Yukio hopes to win me over by sending this charming lady and an old comrade-in-arms as emissaries. But I find it curious that he does not come to me himself."

Jebu's clear grey eyes held Hideyori's. "My lord, he has an army to command, and there is always the threat of a Takashi attack. Please, if you will, read this letter from him. He acknowledges you as chieftain of the Muratomo and is prepared to meet with you whenever it becomes possible." Jebu drew a sealed bamboo tube from an inner pocket of his robe and offered it to Hideyori, who laid it unopened on the table beside him.

"Yukio feels safer with his army," Hideyori said curtly. "Let us dine now. You can both tell me about China and the Mongols."

Hideyori gave Bokuden a slight nod, and Taniko's father clapped his hands. The shoji panel slid back and servants brought in a

succession of dishes and deposited them on their tables. At another glance from Hideyori, Bokuden, barely concealing his exasperation, ordered a table set for Taniko.

Taniko told Hideyori the acceptable story she had devised to cover her years in China. Bokuden and Hideyori might know that Horigawa had reasons for taking her to China other than a diplomatic mission, but she doubted that either would be rude enough to contradict her.

Hideyori was intensely curious about the personality of Kublai Khan, the strategy and tactics of the Mongols and their ultimate ambitions. He questioned Jebu and Taniko in turn. Eor Taniko, the evening was reminiscent of her first meeting with Kublai, when he asked her so many questions about the Sunrise Land.

"Do you think the Mongols plan to invade our islands?" Hideyori asked.

Bokuden laughed. "How could they transport a big enough army across the sea?"

"Yukio did it," said Hideyori quietly.

"Yes, lord, but Lord Yukio's army landed in friendly territory where provisions could easily be obtained," said Jebu. "It landed piecemeal over the course of a month. Nor is it large enough to be an invasion force in its own right. It is only meant to be part of a general uprising against the Takashi."

They had finished eating. Taniko waved away the maid and poured sake for the men herself.

"Very good," said Hideyori. "It's best our cups be filled by someone we know and can trust." He took up Yukio's letter, drew the scroll out of the bamboo tube and read it slowly and carefully.

"He apologizes for his proclamation. Well he might. He was foolish to issue it so hastily, without even knowing whether I was alive or dead. He has no idea what he has stirred up. I will write to him, and you will carry my letter back to him. It is important that our efforts be planned in such a way that all blows fall upon the Takashi at the same time."

A look of fear crossed Bokuden's face. "You're not thinking of going to war, Lord Hideyori?"

"There'll never be a better time. Yukio's army moving down the west coast, an uprising in the capital, and our army marching from the east. Would you have me wait here until Sogamori decides he's strong enough to come after me?"

"An uprising in the capital?" Taniko echoed.

"Sogamori's grandson, Antoku, a boy of four, now wears the Imperial necklace," said Hideyori. "Prince Mochihito, the child's uncle, was bypassed, though his claim to the throne is much better." Taniko nodded. All this she knew. "A secret opposition to Sogamori has formed around Mochihito," Hideyori went on. "It includes Eujiwara no Motofusa, the former Regent, contingents of the palace guard, and the Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa. And Prince Sasaki no Horigawa." Hideyori looked at Taniko.

Jebu said, "Eorgive me for speaking bluntly, my lord. If I ever encounter Prince Horigawa, I will kill him."

Hideyori frowned. "Why? What grievance do you have against him?"

Jebu's grey stare was level. "I am not free to say. He has committed unspeakable and unforgivable acts against-those I love."

"I always thought Zinja monks were utterly detached and impartial," said Hideyori.

Jebu gave him a faint, bitter smile. "I will spend the rest of my life repenting and trying to be detached, after I have killed Horigawa."

Bokuden was livid. "Prince Sasaki no Horigawa is an ally of this house and always has been. I will not have threats uttered against him in my presence." He turned to Taniko. "He is your husband."

Taniko burned with envy of Jebu. It should have been her right, hot Jebu's, to threaten to kill Horigawa. If Jebu did kill him, it would only be in her behalf. Why must women always have men do their killing for them? Her father's suggestion that she ought to defend Horigawa shocked her. She answered with understatement.

"The prince has treated me badly," she said quietly.

"It is your duty to be loyal to him," her father said. "How he has treated you does not matter."

"Prince Horigawa helped me, even though I once tried to kill him," Hideyori said. "Long ago, as the Lady Taniko knows, I led a party of Muratomo samurai to his country estate to kill him. He escaped me. Many years later, when Kiyosi was killed by Yukio's men, Sogamori was so enraged that he ordered Lord Bokuden's brother, Ryuichi, to have me executed." Taniko could not help a glance at Jebu. He was gazing calmly at Hideyori, his face attentive, revealing nothing. "Horigawa asked Ryuichi to let him handle my execution. Horigawa then wrote a letter to Lord Bokuden urging him not to kill me, but to protect me. He advised Bokuden on what excuses to make to Sogamori. He helped persuade Sogamori that I was harmless, loyal, and thoroughly disapproved of Yukio's crimes, and that it would be pointless to kill me. So you see, where my brother very nearly caused

my death by killing Kiyosi"- Hideyori's face grew ugly with long-felt bitterness-"my old enemy Horigawa saved my life."

"You were the last Moratomo leader in the realm," Jebu said. "Why would Horigawa want to save you?"

"He sensed the turning of the tide. Whoever put that arrow in Kiyosi's chest at Hakata Bay doomed the house of Takashi. If Kiyosi had lived to advise Sogamori and eventually succeed him, Takashi rule might have been fastened on the realm forever. Kiyosi was the only one of them who combined a warrior's prowess with a sense of statecraft. Sogamori is nothing but a blustering tyrant. His other sons are stupid and arrogant. The Takashi are doomed. They have misgoverned too long. They have made too many enemies. Horigawa saw all that and sensed that I am the man who can bring down the Takashi."

"But why would he want the Takashi brought down?" asked Taniko. "He seems to have devoted his entire life to their advancement."

"Oh, he has his own reasons," Hideyori said with a laugh. "He wants to see the samurai destroyed and the old courtier families like the Sasaki and the Eujiwara once again supreme. He hopes the great samurai clans will kill each other off." Hideyori smiled. "I will give him the war he wants, but not the outcome he desires."

"Excuse me," said Jebu. "Lord Hideyori, I sense that you hold Lord Yukio to blame for endangering your life. I was at the battle in which Kiyosi was killed. Lord Yukio had nothing to do with his death. Now Lord Yukio submits himself to your leadership and offers twelve thousand veteran troops, men who have been fighting for the past seven years or more, while the Takashi have been growing soft. Surely you will accept his brotherly obedience?"

Hideyori pursed his lips. "I was nearly beheaded because of him. He came back here thinking I had died and proclaimed himself chieftain of our clan. Now he does not come in person to resolve our differences but sends a henchman with a letter-I mean no disrespect to you, shike. I will accept his submission, but there is much to be settled between Yukio and me."

Jebu's remark about Yukio's troops having been in combat for years reminded Taniko that Hideyori had been leading an inactive life in Kamakura ever since the age of fifteen. In all that time he had had to suffer the perpetual fear that Sogamori might at last bring about his execution. Bokuden and Horigawa must have seemed utterly untrustworthy protectors. Living with such fear for so long had undoubtedly scarred Hideyori, but in what way?

"I will send my brother a letter," Hideyori said. "I will tell him I am prepared to raise an army and go into battle immediately. I will command him to strike from the north-west down the Hokurikido Road, and I will come down the Tokaido from the east. At the same moment, Mochihito and his supporters will rise in the capital."

He raised his sake cup and stared deep into Taniko's eyes. She felt herself blushing. "By the end of summer we will be in the capital and the Takashi will be as forgotten as last winter's snow."

Why, Taniko wondered, did he say that especially to me?

Chapter Seven

Takashi no Atsue went to the treasure box in his chambers, unlocked it and took out his father's sword, Kogarasu. The sword was wrapped in heavy red silk. Atsue uncovered it, laid the two-edged blade on a blackwood stand in the tokonoma alcove, and burned incense to it on a small brazier. Kogarasu glistened like a lake under a full moon. Atsue had made it his personal duty to polish the sword every day. He prayed now to Kogarasu, asking that he be a worthy son of his father in the battles to come. In the sword, if anywhere, his father's spirit must reside.

Then he went to see his grandfather. In the main audience hall of the Rokuhara, Sogamori, fat and shaven-headed, wearing his orange monk's robe, was bawling orders at Atsue's uncles, cousins and other high-ranking officers.

Prince Mochihito, the Emperor's uncle, had proclaimed himself Emperor and immediately fled the city. A contingent of the Imperial Bodyguard had gone over to Mochihito and left the city with him. They were led by a Muratomo relative who had not been purged from the guards because he had avoided involvement in Domei's insurrection. With Mochihito, also, was the former Regent, Eujiwara no Motofusa, an old enemy of the Takashi; it was Motofusa's men who had caused the street brawl that had terrified Atsue as a boy.

Mochihito had echoed Muratomo no Yukio's proclamation, calling for a general uprising against the Takashi, declaring that those who made war on Sogamori would not be rebels but loyal supporters of the rightful Emperor-himself. The pretender and his little band were headed, Sogamori believed, towards Nara, two days' journey southeast of Heian Kyo. There they would probably seek refuge with Buddhist and Zinja warrior monks who supported their cause. They

might try to hold out in Nara until Hideyori, who was raising an army in the east, could reach them.

Sogamori ordered thirty thousand samurai mobilized and sent after Mochihito and his followers. They were then to go on to Nara and attack the monasteries that favoured the Muratomo. Erom Nara, he commanded, they were to march north and meet Hideyori on the Tokaido. Hideyori defeated, they would return to Heian Kyo, gather reinforcements, and advance into the north-west provinces on the Hokurikudo Road to crush the other Muratomo brother, Yukio.

"They think to defeat us by attacking from three directions at once," Sogamori growled. "But we will meet each threat in turn and defeat them one at a time." He held up a finger and repeated. "One at a time, that is the secret of victory." His sons and generals bowed.

"I have been too magnanimous," Sogamori went on. "Having taken holy orders, I have tried to live according to the Buddha's teaching. I let the Muratomo brothers live. I tolerated untrustworthy officers in the Imperial bodyguard. I left the Northern Eujiwara in peace." He stood up suddenly and kicked over an ancient and beautiful four-panel screen. "When this war is over, every close relative of Muratomo no Domei will be sent into the great beyond, even infants at the breast. The Muratomo imbibe treason with their mothers' milk. All officials and samurai who have come under suspicion of disloyalty, no matter how slight, will be executed. All orders of warrior monks will be suppressed. The Northern Eujiwara will be stripped of their lands. No longer will Takashi no Sogamori show compassion." He stamped the screen to splinters.

Sogamori's officers hurried out, their silks and satins rustling, the gold scabbards of their ceremonial swords twinkling. Sogamori turned to Atsue, and his broad face opened in a huge grin.

"Atsue-chan. What does my beautiful grandson want of me?" Atsue prostrated himself and swallowed nervously. "Honoured Grandfather, I want to fight the Muratomo."

"Get up, child. Come sit with me." Sogamori pointed to cushions beside him. There was a pained expression on his face. "Eighting is butchery, foul work. My ancestors were samurai, I am samurai, my sons are samurai. Now, though, I have one grandson on the Imperial throne, and I have always hoped that other grandsons of mine would be above going to war, would serve as scholars and men of state."

"Honoured Grandfather, you're afraid something will happen to me," Atsue said, smiling at Sogamori. He knew that with that smile he could get his grandfather to agree to anything.

"Nonsense," Sogamori chuckled. "What could possibly happen to you? You are the favoured of the kami."

"The spirit of my father calls me to war, Grandfather," Atsue said. "Ever since I came to live with you, you've been telling me over and over again how my father drove the Muratomo out of the Imperial Palace. I want to have a great battle against the Muratomo, too, as you did and my father did. Then I can settle down to serve my Imperial cousin at his Court."

"The Takashi have always fought," Sogamori sighed. "Have you arms and armour?"

"I have a beautiful suit of armour with blue lacings, Grandfather, which you gave me last year when we performed my manhood ceremony." He touched his samurai topknot. "As for arms, I was hoping you would let me take Kogarasu."

Sogamori sighed. "Take Kogarasu. Kill many Muratomo with it. I

want to see all the Muratomo go into the next world before I do." "Yes, Grandfather."

"One more thing, Atsue-chan. As you know, it is my wish that you marry the Imperial Princess Kazuko. You may go to the war tomorrow, but tonight you must pay your first-night visit to the princess's bedchamber at the palace. I trust you are as eager to acquit yourself well there as you are to display prowess in battle."

Atsue bowed. The blood raced through his body. To lie with a beautiful princess tonight and to go to war tomorrow-it was too perfect. The world was heaven.

Atsue arrived at the scene of battle late and tired. Princess Kazuko had kept him awake all night. No, to be fair, he had wanted to stay awake all night with her. Even when she had complained of soreness-she had been a virgin when he crept into her room at the beginning of the night-he could not restrain himself from coupling with her one last time.

He had cheated a bit and written his next-morning letter and poem the previous afternoon. He could not have managed to stay all night long with the princess, then to arm himself and leave for Nara in the morning, and also find time to compose a decent letter and a suitable poem.

He had told her he was going to pursue the rebel prince who was fleeing to Nara. Her parting words echoed in his mind. "You are as tall and beautiful as a heron. Ely back to me safely and quickly."

He began to see the bodies before they reached the Uji, where, he had been told, the main battle had taken place. Most of the dead had been stripped of their armour, and they lay like heaps of stone or bundles of cloth on the side of the road. Atsue's horse shied, and he

had trouble controlling it. This annoyed him, because Grandfather had sent an escort of twelve veteran samurai with him, and he didn't want to look like a poor horseman before these experienced warriors. The samurai didn't seem to notice the bodies. The worst sights, Atsue thought, were the parts of bodies, the men who had been cut in two, the severed limbs. Most of the corpses lacked heads. Each samurai received honours and pay according to the number of heads he could produce after a battle.

Erom wounded Takashi samurai passing on their way back to the capital, Atsue learned, to his disappointment, that there was no more fighting. The battle had been fought late the night before and finished in the morning. Vastly outnumbering Prince Mochihito's supporters, the Takashi fell upon them and overwhelmed them at sunset. During the night many of the rebels disappeared into the countryside. Most of their leaders had cut open their bellies early this morning, choosing a temple called Phoenix Hall on the southern bank of the Uji as the site of their self-immolation. The former Regent, Eukiwara no Motofusa, had been captured. As for Prince Mochihito, he had fled to a Shinto shrine further down the road to Nara, where the Takashi caught up with him and finished him off with a volley of arrows.

The Uji was a broad, fast-flowing grey-green river running through wooded hills. Simple Shinto shrines and elaborately painted Buddhist temples lined its banks on both sides. Atsue and his escort rode over the bridge with a clatter of hooves on planks. Atsue turned downstream in the direction of the Takashi camp.

The Takashi had set up camp before Phoenix Hall. Samurai sat on the ground beside their tethered horses, repairing their armour and polishing their swords. Many of them recognized Atsue and called respectful greetings to him. He had always been popular with the samurai.

The Phoenix Hall was an elaborate building in the Chinese manner with two wings and uncurling roof corners. It had once been the country villa of a nobleman, who had willed it to religion. Now Red Dragon banners fluttered over it. Atsue's uncles and the other Takashi officers sat at their ease in the shade on the front steps of the hall.

In the dusty courtyard before the temple stood a lone man, tied to a pole, his arms bound behind him with ropes. He was small and slender and wore a dark, dusty robe. His head was bowed, his shoulders bent.

Atsue walked around the man to get a better look at him. He recognized him at once, even though his face was unpowdered and he was shabbily dressed. It was the former Regent, Eujiwara no Motofusa. The small black eyes looked back calmly and incuriously at Atsue. Doubtless many men had gone up to Motofusa to stare at him today.

Atsue had seen Motofusa in public many times after the day of the carriage fight. Eventually, though, as the Takashi hold on the government grew stronger, Motofusa had been pushed out of the Regency and replaced by a younger relative more amenable to Sogamori's influence.

Now that he and Motofusa were staring at each other, it would be rude not to speak to him. Atsue bowed deeply.

"My respects to you, Lord Eujiwara no Motofusa. I am sorry to see you in this uncomfortable position."

Motofusa smiled at him, showing blackened teeth. "Your manners are exquisite, like those of all the younger Takashi." The implication that fine manners were not enough was clear. It stung Atsue and

made him want to remind Motofusa of their encounter years before.

"I'm sure you don't remember me, my lord. I am Takashi no Atsue, son of Takashi no Kiyosi, grandson of Takashi no Sogamori. In the Year of the Horse your carriage had an unfortunate meeting with one in which I and my mother were riding." Atsue realized that he had not thought of his mother in years. The helpless hunger for her, when it did arise, was so painful that he quickly pushed the thought of her from his mind. Lately he had been telling himself that he really didn't miss her, but her face kept appearing in his dreams.

"Ah, yes," said Motofusa. "You must be the son of Kiyosi and that little woman from the provinces who was married to Prince Sasaki no Horigawa. I warned Horigawa that he was making a mistake, marrying beneath him. Well, forgive me for saying that. I have no wish to hurt your feelings, young man. The occasion you spoke of caused me considerable discomfort thereafter, as you may also recall."

"After all, you humiliated our family, my lord," said Atsue.

"That's the difference between us, young man. Your family can be humiliated. I, on the other hand, can suffer endless indignity, I can even be put to death, and remain a Eujiwara."

Atsue swallowed hard. "Are they going to kill you?"

"Don't look so shocked, young Lord Atsue. You are samurai. Samurai are expected to revel in the sight of blood. Your generation of

Takashi has not had the opportunity to see much blood spilled before now. Instead you powder your faces and blacken your teeth, you paint, you write poetry in beautiful characters, you dance and you play musical instruments. The power of the Takashi is not based on

these attainments, however, but on military prowess. You younger ones are somewhat lacking in experience of bloodshed. Don't worry, though." His eyes hardened. "You're going to see a great deal of blood spilled before this war is over. Oceans of it. I only regret that when it is done, the world I knew and loved will be even more distant than it is now." He began to speak in Chinese.

But when I look back and speak of things that were, With glowering brows I find I loathe my life.

The streams and hills now shelter thieves and bandits; The fields are now abandoned to brambles and thorns.

He paused, looking sadly at Phoenix Hall. Atsue couldn't resist providing the final two lines of Liu Yin's poem:

Our heritage is a burden of moral obligations,

But we lack a ruler who grieves at committing murder.

Motofusa smiled with pleasure. "Thank you. Your literary learning is extensive. I did not wish to finish the poem myself because you might think it an offensive reference to your grandfather."

Atsue stiffened. "I know what my grandfather's enemies say about him. I don't consider him a ruler who approves of murder. My grandfather loves religion, nobility and learning. He hates the necessity of killing. He fights to preserve peace."

Motofusa's smile seemed to say that Atsue couldn't actually believe that. "You must know something of the history of the realm, young man. For hundreds of years, from the founding of Heian Kyo until the disturbances of the last twenty-five years, there was peace in the realm. You samurai are not protectors of peace. You yourselves have destroyed it."

Atsue felt a certain pleasure, knowing he could trap the former Regent. "Excuse me, sir, but wasn't it rival members of your family, the Fujiwara, who first enlisted bands of samurai to settle differences between them by fighting?"

Motofusa bowed his head. "Humiliation is endless."

Atsue felt sorry for him. He had no business winning arguments with a man of Motofusa's age and dignity, especially when he had only a short time to live.

"Eorgive me for disagreeing with you, my lord. Is there anything I can do for your comfort or peace of mind?"

Motofusa sighed. "Only I can pacify my mind, I'm afraid. But these ropes around my arms and hands are a dreadful nuisance. I'm perspiring, and I can't even wipe my brow. On the honour of my ancestors, if you remove these ropes I won't try to escape. Not that a man of my age could get away from thousands of samurai."

"Allow me to ask permission to free your arms, my lord."

Atsue strode across the dusty open space to the entrance of Phoenix Hall, where the Takashi leaders sat. They had all changed out of armour and into handsome red, green and blue robes. They were drinking sake and one of them was playing a lute.

Atsue's Uncle Notaro, second son of Sogamori, sat in the centre of the group. He had inherited Sogamori's tendency to stoutness, but without the muscular solidity that lay underneath it. Even here in the field his round face was carefully powdered and painted and his robes as thoughtfully chosen as if he were about to appear at Court.

"We were wondering if you'd ever catch up to us, Nephew. Wasn't

last night your first-night with the Princess Kazuko?" Notaro's younger brother, the handsome Tadanori, laughed. Atsue felt his face grow hot.

"Honoured Uncle, I just want to ask a favour for the Regent Motofusa. The ropes are hurting him. May I untie him? He has sworn not to attempt escape."

"Why was I keeping him alive? I forget," Notaro said. "All the other prisoners were sent into the Void this morning. Well, no matter. If he's uncomfortable, let's kill him at once and end his suffering."

One of Kiyosi's older sons, a half-brother of Atsue, spoke up. "Honoured Uncle, perhaps he should be spared because he is a Eujiwara and a noncombatant?"

"That may have been in my mind earlier," said Notaro, "but we've executed Eujiwara before this. As for his being a noncombatant, the Eujiwara never soil their hands with blood. Oh, no. They get others to do their killing for them. He helped start this rebellion. He deserves to die. Let him feel the edge of the sword. Immediately." With a wave of his hand Notaro sent two officers to see to Motofusa's execution.

Atsue pressed on. "May I untie him first, honoured Uncle? Whatever he has done, it is a shame for him to die trussed like a common criminal."

Notaro smiled indulgently. "Go with those officers and unbind the prisoner, Atsue-san."

The ropes on Motofusa's arms were so tightly tied that Atsue quickly gave up on the knots. He drew Kogarasu, hearing the officers with him draw breaths of admiration at the sight of the famous sword. Atsue had been handling swords since he was four years of age,

and Motofusa's bonds fell away with a flicker of the two-edged blade.

"Thank you, young Lord Atsue," said Motofusa with a black-toothed smile. "That is the closest a sword stroke has ever come to me-yet."

One of the officers bowed. "I must ask you to prepare for death, my lord."

Rubbing his arms and wrists, Motofusa frowned slightly. "Is it to be at once? There are favours I would like to ask, if the Takashi lords will be good enough to allow me."

"We were ordered to help you into the Void immediately, my lord." "May I have writing materials? I would like to write a poem before I die."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, my lord."

Atsue's face grew hot with sudden anger. "This is barbarous. This is the former Regent, a man who was spokesman for the sacred person of the Emperor. We are taking his life. Let us give him the chance to make something that will live after him. Let paper and ink be brought."

Reddening, the officer snapped his fingers to a servant and sent for writing materials. They brought brush, ink, green-tinted paper and a writing table. By now word had got round the camp that Motofusa was to be executed and was writing a final poem. The samurai formed a ring at a respectful distance from the old nobleman, who knelt before the small table. Motofusa thought a moment, then sent his brush flying down the page. Einished, he contemplated his poem for a moment, then without rising held it out to Atsue.

Atsue's eyes blurred as he read.

Like a fossil tree from which we gather no flowers Sad has been my life, fated no fruit to produce.

"Beautiful," said Atsue, shaking his head.

Motofusa waved away the writing table. Now he knelt in the dust in the centre of the circle of warriors. Even the Takashi commanders, led by Notaro and Tadanori in their flowing robes, left their pavilion to witness Motofusa's death.

"At my age it is difficult for me to kneel and stand and kneel again, so if there is no objection I will remain kneeling-for the rest of my life." Motofusa smiled. "It is the custom, I know, among samurai for a man who performs self-immolation to be helped by a close friend. I wish, too, that I might die by a friend's hand. I have no such friends in this camp, but my last moments have been made more pleasant by the kindness and courtesy of the young Takashi no Atsue. If he is willing and if his commanders permit, I desire him to do me the final service."

Atsue's body went cold. He had never killed a man. A picture suddenly appeared in his mind: his mother standing over a dead samurai, a dagger in her hand, her robe spattered with blood. He remembered the terror he had felt, as if his mother had turned into a murderous devil. He had forgotten that terror completely. Now it flooded back inside him, full force.

Notaro smiled and nodded. "My nephew will be honoured to take so distinguished a head."

Motofusa's dark eyes looked into Atsue's. "It will further your education in bloodshed, young Lord Atsue."

All eyes were on Atsue. If he refused now, he would bear the shame

the rest of his life. After all, he had asked Sogamori to send him to this war so he could kill the enemies of the Takashi. He had expected to do his killing in the heat of combat, though, not to bring his sword down on the neck of a helpless man with whom he had just had a friendly conversation. He must do it, or he would disgrace not only himself but the name of his father.

He bowed his head and in as strong a voice as he could muster said, "I will be honoured, Lord Motofusa."

What if my hand trembles? Atsue thought. What if I miss? What if I have not the strength to do it in one stroke, and he suffers?

He remembered what his mother always said in time of trouble and, for the first time in many years whispered, "Homage to Amida Buddha."

He must forget that he was killing a man. He must imagine that he was back at the Rokuhara, taking a practice swing at a bundle of straw suspended from the ceiling. He knew how to aim the blow, and just how much force to use. He could do it perfectly, as long as he resolutely put out of his mind the thought that he was killing a man.

He tried to forget, too, that hundreds and hundreds of samurai, many of whom doubtless had followed his father, were watching him.

He drew his sword. "This is Kogarasu, Lord Motofusa. It was given to my ancestor, Emperor Kammu, by a priestess at the Grand Isle shrine and has been in our family ever since." He held it out for Motofusa to see.

"You handled it dexterously when cutting my ropes," Motofusa said. "I am sure both the sword and you will serve me well. Please see that a copy of my poem is sent to my son at the capital. You may keep the

original yourself."

"Thank you. I do not deserve such an honour," Atsue whispered. "May you be reborn in the Pure Land, Lord Motofusa."

"I'm hardly worthy of that. I shall have to suffer through quite a few more lives before I reach the Pure Land, I'm afraid." Motofusa bowed his head, exposing his neck.

Atsue took a deep breath, planted his feet firmly and wide apart, clenched his fists around the hilt and drew the sword back over his right shoulder. He had practised this stroke ten thousand times. He did not need to think. He fixed his eyes on a spot in the centre of the slender, white neck. He said in a clear, strong voice, "Homage to Amida Buddha." He brought the sword down with all his might and severed head from body.

His ordeal was over. The life of Eujiwara no Motofusa was over.

He stood breathing heavily, still holding the sword in both hands, staring at the gilded roof of the Phoenix Hall. The cheering of the samurai around him came faintly to his ears. He was vaguely aware of the corpse at his feet being dragged away.

Notaro was standing beside him. "Well done. You're a Takashi and a worthy son of your father."

"Thank you, honoured Uncle."

Atsue's orderly came up to him. "Let me polish Kogarasu, sir. You know how quickly blood can pit the steel."

Atsue handed him the sword without a word.

Atsue went through the travel box strapped to his baggage horse

until he found his flute, Little Branch. He trudged up a pathway of flat stones on a slope shaded by towering cryptomeria. At last he came to a spot where he could overlook the rushing Uji, Phoenix Hall, the other nearby temples and the samurai camp.

All that afternoon, while his uncles and half-brothers caroused at the entrance to the Phoenix Hall and the other samurai repaired their equipment, Atsue sat on the hillside playing every song he knew.

Many men in the camp below stopped what they were doing to listen to him. His playing was beautiful to hear.

Chapter Eight

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

On receiving word of Prince Mochihito's uprising, Hideyori at once led a glittering procession of Muratomo and Shima samurai to a shrine to Hachiman, the god of war and patron of generations of Muratomo. Hideyori had the shrine built several years ago, at what my father feels was a ridiculous expenditure. But Hideyori believes in the power of the kami and of prayer, whereas my father only believes in the power of wealth.

Returning from the Hachiman shrine, Hideyori assembled all the nearby warlords and called on them to march south with him. He told them that Hachiman had promised him victory. I was reminded of Kublai's telling me that the Great Khans of the Mongols always commune with the spirits before sending their armies on campaign. Hideyori told the samurai that their numbers would grow to a hundred thousand before they reached Heian Kyo. He reminded them that they are warriors of the eastern provinces, and eastern warriors are said to be the fiercest in all the islands.

I listened to all this from a window in the tower. Hideyori's speech was not impressive. He lacks fire. He is a man who has lived in fear more than half his life, and it shows, at least to me. Yet, he is very ambitious and very intelligent. He is determined to destroy the Takashi and restore the glory of the Muratomo, no matter what the cost.

After his speech to the samurai, Hideyori led them out of Kamakura to attack Takashi Kanetake, the most powerful Takashi lord in this area.

-Eighth Month, seventeenth day

YEAR OF THE OX

"I can't understand a lady of your station conversing with a carpenter," said Chogao. "Especially not that carpenter. Those enormous white teeth make him look like a shark. And those eyes. You can't tell where he's looking."

"Moko is a very old friend, Aunt."

"One does not have carpenters for friends."

Taniko received Moko in her chambers behind a screen of state painted with peonies. In the dimly lit room the little man looked downcast. He stared at the floor.

"This is ridiculous," said Taniko. "I'm not going to talk to you through a screen." She started to get up.

Moko raised a warning hand. "No, my lady, stay where you are. Everything we do and say can be seen and overheard. If you talk to me without a screen it will only cause a scandal and make it more difficult for me to see you in the future."

"All right, Moko." Taniko settled down on her cushions again. "Have you found a home in Kamakura?"

"I have bought myself a fine piece of land on a hill overlooking the beach, my lady. I am building a house on it. I've sent to Hakata for my son and his mother, whom I plan to marry. I may even at last acquire the five children-or was it six?-I told you of when we met so many years ago. I have also been accepted into the joiners' guild of Kamakura. That wasn't easy. They're a tightly knit lot. I couldn't do any work here without being accepted into the guild. I promised to

help pay for a new guild-hall for them, and I showed them a new system of construction proportions which I learned in China. In the long run I hope to become a shipbuilder."

A silence fell between them. Suddenly Moko said, "I'm sorry you and the shike couldn't stay together."

Taniko sighed. "Jebu has a war to go to. I must fight a battle inside myself."

"I was there," said Moko softly. "I saw him kill Kiyosi." "Jebu told me that."

"I was the first person in all the world to weep for Kiyosi's death, my lady. Lord Kiyosi was a great and good man. But it is madness to let his death years ago inflict so much suffering on the living today."

"I agree, Moko. Madness seizes us, though. It does not go away when we tell it to. I can only hope that this madness will leave me in time. I think that it will."

Taniko felt a tapping on her shoulder. She woke instantly. It was one of her maids. The maid beckoned her. Taniko stood up, pulling her kimono closer around her. A driving summer rainstorm was hammering on the roof of the women's building. It must be past the middle of the night, Taniko thought. She followed the maid to a partly opened screen overlooking the Shima mansion's courtyard.

A small band of horsemen was just coming through the main gateway. Their heads were bent against the rain, their faces hidden under hooded cloaks and sedge hats. Something more than the rain had beaten these men down. Their movements were heavy, weary, hopeless. As they dismounted lightning flashed and Taniko recognized Hideyori.

"Does Lord Hideyori have a wife or woman to attend him?" Taniko asked the maid.

The maid shook her head. "His one wife died in childbirth two years ago."

"Go to him. Tell him Lady Shima Taniko offers to serve him and see to his comfort, if he wishes it."

The maid looked shocked, but said nothing and hurried away. I'm not going to lie with him, you idiot, Taniko thought. But after what he's been through, a man needs dry clothes, food, warm sake and someone pleasant to talk to. Surely the head of the Muratomo clan deserves that much.

Hideyori was shivering. He drained four cups of sake in quick succession, each time holding the empty cup out to her without a word. He stared at the wooden floor, his face impenetrable.

This was the first time she had been in Hideyori's chambers. The room was utterly bare except for a writing table, a plain wooden pillow and a rolled-up futon. In a tokonoma alcove stood a small black-wood statue of the war god, Hachiman, grim of face, on horseback, armed with bow and arrows. Hachiman hasn't been much help to Hideyori so far, Taniko thought.

At last he looked up at her. "I do not deserve to live," he said in a voice faint with fatigue.

He's trying to find out what I think of him, Taniko thought. "My lord, you have an obligation to live. The whole future of the Muratomo depends on you."

He shook his head. "I watched my father lead our clan to disaster. I

vowed I would never make the same mistakes. Nineteen years later I have my first opportunity to lead a Muratomo army into battle, my first chance to strike back at the Takashi. Another disaster." He waved his hand vaguely southwards. "I had five thousand men under my command. I lost four thousand."

Taniko wanted to console him, but she could find nothing to say that was both kind and honest. "I am sure the eastern warriors displayed the courage for which they are famous," she said at last.

"Courage." He laughed bitterly. "They ran away in the night. I ran with them. But women aren't usually interested in talk of war."

"I do not like war, my lord. Still, I consider it too important to ignore."

"I have always thought you an unusual woman. I marched out of Kamakura, then, as you saw, at the beginning of this month, with high hopes. Many landowners and their men joined us as we went. By the time we were ready to besiege Takashi Kanetake in his stronghold, we were three thousand. We took Kanetake's castle and put him and all his people to the sword."

Taniko felt a hollowness in her stomach just as she had when Kublai talked to her about the Mongol massacres. "You took no prisoners, I suppose."

"Samurai never take prisoners. My aim, when this war is over, is that there be not one Takashi left alive. At least, that was my aim, until Ishibashiyama."

"What happened there?"

"After our victory over the Takashi governor we felt invincible. More samurai flocked to us. We were five thousand. Then I received word that Mochihito, Motofusa and their followers had been wiped out by

the Takashi. Now there was no reason to march south, I thought. Unless Yukio was continuing to push southwards. He and I might take the capital together. Otherwise it would be better to stay here, to consolidate our hold on the north-eastern provinces and the Kanto plains. Let them stretch their lines coming after us.

"Then new messages arrived. The Takashi were on their way north, coming up the Tokaido. My officers were all of one mind. We must go to meet them. We must not allow the Takashi to invade our home provinces, murdering and pillaging. I would have preferred to retreat, drawing the enemy into our territory until we could ambush them somewhere. But my brave eastern warriors wouldn't hear of that. They were all for attacking at once. I couldn't put up much opposition. After all, I've never proven myself in war, and if samurai get the notion that their leader is a coward, they'll never fight for him again. So I let myself be led by my followers.

"We marched south through the Hakone mountains. We crossed the neck of the Izu Peninsula. I stopped to pray for victory at the Mishima Hachiman shrine. At last our scouts brought us word that the Takashi were at Shimizu. They estimated that there were thirty thousand of them. We were outnumbered six to one. Now I insisted that to attack was madness. There were those among the officers who were still con vinced we could win. The Takashi aren't fighters, they said, but effeminate courtiers. Five thousand real samurai could easily beat ten or even twenty times that number of decadent fops.

"Einally, one officer who knew the countryside near by came up with a proposal that satisfied everyone. Near the sea coast, north of Mount Fuji, there is a valley called Ishibashiyama that cuts through the Hakone mountains. It is so narrow that no more than a hundred men can stand abreast at its widest point. At this pass we could make our stand. The Takashi could not go around us, because then we could strike at their rear. They would try to come through the

pass, but in that narrow area their numbers would be useless to them. They could come at us only a hundred men at a time. We could inflict such casualties on them that they might eventually give up and retreat. News of a setback to the Takashi like that would bring many more samurai to our side.

"It took nearly two days for us to take up our positions at Ishibashiyama. By then it was the twenty-third day of the month. A Takashi advance guard had pursued us. Before entering the pass we turned and slaughtered them. This gave us even more confidence."

Atsue could have been riding with that advance guard whose slaughter Hideyori so casually described, thought Taniko. I must not think about that.

"Would the Takashi follow us or had we guessed wrong? Would they try to bypass us instead? It wasn't till almost nightfall that we heard taiko drums and flutes playing martial music and saw rank after rank of mounted samurai climbing over the foothills.

"Our two armies camped a short distance apart for the night. I thought it might be a good idea to retreat under cover of darkness, but my officers refused to listen.

"Then, in the middle of the night, there was a thunderous noise from behind us, the north end of the pass. Men jumped up in the darkness. Someone shouted, 'It is the army of the Takashi coming to attack us! There are hundreds of thousands of them.' They thought the Takashi had stolen around the mountains in the darkness and were attacking us from the rear. Our samurai, half-armed and half-dressed, ran forward, right into the Takashi camp. The Takashi slaughtered hundreds of them.

"By this time some of us realized that the noise that set off the panic was the whirring of the wings of a flock of water-fowl that had taken off in the middle of the night from a lake at the north end of the valley. We started to retreat up the pass, but the narrowness of the valley slowed us down. The supposedly effeminate Takashi fell upon us like a bear chewing up a deer. Less than half our men got out of the valley alive.

"I fled into the forest beyond the pass. It was every man for himself by now. I was alone. I lay with my face in the mud while enemy troops searched the bushes a few feet away." He looked at Taniko. He could not say that he had been nearly mad with terror, but she could see it in his eyes.

"Eor five days the Takashi scoured those mountains and forests, killing every Muratomo samurai they found. Most of all, though, they were looking for me. Throwing off my armour, keeping only my sword, I fled them and hid from them." His face brightened. "The worst moment of those five days was also the best. I know the kami are protecting me. I hid in a hollow tree. I could hear a band of the Takashi crashing through the underbrush. Then they were all around me. One of them approached the tree. I recognized him. He was a samurai who had served in the palace guard under my father. He looked into the hollow where I was hiding and right into my eyes. I clenched my fist around my sword. I was determined that I would kill him before he killed me, even though I could never escape his comrades. Then he smiled at me. He stepped back from the tree and struck it twice with the flat of his sword. Three doves that had been perched in the upper branches took flight. 'No one over here,' he called and walked away. Do you see? The gods must be watching over me."

Taniko remembered how, long ago, Kiyosi had seen Moko hiding in a tree and spared his life. On that same day Kiyosi had beheaded

the father of this man sitting before her.

She said, "Even in time of fiercest strife some men feel kindly impulses."

"Kindly impulses?" Hideyori looked at her, surprised. "No, it was not the warrior who saved me. It was Hachiman. The dove is the messenger of Hachiman, and there were three doves in that tree. Hachiman clouded that man's mind so he would not see me. It was Hachiman who smiled at me through the man's face." Hideyori walked over to the alcove. He knelt and prostrated himself before the statue.

"Are the Takashi coming here?" Taniko asked when he had seated himself with her again and drank some more sake.

"No. After five days they regrouped and withdrew down the Tokaido. Yukio must be threatening the capital." Hideyori glowered at the Hachiman statue. "The thought of that upstart half-brother of mine in the capital before me makes me want to cut my belly open."

He's never been able to trust anyone, Taniko thought. He's spent most of his life knowing that anyone around him might be willing to kill him and take his head to Sogamori. "Your brother Yukio has never spoken of you except in terms of the deepest respect, my lord," said Taniko.

"How well do you know him?"

"I met him at the beginning of this year," Taniko admitted. "I knew his mother at Court long ago."

"I think I know Yukio better than you do, then," Hideyori said with a hard smile. "I watched him grow up. He was a snivelling, ugly little snake whose mother turned my father's head. She enticed him to

forget his true family and give all his attention to her and her child. When he grew up he sneaked away from the Rokuhara and drifted about the country, living like a bandit. He never cared how his crimes endangered my life. Twice Sogamori ordered me executed because of things Yukio did. Only my ability to build alliances saved me. Can you wonder why I wanted to be in the capital before him? I wanted it so much, I made the same mistake our family has made for generations, the mistake that has led us into defeat after defeat.

"We are impetuous. We act rashly, prematurely. That's what got my grandfather and my father killed. It caused the destruction of the Muratomo who followed Prince Mochihito. It nearly got me killed at Ishibashiyama, because I was in such a rush to get to the capital I didn't wait until I had gathered a large army here at Kamakura before setting out to attack the Takashi. Eor that matter, I should not have gone into battle at all. A leader can't plan intelligently in the heat of battle. You don't see Sogamori riding at the head of his troops. He sends his sons and his generals to do his fighting for him. He sits like a spider at the centre of his web, taking advantage of his victims' mistakes, growing fat on their bodies. Ishibashiyama is the last time I'll ride to war at the head of troops. Erom now on I'll stay here, making my plans, organizing my supporters, sending out my generals and troops, praying to Hachiman for victory. I believe I can fight this whole war from right here in Kamakura, better than I could if I were riding about the countryside like some ancient prince."

"Perhaps you're right," said Taniko. "Especially since you have fine generals like Yukio to take the field for you."

Hideyori eyed her coldly. "You keep trying to tell me that Yukio is a help, rather than a danger to me. If you weren't so open about it, I'd suspect you of being a spy for him."

Taniko smiled and shook her head. "I'm not a spy for anyone."

"Of course not. You are staying here, are you not, with your family? You and I will be together throughout this war, then, Lady Taniko." He smiled at her. There was no warmth in the smile, but there was desire. Taniko suddenly felt uneasy. She had put herself in a compromising position, coming here to his chambers, because she hadn't expected him to be interested in her.

"I have never forgotten that day at Daidoji," he said softly. "To save your husband's life, you emerged from behind your screen of state, your pale face modestly turned aside, your ivory fan held up before you. I thought you the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Now there is no screen, and you are still the most beautiful woman I know."

"You're too kind, my lord." She felt her heartbeat quicken. There was something frightening about this brooding man full of cold anger. He lived among memories. He hated Yukio, it seemed, because as a baby Yukio had supplanted him in his father's affection. He nurtured the recollection of that one glimpse he'd had of her nineteen years ago, and he saw her as she was then, not as she was now. She felt no desire to lie with him, certainly not after these past months with Jebu, but she had to be careful how she went about putting him off.

"Excuse me, my lord, but I know I can't be as beautiful as you say. I'm thirty-four years old now, practically middle-aged, and I look it. It would take a girl closer to fifteen, as I was then, to equal the picture of me you carry in your mind."

Hideyori reached for her across the table. "Some women do not age. Or they grow more desirable with age."

Trying to move gracefully and wishing not to offend Hideyori by seeming alarmed, Taniko backed away from the table. "I think I have

done all I can for you tonight, my lord. You need rest. I'll bid you good night."

She and Hideyori stood at the same moment. "You have not done all you can for me," he grated. "I have never forgotten you. I have hungered for you for nineteen years. Even while you were giving yourself to Kiyosi, the son of my worst enemy, I longed for you. You came to me tonight of your own choice. You set up no screen between us. You said you wanted to comfort me." He moved around the table and put his arm around her waist. He pushed her towards the sleeping area of his room.

He was far stronger than she, and Taniko knew she would not be able to resist him if he tried to force himself upon her. He knew she had lain with men other than her husband; at least, he knew about Kiyosi. So she could not claim to be a chaste married woman. If she tried to fight him off, she would offend him, with possibly disastrous consequences. She did not want to go to bed with him, though. What a fool she had been to separate from Jebu.

She whispered, "Homage to Amida Buddha."

"What did you say?" said Hideyori in a low voice full of tension.

She remembered that this was a man who seemed convinced he could accomplish more for his cause by praying to Hachiman than by leading an army in the field. She thought quickly.

"I was calling upon the Buddha, my lord. I hope you will not force me to break my vow. It might bring bad karma to both of us." Hideyori's hand fell from her waist. "What vow?"

"As you may have guessed, my marriage to Prince Sasaki no Horigawa was not a happy one. In my resentment of my lot and in the

strength of my youthful passions I turned to Kiyosi when Prince Horigawa separated from me. When Kiyosi was killed, I felt with absolute certainty that my lying with him had displeased the gods and caused his death. I promised the Buddha then that I would never again go to bed with a man other than my husband."

Hideyori stared at her. "Thousands of woman have lain with men who are not their husbands, and the men usually don't die." He laughed. "Unless the husband kills them. Why should your favours be so dangerous?"

Taniko cast her eyes down. "You may joke if you like, my lord. I realize that Kiyosi was your enemy. But his death was one of the great sorrows of my life." That is the simple truth, she thought, even if it is not the reason I don't want to lie with Hideyori. That reason is a living man, and his name is Jebu.

It was as she had hoped. She was beginning to accept Jebu as Kiyosi's killer. When she saw him again it would be as it had been between them in the best times.

Hideyori's eyes smouldered with frustrated yearning. "At least tell me that you would couple with me if this vow did not stand in the way. Do you find me desirable?"

"It has been so long since I went to bed with a man that I've almost forgotten what it is like," Taniko said. Now that was not the truth. "Even so, my lord, I do find you a very attractive man, and if I were to lie with any man in Kamakura it would be you." That was true enough. She felt stirred by his desire. He was the sort of man who moved her, a man like Kiyosi or Kublai. He even reminded her of Jebu a bit. He had the same sort of haunted quality.

"Good. I want no one near you, then, but myself, while you are in

Kamakura. Perhaps the day will come when we will find a way to release you from your vow."

As she lay alone, her head resting on the worn wooden pillow that had been her companion throughout her life, Taniko could not sleep. Hideyori frightened her. She seemed to feel his desire surrounding her as solidly as the bars of a cage. She had stepped into that cage tonight, not knowing the danger she was in. She wondered whether it would be as easy to escape from it.

Chapter Nine

At the top of the hill called Tonamiyama, Atsue reined in his horse to admire the view. To the east rose row upon row of snow-streaked mountains, glowing gold in the setting sun. To the west was the sea that lay between the Sunrise Land and Korea. Somewhere beyond that sea was the strange country from which Muratomo no Yukio had brought the barbarians who made up most of the army.

Atsue felt a twinge of fear. No one knew what Yukio's barbarians were like, or even how many there were, but everyone had heard frightening stories about them. They were twice the height of a normal man. They lived on raw meat and smelled like tigers. Their skin was black. The Takashi leaders like Uncle Notaro had ridiculed the notion that ignorant savages could pose any threat to forty thousand superbly trained, well-armed samurai. The stories were nonsense, they said, but they did show that the barbarians were subhuman.

Not far away, Takashi no Notaro, commander of the army, astride a black horse and wearing the red brocade robe of a general under his armour, was conferring with a semi-circle of mounted officers. They were gesturing to a distant ridge where a line of white Muratomo banners rippled in the purpling sky. Between Tonamiyama hill and that distant peak was a pass called Kurikara. The valley and the mountains around it were thickly covered with pine trees. Behind Atsue, spread over the hills to the south, forty thousand samurai were labouring up the slopes. The pines made it hard to see the men. Once in a while Atsue caught a glimpse of a man or a group of men struggling through a clearing.

Isoroku, a young samurai from Hyogo, whom Atsue had befriended because they were the same age, rode up beside him. "Looks like

more of them than there were at Ishibashiyama," Isoroku said, pointing to the banners.

"Well, we can't go into the pass while they occupy that hill," said Atsue.

Little information had come to the Takashi from the country through which Yukio's army had passed. They knew it was a large army and that it threatened the capital. So, after their autumn victory at Ishibashiyama they crossed the narrow neck of Honshu to Heian Kyo, where they spent the winter and collected' reinforcements. Apparently Yukio had gone into winter quarters as well. Then, in the Eifth Month of the Year of the Tiger, the huge Takashi army moved away from the capital and started marching northwards to find Yukio and destroy him.

They had paused for a day to admire Lake Biwa, the largest lake in the Sacred Islands. The entire army had waited while Notaro took a boat to a pine-covered island called Chikubushima, where he sang and played the lute at the shrine of the kami of the island. He even composed a poem in her honour. Later a rumour went around the army that the goddess had appeared to him in the shape of a Red Dragon and had promised him victory over the insurgents.

Yesterday they had started climbing the mountains that formed a rampart between the Home Provinces around the capital and the wild country to the north. At midday Atsue had found himself on a peak from which he could look back and see Lake Biwa, a silvery sheet of water, and look ahead to the rolling sea on the long north-western coastline and rank upon jagged rank of mountains. He felt a pang of longing for Heian Kyo. Any day now Kazuko would be giving birth to their child, conceived after his return from the great victory at Ishibashiyama. As they descended the peak and Lake Biwa disappeared, he felt he was leaving home and safety behind and

venturing into unknown and dangerous territory.

Atsue hated to admit it to himself, but he did not like war. The actual fighting was never what he expected. There might be hours of waiting or riding about. Then suddenly someone was at your throat, and just as suddenly it was over. Most of war seemed to consist of looting, raping and massacre. Atsue was particularly upset by the memory of the destruction of the temples around Nara. Even the women and children who lived in the temples had been burned to death or cut down with swords. The great Todaiji, five hundred years old, had been burned to the ground on Notaro's orders. A huge statue of the Buddha had been melted down to a heap of slag.

Atsue tried not to notice when a group of his men were abusing peasants or torturing captured enemy samurai to death. It was hard to ignore such things, though, when they shocked him so. Some incidents he had witnessed would burn in his mind forever. Only his flute playing took his mind off such horrors.

Now the order came to set up camp on the crest of Tonamiyama hill. "Didn't we get enough rest the other day at Lake Biwa?" said Isoroku impatiently.

"Would you rather cross the valley and charge uphill at that enemy army?" Atsue asked. "Look at all those Muratomo flags. There could be fifty or a hundred thousand of them over there. That's why we're stopping."

Atsue's servant got his tent up, and Atsue lent the man to Isoroku to set up Isoroku's tent beside his.

As night fell, Atsue and Isoroku sat in a circle with the armed retainers who followed Atsue into battle. They enjoyed a dinner of coarse rice and broiled lake trout. Atsue's men were skilled at

finding provisions, which was a blessing, since the army's food supply had run out shortly after they left the capital. They had been living on the land like locusts ever since, stripping bare every farm in their line of march. It was a shame, because the country through which they passed had always been loyal to the Takashi. Atsue wondered why these things couldn't be better organized. He liked to think that if his father, great Kiyosi, had been leading the army, enough food would have been provided to get at least as far as the unfriendly northern provinces. Now they were in the mountains, and farms were few and far between. The shortage of supplies was becoming a real hardship.

After they had eaten, Atsue took his flute out of his belt, where he now carried it all the time, and played the melody called "Peach Blossoms." Those nearby remained respectfully silent for a long time after he had finished.

"You play so well, I think you will bring us good fortune," said

Isoroku. "The kami will notice us, and they will give us victory." "Then victory goes to the best musicians?" Atsue said with a smile. "Are not the Takashi more cultured than the Muratomo?" Isoroku asked earnestly. "And have we not always defeated them?"

"We've always outnumbered them," said Atsue. "In my father's day, we often outsmarted them as well. We do not know what is waiting for us beyond the ridge now." He gestured to the hill where the Muratomo banners had flown, now invisible in the darkness.

"Would you like to die in battle, Atsue?" Isoroku asked.

Atsue shook his head. "I would like to live. Of course, it would be better to die in battle than be taken prisoner and treated shamefully. But why else would anyone want to die?"

"I sometimes feel that I would rather die when I am young and handsome and strong, doing something brave, then grow old and ugly," said Isoroku. "One cuts a flower when it is most beautiful, not when it has withered. Your father died a hero's death, and all remember him that way. If he had lived he would be greatly respected, I'm sure, but he would not be worshipped almost as a kami by the Takashi."

"I'm old enough to know that I'm very young, Isoroku-san. I know very little of life. I want to know and do much more before I die. I don't care whether people think of me as a hero or not. As for my father, I would much prefer him to be alive and respected than dead and worshipped. I miss him terribly."

The humming-bulb arrows, screaming like falcons, began to fall on the Takashi camp just after sunrise. They killed no one. Crouching, a bit nervous, Atsue looked across Kurikara pass to the hill bedecked with white banners. A row of about a hundred archers was standing there, bows aimed high so their whistling arrows would carry across the valley.

"How civilized of them to wake us up," said Isoroku, laughing. "They might have started with arrows that gave us no warning. This is a gesture worthy of the Takashi."

"Not really like the Muratomo, is it?" Atsue said uneasily. The enemy was controlling the situation, he thought. Eirst, by displaying their banners on the opposite hill, they had determined the place where the Takashi would stop for the night. Now they had chosen the time and manner of opening the battle. Where were those mysterious barbarian troops everyone talked about? The archers across the valley looked like ordinary samurai.

The Takashi were lining up, pulling their man-high bows, releasing

their own whistling arrows. After a few moments they drew first blood. A Muratomo archer fell, to much cheering from Tonamiyama hill. Atsue and Isoroku joined the crowd gathered a short distance behind the bowmen. No one wanted to be too close to the archers-even a humming-bulb arrowhead could kill a man if it hit him in a vulnerable spot-but to stand very far away could look like cowardice.

Two Takashi archers were hit. There was a rumble of anger. Some one suggested switching over to willow-leaf arrows. Someone else said it was too soon for that. Two more men took the place of the fallen, who were only wounded and were dragged out of the line to be cared for by their friends. Atsue saw Notaro and several other officers standing a small distance away, watching. Notaro called out praise when another Muratomo archer fell.

I wonder what plans he has for the battle, Atsue thought. It was odd that they couldn't see any more of the Muratomo than those few archers. Maybe there weren't as many of them as the Takashi had thought. He squinted at the line of white banners. Clever of them to start a fight with arrows when the sun was in the east, blinding the Takashi.

Just when the incessant screaming of the humming-bulb arrows was becoming more tiresome than intimidating, the Muratomo switched to willow-leaf and armour-piercing arrows. The Takashi archers did the same, and more samurai joined in the contest.

Some of the bolder warriors mounted horses and charged partway down the eastern slope of Tonamiyama. Immediately the Muratomo made a dash down their hill to match them. Atsue glanced to the top of the Muratomo hill. Would they attack now? The white banners remained in place. Only about two hundred Muratomo archers faced twice that number of Takashi. Soon the two groups of archers had halved the distance between them, and men on both sides were

falling in threes and sixes, instead of ones and twos. Now some of the Takashi fell back, and some Muratomo did likewise.

The archery battle continued most of the morning. Once in a while a Muratomo samurai would get off a particularly long, accurate shot and kill or wound a Takashi in the watching crowd. Most of the injuries were confined to the archers themselves.

Both Atsue and Isoroku were devotees of the sword and not particularly proud of their skill with bow and arrow. While many other samurai joined or dropped out of the archery combat as the spirit moved them, the two young men stayed out of it entirely.

Just when the sun was directly overhead, the Muratomo stopped firing. They began to withdraw up their hill. Three horsemen rode down towards the Takashi lines. One of them held aloft a white banner. They stopped in an open meadow at the bottom of the pass. Takashi samurai, some on foot, some on horseback, began to drift down the slope towards the Muratomo riders.

"I am Saito Kiji of Nakatsu," the samurai carrying the white banner shouted. "I have fought both in China and in the land of the Mongols, and I have won many victories." Kiji went on to describe the martial careers of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. He claimed descent from the Brave of Yamato, legendary son of an ancient Emperor, subduer of malignant kami and of barbarians. He called upon the Takashi to send a warrior of suitable pedigree out to meet him.

"Let's get closer," Atsue called to Isoroku. "I want to see this."

A Takashi officer rode down the hillside and exchanged words with the Muratomo challenger. The two men rode a short distance apart, then charged each other with drawn swords. Atsue and Isoroku were

part of the crowd cheering for the Takashi fighter. Atsue felt himself trembling with excitement.

It was difficult to strike a killing blow from horseback. The two samurai circled around each other, swords mostly missing or glancing off their armour. Then Kiji, the Muratomo samurai, stood up in the saddle on his short stirrups. With two hands he brought his sword down on the Takashi warrior's right shoulder. Stunned, the man fell from his horse with a crash.

He scrambled to his feet just as Kiji rode down upon him. Kiji brought his horse to a sudden stop, grabbed the Takashi's chin from behind, and pulled him against his saddle. With one quick downward swipe of his sword the Muratomo warrior cut the Takashi's head off.

The head was still strapped into its helmet. Holding it high by one of the helmet's decorative horns, Kiji rode in a circle around the meadow. Isoroku, Atsue and the other Takashi samurai groaned, while the Muratomo opposite them cheered.

Another Takashi rode out to challenge Kiji. More Takashi rode down the hillside shouting their own lineage to anyone on the Muratomo side who might be a worthy opponent. The scene in the valley was becoming quite confused, with more and more samurai riding about bellowing their ancestors' names and looking for someone to fight with. All the Muratomo wore something white, an armband, a streamer on the helmet, a robe. Each Takashi wore something red.

Excitement, fear and eagerness swept through Atsue. He had been too late at Uji bridge and in the rear ranks most of the time at Ishibashiyama. Now was the time for the youngest son of Kiyosi to ride forth and bring back his first Muratomo head. What terror the Muratomo would feel when he announced his father's name.

"Let's get our horses," he called to Isoroku, scrambling up the hill. He looked back over his shoulder. Samurai were fighting all over the meadow.

Back in the camp, he was about to mount his warhorse, a grey with black spots, when he heard his name called. His Uncle Notaro, in full armour but bareheaded, was hurrying towards him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To issue a challenge, Uncle." Notaro's manner gave Atsue a sinking feeling.

"Your grandfather made me swear to bring you through this campaign safely. I forbid you to go into battle now."

Atsue was so frustrated he felt on the verge of tears. "It will tarnish our family name if I hang back while these brave men fight." Notaro shook his head. "Only the most experienced and skilled samurai get into these single-combat duels at the beginning of a battle. They're old veterans, who know all the tricks. Especially these men of Yukio's, with all the devilish foreign ways they've picked up. Of course you may fight, Atsue-san. Eventually. Wait till the battle becomes more general. If I let you go now you wouldn't have a chance."

Atsue walked back to Isoroku, his head hanging. "Battles aren't the way I thought they would be at all."

Chapter Ten

Atsue forgot his disappointment as he watched master swordsmen on both sides display their skills in duel after duel. It was no pleasure to see men killed outright or lose their heads after being badly wounded. He didn't care to notice the way blood spattered everywhere, gradually staining red the grass of the meadow. Still, he had seen enough blood in the past month to take it calmly. He could ignore the ugly parts of fighting and focus on the mastery of horsemanship and weapons.

It seemed as though more Takashi heads than Muratomo were falling. These Muratomo, Atsue recalled, had been fighting constantly in China for the last eight years. Perhaps one of the Muratomo samurai fighting now in the meadow before him was his father's killer. Whoever had actually fired the arrow, it was Muratomo no Yukio whom Atsue blamed for his father's death. One day, he had promised himself, he would ride out before a Muratomo army and call Yukio out for combat. He would take Yukio's head and bring it to his grandfather, and Sogamori would bless him for it.

The Muratomo seemed to be withdrawing, disengaging themselves from battle. Those who survived their single fights accepted no further challenges, but cantered over to the sidelines. Atsue wondered, what now? Are they about to attack us? He looked up at the white banners on the hilltop. No movement, and still no Muratomo to be seen.

A Muratomo samurai called out, "If there are a hundred of you who are brave enough, a hundred of us will fight you in a general melee."

Now I must join in, Atsue thought. He started up Tonamiyama again, followed by Isoroku. He hoped Notaro would not stop him this time.

Notaro was nowhere to be seen. Atsue put on his helmet and mounted his horse. Isoroku, on a piebald horse, was beside him. Atsue flicked his reins and the two young samurai rode down the hill together.

A Takashi officer who knew Atsue bowed him to a place in the line. The Muratomo were lined up on the other side of the meadow, too far away for their faces to be clearly visible.

There was a long silence. Atsue heard a bush warbler call in the pines. Then, from the far side of the meadow came a high-pitched scream.

"Muratomo-o!"

A samurai holding a white banner in his left hand and waving his sword in his right charged at them. Immediately behind him the whole line of Muratomo samurai pounded forward.

"Takashi!" cried the officer who had taken command on their side. Atsue drew Kogarasu from its gold-mounted scabbard and whipped Plum Tree into a gallop. He glanced to his right. Isoroku was beside him.

Atsue's heart leaped into his mouth. A dark-faced warrior with a thick moustache was charging at him. Without thinking, he held up Kogarasu to fend off the other man's blow and rode safely by him. Now he was facing the other end of the meadow, which was empty except for a few spectators on foot.

He turned his horse and saw a warrior wearing a white robe, his back to Atsue, duelling on horseback with a Takashi samurai. Should he attack the man from behind, or should he warn him before striking? He decided that it was a samurai's responsibility to guard

himself against attack from the rear. He spurred the grey, aiming the point of Kogarasu at the back of the samurai's neck, underneath his helmet brim. The sword struck something hard and slid off. Atsue had thought there would be no armour there. The Muratomo whirled in the saddle, striking at Atsue with his sword. Atsue jerked back on the reins so hard that the horse stood on his hind legs.

"Back off, he's mine," the Takashi samurai roared. Embarrassed, frightened and confused, Atsue rode a little distance away from the fighting and tried to survey the field. A samurai with a white silk cloth tied around his helmet rode at him. Atsue brought his sword up to a defensive position and stood his ground.

"I am Tezuka Shiro of the province of Toyama," the samurai shouted. "Who are you, sir? Declare your name and titles."

"I am Takashi no Atsue, son of Takashi no Kiyosi, grandson of Takashi no Sogamori," Atsue answered proudly.

"A noble opponent," said Shiro. "I won't disgrace your arms, either. Come on, then."

Whispering a prayer to his father's spirit, Atsue rode forward and aimed a blow at Shiro's head. Shiro parried the slash and reached out with his free hand to pull Atsue to him. Elailing wildly, Atsue felt himself dragged from the back of his horse and pinned against the front of the Muratomo samurai's saddle. A steel and leather gauntlet smashed against his face. He felt his head being twisted around. He knew the sword blow was coming.

Then Shiro uttered a sound half-way between a grunt and a moan. He made the noise again and relaxed his grip on Atsue. Atsue fell from Shiro's horse, looking around wildly, and saw the grey standing near by. He ran for his horse and jumped into the saddle. Only then

did he look back to see what had happened to Shiro.

Isoroku had just finished cutting Shiro's head off. He pulled it free from its helmet, held it up with a grin, then tied it to his saddle and remounted.

Sick with terror, Atsue rode over to him. "I owe you my life."

Isoroku shrugged. "While he was busy with you I came up on his left side, pulled up his armour skirt and stabbed him twice. You and I make a good pair. Let's get ourselves another. This time I'll grapple with him while you slip up on him and stab him."

I nearly died back there, but I didn't, and the man who was going to kill me is dead now, Atsue thought. The only way to get through this is to refuse to think. Just fight. Atsue gritted his teeth and clapped Isoroku on the shoulder. "Let's go, then."

One of Atsue's retainers rode up. "Lord Takashi no Atsue, you are ordered to leave the field at once. Lord Takashi no Notaro requires your presence in our camp."

"No."

"Please, my lord," said the retainer, seeing the black anger on Atsue's face. "I'm only delivering the message."

"You'd better go," said Isoroku. "Your uncle is commander of the army, after all."

Notaro's fat face was almost as red as his general's robe. "I told you to stay out of it."

"Excuse me, honoured Uncle, but you told me to stay out of the single combats. This was a general melee."

Notaro's eyes narrowed angrily. "I saw what happened down there. If I have to report to my father that a Muratomo warrior took your head because I happened to be looking the other way at the wrong time, he might very well disinherit me. Now get out of my sight and don't go near the fighting unless there's an all-out battle. If you get yourself killed then, it won't be my fault." He turned, unused to armour and clumsy, and stumped away.

Atsue spent the rest of the afternoon on the hillside watching the fighting in the valley, sunk in shame and not speaking to anyone. If only Uncle Notaro had allowed him to remain on the field, he might have redeemed himself by killing a Muratomo samurai or else have died and thereby ended his pain.

The battle in the valley remained curiously unchanged. Though the Muratomo lost fewer men than the Takashi, they sent no new warriors down from their camp to replace those who fell. By nightfall a hundred Takashi were fighting with less than fifty Muratomo. If the

Muratomo were trying to prove what formidable fighters they were, Atsue thought, they were succeeding.

It grew too dark to fight. Calling compliments to one another, the samurai withdrew up their respective hills. Servants crept out to recover the bodies of the fallen. One of those corpses could have been mine, Atsue thought. Now that it was dark he let the tears run down his cheeks. A servant came and asked him if he would have something to eat. Atsue ignored the man until he went away.

He had his flute at his belt, but he had no desire to play. He tried invoking the Buddha, but he doubted that the gentle Buddha would be interested in consoling a young man who was crushed because he had taken no enemy heads. He sat cross-legged with his hands

dangling over his knees. He tried to tell himself that tomorrow he would do better. He realized that he had forgotten to take off his armour. Perhaps he would leave it on all night to punish himself for his total inadequacy in combat.

A moon the shape of a thumbnail crept above the hill where the Muratomo were camped. Atsue tried to see their white banners, but he couldn't. The forest around him was silent. Somewhere in the distance an ox bellowed.

Then there were shouts. They were coming from above and behind him. Hoofbeats crashed through the forest. Atsue sprang to his feet. There were torches flickering in the trees on the west side of the hill.

There were cries of, "The Muratomo! Get your horses! Get your weapons!" Atsue ran up the hill to his campfire. He couldn't count the torches he saw blazing in the forest. Yukio might have as many as a hundred thousand horsemen, he remembered. They had let themselves be lulled by the gentlemanly battle the Muratomo had drawn them into. All the while the enemy was planning this.

"Run, run!" a servant cried, scurrying past Atsue. There were men on horseback, apparently Takashi, trotting around him now. He was going to be trampled if he didn't get to his own horse.

He saw Isoroku's face in the light of the campfire. A frightened servant was holding both their horses.

"Another chance to fight," said Isoroku, as they threw themselves into their saddles.

"Where's your armour?" shouted Atsue.

"I took it off at sunset. No time to put it back on. I've got my sword." He waved it. "Come on, everybody's going down the hill."

An officer galloped by, his face scarlet in the torchlight. "Into the pass. Try to outrun them. We'll make a stand in the open country beyond the pass. Keep together." He raced past them.

They dashed down the hill together, Atsue glancing from time to time at Isoroku to see if he was keeping up. The torchlit enemy arm seemed to be right behind them, thundering down the slope. Again he heard oxen bellowing.

He and Isoroku were in the pass now. The hills on either side of them blotted out the moon. Behind them, the pursuers had overtaken the rear of the Takashi army. They heard screams, the crash of armoured men falling, the neighing of horses. The enemy torches blazed, lighting up the trees, the struggling samurai, the tossing horns of

Cattle.

"It's not samurai," Isoroku called. "It's a cattle stampede." Now some of the Takashi were slowing down. Atsue could plainly see, at the base of Tonamiyama hill, the humped backs, the rolling eyes, the gleaming horns of the oxen.

"Let them through," voices called. "Just get out of the way and let them through."

"They tied torches to their horns to madden them," said Isoroku. "A dishonourable trick," Atsue replied.

Atsue and Isoroku pulled their horses to one side as a huge grey ox, groaning angrily, charged past. Sparks from the torches tied to each of its horns stung its humped back. Atsue patted the grey's neck as the frightened horse danced and threatened to rear.

There was some laughter, shaky with relief, as the samurai realized that their attackers were only a herd of cattle. The oxen continued to crowd the warriors, though, pushing them deeper into the Kurikara pass. The hundreds of torches still sizzling on the horns of the huge animals lit up the Takashi army so well that Atsue could recognize the faces of comrades half-way across the valley.

Something hissed past him through the air. A night bird? There was another whisper, and another. Thudding sounds. Someone screamed. Again there was the clang of a falling, armour-clad body.

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"Arrows! They're shooting at us," Isoroku cried.

Now, looking up, Atsue saw lanterns on the hills above and behind them. Winking balls of light, red, yellow, green, blue, white, almost like the fireflies in the distant trees, signalled to one another across the valley.

Someone near him cried out and fell. In a flash Atsue saw it all. The stampeding oxen had driven them from their secure hilltop position into the valley. The torches on the horns of the cattle made the warriors into perfect targets.

The whole valley now echoed with the shouts and screams of men and animals. There were no orders, just wild, confused cries. In a mass, with no more thought than the stampeding animals among them, the samurai urged their horses into the pass, desperately trying to escape the arrows that hummed down on them like a murderous swarm of bees.

"Eorward! Hurry, hurry!" they screamed at those blocking the pass ahead of them.

But now there were cries from the front ranks.

"The valley is too narrow. Stop! We'll be crushed."

Atsue had been expecting to see a wedge of starlit sky at the end of the pass. Instead there was solid blackness. The arrows poured down. Atsue felt himself struck many times, but the arrows glanced off his helmet and armour or embedded themselves harmlessly in its plates and padded under robe. He glanced over at Isoroku, racing his horse beside him. Isoroku lay along his horse's back and neck to present less of a target.

We left our whole camp behind, Atsue thought. They've got everything, our tents, our baggage, our armour, most of our weapons. How will we be able to fight tomorrow? That doesn't matter. How will we live through tonight? By now the packed mass of men and horses wasn't moving at all.

A man ahead of Atsue said, "They say the valley is open at the other end, but it's only wide enough for one man at a time to go through. It will take all night for us to get out of here."

Erom somewhere on the slopes above them came the pounding of drums. There were wild, high-pitched cries, like the screaming of gulls. Hoofbeats reverberated against the hills.

Something struck the western flank of the Takashi army with such force that a shock wave surged through the mass, crushing men and horses against one another.

Atsue suddenly found there was room for him to urge his horse forward. Terror had crowded those ahead even deeper into the narrow end of the valley. The screams from behind were deafening. Steel clanged. Something was biting into the Takashi army, like a

shark devouring a frantic swimmer. His hands ice-cold with fear, Atsue pulled Kogarasu from the scabbard.

He caught a glimpse of big men with fur-trimmed helmets waving curved swords, lances, and axes. Their triumphant shrieks drowned out the cries of the dying. One of them struck at Atsue. Kogarasu fended off the blow.

A lance plunged into Isoroku's back, was jerked out again. He fell from his horse, his eyes fixed on Atsue, his mouth open, not making a sound.

The barbarian who had killed Isoroku glanced over his shoulder for a moment, and Atsue saw his face clearly in the light of a near-by torch. Dark brown skin, huge white teeth, mad ferocious eyes. It was a face from hell.

Screaming at himself to run, Atsue made himself jump down from his horse. "Isoroku," he called. He tried to find his friend in the darkness. There was no answer. Isoroku is dead, he told himself. Get back on your horse and ride out of here.

Ride where? There was nowhere to go. The torches were going out now. There were struggling men and animals all around him, but he could see nothing. He was stepping on flesh, whether animal or human he couldn't tell. There was nothing he could do for Isoroku. He couldn't even find him.

A horse bumped into him. "Out of my way" snarled a voice edged with fear.

"Help me, please," Atsue called. "I've lost my horse."

"Takashi?"

"Yes, Takashi." If he's Muratomo, I'm dead.

"Come on, climb up here." The voice had a ring of experience and authority. Atsue took the man's hand and clambered up behind him on the horse.

"I'm a fool to do this. Two riders will slow this horse down too much. What's your name?"

"Takashi no Atsue. Why are you going this way?"

"Oho. The chancellor's grandson. I guess you are worth saving, after all. I'm Hino Juro of Ise. We're going south, back the way we came from."

"But that's where the enemy is." Atsue knew of Hino Juro, a veteran fighter who had distinguished himself in the battle at Uji bridge. Even though he protested, he felt safer.

"The enemy is in the pass, slaughtering our men. There's no escape that way. Our only hope is to head south."

Sodden with despair and defeat, the Takashi samurai gathered the following morning by a bend in a stream far to the south of Kurikara pass. Notaro was among those still alive. His red brocaded robe stained with blood and dirt, he wandered dull-eyed among his surviving troops. He ignored Atsue's greeting.

"Lord Notaro, I've brought you your nephew safe and sound," said Juro heartily. "That ought to cheer you up a bit."

Notaro shook his head. "Yesterday I had forty thousand men. Today, eight thousand."

"What happened last night, my lord?" said Juro. "Does anybody

understand it?"

Notaro grimaced, baring his blackened teeth. "They tricked us, made us think they were going to fight like honest samurai. The bodies of our men are piled ten deep in Kurikara pass. Yukio and his barbarian monsters!"

"Where is Yukio's army now, honoured Uncle?" Atsue asked. Notaro looked at him with dread. "No one knows." He shuffled off without another word.

The remnants of the Takashi, still numb with shock, began the ride back to Lake Biwa later that morning. They would have to cover the distance to the capital quickly. Even though there were fewer of them, they had already stripped bare the land through which they were passing, and they would get nothing to eat until they reached Heian Kyo.

As he rode along on a horse Juro had found running riderless, Atsue kept glancing over his shoulder. He expected to see Yukio's army thundering down upon them at any moment. He had been at three big battles and had not won a single combat. I'm not much of a son for my father, he thought. Kiyosi must have killed hundreds by the time he was fifteen.

But then, none of the Takashi were worthy of those who had gone before them. They had let themselves be tricked and terrorized. With so few men left, how could they defend the capital and the Emperor?

What would his grandfather say? He hoped he wouldn't have to face Sogamori. As for Uncle Notaro, he would have to kill himself. How could he account for the loss of more than thirty thousand men?

Isoroku, forgive me, Atsue prayed. I failed you. Eather, forgive me. I

failed you, too.

They had all been so sure of themselves, so triumphant. This battle with Yukio was to be the last, the one that would secure the realm for the Takashi forever. It was now no longer a question of finishing off the last of the Muratomo. Now the question was: could anything be done to save the Takashi?

Chapter Eleven

A small, rectangular lamp illuminated Hideyori's statue of Hachiman. The war god's stern features flickered as if they were alive. Hideyori had placed before the statue a blue vase containing a cluster of handsome purple wisteria blossoms.

Bokuden and Ryuichi were both seated with Hideyori in his bare chamber when Taniko entered. The Muratomo chieftain sat like a stone, immobile, impenetrable. A scroll lay on the floor before him.

"You know my half-brother better than either your father or your uncle does. I want you to tell me what he will do next."

Taniko bowed and knelt facing the three men. Her father looked frightened; Ryuichi, beneath his white powder, appeared bland and calm.

"That depends on what he has done lately, my lord," said Taniko with a little smile.

"He has done what I could not do," said Hideyori, almost choking on the words. "What my father and grandfather died trying to do. He has broken the Takashi." Hideyori described the battle of Tonamiyama to her.

She felt her body grow cold as she grasped the enormity of it. Eorty thousand Takashi, the largest army ever mustered in the Sacred Islands, had gone forth from the capital. Now over thirty thousand lay dead in Kurikara pass, slaughtered by a single tuman of Mongols and whatever samurai Yukio had recruited. Next, she thought, there will be Mongols in the capital. Arghun, the red giant who had tried so many times to kill Jebu, would smash his way into the Imperial

Palace, perhaps even capture the sacred person of the Emperor. To the Mongols no monarch was sacred, not even their own.

We should be celebrating the defeat of the Takashi, she thought. Instead, we're all frightened to death.

"He will take the capital," said Hideyori. "Then what? Will he proclaim himself chancellor? Will he set himself up in Sogamori's place?"

"I'm sure he won't act without orders from you, my lord," said Taniko quickly.

"What does he need me for?" said Hideyori, a note of self-pity in his voice. "How long will the Muratomo follow a chieftain who leads them to defeat, when they can turn to another who has won the most spectacular victory in the history of the Sunrise Land?"

It was not the Mongols that Hideyori feared, Taniko thought, but his brother. "He does need you," she said firmly. "He needs you, because any legitimacy he has comes from you. He is not the son of Domei's primary wife. He is not the chieftain of the Muratomo clan. The majority of his troops are foreign. Without a mandate from you he would be nothing more than a criminal."

Ryuichi said, "See how much our little Taniko has learned about the way of statesmanship at the courts of China and Mongolia."

"She has always pressed her opinions upon anyone who would listen," Bokuden said sourly. "Even on those who do not care to listen."

"The words of this woman are worth the views of the entire Great Council of State," said Hideyori flatly, not even bothering to look at Bokuden. Ryuichi stared at Hideyori with surprised approval.

Bokuden quickly changed his contemptuous expression to an obsequious smile, as if Hideyori's words had enabled him to discover new virtues in his daughter.

Taniko could not help but be warmed and flattered. Hideyori was ambitious, distrustful and merciless, not at all like Jebu or Kiyosi, she reminded herself. Yet deep within him there was a vision she admired and a passion that stirred her. He needed someone to advise him. He sought such a person, without knowing it. No man could think entirely by himself. Hideyori was unable to trust any man, but he was willing to listen to her, a woman. Even though she came from Yukio he trusted her.

With Yukio's forces at his disposal, Hideyori was on the verge of being the most powerful man in the land.

A chill of excitement rippled through her. Be careful, she warned herself. Now that you feel so close to what you've always wanted, don't let yourself be swept away. She kept her eyes modestly lowered.

"These Mongols who follow Yukio," Hideyori said, "Why do they fight for him?"

Taniko shrugged. "For the same reason Mongols always fight. Eor loot, for land, for power. Their leader, Arghun Baghadur, and his men are out of favour in their homeland and wish to fight for another master."

Hideyori shook his head. "Erom what you have told me, the Mon gols are a very practical people. I suspect they are here for a more serious purpose than adventure and plunder. They are the advance guard of an invasion."

As much as she wanted to reassure Hideyori, Taniko knew she could only earn his confidence with the truth as she saw it. "That is possible, my lord. The Mongols do have an exaggerated notion of the wealth of our islands. The few times I talked with their Great Khan, I tried to convince him that China and the other nations west and south of it are far richer than we are. Naturally, he thought I was trying to mislead him to protect my people. Even so, I think that when his men report back to him that I told the truth, he may decide an invasion is more trouble than it's worth."

"Is the Sunrise Land really so poor compared to China?" Bokuden asked, his eyes wide.

"Yes, Father. You were born in the wrong country."

"If Yukio knows that the Mongols have come here to pave the way for an invasion, he is a traitor," said Hideyori. "If he does not realize their purpose, he is a fool. A very dangerous fool."

"He is neither, my lord," said Taniko. "He does not conspire with the Mongols, and he is fully aware of the risk in bringing them to our shores. He did it because this was the only way he could have any hope of defeating the Takashi. Believe me, my lord, he fights, not for himself, but for you."

Hideyori smiled faintly. "I believe that you speak honestly. When I meet Yukio he will have a chance to prove his loyalty. If he agrees without objection to what I intend to order, he will pass at least one test."

Bokuden frowned. "What will you tell him to do, my lord?" "I will command him to turn over the Mongol troops to me."

Eour lanterns burned around the rectangular stone tank in a shadowy

room on the ground floor of one of the Rokuhara towers. In one corner two priests sat reading aloud from a huge book of the Buddhist sutras, each monk chanting a verse in turn. A pair of acolytes held the book up for them. A priest-physician beckoned Atsue forward. Atsue approached the tank and peered down into it. A stout figure wrapped in white cloths lay in the tank, panting like a beached whale. Water covered the body almost completely, except for the shining, shaven head, which was propped up on a large wooden pillow. The eyes were open, staring upwards, and Atsue automatically followed them to see the lantern light reflected from the rippling water in the tank to the ceiling.

"Hot. Hot," Sogamori whispered hoarsely. "Everything is going up in flames."

Grieving and frightened, Atsue looked down at his grandfather.

Since the loss of his father and his mother, Atsue had relied on Sogamori as the one indestructible person in his life. He was like that great tortoise on whose back the whole world rested. It was unbelievable that any disease could strike the old man down. Some said Sogamori's illness had been brought on by the Tonamiyama disaster. Others maintained that he was cursed because he had ordered the destruction of the Buddhist and Zinja temples at Nara and the massacre of their inhabitants.

Atsue wanted to reach into the tank and shake Sogamori, demand that he come out of there and shoulder his burdens. Our army is destroyed, Grandfather, he said only to himself. The enemy is a day's ride from the capital. You can't leave us now. You must tell us what to do. He laid his hand gently on Sogamori's forehead. Instantly, he pulled it back, as if his palm had touched a hot brazier. Now he understood why Sogamori spoke of flames, why he was kept in a stone tank which was drained every hour and refilled with fresh, cold

water from the well of Senshuin on Mount Hiei. The old man was consumed by fever.

At the touch of Atsue's hand, Sogamori rolled yellow-stained eyes towards him. "I'm dying, Kiyosi-chan."

Kiyosi. He thinks I'm my father, Atsue thought. Should I tell him who I am? "No, Grandfather. You'll get better."

Sogamori raised himself in the tank and put his hand on Atsue's wrist. Atsue, had to break free. The heat from Sogamori's hand was unbearable.

"When I am dead, Kiyosi, do not chant sutras in my memory. Do not build temples or pagodas for the repose of my soul." Sogamori bared his teeth, still strong and white. He had never dyed his teeth, as so many of the younger Takashi had. "Only kill Muratomo no Yukio as quickly as you can, and lay his head before my tomb. That will be the best offering you can make for me in this world or in the next." His eyes went out of focus and he fell back, gasping.

Atsue remained kneeling by the tank for another hour, but Sogamori did not speak again. Erom outside the room Atsue heard frantic cries, the thumping of boxes, the lowing of oxen and the clatter of horses' hooves. At last, giving up hope of really speaking with his grandfather, he stood up and left him.

A short time later, dressed in full armour and mounted on the dappled grey horse that the veteran samurai, Hino Juro, had found for him after Tonamiyama, Atsue was riding up Redbird Avenue, forcing his way against the crowds fleeing the capital. People kept looking to the north of the city, as if they expected to see the hills swarming with the dreaded Mongols. Once or twice Atsue was tempted to draw his sword to threaten the people blocking his way,

but such a use would be beneath Kogarasu's dignity. At last he came to the main gateway of the Imperial Palace.

He ached to visit Princess Kazuko and the baby just once more, but he could not. He had spent all the time he could spare with his grandfather, and he had to join his assigned unit at the palace at once. Princess Kazuko had borne Atsue a son, Sametono, two months earlier, while the battle was raging at Tonamiyama. Eollowing custom, the princess and the baby stayed at her parents' home, the Imperial Palace, where Atsue visited her whenever he could. His wife and child were somewhere in that complex now. They were not taking part in this mass flight. Neither was ready to travel. They would be safe enough here. Crude as the Muratomo might be, they would hardly harm an Imperial Princess and her baby. It broke Atsue's heart to leave without seeing his little family, but filial piety had demanded that he put his dying grandfather first.

He rode across the palace grounds through crowds of samurai and civilian officials as confused and frightened as the crowds in the streets. Arriving at the Pure and Eresh Hall, he joined the band of young men from the best families who had the proud task of escorting the Emperor out of Heian Kyo.

One of the young men had heard bad news. The Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa and the Minister of the Left, Prince Sasaki no Horigawa, had both fled to Yukio the previous night.

"We're still the government, and they're still the outlaws," said Atsue. "We have the Emperor."

As ox-drawn carriage rolled past, preceded and followed by Shinto priests mounted on white horses and surrounded by hundreds of Buddhist warrior monks on horseback and armed with naginatas. Lucky for the Takashi that the temples around the capital had

remained loyal, thought Atsue, or we might have had to fight our way out. The carriage contained the Imperial regalia-the sacred mirror, the sword and the necklace. The Three Treasures had been given to the first Emperor by the sun goddess, and they had been the sacred symbols of Imperial authority ever since. This was the first time the Imperial regalia had left the palace in the five hundred years since the founding of Heian Kyo. Atsue and the other samurai climbed down from their horses and prostrated themselves as the cart passed.

Then the little Emperor, carried in a gilded chair, appeared on the wooden steps of the Pure and Eresh Hall. He wore the formal Imperial robes in apricot. His black cap of office was decorated with pearls, but under it he still had the shoulder-length hair of a child. Emperor Antoku, grandson of Go-Shirakawa and of Sogamori, the proudest jewel of the Takashi family, was six years old. His samurai guards all pressed their faces into the white gravel at the sight of him. When Atsue looked up again the Emperor had disappeared into the giant, gold-roofed Imperial palanquin. Atsue watched his aunt, the Imperial mother Kenreimon, a moon-faced lady in her thirties, enter the palanquin behind Antoku. The carriers raised the huge structure smoothly, and Atsue's heart lifted with pride and pleasure as he saw the golden phoenix on its roof gleaming against the blue sky. We have the Emperor, he repeated to himself. He and the other noble samurai mounted and surrounded the palanquin, and all moved off together.

After their procession left the Imperial Palace grounds, Atsue stood up on his stirrups to see down Redbird Avenue. The vast thoroughfare was an endless jumble of mounted samurai and carriages of the Takashi nobility. Dozens of Red Dragon banners fluttered as proudly as if they were going into battle instead of fleeing from it. The common people had been pushed into the side streets.

Although he could not see that far, Atsue guessed that the head of the caravan was already passing beneath the Rasho Mon. The procession stretched the entire length of Heian Kyo and even now it was not complete. More carriages and carts, more mounted warriors, more banners, would be joining the line of march.

It was late afternoon, the hour of the rooster, by the time the Imperial palanquin reached the Rasho Mon. Even with the Emperor's outriders forcing a path through the refugees, it was simply impossible for vehicles, horsemen and masses of people on foot to get out of the way quickly. The retreat was disorganized. Atsue had seen no high-ranking officers, had received no orders, for hours.

Where were they going? He only knew that they were headed south towards the sea, and from there to the western provinces. The western half of the Inland Sea had been Takashi territory since the founding of the clan. There they had won their first holdings and built their first ships. There Sogamori's grandfather had fought his battles with the pirates who then infested the Inland Sea, and thus had laid the foundations of Takashi power.

Atsue turned as he passed under the Rasho Mon for a last look at the city. Even at this distance he could see the three towers of the Rokuhara off to the east. A bright crimson flicker on the nearest tower caught his eye. At first he thought it might be the setting sun reflecting on some gilded ornament, but then he recognized fire. The Rokuhara was burning. His heart stopped for a moment, then grew heavy with sorrow. If only I hadn't looked back, he thought, as he watched the castle that had been his home for eight years enveloped in smoke and streamers of flame. Red banners on the Rokuhara to the very end. Now, over other parts of the city, pillars of smoke appeared, like the trunks of enormous trees.

"Are they burning the whole city?" he cried.

"No," said a young man riding beside him. "Just our palaces. Why leave them for those Muratomo dogs?"

Looking back again, Atsue saw a wall of fire and smoke rise directly to the north, at the opposite end of Redbird Avenue. A chill of horror shook him.

"Not the Imperial Palace?"

"Why not? Wasn't it ours, too?"

"But my family is there. Princess Kazuko and my son."

The other young man's face registered sympathy and alarm. "I'm sure they got everyone out before they set fire to it." He patted Atsue's arm briefly and rode off, the tragedy being too much for him to respond to adequately.

There were many Takashi supporters and relatives in the Imperial Palace, Atsue thought. Surely they had evacuated the place. Still, to destroy the work of so many years in an hour was a vicious, spiteful act, and it shamed him that it was his family that had decreed it and carried it out. The Imperial Palace belonged to the Sacred Islands, to the gods, not to the Takashi family. And now there were fires in every neighbourhood. Thousands of smaller houses, as well as the mansions of the great, were going up in flames. The whole city might well be in ashes by nightfall if the fires spread. As the Imperial party passed through the gateway he heard a steady, heavy, monotonous tolling from somewhere in the distance. Looking back, he saw the pagoda of the Gion Temple in the centre of the city, almost hidden by smoke. Whether the monks were sounding the bell as a fire alarm or were ringing out a farewell to the Takashi he did not know, but in the sad sound of the bell he heard a lament for the passing of all things.

The Takashi flight followed the Shujaku Road towards the Inland Sea. They pressed on through the night without stopping, different shifts of bearers taking turns with the Imperial palanquin. At dawn, Notaro and his personal guards rode up to the Imperial party with a great fluttering of Red Dragon pennons. At Notaro's order the bearers set down the palanquin and all prostrated themselves while the yawning Little Emperor, his mother and a group of ladies-in-waiting stepped down from the palanquin and went for a walk in a near-by field. After they had once again retired behind the curtains, Notaro called together the hundred young samurai of the Imperial escort.

"Which of you is in command?" He had lost weight since Tonamiyama, and his eyes were sunk in hollows over bony cheeks. He looked nervously from one man to another, his gaze settling nowhere, like a fly trying to escape from a room.

After a pause one of the young men said diffidently, "I don't think we have a commander, Lord Notaro."

"How in the name of Beautiful Island Princess can you guard the Emperor properly without anyone being in charge? This should have been reported to me. Has no one any sense in this army? Must I discover everything myself?"

Notaro's glance fell on Atsue. "You'll do. You're Kiyosi's son, after all, and you've had combat experience. You are in command of His Imperial Majesty's escort until further notice. Make these palanquin bearers run, if it kills them. We must get the Emperor to Hyogo and aboard a ship for the west." Notaro beckoned his aide to bring his horse.

Atsue stepped closer to him to speak privately. "Please, honoured Uncle, my wife the Princess Kazuko, and my son Sametono, were

left behind in the Imperial Palace. Since the palace has been burned, I'm concerned about their safety."

Notaro stared at him. "Worrying about your wife? You should be ashamed of yourself. I'm sure I have no idea where any of my wives or children are at this moment, and I'm concerned about more important matters. Are you a samurai or aren't you?"

"Forgive me, honoured Uncle," Atsue whispered, his face burning. "How is Grandfather?"

Notaro stared at the ground, then spoke in a barely audible voice. "I do not want this known. The great Lord Sogamori is no longer with us."

"No," Atsue whispered. Even though he had known Sogamori was dying, Notaro's words were a shock. Why had everything been taken from him? The power of the Takashi was gone, Heian Kyo and the Rokuhara were gone. Kazuko and Sametono were in the hands of the enemy. His father was long dead, now his grandfather was gone. He wondered if his mother were still alive somewhere.

"Did he die of his fever?" he asked Notaro.

"I was not present."

"When will we hold his funeral, Uncle?"

Notaro did not answer. After a moment, Atsue repeated his question.

"We do not have his body," Notaro choked out.

"Do you mean that Grandfather's body is in the hands of the enemy?" Atsue was stunned, horrified. "How could we let that happen, Uncle?"

Notaro shook his head and closed his eyes. Tears squeezed from under his eyelids.

"He was among the last to leave the capital. They had to find a special carriage big and strong enough to hold him and a tub of water. By the time he was prepared for travel there were only a thousand samurai left in the Rokuhara to escort him. Still, we thought that would be enough. I was at the head of the march, several hours' ride away. During the night Yukio's men attacked and cut off the end of the column just south of Takatsuki. I didn't find out that it had happened until hours later. It was too late to go back and try to rescue them."

"Was Grandfather already dead when the Muratomo attacked?"

Notaro looked at Atsue. Never had Atsue seen such shame and anguish in a man's face.

"I don't know."

Atsue wanted to scream. He felt a sudden, overpowering nausea. Could his grandfather have been captured alive by the enemy? Notaro should have sent the entire Takashi army back to attempt a rescue, even if rescue was impossible. To the last man, every Takashi, even the Emperor, should have died trying to save Sogamori. Hating No-taro, Atsue bit back the things he wanted to say. Notaro was his lord and leader, standing in place of his father and grandfather. To show disrespect to the chieftain of the clan now would only add a further blot to the hideously stained honour of the Takashi.

Restraining himself with a painful effort, Atsue said only, "How sad that the greatest man of his age, after a life of many victories, should face a degrading death alone at the hands of his enemies."

Notaro was openly weeping now. "You don't understand, Atsue. You'll never understand. I'm the head of our family now. I have to make the plans and decisions. After Tonamiyama I wanted to take my life, but Eather forbade it. There was no one else, he said, of the age and experience and seniority in the clan to take my place. I must live and lead, though I have proven that I am unfit for it." With a jerk of his body, Notaro pulled himself away from Atsue, stumbled to his horse and rode away through the fields, the proud red banners of his escort belying the enormity of the humiliation the Takashi had suffered.

Atsue stood trying to bring himself under control before returning to the men he now commanded. But when he thought of the old man dying alone among enemies, the tears came hot to his eyes. When the Takashi were all safely in the western provinces, when Atsue could turn over responsibility for the Emperor to someone else, he would kill himself. Only that way could he protest the catastrophe, the utter degradation, that had befallen them. He would join Grandfather and Eather in the next world. That was how he would mourn them.

Chapter Twelve

The rice paddies south of Takatsuki were littered with the corpses of horses and men, most of the bodies sprouting clusters of arrows. Here and there lay the burnt wreck of a carriage. The Mongols had used fire arrows to light their targets in the previous night's attack. Riding along a narrow dirt road, Jebu noticed a movement in a nearby ditch. A man, pierced by so many arrows he looked like a sea urchin, was, amazingly, still alive. None of the arrows had gone deep enough or struck a vital spot. Groaning, he raised his head and reached for a sword that lay near his lacerated hand. Tuman-bashi Torluk also saw the man and signalled to a party of foragers who were collecting weapons and searching for any loot that might have been overlooked by the advancing troops. The Mongols fell upon the samurai, stripped away the armour that had saved him from death until now, and finished him with their short knives. Jebu turned away. A miserable death.

"This is the place," said Torluk, pointing to a small temple halfway up the side of a terraced hill. A group of Mongols lounged at the entrance of the brightly painted Chinese-style building.

Riding abreast of Torluk, Jebu and Taitaro made an odd pair. Jebu was in full battle armour, only the headcloth he wore in preference to a helmet distinguishing him as a monk. Taitaro had on nothing but his grey Zinja robe and the white abbot's cord around his neck. Yukio had sent Jebu to ride with the Mongols as his personal representative. Jebu did not relish spending time in the company of Arghun and Torluk, but he was the only man qualified to speak to the Mongols for Yukio.

"Perhaps we can at least get a ransom out of this," said Torluk, speaking in Mongol. "I'll tell you, the men need some sort of reward

after being told that no Mongols are permitted to enter Heian Kyo. It was we who gave Yukio the capital. Now we are forbidden to ride in his victory procession and to share in the looting of the city."

"There will be no looting of the capital," Jebu said. "The capital was badly enough damaged by the Takashi as they left. Lord Yukio has traded your satisfaction for something more valuable, if you'll forgive me for saying so. His Retired Majesty, Go-Shirakawa, has given his sanction to the Muratomo. He has appointed Yukio to be Lord High Constable and Envoy of the Retired Emperor. Yukio is no longer a rebel. The task of winning support and recruiting samurai is now very much easier. In return, Yukio could do no less than agree to GoShirakawa's demand that no foreign troops enter Heian Kyo."

They had arrived at the low wall around the temple grounds. As they dismounted and approached the doorway of the temple, three shaven-headed men in the yellow robes of Buddhist priests barred their way. Motioning Jebu and Torluk to wait, Taitaro stepped forward, smiling, and bowed to them.

"Is this your temple, holy ones?"

"No, sensei," said the monk in the centre. "This is the Takatsuki Temple of Kwannon. We found it deserted. We felt it would be the safest place to bring our great lord." The monk motioned with his head towards the dark interior of the temple. "We have attended him throughout his illness. His guards are all dead. We did not fight, because we carry no weapons, but if you intend to harm him you will have to kill us first."

"Well spoken, Suzuki-shike," said Taitaro with a smile. "But now that your charge is coming to the end of his journey of life, you may yield your responsibilities to us."

Suzuki smiled back. "Are you formally relieving me of my mission, Taitaro-sensei?"

Taitaro bowed. "Yes." The other two priests stared at Suzuki, then began to back away from him.

Taitaro chuckled. "Eorgive us, brothers, for having disguised a member of our Order as one of you. We felt it necessary, after the destruction of our temple at Nara, to keep a representative close to the chancellor."

"You poisoned him," one of the priests exclaimed.

"Not at all," said Taitaro. "Suzuki-shike is an expert physician. His ministrations probably prolonged Lord Sogamori's life. I grant you, we had good cause to assassinate the chancellor, but we only wanted advance warning of any more attacks on our temples. Now, let us see him."

Torluk waited in the doorway of the temple as Jebu and Taitaro entered the dark hall. Jebu recalled his intention of killing Sogamori at the first opportunity, to avenge the death of his mother, Nyosan. Now the man whose command had obliterated Zinja temples, whose word had been law throughout the Sunrise Land, lay panting and groaning at Jebu's feet on the polished cedar floor of an out-of-the-way, deserted temple, and Jebu felt no wish to speed his departure into eternity. Death was very close for the old man, in any case, and would now probably be a blessing. Erom a candlelit altar the serene face of Kwannon, goddess of mercy, looked down upon Sogamori. He could find no better place to end his days than beneath the eyes of Kwannon. He lay flat on his back, his arms at his sides, his great belly rising and falling under the wet cloths wrapped around him. Over and over he whimpered, "Hot. Hot." Taitaro knelt beside him, put his hand on the shaven head and drew it back quickly. Then he

took a silk purse full of gold needles from inside his robe and began inserting the needles into Sogamori's bare shoulders and arms. One of the Buddhist priests cried out in protest.

"I'm not torturing him," said Taitaro with a smile. "This is a Chinese method of treating the sick. I am placing the needles so as to relieve his fever. I cannot save his life, but I can ease his dying." Why in the name of the Willow Tree would Taitaro want to make Sogamori's dying moments easier? Jebu wondered. The Zinja were physicians only because a warrior must be able to treat his own wounds and those of his comrades. Now, using some powder he carried with him, Taitaro was mixing a potion in water. Drop by drop he poured it between Sogamori's thick, fever-cracked lips. Gradually the Takashi patriarch stopped moaning. Taitaro put his hand back on his forehead and let it rest there. After a moment, Sogamori opened his eyes and looked at Taitaro.

"Have you brought me Yukio's head?" he whispered.

He's still delirious, thought Jebu, but Taitaro only answered, "It is not Yukio's time to fall. It is your time now, Lord Sogamori. All those who are great must be brought low."

"Who are you?" Sogamori rasped. His eyes were more alert now. Taitaro's treatment was having its effect.

"I am the former abbot Taitaro of the Order of Zinja, Lord Sogamori."

"A Zinja. I have forbidden all Zinja to approach me. Except, of course, for that monk Suzuki, who thinks he deceives me with his Buddhist robes. I keep him around so I can feed the Zinja false information." Sogamoni laughed feebly. Jebu smiled over at Suzuki, who shrugged and rolled his eyes.

"Listen, Lord Sogamori," said Taitaro. "You are going to die. I would judge that you do not have more than an hour of life left to you. I advise you to spend it well. If you wish we will withdraw and leave you to be comforted by these two Buddhist priests who stayed faithfully by you when all your guards were killed."

Sogamori's eyes widened. He had been unconscious ever since the evacuation of Heian Kyo and had been unaware of the military situation for many days before that. Now he asked Taitaro quick, probing questions. He learned that the Takashi had lost the capital, that he was in a Buddhist temple south of Takatsuki, and that he was in the power of the Muratomo. His reaction was calm and courageous. Jebu could not help but feel admiration. Sogamori had taken the news just as a Zinja would.

"Why don't you kill me?" he asked, staring into Taitaro's eyes. Taitaro quoted The Zinja Manual: "When it is not necessary to do a thing, it is necessary not to do it."

"True, I am about to die," Sogamori said, "but the Takashi will win this war. The whole realm supports us. We have the Emperor. Hide-yoni has only a rabble of country samurai, and Yukio's army are barbarous foreigners. We will move to the west where we are strongest. All the great samurai families will rally to us against the rebels. My grandson is the Heavenly Sovereign, and my great-grandson and all my descendants will sit on the Imperial throne until the end of time. In this world I have nothing left to desire. My only regret is that I cannot see the head of Yukio."

Taitaro sighed. "Lord Sogamori, do you want to go into the Void shouting lies to deafen yourself or do you want to be liberated from illusion?"

"You Zinja speak of insight," said Sogamori. "Can one who is not a

Zinja achieve it?"

"You have your last chance now to experience insight in this life," said Taitaro.

"Who will I be in my next life? Do you know, Zinja?"

"We do not claim to know what comes after death."

"A year ago a saintly monk came to me and told me he had been to the kingdom of the dead in a dream. Emma-O, the king of the underworld, told him I am the reincarnation of the famous priest Jie Sojo, who lived three hundred years ago. Emma-0 said that even my evil karma will help mankind. If so, I am no ordinary man, and my future life will not be ordinary."

"The future does not exist," said Taitaro. "There is only the present. While I am with you, let me help you."

"I am not afraid to die," Sogamori whispered.

"I do not seek merely to free you from fear," said Taitaro. "I seek to make you an infant again, stripped of possessions, rank, kindred, knowledge, past, future, even of language itself. So that you will go into the Void as a baby goes to its mother's arms."

Sogamori is the man who killed my mother, Jebu thought, but he was more interested in what Taitaro was saying than in his hatred of the Takashi chieftain.

"You are not Sogamori," Taitaro went on. "You must give up Sogamori, forget him. Sogamori was a festival mask you wore, but the dance is over now."

"I shall take another mask for another dance." Sogamori's voice

seemed fainter.

Taitaro leaned forward and stared intently into Sogamori's eyes. "There is no other dance. There was no dance before this. All time was, is and will be now, and you have always worn this mask, but the mask was never you. Relinquish it. Now." He snapped his fingers over Sogamori's face, a loud, startling sound, like the cracking of a bone.

There was a silence, and then Sogamori said, "I see."

"What do you see?" There was eagerness in the way Taitaro crouched over him.

"I see Sogamori. I see him as a young man shooting his arrows at the warrior monks of Todaiji-at their very shrine-without fear of the gods. I see him with his son Kiyosi subduing the enemies of the Emperor. I see the Son of Heaven proclaiming him chancellor, even the Eujiwara bowing before him. I see him closing the circle that was. opened when his ancestor, Emperor Kammy, was on the throne. Sogamori, Takashi no Sogamori."

"Not Sogamori," said Taitaro softly. "Not Takashi."

"Not Takashi?" Sogamori whispered plaintively. The voice was weaker still. The words slurred. Jebu knew that Sogamori was making his last slide down into fever, delirium and death. "Not even that? If I am not a Takashi, I am nothing. If I am nothing then I am-" There was a long silence as Sogamori searched Taitaro's face, stared up into the shadows of the temple hall, peered at smiling Kwannon.

"Everything," Sogamori said, and closed his eyes.

Taitaro, Jebu and the three other monks sat cross-legged and

waited. From outside the temple came the cries of Mongol soldiers playing some game of chance. In the late afternoon, during the hour of the ape, Takashi no Sogamori died. Taitaro laid his hand on the broad, immobile chest, now cool to the touch, and nodded to Jebu. He began removing the needles from Sogamori's body. The two Buddhist priests intoned prayers, while the monk Suzuki led Taitaro to a chest in the corner of the temple, containing Sogamori's remaining possessions. The priests had rescued it from the carriage in which Sogamori had gone on his last journey. There were gold and silver cups and bowls, jade statues, bolts of exquisite silk, scroll paintings and several magnificent swords. Jebu looked for the famous Kogarasu, but it was not there. There was another sword, though, that Jebu recognized. It was very long, the blade straight in the style of hundreds of years ago. The hilt was ornamented with a coiling silver dragon on a black-lacquered background.

"This is Higekiri, the Beard Cutter," he told Taitaro. "The oldest sword of the Muratomo. I last saw it in Domei's hand, nearly twenty years ago, when he sent me with his son Hideyori to Kamakura. The Takashi captured him soon after that, and Sogamori must have kept the sword ever since. Yukio will be delighted to see Higekiri again." Followed by the three priests carrying the chest, Jebu and Taitaro walked to the temple entrance, where Torluk waited for them.

"What did you do, holy man? Poison him with those needles and that drink?"

Taitaro shook his head. "Those things were to wake him up and ease his pain, not kill him."

"I'll never understand shamans and monks," Torluk growled. "Well, he's dead now and I can take his head to Lord Yukio."

Without a word, Taitaro went back into the temple. He picked up the

candles on the altar one after the other and tossed them at the paper screens and wooden walls, while the Buddhist priests screamed and Torluk bellowed at him to stop. Soon the whole interior was a whirlwind of flame and smoke.

Torluk's face was red with rage. "If you weren't a man of religion and your son weren't Lord Yukio's companion, I'd kill you, old man."

"I felt that Sogamori's body deserved to be burned, not mutilated," said Taitaro calmly.

"You've burnt down the temple," one of the priests screamed. "You're no holy man. You're a devil." Taitaro gave Jebu a meaningful look.

"Sogamori built hundreds of temples," Taitaro told the priest. "The Lord Buddha and the Goddess Kwannon can spare one for him."

"We might have had some reward if we could have brought Sogamori's head to Yukio," Torluk grumbled. "Now we'll get nothing."

"Yukio doesn't need to see Sogamori's head," said Jebu. "The news that we captured him and he died will please Yukio well enough." He held up Higekiri. "He will surely reward those involved in the return of this sword to his family."

"I will never understand what you did," Jebu said later, as he and his father rode north along the Shujaku. Even though they could not see Heian Kyo, a grey cloud to the north told them it was still smouldering.

"An inner voice told me I should not let Sogamori be tortured, killed and mutilated," said Taitaro. "He seems a monster to us now, a man who destroyed his country, but perhaps it is as he told us; even his evil karma will benefit mankind. Perhaps, indeed, he was no ordinary person. There are moments in my life when our notions of right and

wrong, our customs, common sense itself, must be set aside and I must act in a strange way that seems right, though I can see no reason for it. This encounter with Sogamori was such a moment. If you would understand it better, spend more time with the Jewel."

Chapter Thirteen

Yukio urged his chestnut horse down the steep, pine-shaded path that wound over the eastern slope of Mount Higashi. It was the hour of the rooster, and from the top of the mountain he had seen the setting sun glowing on the rooftops of Heian Kyo. On this side, twilight had already fallen. It was cold enough now, in the Ninth Month, for his horse's breath and his own to turn to steam in the air before him. The prospect of meeting Hideyori made Yukio nervous. In childhood he had known Hideyori as someone who was big, formidable, older, who treated him with undisguised contempt. Now he reminded himself of all he had seen and accomplished since he last saw his half-brother. His victories surpassed those of any other general in the history of the Sunrise Land. Hideyori had yet to win a single important battle. If Hideyori was about to take control of the government, it was Yukio who had given it to him as a gift. I am not a child any longer, Yukio thought, I am thirty years old. Still, Yukio felt towards Hideyori as a boy feels towards a revered and feared elder brother. Why, he wondered, had Hideyori insisted in his messages that Yukio and he must meet alone, in concealment, outside the city? Why the furtiveness? He noticed a row of tumbled stones along the side of the road. Over twenty years ago, Jebu had told him, a Zinja temple had stood here. It had been destroyed by an earthquake and never rebuilt. A horse and rider stood motionless in the path ahead of Yukio. There was something ghost-like about the figure in dark armour sitting astride a pale grey horse.

Yukio climbed down from his horse and called, "Hideyori? Brother, is that you?" There was no answer. After a moment, the armoured figure dismounted and slowly walked towards him. In the half-light Yukio saw, under a horned helmet, a stern, strong face with glittering black eyes, a face that immediately reminded him of his father,

Domei.

Now Yukio was sure this was Hideyori. He dropped to his knees and pressed his forehead into the earth.

"My lord. My brother. I am your younger brother, Muratomo no Yukio."

"I know. Stand up." The voice was gruff, the words rude. Hideyori had spent the last twenty years of his life in the uncultivated eastern provinces, Yukio reminded himself. Perhaps that was the way they spoke there. Yukio stood and smiled at Hideyori, but there was no answering smile.

"I brought you a gift, Brother. Give me leave to get it." At Hideyori's nod, Yukio went to his horse and unstrapped a long package wrapped in green silk, which he held out with both hands. Erowning, Hideyori unwrapped it, saw the ancient sword with the silver dragon coiling around the hilt, and gave Yukio a questioning look.

"I am sure my honoured brother recognizes this sword."

"It is Higekiri," said Hideyori wonderingly.

Yukio told him how the sword had been found in Sogamori's baggage. "As head of our family, you are the rightful owner of Higekiri. I am happy to be able to present it to you on our first meeting." Yukio only regretted that the gift could not have been given at a splendid public ceremony. All Heian Kyo was eager to see and greet the chieftain of the victorious Muratomo clan. But Yukio had promised himself that he would offer the sword to Hideyori at the very first opportunity. Yukio had hoped that when he met his half-brother their common blood would kindle a warmth between them that would dispel his trepidation. But nothing, it seemed, had changed since his childhood. He still dreaded Hideyori's cold contempt.

Hideyori seated himself cross-legged on the ground and gestured to Yukio to join him. He rewrapped the sword and laid it across his knees.

"There are things we must discuss now," he said. "In a day or two you and I and our officers will be meeting with the Retired Emperor and his councillors. We should not disagree before them." Yukio was overcome as, point by point, in rapid succession, Hideyori outlined his plans. Yukio, he proposed, would take to the water, seizing all the ships he could find along the coast, and hound the Takashi from their island strongholds and ports along the Inland Sea. Hideyori would wage a land war against the Takashi and their allies throughout Honshu. Eor now, Go-Shirakawa would reign in place of the Son of Heaven. After the war they would choose a successor to the Takashi usurper, the boy Antoku. Clearly, Hideyori had been thinking carefully about these things while Yukio had been blundering from battle to battle. Yukio felt foolish. It was for the best that Hideyori was the older of the two of them and the head of the family.

"Do you agree to all of it so far?" Hideyori asked.

"I am a warrior, not a statesman," said Yukio. "I am sure your judgment in these matters is superior to mine. My only thought has been to overthrow the Takashi and win justice for the Muratomo."

"Justice we will have in good measure, Yukio-san," said Hideyori, a friendlier note in his voice. It warmed Yukio to be addressed as Yukio-san by his forbidding elder brother. "You know, I had no idea what sort of person you would be or what you would want. We seem to agree on most things, as brothers should. Let us turn to the difficult question of the Mongols, then. You know, of course, that there are those who say that you have come to conquer our land for the Emperor of Mongolia, who has promised to make you his vassal-king?"

Was Hideyori going to condemn him, as so many others had, for bringing a foreign army into the Sacred Islands? "What must I do, cut my belly open to prove my loyalty?"

"Do not suggest such a thing even lightly, Yukio-san," said Hideyori. "There's really a very simple way for you to show you are not an agent of foreigners. Relinquish command of the Mongols."

Yukio was stunned. "To whom?"

"To me, of course. No one questions my loyalty. I've never left the Sunrise Land."

"You couldn't command the Mongols."

"It's foolish for us to try to talk to each other in total darkness," said Hideyori, changing the subject in a pleasant tone. "Can you light a candle, Yukio-san?" Yukio took a tinder box and a scrap of candle from a kit at his belt. He lit the candle and set it on the box on a bed of fallen maple leaves between himself and Hideyori.

"Good," said Hideyori. "Now tell me what you mean about my not being able to command the Mongols."

"Of course, they would take orders from you," said Yukio. "Eorgive me for speaking frankly, honoured Brother, but I must give you my opinion as a soldier or fail in my duty to you. The question is, how well could you lead them? I don't think you know enough about the Mongols' special ways of fighting to make good use of them. You don't speak their language. They don't know you. A leader must be known to his men to arouse their fighting spirit."

In the candlelight Yukio saw a dull red flush spread over his brother's face. Hideyori started to raise his hand in what appeared to be an

angry gesture, then stopped himself. Gradually, the colour faded from his face. He stroked his small moustache thoughtfully.

"As you said, Yukio-san, that is your opinion as a soldier. If I had not realized that, even as you spoke, I myself would have been tempted to distrust you just as others do. If I, your brother, could suspect you, think how much easier it is for those who do not know you to believe the worst of you. You may be right when you say that I do not know how to use the Mongols as effectively as you do. Remember, though, that wars are not won on the battlefield alone. If it becomes widely believed that the Muratomo are not loyal to the Sacred Islands, the supporters we need will turn to the Takashi instead."

There was much in what Hideyori said, Yukio realized, even though he suspected that Hideyori had other, unspoken reasons for wanting the Mongols under his control. He felt as if he had been asked to give away his sword in the middle of a battle. At this stage of the war, though, the Mongols were not as necessary as they had been when he first landed in the north. Now, just as Hideyori said, their presence might be more of a hindrance than a help in winning the war. In war, just as in go, there were fuseki, chuban and yose-opening, middle and end games-each requiring a different strategy.

"I will have to have samurai to replace the Mongols," he said at last. Hideyori's lips stretched in one of his rare, chilly smiles.

"You shall have them, as many as you need, tough fighters from the eastern provinces, the best men in the land. Erom now on, though, you'll need ships more than men. We have a new shipbuilder in Kamakura, a man who studied the art in China. I will commission him to build for you. Erom what I know of the Mongols, they would be little use to you at sea."

An inexplicable inner reflex of caution kept Yukio from telling Hideyori

that the shipbuilder was Moko, an old companion of his. "True," he said. "The Mongol homeland is far from the sea." He was already regretting having yielded to Hideyori. He had lost his best weapon, the Mongols, and had agreed to undertake the most difficult, dangerous phase of the war-fighting the Takashi at sea. Still, heavily outnumbered, he had beaten the Takashi in Hakata Bay long ago. The vision of what he could do with plenty of ships and men began to excite him.

"One question, Yukio-san," said Hideyori. "I believe you have no intention of betraying the Sacred Islands, but what are the intentions of the Mongols themselves?"

Yukio laughed. "I've always assumed that they could be spies or the vanguard of an invasion. Eor now, let us make use of them. When they become a problem, let us deal with them."

Hideyori clapped Yukio on the shoulder and stood up. "Exactly my thought. We must always remember that today's ally may be tomorrow's enemy." He raised his arms. There was a rustling in the trees that grew throughout the Zinja temple ruins. Yukio stared about him, startled. Shadowy figures-samurai armed with bows and arrows-emerged and formed a circle around himself and Hideyori.

"You said we were to meet alone," Yukio choked out.

Hideyori smiled. "I told you before, Yukio-san, until now I had no idea what sort of person you are or what you would want. This meeting has gone very well, honoured Younger Brother. I look forward to seeing you in a day or two in the capital." One of Hideyori's men brought his grey stallion forward for him to mount. With a wave,

Hideyori turned and rode off down the mountain path, his men following on foot.

Yukio stood alone among the broken stones, asking himself what kind of man his brother was. A man who feared treachery, yet deceived others without a flicker of shame. Yukio felt hot anger rise within him at the thought of the archers concealed in the forest while he talked with his brother. That was why Hideyori had asked him to light the candle, to make him an easy target for the archers. What if he had refused to let Hideyori have the Mongols? He'd be lying dead on the ground right now, riddled with arrows. Yukio shivered as a death-like chill travelled up his spine. Calling to his horse, he stepped angrily on the guttering candle and ground it out.

Chapter Fourteen

As if to show that they could be far more destructive than men, the gods chose to halt the War of the Dragons for a time with a series of natural calamities. The Year of the Hare began with blizzards, which turned in the spring into heavy rains and sudden floods. In the summer there was a drought. Many landowners and samurai deserted both the Muratomo and Takashi forces to try to save their farms. By autumn there was famine in the land. The contending clans sent most of their warriors home because they could not feed them. Hundreds of thousands of people starved to death. The dead lay unburied in the streets of Heian Kyo. A group of monks went around the city painting the character "A" on the foreheads of corpses in the hope that they might be reborn in Amida's Western Paradise. They reported that they had found over forty-two thousand dead within the city limits alone.

The Year of the Dragon was even worse. The droughts continued, and for the second year in a row there was starvation throughout the sixty-six provinces. The weakened populace succumbed to disease, and plague swept the Sacred Islands. Then there was a great earthquake at Heian Kyo. Many were crushed by falling buildings, while those who fled into open spaces were swallowed by huge cracks in the ground. Not a structure in the capital was left undamaged, and the aftershocks continued for three months. The Red Dragon and the White withdrew into permanent camps, waiting for the time when they could begin fighting again.

At last, in the first months of the Year of the Serpent, the forces of nature showed themselves more kindly disposed, thus allowing men to resume their enmity.

The nucleus of the Takashi forces, still led by Sogamori's eldest

living son, Notaro, were encamped at a fortress called Ichinotani on the shore of the Inland Sea. The child-Emperor and his household, guarded by thousands of samurai, took shelter in a cluster of wooden buildings on the beach behind a huge log wall. Rising above the rear of the stockade were steep cliffs, a giant replica in stone of the manmade palisade. In front of the Takashi fortress was the sea, on which a fleet of three hundred Chinese-built junks and large war galleys rode at anchor out beyond the shallows and breakers, a rampart against attack from the water and a refuge in case of attack by land.

One evening in the Second Month of the Year of the Serpent, almost four years after their return to the Sunrise Land, Yukio and Jebu looked over a cliff edge, studying the defences of Ichinotani from above. Yukio had divided his force of eastern-province warriors, leaving seven thousand poised for a frontal assault along the beach from the east, while he led another three thousand along the cliffs, looking for a place to attack the Takashi from the rear. Jebu found a hunter who showed Yukio a narrow pass leading down to the beach. The path through this pass was steeper than the slope of a roof, more suitable for mountain deer than horses and men, but Yukio tested it by sending five riderless horses scrambling to the bottom. Only two of the horses fell and broke their legs in the descent. Yukio was pleased, saying that if they had had riders to guide them, the horses would have made it down unhurt. That night Yukio's three thousand camped on the cliff, the Takashi still unaware of their presence. Though it was early spring and the evening was cold, the Muratomo lit no campfires.

Word had come that day that an army of Mongols and samurai commanded by Hideyori had crushed the Takashi at Kojima, further to the west. "Now perhaps he won't be as envious of you," said Jebu as he walked with Yukio back from the edge of the cliff.

"If I win victories with these eastern warriors, he can always say it was because they were his men, whom he lent me," Yukio laughed.

As they seated themselves in the camp Yukio's eyes shone with delight. "I've had other news, Jebu-san. These infernal disasters the land has been suffering gave me time to visit Hiraizumi last year, and the visit has borne fruit. I've just had a message that my lovely Mirusu, who helped me learn the art of war, has given birth to our son. How I wish I could be there to see the new baby instead of on this cold clifftop. I wonder why Hideyori hasn't bothered to remarry and sire some children. The Muratomo could soon be as numerous as they were in my father's time."

Jebu was silent. A Zinja who had come down to join Yukio from the Pearl Temple near Mount Euji had told him that Lady Shima Taniko had moved from her family home into Hideyori's castle, where she acted as a kind of hostess for the widowed Muratomo chieftain. Everyone in Kamakura assumed that Taniko was Hideyori's mistress, even though she was the estranged wife of Hideyori's ally, Prince Horigawa. In spite of the gossip about her, Taniko was known as a woman of intelligence and character and respected by all the eastern samurai. Jebu did not believe she and Hideyori were lovers, but it made little difference to him. If he lost Taniko, it would not be to another man's body, but because of her hunger for the company of the powerful and her yearning to be at the centre of events. That and the ghost of Kiyosi.

Jebu's thoughts were dispelled by the music of a flute. Someone in the Takashi stronghold was playing, unaware that he was entertaining not only his own people but an enemy army poised over their heads like an executioner's sword. The flautist was playing an air called "Buddha Mind, Quiet as Still Water." The melody spread like balm over the cool evening air, easing the fears of men who knew that tomorrow they might be maimed or killed.

"He plays exceptionally well, whoever he is," said Yukio, touching his own flute, which hung in a case at his belt. "I'd like to be able to accompany him. What lovers of beauty those Takashi courtiers are. What a pity all this is." He lay down, pulling his cloak around him against the damp chill, and closed his eyes for sleep.

At the hour of the tiger, as the eastern sky paled and riders were able to see the ground at their horses' feet, the Muratomo quietly mounted. They formed their lines far back from the cliff so that the sounds of their preparation would not carry to the Takashi below. Yukio had divided them into hundred-man units, each with its White Dragon banner surmounted by a square pennant of a distinctive colour. Having commanded these countrified eastern samurai for over a year, Yukio had managed to teach them something of the mass cavalry tactics he had learned from the Mongols. Now, on a white horse, wearing his helmet surmounted by a silver dragon, Yukio trotted out in front of his formations.

"That's where we're going," he called, pointing with his sword at the head of the pass that led to the Takashi stronghold. "I'll show you the way." He turned and galloped his horse straight towards the cliff edge. They may once have been Hideyori's men, but Yukio has won their hearts, Jebu thought. Otherwise they'd never follow him over a cliff. With one wild wave of his sword, Yukio disappeared below the rocky cliff edge. Thirty of his closest companions, including Jebu, thundered after him.

Jebu, his headcloth streaming in the wind, made no attempt to control his horse, but sat leaning so far back in the saddle that his head nearly touched the animal's rump. He trusted in the Self, present in his horse as in all things, to get them down the cliff safely. The first part of the descent was over sand and pebbles, and Jebu and those around him slid until the slope levelled off for a short

space. Below were great mossy boulders. It looked impossible, but Jebu saw Yukio's silver dragon down there and spurred his horse on. All around him hooves clattered on rocks and riders shouted "Ei! Ei!" to keep their courage up. Jebu saw that many of the men near him were riding with their eyes shut. So steep was the slope that the stirrup of a rider above and behind Jebu struck against his head. Then Jebu heard a shriek and a crash and jerked his horse aside just in time to avoid being struck by the tangled bodies of a samurai and his horse rolling over and over, legs flailing in the air. After the first anguished cry the rider was silent. The horse had crushed him. Ealling faster and faster he hit other mounted warriors ahead of Jebu, sending two more horses and samurai crashing to destruction in an avalanche of flesh and armour.

Looking straight down past his horse's head, Jebu could see into the Takashi camp as if he were a seagull flying over it. Within the stockade the Takashi warriors, tiny figures, rushed from building to building and out to the gates to the east, where they mounted their horses. Smoke rose beyond the eastern wall of the stockade. Yukio's other seven thousand warriors had begun their attack. A rock dislodged by someone above him struck Jebu's head, dizzying him, and he had to summon all his strength to keep his seat. But the jolting and bouncing finally ended, and the hooves under Jebu pattered on the sand. Now that it was over, Jebu was struck with a sudden awareness that the mad scramble had been a wild delight. He stroked his terrified horse's neck to soothe it.

The first two hundred Muratomo riders who had landed on the beach let out a roar that sounded more like that of two thousand men as it echoed against the cliffs. A lone Takashi archer appeared on the gallery behind the palisade, his voice and the shriek of his humming-bulb arrow sounding an alarm. A hundred answering arrows transfixed him, and he toppled out of sight. The wooden wall was low on this side and not protected by guard towers. The Takashi had

thought the cliffs to be defence enough. Shouting his war cry, "Muratomo-o!" Yukio rode up to the wall, swinging a blazing torch over his head. He hurled it, and it landed on the thatched roof of a house just beyond the wooden wall. The Muratomo gave a cheer as thick black smoke and red pennants of flame fluttered upwards. Tendrils of fire reached out to caress the palisade itself. Soon a section of the barrier would be burnt away. Some Muratomo were not waiting. All along the wall men were scampering up on ropes. Someone had found a small gate further down the palisade, and now it was swinging outwards. A hundred horsemen raced for the opening, knocking one another aside in their haste to be among the first through. Drawing his sword, Jebu kicked his charger in the ribs and galloped after them.

The Takashi might have saved Ichinotani if they had rallied and put up a house-by-house resistance. They outnumbered the Muratomo three to one, but they lacked spirit and leaders. Many of the Takashi samurai were hired or impressed from Kyushu and Shikoku, with no enthusiasm for the cause they served. The nobles who might have led them in defence of the stronghold were at the eastern ramparts, fighting the other part of Yukio's army. With the Muratomo inside the walls and black smoke and flame spreading everywhere, the defenders threw open all the gates and rushed to the beach in panic, seeking refuge on the ships. Seeing the stockade overwhelmed, the Takashi fighting on the east side also fell back to the sea.

The water near the shore was filled with men wading, riding or swimming their horses to deeper water. Overloaded longboats wallowed in the waves. Jebu saw three great galleys, impossibly burdened with hundreds of armoured samurai, slowly tip to one side, then roll completely over, their keels in the air and their passengers drowning. He watched the high-ranking Takashi beat away the common soldiers trying to board the ships in the offing. They slashed

with swords and naginatas at the men clinging to the rails, hacking off their arms and hands so that they fell back into the water and sank, their blood staining the sea.

The Takashi who were left behind on the beach fought with the fury of despair, their backs to the waves and their retreating comrades. Believing with Sun Tzu that to deprive an enemy of all hope is to strengthen him dangerously, Yukio had been preaching against the practice of slaughtering all captured enemies, but he had made no headway with his hardened eastern-province warriors. So these Takashi knew the Muratomo would take no prisoners.

Atsue, his dappled grey horse up to his knees in the water, saw the fall of his uncle Tadanori, younger brother of Kiyosi and Notaro. Tadanori was a fine artist and poet, and his death saddened Atsue. Atsue knew by reputation the one who had killed Tadanori. It was the legendary Shike Jebu, the giant, red-haired Zinja who had been Yukio's companion, so it was said, since he was a boy, the monk who had once collected a hundred swords just to show his contempt for the samurai. Atsue seethed. Again the Takashi were disgraced. The Emperor had been safely bundled aboard one of the ships, but this day was a worse defeat than Tonamiyama, worse even than the loss of the capital. Everywhere Atsue looked he saw shame. The citadel taken by surprise from the rear, the cowardice of the immediate flight, his noble relatives abandoning their own troops just as they had abandoned the dying Sogamori. I was about to flee, too, Atsue thought. Why? I've resolved to die rather than bear any more of my family's shame. Today is as good a day as any.

The Shike Jebu was staring across the water at Atsue. Their eyes met. Atsue spurred his charger and drew Kogarasu from the scabbard hanging at his belt. He did not bother to call out a challenge. Warrior monks were a rabble without heritage. The Zinja sword was barely a quarter of the length of Kogarasu. Atsue could

easily get in a blow while staying clear of his opponent's range. The Zinja wore no helmet, only a headcloth, so Atsue slashed at his face. The shike flattened him self against the back of his horse, which danced in a tight circle, keeping its head towards Atsue as he rode past. Atsue pulled his horse up short and whirled, and they fenced on horseback, swords clanging together. Atsue knew that he was fighting better than he had ever fought in his life. It was as if his opponent, a consummate master of the sword, was pulling Atsue's skill up to his own level. Still, Atsue knew he was losing. Kogarasu seemed slow and unwieldy. In fighting at close quarters, Atsue was unable to swing the great sword fully. The short, two-edged Zinja blade darted in and out of Atsue's guard with ease, seeming to come at him from all directions. The enemy's face came closer and closer. The strange grey eyes were calm as incense smoke. Deep lines were etched in the sharp-boned, sun-browned face, but they were lines of experience, long journeys, hard work, not lines of rage. The dark red, drooping moustache seemed ferocious, but the thin-lipped mouth beneath it was merely concentrated, intent. It was the face of an engrossed craftsman, not a killer. What I wouldn't give to have whatever you have, Atsue thought. He cut with all his strength at the unprotected neck. Instead of parrying, the monk leaned back, caught Atsue's sword arm with his free hand, and twisted him out of the saddle. As Atsue crashed to the ground his helmet with its golden horns was knocked from his head. Instantly, the monk was crouched over him, the point of his sword at his throat. Atsue closed his eyes.

"Who are you?" came a harsh, hoarse voice from above him.

"Oh, you've done well for yourself," said Atsue. He opened his eyes. The Zinja was searching his face, frowning in puzzlement. "Show my head to any of your prisoners, and they'll tell you. If you let any of your prisoners live."

"Your face is familiar," said the shike. "I don't like to kill men as young as you. Please tell me your name."

I don't want to live, Atsue thought. On top of everything else, must I bear the shame of captivity? Torture and mutilation? No.

In a despairing voice he said, "I am Takashi no Atsue, son of Takashi no Kiyosi, grandson of Takashi no Sogamori."

The Zinja looked astonished. "Atsue, the son of Kiyosi? Is your mother Lady Shima Taniko?"

"Yes. If you wish to show me a final kindness, you might try to send her word of my death. I do not know where you can find her, though. You could also send my farewell to my wife, the Imperial Princess Kazuko. She stayed behind in the capital with our son when the Muratomo captured it." Now, he thought, Kazuko will have to find another father for Sametono.

Slowly the Zinja straighted up, the sword point pulling away from Atsue's throat. "Please give me your sword and stand up."

Atsue got shakily to his feet as the monk said, "A double edge, the sharp curve that starts at the hilt, the gold and silver mountings-this must be the famous Kogarasu. Long ago I wanted to capture this sword from your father."

"I wish you had tried," said Atsue. "He'd have killed you." "Perhaps," said the monk with a sad smile. "I never got very close to him."

Atsue noticed that there were arrow shafts protruding here and there from the monk's armour. He'd been hit, but the metal strips and lacings of his armour had caught the arrows and held them harmlessly. Just as with samurai armour, though, the monk's right side was vulnerable. The front, left and rear sides of the box-like

yoroi armour were a unit, but the right side was laced on separately. Evidently the Zinja had decided not to kill him. He stood holding Kogarasu and staring out to sea. The thought crossed Atsue's mind, what glory the killer of the notorious Shike Jebu would win. Atsue had killed a few of the enemy in small battles that preceded the withdrawal of the Takashi to Ichinotani, but he had never defeated an opponent whose death brought much honour to his arms. The Demon Monk's profaning hands held Kogarasu, but he had neglected to take Atsue's kodachi, his short sword. The monk's guard was down. Would it be honourable to attack him when he wasn't expecting it? Of course. It was the responsibility of a warrior always to be ready to meet attack, and this was no ordinary warrior, but one who had vanquished thousands of samurai. Atsue slipped his kodachi out of its sheath and took a deep breath. With a shout he leaped on the Zinja. He drove the short sword with all his strength into the crevice in the monk's armoured right side, high on the ribs, striking for the heart. His mind soared aloft on golden wings of glory.

Atsue never saw the flashing arc of Yukio's sword that swept his head from his shoulders.

"No!" Jebu screamed.

Too late. The pale young head, severed, lay in the sand, the beautiful face, in which Jebu could now clearly see Taniko's features, serene in death. The rich blood, partly hers, was staining the yellow sand. Jebu felt a hideous pain in his side, where the boy's kodachi had gone in. It was nothing to the pain in his heart. I wish he had killed me, he thought. I want to die.

"Come," said Yukio gently."You're lucky I was close by and saw the Takashi spring at you." He put his arm around Jebu's waist. "Sit down slowly and carefully." When Jebu was sitting, Yukio cut through the lacing of his armour with his short sword and tore away the grey

robe underneath it. "The wound is deep, I can't tell how deep. The blood is pouring out of you like a waterfall."

"I don't want to live, Yukio."

"Jebu. What is it?" Yukio stared into his face. Still sitting up, Jebu swayed, already dizzy from the loss of blood. His breath bubbled in his chest. It was agony to speak.

"Please excuse me-for telling you this, Yukio," he panted. "That boy. He was Takashi no Atsue. Taniko's son."

"Oh, no." Yukio's head and shoulders sagged as though he had taken an arrow in the chest. "Eorgive me, Jebu." He pressed his armoured sleeve to his tear-filled eyes. He knelt beside Jebu and began unlacing his armour. "You killed the father to save my life. Now I've killed the son to save your life. Our friendship has cost Lady Taniko dear."

"Go back to the battle, Yukio-san."

"Not until we have cared for you." Yukio cut a strip of white silk from the edge of his armour robe. From a pouch at his belt he took a packet of powdered herbs Jebu had given him long ago. The herbs were a Zinja secret, used to protect wounds from infection and speed their healing. Yukio sprinkled the powder into Jebu's wound, then unlaced the rest of his armour and began to bind his chest tightly.

Yukio's retainers gathered around them, some helping him to treat Jebu, others stripping Atsue's body of its armour and valuables. One of them came over with a brocade bag. Yukio opened it, then shut his eyes in pain. Slowly he drew out an ivory flute.

"This boy could have been the same one who played so beautifully

last night." Again he wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

"The sword I took from him is called Kogarasu," Jebu said. "It belonged to Kiyosi and is a sacred Takashi heirloom. Please send it to Taniko, along with this flute."

"I will, Jebu-san."

"He mentioned an Imperial Princess Kazuko to whom he was married. They had a child. He said she was at the capital."

"I'll see that she gets word."

Jebu thought, if Taniko had been unable to love him after learning that he had killed Kiyosi, how would she feel when she was told that he and Yukio, between them, had done Atsue to death? She would never want to see either of them again. Yukio's sword had not only cut short the life of a beautiful young man, it had forever parted Jebu and Taniko. Again and again, he thought, I learn how profoundly true it is that life is suffering. I will send a letter along with the sword and the flute, but what can I say to her? That I did not know it was Atsue. That he attacked me, not I him. I meant to spare his life. It was Yukio who killed him, not I. I am not to blame for her son's death, any more than I was to blame for Kiyosi's death. I would much rather I had been killed instead of Atsue. She will read my letter and she will understand. She will even find a place in her heart, in the midst of her grief, to feel some pity for me, but it can make no difference. She cannot force herself to love me. If only I had spoken sooner, had told the boy that his mother was dear to me. If I could have made him understand, he would not have tried to kill me. If only I had taken his kodachi from him, as any careful warrior would have done. Truly, the Zinja are dev ils, even as Taitaro told me long ago, if we cause such agony for those we love. I want no more of this war. I want no more of being a warrior monk. I am ready to do what Taitaro did, to withdraw

to a forest hut. I want to cause no more suffering. I want no longer to be a devil.

Jebu looked into Yukio's eyes and saw tiny squares of white, reflections of the sails of the fleeing Takashi ships. He tried to recite the Prayer to a Eallen Enemy, but the words slipped like little fishes through the net of his mind. Slowly a darkening sea rose around Jebu, and the pain of his wound and the anguish of his spirit dwindled with the fading of the light.

Chapter Fifteen

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

Hideyori has revealed to me his plan for ruling the Sunrise Land. It is an astonishing departure from our customary ways, but well suited to these Latter Days of the Law. He says that trying to imitate the courtiers at the capital made the Takashi soft, corrupt and effeminate. This notion, that softness and corruption go with femininity, is typical eastern-province boorishness.

Hideyori thinks the country can only be governed well by those with the power to govern-the samurai. To escape the influence of Heian Kyo, this samurai government will have its headquarters here in Kamakura, in the field, as it were. So it will be known as the Bakufu, the Tent Government. Hideyori says he got that idea from my description of the travelling courts of the Mongol khans. He has chosen Kamakura as his headquarters because he believes the eastern provinces, especially the rice-rich Kanto Plain, are now the most important part of the realm.

In olden times, when a single general was given command of all the armed forces to meet some grave threat to the empire, he was called Shogun, Supreme Commander, for as long as the crisis lasted. Hideyori plans to take that title for himself, permanently. As Shogun he will, of course, derive his authority from the Emperor, but since the Shogun will command all the swords in the land, the Emperor will doubtless be quick to obey all his humble subject's suggestions. I, Hideyori keeps telling me, shall be at his side. If I want to be, I silently add to myself.

Hideyori has already petitioned Go-Shirakawa to make him Shogun, but to his great frustration and annoyance that wily old man replied

that, being only a Retired Emperor, he lacks the authority to confer the title. This means Hideyori will have to wait until the war is over and a new Emperor ascends the throne. Meanwhile, he fears that Yukio may have learned of his request and may try to thwart him. Even though Yukio gave in to him in the matter of the Mongols., Hideyori still hates and fears him.

As for the Mongols, Hideyori has taken steps to reduce the threat from them by getting them killed off. Yesterday he told me gleefully that they have lost over a third of their original number in battles he has sent them into. He says that by the time the war is over there will probably be fewer than five thousand of them left. This is the first time I've heard of a military leader achieving his aims by being a bad general.

Good or bad, a general will rule us when all this is over, and Heian Kyo will take orders from Kamakura. When I was a girl I left my home to go up to the capital. Now the home I left will be the capital. When I first saw fires in that magical city of Heian Kyo, I didn't know they signalled the dawn of a new age. A rough, ugly age it promises to be.

-Third Month, twenty-second day

YEAR OF THE SERPENT

One evening early in the Eourth Month, a maidservant came to Taniko and told her Hideyori wished her to attend him in his prayer chamber. The intensely religious Hideyori had set aside a special room for meditation and scripture reading in the top of the main tower of the huge new castle he was building. Two samurai in full armour bowed to Taniko outside the oratory, and slid a pair of heavy wooden doors aside for her. The chamber was unpainted and bare except for the alcove in which Hideyori's treasured blackwood statue

of the great kami Hachiman stood. A single dark red peony in a pale green vase bowed its lion-like head to the war god. Wearing a black robe with circular White Dragon crests on front and back, Hideyori was seated on a cushion, reading a scroll. Beside him was a long wooden sword box.

"What are you reading, my lord?" she asked after they had formally greeted each other and she sat down on the cushion beside him. There was no question of a screen between them. She was lady-in-waiting, in effect, to the future Shogun, and she considered herself privileged, like Imperial ladies-in-waiting, to deal with men face-to-face.

"This is the Lotus sutra," said Hideyori. "It is my favourite. It gives me great strength." His dark eyes, when he looked up at her, seemed to search her mind. His voice was softer than usual. "Do you have a special devotion, Taniko-san?"

"Yes, I often recite the invocation 'Homage to Amida Buddha,' when I need comfort."

"Very good. Everyone needs a way of calling upon higher powers in times of great suffering." As she sat beside him, he gently took her hand. It was a liberty she allowed him, now that he had agreed not to try to take her to bed. "I have news of terrible sorrow for you," he said. "You must bear it like a samurai."

Jebu, she thought at once, and her heart turned to ice. Then she remembered that Hideyori did not know what Jebu was to her. Involuntarily she pressed Hideyori's hand.

"Please tell me, Hideyori-san. I can bear it."

Hideyori picked up the long, polished cedar box and set it on his

knees. He opened it and took out a sword in a gold and silver scabbard.

"You may know this sword. It is the Takashi family treasure Kogarasu." He passed the sword to her, hilt first. It was so heavy she could hardly imagine how a man could swing it in combat. Kogarasu. Kiyosi's sword. She had supposed it went to the bottom of the sea with him at Hakata Bay. To take it from Hideyori's hands, here in Hideyori's palace, was bewildering. What was Hideyori trying to tell her?

He reached into the box again and took out an ivory flute and handed it to her. She recognized Little Branch at once. At the sight of it she could almost hear Atsue playing on it, as he had done so many times for her before Sogamori's men took him away.

Understanding flashed through her mind like a lightning bolt, and with it came a torrent of grief. Atsue. She remembered the thin arms torn from around her neck, the last despairing look he gave her. She had always dreamed that one day she would find him again. She had prayed that she might see how he had grown, what sort of man he had become. Now she would never know him. She felt herself falling and leaned against Hideyori, clinging to him for support. A sob forced itself through her throat. Not my Atsue. Not my other baby.

"When a man and a woman put their pillows together, the karma relations that come of it are endless," Hideyori said. "How could you have known, so many years ago, that your son by Kiyosi would go to war against his mother's friends?"

"Did he die in battle? He's just a child. He has not lived."

Hideyori's voice was strong in her ear. "The cherry blossom falls from the tree with the first strong breeze, but we do not say that it has

never lived. A bloom that lasts only a day is no less beautiful for that."

"Homage to Amida Buddha," Taniko whispered. She released her hold on Hideyori and sat up. She had lost so much in her life-her daughter Shikibu, Kiyosi, Jebu. Atsue she had lost twice, once long ago and now again. Sogamori had made a samurai of him and sent him into battle to be killed, just as he had done to Kiyosi. She would not let this break her. As Hideyori reminded her, she, too, was samurai. She wept silently, knowing that all the tears she could shed would leave her inner desolation untouched, a vast emptiness like the Mongol desert.

"He has fallen from the bough," she said in a quiet voice. "He will suffer no more. But I go on suffering. What sin have I committed, that I must trudge on from year to year, from agony to agony?"

"Perhaps you are being reserved for a higher destiny," said Hide yori. "The steel for the finest swords is thrust into the fire ten thousands times."

"I have no wish to serve a higher purpose. If I can't die, let me live as a nun. My father threatened to put me into a convent the morning I left Kamakura to be married in Heian Kyo. If only he had."

"A convent is no place for a woman as clever and beautiful as you. If you want to escape from your sorrow, turn to work. Do your duty to your family, to the Sacred Islands and to the kami."

Taniko wrapped her arms around herself and clenched her teeth, trying with all her strength to hold herself together.

"Your son, Takashi no Atsue, is gone from this world," Hideyori said quietly. "You must accept it and go on." Atsue's full name, which Taniko herself never spoke aloud, sounded like that of a stranger on

the Muratomo chieftain's lips. It brought home to her again the reality of what had happened. Atsue was dead. Killed by some Muratomo samurai. She could no longer contain her grief. A long scream tore itself from the very core of her body, and she burst into a storm of weeping. She bent double over the sword and flute, convulsed by sobs. Hideyori sat silently, his face averted.

At last her anguish subsided enough for her to speak. "Eorgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive. You have suffered greatly."

Taniko's mind went back to that terrible time in Heian Kyo when no one dared tell her Kiyosi was dead until Sogamori's secretary blurted it out. "I am grateful to you, Lord Hideyori," she said formally. "You had no duty to tell me of the death of one of your enemies. You were under no obligation to spend so much of your precious time with me to comfort me in my grief. I am obliged to you for taking this task upon yourself."

"It might have been much more difficult for me," said Hideyori, his glance darting sideways at her. "I am grateful that you did not ask me how he died."

"What do you mean?"

Hideyori looked perturbed. "I meant nothing."

"You have not told me everything."

"No, no. I have said enough already."

"I want to know all, Hideyori-san. Do not leave some ugly truth lying in wait to catch me unaware later on. Let me suffer now all that I must suffer."

"Please, Taniko-san, do not ask me to say any more. You will regret it."

"Did he die dishonourably? Did he commit some act of cowardice?" "No, it was not that, Taniko. Will you force me to tell you, then?" "Please speak."

Hideyori sighed. "This sword and this flute were sent to me as spoils of war by my half-brother, Yukio. It was Yukio who killed your son." Taniko bit her lip. "No." Not Yukio. It would not be. Not Jebu's dearest friend. Not the smiling companion who had helped her return from China to the Sacred Islands. She felt as if she were falling into an abyss without light and without bottom.

Hideyori went on. "Atsue was captured during the battle at Ichinotani by the giant Zinja monk Jebu, who travels with Yukio. The Zinja brought Atsue to Yukio. When Yukio learned that Atsue was Sogamori's grandson, he instantly cut off the defenceless boy's head."

"Sogamori's grandson? But Yukio and Jebu both knew that Atsue was my son:" Taniko felt her body grow cold.

"Apparently that did not affect Yukio's angry mood," said Hideyori. "It is well known that he has a furious temper."

"Homage to Amida Buddha," Taniko whispered, but the Lord of Boundless Light was far from her lightless chasm. "Was there a letter?" she asked, after a long silence in which she fought to overcome the pain.

"No. The samurai who brought the sword and the flute told me how your son died."

"If Yukio sent these things, he must have regretted killing Atsue."

"He sent them to me because they are Takashi treasures. Knowing I distrust him, he seeks to curry favour with me. I felt that I should give them to you."

"Did the monk Jebu try to stop Yukio from killing my son?" "If he did, I did not hear of it."

"I would like to speak to the samurai who brought the sword and the flute."

"I'm sorry, but he has already gone back to rejoin Yukio's army."

Taniko rose to her feet, clutching the sword and the flute to her breast. "Eorgive me, my lord, but I must ask your permission to leave. I must be alone."

"Kwannon bring comfort to you, Taniko-san."

Knowing that everyone in the palace was constantly watched on Hideyori's orders, Taniko decided to ride out into the hills. There she would defy her karma. She would kill herself. Of course, she would be reborn to suffer more, but at least the bitter memories of this life, in which she had been so cruelly betrayed by those she trusted and loved, would be wiped away. She considered leaving a final farewell message in her pillow book, but there was no longer anyone she wanted to write to. That in itself, she thought, is a good reason to leave this world.

Soon her horse was climbing the hills along the same road she and Jebu had followed twenty-two years earlier on their first journey together. The houses of Kamakura had spread into those hills, and it took her much longer to reach the thick pine woods. The path wound to a spot from which she was able to see the whole sweep of forest,

city and ocean. The blackness all around was dotted by countless tiny points of illumination, the fireflies in the trees, the lanterns in the streets and gardens below, the phosphorescence on the rolling surface of the ocean, the blazing stars overhead. The beauty of this moonless night penetrated the numbness of her grief. She decided she would follow the forest path to the top of this hill. There she would sit under a pine with Kogarasu and Little Branch in her lap. She would take out the small dagger concealed in her kimono, and when she felt ready, perhaps at sunrise, she would cut her throat and let her blood spill over these last things she had from Atsue.

She felt a momentary surge of annoyance when her horse neared the top of the hill and she saw it was already occupied by a little temple, scarcely larger than a hut, with a thatched roof. The doorway of the small building faced east, hiding its light from any traveller approaching from the city. She had never heard of a temple on this hill, but as Kamakura grew in importance the forests around it were filling up with yamabushi, mountain-dwelling monks. Perhaps she was meant to find this temple. By saying "Homage to Amida Buddha," with perfect faith one might achieve rebirth in Amida's Western Paradise where it was possible-as it was not in this corrupt world-for an ordinary person to attain Nirvana. Taniko had been invoking the Buddha for most of her life, but she had no way of knowing whether any of her prayers had enough purity to release her from the anguish of being reborn on this earth. Perhaps in one last visit to a temple she might find the wings of grace that would carry her to Amida's paradise.

The temple was very small and utterly bare, like Hideyori's prayer chamber. There was not even a statue of a Buddha or bosatsu on the altar, where a small oil lamp provided the only illumination. Taniko walked to the altar, bowed and clapped her hands to get the attention of whatever deity might dwell in this temple. Aloud she said, "Homage to Amida Buddha."

"A waste of breath," said a voice behind her.

The irreverent remark immediately made Taniko think robbers must have taken over the temple. She whirled, preparing to defend her honour or kill herself here and now, if necessary, with her dagger. In the shadows on one side of the room a black-robed monk sat in the lotus position, smiling at her. He had been so silent and immobile when she entered that she hadn't noticed him. She bowed in reverence to his vows, though his words were odd for a monk.

"Why wasted breath, sensei?"

The monk had a round, cheerful face and a chunky body. Though he was utterly motionless, there was such a strength in his sitting that it seemed not even elephants would be able to budge him. His eyes penetrated Taniko's mind, giving her the feeling that he knew her because he knew the whole universe, and that he contained the universe in himself.

"Amida Buddha does not exist," he said.

"What? Amida does not exist? What teachings do you profess, monk?"

"I teach nothing special. What sort of teaching are you looking for?" In spite of his odd words there was a kindness in his face that made her like and trust him. She needed to believe in someone. It was because she could no longer believe in anyone that she wanted to die.

"I'm not looking for teaching. I want peace, nothing else." In a rush, she poured out her story. By the time she had finished telling the stocky monk about Kiyosi, Atsue, Yukio and Jebu, the two of them

were seated facing each other before the empty altar. Though she'd had to pause several times to release the tears that seemed to fill up her whole body, the telling had eased her grief. Even so, as she admitted to the monk, whose name was Eisen, after she left his temple she meant to kill herself.

"Perhaps you were fated to come here," Eisen mused. "It can't be coincidence that I met and talked with the monk Jebu and Lord Muratomo no Yukio years ago, just before their journey to China. Lord Yukio did not seem to me a man who would murder a helpless youth, but then, you do not seem to me the sort of woman who would kill herself because her son is dead. The Buddha himself had a son, you know."

"I thought you said the Buddha does not exist."

"Assuredly, a man called Siddhartha lived many hundreds of years ago, and he had a son whom he called Obstacle, because, he said, the love of a child is a great hindrance to enlightenment."

"I would rather love my child and not be enlightened."

"To say that shows that your enlightenment is already great. If you are willing to love, you must expect to suffer. If you are willing to suffer, you are willing to live. Your life is not yours to dispose of, you know."

"If not mine, then whose? The Buddha's?"

"All lives are the Buddha's life, because you are the Buddha."

At his words, there was an explosion of light within Taniko like a Chinese rocket shooting into the sky and then bursting into a chrysanthemum of glowing colour. She felt an enormous surprise. It was all so simple. She felt peace and gladness, as if she had just found the answer to all the questions that had been tormenting her for

years. What she had learned or why she felt this way, she could not put into words. She looked at Eisen, amazed.

His broad smile was delighted, congratulatory. "Some monks spend their whole lives sitting in meditation before experiencing what you have just experienced."

"What happened to me?"

"Nothing special. The feeling will fade after a time. It is a very good feeling, but you will fall into hell if you try to hold on to it. You are like a person lost in a forest, who stumbles across a hidden temple.

Having found it once, you will be able to find your way back more easily, but do not try to stay there, because you have work to do. Work is the true Western Paradise in which we achieve salvation."

Taniko remembered that Hideyori, the opposite sort of man from this monk, had said she could escape her sorrow through work. How strange. She stood and looked out the door of the little temple. The quiescent ocean gleamed like a bronze mirror as the rim of the sun appeared at its edge.

"May I come to see you again? I know there is much more you can teach me."

"Life is the teacher," said Eisen. "Everything that happens to you is what we call a kung-an, a question whose answer points to the Buddha within you. Life has already set you some bitter kung-an. Perhaps you are being prepared for very great attainment."

"I'll go home now."

"Good," said Eisen with a chuckle. "That samurai who has been following you will be grateful. Sitting out there in the cold, damp forest

must have made him quite miserable." Surprised, Taniko looked where Eisen was looking and saw a flash of sunlight on metal in the forest sloping down from the temple doorway. One of Hideyori's men, no doubt. She wouldn't have been able to commit seppuku even if she'd tried. Angrily, she thought, Hideyori is not trying to protect me, he is trying to control me. Even this realization seemed trivial, though, beside the wondrous new feeling which made all discontent seem unimportant. As she gazed at the rising sun the light within her seemed to shine more brightly. I did not kill myself, she thought, but this night I died and was reborn.

Chapter Sixteen

It was the hour of the serpent. The Inland Sea sparkled in the morning light, darkening to indigo whenever a cloud crossed the sun. Jebu, in black-laced monk's armour, stood in the bow of the war junk Soaring Crane. With the weather so fine, the two fleets would certainly fight to a finish. Strange, how the well-being of the kami of sky and water could mean so much suffering for humankind.

Right now, the kami seemed to have sided with the Takashi. Through the play of light and shadow seven hundred ships of the Red Dragon advanced grandly from the west, borne on the tide rip flowing through the Shimonoseki Strait. The thunder of the huge war drums on their afterdecks rolled over the waves. The Takashi had divided their vessels into three fleets. In the van came three hundred big ships led by a row of Chinese junks bedecked with red banners, sails spread like dragon wings, eyes painted on their bows glaring ferociously. Next came two hundred ships of Takashi allies, and last came the high est Takashi nobles, including the clan chieftain Notaro and his nephew the Emperor, in two hundred more.

With wind and tide against them, the five hundred Muratomo ships were hard put to maintain any sort of battle order and were driven towards the rocky islands of Kanju and Manju. Here at the narrow western end of the Inland Sea the waves beat against forbidding cliffs on the Honshu side, while the Kyushu shore was crowded with serried ranks of samurai on horseback and on foot. Supposedly, they were allies of the Takashi, but their commanders had grown independent after five years of civil war. They would join whoever won the battle at sea.

Moko, looking fierce in full samurai armour, stood beside Jebu. Soaring Crane, like a hundred other ships that formed the heart of

the Muratomo fleet, had been built at Kamakura under Moko's direction. Moko's ships were junks, propelled by sail rather than oars, but smaller and faster than the Chinese-built Takashi junks. Moko had followed Chinese models but tried to improve on them. His ships had fought in only one battle, at Yashima, where the Muratomo had taken the Takashi by surprise and won an easy victory. Today's fight would be the real test. Moko had insisted on sailing aboard Soaring Crane with Jebu. If his junks were defeated, he explained, he would rather go down with them than face Lord Hideyori's wrath. Jebu made him welcome, but was disappointed when Moko sadly told him he bore no message from Taniko.

"She has never talked to me about the death of her son," he told Jebu. "I would certainly never raise the subject with her myself I suspect she does not want to force me to choose between you and her, shike. She is a lady of great grace."

The Takashi vanguard ships were crowded with archers standing shoulder-to-shoulder, and now at a signal they let fly volley after volley, hundreds of arrows at a time. The feathered shafts poured down like hail on the deck and hull of Soaring Crane. The Muratomo archers shot back, but they were at a disadvantage with the wind against them and the Takashi protected by the high hulls of their junks.

"We're going to have to board those big ships and fight the Takashi hand to hand," Jebu told Moko. Ordering his friend below, Jebu signalled the two steersmen at the rudder to set a collision course for one of the biggest of the Takashi ships. Muratomo samurai crowded Soaring Crane's rails, ready with ropes and grappling hooks. Jebu braced himself as the enemy junk bore down upon them. An arrow thudded into his shoulder plates, its impact almost knocking him to the deck. The Takashi junk swerved at the last moment, as if trying to avoid the Soaring Crane, but the two ships crashed together with a

boom and a scream of tortured wood. The enemy's black hull loomed above Jebu like the wall of a fortress. Grapples flew through the air.

"Muratomo!" Jebu cried, scrambling up a rope. He poised himself on the railing of the Takashi ship, then drew his sword and threw himself at the nearest enemy samurai.

"Shoot Yukio!" shouted a Takashi officer splendid in red-laced armour. The Takashi would be disappointed, Jebu thought. Yukio had hidden himself elsewhere in his fleet.

Every defector who presented himself in the Muratomo camp had brought the same warning. The Takashi were convinced that Yukio was the sole cause of their many defeats. They could still turn the tide and overcome the Muratomo if only they could manage to kill Yukio. Hideyori they dismissed as a mere intriguer. Each Takashi samurai went into battle praying that he might be the one permitted by the kami to save the clan by destroying their worst enemy. But Takashi numbers dwindled steadily. Every day warriors eager to end the war on the winning side abandoned the Takashi and pledged themselves to the White Dragon. Before Ichinotani the deserters had come into Yukio's camp by tens; afterwards, by hundreds. After Yukio led his newly built fleet in a surprise attack on the Takashi stronghold on Yashima island and nearly annihilated them there, great lords of ancient lineage brought thousands of warriors to aid the Muratomo. The steward of the shrine of the kami Gongen at Kumano, appointed years ago by Sogamori, held a fight between seven white cocks and seven red ones before the image of Gongen. When the white cocks killed or drove off all the red ones, he set sail with two hundred ships and two thousand men, carrying the Gongen shrine itself in the flagship. All this he placed in Yukio's service.

Yukio welcomed the many who joined him and accepted their oaths

of fealty to his brother. If today's battle went well, it would be the last. The Takashi had nowhere to go. Inexorably Yukio had driven them westwards across the Inland Sea until they were bottled up in Shimonoseki Strait. Beyond lay only the open ocean and the inhospitable, Mongol-dominated mainland. Ten-year-old Emperor Antoku, grandson of Sogamori, still in possession of the Three Treasures, ruled over an empire of wood, the decks of the Takashi ships. He was somewhere in the fleet that faced the Muratomo today, the fleet commanded by the feckless Notaro and which was now the last hope of the Takashi.

It was now almost a year since Yukio's victory at Ichinotani, since Atsue had gone into the Void. Eor much of that year Jebu had remained at the Zinja monastery of the Red Eox on Shikoku. His left lung pierced by Atsue's dagger thrust healed slowly. A month after Yukio's men brought him to the monastery, Taitaro arrived to nurse him. His white beard now reaching almost to his waist, Taitaro had little to say. He held the Jewel of Life and Death up for Jebu to see, when Jebu was too weak to hold it himself. Gradually, Jebu's strength came back. As soon as he could hold a brush he composed a letter to Taniko. Although he hazily recalled that Yukio had promised to write her explaining how Atsue had died, he wanted to tell her in his own words what had happened. The letter was entirely unsatisfactory, but it was the best he could do. He sent it knowing he had to send something. She never replied. With the help of his own vitality and Zinja medicine, Jebu's breathing was back to normal after six months, and he was able to resume training with the monastery masters. Nine months after being wounded he took ship from Shikoku to join Yukio's fleet, just in time to be part of the victory at Yashima.

Jebu stood over the body of the samurai officer who had called for Yukio's death and whispered the Prayer to a Eallen Enemy. The battle for the big Takashi junk had been surprisingly brief. The deck

was stained red, mostly with Takashi blood. The enemy had manned the formidable ship with their least experienced warriors, probably thinking the Muratomo would be less likely to attack the bigger vessels. Many of the dead were only boys. Each, thought Jebu, would be the object of some mother's lifelong grief, as Atsue was. The important thing now was to try to get word to Yukio that the big Chinese junks were the most negligible part of the Takashi fleet. Jebu ordered the red banners thrown over the side along with all the dead, and the white Muratomo flags run up. Yukio, he knew, was aboard the Green Castle, one of his smaller ships, where he hoped to avoid the notice of the Takashi. Appointing a crew for the captured junk, Jebu reboarded the Soaring Crane to sail in pursuit of Yukio.

The battle had moved eastwards, pushed in that direction by the wind and tide that favoured the Takashi. Smoke billowed over the water from burning vessels. At last Jebu saw Yukio's ship, grappled to a junk twice its size with the Red Dragon painted on its largest sail. That could be the Imperial ship or Notaro's flagship, thought Jebu, unless, like the junk he had just captured, it was a decoy. A Takashi sekibune, a large galley, closed in, and over a hundred warriors charged across spiked planks into the stern of Yukio's Green Castle. Two more enemy galleys were approaching. They must know they've got Yukio trapped, Jebu thought. He ordered the captain of Soaring Crane to put on more sail. They were close enough now to see Yukio, a small figure in white-laced armour at the centre of a dwindling knot of Muratomo samurai, his back to the rail. Closer and closer Jebu's ship drew. Now Yukio turned and saw Soaring Crane bearing down on him. He waved his sword and began cutting his way out of the Takashi ring surrounding him. With arrows and spears falling all about him, he ran and leaped across the gap between Green Castle and Soaring Crane. Eor a moment he tottered on the railing until Jebu seized his arms and pulled him to the deck with a thump.

"Magnificent, Lord Yukio," Moko exclaimed. "I don't think I've ever seen a man jump that far."

"Fear transformed me into a grasshopper." Yukio laughed.

"The battle is going badly for us," said Jebu as they pulled away from the cluster of enemy galleys that had almost finished Yukio.

Yukio glanced up at the sun, which now stood almost at the zenith. "Moko, you'd better confer the mark of divine favour on us while the wind is still blowing towards our fleet."

"At once, my lord." Moko went below. When he returned he held a large wooden box cradled in his arms. Two serving men followed him carrying a stack of wicker cages on a pallet. Moko opened the box and took out a huge Chinese rocket mounted on a three-legged stand, which he set up on the deck.

"I tested this device many times in Kamakura, and it worked most times. A hundred things could go wrong, though. If all happens as planned, I truly will believe that the kami are with us."

"What is it?" Jebu asked.

"Wait and watch," said Yukio.

Moko lit the rocket's fuse and stepped away. A ring of curious samurai had formed around him, and they gasped and drew back as, spitting yellow sparks, the rocket leaped into the air. All heads aboard Soaring Crane tilted back as the blazing trail rose as high as a gull can fly and still be visible, arcing towards the midpoint between the Muratomo and Takashi fleets. There came a thunderclap and a flash of light. The noise startled the fighting men, and a silence spread over the two fleets. Now a great square of white silk unfurled

in the sky. Light as a cloud, the white banner floated and rippled on the currents of the upper air, while the men below shouted in awe.

"Indeed, Hachiman has declared for us," whispered Moko. In Moko's hand Jebu now saw an almost invisible white string that guided the banner in its descent. Majestically the banner drifted downward towards Yukio's ship. Moko gave a signal to the men with the wicker cages. One by one they opened the cages, and a flock of white wood doves, the birds of Hachiman, whirled into the air with a drumming of wings. They circled around the white square of silk, then flew off to the north-east. Moments later the banner draped itself over the stern of the Soaring Crane. An utter silence had fallen over the strait.

"We could have used the exploding devices of the Chinese as weapons," said Yukio. "But I am already blamed for unleashing Mongols against my countrymen. At least I will not be accused of bringing another horror to the Sacred Islands." He turned away from Jebu, leaped to the gunwale of the Soaring Crane, and stood with his sword drawn where all could see him. "Nail the heavenly banner to our mast. Hachiman wills victory to the Muratomo."

As a crewman scrambled up the ropes to the tallest of the Soaring Crane's three masts and attached the banner there, Jebu noticed that the wind blew the flag towards the west. It was midday. The wind had shifted. Now it was behind the Muratomo ships.

Within the hour the Takashi fleet was falling back in disorder. Directed by a system of flag signals Yukio had learned from the Mongols, the Muratomo regrouped and sailed to the attack. Yukio's standing order to concentrate fire on the crewmen of the enemy junks and galleys soon had its effect. Stricken Takashi ships wallowed and spun in the powerful westwards-flowing current, the samurai on board helpless targets for Muratomo archers. Takashi ships crashed

into one another, driven against the northern shore of Shimonoseki Strait below the town called Dannoura.

"When the tide ran against us," said Yukio, "we had all of the Inland Sea at our backs and plenty of room to run before the Takashi. Now the current is driving them into the narrows, and there is no space for them to manoeuvre."

Some Takashi samurai beached their ships and swam to shore, but they died there under volleys of arrows fired by former allies gathered on the cliffs above them. As one ship after another in the Takashi fleet was captured, sunk or burst into flame, the balance of numbers shifted over to the Muratomo. Now an arm of the Muratomo fleet, some of the junks designed by Moko that were so much faster than those of the Takashi, outraced the enemy and blocked their escape route into the western sea.

The man who had nailed up the white banner was still aloft. Now he shouted, "I see His Imperial Majesty. He's on a red-painted junk with gold dragons painted on the after cabin. He's just come out on deck with his courtiers around him."

Yukio peered in the direction of the man's pointing arm. "The Emperor is the only strength they have left. We must capture him. I see his ship." He snapped orders to the captain of Soaring Crane, who relayed them to his crew. The junk plunged through the smoky chaos of ships locked in combat, relentless in its pursuit of the Emperor's vessel. Yukio gripped the rail, staring ahead, oblivious to the arrows and spears that showered down on him.

There was a cry of horror from the lookout. "A woman has jumped overboard with the Emperor in her arms. His Majesty is in the sea." Jebu stared at the ship that was their objective. His mouth dropped open. Erom this distance it looked as if someone had spilled a

basket of flowers into the water. Men and women in the brightly coloured robes of the Court were jumping to their deaths. Eor a moment the bright reds, greens and blues billowed out upon the waves, then the many-layered costumes soaked up water and the courtiers sank out of sight.

"His Imperial Majesty is drowning," Yukio roared at his crew. "Easter." But Soaring Crane was already making all possible speed. When they arrived at the ship, there was no one left aboard. Even the crewmen, all Takashi samurai, had drowned themselves. A shout arose from one side of the Muratomo ship. Jebu ran to the rail. Yukio's men had sighted a woman still afloat and were pulling her in with grappling rakes. Two samurai stripped off their armour and undergarments and dived naked into the water. Soon they had the woman kneeling on the deck before Yukio. She wept bitterly as torrents of salt water ran from her sodden robes.

"Who are you?" Yukio demanded.

"My name is Takashi no Harako. I was an attendant to His Imperial Majesty's grandmother, the widow of the late Chancellor Sogamori. My husband was General of Cavalry Takashi no Mizoguchi. I am carrying his child. Now my Emperor, my lady and my husband are all dead. I beg you to let me join them beneath the waves."

"What happened to His Imperial Majesty?" Yukio demanded.

"His grandmother told him that his cause was lost and his enemies would never permit an Emperor related to the Takashi to remain on the throne. It was time for him to leave this sorrowful world, she said. She gave him the sacred sword to hold and the sacred necklace to wear. He asked her if it would hurt to drown. She told him, "We will find another capital beneath the waves. Grandfather Sogamori will be there, along with all Your Majesty's ancestors." Then he said he

was ready to go, and, weeping, she enfolded him in her arms and jumped over the side of the ship. They sank out of sight at once." Lady Harako burst into sobs. "The poor little Emperor. He was only ten years old."

"My lord, come look at this," a samurai called. Yukio went to the rail, followed by Jebu. The heaving waters were dotted with bobbing heads, heads that disappeared as quickly as splashes of raindrops on a pool, to be replaced at once by hundreds of others, as more men jumped from their ships. The last of the Takashi warriors were following the example of the boy Emperor and his Court and giving themselves to the waves.

"Let me drown, too," Lady Harako begged.

"You said the sword and the necklace went to the bottom with His Imperial Majesty," said Yukio. "What of the sacred mirror?" "Eor all I know, it is still aboard the ship."

Sending Lady Harako below deck despite her pleas that she be allowed to die, Yukio summoned Soaring Crane's priest and ordered him to board the late Emperor's ship, search for the sacred mirror and bring it back to Soaring Crane. Then he turned back to the rail to watch the end of the Takashi. Many of the drowning warriors had jumped into the water clutching their red banners. As their armour pulled them under, only the red squares of silk remained on the surface. It was all over in moments. The empty ships bobbed on the waves. The Takashi banners were strewn over the strait like red maple leaves on a woodland stream in autumn. A cold evening mist spread from the shore.

The cries of the victorious Muratomo echoed like the screams of gulls over the dark water.

A rowboat pulled up beside Soaring Crane, and a man with bound arms was pushed over the railing to stand sullenly before Yukio. He was unarmoured, and his under robe, the red brocade of a general, dripped on the planking. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes sunken and lifeless. After some prodding by the samurai who had brought him to Yukio, he gave his name in a low voice.

"I am Takashi no Notaro, commander-in-chief of His Imperial Majesty's forces and son of the late Imperial chancellor Takashi no Sogamori."

"Lord Notaro," said Yukio wonderingly. "How is it that all your clansmen have destroyed themselves and the chieftain alone is left behind?"

"We saw it all, Lord Yukio," one of the samurai with Notaro said. "All the men on his ship were jumping into the water while he hesitated. At last one of his own officers pushed him over the side. Whereupon the coward stripped off his armour and tried to swim to shore. We fished him out."

"If I ever again hear any man refer to a son of the great Sogamori in rude terms, I will personally take his head," said Yukio evenly. "Lord Notaro is to be treated with all courtesy and given every comfort that we can supply. Escort him to the master cabin and move my things out of there. And untie him."

"What are you going to do with me?" Notaro asked.

"I must send you to my brother, Lord Hideyori, for judgment."

"My father should have killed both you and your brother when you were children," said Notaro. "His generosity has destroyed his family."

"Excuse me, but it was not your father's generosity that moved him to spare my brother and me, Lord Notaro," said Yukio with a smile. "It was my mother's beauty."

A rowboat carried the priest back from the Emperor's abandoned vessel. A samurai walking before the white-robed priest struck a small gong to call attention to the holy object being carried on board. All on Soaring Crane prostrated themselves. In trembling hands the priest held a silk bag. Within, Jebu knew, was another, more worn, silk bag, and within that another, and so on to a number no one knew. Each time the outer covering of the sacred mirror began to deteriorate, it would be placed in a new one without removing any of the previous silk bags. The reflection of the sun goddess herself, it was said, could be seen in the sacred mirror, death for any mortal to look upon. The priest carried the one surviving Treasure of the Realm below to the ship's shrine.

Placing Muratomo crews aboard the abandoned Takashi ships, Yukio ordered the victorious fleet to sail at once for Hyogo. Homing pigeons were released to carry word of the victory of Shimonoseki Strait to the capital and to Kamakura. Yukio leaned on the rail and looked out at the drifting red banners receding sternwards. Joining him, Jebu saw tears on his face.

"Why are you crying, Yukio-san?" said Jebu softly. "Is it from joy at our victory?"

"I am thinking about the Takashi, and how nothing lasts," said Yukio slowly. "How magnificent they were when I was a boy. How swiftly their glory has vanished. How long will the kami permit us to enjoy our own victory?"

The following morning, as they sailed eastwards past jewel-like islands, a samurai reported to Yukio that Lady Harako had

disappeared during the night.

"It is better for her," said Moko. "She said she was with child. Before I left Kamakura, Lord Hideyori had issued orders that all whose descent could be traced from Sogamori's grandfather are to be sent beyond. Her baby would have been torn from her as soon as it was born. Now they will sit together on the same lotus blossom in the next world."

With a chill, Jebu remembered that Atsue had said his wife at Heian Kyo, Princess Kazuko, had a child by him. Taniko's grandson or granddaughter.

"How admirable was the Lady Harako's determination to kill herself," said Yukio. "How pathetic is Takashi no Notaro's clinging to a useless life. I hope I may have the wisdom to see it, when I no longer belong in this world, and have the grace to step cheerfully into the Void."

Chapter Seventeen

The captain of the guard at the bridge over the Rokuhara's broad moat made a face of revulsion. "It is not a pleasant thing to see children buried alive, and their mothers stabbed or strangled."

"Who orders these executions?" Jebu asked the captain, his heart filled with foreboding.

"A tribunal presided over by Lord Shima Bokuden of Kamakura and Prince Sasaki no Horigawa," the captain answered. "They act as deputies of my lord Hideyori."

Horigawa. At the sound of the name the hairs on the back of Jebu's neck prickled, and his hands itched to crush the scrawny windpipe.

"Just as I told you, shike," said Moko. Mounted on horses, Jebu and Moko stood side by side at the entrance to the Rokuhara. Hideyori had commanded that the Takashi stronghold be rebuilt. It was now

Bakufu headquarters in Heian Kyo. The three towers of the Rokuhara stood tall and forbidding again, as they had in the days of the Takashi, except that now the banners that bedecked the upcurving roofs were white. Meanwhile, the Imperial Palace to the north was still a blackened ruin, and no Son of Heaven occupied the throne. After the Muratomo victory in Shimonoseki Strait, old Go-Shirakawa, the Retired Emperor, could no longer delay bestowing on Hideyori the title he craved, Shogun, Supreme Commander. The new overlord of the Sunrise Land was now deciding at his leisure which of several pliable candidates would sit on the Imperial throne.

"Is the Imperial Princess Kazuko here at the Rokuhara?" Jebu asked. He had not forgotten Atsue's concern for his young wife.

"All members of the Imperial family are housed here under the protection of the Muratomo," said the samurai captain. His right cheek was riven by a scar that ran from temple to jaw. He spoke with the harsh accent of the eastern provinces, but there was respect in his voice when he addressed Jebu, whom he recognized at once as the legendary shike who accompanied Lord Yukio in exile and in triumph.

"Is she one of those to be judged by the tribunal?"

"Yes," said the scarred samurai. "It is said that her son is a direct descendant of that devil Sogamori. The child surely will not be allowed to live, but Prince Horigawa and Lord Bokuden are dealing with the easier cases first. Those involving the Imperial family require more delicate handling. What is your interest in the princess, shike?"

Delicate handling indeed, Jebu thought, considering that the child whose execution was being prepared was Bokuden's own great-grandson. Not that Bokuden would care about putting a member of his own family to death. If Taniko knew what was happening, though, she might use her influence with Hideyori to win a reprieve. But it would take thirty or forty days for a message to reach Kamakura and the reply to be received. By that time the boy would probably be in a premature grave. It was necessary to act immediately.

"I was there when the Takashi noble to whom Princess Kazuko was married fell in battle at Ichinotani," Jebu said. "I promised him that I would tell the princess how he died. Where are the Imperial ladies quartered?"

The samurai indicated one of the Rokuhara's newly rebuilt stone towers, but added, "You should apply to the secretary of the tribunal for permission to see her."

"There is no need. It is a small matter, and I'll only spend a moment with her."

"If it were anybody but you, Shike Jebu, I would refuse you admittance," said the captain. "But I cannot say no to a hero of the War of the Dragons."

"Thank you for your courtesy, captain," said Jebu.

The scarred samurai bowed. "Nagamori Ikyu, at your service, shike."

"Moko-san, I'll go on alone," said Jebu. "Do you remember the shrine of Jimmu Tenno on Mount Higashi?"

Moko's crossed eyes were wide with anxiety. "I can never forget it, shike."

"Be there with your escort, prepared to travel back to Kamakura, at the hour of the ape." Moko had used his new wealth to hire and equip an entourage of samurai who saw to it that he was treated with proper respect despite his lack of skill at arms.

Jebu dismounted and walked his horse across the bridge over the Rokuhara's moat, wide as a river. "The kami grant that I see you again, shike," Moko called. Jebu led his mount through the maze of narrow, high-walled passages designed to foil attackers. Tethering the horse before the thick stone wall at the base of the tower where the Imperial women were quartered, he strode past guards who, like Captain Ikyu, recognized him with awe. No one stopped him until he reached the second floor of the tower. There an old dragon of a lady-in-waiting, seated at a teak table piled high with scrolls, demanded to know his business. He asked for Princess Kazuko.

"What right has a mere warrior monk to request an audience with an Imperial princess?"

Jebu was amused at her ferocity. "As a disgraced member of the Imperial family, she is not so far above me."

"She is not disgraced. She has not been judged." Jebu sensed sympathy for the princess in the elderly woman's tone.

"You need not protect her from me. I'm here to help her if I can." "How can I be sure of that?"

"If I were from Lord Bokuden and Prince Horigawa, would I need permission to see the princess?"

A short time later Jebu was in a small chamber facing a shadowy figure behind a screen painted with wild roses. The lady-in-waiting sat behind him. He could hear her agitated breathing.

"I don't understand why you want to help us. You killed Atsue." The voice was soft, melodious, the accent cultivated.

"Your husband died in battle, Imperial Highness. It was not I who killed him. Of all the Takashi, Atsue was the one I would never knowingly kill."

"Why?" asked the gentle voice.

"Many years ago I vowed my life to the service of Atsue's mother, the Lady Shima Taniko."

"Were you her lover?"

"Your Imperial Highness is quick to sense feelings."

"But Atsue's father was Takashi no Kiyosi."

"Karma has forced Lady Taniko and me to spend most of our lives apart, but that has not diminished my love for her."

"A samurai lady and a warrior monk. How very sad and how beautiful."

Jebu brought the conversation back to the business at hand. "The fact that you are of the Imperial house will not save your son from death, princess. Horigawa and Bokuden have only to write the necessary decrees to make it legal and proper to execute the boy." There was a whimper from behind the screen. The princess made a hushing sound.

"I'm sorry," said Jebu. "I would never have spoken so frankly if I had known the child was there."

"I have heard that the children of the Zinja are introduced to the fear of death at an early age," said Princess Kazuko. "If Sametono is to live at all, he must learn to live with death. I am prepared to trust you, Zinja. If we stay here Sametono will certainly die. What do you want us to do?"

"The trick I have in mind is an old and obvious one, but it is to our advantage that they will not expect you to try to escape. After all, you have never been outside Heian Kyo. You would not even know how to speak to a common person to ask for help. You are as much a prisoner of your way of life as of the Muratomo. As for the Muratomo, their discipline is slack. They've been fighting for five years, and they want to rest."

"But where can you take us?"

"To Kamakura, to the one person in the Sacred Islands who can save the boy's life, the Lady Shima Taniko. She is the child's

grandmother and she is said to be close to Hideyori." The words tasted bitter in his mouth.

There was a cry of horror from the old lady. "She is the daughter of Lord Bokuden and the wife of Prince Horigawa. Why should she of all people help the princess?"

Jebu turned to her. "She, better than anyone, knows that pair for the despicable scoundrels that they are. When she realizes that they intend to kill her grandson, she will do everything in her power to thwart them."

"Kamakura," the princess wailed. "That is the end of the world. Muratomo no Hideyori is there. How can we be safe in Kamakura?"

"If the Lady Taniko can persuade Lord Hideyori to place you and your son under his protection, Kamakura will be the safest place for you in all the Sacred Islands. Can you ride a horse?"

"Certainly not."

"A pity." He turned again to the old lady. "Can you find two trustworthy servants who will take her and the boy out of here in a sedan chair? She can wear the robes of a lady-in-waiting, and the boy can hide under her skirts."

"Women of low rank enter and leave the Rokuhara regularly," said the lady-in-waiting. "As you say, the guards are lax. I can supply the costume she needs and find two men who will not know whom they are carrying."

"Good. Where the Sanjo Avenue leads to the foot of Mount Higashi there is a bridge across a small stream. I will be waiting there."

Jebu tethered his horse at the far end of the bridge, recrossed it and

seated himself on a huge boulder from which he could look out over Heian Kyo. There were so many new buildings going up that the capital reminded him of Kublai Khan's Khan Baligh. The smell of fresh-cut wood and the ringing of hammers filled the air. Oxen strained at wagonloads of timber. It was a carpenter's paradise. If Moko were not already rich, and if the carpenters' guild of Heian Kyo were not so rigid about whom they allowed to work in the city, he could have made a fortune here.

It was dusk when a plain sedan chair carried by two servants emerged from the nearby Rokuhara and approached the bridge. Shouldering his naginata, Jebu stepped forward and identified himself to the bearers. He heard the princess's frightened voice from within the chair's curtains. But at that moment the shout of warriors' voices and the clatter of hooves arose from within the Rokuhara's walls.

"Over the bridge," Jebu snapped to the bearers. "Run!"

Casting terrified looks at him, the men picked up the chair and ran for the bridge.

"Stop! Halt with that chair!" The voice that shouted at them was familiar. A band of Muratomo samurai raced across the moat and up the avenue towards them. Behind them, riding on the shoulders of a brawny, half-naked servant, was Prince Sasaki no Horigawa.

"Run!" Jebu called. But the bearers, looking back, recognized the prince and obeyed his order to stop. Jebu stood blocking the bridge. A circle of bystanders formed, a healthy distance from Jebu and the samurai. Jebu stared at Horigawa. The old prince's face was more withered and shrunken than Jebu remembered it, but his back was straight and the hands resting on his servant's head did not tremble.

Jebu had not seen Horigawa since that day, over twenty years ago, when he fled from the guardhouse at Daidoji. All those years he had dreamed of killing the prince, knowing all the while that to harbour such a desire went against all his Zinja training. Even the years of contemplating the Jewel day after day did not help where Horigawa was concerned. He had prayed that the prince might die during the War of the Dragons, as had so many thousands of others, so that he would be relieved of this foolish desire for revenge. Karma, it seemed. would not have it so.

Now he wanted nothing more than to plunge into the midst of Horigawa's samurai, whirling his naginata to knock the guards aside. and lop the prince's head off. He realized that, as had happened so many years before at Daidoji, he could not kill Horigawa and accomplish his purpose. The instant he left his post at the bridge, the samurai would seize Kazuko and her son, Sametono.

"When I heard that you had visited the Rokuhara I knew some evil was in the air," said Horigawa. "We were not able to move quickly enough to stop this renegade daughter of the Imperial house and her tainted offspring from escaping. Her corrupt servant has paid with her death for her part in this escapade, though. Now that the princess has admitted her guilt by fleeing, she shall stand trial at once. Aside, monk, or you die on the spot."

"If the princess is a renegade and the child is tainted, what of a prince who served the Takashi cause for a quarter of a century, to switch sides only yesterday, as it were, to the Muratomo?" Jebu could see approval in the eyes of the samurai who faced him. They would obey the prince's orders as a matter of duty, but they would do it with reluctance.

"I do not need to justify myself to a bandit masquerading in monk's robes," Horigawa said with a sneer. "Step aside."

Eor answer Jebu took a firm grip on his naginata and set his feet wide apart in the stance called the Bear at Bay.

"Kill him," Horigawa said.

"But, Your Highness, this monk has fought beside Lord Yukio in all the great battles of this war," said the scarred samurai officer, Captain Ikyu, who had let Jebu enter the Rokuhara a few hours earlier.

"That war is over," Horigawa rasped. "It will soon be shown that our honoured Shogun's half-brother and all who are close to him are traitors to his family and the Sunrise Land. Kill him, I say."

A samurai drew his tall bow and let an arrow fly at Jebu. With a quick, easy swing of his naginata Jebu cut the arrow in half, and it fell, harmless, at his feet. Arrow cutting with the naginata was a daily exercise for every Zinja from the age of eight. At first the arrows used were tipped with leather balls that left a painful bruise but did not pierce the body. Later the arrows had pointed metal tips and the young monks were expected to pick off as many as twelve of them fired simultaneously at close range. Now Jebu went to work with utter concentration and instantaneous reflexes. His naginata became a blur as he chopped arrows out of the air as fast as they could be fired at him. Even as they tried to kill him, the samurai cried out with admiration at his virtuosity. Horigawa's wrinkled face was red with rage.

"Shoot at the chair," he called suddenly. "It is the princess we must stop, not this worthless monk."

"No," Jebu cried as a flight of arrows whistled over his head. They rained upon the green-curtained chair and its bearers. The two servants died without a sound. There was a choking scream from

within the chair. Jebu felt rage surge like lava through his body.

"Now I will kill you as I have always wanted to," Jebu growled, striding forward into a storm of arrows, his naginata at the ready. Arrows struck his armour and wounded him, but failed to penetrate deeply, and he ignored them. Horigawa muttered a command to the brawny man on whose back he rode, and the servant turned and ran full speed down the avenue towards the Rokuhara's eastern gate. Jebu started to pursue them, but the samurai barred his way with a fence of swords.

"We don't want to kill you, Master Jebu," panted Ikyu. "We've done our duty, that's all."

"That woman and her child harmed no one," Jebu grated.

"Most of the tens of thousands who fell in the late war were innocent of wrongdoing, too," the scarred officer answered. "Let this end here, shike. We do not wish to shed your blood and you do not wish to shed ours."

"Some day I will kill Horigawa," said Jebu. He was ashamed of the words as soon as they left his lips, but they expressed his true feelings.

"Such a desire is not worthy of you, shike," said the samurai leader. "Horigawa's death at your hands would honour him, but it would do you nothing but dishonour to kill that feeble old stick of a man."

"That feeble man has been the cause of more spilt blood in the last thirty years than the fiercest warrior who ever lived in these islands," Jebu said. "Still, I accept your correction." He recalled how, years ago, he had thought of the samurai as foolish and destructive, like cruel boys. Either they had learned much in the interim, or he had,

and was now seeing them differently. He bowed to the samurai leader to show his respect.

"I will guard the bodies of the princess and her son until you can send servants to take them back to the Rokuhara," Jebu said.

"Very good, shike," said Captain Ikyu. "We will also post guards at the approach to the bridge, but you may say your farewell to her in private." The samurai marched away, and Jebu walked to the middle of the bridge, murmuring a prayer for the dead. The bearers lay sprawled in awkward positions, arrows protruding from their backs. Jebu gently drew the chair's curtain aside. A woman dressed in a plum-coloured robe sat slumped forward, her long black hair hanging down like a veil. He could see at once, from her absolute stillness, that she was dead. Two arrows had gone into her back, and her skirts were soaked with blood. He took hold of her shoulders with both hands and raised the lifeless weight. Her face, which as an Imperial princess she had hidden from the world, was round and pretty, with small features. Her mouth hung open, revealing teeth dyed in the Court fashion, like rows of tiny black pearls. She had been brave. She might have been allowed to live if she had surrendered her son to the executioner. She chose instead to lose her life trying to get the child out of the Rokuhara. Under the Princess's inert body Jebu saw a small black head and two hands clinging to her skirt. The hands moved slightly. He drew in a breath.

"I know you're alive," he whispered. "Are you hurt?"

"No," the boy said softly.

"We must move quickly. I'm going to pull you out of the chair and put you on my horse. Get ready." Jebu reached into the sedan chair with both hands, dragged the boy out from under his mother's body, and straightened up. Clutching Sametono to his chest, Jebu ran across

the bridge to his tethered horse. The guards at the other end of the bridge were only beginning to react, shouting at Jebu to halt as he leaped into the saddle and set the boy in front of him. As they galloped off, arrows flew past them. Two struck Jebu in the back, but they were not strong enough to pierce his armour, though they lodged in its plates. Sametono was silent. Jebu could feel that the boy's body was rigid with fear. The horse plunged through the twilight along a pine-shaded path that wound up the side of Mount Higashi. The guards at the bridge had no horses, and it would be a long time before they could bring help from the Rokuhara. By that time Sametono would be safely with Moko and his men. Twenty years ago, Jebu thought, Horigawa killed our daughter. Now I have saved this boy from him. He exulted in the thought. It was far more satisfying to save a life from Horigawa than to have killed Horigawa himself.

"Where are you taking me?" Sametono asked. His small body had relaxed somewhat against Jebu's chest.

"To your grandmother." Jebu knew that Hideyori might yet insist on the boy's death. And even if the gift of Sametono changed Taniko's feelings toward Jebu, that wouldn't matter if she needed her closeness to Hideyori to save the boy's life. The horse breathed hard as it climbed the steep path. A three-quarter moon, rising over the mountains east of Heian Kyo, provided Jebu and his mount just enough light to see by. It had been a full moon, Jebu recalled, the night he and Taniko had pledged to love each other for ever on this same mountain. He heard a jingling of harness and a stamping of horses' hooves ahead. Moko.

Moko and Sametono both looked woeful when Jebu said he would not make the journey to Kamakura. "I must go to Lord Yukio at once," Jebu explained. "Something Horigawa said just now warned me that he is up to his old trick of setting samurai against samurai. Yukio must be warned, or he may not have long to live. Meanwhile,

Horigawa and Bokuden will have the Tokaido searched for me, thinking I have the boy. By the time they realize I'm still in Heian Kyo I'll be under Yukio's protection. You and your men have a better chance of getting through, hiding Sametono among yourselves. Remember that you are to take him directly to the Lady Taniko and no one else."

"Thank you for rescuing me, big monk," said Sametono, looking at Jebu with that calm, intelligent gaze he remembered so well in Taniko.

"You kept still until I could reach you while your mother lay dead on top of you," said Jebu. "You are a young man of great mental power, if you know what that means."

"I hope I grow up to be as tall as you."

Jebu thought, I doubt whether any of us will live to see you grow up, little boy.

Chapter Eighteen

Hideyori pressed his hand against her breast. Taniko allowed it to remain there. A flicker of surprise crossed his stony features. "Are you starting to find me more attractive?"

"I have always found you attractive, my lord. I only wonder what you see in such a pathetic old woman." Gently, Taniko drew away from him and began to pour ch'ai from a three-hundred-year-old T'ang bowl. "Is my lord aware that I am a grandmother?"

"You have never mentioned it before." That was not a direct answer. She was sure he knew nearly everything about her. Hideyori seated himself cross-legged, arranging the dark robe over his knees, and sipped the foaming green ch'ai from a delicate, glazed cup that matched the bowl. He kept his bedchamber austere as ever, but the objects he used now were precious and beautiful enough for an Emperor.

"My grandson arrived in Kamakura only yesterday," said Taniko, folding her hands in her lap and looking sedately down at them. This matter had to be handled with exquisite care. Perhaps it did not matter how it was handled, perhaps Sametono was doomed in any case. Taniko thought she had a proposal that would persuade Hideyori to spare Sametono, though, by appealing to the Shogun's desire to stabilize the realm. She had talked it over with Eisen the night before, after Sametono arrived. The monk agreed that her idea might work.

"But it means you must sacrifice the rest of your life," the Zen master pointed out.

"There is no one to make the sacrifice and no future to be

sacrificed," Taniko rejoined.

"Your words stink of Zen," Eisen shot back. Taniko knew that this was a grudging compliment to her deepening understanding. Eisen hardly ever encouraged her, believing, as he put it, that praise is poison. She did not need him to tell her that she was making progress. She knew now that you could not acquire true understanding from anyone else, and no one could give you enlightenment. All you could do was increase your awareness that you already were a Buddha, an Awakened One. Only you could do that for yourself. As she moved through each day in a state of awareness maintained, enhanced and deepened by sitting in zazen meditation, she found that her decisions were right for each situation, and their consequences more beneficial to all. At the same time, she cared less about results. She did what she felt an enlightened person would do and refused to concern herself about whether things turned out as she wished.

Now, rage threatened to break through her philosophical calm. The wound left by Horigawa's murder of her baby at Daidoji had never healed. Nothing could rouse her to a more consuming anger than the thought of a child being killed. That children were being drowned and buried alive at Heian Kyo was hateful enough. That Horigawa was supervising the executions-with her own father helping him-tore that old wound open to bleed afresh. That her grandson, Atsue's son, had nearly been one of the victims left her speechless with fury when Moko told her the tale and presented the wide-eyed, travel-weary child to her.

At first her rage was directed against Hideyori himself. He, after all, had given the command for the slaughter. After a time of meditation she realized that it was useless to hate Hideyori. He had lived with fear and death since his boyhood, and nothing could change him. Now that he had achieved supreme power he felt more vulnerable

and more fearful than ever. How different he was from Kublai Khan, who easily assumed that the world was his by right of birth.

"I have heard news that distresses me sorely," she told Hideyori. "Perhaps it would not move you, since you are a man and a warrior. I know what it is to have the child I bore torn from my arms and murdered. They are killing babies in Heian Kyo."

Eor a moment Hideyori's face was blank. Then it rearranged itself into a mask of shock and sympathy. "Who is killing babies, Tanikosan? By what authority?"

"My father and Prince Horigawa. By your orders, they say." Taniko did not for a moment believe his air of surprise. These days, nothing went on in the Sunrise Land without his knowledge and permission.

"I have ordered the death penalty for all Takashi who threaten our peace," said Hideyori. "That is why I signed the warrant of execution for Notaro. I have never intended that children be killed."

"I am happy to hear that," said Taniko quickly. "My grandson is a Takashi, but he is only four years old, and I am sure he has no desire to raise a rebellion against you."

Hideyori looked away from her and was silent for a long time. This is the moment, she thought, that will decide whether Sametono lives or dies. Hideyori knows what I'm going to ask him. He will have to admit that he wants the child killed, or he will have to let the boy live with me. At last Hideyori turned to her, and she saw indecision in the dark eyes. Her hold over him was still strong.

"The blood of Sogamori and Kiyosi flows in his veins." No more pretence that Hideyori was unaware of the boy's existence.

"The blood of Amaterasu Omi Kami flows in his veins as well," said

Taniko. "Surely he is to be treasured for that."

Hideyori shook his head. "That only makes him more dangerous." "Besides all those illustrious ancestors, this little boy is the grandson of Shima Taniko," Taniko said softly, "if that means anything to you." "If it did not, he would be dead already."

"If my lord could find a place in his heart for Sametono, my gratitude would know no bounds."

Hideyori was silent. Each time she spoke, he weighed and digested her words, carefully calculating his reply. At last he gave a short, barking laugh.

"How ironic. Was this not precisely Sogamori's undoing? Was it not his lust for my father's mistress, the Lady Akimi, that persuaded him to spare Yukio's life-and incidentally mine? Shall I, for your sake, nurture a hatchling of the Red Dragon so that it may grow to devour my clan in turn?"

Now was the time to try him with her proposal. "You have the power to change the hatchling's colour from red to white, my lord. Adopt him as your own son." Hideyori looked amazed and angry. He opened his mouth to speak, but she hurried on. "Forgive me for mentioning it, but it has been your karma not to have children of your own. You have no son to inherit the Shogunate, this great title you have created for yourself. If you choose a successor from among your allies, you will make one family too powerful and all the others envious and rebellious. This boy's close kin are all dead, except for me. Make Sametono your son, and his cause becomes your cause. You never need fear that he will lead a rebellion against you. True, he is descended from Sogamori and Kiyosi, but what better way to heal the wounds of these years of civil war than by uniting the Red Dragon and the White in one family? If you do not have sons of your own

blood, which is the worthiest in the land, you can at least choose your heir from the next best lineage-that of the greatest of the Takashi."

Hideyori's frown deepened. "Why should I concern myself with who succeeds as Shogun after I am gone?"

Taniko shrugged. "True, you need not. If you don't, the samurai will undoubtedly turn to your younger brother, Yukio, who has a son of his own. Perhaps that would please you just as well."

Hideyori's eyes glittered with rage, the reaction she had expected. "Neither my half-brother nor any offspring of his shall ever succeed me." He paused for a moment. "Perhaps you are right. I must select my successor, and this boy may have been sent by the kami for that purpose. If I'm to adopt a son, he'll need a mother, won't he? I'll need a wife. I have desired you ever since I met you." Hideyori clenched his hands in his lap. She knew that he burnt to reach for her but was restraining himself. "Will you sleep with me and even marry me, when the obstacle of Prince Horigawa is eliminated? What about the vow you told me of?"

"Eisen Roshi assures me that I may set aside my vow for a good enough reason. He says that the past cannot bind the present, because the present is all there is." Actually, since there had never been any vow, she had never discussed it with Eisen, but the remark about past and present was one he had made to her once.

Hideyori shook his head. "I do not like these teachings of the monk Eisen. I have talked with him, and he seems strange and irreligious to me. I suspect that the views of this Zen sect are not religion but a mockery of religion."

"I have benefited profoundly from my study of Zen, my lord."

"Your grandson is alive only because he is your grandson. Eisen has been allowed to settle here and gather disciples around him only because he is your teacher. Otherwise, I would have had him driven out long ago. I mean to bring order and discipline to that vast rabble of unruly monks that infest the Sacred Islands-as soon as I have dealt with other dangerous elements."

Taniko knew that "dangerous elements" meant Yukio. Ever since she had learned that Yukio had killed Atsue, she had given up pleading his cause to Hideyori. She could not believe that Yukio was as Hideyori believed him to be, a dangerous rival plotting to use his victories as stepping stones to supreme power, but it was also hard to imagine Yukio striking down a helpless, innocent boy. If he had done the one, perhaps he was capable of the other.

"Regardless of what Eisen says, I believe that your vow is binding, and I will not lie with you." Hideyori smiled faintly. "As you doubtless know, I do not lack for companions to share my bedchamber, even though, as you said, it is my karma to be childless. I want you because you are more beautiful and wiser than any woman I have ever known. When we are properly married, I will lie with you, not just for the pleasure of it, but to possess you utterly." His pupils seemed to expand until they were huge black pools into which she felt herself falling. She ignored the fear that rippled through her. She was saving Sametono's life, she reminded herself.

"May Sametono live, and may he remain with me?"

"Eor the present. Eor the future, I will consider your suggestion, and I will observe the boy closely. Should his conduct even once give me cause to doubt him, he will be sent immediately into oblivion." Taniko bowed her head in acceptance, but within she was aglow. She had won. Recognizing that the price of her victory was eventual marriage to Hideyori, she determined to press him for more concessions.

"What of the other children being killed in Heian Kyo in your name? Will you also put a stop to that?"

Hideyori smiled. "The true samurai has compassion for the defenceless. I will order the killing of children stopped for your sake, and also because I want to be remembered in the chronicles as a man of compassion."

Taniko whisked the green liquid in the ch'ai bowl to a froth and poured Hideyori another cupful. "A handsome gesture, my lord, but it may be lost to the chronicles if all the condemned children are dead by the time your order reaches Heian Kyo. It is my father and Prince Horigawa who spattered blood on your reputation. If you were to punish them, it would show the world that they acted against your wishes."

Hideyori stared at her, sincerely shocked. "You advise me to punish your own father? Where is your filial piety?"

"The Sage has said that a wife shall forsake her own mother and father and give all her loyalty to her husband and his family. Anticipating our marriage, I make your interests paramount, my lord."

"How would it be in my interest to turn your father against me? Your clan, the Shima, have always been my chief supporters."

"That is precisely why you must not allow my father to become too powerful. He believes that he made you Shogun. He thinks himself your master, not you his. Who knows what he and Horigawa and GoShirikawa might be plotting down there in the capital?" The sure way to influence Hideyori was to play upon his suspicions. "My uncle Ryuichi would serve you better as chieftain of the Shima than my father."

"Are you suggesting that I remove your father from the chieftainship of your clan? I sometimes think your designs are even vaster and bolder than mine. The time may come for such a drastic step. Eor now, I will let your father and the prince feel my displeasure, but I will not be as severe as you suggest. I am under obligation to them. Time after time when Sogamori's sword would have fallen on me, they shielded me."

Taniko gave a cry of scorn. "My lord; no one knows those two better than I do. Horigawa pressed Sogamori day and night to have you killed. I was at Horigawa's winding water banquet celebrating the Takashi victory over your father, Captain Domei. 'Nits make lice,' Horigawa said that evening, meaning you and Yukio. He changed his mind only when he realized that you could be of use to him. As for my father, I am sure he never told you this, but it was I who first put it into his mind to protect you. I wrote him a letter shortly after you went to him, suggesting that you would be more useful to him alive than dead."

"I never knew that. I thought I had frightened and offended you that day I came to Daidoji seeking Horigawa. Why did you do that? Were you drawn to me even then?"

"To be honest, I was not, my lord." It was Jebu and only Jebu who filled my heart in those days, she thought. "I was simply meddling in politics. It's always been a vice of mine."

"Vice? Hardly. Though you are a woman, you are more sagacious in matters of state than most men are. Perhaps you were an Emperor or a prime minister in a previous life."

"My incurable urge to involve myself in politics led me to arrange a rendezvous between Sogamori and Lady Akimi, Yukio's mother," Taniko said. "As you know, it was she who persuaded him to hold

his hand from Yukio and from you as well. Horigawa was so enraged that your lives were spared that he sequestered me in the country. That is the man to whom you consider yourself obligated."

Hideyori stared at her in surprise. "I never knew you were so instrumental in that affair. It makes me all the more determined that you shall be the principal wife of the Shogun."

Wife of the Shogun. Taniko's head spun with excitement. Not even an Empress would enjoy as much power.

"What of Horigawa?", she asked softly.

"To repay Horigawa for his complicity in the deaths of my grandfather, my father and so many other kinsmen of mine, he shall make a long overdue journey to the underworld. To reward him for his aid to me, which made possible the final victory of the Muratomo, I will see that his bereaved widow, Lady Taniko, is not only cared for fittingly, but exalted." Hideyori grinned at her. "Does that suit you, Taniko-san?"

Taniko bowed her head. She knew that Eisen would say that desire for revenge was an attachment she must break, but she could not help feeling a thrill at the thought that for her sake, the most powerful man in the realm was prepared to bring about Horigawa's death.

"It suits me," she whispered.

"But, still-" Hideyori shook his head, "the great-grandson of Sogamori to succeed me as Shogun? To inherit what I have created? Shall the reward of the thirty-year struggle of the Muratomo to overthrow the Takashi be reaped by a Takashi? It is as if Sogamori had triumphed after all, in the end."

"Who is the true father of a boy?" Taniko asked, having prepared

beforehand to meet this objection. "Is it not he who rears and shapes the child? Sametono never knew a father. He is only four years old. You will be his father, and the great Muratomo chieftains will be his ancestors. It is you, not Sogamori, who will win in the end, because you will have changed the last child of his line into a Muratomo."

Hideyori gazed at her admiringly. "Your mind slices like a sword into the heart of a problem. It is for this that I would make you my wife." Then his expression hardened. "But there is one more concession you must make to me. I know that Yukio was your companion in China and that you hold him in high esteem. You have always urged me to trust him. Now I must insist that you renounce your friendship for him out of loyalty to me. I have learned that he intends to destroy everything I have built."

Taniko sighed. Those years in China seemed so remote. She was a different woman now. She saw Jebu again as he had looked in Kublai Khan's park at Khan Baligh that day they were reunited. Almost unrecognizable in his Mongol cap and cloak, his face gaunt, his red moustache drooping. It was Jebu who had rescued Sametono from the Rokuhara. Yet there had been no message from him, just Moko arriving with the boy.

"I have no idea what Yukio is doing now, my lord. How do you know he is plotting against you?"

"He has been in Heian Kyo ever since the battle at Shimonosek: Strait. His huge army is camped outside the city. He has begun the rebuilding of the Imperial Palace without my permission. He visits the Retired Emperor daily, and he is the darling of the Imperial Court. He has received numerous titles and honours and estates from GoShirakawa, including lieutenant in the Palace Guard."

"I remember from my days at Court that most such honours bring with

them no real power," said Taniko.

"They are all ancient honours and should have been offered first of all to me, not to one of inferior birth, like Yukio. My father was captain of the Palace Guard. But these displays of Imperial favour are only the outward sign of the disease. I have learned that Yukio conspires with my enemies to take action against me and the Bakufu."

"How do you know this, my lord?"

"I have received messages from your father."

"It may be that the real conspirators are my father and Horigawa. Horigawa would like nothing more than to set you and Yukio at each other's throats. He has not given up his lifelong dream of destroying the samurai by pitting them against each other. He could be using my father. Indeed, Go-Shirakawa may have the same end in view. If the Muratomo quarrel among themselves, the Imperial Court gains power. Perhaps that is why the Retired Emperor shows so much favour to Yukio."

"Everyone plots," said Hideyori through clenched teeth. "No one can be trusted. I can rely on men only to betray one another. Your father pretends to be Yukio's ally while reporting to me his plans and ambitions."

"I know Yukio and I know my father. It is Yukio I trust." "Yukio killed your son."

Taniko sighed. "I can never be his friend, but I still believe him to be a man of honour."

Hideyori's face darkened. "You are a stubborn woman."

His anger surprised Taniko. She realized that she was in danger, but

his sharp words stung her to a quick retort. "My lord, I am simply setting aside my own feelings about Yukio and telling you what I believe to be true. You did say, only a moment ago, that you think highly of my wisdom."

"Yukio is my enemy." Hideyori's eyes glittered with hate. "Erom the day he escaped from the Rokuhara he has been trying to make himself chieftain of the Muratomo. While I was held prisoner here in

Kamakura, Yukio was loose in the countryside, his every action a provocation to Sogamori to have me executed in retaliation. When Sogamori's son Kiyosi was killed during Yukio's escape from Hakata Bay, I was sure I was a dead man."

Yes, yes, thought Taniko sadly, so much died when Kiyosi died.

"I would have been executed then, had not Horigawa chosen that moment to begin protecting me. Years later, Yukio returned with his army of Mongols and proclaimed himself clan chieftain, as if I were really dead. He found he could not dispose of me so easily. I risked my life to support his campaign against the Takashi, even though I was in a far more vulnerable position than he. I laboured in the shadows to found a new government, without which his victories would mean nothing. I sent him the ships he needed to win at Shimonoseki Strait. What I have done is ignored or condemned, while the land resounds with the praises of Yukio. Always Yukio, the mighty warrior, Yukio the brilliant general, Yukio the shining jewel of the house of Muratomo. I tell you, Yukio is nothing but a bandit, and his mother was nothing but a Court harlot, while mine was the daughter of a high priest. All friends of Yukio are my enemies, and I mean to destroy all my enemies. If you wish to live here with me, if you wish to adopt your Takashi grandson with my approval, you must bind yourself to me and to me alone. Do you agree to that?"

Taniko sat stunned. The wave of Hideyori's rage had crashed over her and receded, leaving a pool of despair. Much of what he said made no sense. Now she knew that Hideyori's hatred of his younger brother was a lifelong passion he would never be able to relinquish. Anything she might say to correct or contradict him could mean death for herself and Sametono. She was a prisoner. Hideyori would make use of her intelligence, yes, but for his own mad and murderous purposes. She would have no power as the Shogun's wife. She could only be the Shogun's instrument.

"I agree, my lord." Even though she knew she must hide her feelings, she could not hold back her tears. Hideyori watched her for a moment, then reached out and took her hand.

When he spoke again, his tone was more reasonable. "Taniko-san, I know you feel under obligation to Yukio. Perhaps you feel pity for him. I, too, have not forgotten that he and I have the same father. I fear him because in the capital his innocence can be victimized by flatterers and dangerous influences. He is the sort of man around whom rebellious forces might gather, and there are many powerful persons who oppose the new order of the nation. I simply want Yukio in a less dangerous position."

Hideyori's sudden change of manner left 'Taniko even more uncertain about what he intended. In a way it was more frightening than his previous rage had been. In her mind she said, homage to Amida Buddha.

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

It is now eight days since I agreed to Hideyori's terms. I went to see Eisen and told him of the shape my future appears to be taking. I asked his advice and he merely said, "Show me the face you had before you were born." Zen monks like to meditate on such strange-

sounding problems as this, which their Chinese predecessors called kung-an, questions. Eisen had promised me a kung-an to study, but I hardly expected to get one instead of advice about Hideyori. Is this Eisen's way of saying I should not think so much about my problems?

"Next time you come," Eisen said, "bring the boy."

Messengers have gone to the capital bearing decrees that strip my father and Horigawa of their powers as deputies of the Shogun, charging them with excessive zeal in executing women and children connected with the Takashi. My father is ordered to return to Kamakura. To think that he might have killed his own great-grandson. I am determined that he shall not enjoy power as long as I can prevent it.

Hideyori is also moving against Yukio. The day after we spoke he sent an order that no man under the Shogun's authority may receive titles, gifts or offices from anyone else without the Shogun's permission. Two days after that he followed with a letter reprimanding Yukio in insulting language for having accepted promotion to the Eifth Rank of nobility and the title of lieutenant in the Palace Guard from Go-Shirakawa, ordering him to give these honours up at once. At the beginning of the new year, he says, he will relieve Yukio of his command. It seems to me dangerous for Hideyori to offend all his vassals in Heian Kyo at the same time. Might they not band together against him? Hideyori does not think so. He says that if a ruler is going to injure his subjects, he must do all the harm at once, so that it will be over quickly, while benefits should be conferred gradually, so that men will remember them longer. He means only to frighten Horigawa and my father back into line. His attack on Yukio, though, is the first step in stripping Yukio of power. All men will realize that, Hideyori thinks, and they will abandon Yukio, leaving him alone and helpless.

Jebu, as far as I know, is still with Yukio. It has been so long since I've seen Jebu. Truly, he has washed Kiyosi's blood from his hands by his brave rescue of my little Sametono. I pray that he will not be dragged down in Yukio's ruin. Still, I cannot forgive Yukio for Atsue's death. Why has Jebu never sent a message to me? No matter, there is no future for Jebu and me. I shall soon belong to Hideyori.

Yesterday, while meditating on my kung-an after my midday meal, I remembered what Hideyori had said about my having been an Emperor or prime minister in a previous life. I set out at once to tell Eisen I had already solved my kung-an. With Sametono perched on the saddle in front of me and the inevitable pair of samurai Hideyori always sends with me whenever I leave the Shogun's palace riding behind us, I directed my favourite mare up into the hills to Eisen's temple. It now consists of three buildings. Eisen has four young monks and two elderly retired samurai studying with him. Sametono and I were admitted at once into Sensei's chamber.

"Show me the face you had before you were born," he said without a word of greeting as soon as I was seated before him. His own face was as stern as a boulder, and I quailed a little.

"I believe now that before I was born I must have been an official at Court, or perhaps even an Emperor of olden times. This would explain why affairs of state fascinate me so."

"Rubbish," Eisen snapped. "Individual persons do not pass from one life to the next. You do not understand the true meaning of rebirth."

If I do not, I thought, then neither does Hideyori. "Who is it that is reborn then if not the person?" I asked.

Eisen threw his hands in the air and shouted, "Kwatz!" I was startled, even though Sensei has done this to me several times before,

usually when I ask him a question about religion.

Sametono was amused. He laughed so hard at Eisen's outburst that he fell over sideways on the mat. My heart melted at the sight of that round little boy rolling on the floor. He looked exactly as I remember. Atsue looking at the age of four. My eyes grew wet, but I frowned at him for behaving so in Sensei's chamber.

"This boy has more of Zen in him than many an aged monk," said Eisen with great seriousness. "Learn from him, Lady Taniko, and protect his attainment. Do not let his Buddha-mind become clouded over as he grows older."

We left Eisen's temple, my kung-an still unsolved. All the way down from the hills Sametono kept shouting, "Kwatz! Kwatz!"

-Seventh Month, fifteenth day

YEAR OF THE HORSE

Chapter Nineteen

The three bodies lay side by side on a dais. The two men and the woman were dressed in their finest robes, only their pallid faces visible amid folds of shining cloth arranged to hide their awful wounds. They had committed seppuku. Eirst Shenzo Saburo had disembowelled himself with his short sword, then his best friend had beheaded him to end his pain. In turn, Saburo's friend had cut his own belly open and been decapitated by Saburo's son, Totomi. Meanwhile, Saburo's wife, in the women's quarters, had joined her husband in death by severing the main artery in her throat with a small dagger.

Shenzo Saburo had been one of Yukio's most trusted, respected of ficers all during the War of the Dragons. Now he lay dead with his wife and his friend in the main hall of his Heian Kyo mansion, and Yukio wept for one of his oldest comrades. Wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his robe, Yukio turned to Shenzo Totomi, who stood respectfully by, his face pale, his eyes huge with the solemnity of the things he had seen and done.

"Why did your father do this?"

"Out of love and loyalty for you, my lord," said the young man. "When the new commander Lord Hideyori appointed over your troops declared that you are a traitor to the nation and have been plotting against the Shogun, my father felt he must protest in the strongest possible way. My lord, may I present to you my father's death poem and his final testament?"

Yukio nodded, and with a deep bow the young man drew a scroll from his sleeve. "My father's last poem is dedicated to you, Lord Yukio." Yukio read the poem, first silently, then aloud:

On a hilltop in Yamato

Stands a solitary pine

Unaware of the approaching storm.

To Jebu the meaning of the poem was transparent, as it doubtless was to everyone else in the room. Yukio shut his eyes and again used his silk sleeve to wipe away tears from cheeks as pale as those of the dead. Now Saburo's son offered him another scroll, the testament. Yukio began to read it. Jebu noticed that many more men, samurai and servants, had entered the room to listen. Saburo's letter began with a recitation of the Shenzo family tree, just as if he were challenging someone on the field of battle.

Then Yukio read, "I have tried to warn the lieutenant that he is permitting a great wrong to be done to himself, his family and his loyal followers. Honour forbids him to hear my warning. Therefore honour requires me to choose this drastic way of reaching his ear. I plead with him not to let my death and the deaths of those close to me go to waste." Yukio stopped, unable to continue, filled to overflowing with tears. He thrust the scroll at Jebu.

Jebu found the place where Yukio had left off and took up the reading. "My lord, your brother sat safely in Kamakura while you were in the forefront of every battle. He envies your glory and fears your prowess, and he means to destroy you. Your enemies are gathering. Your brother presumes, as did the Takashi, to give orders to the Emperor himself. Shall the Sacred Islands be enslaved by another upstart tyrant? My lord, place yourself at His Imperial Majesty's disposal before it is too late. Arise. Arm yourself. Attack."

"Read no more," said Yukio. "This is treason."

"It is you who are betrayed, my lord," said Shenzo Totomi.

Yukio shook his head. "I have never wanted anything but the victory of the Muratomo, and the chieftain of the Muratomo is my brother, Lord Hideyori, the Shogun."

"Your first loyalty is to the Emperor and to the Sacred Islands, honoured lieutenant," said Totomi quietly.

Yukio's large eyes bulged with rage. "Do not call me by that title. I have relinquished it. Do you dare to tell me my duty?" His pale face darkened to a deep red, and Jebu tensed himself, because he had never seen Yukio become this angry without reaching for his sword. Then Yukio smiled and sighed. "I am sorry I spoke harshly to you. I forgive your forwardness. You are the son of an old comrade, and you have just lost your father. Remember this, though. Lord Muratomo no Hideyori is the protector of the Retired Emperor and of the Sacred Islands. His every action is for the good of the Crown and the realm."

Shenzo Totomi's eyes fell. "My lord, there was more to the testament. My father asks you to accept me in his place as your vassal."

Yukio put his hand on the young man's shoulder. "It is a great gift that your honoured father and you offer me, but if I accepted you into my service now I would expose you to mortal danger. I will not do that to the son of an old friend. The day may come when I will be able to receive your oath of fealty. Eor now, be patient, Totomi-san. I shall see you again at your father's funeral."

That night, Jebu and Yukio sat up talking until the hour of the rat. Yukio was melancholy. He seemed unable to make plans or decisions, even though he agreed with Jebu's assessment of the situation. As Jebu saw it, Hideyori had decided that he no longer

needed Yukio, and he feared that Yukio might become a leader for those who opposed the new military government. Yukio had only two choices. He could go into hiding or he could do what Hideyori seemed to be expecting him to do, raise a revolt against the Shogun. If he did try to flee, Hideyori would undoubtedly track him down and try to kill him. Yukio's only hope was to fight back now, while there were many who still were willing to join him.

Yukio smiled sadly. "Have you forgotten the years of blood and fire and famine? Do you want me to plunge the country into another war, just to save my own life?" Jebu had no answer. He wished Taitaro were there to advise them. His hand stole into his tunic pocket and fingered the Jewel of Life and Death.

"If I must flee," said Yukio, "I can go north to Oshu where my wife and children are, where my father's old ally, Lord Hidehira, can protect me from my brother's hatred."

"You are the only man in the Sunrise Land strong enough to stand up to Hideyori," said Jebu. "If you run from him, I doubt that anyone can protect you for long."

"I will not break with my brother until I have made one last attempt to convince him that I am loyal and he has nothing to fear from me. I owe that much to our father and to our family."

Looking at his friend, Jebu felt as if he were seeing Yukio's face for the first time. Gaunt and lined, it could have been the face of a saintly abbot-Buddhist, not Zinja-steeped in awareness of the suffering and transience of all things. He did not look like a man about to lead warriors into battle.

The glory of the Takashi is reduced to a few crimson rags drifting on the sea, Jebu thought, and now the glory of Muratomo no Yukio

withers before my eyes.

From a letter from Muratomo no Yukio to Muratomo no Hideyori:

. . . All my life I have wanted only one thing, to be with my family. Our father was torn from us when I was an infant, and from that day to this my mind had never been at peace for a single moment. I grew up an orphan. Now I beg you, elder brother, to be a father to me. Weeping tears of blood, I beg of you to turn your wrath aside from me. I want nothing for myself. My victories were your victories. If my success in war has made you hate me, I wish I _might have died on the battlefield. I have fought for only one reason, that I might expunge the disgrace, defeat and sorrow suffered by our father. I accepted the title of lieutenant and the other honours because I thought they would bring glory to the Muratomo. You are our father's successor on earth, and I live only to serve you. All that I have done, I lay at your feet. Let me come to you and plead my innocence face-to-face. Do not spurn me, for if you do, where on this earth can I turn?

-Second Month, twelfth day

YEAR OF THE SHEEP

A month after Yukio sent the letter, Jebu unrolled his futon and lay down to sleep, as usual, just outside Yukio's bedchamber. Erom within he heard the plaintive sound of Yukio's flute accompanying a woman's sweet voice raised in song. The singer was a young woman named Shizumi, whom Yukio had taken as a mistress upon his triumphal return to the capital after Shimonoseki. Besides having a beautiful voice, she was considered the finest dancer in the land. Jebu lit a lamp and sat cross-legged on his mat, revolving the Jewel of Life and Death in his fingers as the mournful music fell, note by note, on his ears. That men and women could take the crude clay of painful human existence and shape it into poetry, music, art and

dance was, at times, all that made life bearable. Tonight was the night of the full moon, whose beauty fascinated poets and scholars. Jebu lay down and dozed, but sleep came with difficulty. He could not forget that it was under a full moon that Taniko had lain in his arms for the first time.

He was suddenly awakened by the sound of stealthy footsteps in a near-by room. Eor a moment he was still reliving that night nearly thirty years ago when Taniko's soft footfall had roused him from sleep. Then he came back to the present. As always when he was unexpectedly awakened, he remained motionless. To the ear of a Zinja or any well-trained assassin, there was a difference between the small sounds made by a sleeping person and those made by one only pretending to be asleep. Jebu knew how to imitate those sounds. He allowed his body to shift from time to time as a sleeper would, all the while listening carefully to the movements in the next chamber. There were two, perhaps three, men on bare feet. They had avoided the singing boards placed throughout Yukio's mansion, floorboards that would creak loudly when stepped on. That meant they had help from members of Yukio's household.

Jebu heard a screen sliding back. Clearly the intruders were not trained to make an inaudible approach. Yukio's samurai guards might not hear anything, but to a Zinja it was as if an ox were being led through the mansion. The enemy probably knew Jebu was outside Yukio's room, and now that they could see him, they would try to kill him. At that very thought, Jebu heard the faint rasp of an arrow being pulled from its quiver and the creak of a bow being drawn. When he heard the archer take a sharp breath just before he let go the bowstring, he rolled to, one side. The arrow thudded into the futon. Jebu shouted an alarm, seized his naginata and sprang. The archer was still holding the bow extended when Jebu drove his stiffened fingers into the man's windpipe, crushing it.

"Wolf! Wolf!" a man cried from behind the falling archer. At that signal more dark figures crowded into the room. Jebu swung the naginata in an arc that sliced through two of the attackers. Now there was light. The young dancer Shizumi stood in a white silk robe like the statue of a goddess, calmly holding aloft a lantern as her lover, Yukio, rushed into the fray, slashing with his long sword, recklessly naked, as if he didn't care whether an enemy blade bit into his unprotected flesh. Jebu scanned the raiding party looking for a leader. It would be important to leave at least one of the would-be assassins alive, to find out who was trying to kill Yukio. All the attackers were ragged Heian Kyo street toughs, except for one who wore black armour and had the shaven head of a Buddhist monk. As Yukio's guard poured into the room and blood splashed on the floor and flecked the walls, Jebu fell upon the warrior monk and knocked him senseless with the pole of his naginata.

Moments later all the attackers except the monk had been cut to bits. The monk lay in Yukio's bedchamber, glaring sullenly as Yukio pressed the point of his sword into his throat. He was stripped of his armour and wore only his saffron under robe. According to Yukio's guards there were twelve dead raiders in the anteroom.

"Tell me at once who sent you, or I'll cut your throat," Yukio demanded.

The captured assassin's brown eyes remained opaque, his thin lips closed. "I'll have him talking in an hour, my lord," said the captain of the guard, anxious to make amends for his failure to protect Yukio.

"I would rather you inspected the household," Jebu said. "Eind out how many guards these men had to bribe or kill to gain access to Lord Yukio." He smiled at the captive. "You and I are going to drink ch'ai and talk together, as one monk with another."

When the ch'ai was brought, Jebu sat companionably on a straw mat beside the prisoner, who refused even to tell his name. Jebu poured a cupful of the steaming green liquid for himself and a cup for the monk. To the monk's cup he added a white powder from a paper packet. When he held out the cup, the monk pressed his lips tightly together and shook his head. Still smiling, Jebu reached over and pressed a spot under the monk's ear. The shaven-headed man's mouth dropped open, though he remained seated upright. Jebu put his hand over the monk's face, pinching his nostrils together and tilting his head back. He poured ch'ai down the captive's throat.

"Now you will join me in prayer," Jebu said. "Homage to Amida Buddha." Slowly, softly, Jebu droned the invocation over and over. At first the monk sat silently. Then, as if his lips and tongue had acquired a life of their own, he joined in the prayer. "Very good," Jebu said. "Continue by yourself, please." The monk went on repeating the invocation, his voice flat, lifeless. At last Jebu said, "Now stop." He leaned forward, bringing his face closer to the other man's.

"What is your name?"

"Yato," said the monk in an empty voice.

"What monastery are you from, Monk Yato?"

"The Rodojo-ji, at Hyogo."

"That temple was endowed by the Takashi," said Yukio. "Hyogo was their chief seaport. This monk must have been trying to avenge them." He was sitting on his sleeping dais, dressed now in tunic and trousers, his sword in his lap. Shizumi crouched in a corner, the dark eyes in her pale face like two inkblots on a sheet of paper.

"I doubt it," said Jebu. "Now, Yato. You are a holy man. You have taken the Buddhist vow never to injure any living thing. You should take up arms only in defence of your temple. Yet, you tried to assassinate this noble lord who has never harmed a holy place. You have broken your vow, have you not?"

"My abbot commanded me," said Yato dully. "I could not disobey."

"So, you had to choose between your duty to your abbot and fidelity to your vow," said Jebu gently. "That must have been hard. You carry a heavy karmic burden. If you tell us now why your abbot commanded you to kill Lord Yukio, it would lighten your karma somewhat."

The monk's shaven head glistened with sweat. "I am not permitted to tell."

"Your superiors have forfeited their right to your obedience," said Jebu. "You are guilty of many wrongful deaths. The men you hired to help you in this attack, the guards you killed breaking into this mansion. Their angry spirits will pursue you until you atone."

"We did not kill any guards. We bribed those who were on duty to let us in."

"We will have to discover and execute the guards you bribed," said Jebu. "You are responsible. Who instructed your abbott to send you?" The monk's lips moved, but he made no sound.

"You must tell me, Yato."

The cords in Yato's neck stood out as he struggled with himself. At last, in a strangled voice, he said, "It was the lord of Kamakura." "No!" Yukio cried.

Now that the barrier was broken, Yato's words poured out. "It was

Muratomo no Hideyori, honoured Shogun of the Sunrise Land. He promised benefits to our temple if we did what he asked of us and said we would suffer great harm if we did not. My Eather Abbot told me I would be acting for the protection of my temple."

"This monk lies," Yukio snarled, gripping his sword hilt.

Jebu held up his hand in a restraining gesture. "In his present condition, he cannot lie. You do not want to see what is so, do you, Yukio-san?"

Tears sparkled in Yukio's eyes. "It is the end of all my dreams. I've helped to rebuild this land, and now there is no place for me in it. I can't rebel against my brother. All I want to do is serve him. Why won't he accept me? Why does he try to kill me? There is only one thing left for me to do. I must go to Kamakura alone and unarmed."

"Do you think this monk is the only assassin your brother has sent out against you? He is too careful for that."

"The Zinja monk speaks the truth," a hollow voice said unexpectedly. Yukio and Jebu turned to Yato.

"What more can you tell us?" said Jebu.

"My abbot said that whether our effort to kill Lord Yukio succeeded or failed, the lord of Kamakura is sending an army to seize Heian Kyo and wipe out all Lord Yukio's friends and followers. The barbarian horsemen from the Sunset Land are even now on their way."

"The Mongols?" said Yukio, stunned. "Have the Mongols turned against me?"

"Were they ever really for you?" said Jebu. "You no longer have an army of your own to command, Yukio-san. You cannot make a stand

here. We must gather those we trust and escape from the capital at once." A picture of Arghun Baghadur riding at the head of his tuman arose in Jebu's mind. If the Mongols travelled with their usual speed, they might be here before the news of their coming could precede them.

Staring uncomprehendingly, his cheeks still wet with tears, Yukio slowly stood up. Jebu had never seen him like this. He had to resist an impulse to shake his friend. He gestured to Shizumi, who was already gathering Yukio's robes, to help him dress and went out to give the necessary orders to the household.

Chapter Twenty

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

Hideyori tells me again and again how valuable my counsel will be to him when I am his wife, but he rarely consults me-these days. Marriage seems no closer. Horigawa still lives. All my news comes from the various lords and samurai officers who flatter me by calling on me when they come to Kamakura to report to the Bakufu. I suppose they cultivate me because I am close to Hideyori, but I like to think they also find my company interesting for its own sake.

Uncle Ryuichi is particularly helpful in keeping me informed. He says Yukio has disappeared and that he has only a dozen followers left, if that many, in the whole country. Last month Yukio raised a rebellion against Hideyori. He claimed that Hideyori had sent assassins to kill him. Hideyori, of course, denied it, charging that Yukio had arranged the incident to give himself justification for making war on his brother. Go-Shirakawa was convinced, though. He gave Yukio a commission ordering him to chastize Hideyori as a rebel against the throne and an enemy of the Court. But Hideyori had already sent the Mongols to arrest Yukio, and Yukio was forced to flee the capital. When the Mongol army got near, Go-Shirakawa withdrew the commission and sent an apology to Hideyori, saying he had issued it under duress. Yukio fled south to Hyogo with a thousand warriors.

When he sailed from Hyogo one of those great storms that the Chinese call tai-phun came up and wrecked his ships near Shimonoseki, the very place where he won his great victory over the Takashi only two years ago. It is said that the angry ghosts of the Takashi called up the storm. I wonder if the ghost of my beloved Atsue was among them. There are rumours among the local fishermen that the shells of crabs caught in Simonoseki waters bear

the imprint of the faces of Takashi warriors.

Yukio left his mistress, Shizumi, behind at Hyogo, which probably saved her life, but she was quickly captured by Hideyori's men. Poor thing, I hear she's pregnant. Now Hideyori has his men searching everywhere for Yukio. Even though Yukio was generally loved, when it came to an open break between the brothers, almost all samurai hastened to side with Hideyori. He has lands and offices to give away while Yukio has nothing to offer but an unprofitable struggle against injustice.

Eor it is an injustice, what Hideyori is doing to Yukio; even I admit that in my heart.

Insisting that Yukio is still a threat to the peace and good order of the realm, Hideyori has extorted enormous concessions from the Court. He has been granted the power to tax the rice harvest of every estate in the Sunrise Land, income which he says he needs to pay for troops to search for Yukio. He also has the authority to appoint stewards and oryoshi in every province to enforce his decrees and collect the taxes. Land, after all, is everything. Now Hideyori has control of all the land in the realm, and Yukio helped him get it. Also, at his insistence, the vacant throne is at last to be occupied by the Imperial candidate of his choosing, Kameyama, a young grandson of Go-Shirakawa. So Hideyori is now a maker of Emperors. I have known many leaders-Sogamori, Kiyosi, Kublai Khan, Yukio-but Hideyori has started with the least and accomplished the most of all of them.

It does not trouble me that he is too busy to pay much attention to me. Another man now absorbs all my time and thought, even though he is only five years old. Of course, I could let my ladies take charge of his care and education, but I do not trust the women Hideyori has appointed to serve me. Some are doubtless spies who might report

any careless remark or small act of Sametono's to Hideyori in an unfavourable light.

I am seeking music, poetry and calligraphy masters for my grandson. There was a time when it would have been impossible to find a first-rate teacher of any art in Kamakura, but now that the centre of power is here, accomplished men are drawn to the north as bees to a flower. My cousin Munetoki has agreed to teach Sametono the martial arts. And, of course, the most important part of his education is that which he receives from Eisen.

Another friend we often see is Moko. He has two children now, a thirteen-year-old son named Sakagura, who was born the year we all left for China, and a new baby girl. He is on the way to the five-or was it six?-children he claimed when Jebu and I first met him. His shipbuilding trade, he says, is prospering. Whenever he comes to call, the first question we ask each other is, "Do you have any news of Jebu?" Neither one of us ever does, and we shake our heads together in disappointment. If Jebu is still alive he is surely with Yukio, sharing his fate.

-Fifth Month, twenty-first day

YEAR OF THE SHEEP

At the beginning of summer, to celebrate the destruction of Yukio and his acquisition of new powers, Hideyori gave a great feast at the Shogunal castle in Kamakura. Over three hundred kenin, the highest ranking samurai, filled the reception hall of the castle. Most of the guests sat at low individual tables enjoying the delicacies Hideyori had selected for the occasion. While their costumes were less elaborate and confining than the dress of the Imperial Court, these new masters of the Sunrise Land wore equally fine materials, no less handsomely adorned. The treasures that had gradually been

accumulating in Hideyori's castle, gold and silver drinking vessels, T'ang dynasty porcelain, ebony and rosewood tables, statuettes and vases of jade and ivory, ancient scrolls on which Buddhist verses were painted in gold leaf, all were brought out to decorate the hall. Eive groups of musicians from aristocratic families played in turn, so that there was continuous music.

Hideyori's most important vassals sat with him on a dais at the north end of the hall under a canopy of plum-coloured silk. Among them were the heads of the powerful Shima clan, the brothers Bokuden and Ryuichi, as well as Ryuichi's son, the strapping young Munetoki. With them sat the chieftains of the Ashikaga, the Hiraga, the Wada and the Miura clans. Taniko knelt just behind Hideyori, silently pouring sake and serving morsels of vegetable and fish and rice to the Shogun.

Hideyori's eyes tonight were bright and beady, like those of a crow that has just captured a tender bit of meat. He wore a black ceremonial robe and a tall black cap of lacquered silk. Midway through the banquet he clapped his hands for attention, and the hum of conversation and the clatter of eating and drinking in the hall died away. The musicians fell silent.

"I have a special treat for all my guests now," Hideyori announced to the hall at large. "Here is a woman reputed to be the greatest dancer in the Sunrise Land. She comes to us from the Court at Heian Kyo, where she gave much delight to our new Son of Heaven, Emperor Kamayama, as well as to His Imperial Majesty's most honoured grandfather, the Retired Emperor. As well as others who were recently at the Court."

There were a few chuckles in the hall from those who realized who the lady was and what Hideyori meant by "others at the Court." Taniko sensed what was about to happen, but somehow she had not

thought Hideyori would stage this kind of public spectacle.

"In return for our hospitality this lady has agreed to entertain us," said Hideyori, pleased with himself. "Noble lords of the Bakufu, I present the Lady Shizumi."

The doors at one end of the hall slid back and a tiny figure was revealed in the gallery leading from the women's house of Hideyori's castle. Taniko's first sight of Shizumi wrung her heart. Yukio's mistress was a beautiful young woman with huge dark eyes and red lips. Her long black hair hung unbound past her shoulders, black locks spreading protectively over her small breasts. She held herself very straight in a trailing robe of pure white silk, tied by a white sash. She is far more lovely than I was at her age, Taniko thought admiringly.

She had heard Yukio's mistress was pregnant. There was no sign of it, but it was still cruel to put her through this ordeal.

Taking small steps, her eyes cast down, Shizumi moved into an open space in the centre of the hall.

"Why are you wearing the colour of mourning?" Hideyori demanded. "I told you to put on your finest gown."

"Please forgive me, my lord," Shizumi said. "This is my best gown." She spoke softly, respectfully, but there was a strength in her voice that was surprising, coming from such a fragile-looking body.

Six musicians in Court dress with drums, bells, woodwinds and lutes glided from the gallery and seated themselves near the dais. Shizumi looked questioningly at Hideyori, and he nodded brusquely. She bowed to the musicians, drew an ivory fan from her sleeve and spread it open. Hideyori sat back with a smile, his hands resting on

his knees. To force Yukio's mistress to entertain him and his guests made his triumph complete.

The first notes the musicians struck were slow, solemn, booming, like the tolling of a temple bell. Taniko realized at once that Shizumi's choice of white robes was no accident. Her dance was as mournful as her white raiment. Her measured steps, the bending of her body like bamboo in the wind, the horizontal rippling of her arms and the droop of her fan said that all things pass, happiness turns to sadness, each of us is alone at last. This was not what these leaders of samurai wanted to hear tonight, but it was a measure of Shizumi's talent as a dancer that she changed the mood of the gathering. Every head was still, every eye fixed on the flowing white figure in the centre of the hall. In the eye of many a scarred old eastern warrior there stood a tear. The woman in white was a cherry blossom, blown from the bough by the wind, fluttering to the ground. White, those watching recalled, was the colour of the Muratomo. One day, the dance whispered, even the victorious banner of the White Dragon must fall. The music ended with the same slow, ringing notes that began it. When Shizumi was done, she sank gracefully to the floor. There was no cheering, no applause, only a sigh that rustled around the hall like the wind in autumn leaves. A far greater tribute, Taniko thought.

Hideyori alone was displeased. He gnawed at his moustache, frowning angrily.

"That dance was not suitable for this occasion," he growled. "Nevertheless, it was exquisite," Shima Ryuichi said gently. Tani ko's respect and love for her uncle rose. He had indeed grown braver since the days when he trembled before Sogamori in Heian Kyo. Hi deyori threw an irritated glance at him, then turned back to Shizumi. "Sing something for us now. Something more cheerful." "I will sing of love, my lord."

"Proceed." Hideyori smiled thinly.

Shizumi nodded to the musicians. She sang in a voice that was rich and sad and husky, her red lips forming a circle on certain words, as if she were offering kisses to one who was not there.

The memories of love settle like snow

That drifts down from the mist on Hiei's crest, As I sit alone and the day grows dark. Ah, how I grieve for the beauty we lost.

In the cloudland under a distant sky

He lays his head beneath a snow-capped pine. That strange land is an ill place for my love. Ah, how I grieve for the beauty we lost.

Amazing, thought Taniko. What courage this young woman has. Hideyori tries to use her to celebrate his victory over Yukio, and she seizes the moment to proclaim that she still loves Yukio and mourns for him.

In his mansion our pillows still remain Side by side, though we are a world apart, And I will not see him before I die.

Ah, how I grieve for the beauty we lost.

"Enough!" Hideyori shouted. He sprang up, his face suffused with anger. The musicians faltered to a stop. The hall was utterly silent as the guests stared, amazed, at the Shogun. Yukio, Taniko thought, you have triumphed over your brother even now.

"How dare you sing such a song here in my home," Hideyori raged. "How dare you sing of your illicit love for a rebel and a traitor." His fingers twitched on the dragon-adorned hilt of the heirloom sword

Higekiri that hung in a jewelled scabbard at his belt.

"My lord, it is the only love I know," Shizumi said quietly. She stood with bowed head, hands folded before her. She is ready to accept anything, Taniko thought. If he kills her, she will die happily.

Taniko was on her feet. "My lord." She gripped Hideyori's sword arm with all her strength. He whirled on her, his eyes so wild with fury that he seemed not to see her.

"Take a moment to think," Taniko whispered insistently. "Remember who you are and where you are. You would disgrace yourself if you ruined your feast by murdering this child. Everyone would say that you made her the victim of anger because you could not find Yukio." They stood, eyes locked, while Taniko asked herself, what am I doing, why am I standing here? I have forgotten myself as much as he has.

The rage faded from Hideyori's eyes, and a look of sullen anger replaced it. "She will be punished."

"She must not be punished," said Taniko firmly, wondering at her own temerity. "She has suffered enough and deserves no punishment. What is she but a helpless prize of war? You dragged her before your guests and forced her to sing, and she had the bravery to sing of her love. If you punish bravery, my lord, what kind of samurai are you? What this girl has done tonight will be remembered. When the tale is told, will you be spoken of as the cruel lord who rewarded her fidelity with death?" They both turned and looked down at Shizumi. The young woman had thrown her head back and was staring, face flushed and eyes burning with a pure fire, directly at Hideyori.

"Get her out of my sight," Hideyori choked.

"I will, my lord." Hiding her hands in her sleeves to conceal their trembling, Taniko stepped down from the dais and went to Shizumi. Taking the young dancer's arm, she led her through the silent crowd towards the gallery entrance. What have I done? Taniko thought. Why did I risk Hideyori's rage when I have been so careful with him all these years? I must be mad.

Her body went ice-cold as she realized the full enormity of her action-publicly thwarting Hideyori's wrath-but she also felt a satisfaction with herself that she had rarely known before. The feeling swelled, as they came to the doorway, to an exaltation almost like satori. She had acted immediately, impulsively, without a moment's consideration. It was Zen that had inspired her to do this. Those hours of meditation followed by gruelling sessions with Eisen in which he demanded an instant response to the absurd questions he asked her-this training made it possible for her to act as she had tonight. The consequences, for herself, for Sametono, for this girl, for everyone close to her, might be dreadful, but she could hear Eisen's voice saying, "When you do what you know you should do, the results do not matter."

But it was not just Eisen's influence. She remembered that long ago she had intervened to help a woman threatened by a tyrant. The woman had been the Lady Akimi, Yukio's mother. Now Shizumi was carrying Yukio's child. Strange are the meshings of karma, she thought.

Tonight I, a helpless woman, stood before the most powerful man in the land and defied his wrath to protect this girl beside me. Helpless? I am not so helpless, after all. As the two women walked together into the silence outside Hideyori's hall, Taniko's flesh tingled with excitement and the blood pulsed in her head, a pounding rhythm, like the beating of a taiko drum.

Chapter Twenty-One

Six severed heads impaled on tall poles stood out dark against the cloudy sky. At first, climbing a hill, Jebu and the men with him saw only the heads, small black ovals far away. Then, when they reached the top of the hill, they saw the fort with its brown palisade, on a ridge still half a day's walking and climbing from where they were. They could see birds swooping and darting around the heads and hear their distant cries as they picked away the remaining morsels of flesh.

Yesterday, in the foothills of these mountains on the north-west coast of Honshu, Jebu and Yukio and their men had met a party of traders coming down from Oshu, Yukio's destination. The traders told them that the soldiers in the fort at Ataka had executed six monks travelling north on suspicion that they were followers of Muratomo no Yukio attempting to escape from the Shogun's wrath.

"The Shogun is turning the country upside down to find his fugitive brother," said the leader of the trading party. "I advise you, holy ones, to postpone your journey and turn back here, rather than try to get past the barrier forts just now. The soldiers would rather lop off a few innocent heads than let any of the Shogun's enemies through by accident. Of course, you may have business in the north that is worth the risk of your lives." The trader's narrowed eyes roved shrewdly over Yukio and Jebu and the eleven men with them. What he saw, Jebu hoped, was a party of yamabushi, Buddhist mountain monks. All of them had shaved heads and wore saffron robes and torn quilted coats to keep out the cold of the Tenth Month, whose teeth grew sharper than a wolf's as they worked their way north.

"Buddha will watch over us," Jebu replied piously to the trader. With his moustache and hair shaved off, only his height and his grey eyes

might give him away. "If our time comes, we are not afraid to die as long as we are fulfilling our duty."

"Buddha did not watch over the six monks who died this morning, and they were afraid to die," said the trader. "All their prayers availed them not. They begged for their lives. You seem braver. More like a samurai than a monk." Again he cast that thoughtful look at Jebu and his men.

Jebu laughed. "I am no samurai, honoured sir, I assure you."

The trader shrugged. "Who you are is no business of mine. I wish Lord Yukio no harm. On the other hand, it will be safer to travel when the Shogun's will prevails everywhere. Lord Hideyori is bringing us peace."

Now Yukio and Jebu studied the fort that blocked their road to Oshu. It stood at the high point of a pass between two purple-black crags dusted with snow that towered like pagodas built by giants.

"Not far from here is Tonamiyama, where we first led the Mongols into battle against the Takashi," Yukio said.

"We could try to avoid this fort," said Jebu, his mind fully in the present as he followed the winding of the thread-like path through pines and boulders up to the entrance of the fort. "We could climb over the peaks or work our way around them to the east or the west."

"It would take too long," said Yukio. "We do not have enough provisions, and there is no food in the mountains. Besides, there are other forts to the east and the west."

The Yukio who had led the attack at Ichinotani would leap over these mountains like a deer, Jebu thought. "Better to go hungry for a few

days than lose our heads," he suggested.

"Remember what the trader told us yesterday," Yukio said. "If I die it will bring peace to the realm. Even if it does not, my sufferings will be over."

The despair that had come over Yukio in Heian Kyo when he first realized that his brother had turned against him had grown deeper with each downward turn of his fortunes. Increasingly, Jebu was making plans and decisions for him. It was Jebu who found a Zinja monastery for them to hide in after the shipwreck in Shimonoseki Strait. The Zinja were willing to help Yukio. Though they had supported the Muratomo in the War of the Dragons, Hideyori had begun to harass and threaten them of late. While at the monastery Yukio had learned, to his great anguish, that the samurai to whom he had entrusted Shizumi had betrayed him at the first opportunity and had delivered her to Hideyori's men. The thought had driven Yukio into a fit of wild weeping.

With only a few followers remaining, Yukio had no alternative but to go into hiding. Though few would risk open resistance to Hideyori, there was widespread "sympathy for the lieutenant," as people phrased it, remembering the title Hideyori had begrudged Yukio. Eor two years Yukio and his men had managed to move in disguise from one refuge to another, finding shelter in temples, the castles of friendly samurai, and the homes of commoners. Hideyori launched the greatest manhunt in the history of the Sacred Islands, sending the armies of the Bakufu into every accessible corner of the realm, conducting a house-to-house search of the capital, and even threatening old Go-Shirakawa and young Kameyama with "certain untoward eventualities" if they did not co-operate wholeheartedly. Hideyori used the supposed threat of rebellion as a pretext for stamping out all potential resistance to the new government he was establishing. Yukio's well-wishers were becoming increasingly

reluctant to help him. The only place left for him was the far northern land of Oshu, so remote and powerful as to be almost a kingdom in its own right.

Now Jebu and Yukio stood on a mountain-top in Kaga province facing a barrier fort which blocked the pass through the mountains north of them. Their men, unarmed and shaven-headed, sat down along the narrow path, part of the Hokurikudo Road, to rest. Young Shenzo Totomi, who was dressed as their porter, knelt and untied the gilt chest, a portable Buddhist altar, which he had been carrying on his back. Despite Yukio's declining of his offer of help, General Shenzo's son had not hesitated to join those rallying around Yukio when he broke openly with Hideyori. Now he set the altar on its four legs beside Yukio.

"Only with my death will this unnecessary killing stop," said Yukio, looking at the six heads on the distant poles.

Shenzo Totomi's eyes gleamed like a young tiger's. "Any man who dies because of you, my lord, dies well."

Jebu said, "Do you really believe, Yukio, that your death, or any man's death, will put an end to this kind of killing? You, like thousands of others, are deceived by Hideyori's protestations that just one more death is needed for peace. If you were dead, Hideyori would find other necessary murders. In time other warriors will arise to challenge him. When he dies, new contenders will struggle for the power he has built. Stop imagining that you could sacrifice your life to bring peace. Your duty is to try and save yourself."

Eor the first time in months a merry light appeared in Yukio's eye. "Disguise you as a Buddhist monk and at once you begin to prate like one. What must we do, then, 0 holy one?"

"Since you insist on it, we will go through the fort rather than around it," said Jebu. "Perhaps the very innocence of that unfortunate group of monks who preceded us aroused suspicion, and we will be more convincing because we are more careful." He turned and addressed the group. "If any of you have weapons, rid yourselves of them now. They would give us away if we are searched, and they would be useless to us in that fort. We will be greatly outnumbered." Reluctantly, some of the men drew daggers from under their saffron robes and tossed them into the cedars that grew thickly down the hillside. Jebu turned back to Yukio. "Yukio-san, I want you to trade places and clothes with Shenzo Totomi."

"No," Totomi said instantly. "It would be a disgrace for us to make our lord do the work of a porter, even to save our lives."

"Exactly what Hideyori's men will think," said Jebu. "If we dress Lord Yukio as a porter and load this altar on his back, he is far less likely to be recognized, because no samurai would adopt such a degrading disguise. As it is, he is wearing the heaviest cloak of all of us and the finest robes. He looks like our leader. If they have a good description of him, they're sure to recognize him. Indeed, there may be some who have seen him before."

"This is intolerable," cried Totomi.

"Do as you are told, Totomi," said Yukio quietly. "A samurai never does things by halves. If we are to deceive our enemies let us deceive them as perfectly as we can."

In a few moments Yukio was dressed in Totomi's ragged robe and coat of straw. Totomi wore Yukio's sturdy new wooden sandals, while Yukio went barefoot. The men, except for Jebu, had blistered and bleeding feet because they had been mounted warriors, unused to long marches on foot.

"There is a scroll of melancholy poems in the sleeve of that robe, Totomi," said Yukio. "Take care of them but don't read them. It would embarrass me."

With great reverence and gentleness, Yukio's men loaded the heavy altar on their lord's back. Bent under the weight of the altar-chest and dressed in clothing too big for him, Yukio seemed a small, sad figure. He managed a smile, a ghost of his old gaiety, and several of the samurai turned away from him with tears in their eyes. Taking up the lead, a long staff in his hand, Jebu cautioned the men to ignore their ravaged feet and try to look like true yamabushi, who had been roving the mountains barefoot on spiritual journeys all their lives. Yukio brought up the rear. He limped forward, stumbled and almost fell, then pulled himself up and trudged on with a determined expression. Totomi caught Jebu's eye and glared at him. These samurai, Jebu thought; Totomi would rather see his lord beheaded than forced to endure a few hours of pain and indignity pretending to be a porter.

The kami of the mountains chose to make their progress more difficult by sending ice-cold rain mixed with snow and hail to drum on their rice-straw hats and freeze their hands and feet. Their destination, the fort by the pass, disappeared in a gray swirl, and they could see only a few paces ahead.

Just as they reached the outpost, soaked and exhausted, the storm rolled away, chased by a howling wind that blew through their wet robes and, froze the rough cloth against their skin. A silk banner emblazoned with the White Dragon of Muratomo crackled above the gatehouse. The sky was blue now, and the sun, sinking into the snow-dusted teeth of a black crag to the west, glinted on the silver helmet ornaments of six guards who slowly, sullenly formed a line in front of the barrier pole across the road. Soldiers in peacetime

quickly become attached to comfort, Jebu thought. These were obviously annoyed at having to leave shelter and a warm brazier.

"More monks," said one of the guards. "Let's take their heads now, as we did with those others, and get in out of this wind." He spoke with the rough accent of the eastern provinces, Hideyori's base.

"It's bad karma to kill monks," another man protested.

"Not if they aren't really monks," said the eastern soldier.

During this exchange Jebu stood serenely, hands clasped before him, as if he did not hear the guards discussing his possible fate. The men behind him stood patiently. It was all in the hands of the kami now, thought Jebu. After a little more talk the guards singled out Jebu and Shenzo Totomi and ordered them to go into the fort, which stood a short distance up the mountainside from the road.

"If our captain doesn't believe your leader's story, the ravens are still hungry," the eastern warrior said to the rest of Jebu's party. With a laugh he pointed to the six almost-bare skulls on the poles above the fort's log wall. Jebu was relieved that Yukio would not be exposed to the eyes of the entire garrison. Now it all stood or fell on Jebu's ability to convince the post commander that they were authentic monks. As he climbed the steep path to the fort, Jebu felt the silent tension in the men he was leaving behind. He himself felt exhilarated, happy to be shouldering responsibility for the lives of Yukio and the others. Now, if only this young hothead beside him didn't make a mess of things.

The fort was actually a large old manor, a scattering of low wooden buildings perhaps fifty years old, in more peaceful times the mountain retreat of some nobleman. The only fortifications were the newly built log palisade and a few square wooden guard towers. The tumbling-down, one-storey halls were crowded with samurai and foot

soldiers taking their ease, laughing and talking, gambling, quarrelling. Erom a distant house Jebu heard the tinkle of musical instruments and women's voices. Discipline appeared lax; some of the men were drunk. Heads turned as Jebu and Totomi were led into the central courtyard.

"A hulk like that ought to be a wrestler, not a monk," said a voice in the crowd.

"He'll be shorter by a head when our executioner gets done with him," said another.

The commander of the fort strode out of the doorway of the central hall. He wore a blue robe richly brocaded with silver. His face was square and hard, all bone and muscle, the mouth set in the harsh, lipless line Jebu had seen under many a samurai helmet in combat. He has the suspicious eye of his master, Hideyori, Jebu thought,

"I am Captain Shinohata. I am a kenin, a vassal of the Lord Shogun," said the commander, his accent revealing another eastern warrior. "And who might you be?"

Jebu knew that the high-ranking samurai known as kenin owed allegiance to Hideyori alone. They were pillars of the new Kamakura government.

"I am Mokongo, priest of the Todaiji Temple in Nara," said Jebu in a commanding voice. In the edges of his vision he could see a crowd gathering. These idle troops, he knew, lacked amusement and would be delighted to see a monk's shaved head rolling in the dirt.

"Be careful what tone you use with me, priest," said Shinohata with contempt. "Six of your sort met their deaths yesterday because their answers did not please me."

"It is a great sin to kill the servants of Buddha, bringing down terrible curses on all who share the guilt," said Jebu, putting all the authority he could muster into his voice. A murmuring arose in the crowd of soldiers around him, whether of fear or anger it was impossible to tell.

"We have our orders," the captain replied. "Yukio and his henchmen must be brought to justice even if a thousand innocent men have to be slain." In spite of the merciless words, there was .a note in his voice almost of pleading. This man is not comfortable with what he does, thought Jebu. He felt the excitement of one trying to lift a heavy stone, who finds the right spot to set a lever. He cast his eyes down and folded his hands piously.

"Such talk distresses me. My life has been dedicated to ahimsa, harmlessness to all sentient beings."

In that same troubled tone Shinohata said, "Agree to turn back now,

Priest Mokongo, and you have nothing to fear from me and my men." "That cannot be," said Jebu calmly. "Like you, I have my orders." "Why must you pass this barrier, priest?"

Relying on the Self to guide him through encounters such as this, Jebu had prepared no answers in advance. Even his assumed name and temple had just come to him as he spoke. Now he remembered that the Todaiji was one of the great Nara temples that had been burned by the Takashi as punishment for supporting the uprising of Motofusa and Mochihito in Heian Kyo. Most of its monks had been killed in that catastrophe. Why had the Self chosen such an unlikely place for Jebu to claim as his temple? Then inspiration came to him.

"Know, Captain Shinohata, that the temple I serve, the Todaiji, was burned by the Takashi in the late War of the Dragons. By order of His

Imperial Majesty, it is now to be rebuilt. We surviving monks of the Todaiji are going to every part of the Sacred Islands asking each to give his gift to aid this holy work. My party has been charged with travelling through the provinces on the Hokurikudo, obtaining promises of offerings. If you choose to kill us rather than let us pass, you merely release us from a life of suffering. Doubtless our martyrdom will earn us a reward in incarnations to come."

A voice from the crowd of samurai called, "Please let them pass, Lord Shinohata. These are no ordinary monks but holy men from one of the greatest temples in the land. If you spare them, you may balance the bad karma we brought upon ourselves by killing those monks yesterday."

"The Takashi never won another battle after they burned the temples at Nara," another man said. The samurai tended to be more in awe of religion than either Court aristocrats or commoners, Jebu thought. It went with the uncertainty of their lives.

"I'm of a mind to let you go through," said Shinohata. "If I kill every monk who comes up this road, my karma will surely be as heavy as one of these mountains. But I must be sure you are what you claim to be." He thought for a moment. "If you are seeking contributions, Priest Mokongo, you must be carrying a solicitation scroll to read to those whom you approach. Let us hear it, and I will judge if your mission is truly what you say it is."

Eor a moment Jebu's mind went blank. Then the Self came to his rescue. He remembered the scroll of poems Yukio had mentioned. And a flood of phrases from Buddhist literature filled his mind. Part of his early training as a Zinja had included familiarization with the dominant religions of the land, and later he had often listened to sermons by Buddhist monks.

Jebu turned to Totomi, who was staring at him apprehensively, and held out his hand. "The scroll, please."

After a moment's puzzlement Totomi remembered, took Yukio's scroll out of his sleeve and handed it to Jebu. Jebu stepped up to the veranda of Shinohata's headquarters building and positioned himself so no one could get behind him and read the scroll. He opened the scroll and, trying to look as if he were reading, he began to speak in a resonant voice.

"Contribution roll of the Priest Mokongo, who has been charged to travel through the provinces of the Hokurikudo, respectfully begging all, high and low, to give a gift to aid the holy work of reconstructing the Todaiji of Nara: As all know, we live in that time called Mappo, the Latter Days of the Law, when men give themselves up to passion and wine, and the land is afflicted with civil war, fire, earthquake, famine and pestilence. Alas! How pitiable!

"One of the foulest deeds of these dark and gloomy times was the sacrilegious burning of this most magnificent temple, the Todaiji. Eour thousand monks and their wives and children perished in the flames. Not all the cries of the sinners amid the fires of the fiercest of the Eight Hot Hells were more pitiful than their screams. Ancient works of art beyond price went up in smoke. Most shameful of all, the great bronze Buddha, the largest statue of the Sakya Sage in our Sacred Islands, was reduced to a shapeless mass of slag.

"Eor this desecration the Takashi paid dearly. That evil brood who hated mankind and the law of Buddha now suffer the torments of Emma-O, the king of the underworld, and his jailers. Such is the fate of all who harm the servants of the Lord Buddha." Jebu delivered the last statement in a thunderous voice and swept Shinohata and the circle of samurai with a threatening gaze.

"The Todaiji as it was can never be replaced. We hope, even so, to build another splendid temple on its ruins. The great Buddha will be rebuilt of copper and gold with a sacred jewel in his lofty forehead.

"Even as the Buddha and his disciples went forth daily with their begging bowls, so I, Mokongo, stand before you weeping, asking your contributions. If they who destroyed the Todaiji earned bad karma, surely those who help rebuild it will enjoy good karma in equal amount according to the most true law of cause and effect. They will attain to the further shore of perfect enlightenment. As for those who hinder us, they will be cast into the fire pits, there to gibber for a thousand times a thousand lifetimes.

"A small contribution will be enough to earn the Buddha's infinite mercy. Who is there who will not give? It is said that even he who gives a little sand to help build a pagoda earns good karma. How much more he who gives something of value?

"Composed by me, Mokongo, for the purpose of obtaining contributions as stated. The Tenth Month of the Year of the Rooster." Again Jebu gazed sternly about him. His hearers fell back under the look in his blazing eyes. He closed the scroll with a snap and handed it to Totomi, who quickly put it away.

Timidly at first, samurai in the audience began to come forward holding out small gifts-rings and necklaces, Chinese coins, carvings. Grandly, Jebu gestured to Totomi to collect the offerings.

"I did not read my solicitation scroll to obtain gifts here, only to set your mind at rest," Jebu said to Shinohata. "But since your men seem moved to help us, perhaps you can supply us with travelling boxes to hold what they give us."

"There is one more precaution I must take," said Shinohata. "I must

inspect your entire party before I let them pass." He stepped down from the porch, and with a samurai's swaggering gait led the way to the entrance to the stockade. Reluctantly, Jebu walked beside him, followed by Totomi.

"This is distasteful to me," said Shinohata, his harsh features softening as he spoke quietly to Jebu. "Of course, the Lord Shogun has every right to do whatever he deems necessary to preserve order in the land. Still, I bitterly regret the turn of events that set the two great Muratomo brothers against each other. I had the honour of serving under Lieutenant Yukio during the War of the Dragons. A most gallant commander."

Jebu glanced over his shoulder at Totomi, whose eyes bulged in a flushed face. He seemed almost ready to spring upon Shinohata's back. Eorcing a casual tone, Jebu said, "Were you at Shimonoseki Strait, captain?" Perhaps the man had not actually seen Yukio.

"Unfortunately, no. The lord I served withdrew from Yukio's army after the battle of Ichinotani. We left to help subdue the Takashi forces in the western provinces, where we fought beside the barbarian horsemen who accompanied the lieutenant from China. But forgive me, Priest Mokongo, I'm sure you have no desire to hear this talk of war."

Jebu smiled. "The Buddha himself was born into a family of warriors." By this time they had passed through the gates of the fort and were among short, twisted pines, treading the steep path that led down to the place where the barrier pole blocked the road. There were about thirty soldiers following them. Another six were down below, guarding the travellers, who squatted on the ground, patient and quiet as true yamabushi.

"Yes, but the Enlightened One did not stay a warrior," Shinohata was

saying. "Sometimes I feel ready to give up this life myself, to trade it for the serenity that you must enjoy. Eor now, I must faithfully carry out the order of the Shogun. Believe me, Priest Mokongo, there are those who watch everything I do." He glanced back at the troops following them down the mountainside. "Much as I might wish to speed you on your way, I must err on the side of severity to be sure of pleasing the Shogun."

"I understand, Lord Shinohata," said Jebu, not at all easier in mind. "We desire nothing more than peace, and perhaps peace can be best achieved when warriors remain vigilant." Now they had reached an outcropping of jagged black rock just above the road. Shinohata poised himself there, his booted feet planted wide apart. Behind him the soldiers formed a semi-circle, holding their bows, swords and naginatas.

"Raise the barrier," Shinohata ordered the guards blocking the road. "Let those monks pass through it one by one."

Jebu and Totomi scrambled down to join their comrades. "Let's seize him now," Totomi whispered. "His men won't attack us if we hold him hostage."

"He'd insist on dying, as any good samurai would," said Jebu with an irony that escaped Totomi. Jebu ordered the false monks into line. Passing close to Yukio he whispered, "He may have seen you before. Keep your head down." He stood at the base of the rock from which Shinohata watched as the monks in their tattered robes trudged by.

"Have them take their hats off," said Shinohata. Jebu gave the order, and those wearing conical rice-straw hats as protection against the elements bared their bald skulls. Yukio was tottering at the end of the procession, bent under the portable altar.

"You've got your smallest monk carrying that great, heavy altar," Shinohata remarked.

"He's not a monk," said Jebu. "Just a lay brother, a porter."

Just as Yukio, who had fallen far behind the others, came abreast of Shinohata, he tripped over a stone in the path and fell. The altar landed on its side with a booming crash. Yukio, on all fours, looked directly into Shinohata's face. Jebu heard Shinohata gasp. He saw the samurai officer's eyes fill with amazed recognition.

At that moment the Self took charge of Jebu. He sprang at Yukio, brandishing his walking staff. One part of his mind brought the stick down on Yukio's back.

"Careless monkey!" he shouted. "How dare you let the altar of the Lord Buddha fall to the ground? Weakling! You repeatedly delay us, and now you drop our holy altar. On your feet and pick up that altar, or I'll break every ,one of your delicate ribs." He thumped Yukio with the stick until Yukio crawled to the fallen altar and got his back under it. With horrified glances at Jebu, two of Yukio's men went to help him shoulder the burden.

"Get back," Jebu roared, waving the stick at them. "A mere porter has no right to the help of monks." At last Yukio got the four-legged chest on his back and securely tied around him. Bent double, he staggered forward again. Shinohata looked shocked.

"I thought for a moment-" he stammered. "But no samurai would strike his lord as you have thrashed this porter. Not even to save his life." He glowered at his men as if challenging them to question his thinking. The soldiers stood silent, amazed at the giant priest's outburst of anger and beating of the little porter. Also silent, staring thunderstuck at Jebu, were the other false yamabushi. Shenzo

Totomi, already some distance past the barrier, appeared almost maddened with rage.

Shinohata looked back at Jebu. "You are a remarkable man, Priest Mokongo. I am sorry that we threatened you and delayed you. I will send a runner after you with a few jars of sake, by way of apology."

"Monks do not drink sake," Jebu reminded him.

"Of course not. Even so, it may be permissible for you to take a drop to ward off the chill in this mountain air." He glanced down the road at the little figure stumbling under the altar, and Jebu saw tears standing in his eyes. "The mountains are so vast and hard, and man is so small and fragile."

Bars of sunlight streamed from behind the black peaks to the west and gilded those to the east. The fort was hidden behind a pine-ridged slope. Jebu prostrated himself before Yukio, who had shrugged out from under the portable altar. Tears poured down Jebu's cheeks.

"Eorgive me, Yukio-san," he sobbed. "I don't know how I could have done that. Punish me as you see fit."

Totomi sprang forward. "Let me kill him, lord. Eor striking you, he deserves to die."

Yukio laughed. "What will you do, Totomi, beat his brains out with a rock? Have you forgotten that the monk Jebu cleverly ordered us to throw all our weapons away? Almost as if he knew we were going to do something outrageous. Jebu, you've probably been waiting years to give me a good whack across the shoulders with a stick." Tentatively at first, then uproariously as relief swept over them, the men laughed. Even Totomi joined in at last. No one really wants to

die, thought Jebu. It is one thing to be willing to die, as these men are, and another thing really to want death.

The pounding of booted, running feet echoed in the silence of the mountains. Three soldiers in tunics and trousers were hurrying along the path in the twilight. The chilling thought crossed Jebu's mind that Shinohata had sent troops after them to arrest them. Then he saw that the men were unarmed and that large sake jars were bouncing on their shoulders.

"Compliments of Lord Shinohata to your holinesses," one man panted as they presented the wine to Jebu's party. Some of Jebu's men built a fire, and Jebu invited the three soldiers to share the wine with them. Regrettably, the soldiers agreed to stay, and so the fugitives could not freely celebrate their escape but had to keep up the pretence of being monks. Yukio, still playing the porter, served a supper of dried fish and rice cakes. Jebu felt the wine glowing in his middle like a jolly round red lantern. He was overjoyed at having survived the ordeal of the barrier and miserable at having struck Yukio. The contradictory feelings were pulling him to pieces like those horses the Mongols sometimes used to tears apart a heinous criminal. He could not sit still. He jumped to his feet, picked up his staff and held it horizontally in both hands before him. He began to dance, first stepping solemnly to the left, then hopping more quickly to the right, then whirling about. It was a young man's dance he had learned at the Waterfowl Temple an age ago. His companions stared open-mouthed, but the soldiers laughed delightedly and clapped their hands in time to Jebu's steps. Yukio produced a taiko drum and beat out a complex rhythm. Eiercer and wilder grew Jebu's dance as he poured into it everything he felt-grief at Yukio's downfall, anger at Hideyori and his minions, longing for Taniko, joy at being alive, sorrow at the tragedy that is all of life. He astounded the onlookers with a series of midair somersaults, then ended with side steps as slow and stately as those he had begun with.

Holding up a torch to light their way, the soldiers said good night reluctantly to this remarkably merry band of monks. When they were gone, Jebu again threw himself to the ground before Yukio and pressed his forehead against Yukio's bare foot.

"My lord Yukio. Can you truly forgive me?"

Yukio smiled sadly. "I can forgive you the beating," he said softly. "That was nothing. What I am not sure I can forgive is your perpetual effort to keep me alive. When I fell and looked up into the face of the commander of that fort and knew that he recognized me, I felt a vast relief. Then you rescued me. You cannot imagine, Jebu-san, how little I desire to cling to this life." He turned away and walked into the darkness.

Holding the Jewel of Life and Death in his hand so that the dying firelight glowed red in its crystal depths, Jebu sat where he was and wept.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Like all buildings in the Sunrise Land, the Shogun's castle was draughty and cold in winter. Taniko, Hideyori, Bokuden and Ryuichi, dining privately in Hideyori's chambers, wore many layers of clothing and kept their feet near the charcoal fire burning in the kotatsu, the square well in the floor covered with a low table.

"Taniko-san," said Hideyori, "you spent many years among the Mongol barbarians. I have just received word that ambassadors from the Emperor of the Mongols have landed at Hakata on Kyushu."

Taniko's heart momentarily stopped, then began a frightened thumping. She shut her eyes, touching her fingertips to her forehead, and saw the face of Kublai Khan, huge, commanding, round and brassy as the summer sun, as vividly as if she had left his palace only yesterday. When she opened her eyes Hideyori was staring at her with a penetrating gaze remarkably like Kublai's.

"I have never seen you appear so frightened, Taniko-san," he said softly, curiously.

"My fear is of the dreadful suffering this may bring upon our people, my lord. What message do the Mongols carry?"

"They have a letter which they insist they must deliver to His Imperial Majesty. I have ordered the Defence Commissioner for the West to detain them at Dazaifu on Kyushu until we decide what to do with them."

"If their ambassadors are harmed, I have no doubt that they will make war on us, my lord. To the Mongols an ambassador is sacred."

"These islands are sacred. If they invade us, the gods themselves will fight on our side."

"Please excuse me, my lord," said Taniko politely, "but every nation believes it enjoys the favour of the gods. When I was at the court of the Great Khan I met a princess from a land far to the west, where they worship a god called Allah. Their spiritual leader was a holy man who lived in a mighty city known as Baghdad. He ordered the Mongol ambassadors slain when they came to Baghdad, and announced that Allah had declared war on the Mongols. He called on all the faithful to come to the aid of Baghdad. No one came. Neither god nor man could stop the Mongols from tearing down the walls of Baghdad in a few days. Because their ambassadors had been killed, they took out the people of Baghdad, men, women and children, and they put them all to death. Even babies. Ninety thousand died."

"What of the holy man?" asked Ryuichi. Taniko's uncle had grown much fatter in recent years. He had stopped wearing white face powder, but he still dressed in trailing robes.

"They covered him with a pile of carpets, Uncle, then rode their horses over the carpets, trampling him to death. This they did to avoid shedding his blood. The Mongols' law forbids spilling the blood of a person of high rank."

Hideyori uttered a barking laugh. "A most lawful people. And merciful."

"My lord, I do not suggest that we yield to the Mongols. It may be that we will have to fight them. But we should be aware of what would happen to us if we lost a war with them. Picture our beautiful city of Heian Kyo depopulated and our Son of Heaven trampled under carpets."

Hideyori stared at her, genuinely shocked. "Taniko, never say such a thing in my presence again. It is blasphemy to suggest that foreign barbarians could lay a hand on our sacred Majesty."

Taniko offered no answer. Hideyori appreciated her intelligence, or so he said, but not when her remarks verged on scepticism.

"Might not the Mongol army that is now on our soil turn against us?" asked Bokuden, stroking his sparse grey moustache with the tip of his index finger.

"There are barely three thousand of them left," said Hideyori, his hard features relaxing in a small smile. "They lost many in the War of the Dragons. I saw to that. They are at the opposite end of the realm from their ambassadors on Kyushu. I have sent the Mongol army to the land of Oshu to arrest my brother."

"Have you located the lieutenant, then, my lord?" Ryuichi asked. As if the might of Kublai Khan were not enough to frighten me, thought Taniko, now I must fear for the lives of Jebu and Yukio.

"I'm sure you are aware that title has long since been revoked, Ryuichi," said Hideyori irritably. "Yes, my rebellious brother has managed to escape to Oshu, where he sought refuge with the Northern Eujiwara. He managed to slip through the barrier fort at Ataka disguised as a wandering monk. I have ordered the fort commander at Ataka to commit hara-kiri to expiate for having let Yukio and his companions through. Yukio is travelling with that big Zinja monk who goes with him everywhere, and with a few other bandits. The Zinja helped us in the early stages of the War of the Dragons, but I have ordered them to withdraw their support from Yukio and they have not done so. I intend to proceed against the Order of Zinja as soon as Yukio has been captured."

Taniko remembered an afternoon in Oshu, long ago, on a hilltop overlooking the Chusonji Temple, when a few words from Jebu had brought their happiness to an end with the suddenness of an earthquake. Now, seeing in her mind the glitter of that golden roof and the temple pillars, she felt tears coming to her eyes. I must send for Moko and tell him about this at once, she thought. At last we know where Jebu is, and that, for the moment, he is alive.

"What will the Mongols do when they catch up with your brother, my lord?" she asked.

"That depends on Yukio, of course, Taniko-san," said Hideyori. "What I desire above all else is to end this wrangling between us that began when he permitted the Imperial Court to turn his head. Their orders are to arrest him and bring him here to me. If he comes peaceably, we will discuss our differences. If we can come to a meeting of the minds, I will pardon him. I have sent Prince Horigawa to Oshu along with the Mongols. He acts as my personal emissary to Lord Hidehira, urging him, out of his old friendship to my family, to help make peace between Yukio and me. However things turn out, Horigawa will then proceed to Kyushu to meet with the Mongol ambassadors." So, in spite of Hideyori's talk of marriage, Horigawa was still part of his plans, thought Taniko.

"Are you sure you can trust Prince Horigawa with such important matters, my lord?" she asked.

"Taniko," said Bokuden reprovingly. "Your conduct towards Prince Horigawa has shamed our whole family. You should not speak of him."

"The question is a sensible one," said Hideyori with a stare that crushed Taniko's father. "The answer is that Prince Horigawa, like all who serve me, knows that he had better carry out my orders

precisely if he wishes to keep his head."

Bokuden cringed and had nothing further to say.

A cold, damp wind from the sea swept across the grey plain, blowing the white cloaks of the mourners and spurring the priests to hasten their funeral chants. The long white beard of Eujiwara no Hidehira, the late lord of Oshu, fluttered in the breeze. His body, on the pyramid of logs his people had built to do him final honour, was wrapped in a dark green robe brocaded in gold with a scene of mountain pines. Lord Hidehira's eldest son, Yerubutsu, his round head topped by a tall cap of lacquered black silk, stepped forward and held a torch to the pyre. Eed by the wind, the flames leaped from log to log, and the containers of sweet-smelling oils sizzled and released their perfumes on the air. The body on the pile of logs disappeared behind a blazing orange wall.

The people of Oshu had gathered on this plain to the west of their capital, Hiraizumi, to bid farewell to their lord, who had passed into the Void at the amazing age of ninety-six. Hidehira had ruled Oshu for so long that most of his subjects could remember no earlier lord. The masses of common people were held back from the pyre by a hollow square of four thousand warriors. The samurai wore full armour, and their helmet ornaments and naked weapons reflected a steel-grey sky. In the midst of the soldiery, Lord Hidehira's large family was gathered, headed by Yerubutsu, the new chieftain of the Northern Eujiwara and lord of Oshu, surrounded by brothers, sons and nephews. All of them looked with poorly veiled hostility at their distinguished guest, Muratomo no Yukio, who stood off to one side, dressed, as were all the others, in white robes of mourning. Towering over Yukio was the monk Jebu, who added his Zinja prayers for the departed to those of the Buddhist and Shinto priests.

Little was said while the flames crackled, sending up puffs of

scented smoke to be torn to shreds by the wind before they could rise into the sky. When the pyre had burned down to ground level, Yukio approached Yerubutsu and bowed deeply, showing his reverence for his host's new rank. Yerubutsu nodded coldly.

"Now I am alone in the world," said Yukio.

"My father commanded me to protect you and to help you to become once again the greatest leader in the realm," said Yerubutsu, with no more enthusiasm than he had shown when Yukio sought shelter with Lord Hidehira after his return from China. "Even as my father was a father to you, I will be a brother to you."

"I need a brother," said Yukio, "my blood brother having become my mortal enemy."

"You will always be safe with us," said Yerubutsu, fuming away and motioning his kinsmen to follow.

Before the new chieftain would move out of earshot Yukio called, "Is it true, Lord Yerubutsu, as I hear, that an army sent by my brother is approaching the border of your land?"

Yerubutsu reddened slightly. These warriors of Oshu were not used to dissembling. With a grunt of resignation he turned again to face Yukio.

"I had intended to tell you about this army, Yukio-san, but I didn't want to worry you unnecessarily. We do not yet know who sent them, or why. In any case, it is only a small force, about three thousand. We have fifty thousand men under arms here."

"I don't mean to sound critical, Lord Yerubutsu," said Yukio with a gentle smile, "but if I had been doing your scouting for you, I would have learned much more about this army by now. As you see, with no

help at all I was able to find out about its existence, even though you so kindly tried to protect me from this disturbing knowledge. Perhaps you could spare me a small troop of samurai, and I could assist you in intelligence gathering?"

Yerubutsu's grin was like that of a cannibal demon in a Buddhist painting of hell. "We are fully able to protect you, Yukio-san. You are our guest. We wish to free you from care."

As the vast crowd drifted away from the cremation site, leaving the final burial of Hidehira's ashes to the priests of the Chusonji, Yukio and Jebu walked by themselves towards the mountains to the north.

"They want to free me from care for ever," Yukio said wryly.

"Yerubutsu has no love for you, but he would not go against his father's last wish," said Jebu. His words rang hollow in his own ears.

"The past is the past and the present is the present," Yukio said, repeating the old samurai saying. "I'm finished, Jebu-san. Yerubutsu knows it as well as I do. Hideyori will have my head if he has to knock down these mountains to get to me."

Jebu thought of his own father, relentlessly tracked down by Genghis Khan's agent, Arghun, and he felt overwhelmed by a wave of love for the small, frail-looking man beside whom he had fought for over twenty years.

"I will never desert you, Yukio."

"I will need you at the end, Jebu-san."

It was beginning to snow. Helmets of white formed on the dark boulders that littered the plain. Yukio pulled his thin white cloak tighter around him. They still had a long walk over the stormy ground

to the castle they had been given by Lord Hidehira as a refuge. Since Yukio's arrival in Oshu ten days ago, just before Lord Hidehira's final illness, Yerubutsu had been promising to furnish Yukio and his party with horses, but the horses never came. Yerubutsu and his family rode away from Hidehira's funeral, back to Hiraizumi; Jebu and Yukio had to walk. The road they followed had been cleared by an age-old succession of travellers moving rocks and gravel to one side. The path rose into bare, black hills and began to twist and turn. New-fallen snow partly obscured the way. The cold bit Jebu's toes through his deerskin boots.

"Yerubutsu means to betray me," said Yukio.

"Then let's get away from here, Yukio-san."

Yukio shook his head. "The priests say, live as if you were already dead. I've been doing that ever since Hideyori answered my plea for friendship by sending assassins. Where could I fly to? North to Hokkaido, to live among the hairy barbarians? Back to China, to throw myself on the mercy of Kublai Khan? No, Jebu, some ways of living are so wretched that death is clearly better. I've lived like a hunted animal most of my life. That was all right when I was young and had hopes of a great future for myself and for the Sunrise Land. Hideyori has closed the door to all hope. I am too old to take up the fight again."

"You're only thirty-eight, Yukio-san."

"For a samurai, that is the beginning of old age. Soon my body will start to fail me. And even now I have an old man's awareness of how foolish were the visions of my younger self. Men say my victories over the Takashi were brilliant. All I ever achieved with those brilliant victories has been to inflict a far worse tyranny than Sogamori's upon my country, a tyranny that may well last a thousand years. I fought to

restore the glory and authority of the Emperor, and now the Emperor has no more importance than a doll. Somewhere in heaven or in hell Sogamori and Kiyosi are laughing at me. I want to join them and laugh along with them, Jebu-san, at the futility of human hope."

The wind stung Jebu's face with sharp, bitter-cold particles of ice and snow. "What of your wife and children? If you stay here and fight, they will surely die when you die." Yukio's father-in-law had sent Yukio's family over in a palanquin from his estate. Yukio's son and daughter had rarely seen their father and had no idea who he was.

"Remember what happened to the women and children of the Takashi?" Yukio said. "I will stay with my wife and babies. I will not abandon them to be buried alive."

The narrow path climbed the side of a cliff. Half-blinded by the huge white flakes blowing into their faces, they walked single file, Jebu in the lead, one hand on the rock wall. Whenever the wind died down, they could see the yellow, flickering glow of lanterns higher up in the mountains. They came to a cleft that offered shelter and pressed themselves into it to rest.

"You are a warrior without peer, the bravest man and the noblest soul in all the Sunrise Land," Jebu said. "You ought to be seated in glory at the feet of the Emperor. You, and not Hideyori, that sly, self-deluded coward, should hold the reins of power. The Order taught me to expect nothing from life but a violent death. Even so, I find what is happening to you impossible to understand."

Long ago some pious traveller had carved deep in the cleft an image of a standing Buddha, his hand raised in blessing. With a smile, Yukio bowed towards the carving.

"If you Zinja believed in karma, as good Buddhists do, you would

realize that in a past life I must have done something so evil that my present troubles are only just payment for it."

"People believe in karma because they can't find any other idea that makes sense of life," Jebu said.

"Life does not make sense," said Yukio, staring impassively into the storm. "The Buddha taught that life is suffering. The Eirst Noble Truth. We suffer because we can't understand life. Injury and agony fall upon the virtuous and the wicked alike, without rhyme or reason. It is not only I who must fail and die. Hideyori will end in a grave just as surely. In the end life not only defeats us, it even defeats our efforts to understand it. We die as ignorant as when we were born." Yukio slapped Jebu on the shoulder. "Come on. It would just add to the general senselessness if we froze to death out here."

They trudged on, kicking up puffs of snow. Now the storm was dying down, and the lanterns above the log wall of the castle were steadily visible. Small though it was, the castle was well placed for defence. It was set on a platform of stone overlooking a deep gorge, and the cliffs behind it were absolutely vertical. The path approaching it was so narrow, it could be defended even by the handful of men Yukio had with him. In the dim past this had been the stronghold of a tribe of barbarians of a race that no longer existed. Later, before the Northern Eujiwara unified the land, a bandit hideaway had occupied this eyrie. Lord Hidehira had known what he was doing when he turned the place over to Yukio just before he fell ill.

Now Yukio and Jebu were close enough to see a figure in a grey fur cloak and hood watching them from the guard tower overlooking the gate. It was Yukio's wife, Mirusu, who had set the lanterns in the tower to guide them home. Jebu's feet were numb. His heart felt numb as well. A Zinja, he reminded himself, does not care whether he lives or dies. That was what troubled him. He no longer believed

that he should not care. He wanted to die caring.

Three days after Lord Hidehira's funeral, at the hour of the horse, Jebu was finishing his midday meal of rice and fish when he heard the lookout's shout from the guard tower. As he ran to the ladder, he saw Yukio in the doorway of the hall where he lived with his family, talking to Mirusu. Yukio's hall was slightly more decorative than the other buildings in the compound, having walls of rough plaster and a tile roof with upsweeping eaves. It contained a small chapel.

Climbing to the tower, Jebu saw at once a long single file of dark, mounted figures approaching at a leisurely pace up the path from the distant plain.

"I make it about a thousand," said Jebu when Yukio joined him. Jebu's heart boomed like a bronze bell in his chest. He had never felt the end of his life to be closer.

"More than enough to finish us," said Yukio, peering at the line of horsemen that disappeared and reappeared as it wound its way through the hills below the fort. "They're taller than most samurai and they have a different way of sitting a horse. Mongols, Jebu-san."

Jebu felt a momentary surge of hope. "Could they be coming to join us?"

"They have been riding under Hideyori's command for the last seven years. He sent them here."

As the riders came nearer, Jebu saw that midway down the line porters were struggling to carry a heavily curtained palanquin up the steep, snow-covered path. Some high-ranking person was coming to view Yukio's death. Jebu unslung his small Zinja bow from his shoulder and made ready to fire as soon as the first of the Mongols

came close enough, but they halted out of range. Only two kept coming, one holding up a heraldic pennon, both men without spears, bows or sabres.

"By the gracious Kwannon," Yukio exclaimed. "The one with the flag, that's Torluk, and the taller one behind him is Arghun."

By the time the Mongol leaders had reached the fort, Yukio and Jebu were standing, unarmed, before the gate on a small tongue of stone where the path to the fort ended. Arghun had to ride behind Torluk until they tethered their horses to a crooked pine growing out of the cliff wall, and approached on foot. It was seven years since Jebu had seen Arghun, but the tarkhan looked little changed, except that he now wore samurai armour, a large suit with crimson lacings that must have been built specially for him. His face under the golden-horned helmet was sharp and angular as the mountains around them, his eyes as blue and inhumanly expressionless as the Eternal Heaven the Mongols worshipped. His moustache was now entirely grey. Torluk, a compact figure who still wore Mongol heavy cavalry armour, had grown a short, thick grey beard that made him look more barbaric than ever. He glowered at Yukio and Jebu with undisguised hostility.

"Well, tarkhan and tuman-bashi, have your years in the_ Sunrise Land been rewarding?" Yukio asked. He spoke the Mongol tongue haltingly and with a heavy accent, not having used it in years. "I hear that two out of every three of your men have fallen in battle. You would have fared better under my command."

"It was you who placed us under your brother's authority," said Torluk sullenly. "He used us ill."

"As he uses all who serve him," Yukio said softly.

"Even so, your samurai have learned to speak of the Mongols with dread," said Torluk.

"You might wish to think so," Yukio said dryly. "I doubt it."

"Those of us who lived have gained much wealth," said Torluk. "This is a poor country compared to China, but there is loot to be gathered."

"Now you are going back to your homeland?" asked Yukio. "After you perform this last service for Hideyori?"

Eor the first time Arghun spoke, his voice as heavy as the black rock beside him. He answered Yukio in the language of the Sunrise Land, which he used with more fluency than Yukio did Mongol.

"You need not die, Lord Yukio. You could be restored to your former power and glory. You could see your brother lying crushed at your feet. You could be the mightiest man in these islands. The choice is yours."

"But there is a condition, isn't there, Arghun?" said Yukio lightly. "You insult me, Arghun. You think I am the sort of man who would betray his country."

"That is a foolish way to put it," said Arghun. "Your people will be harmed only if they resist us. If you lead them peacefully into the fold, you will be your country's benefactor, not its betrayer." Arghun stared piercingly down at Yukio, weighing him. What he was proposing was plain to Jebu. The only thing he couldn't understand was how Arghun could have so misjudged Yukio. Argun's gaze shifted to Jebu.

"You are his friend, son of Jamuga. You are part Mongol yourself. Persuade him. A tidal wave is rushing towards these islands. Lord Yukio can ride its crest, or he can stand against it and be smashed

flat. There are no other possibilities."

"Why is this choice offered now?" Jebu asked.

"My master's thoughts move beyond China now," said Arghun. "He has sent ambassadors to your Imperial Court to invite your Emperor to submit to him."

"We know that what the Court says to your ambassadors means nothing," said Yukio. "It is Hideyori's wishes that count. Why haven't you made this offer to the Shogun?"

"He would reject it. But even if he did agree to become deputy king of the Sunrise Land under the Great Khan, we could not be sure of him. Of all your leaders, he is the least trustworthy."

Yukio laughed with a trace of bitterness. "Again you insult me, Arghun. You think my brother would resist you, while I would deliver this land to Kublai Khan. I had not thought you were so stupid, Arghun."

"Neither do I think you stupid, Yukio," said Arghun calmly. "Your country has turned against you. Erom the Emperor down to the lowliest peasant all acquiesce in your destruction. I offer you power. You and your children and your children's children could rule the Sunrise Land under the protection of the Great Khan until the end of time."

"Do you truly expect your Mongol empire to last until the end of time?" Yukio said. "I doubt it will be in existence a hundred years from now."

"Then you badly underestimate us," said Arghun. His cold eyes took on a distant look. "Kublai Khan is the first Emperor to rule over all

China in over a hundred years, and China is but one province in his empire. Doubt not, Yukio, that he can build an empire that will encompass all lands and peoples and last for all time. Your people can share in the power, the wealth, the peace and order, the arts and wisdom of the Great Khan's new empire. Of what value is the pathetic independence of your little island kingdom compared to the benefits you can enjoy as subjects of Kublai Khan?

"You know I speak the truth, Yukio, because you have seen the power of the Great Khan. That is, in part, why he wishes you to govern the Sunrise Land on his behalf. He has not forgotten that you served him faithfully and well. And even though Hideyori may persecute you now, the people would flock to you if they thought you could win out over Hideyori. You are a great general, the best among your people. You are the only one we fear. By killing you, we can assure our victory over your people, but we would prefer to have you on our side. Save yourself and your people, Yukio. Join us."

A movement beyond Arghun caught Jebu's eye. The palanquin was rocking and bobbing towards them along the path. Warriors pressed their horses and themselves back against the cliff wall to let the gilded box and its bearers by. The person riding in it must be very lazy or very feeble, Jebu thought, to travel in such a precarious conveyance on a road barely wide enough for a horse. He wondered if armed men were concealed behind the heavy purple curtains.

"Arghun," he said, "whoever is in that palanquin, tell the bearers to stop right there, or this talk ends now."

Arghun laughed, a short, harsh laugh. "Only an old friend of yours, Jebu. Quite a harmless person." He turned and raised a gauntleted hand, and the bearers set down the palanquin.

Yukio spoke in a quiet, thoughtful tone. "You have lived among us

many years, Arghun, but you still don't understand the Sunrise Land. I doubt that there is a single man on these islands, no matter how crude or treacherous he might be, who would give your proposal a moment's consideration. Our Emperor is a god. No mere mortal, such as Kublai Khan, could ever rule over him. Our land is the home of the gods. It could never be seized by foreigners.

"To live a long time is not important. To be exalted above other men is not important. What is important is the beauty of one's life, like the beauty of a flower that appears one day and is gone the next. To go against nature is hideous, and disloyalty is against my nature. Shake me from the tree whenever you wish."

Arghun turned to Jebu. "Will you say nothing? You do not share this blind devotion to the Emperor of the Sunrise Land. Your loyalty is to the Zinja, and it crosses the seas, as does the very blood in your veins. Make your comrade see that it is folly to cling to old ties when the Great Khan offers a new age of order and prosperity."

Jebu smiled grimly. "You once preferred old ties to the Great Khan's new age, Arghun."

"I had the wisdom to change my views when I saw that the old ways are doomed to fail and disappear. Because I once made the same error Yukio now makes, I urge him now to follow my example."

"Do you think Arghun is right, Jebu-san?" Yukio asked mildly.

"No, I think you are right, that he does not understand the Sunrise Land," said Jebu. "He does not understand the Zinja, and he does not understand you and me. Perhaps we can show him the truth. This day, let us kill so many of Arghun's warriors that he will tell his Great Khan there are not enough troops in all the world to conquer the Sacred Islands."

The curtains of the palanquin parted, and a small figure wearing a lacquered silk cap, and swathed in shimmering grey fur, stepped out. He was alone and unarmed, but Jebu felt a chill between his shoulder blades as he recognized Horigawa. The prince advanced towards them with mincing steps, his feet hidden by the long grey coat that brushed the snow. His expressionless face was scaly and scarred with creases like a lizard's, his eyes sunk deep in his head. His tiny beard and moustache were silver-white. He must be nearly eighty now, Jebu thought. He realized with surprise that if he died this day, Horigawa would outlive him. He resolved that Horigawa should die that day as well.

"I heard your words, Muratomo no Yukio," said Horigawa in a piping voice like a child's flute. "You said no one in the Sunrise Land would help Kublai Khan gain rule over these islands. Excuse me, but you are wrong. This aged scholar is just such a man."

Yukio paled. "I can't believe that. I have never heard anything good about you, Your Highness, but the Sasaki are one of our oldest and noblest families. They have served our Emperor faithfully for hundreds of years. No one of your lineage could betray the Sacred Islands and the Crown."

Horigawa parted his lips in a smile. It was impossible to tell whether there were teeth, blackened in Court fashion, in his mouth, or whether they were all gone. What came out of that little orifice was pure venom.

"You know nothing about good lineage, Muratomo no Yukio. Those of your ancestors who were distant cousins of the Imperial family left the capital hundreds of years ago and intermarried, generation after generation, with bandits, peasants and barbarians. The few drops of Imperial blood that may remain in your body no more make you a member of the Imperial family than a few leaves tossed into the

ocean could turn into ch'ai. You are common. You and your kind are useful only to do work that is too bloody and dirty for your betters. You samurai tried to rise above your station. In my lifetime I have seen first Domei, then Sogamori, and now your brother presume to give orders to the Emperor himself. I am not betraying my country, because this ceased to be my country when the samurai took control of it.

"I hoped you and Hideyori would destroy each other, but you proved too stupid and easy for him to defeat, and now Hideyori is all-powerful. To bring him down I must turn to a foreigner, the Great Khan. I did not come here to witness your death, Yukio, which is now a foregone conclusion, nor the death of this huge oaf who is your friend. I came here merely to see whether you would accept Arghun's offer, which the Great Khan insisted must be made. Had you agreed to rule the Sunrise Land as the deputy of the Great Khan, it would have been a setback for me. Eortunately, you remain stupid to the end. So I will now hasten to Heian Kyo to urge the court to submit to the Great Khan. The Mongol army will enter our land, not as invaders, but at the invitation of the Son of Heaven. Led by Arghun and Torluk and their men, who know these islands and the fighting methods of the samurai, they will crush that upstart who calls himself Shogun, and obliterate the samurai. With the Great Khan's approval I will be appointed Regent, ruling the Sacred Islands in the name of the Emperor, as the Eujiwara did of old. The tribute we will be required to send Kublai Khan will be a small price to pay for the restoration of correct and honourable government." With a small smile Horigawa raised his hand in a parody of a bosatsu's blessing. "Muratomo no Yukio, I bid you farewell."

Jebu sprang. His whole attention was focused on Horigawa, who had turned away. Torluk's square, grey shape eclipsed that of the prince. Shifting the direction of his movement, Jebu checked his lunge. Grinning, Torluk drew a concealed dagger from his fur-topped

boot.

"Since each finger of an empty-handed Zinja is a dagger, I thought it not dishonourable to bring my own dagger to our parley. Come on, you devil. I've always hoped I might be the one to kill you."

"Don't trifle with me, Torluk."

Arghun had swept Horigawa off his feet like a sack of rice and was bundling him back to his palanquin. A file of archers, arrows nocked in their bows, was trotting up the mountainside. In a moment Horigawa would be gone. Torluk, shifting the dagger from hand to hand, stood blocking the way. The Self took charge of Jebu's movements. When Torluk came at Jebu with the knife in his right hand, Jebu put out his own right hand as if to ward off the blow, and Torluk grabbed Jebu's forearm with his free hand, to pull him towards the dagger point. Jebu turned and slid past his opponent's left side, twisting and lifting his arm so that Torluk's elbow locked and he was pushed off-balance. Pulling free of Torluk's grip, Jebu threw his shoulder against the smaller man's back. The shove sent Torluk reeling over the edge of the path. He rolled down the steep incline. Easter and faster he tumbled, striking shrubs and outcroppings of rock with a force that was more than flesh could bear. At last he crashed to the bottom of the ravine, and lay still, half-buried in snow. Arghun shoved Horigawa through the purple curtains. As the bearers raised the gilded box, Arghun spoke a last rumbling word to the prince.

"The man who just fell protecting you is more valuable to me than an entire army. If he is dead, your actions in Heian Kyo had better be worth that price."

Jebu started to rush the palanquin, but it was already too late. Six warriors stood along the path between him and Horigawa, their

short, horn-reinforced Mongol bows drawn, steel-tipped arrows pointing at Jebu's chest. Beyond the palanquin more archers stood ready. His armour might be able to absorb most of the arrows, but they would surely stop him before he reached Horigawa, and he would die uselessly. Once again he would have to forgo vengeance. He stood, trembling with frustrated rage, as the palanquin bobbed off down the mountainside. Arghun ordered some of his men to climb down into the ravine to retrieve Torluk. Even if the tuman-bashi had survived the fall, he would not fight in this battle.

"I could kill you both now and save the lives of many of my men," Arghun called to Jebu and Yukio. "But I remain true to our word. Go, get behind your wall. You will die soon enough."

As Jebu and Yukio, turning their backs on the Mongols, walked through the gate, Yukio said, "Jebu-san, I do not want to do any killing today. I do not want to die as I have lived. I have practised the warrior's trade as best I could. I liberated the Sacred Islands from the Takashi, which, I believe, I was sent into this world to do. It has not been my karma to enjoy ease and honours. Now all that is left to me is to depart this world. I want my leave-taking to be beautiful. I want to be with my good wife and my children for a time, to read to them the Lotus sutra which has always been my favourite. Will you make it possible for me to do that, Jebu-san? Will you hold them off long enough for me to die as I want to?"

Hot tears filled Jebu's eyes. A poem came to him, a final gift from the Self. He spoke it to Yukio.

The lone pine,

The lightning flashes. The mountain top is bare.

Yukio said, "You are the mountain top, Jebu-san." Tears were

running down his cheeks. "Men thought me a giant, but I was always standing on your shoulders." He gripped Jebu's arm hard for a moment, then turned away, his dark green robe swirling.

Jebu went to the samurai quarters to arm himself. Yukio's men had already put on their armour and helmets. When Jebu told them Yukio had refused Kublai Khan's offer of the kingship of the Sacred Islands, they were overcome with admiration. Several of them wept.

"To this day I have regretted that I did not kill myself when my father did, even though I was happy to serve Lord Yukio," said Shenzo Totomi, wiping his face with the sleeve of his under robe. "Now I am grateful that I can die with his hero-this god."

"Let no man die until he has sent a hundred of the enemy into oblivion before him," said Jebu. And Yukio's last army, twelve warriors strong, went out to meet the Mongols.

Alone, moving unhurriedly, Jebu began to don his suit of black armour. He tied the belt of his broad, short Zinja sword in the world-serpent knot, remembering the chant of the monks when Taitaro presented it to him on his initiation day: "The sword is the Self, cutting through matter and time and penetrating to true insight." He took down his naginata from the wall, a weapon so big only he could wield it. Who could withstand his naginata? Only one man, and he wasn't fighting today. As he armed himself he composed his mind, making each action part of his meditation. He repeated the statements of Zinja attitudes he had been taught as a child: I am going into battle now. I am not concerned about the outcome. I am concerned only that I fight with all the mind and strength I possess.

It is strange, though, he thought, interrupting the chain of affirmations. Even though I have entered every battle with the belief that it may be my last, I have never felt so certain that I am going to die as I do this

day. He could hear the shouts of battle and the ringing of steel, but he knew there was no hurry. Today, the Mongols would not be able to use their mass tactics. They would have to come at the fort one at a time and engage in single combat, to the delight of the samurai. Let the other men have their moments of glory before I enter the battle. He took the Jewel out of the inner pocket in his robe and revolved it in his fingertips. To his surprise, instead of clearing his mind as it usually did, the heart of the Jewel showed him Taniko. She was looking right at him, with that keen, sparkling gaze that had always de lighted him. The Jewel shows me what I have lost and so resigns me to death, he thought. Taniko blamed me for the deaths of those she loved, and now she is Hideyori's consort. Yukio will surely die today, and then I have no one to live for. The Zinja bound me to Yukio for so many years that he has come to mean more to me than the Order itself. It is good that I die with him today. He looked once again into the heart of the Jewel and saw there a glowing emptiness, the Void from which all things spring, not a darkness but a blinding light. His mind filled with that light, he tied his headcloth, shouldered his naginata and went out.

As he crossed the small yard to the gateway he heard, above the clangour of battle, the pure, sweet notes of a flute floating from the tile-roofed house where Yukio and his family prepared for death. Yukio had courted Mirusu by playing the flute under her window night after night. Perhaps it was she who had asked him to play now.

At the gate, six men were crowded together. Two more, in the watchtower, stood with their tall samurai bows ready.

"Each time they rush for the fort, one of us goes out to hold them off," said Kanefusa, a big northern warrior who was a cousin of Yukio's wife. "Their archers have killed three of our men, but we've killed many of theirs."

"Open the gate and stand aside," said Jebu, swinging the naginata down from his shoulder. As soon as the gate was open wide enough, Jebu rushed out. There were no Mongols outside. They had taken cover from the samurai arrows behind an outcropping of rock at a bend in the road. Jebu ran down the path and around the rock. A warrior in brown stood before him, mouth fallen open in astonishment. The path was not wide enough to allow Jebu to swing the naginata in a full circle. Instead, he thrust its point into the man's throat. Shouting, the next Mongol came at Jebu with a sabre. Jebu brought the cutting edge of the naginata down on the man's shoulder, sending him tumbling over the cliff after his comrade. The attackers set up an outcry as, one after another, Jebu killed them where they stood, or knocked them into the ravine. A mounted warrior charged him. Jebu sliced into the horse's belly, and animal and rider toppled from the path together. Now the Mongols were crowding one another to get away from the flashing blade at the end of the long pole, away from the figure in black armour bearing down on them. Then Arghun, on horseback, was facing him, standing in the saddle, his bow drawn, an arrow aimed at Jebu's head. Jebu stood, staring into the empty blue eyes.

"Climb down here, Arghun, and draw your sword," he called. "Let's finish it now."

"Eor you, it is finished," said Arghun, and he released the arrow. A quick chop of the naginata deflected it, but a line of bowmen fired a cloud of arrows at Jebu. Several arrowheads embedded themselves in the sharkskin and steel strips of his armour, while most rebounded from it. Not one missed altogether; the archers were expert marksmen. Grinding his teeth and chopping down arrows in flight with his naginata, Jebu retreated step by step. By the time he reached the gate his armour was bristling with arrows, and one had pierced his left shoulder. Behind the gate, panting, he let Kanefusa unlace his armoured left sleeve to pull out the arrow and bandage the

wound with a strip of paper.

"I do not want you here today, monk Jebu," Shenzo Totomi said with a grin; "Only your feats will be remembered when the chroniclers write of this battle, and the rest of us will be ignored."

"You must outdo me," Jebu answered, shrugging his arms back into the sleeve. "Then we all will be remembered."

For a time, they lost no more men. The Mongol archers could shoot at the defenders only by exposing themselves to fire from the watchtower. Thus protected, the samurai took turns single-handedly meeting the Mongol charges, striking down the attackers one man at a time. Repeatedly, Jebu charged through the gate when the Mongols attacked and rushed headlong down the path, flailing enemy warriors into the ravine with his naginata. Each of his assaults ended with his being driven back by volleys of arrows, but he was determined to break through to Arghun.

They were fighting in shadow now. The sun had crossed the narrow blue gap between the mountains above them. Jebu looked up to see bright rays stretching from the peaks to splash dazzling light on the snowy mountain opposite. He heard a rumble from above. He had barely time to shout a warning. Huge rocks-grey boulders the size of horses-were tumbling down the steep slope towards them. A picture of Yukio's charge down the hillside at Ichinotani leaped up in Jebu's mind. But these were not horses and men thundering down on them. These were insensate masses of stone capable of crushing them all and sweeping the entire fort from the ledge. There was nothing they could do but throw themselves flat. With a roar like the firing of a hundred hua pao, the avalanche was upon them. The crashing and shaking of the earth stunned Jebu, and he squeezed his eyes shut as he waited to be smashed like an ant under a sandal. At last there was a silence, almost as terrifying as the noise that preceded it.

They lay still on the ground, and Jebu realized that somehow they were still alive. He rolled to his feet. He saw the worst damage at once. The watchtower was kindling wood, the two samurai archers who had been standing in it gone. Where it had been lay a giant, jagged stone, cracked in several places from the force of its fall. Amazingly, the house that sheltered Yukio and his family was still standing. There were seven defenders left now, and no place from which an archer could provide protective fire for them. The wall itself was down in many places. Yukio had nothing between himself and his enemies but seven human bodies. One of the seven had his arm broken by a huge rock. Looking up, Jebu saw tiny figures peering down at them from a ledge far above. It was Arghun who had unleashed the avalanche.

Jebu sent Shenzo Totomi to make sure Yukio was unhurt and to report to him. Even as Totomi crossed the rock-strewn courtyard, Jebu heard the war shouts of attackers. The injured samurai ran out through the gate with his sword in his left hand and a poem on his lips. He managed to account for three of the enemy before he fell under a volley of arrows. Another samurai leaped to the top of a fallen stone and nocked an arrow with a double-bladed frog-crotch head. He let fly, and a Mongol archer screamed. The arrow had severed his hand from his wrist. The Mongols withdrew momentarily. But soon another file of them, waving sabres and spears, was running, shouting, up the path. Jebu wondered, how does Arghun get them to charge into certain death? It must be because most warriors think they will be lucky enough to survive when all around them are killed. What is called courage is often self-deception. These samurai defending Yukio, on the other hand, knew they were going to be killed. One by one they sallied forth, calmly and cheerfully, intending to keep on fighting till they were cut down. With the battle almost over, the Mongol attacks were coming faster now.

When there were only three of them left, Kanefusa said to Jebu, "You

want to be the last, don't you?"

"Yes."

"It is your right. You were with him from the beginning," said Kanefusa with a nod in the direction of Yukio's house. "See to it that my cousin Mirusu is not dishonoured." And he went out through the gate in the wall that no longer stood, to meet the next Mongol attack.

Shenzo Totomi returned from the little house, his face pale, his eyes staring as they had the night his father committed seppuki in Heian Kyo. He held a blood-dripping dagger in his hand. He seized Jebu's arm in a grip so powerful it hurt Jebu even through his armoured sleeve.

"He needs you."

Jebu stared into Totomi's wild eyes. "What is it? What has happened?"

"What do you think? What is the only thing that could happen? Go to him, in Buddha's name. There is no more time. Go to him, and let me die." With a mad shriek Totomi drew his sword and charged through the gate.

Jebu turned away. The robe under his armour was soaked with sweat despite the chill of the mountain air. They had been fighting for hours, and the very bones in his body seemed ready to crack with weariness. Erom head to foot he bled and burned with the pain of innumerable wounds. Yet the pain was welcome, telling him that his body was still able to feel. The Buddhists were right when they said that life is suf fering, but they did not acknowledge that it is suffering that lets people know they are alive.

Yukio is right, he thought. Our bodies are getting old. But an hour from now at the most this body, my body, will be destroyed; I will cease to exist. It is impossible for me to think of it. I don't want to die, do I? After all these years of being trained to kill, of facing death and dealing out death to others, I still want to live. I am not a good Zinja.

He climbed the steps to the front door of Yukio's house. There was silence and darkness within. The chapel was on the second floor. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw four rolled-up sleeping mats, with wooden pillows beside them, and a few wooden boxes containing what little clothing and possessions Yukio's family had managed to bring here. On top of one of the boxes an Empress doll sat regally, her flowing, brocaded robe glittering.

Jebu climbed the ladder to the chapel, calling hoarsely, "Yukio. Yukio-san." As his head rose above the chapel floor he saw, first, a tiny oil lamp flickering in front of a many-coloured porcelain statue of Kwannon, seated. Then he noticed that the goddess was smiling gently down on what appeared to be four dark bundles of clothing. Jebu felt his stomach clench as he recognized the figure lying on the polished wooden floor.

"Jebu-san?" Yukio's voice came in a whisper.

"Yukio. You are still alive?"

"Yes-unfortunately." There was a faint chuckle. "I asked Shenzo Totomi to advise me on the best way to kill myself. He said that all samurai down through the ages would admire me if I did it as his father had in Heian Kyo, by hara-kiri. But he did not tell me this belly-cutting would hurt so much. Or that I would take so long to die. And what is the use of it? No one will know that I died this way, suffering abominably. No one knows except Shenzo Totomi and you. He is probably dead already. You will soon be killed as well. So, who will

there be to tell the world of my so-glorious end?"

"Is Mirusu-gone? And your boy and girl?" Jebu had wept before, saying goodbye to Yukio. Now his eyes were dry. The shock of this took him beyond tears.

"Mirusu gave each of them the gift of oblivion. It was her final act of love for them. Neither Totomi nor I had the heart for it. Then, not wishing to see me die, she begged Totomi to stab her in the heart. At least he yielded and ended her life. I held her hand while he drove his sword into her. Then I took the kodachi that Mirusu used to cut the children's throats, and with it I opened my belly."

Even though it was too dark to see the terrible sight, Jebu turned away from the shadowy figure lying on the floor beside him. He was divided between anguish for Yukio and rage at his friend for being willing to inflict a mortal wound on himself, for causing the deaths of his wife and children. The Zinja code and that of the samurai were so far apart. But it would do no good to rail at Yukio now.

"Can I help you somehow, Yukio-san?"

Yukio gave a deep groan. Eor a long time Jebu could hear nothing but his gasping, heavy and rhythmic as ocean waves. Speech must be an enormous effort, but it was worth it, perhaps, because soon Yukio would not be able to speak at all, would never speak again.

"I will die slowly and in great agony, Jebu-san, or I will die quickly and easily. It is up to you."

Jebu's body went cold. "You can't ask that of me."

"If not you, who can I ask? Totomi would have done it, but I wanted you. You knew that some day you would have to do this last favour for me, didn't you? You knew all along. Your Zinja rule lets you slay

enemies by the hundreds. Surely, then, you can give death as a kindness to a friend."

Jebu began to unlace his chest armour. He remembered that he was carrying, in a secret pocket, the one drug in the Zinja pharmacopoeia that could help Yukio now. He knelt beside his friend and took his hand. The smell of blood was overpowering.

"Yukio, I can free you from your pain. I can give you a potion. You will fall asleep at once. I will stay here with you until you have passed over. Wait a moment. I'll get some wine."

Yukio's hand squeezed Jebu's with surprising strength, crushing the knuckles together painfully. "No, I refuse, Jebu. I absolutely refuse to die that way."

"Why?" Jebu's voice was hoarse with suffering. "Must I kill you? Is that the only way?"

"I will not die in my sleep. A filthy death. I want to know what is happening to me. To die as a man. Not an unconscious piece of meat." Yukio's words came between gasps. "I want to feel the sword. It is the cleanest way to die."

Jebu felt something break within him. "All right. It will be the sword, then, as you ask."

"You must hurry, please, Jebu-san. They will be here any moment."

Grief was an iron ball in Jebu's chest. He had come to love this man even more than he loved his father, Taitaro. He put his hand on his sword hilt and began to slide the blade from its scabbard.

"I do this only because I know I won't have to suffer long," he said. "No matter how terrible the load of sorrow I bear, it will be but for a

moment. Outside the chapel Arghun and his men wait to give me peace."

"We will meet again in another life, Jebu-san," Yukio whispered. "We Zinja do not believe that men and women are reborn after they die. Nirvana is death."

"Warriors like us are not worthy of Nirvana. We will see each other again. Strike now, Jebu. You will be as much a bringer of mercy as the goddess there who watches us. Your steel will end my agony."

Once again a poem made its presence known in Jebu's mind, a last verse to share with Yukio. Now he was able to weep. His eyes burnt as the tears flooded them.

Together we roamed,

Braved the roaring ocean waves, The hot desert sands.

Eaintly, but promptly, Yukio's voice came back with lines to complete the poem:

Together our swords in hell Will send its guardians howling.

Why must such a mind, that could compose the ending of a poem in an instant, be obliterated in an instant? Jebu still could not relinquish his belief that life, even on the worst terms, was preferable to death. But there was no more time to deliberate. He drew his short, heavy sword from its sheath and knelt beside Yukio, so he could see his friend's exposed neck in the dim light. He avoided looking at the dreadful wound below.

"Strike," Yukio whispered, "and burn this house down."

Many times Jebu had gone into a trance in battle and had killed

without knowing what he was doing; later he was unable to remember how he had fought. This moment was not like that. Just as Yukio wanted to be aware of death, so Jebu refused to draw his mind away from his task. Never had he lived so utterly in the here and now. This room, his friend's body, his sword, all seemed to glow with the same fire he had seen often in the depths of the Jewel of Life and Death. Still on his knees, Jebu raised his arms over his head and brought the sword down. The Zinja sword fell truly. Muratomo no Yukio was dead.

Jebu stood up quickly. He had not expected to feel this strange relief, this sense of lightness. Eor nearly twenty years he had fought beside his friend, feared for him, rejoiced in his victories, wept with him, worked to strengthen him, tried to protect him, planned for his future. Now Yukio's life was ended, and Yukio's servant was dismissed. Eor good or for evil, the terrible task was over. At the same time, he knew that without Yukio to give it meaning, life was impossible for him. He felt this lightness because he was empty inside, a hollow tree, dead and ready to fall before the first wind.

What were Yukio's final words? "Strike, and burn this house down." The command made Jebu think of the verses of the Lotus sutra: "In the Three Worlds there is no rest; it is even as a house that has taken fire." He picked up the little oil lamp that burned on a table before Kwannon's statue and tipped it, spilling a thin trail of burning oil along the polished wood floor to the plaster wall. The swirling orange flames leaped up, and the chapel was brightly lit. Jebu saw clearly the lavender and pale blue robes of Yukio and Mirusu and their children, the eight scrolls of the Lotus sutra spattered with blood, the sweet white face and pink cheeks of Kwannon. The goddess was the only living thing left in the room. A shame to let her be destroyed. Jebu picked Kwannon up and, cradling .the heavy porcelain figure in his arms, climbed down the ladder to the first floor of Yukio's quarters. I have only a few breaths of life left to me, he

thought.

He emerged from the building to find himself staring into a ring of surprised Mongol faces. They expected me to commit seppuku in there with Yukio, Jebu realized. A strange sight I must look, in bloodstained black armour with arrows sticking out all over me, and instead of a weapon, I hold a statue of the goddess of mercy.

The blunt tip of an armour-piercing arrow struck the statue squarely. With a ringing sound the porcelain goddess vanished. His arms were empty and a thousand white shards lay at his feet. She was gone, irrevocably, just as Yukio was gone for ever. The devastating realization of the loss of Yukio struck him with the force of a spear thrust. He staggered backwards. Ignoring the arrows that bounced off or stuck in his armour, moving neither slowly nor hastily, he turned and went back into the burning building. His naginata was leaning against a wall where he had left it. As soon as he held it, he felt a sensation of enormous power coursing into his hands, through his arms and shoulders, spreading throughout his entire body, as if a superior being were taking him over. Not Kwannon, but Hachiman, the god revered by all the Muratomo. He came out of the house at a run, swinging the naginata in a circle, feeling it bite through leather armour and flesh and bone, hearing screams.

He gave himself over to the forms and movements of battle that he had been practising from the time he was old enough to stand upright. The warriors surrounding him fell back before the whirling blade. They were veterans enough to read the face of the giant advancing upon them; they had seen men possessed by battle madness before. They knew that no ordinary soldiers, no ordinary weapons, could bring down a man in that state. They were cautious, because this was the last enemy they had to finish. None wanted to die this close to victory.

A lucky blow of a battle-axe cut through the staff of Jebu's naginata, and the Mongols shrieked in triumph as the blade clanged to the ground. Jebu drew the sword that had killed Yukio and rushed his opponents. They tripped over one another, trying to escape, and many fell to the sword that looked so small in the hands of the huge man who wielded it. Steadily, sword in one hand, naginata staff in the other, Jebu drove them back past the ruined palisade to the narrow path where their numbers were useless to them, forced as they were to come at him one at a time. One at a time, they died.

Jebu was aware that some had slipped past him and were behind him in the ruins of the fort. He glanced over his shoulder and saw them hurrying in and out of the blazing building where Yukio had died. They're after Yukio's head, he thought. He wanted to return to the fort and stop them, but he could not turn his back. What happened to Yukio's head no longer mattered, anyway. Nothing mattered now. Jebu was beyond wanting or not wanting. He felt a peace and a bliss beyond comprehension. His mind was filled with a pure, endless white light that blotted out every individual thought or feeling. At the same time, the world around him, its sights and sounds, its feel and its smells, was more vivid than it had ever been at any time in his life. In the midst of the howling Mongols he was perfectly happy, incredibly happy. There would never be a better time for him to die.

He had become the Self. In battle he could make no mistake. He was his opponents, and he was the sword in his hand. Time stretched towards infinity. The Mongols attacked him ever so slowly, as if wading through water. It was no trouble at all to drive his sword past their clumsy defences. There was even time for him to say the Prayer to a Eallen Enemy for each opponent who joined the pile of bodies in the ravine. This was the state Jebu's masters in the Order called ultimate insight, that ecstatic condition in which the individual achieved complete union with the Self and could see the universe

through the eyes of the Self. A single instant of ultimate insight, he had been taught, was worth a hundred lifetimes of ordinary consciousness.

The Mongols were backing away from him now, not attacking, and only their restricted position prevented them from running in panic. Each knew this superhuman being was going to kill him. Jebu was almost to the bend in the path now. It was growing darker. In winter, night fell in these mountains at about the hour of the ape. If he lasted until darkness was total, there was actually a chance of his escaping. At night, in these mountains, it would be nearly impossible to track down a single man. The thought disappointed him. He no longer wanted to live.

The intrusion of desire into his mind was enough to bring him down from the peak of ultimate insight. It was an ordinary warrior, sad, wounded, tired, who rounded the outcropping shielding the main body of Arghun's troops from him. Beyond the rock the path was empty. The roadway curved in a long, concave arc, and at the other end of that arc, shadowy in the twilight, a line of mounted bowmen stood up in their stirrups, eyes narrowed, arrows unwaveringly pointed at him. At the head of the line sat Arghun on a stocky black Mongol pony, his deep red cloak rippling in the wind.

"Kill me!" Jebu roared, and held his arms out wide.

His face hard and immobile, Arghun raised a gauntleted hand and brought it down in a sweeping motion. Bowstrings thrummed in unison, a deep musical note that echoed from the rock walls. Arrows whistled and shrieked across the ravine. His arms still outstretched as if to gather the arrows in, Jebu felt their impact all over his body. There was no pain, only uncountable numbing shocks. He saw Taniko looking at him with her bright eyes, just as he had seen her in the heart of the Jewel earlier today. His last thought was: the Jewel. I

should have thrown it away. Now Arghun will get it. Then he lost consciousness as he began the long fall into darkness.

PART TWO

THE BOOK OF TANIKO

Those who hold rank and power claim that the gods have set them up to rule over the people. In truth, rulers become rulers by tricking the people with just such stories as this, and by using force to make them submit. Whoever says the gods are responsible for the privilege of the few and the oppression of the many, slanders the gods.

THE ZINJA MANUAL

Chapter One

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

The wisteria blooms cluster like purple clouds among the pines. The cherry blossoms on the grounds of the Shogun's castle are a delight. The sweet songs of the bush warbler beguile the ear. In the hills the creeks have become rivers, and the frozen silence of the waterfalls has turned to thunder. The roads to the north-west are open again. Already parties of samurai have set out in the direction of the land of Oshu. All this winter I have buried my dread under a calm exterior, even as the land lay buried under snow.

There has been much to occupy me and help me to keep calm. Continuously, I work on my kung-an. Driven by fear of Eisen's mockery and scolding, I try to become the face I had before I was born, for I dread going to him without an answer. The chapel Eisen built himself in the woods above Kamakura has become part of the landscape. Pine seedlings grow from the roof tiles, and moss is spreading over the walls. Sametono, who is now officially my foster son, always goes with me to see Eisen. These two have a way of talking to each other that has nothing to do with speech. It is all winks and growls and gestures and strange cries. They greet each other with shouts of "Kwatz!"

My cousin Munetoki has become Sametono's kenjutsu master. Hideyori's suspicion is like a drawn bow pointed relentlessly at our hearts, and I fear for Sametono's life, should he show that he has his father and grandfather's proficiency with the sword. Still, he must learn the way of the warrior, unless he is to end up as a monk.

Hideyori has said nothing to me at all about Oshu. He busies himself with his two favourite occupations, statecraft and religion. The

Bakufu is now as highly organized and has as many officials as the court of Kublai Khan. Whenever weather permits, Hideyori rides to the temple of Hachiman Dai-Bosatsu, where he is building a stupa, a holy tower, dedicated to his mother. I never met the lady, who died in exile after Domei's insurrection, but Hideyori insists that she was a saint. I am sure his hatred of Yukio must arise, in part, from the rivalry between his mother and Yukio's mother, my friend Lady Akimi.

Third Month, twentieth day

YEAR OF THE DOG

Visiting Taniko in the women's hall of the Shogun's palace, Ryuichi and his burly eldest son, Munetoki, accepted ch'ai from her with courteous compliments. When, she asked herself, had she seen that uneasy expression, a strange mixture of sorrow, shame and apology, on Uncle Ryuichi's face? Long ago she had seen it, so long that she could not place it, even though the sight of it filled her with terror.

Where was Sametono? She wanted to draw him close to her.

"That is very handsome handwriting," said Ryuichi politely, gesturing with his cup towards the alcove where Taniko had hung a large sheet of pale green paper. On it, Sametono had written a verse of the Diamond sutra, suggested by Eisen as a calligraphic exercise:

Though we speak of goodness, the Tathagata declares that there is no goodness. Such is merely a name.

Taniko lowered her eyes modestly. "It is the poor work of my unworthy son."

"Sametono, madame, may grow up to be one of the finest swordsmen the Sunrise Land has ever seen," said Munetoki fiercely. The epicene Ryuichi could hardly have produced a son more unlike

him than Munetoki. Munetoki's voice was always on the verge of a parade-ground shout. He sounded angry even when he was at his most benevolent. His eyes blazed and his thick moustache bristled. Seated on cushions in Taniko's chambers, he had the air of a resting tiger. Since Taniko's father, Bokuden, had no sons of his own, Munetoki was heir apparent to the chieftainship of the Shima clan. Sametono adored him.

"I am happy that my son's efforts please his sensei," said Taniko softly. Then she looked up quickly and fixed Munetoki's piercing brown eyes with her own. "I would prefer that you not praise the boy too highly or too publicly, Munetoki-san. It might prove embarrassing."

Munetoki glowered at her as if she had said something outrageous. "Madame does not realize that there are samurai in the western provinces who would cheerfully give their lives for her. There are such men all over the Sunrise Land." Taniko remembered the old samurai in the capital, years earlier, who had died defending her and Atsue from Motofusa's retainers.

She dropped her eyes. "The first loyalty of all samurai is to the Shogun and the Bakufu. The Shogun in his vigilance against threats to the peace of the realm finds it hard to forget that Sametono is the last of Sogamori's line, or that we Shima are a branch of the Takashi. I do not wish the Shogun to be unnecessarily vexed."

"Concerning the peace, Lord Hideyori has less to fear now," said Ryuichi with that same expression of sorrow. Now she recognized his look. It was the same he had worn the day she learned Kiyosi had been killed.

"My honoured uncle and cousin did not visit me to admire my son's calligraphy and praise his swordsmanship," Taniko said, fear

tightening its cold grip on her heart.

"Taniko-san," Ryuichi said slowly. "Long ago I failed you by allowing you to hear terrible news from the lips of a stranger. I vowed that if the occasion should arise, I would not play the coward again."

Taniko put her hand to her heart. "Tell me quickly, Uncle."

"The monk Jebu and the Lieutenant Muratomo no Yukio are dead."

The cup Taniko was holding crashed to the floor. Munetoki's hand was on her arm instantly, steadying her.

"How clumsy of me," Taniko murmured as she wiped the pale green liquid from the polished floorboards. "What were you saying, Uncle?"

Ryuichi went on. "I know that you cared deeply for both men. I wanted to be the one to tell you."

"Please tell me how Jebu-how they died," Taniko whispered.

Munetoki answered her, his voice softer than usual. "Most heroically, as the story is told. The Lieutenant and twelve followers, among them the giant monk Jebu, held out for half a day against a thousand Mongols. The Zinja in particular performed superhuman feats in battle. At last Yukio and his men succumbed, but not before they had killed over three hundred Mongols. Yukio and his wife and children all committed seppuku. The story will be told down through the ages."

I can't believe Jebu is dead, Taniko thought. Aloud, she said, "With so many against so few, might not one or two have slipped away unnoticed?"

"They were trapped in a fort on the side of a said Munetoki. "An easy place to defend, but impossible to escape from. They are certainly all

dead." He spoke with some satisfaction. By Munetoki's martial standards, if any of Yukio's men had got away, it would have tarnished the glory of the event.

"Besides, the heads of Yukio and Jebu have been identified," said Ryuichi sadly. "As soon as the snow melted in the passes, Lord Yerubutsu of Oshu sent a delegation of his warriors with the heads of Yukio and Jebu preserved in black-lacquer boxes filled with sake. When they arrived here, the Shogun was occupied with the rites dedicating the new stupa to his mother. It would have been unseemly for him to inspect severed heads. So he delegated my honoured brother, Lord

Bokuden, to go and see the heads. Then they were burnt on the beach." His face took on an even more miserable look. "I'm sorry, Taniko-san."

I will not scream, Taniko told herself. I will hold myself together. This has happened to me before, and I have lived through it. I will live through it this time. I will not scream.

"Do you know Moko the shipbuilder, Uncle? Please send him to me. He was devoted to Jebu and Yukio. I want to do the same service for him that you did for me-make certain he does not get this news from a stranger."

"A common carpenter is your friend, Cousin?" said Munetoki with a puzzled frown.

"A very old and dear friend," said Taniko, feeling a sob swell in her chest until it threatened to tear her apart. "I need to be alone now. Will you excuse me?"

After they left, she sat still for a long time. A maid came to remove

the ch'ai service, but Taniko waved her away. Alone, she poured water into the brazier under the pot to extinguish the coals. Thus life ends-a little fire that is suddenly overwhelmed and snuffed out. The windows of her room faced south, and bars of sunlight streamed through the lattice. Whenever I saw the sun, she thought, it always comforted me to think that wherever he was, the same sun was shining on him. It shines on him no more. Cut his head off and put it in sake, and then burn it on the beach! Oh no, no. Yukio's wife killed herself to die with him. Where is the girl Shizumi? I must try to get word to her as well as to Moko. She will probably want to kill herself, too. If only I could have died with Jebu. And yet I have only myself to blame for being apart from him. I held Kiyosi's and Atsue's deaths against him. I felt I couldn't live with him. I was a fool. Perhaps if I had stayed with him he would not have been killed with Yukio. Oh, Jebu, Jebu. I never knew how much I loved you until now.

She stood, holding her fists clenched at her sides, and screamed his name, so loud and so hard that it hurt her throat. Then she collapsed like a bird, arrow-shot in flight. She lay curled on the floor, weeping violently. Her maids rushed in. With little cries of pity and dismay they washed her face with cold water and put quilts over her. Not knowing what was wrong, they wept along with her even so, pressing their flowing sleeves against their faces. Taniko was unable to speak to the women, but part of her mind was clear. She was surprised at the sharpness of her grief, the violence of her reaction. She had thought that Zen somehow protected a person from the suffering of life. Eisen seemed so resilient, so calm and cheerful, that she had expected Zen would make her that way, too. That she hurt so much seemed almost a betrayal.

She lay helpless, tortured by a grief ,that would not let her eat or sleep or talk to anyone. Sametono came and tried to talk with her and ran out of the room crying when she could not answer him. He did not come back, and one of the maids, who realized that Taniko

could hear and understand even though she did not speak, told her that her Uncle Ryuichi and Aunt Chogao had taken the boy to live with them for a time.

Eor four days she remained in that condition. Then she fell into a deep sleep, dreamless, almost a coma. When she woke, the first thing she saw was the terrified face of a maid, saying that Lord Hideyori was on his way to see her.

She felt beyond fear. She remembered Hideyori's rage when the dancer Shizumi publicly avowed her love for Yukio. How must he have felt on learning that Taniko, the woman he wanted to marry, was prostrate with grief at the news of Yukio's and Jebu's deaths? Having no idea of what had existed between her and Jebu, he would think, of course, that her grief was for Yukio. And some of it was. She had come to like Yukio, in China, and next to the Order, he had been Jebu's whole life. She might have given Jebu a reason to go on living after Yukio's death. But she had not. Jebu died believing that she did not love him. She began to cry again. It was thus that Hideyori found her, when he hurried into her chamber before the maids could give her warning.

Despite the suddenness of his entry, sliding back the shoji screen with his own hand, he looked unhappy rather than angry. He wore billowing white silk robes of mourning with a taboo tag, signifying that he was bereaved and was to be left alone, dangling from his black cap. No sword hung from his belt.

Taniko pressed her forehead to the floor. "Eorgive me, my lord, for being so poorly prepared to receive you."

He knelt before her, seizing her hand in a powerful grip. A fire seemed to burn in the black depths of his eyes.

"Do you hate me, Taniko-san?"

"I? Hate you?" Eor a moment the question bewildered her. Then she understood. He was, after all, the man responsible for the deaths of Jebu and Yukio. Why didn't she hate him? Because, she realized, this grief left her no room for vengefulness. Now she could see how the loss of Kiyosi and later, of Atsue, had embittered her, turning her against the man she had loved most in her life. Now she understood it did not matter who had killed Jebu. It was her karma that the men she loved must die in battle, and it was foolish to hate those who killed them.

Hideyori said, "I realize that it was Yukio who rescued you from the Mongols and brought you back safely to the Sunrise Land. You owed him a great debt of gratitude. I also owe him a debt for doing that. Otherwise I would never have met you again. I spoke violently against him to you. But that was only to use your wisdom to test my fears about Yukio. You were the only one who would argue with me."

He gestured down at his white robe. "Like you, I mourn him. I swear to you I did not want him killed. Do not blame me for his death, because now I need you more than ever, Taniko-san."

I suppose I need you, too, Hideyori, Taniko thought. At least, I need your goodwill if Sametono, who is now all I have left in the world, is to live. How amusing that Hideyori expected me to hate him, and I expected him to hate me. But how can he mourn Yukio? How can he say that he did not want him killed? What a horrible world this is. When Sametono reaches manhood, if he lives that long, I will kill myself.

"Do you truly regret your brother's death, my lord?" she asked.

"By the Three Buddhas, I swear I gave strict orders to Arghun not to

harm him, only to arrest him and bring him to me. Yukio was a good soldier who did not understand how the courtiers were using him in their intrigues against me."

"I'm sure he would have come to you any time you sent for him and promised him safe conduct."

"He would have come with an army, Taniko-san. How could I have stood against him?" Hideyori's eyes widened with candour. "You know I'm not half the general he was. He would have overthrown me, taken over the country, and then not known what to do with it. Under his administration, the Sunrise Land would have fallen to pieces. I am building a nation to last forever. But now that he is dead, I can admit that I would not be where I am were it not for him. When they brought his head to Kamakura along with that of his friend, the mighty Zinja, I made an excuse that viewing the heads would defile the rites I was performing for my mother's memory. Actually, I was too heartbroken to look at my brother's head, or that of Jebu, the Zinja. He saved my life once, long ago. I was told that even your father, Lord Bokuden, was moved to tears when he opened the black boxes and gazed upon the pitiable contents."

I will not believe that, Taniko thought.

"Who does not grieve over Yukio's death?" Hideyori went on. "He was beloved throughout the Sunrise Land, so my reports tell me. Even though his life ended in failure, the people admire him. They think of me as a coldhearted murderer when I was only trying to do good. I must punish Arghun and Yerubutsu, to prove that I did not want Yukio to die. I must avenge him, Taniko-san." Unease flickered in his eyes. "I fear his angry ghost."

"His ghost?"

"Yes, his and the monk Jebu's. Such powerful spirits are not easily put to rest. I must avenge them, to placate them." He clenched his fist. "Yerubutsu will be dealt with when the time is ripe, but Arghun's rampaging through this country must be stopped at once. His army puts the whole nation in jeopardy."

"Because of the Great Khan's designs?"

Hideyori bowed his head in agreement. "Immediately after the death of Yukio, Arghun and his troops rode in haste out of Oshu. They are now somewhere' in the mountains of Echizen province, only a few days' ride from the capital. Prince Horigawa, your husband"- he made a wry face-"hurried on ahead to Heian Kyo by the Hokurikudo Road. Shortly after his arrival in the capital, the Imperial Court invited the Mongol ambassadors at Dazaifu to come to Heian Kyo and present their Great Khan's letter to our Emperor. I had expressly ordered that they not be allowed to come to the capital. This would not have happened if Go-Shirakawa were still alive. There are no wise heads in Heian Kyo now." The wily old Retired Emperor had left the world late last year, in the same month as Lord Hidehira of Oshu.

"What does the Great Khan's letter say?" Taniko asked.

"I have not seen a copy yet."

It was good to have something to think about besides her grief. "It must be a demand that we submit to the Great Khan."

Hideyori eyed her narrowly. "And if it is, how do you think we should reply?"

"That may be the most difficult decision you will ever have to make in your life, my lord. As I have warned you before, those nations who have resisted the Mongols have been destroyed utterly."

"Then you think we should yield?"

"There is no salvation in that course, either. I have seen what Mongol rule does to nations. If we give in to them without a struggle, they will end by plundering these islands from end to end and taking all our men to fight in their wars. They will impose their laws on us in everything from religion to the way we dress. We who called ourselves the children of the gods will cease to exist as a people."

"But if we do decide to resist, how should we answer this letter from Kublai Khan? Should we be conciliatory and try to gain time?"

"I think not, my lord. That would only create conflict and confusion in our own ranks. If you intend to fight the Mongols, send for their ambassadors. Have them come to Kamakura and present their letter to you. Then have them publicly beheaded. There will be no turning back after that. To the Mongols, the killing of an ambassador is unforgivable. The whole country will have to unite behind you to fight the invaders, because the only alternative will be our total annihilation."

Hideyori took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "That is very drastic advice, Taniko-san."

"My lord, we are threatened by the greatest power the world has ever known. The Great Khan has hundreds of thousands of troops and hundreds of huge ocean-going ships. The whole country must be united as one man, or we are surely doomed."

"I shall offer up many prayers to Hachiman, asking his help in making this decision," Hideyori murmured.

"Prince Horigawa is obviously in league with the Mongols, my lord," Taniko went on. "He always has been. He will intrigue on their behalf

with the Imperial Court. You must kill him."

"And rid you of an ardently undesired husband?" said Hideyori with a small smile. "Well, I do not wish him to remain your husband, either." His eyes darkened. "I have promised myself and you that you will be my wife. I need you at my side. I must make decisions that will determine the future of the Sunrise Land for all time. You can help me."

"I only tell you what must be obvious to any person of sense, my lord."

"This talk has been a great relief to me, Taniko-san." Hideyori stood up. "I have dreaded seeing you ever since I learned that Yukio and Jebu were dead. I am happy to see that you bear your grief with wisdom and patience."

After he was gone she shed more tears for Jebu. That was a wound she would carry with her to the grave, one that no one would know about. Yet, how puzzling that Hideyori had not only permitted her to grieve, but had even mourned for Yukio himself. How odd that his need for her seemed to override every other consideration.

She was hungry. She called a maid and asked for food. She was coming back to life. She still had Sametono. She had to see him through to manhood. Then, as she had decided, she would commit seppuku. There was one other thing, the Mongol threat. She would not leave this world of her own volition until she had done what little she could to help defend the Sunrise Land.

Sametono came to her later that day, and she tried to explain to him, in part, the cause of her sorrow.

"Do you mean that the big warrior monk who saved me from the Rokuhara was killed?" Sametono's small face was stricken. Tears

streamed down his round cheeks. "I have often dreamed of him. I want to grow up to be just like him."

To comfort the child and herself, Taniko went to the cedar chest that held her most precious belongings. Sametono's eyes widened as she brought out a sword wrapped in silk. She removed the covering and slowly drew the gleaming, ancient blade part-way from its scabbard.

"This sword is called Kogarasu," Taniko said. She told him its history. "Some day when you are grown you will be able to wear it. Eor now you may come to me and secretly visit Kogarasu from time to time. But you must never let Lord Hideyori know about this. If he ever sees you carrying Kogarasu, that will be your last day on earth." She held the hilt out to him and he drew the two-edged sword all the way from its scabbard. Even though it was as long as he was tall, he held it up with the ease he had already acquired through kenjutsu

Two days later, Taniko was well enough to visit Eisen. Eor once she went without Sametono. This time she wanted to unburden herself of a private grief. She told the monk of Jebu's death, and he listened, unsmiling.

When she was finished he asked, "What has this taught you?"

"Taught me? It has left me with a question, sensei. I have been studying with you for years. I expected my work in Zen to make me stronger to bear sorrow. When I heard the news of Jebu's death I screamed and collapsed. I have made up my mind, once my last duties are fulfilled, to put an end to my miserable life. Why doesn't Zen help me?"

Eisen smiled. "There was an abbott who saw deeper into realization than any person of his day. He was a living Buddha. One day this

holy man was travelling on a pilgrimage and robbers set upon him. His screams as they stabbed him to death could be heard six provinces away." Eisen looked piercingly at her. "Do you understand?"

"No, sensei."

"When you understand, my child, you will see the face you had before you were born."

Chapter Two

Standing on the parapet of the outer wall of the mighty castle Hideyori had built for himself, Taniko watched the approach of the procession bringing the Mongol embassy from the Tokaido Road into Kamakura. A row of samurai stood on the wall a respectful distance behind her. Tears stung her eyes as she remembered how she and Jebu, when she was a young girl, had ridden out of Kamakura to the Tokaido. Beside her, just barely able to see over the stone ramparts, Sametono squeezed her hand excitedly.

"Are those Mongol soldiers, Mother?"

"No, Sametono-chan. Ambassadors do not travel with their own troops. Those are our samurai, sent to escort the emissaries."

Messengers riding ahead of the diplomatic party had brought disturbing news from Heian Kyo. The Imperial Court Council of State had met with the Mongols. The councillors were deeply grieved by the barbarous, contemptuous, well-nigh sacrilegious letter from Kublai Khan, which had claimed divine right to the title Son of Heaven, but, as Kublai had doubtless foreseen, its threat of annihilation should they fail to submit had thrown them into a panic, and they had decided to yield to the Great Khan's demands. A letter would be sent by the seven-year-old Emperor Kamayama acknowledging Kublai Khan's authority over him. The Emperor would send the tribute required. And the Imperial Court would permit a Mongol army to enter the country and set up a garrison near Heian Kyo.

Undoubtedly, Taniko thought, Arghun and his veterans of five years of warfare in the Sacred Islands would form the nucleus of that occupying army. The courtiers neither knew, nor would they have

cared, that the samurai and the common people who had got wind of the capitulation were furious. One reason Hideyori had sent five hundred horsemen and two thousand foot soldiers to escort the ambassadors and the Court officials accompanying them was to protect them from the outraged populace. Only Hideyori himself knew what he would do when he met the ambassadors. He had asked Taniko's advice, but had not confided his plans to her. He might elect to do nothing at all. Officially, this visit by the ambassadors was just a courtesy call on the Supreme Commander of the Emperor's armed forces. Instead of speaking for the Sunrise Land, as Taniko had hoped he could, Hideyori was expected merely to ratify the decision of Heian Kyo. The Imperial Court had chosen to give in to the Mongols without consulting him.

Erom the height on which Hideyori's castle was built, Taniko could see the entire procession winding its way in from the Tokaido. The din of drums, gongs and flutes grew even louder. Now the first foot soldiers, running rhythmically, were crossing the bridge over the wide moat, passing through the heavily fortified main gate of the castle, which was only opened for ceremonial occasions like this. Rows of white Muratomo banners on the walls waved at similar banners strapped to the backs of officers in the escort. Many of the people lining the streets of Kamakura held smaller white flags. They cheered for the samurai as they passed, but watched in sullen silence the heavily curtained, gilded palanquins bobbing along in the midst of the parade.

When the palanquins had passed through the main gate, Taniko and Sametono went down the steps from the walls. Inside the wall there was a succession of lovely gardens meant to resemble those on the grounds of the Imperial Palace at Heian Kyo. These gardens, however, had a second purpose. They were cleverly arranged to form a maze in which any attacker would get lost and could easily be trapped. As Hideyori's officers led the embassy through this

circuitous route, Taniko, Sametono and the samurai escorting her hurried through a secret shortcut to the central hall. Taniko was anxious to see the Mongol ambassadors; she wondered if she would recognize any of them from her days at Kublai Khan's court.

Through a narrow gate she entered the courtyard before the Shogun's central hall. She did not expect that the first dignitary she would see descending from a palanquin, stepping on the back of a prostrate servant, would be Prince Sasaki no Horigawa. Surrounded by a ring of samurai in armour, they stared at each other across an expanse of white gravel. The little eyes in the wrinkled face sparkled with malice as Horigawa gave her a mocking bow.

"How many years has it been since I had the pleasure of meeting my esteemed wife? You have aged gracefully, lady."

A few years ago, had she encountered Horigawa, she might have tried to kill him with the handiest weapon. Now the fire of that hatred only smouldered, like a cooling volcano. Showing that she was unperturbed, she decided, would be the best response to this creature. But she could not resist a word of contempt.

"Long ago you delivered your wife into the hands of barbarians. Now, it seems, you intend to do the same thing to your country."

Horigawa smiled. "That will be my country's good fortune, if it is treated as well by those barbarians as you were. Ah, but I nearly forgot to extend my sympathies. The Zinja monk with whom you were so initimate long ago has at last passed into oblivion. I saw him shortly before his well-deserved death. He tried to kill me. My friend Lord Bokuden tells me that he has seen that red head pickled in sake. A fitting end for such a violent fellow."

Horigawa befouled Jebu's memory by speaking of him. Now she did

want to seize a sword from one of her samurai escorts and run the prince through, to avenge Jebu. Instead she forced herself to smile.

"All of us eventually meet the fate we deserve, Your Highness."

Horigawa stared at her, puzzled, annoyed by her equanimity. "All of us do meet our proper fate, my lady," he agreed in his piping voice. "Perhaps I will have a hand in determining yours, once the affairs of this realm are settled." He turned away and started up the stairs.

"Give me the order and I'll cut him in two," a voice growled at her ear. She turned and looked up to see Munetoki standing behind her.

"Thank you, Cousin, but that will not be necessary," she said. "Such a breach of the peace would be a disservice to the Shogun." She discovered that she was trembling. Only then did she realize what an effort it had cost her to maintain her self-control.

"Who was that man, Mother?" Sametono asked. "He said you were his wife. Is he really your husband?"

Taniko took a deep breath and let it out to relax herself. "He is no one, my child. No one at all."

It was evening when Hideyori and the high-ranking samurai of Kamakura gathered in the Great Audience Hall of the Shogun's castle to meet the Mongol delegation. Ceremonial etiquette required Taniko to observe the gathering from behind a screen on a dais a short distance from where Hideyori would sit. The chamber itself was a huge room, lit by hundreds of oil lamps, with rows of White Dragon banners hanging from the beamed ceiling. Over five hundred vassals of the Muratomo and officers of the Bakufu were seated on cushions. Whatever Hideyori intended, he wanted plenty of witnesses.

When Hideyori entered, stately in his black sokutai robe, the

assembled samurai bumped their foreheads on the floor. His face stony, Hideyori seated himself without a word. On the dais to his right and left were his chief councillors, Bokuden, Munetoki, the chieftains of the great clans and the heads of the Bakufu Secretariat, the Samurai Office and the Judiciary. Hideyori nodded peremptorily to the guards at the rear of the audience chamber, and the large doors slid back.

Three envoys came into the room, a portly, bearded Chinese wearing a red and blue robe brocaded with gold dragons, and two tall Mongols in cloth-of-gold coats trimmed with fur. The Mongols wore sabres in jewelled scabbards. Behind the ambassadors walked Prince Horigawa with five other court officials from Heian Kyo, all in silk robes of varying shades of pearl grey and light green, appropriate for spring. There followed a long exchange of diplomatic courtesies, with the Chinese diplomat speaking for the delegation in the language of the Sunrise Land. He introduced himself as Mon Lim, assistant secretary in the Great Khan's Office of EoreignAffairs. The two men in gold were Prince Gokchu and Prince Belgutei, grandnephews of Genghis Khan, princes of the most exalted blood in the Mongol empire.

"Where did you learn to speak our language?" Hideyori asked gruffly.

"Your eminent Prince Sasaki no Horigawa was kind enough to teach it to me, sir," the Chinese replied with a smile.

"I have already read your Great Khan's letter to our Emperor," said Hideyori. "Eor the benefit of these honoured warriors, I ask you to read it now."

Mon Lim drew a scroll from his sleeve, unrolled it and began to read the Great Khan's letter. Angry mutterings rose around the room at the

arrogance of the Great Khan's claim that his victories in warfare were proof of his "mandate from heaven" but Mon Lim went on without hesitation until he came to the phrase, "offer of union between our great empire and your little country."

"Enough!" Hideyori shouted suddenly. There was a murmur of approval from the assembled samurai, who also had heard enough.

Mon Lim looked up, surprised. "There is only a little more remaining, sir."

"I wish to hear no more. This letter insults His Imperial Majesty. How dare you bring such a blasphemous document to our Sacred Islands? Your Great Khan must be an ignorant barbarian. Such a letter deserves no reply at all."

"Good!" shouted Munetoki from Hideyori's right, unable to contain himself. He smacked his fist into his palm.

"I do not understand, sir," said Mon Lim.

"I do not expect you to understand," said Hideyori. "The Chinese people have surrendered to the Mongols and you yourself have chosen to serve them. We do not intend to submit."

"A truly civilized people turns to war only as a last resort," said Mon Lim calmly. "You, sir, are the chief general in this land. My master would be most kindly disposed towards you if you were to help bring peace between our two nations."

Hideyori bared his teeth in a tigerish smile. "Does the Great Khan reward you well for your services to him? Do you have a fine palace in your own country? A vast estate yielding much rice? A strongroom full of treasure?"

"The Great Khan has deigned to show me such kindnesses, which I little merit," said Mon Lim with a modest smile.

"I hope for your sake you have enjoyed those possessions thoroughly," said Hideyori, still grinning, "because you will never see them again."

The ambassador's face paled. "Sir, you can't mean that."

Hideyori rose to his feet and strode to the edge of the dais, his black robe swirling around him and his hand on the hilt of Higekiri, the Muratomo heirloom sword. "Translate what I say so your two princelings will understand. In coming to this land of the gods with this message, you have descrated our country and insulted the sacred person of our Emperor. Only death can atone for this sacrilege. Only the death of his messengers is a fitting reply to the one who calls himself Great Khan. I sentence you to be taken to the execution ground on the beach north of the city and beheaded. Let this happen tomorrow at sunrise, that Amaterasu Omi Kami may see you pay for your blasphemy against her son."

Mon Lim had begun to murmur a translation for the Mongol princes, but as he grasped the full import of Hideyori's words, he fell silent and his mouth hung open. At last, in the tense silence that followed Hideyori's sentence, he spoke.

"Sir, your Emperor has already agreed to our terms. It is not we who are offending him. It is you who are disobeying him."

"His Imperial Majesty has agreed to nothing. Illegal agreements were made by rebels and traitors in the Imperial Court." Hideyori glared meaningfully at Horigawa and the other officials from Heian Kyo, who stood shocked and silent behind the Mongol ambassadors. The Chinese diplomat hastily finished translating Hideyori's speech for

the two Mongol princes. At once, the one called Gokchu reacted. His sabre flashed as he rushed at the dais, knocking Mon Lim aside. Hideyori stood rigid and motionless, like a guardian statue before a temple, the knuckles white on the hand that gripped his sword. Taniko felt her heart stop. Draw your sword, she thought. Draw your sword.

With a leap and a shout, Munetoki was between the Mongol prince and Hideyori. He seized Gokchu's upraised sword arm with both hands and twisted it violently, stepping into the Mongol at the same time and throwing him to the floor. Taniko heard the muffled snap of a bone breaking. Straddling the fallen Mongol, Munetoki unsheathed his long sword and lifted it high over his head.

"No," called Hideyori. "Do not shed blood here. Let him be killed tomorrow at the public execution ground as I have already commanded. But, for drawing his sword against the Shogun, let him be executed, not by beheading, but by being cut to pieces starting with his feet."

The other Mongol prince spoke rapidly to the pale, trembling Mon Lim, who turned to Hideyori and said, "He warns that if you do this to us, every man, woman and child on these islands will die for it. Every city and village will be levelled. Your country will cease to exist."

Hideyori spoke in a calm, measured tone. "If the Mongols should conquer us, which I doubt our gods will permit, the people of these islands will die willingly. To us death is always preferable to surrender. But we will not line up to let our throats be slit like the animals that the Mongols herd. We are a warrior race, the children of the gods. Each of us who dies will take many, many Mongols into the Void with him. In any case, you will not see the outcome. Take them away." Hideyori's guards marched the three envoys from the room. They would be held in a cellar till dawn.

Munetoki jumped lightly back to the dais and bowed to the Shogun. "Eorgive me for drawing my sword in your castle, my lord," he said politely. As was customary, Hideyori offered no thanks to the young warrior for saving him from assassination. Munetoki had simply been doing a kenin's duty. Instead, Hideyori addressed the assembly.

"Do any doubt whether our warriors are a match, man for man, for the Mongols? See the ease and skill with which Shima Munetoki disarmed and disabled that barbarian." Cheers and shouts of approval came from all parts of the room.

"Now," Hideyori said, seating himself. "Let Prince Sasaki no Horigawa and those officials who accompanied him from Heian Kyo be brought forward." Taniko realized that Hideyori had rehearsed all this in advance. At his words, guards sprang to the sides of each of the six noblemen. Taniko's heart beat faster. After all these years of hating Horigawa, she was about to see his downfall.

"Prince Horigawa," said Hideyori, "even before the overthrow of the Takashi you were making overtures to the Mongols, encouraging them to cast covetous eyes on our Sacred Islands. It was you who invited these ambassadors to Heian Kyo and you who persuaded the Imperial Court to yield to their demands. We could have delayed the ambassadors. We could have kept up negotiations for years, giving us time to prepare for an invasion. I had no wish to kill those men. They are simply serving their master. But because you persuaded the Court to show weakness, you made it necessary for me to take drastic action to demonstrate our resolve. You have served your country and your Emperor so badly that it is plain you are a traitor to both."

Horigawa's eyes narrowed. "There was a time, Muratomo no Hi deyori, that you wet your sleeves with tears of gratitude because I

befriended you. Have you forgotten that you owe your life to me?"

"My life?" Hideyori's face was as cold as a shark's. "Yes, I owe you my life, but only because you wanted to use me as a weapon against the Takashi. I also owe you the death of my grandfather, executed at your urging. I owe you the deaths of my father and my elder brothers, driven to rebellion by Sogamori's excesses, which you encouraged. I owe you the years of oppression and shame suffered by the Muratomo after my father's uprising was put down. If I am under any obligation to you, Prince Horigawa, it has been washed away by blood."

Horigawa's lips drew back, baring teeth that gleamed like tiny black pearls in the lamplight. "Samurai." He spat the word as if it were a curse. "A servant who steals his master's place. Apes, pretending to be human beings. I did my best to use your bloody-mindedness to destroy you. I failed because, like lice, you grow fat and multiply on blood. You destroyed the world I loved, and the world you have made holds no delight for me. If you end my life, Muratomo no Hideyori, you could do me no greater service. My only regret is that I will not live to see Kublai Khan sweep you all away like so much chaff before the wind."

He means it, Taniko thought. Where such a man is concerned, revenge is impossible. He will even turn his own execution into a triumph of sorts.

Hideyori smiled at Horigawa. "Twenty-four years ago my father sent me to kill you. Now at last I can carry out his order. I have searched my mind for a death that would be as long and horrible as your life has been, but no such thing is possible. You are an old man and will go quickly, no matter how careful we are. Yet, beheading is a samurai's death, and you do not deserve it. So, I have decided that tomorrow you will be taken to the place of public execution and

drowned in the sea. Your body will be left there. Your bones will be nibbled by fish and crabs when the tide covers them, and they will bleach in the sun when they lie exposed. It is too merciful by far for you, but I can think of no way to punish you properly." He laughed without humour. "I am not cruel enough."

Taniko thought, it is more appropriate than you realize, Hideyori. He will drown, as my little Shikibu did. Why am I not more delighted? Why, instead of joy, do I feel only this sad emptiness? Because his death will not bring my lost loved ones back.

Horigawa thrust his head forward like a striking snake. He spat at Hideyori's feet. Munetoki roared with rage. Without turning, Hideyori held out his hand in a restraining gesture.

"Do not stain your sword, Munetoki-san," Taniko called from behind her screen. Hideyori motioned to the guards, and Horigawa was led from the hall.

The pale, moon-faced Heian Kyo aristocrats who had come with the embassy cowered as Hideyori's dark gaze turned next towards them. "As for you officials of the Court," he said, "you are also guilty of trying to surrender your country to the Mongols, but I will assume that you acted out of ignorance and cowardice, rather than, as Horigawa did, out of deliberate malevolence. Therefore, I merely sentence you to return to the capital." The powdered faces brightened with relief. After a pause Hideyori added, "On foot."

A howl of anguish went up from the noblemen and a shout of laughter from the samurai. One fat aristocrat fell to his knees. "My lord, such a journey will kill us."

"Nonsense," said Hideyori. "It will make you stronger and wiser. See something of the country you were so eager to give away to Kublai

Khan." Again he paused, while the courtiers stared at him, appalled. "Of course, I shall respectfully point out to His Imperial Majesty that you are not fit to hold the ranks and offices you now enjoy. You and all others at the capital who had a hand in this decision to surrender will be sent into honourable retirement." Hideyori waved away the stout men in their subtly shaded robes.

Now he addressed his clansmen and allies: "We have already sent out two armies, one to the land of Oshu to punish Yerubutsu for killing my brother Yukio against my wishes. The other pursues the Mongols under the tarkhan, Arghun, now lurking in Echizen province and threatening the capital. All Mongols are our enemies now. We must prepare the nation for war."

The samurai cheered until they were hoarse, shouting the old battle cry, "Muratomo-o!" over and over again. Tears ran down Taniko's cheeks. She wept for these samurai and for all the people of the Sunrise Land. They did not know, as she did, the enormity of the disaster that threatened them. Even to Hideyori, this crisis with the Mongols was more an opportunity than a danger. He had used the occasion to assert the supremacy of the Shogun and had put down an attempt by the Court to decide a question of war and peace. Now he would destroy the independent lord of Oshu and Arghun's army. Then there would be no one in all the Sacred Islands not subject to his will.

Hideyori turned away from the cheering assembly. A moment later he was behind Taniko's screen, looking down at her with a smile. "Of all who advised me, your advice was the soundest. Together we will face the worst the Great Khan can send. After tomorrow, you will be free to marry me."

Taniko was unable to speak. Vengeance, she had found, was empty. All victories were hollow. Whether she looked to the past or to the

future, all she could see before her or behind her was destruction and death. Only with an enormous effort of the will could she hold down a sob. Eor some reason she found herself remembering Eisen's story of the Zen abbot who had died screaming.

Taniko lay awake all that night, thinking of the men somewhere else in the Shogun's castle, waiting to die. They, too, must be awake, she thought. How could anyone spend the last night of his life sleeping? She did not want to be near by when they-especially Horigawawere led out to the beach to be executed. Some time during the hour of the ox, with dawn two hours away, she called on her maids to help her dress for a journey into the hills, to see Eisen. Sametono refused to wake up. She had him wrapped in a quilt and carried down to the courtyard where her horses waited. With a maidservant and a samurai guard, who held the sleeping Sametono propped before him on his saddle, she rode up the familiar path into the pine-covered hills north of Kamakura. The sky over the great ocean to the east was already growing noticeably lighter. By the time she had arrived at the monastery, there were great ribbons of crimson unfurling like Takashi banners in the eastern sky.

"Why are you crying?" Eisen wanted to know. "Are you mourning Horigawa and the Mongol envoys?"

"I am crying because I am partly responsible for their deaths through my advice to Hideyori."

"A samurai should never feel regret at causing death," said Eisen firmly. "Killing is what a samurai does."

"There is no end to it," said Taniko, wiping her face with her sleeve. "What have we human beings done to deserve so much pain, sensei?"

"If a man is shot with a poisoned arrow, he does not bother to ask whether he deserved it. He pulls out the arrow and applies the antidote as quickly as possible."

"What is the antidote to all this suffering?"

"Show me the face you had before you were born," said Eisen fiercely.

Her mind a blank, Taniko shrugged helplessly. She still had not solved the kung-an. Their talk turned to her coming marriage to Hideyori. As the wife of the Shogun, she would be the most powerful woman in the land.

"You will be able to accomplish much," said Eisen.

"Yes, through Hideyori." She shook her head angrily. "Sensei, I want to do things in my own right, not just because some powerful man like Kiyosi or Kublai Khan or Hideyori has decided he wants to go to bed with me." Eisen laughed softly.

She and Sametono took their midday meal with the monks. By now, she thought, feeling the tension drain out of her, the condemned men must all be gone. This evening she could return to Kamakura and it would be behind her. The past, said Eisen, did not exist. In the after noon, at the hour of the sheep, she and Eisen walked in the temple's garden.

Their conversation was interrupted by a messenger from Hideyori, a breathless young samurai who bowed to the monk and the lady in the temple garden. "The heads of the Great Khan's ambassadors are on their way back to him. As for Horigawa, he has survived the morning high tide. When I left the Shogun's castle he still lived. Lord Hideyori thought you would be pleased to know that he is still suffering."

"What are they doing to him?" Taniko asked, horrified.

"There is a cliff that drops down to the sea near the execution ground," said the samurai. "The executioners have hung Prince Horigawa from that cliff by a rope tied around his chest. As the tide goes in and out, they raise and lower him so that his head is always just above the water. The waves dash continuously into his face, the cold is intense, and his body is bloody from being repeatedly thrown against the rocks. At times they allow him to be submerged for a moment and he comes close to drowning." Taniko fell to the ground and put her face in her hands. The young samurai stared at her, puzzled. Eisen sent him away.

After he was gone Taniko said, "Hideyori thinks it may please me to know that Horigawa is still alive and in pain. In the name of Amida Buddha, what does he think I am?"

"There is a part of you that wants Horigawa to be tormented. That is why you are feeling so much pain."

In the evening Hideyori's samurai messenger returned to tell her that Horigawa yet lived. He was raving and babbling now in three languages, the young man said. The exquisitely educated mind was unravelling.

Taniko stayed at the monastery that night. She did not want to go back to Kamakura as long as Horigawa was still being tortured. Long before daylight she rose and put on a hooded cloak and went to the meditation hall to sit in zazen with the monks.

At the hour of the dragon that morning, Hideyori himself arrived at the monastery and sent for her. He was waiting with a small group of horsemen just outside the gate, sitting astride a skittish, pure white stallion that had been a present from Bokuden when he assumed the

title of Shogun. A retainer held the horse's head and stroked its nose to keep it calm. When he saw Taniko, Hideyori dismounted. He took a gleaming black box from a servant. Taniko knew what she was going to see and she wanted to run away, but she forced herself to look as Hideyori opened the box with a self-satisfied smile.

The white stallion screamed and reared at the sight, almost kicking the man holding him. Horigawa's dead lower lip hung open, showing his blackened teeth. His face was even more wrinkled than it had been in life, and there were bruises on his cheeks and forehead. She felt an enormous relief that it was all over. She turned away and put her hand over her eyes. Hideyori closed the box lid with a bang and handed it back to his servant. In just such a box as that Jebu's head lay, she thought.

"That man was harder to kill than a centipede," Hideyori said with a smile. "He survived until just before dawn this morning. He screamed all through the night. I went out to listen to him. I am sorry that you could not bring yourself to be there. I hope his execution pleases you."

She must give him some reply. "Thank you, my lord, for giving me this satisfaction," she said quietly.

"You are free of your vow now," said Hideyori. "When may I come to you?"

Was she to acquire another husband so quickly? She felt frightened, walled in. Well, it was the way she could be most useful to the Sunrise Land and could best protect Sametono.

"You will adopt Sametono, my lord?"

"Yes, yes. He will be my foster son. He will be treated as an Imperial

prince is. If he shows himself capable, he may even be Shogun himself some day, as well as chieftain of the Muratomo."

And as the mother of the Shogun-to-be, she, and not her father, would be the most important member of the Shima clan.

"When may I come, Taniko-san?"

"Please understand, my lord. I am upset by all that has happened." "I can be patient a little while longer. But when?"

"Come to me in the Eourth Month on the night of the full moon."

"Will you have a baby?"

"I'm too old, I think."

"But isn't that what happens when people get married?" Sametono, like everyone else in her family, saw Taniko's new position as- the Shogun's primary wife in the light of his own concerns. He was anxious that he might be supplanted in her heart by a new baby. Bokuden was nervously deferential and not pleased that his daughter would nightly have the ear of the most powerful man in the land. Uncle Ryuichi and Aunt Chogao felt themselves vindicated. Taniko's first marriage, which they had helped arrange, had been such a disaster that this one, according to their simple view of the law of karma, must be a great success.

"Now you've got a real man," Aunt Chogao had bubbled as they soaked together in a hot tub. "You deserve some good luck, Tanikochan."

It doesn't feel at all like good luck, Taniko thought later, as she lay on her futon in her dimly lit room, waiting for Hideyori's first-night visit. It simply feels like another turn of the wheel of birth and death. Her

screen slid back. Hideyori was not even making a pretence of secrecy. Beyond him, in the corridor, she could see two guards trying to suppress grins. Hideyori shut the screen and turned to her. He wore a plum-coloured kimono, a departure from his usual sombre tones. He looked unhappy and nervous. I'm the one who should be nervous, Taniko thought. It's been years since I've been to bed with a man, while he, from what I hear, has a different courtesan every night.

"Will you have sake, my lord?" She poured a cup for him and held it out. He seated himself awkwardly, drained the tiny cup in one quick sip, and held it out for more. Twice more she filled it and twice more he drank. She hoped he was not going to drink so much that he would be unable to enjoy his visit. That would be embarrassing for both of them. As for herself, she might as well have been discussing the Confucian classics with an old scholar, for all the desire she felt.

He praised the vase of tulips she had set in a corner of the room. Abruptly, he took a rolled-up sheet of rose-tinted paper from his sleeve. "I wrote this in praise of your great beauty." The scroll was tied with a long blade of grass. Taniko opened it and read the verse.

The bamboo grasses

Bend their backs in the autumn wind, Dancing in the sun.

But when the wind does not blow, They point straight to the heavens.

A lovely poem, thought Taniko. Of course, it's two hundred years old, at least. She remembered that Horigawa had offered her an old poem as his own creation, too. She told herself firmly that she would not think about that marriage. The past did not exist.

She praised the poem.

"I copied it from an old book," said Hideyori glumly. "I am no courtier,

Taniko. I do not know how to make love as they do in Heian Kyo."

"I myself am a simple woman of Kamakura, my lord," said Taniko. She picked up her samisen and played "When the Silver Moon Sets." Then she blew out the lamp and raised her outside screens. The evening air was pleasantly warm. She sat beside Hideyori, and they looked at the full moon just rising above the black castle walls. She played two more melodies for him and gave him more sake. She had expected him, after his long wait to make her his wife, to be more ardent.

At last he put his arms around her. He stroked her face and her hands and began plucking at her robes. She moved to help him open her clothing, feeling at last a tingle of anticipation. It had, after all, been a long time, and Hideyori was, in his way, attractive. They fell back together to the quilts which she had already unrolled. Now his hands, the soft hands of a man who did no labour and no fighting, were gently awakening sensations in her body. Sighing, she stroked the ivory column he pressed against her and she opened her thighs.

Eor a moment Hideyori was above her, blotting out the moonlight. Then he gasped and stiffened as if arrow-shot. He dropped to one side, breathing heavily. Taniko waited for him to take her, but instead he rolled away from her and lay staring out at the moon. Unsure about what to do, she began massaging his back. She ran her hands inside the collar of his kimono and rubbed his neck and shoulders. His muscles were stiff, unresponsive.

"Don't I please you, my lord?" she said at last.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said gruffly, keeping his back to her. She was stung by his rudeness. What was the matter with the man? "You are too forward," he said suddenly.

Nettled, she answered, "I can't believe that a man as experienced with women as my lord is would find anything unusual in my conduct."

"I seem to have been mistaken in you," Hideyori said, sitting up. He was going to leave her, she realized. She was not going to be the Shogun's bride after all, and Sametono would never be Shogun after Hideyori. The whole future of the Sunrise Land was going to be different because of some mysterious thing that had gone wrong in the last few moments. Should she try to placate him, try to persuade him to lie down with her again, or was it too late? She sat up also, and as she did so her fingertips touched a wetness 'on the quilt that told her everything. How stupid of me, she thought. I should have known at once. But it had never happened to her before. Other women had told her about being with men who reached their peak too soon, but all agreed that it was very rare. Hideyori was, no doubt, ashamed. He probably felt she doubted his manhood. The quarrel he had started was just a pretext to escape further embarrassment. She knew what to do to help Hideyori, from conversations she'd had with women over the years. But would he permit her?

"Eorgive me, my lord," she said softly. "I realize I haven't been all that you hoped for. But if you leave me now, the whole castle will know it. Let me amuse you with more songs and warm you with more sake. I beg you, at least pretend you find me pleasing for this one night, or you will make me a laughing stock."

"Very well," said Hideyori, doubtless realizing that he, too, would be a target for humour if he left her now. He sat down again, and Taniko relit her lamp. She put a jar of sake over the brazier to warm it, and took up her samisen. She played and sang a series of songs. The first was romantic, but they became progressively more comical and salacious. Hideyori actually broke into a grin at the last and most uproarious. The songs and the sake were doing their work. He was much more relaxed. She moved closer to him and began caressing

him. His kimono was still open, and she stroked his bare chest first, then his entire body. She gently pressed him back on the quilt while she continued to touch him. Soon she was exclaiming at the magnitude of his arousal while he grinned, pleased with himself. When she judged the moment to be right, she lay back and whispered that she wanted him to enter her. He took much longer to achieve the mountain-top this time, because he was less sensitive than he had been before. In fact, he took so long to satisfy himself that she unexpectedly reached the sublime moment three times before he finished, for which she was very careful to express her humble female gratitude. When at last he lay back with his eyes closed, his face serene and relaxed, she quietly breathed a sigh of relief.

"You are a wise and understanding woman, Taniko-chan," Hideyori murmured contentedly. He turned his head towards her. "Your face as you look down at me now reminds me of the face of Kwannon I saw in a temple my mother took me to as a child. There was a time when I was very young that I thought the statues of Kwannon were statues of my mother. I feel as if I should worship you, Taniko. Please forgive me for speaking so harshly to you before. Be my Kwannon, be merciful to me."

"There is nothing to forgive, my lord." What a strange, strange man this is, she thought.

"I want you to visit the great stupa I built at our family shrine to Hachiman to honour my mother. I am sure it will please you."

After a time he fell asleep. The moon was now high in the sky. She lay looking at his face in the moonlight. In repose, it seemed just the ordinary face of an ordinary man, not the face of a man who had conquered the Sunrise Land and was now about to embark on another war with an enemy vastly more powerful than any he had yet

encountered.

"Let me alone, Yukio," Hideyori moaned in his sleep. Yukio lived inside him, she thought, as Hideyori shifted his limbs and whimpered. You can never truly kill anyone. She settled herself down to sleep, propping her head on the worn wooden pillow that had been her lifelong companion. Past and future might not exist, but their traces in the present were eternal.

The next morning before he left her, Hideyori made her promise that she would tell her relatives he had kept her awake all night. His morning-after letter arrived at the hour of the serpent. It was simple, but seemed sincere. There was no poem with it. Even so, Ryuichi and Chogao were delighted. Two more night visits and a holy man's blessing, and the Shima, the Takashi and the Muratomo would be united in the persons of Taniko, Sametono and Hideyori.

Chapter Four

thumps. Seven boys, aged eight to fourteen, and an instructor, all dressed in loose-fitting white jackets and calf-length trousers, threw themselves at one another ferociously, somersaulted in mid air, and twisted each other's arms and legs in vicious locks that, with a bit more pressure, would have broken them. Shima Munetoki sat at one end of the long, bare room, sternly watching everything and saying nothing. Invited by Munetoki, Taniko observed the class from a screened gallery. It was Munetoki's first visit to the dojo in over six months, and the young students, all sons of leading eastern-province families, were prepared to kill each other and themselves to show their sensei that they had made progress while he had been off fighting the Mongols on Kyushu.

Munetoki strode into the midst of the students, his thick moustache bristling as the corners of his mouth turned down. "Attack me," he commanded. The seven boys and their instructor formed a half circle around him. Sametono, as the Shogun's foster son, had the honour of being first. He flew at Munetoki with a wild scream. Hardly seeming to move, the big Shima samurai sent the eight-year-old boy spinning through the air. Taniko's heart leaped into her mouth. Sametono hit the woven grass mat with his shoulders, rolled and bounced to his feet with a grin. At least he falls well, Taniko thought. Singly, then together, the boys went for Munetoki, who tossed them in all directions. The young instructor was the last to charge. He threw a punch at Munetoki's head, twisting his fist as his arm shot out. Munetoki threw him almost the length of the room. Then, at Munetoki's order, the class knelt in two rows facing each other while he stood at the end, hands on hips, and surveyed them. Having learned from Eisen that neither praise nor criticism truly helps students, he simply glowered at them. At last he pointed at

Sametono. "What are you thinking about?"

Sametono looked his burly cousin fearlessly in the eye. "Sensei, I was wondering if you'd honour us by telling us what happened in Kyushu. Please excuse my impertinence."

"Indeed, you are impertinent, young Sametono," said Munetoki gruffly.

"Please, sensei, it would inspire us to do better," said Sametono. Emboldened by Sametono's outspokenness, the other students added a chorus of eager pleas to his.

"Sit in silence and listen respectfully, then," said Munetoki. "I will tell you of the bravery of the warriors of the Sunrise Land as they faced the barbarian invaders." He seated himself cross-legged on the floor. Taniko was delighted. Hideyori had kept her informed of the progress of the war with the Mongols, but she wanted to hear about it from someone who had actually taken part.

"We knew that Arghun's army of some three thousand horsemen was lurking somewhere in the mountains north of the capital," Munetoki began. "In the Eourth Month, therefore, Lord Hideyori sent an army of five thousand from Kamakura. I, unworthy as I am, had command. Erom the Eifth Month on, we camped north of the capital. At the same time the Shogun sent twenty thousand men into Oshu to punish Eujiwara no Yerubutsu for the murder of Lieutenant Yukio.

"Eearing that the Mongols might take us by surprise unless we caught them first, we at last began to move cautiously into the mountain country. All we found were smouldering villages where the Mongols had come and gone. Not a soul alive. Thus they left a twisting and unpredictable trail of death drawing us deeper into the mountains. After two months of this, fortune turned in our favour.

Down from the far north came our army from Oshu, victorious. Oshu had fallen with surprising ease. When old Hidehira died, something went out of that country. The warriors did not want to fight for Yerubutsu. One of his own men assassinated him and brought his head to our army. Of course, Lord Hideyori ordered that the traitor in his turn be beheaded. One should never violate his oath to his lord.

"Now that we had ten times as many men as the Mongols, we pressed them harder, chasing them through a maze of mountain passes. Then, at the beginning of autumn, they stopped circling around in the mountains and began to move southwards. We knew where they were headed. Word had reached us that the Great Khan's invasion fleet had left Korea and was sailing towards Kyushu. And now Arghun's army began a long march through our western provinces towards the Inland Sea. When they reached the ports at the western end of the Inland Sea, they fell upon them like a forest fire, destroying everything and killing everyone except the crews of the boats they needed to cross to Kyushu. By the time we landed on Kyushu, Arghun and his men had already fought their way through to the Great Khan's invasion army at Hakata Bay."

Taniko recalled the shock she had first felt on learning that the beachhead of Kublai Khan's invasion had turned out to be at Hakata Bay, where Kiyosi had died and Yukio and Jebu had embarked for China so long ago. Perhaps Kiyosi's spirit still lived there, protecting the Sunrise Land.

"When we arrived at Hakata Bay we found the Great Khan's fleet anchored offshore. The ships were Korean, pressed into service by the Mongols. There were over a thousand vessels of every description, from small coastal galleys to seven-masted ocean junks carrying as many as a hundred men and their horses. The enemy army was camped on the shore. It was evening when we arrived and the first day's fighting was already over. Erom their campfires we

estimated that there must be thirty thousand invaders. The Kyushu men had nearly been overwhelmed.

"The following day I met the Mongols in battle for the first time. It was hot, dirty fighting. The enemy were armed with machines that threw big stones at the earthworks. They had giant crossbows that fired arrows the size of spears. And they had a terrible weapon called hua pao, that casts iron balls that burst among our warriors with a noise like thunder, shooting fire and deadly iron fragments in all directions. Their hua pao rained down thousands of the fire balls on our men. Our troops were maimed and killed and our horses stampeded, and the things gave off a black smoke that stank like the Eight Hot Hells. Knowing nothing about Mongol methods of fighting, many of our noblest warriors rode out to challenge the Mongols to single combat. The Mongols slaughtered them from a distance with arrows. They also used poisoned arrows that killed our men by the hundreds.

"Again and again the Mongols massed and charged at this place or that, trying to break through our lines. With stones and hua pao, they battered holes in our earthen walls. We filled the gaps with our bodies, rushing madly from place to place to hold the invaders back.

"At the end of the second day's fighting we were exhausted and in despair. Our only course, as far as we could see, was to keep on fighting until we were annihilated, in the hopes that by then reinforcements could be raised. We prayed that night. The priests passed to and fro among us all night long, carrying their portable shrines, chanting and dispelling the odour of the hua pao with the sweet smell of their incense.

"There was another smell in the air that night, the smell of rain. The air grew cold and damp, and we wrapped our quilts around ourselves and shivered behind our dirt walls. Lightning flickered in the clouds and thunder rumbled like Mongol fire balls. The rain began

near morning at the hour of the tiger. It quickly became a drenching downpour, but the Kyushu men welcomed it with shouts of joy. We eastern warriors did not yet understand why. The wind began to rise, shrieking like a hundred thousand humming-bulb arrows.

"There was no dawn that day. The dark of night extended far into the morning and not until the hour of the dragon was there enough light to see by. Even then we could not see much beyond our own walls. The wind blew harder and harder until it was tearing trees to bits and knocking men in full armour flat on their backs. Timbers from houses along the shore flew over our heads. I saw the tile roof of a temple in Hakata ripped loose and sailing through the air like a kite until it fell to pieces. The sea came roaring up the beach to our fortifications, throwing spray into the air higher than the treetops. At times the wind and rain died down enough for us to see the shore and the bay. The waves reared up as high as Euji-san and tumbled in all directions. The invaders and their horses were huddled in small groups here and there along the beach. Their tents and their great machines had vanished. We were more frightened of the storm than of the enemy, and we crouched against our crumbling walls and prayed that we would not be drowned.

"The storm was gone by next morning. So were the Mongols and their fleet. The waters of Hakata Bay were full of broken timbers and planking. All along the curving beach we could see broken hulls of junks that had been thrown up on shore. With a shout of joy we ran down to the water's edge. We found a remnant of the invaders hiding in the ruins of Hakata and the other towns around the bay. Before we put them to the sword we questioned them. The Korean shipmasters had warned the Mongol commanders that this was one of those great storms the Chinese call tai-phun, and that they would be safer in the open sea than in the harbour. We learned later that most of the fleet had been sunk at sea and thirteen thousand Mongols drowned."

Munetoki stopped speaking and sat there, hands folded in his lap, lost in recollection of the awesome sights he had seen. The boys remained silent, eyes on the floor. On the smooth cheeks Taniko could see the glistening tracks of tears.

Sametono was the first to speak. "Sensei, do you think the Mongols will return?"

"They will certainly return," said Munetoki gravely. "It may be next year, or it may be some years from now, but I believe they will be back in greater numbers than before. We must be ready for them. Thank the gods for our great and wise leader, the Lord Shogun Muratomo no Hideyori, who will mobilize the nation to defend itself."

"I hope that when the Mongols come back I will be old enough to fight them," said Sametono eagerly. Taniko's heart sank, even though she knew that as a samurai mother she should be proud.

Munetoki stood up, towering over the little group of students. He turned suddenly to the instructor.

"They aren't bad, these boys, all things considered. Keep them at it." The instructor's face glowed like a temple mirror. Bowing to Taniko, Munetoki turned and strode out of the dojo.

Chapter Five

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

Can it be seventeen years since I last saw Heian Kyo? The capital has suffered so much in those years-civil war, fires, earthquakes, plagues, famines. Over half the buildings have been destroyed and rebuilt. It is not the fairy-tale city I came to so long ago with Jebu. But the girl who saw it that way no longer exists, either.

The Mongols having been driven off, Hideyori decided to make a state visit to the capital. We travelled down the Tokaido with three thousand mounted samurai and twice that many on foot. I would have preferred to travel on horseback myself, as I did so long ago, but Hideyori insisted a screened palanquin is the only proper conveyance for the wife of the Shogun. He himself rode that nervous white stallion, Plum Blossom, though he is as much at ease on a horse as I would be on the back of an elephant. But the people lined the Tokaido to see the Shogun, and Hideyori felt he should show himself, looking like a warrior. Sametono did not come with us. He begged to be left behind, and I did so, knowing too well how he dreads the Rokuhara.

Hideyori's visit has upset the Imperial Court no end. Erom the Regent on down, he has removed members of the Eujiwara and Sasaki families from office, replacing them with men of less ancient lineage whom he considers more trustworthy. He has also moved against the warrior monks, persuading the Great Council of State to pass an edict forbidding the Shinto and Buddhist monks to bear arms and ordering the Zinjas to disband altogether. No wonder he chose to travel with an army.

My lord seems more fearful of ghosts, though, than of living warrior

monks. Since we've married, I've spent very few nights in peaceful sleep. Again and again he wakes up screaming and covered with cold sweat. It seems his whole family is pursuing him through his dreams, not just Yukio but his father, Captain Domei, his grandfather, his uncles and various illustrious ancestors. Hideyori believes these are not just dreams, but ghostly apparitions. I find it hard to understand why his family would persecute him when he, of all people, has brought the Muratomo clan more power and glory than they ever had before. After one of these dreams, only the union of our bodies restores his peace of mind. I must add, though I dare confide it only to my pillow book, that all too often he is unable to accomplish his desires with me.

Through my personal network of samurai and servants, I've learned that Shizumi, Yukio's brave mistress, has retired to a convent only half a day's ride from here. I must find out why she left Kamakura so suddenly.

Also, as Horigawa's widow, I've inherited not only most of his possessions, but his private papers as well. His family placed them in the keeping of the Kofukuji monastery in Nara, and I have sent for them. The thought of reading documents written in Horigawa's own hand makes my flesh crawl, but there is doubtless much to be learned in those papers, as well as some fascinating and scandalous stories.

-Third Month, twentieth day

YEAR OF THE PIG

The nunnery of Jakko-in was in the Ohara hills, north of Heian Kyo. For appearances' sake, Taniko allowed herself to be carried there in a sedan chair. The temple itself was an ancient building with a broken tile roof, set beside a pond surrounded by dignified trees. In

the hills sheltering the temple, small huts nestled in the shadows of pines and oaks. Taniko felt nervous coming here. Many of the women here who had retired from the world and taken vows were ladies of the Takashi family. Such women might resent someone like herself who had benefited conspicuously from the same turn of the wheel of karma that brought them low.

She paid her respects to the large wooden statue of Amida, the Buddha of Boundless Light, in the temple. Then she presented herself to the abbess, inquired after Shizumi, and was directed up a flight of stone steps spiralling to a grassy slope. Before long Shizumi, a basket of mountain azaleas on her arm, appeared.

Taniko followed Shizumi to her hut. It was a single room on bamboo stilts. Pinned to the shoji were coloured papers bearing verses from the sutras which Shizumi had copied out in a calligraphic hand that reflected her dancer's spirit. Shizumi herself had aged. Her face was gaunt, her hair lank-she had not yet shaved her head-and the edges of her patched robes were threadbare. The one valuable object in her hut was a samisen hanging on the wall.

"Do you play often?" asked Taniko.

"The dampness has ruined it, I'm afraid," said Shizumi with a rueful smile. "But I keep it because of the love and art that went into making it."

"Why did you leave Kamakura without a word to me?" Taniko asked. "You could have stayed with me." Through the mist of time Taniko saw again the fragile, beautiful young woman who had danced in white robes before Hideyori.

"I would have brought ruin to anyone who tried to protect me. I was carrying Yukio's son." Eear gripped Taniko's heart as she asked a

question she did not want answered.

"What happened to your baby?"

"I don't want to talk about it, my lady. Please forgive me." Taniko seized both the young woman's hands in a crushing grip. "You must tell me. You must."

"My baby was nothing to you, my lady. Please don't concern yourself."

"Shizumi, my firstborn child, my daughter, was torn from my arms and drowned. I care about what happens to children."

Shizumi's thin shoulders shook with sobs. "I ran away from the Shogun's castle when I knew my time was coming. I fled to a cave along the beach. I was alone and it was horribly painful, but my son was born alive. A group of samurai came riding up to the cave entrance. They must have heard the baby cry. One came and took the baby from me." Her weeping choked her for a moment. "He held him by his ankles and swung his head against the cave wall."

"Oh no, oh no." Taniko took Shizumi in her arms and cried along with her. "Do you know who did this?"

"I'm sorry, my lady, I don't want to tell you."

"I insist that you tell me, Shizumi-san. Whoever he is, I'll see to it that he is punished. I'm not helpless, Shizumi. I am the wife of the Shogun."

Shizumi looked at her with haunted eyes. "Eorgive me for telling you, my lady. I am under obligation to you, and you have insisted. It was your husband. The Shogun."

Taniko felt as if she had been struck in the heart with a hammer. "Not Hideyori," she said weakly. "He doesn't kill children."

Shizumi squeezed Taniko's hand. "Eorget what I told you, my lady. It won't do you any good to brood about it. It would be much better if you didn't believe me at all."

Taniko shook her head. In the midst of her shock and pain, she felt fully convinced that Shizumi was telling her the truth. Sogamori had let Hideyori and Yukio live because they were so young, and the two boys had grown up to destroy the Takashi family. Hideyori would not make the same mistake. Taniko wiped away her tears with her sleeve.

"You have been very helpful to me, Shizumi-san. It is never an injury to tell someone the truth."

She sat talking with the pale young woman until the tolling bell of the Jakko-in signalled sunset. Then she said goodbye to the dancer. She called her attendants and had them carry her back to the capital. Back in her quarters at the Rokuhara she ordered ten robes from her own wardrobe to be sent to the nunnery for Shizumi. Then she turned to the chests containing Horigawa's documents.

Horigawa's papers had been brought to Taniko by a priest of the Kofukuji, a temple that had been heavily endowed over the centuries by the Sasaki family. She had not yet told Hideyori that the papers had come into her hands. Having heard Shizumi's story, she now decided she would tell him nothing. Tonight he was meeting with the military commanders of the Home Provinces to discuss the defence of the capital against another Mongol attack. The meeting would probably last till nearly morning, and it was unlikely that he would send for her. She lit her lamp and told her maid she did not want to be disturbed.

Six red-lacquered cedar chests, decorated with sprays of sagittaria leaves painted in gold, lay in a row before her. She decided to start with the box on the far right. To pick up one of Horigawa's scrolls felt like touching poisoned food, but the fragrance of cedar helped her overcome her revulsion. She quickly became absorbed in details of Horigawa's life and work stretching over the past seventy years. Most of the papers were written in Chinese, the literary language of the old nobility. Taniko found memoranda to other government officials, copies of poems, reports from spies, genealogical tables, lists of flowers and roots to be judged in Court contests, trading contracts and inventories of Horigawa's lands, possessions and wardrobes. There were threatening letters phrased with the utmost courtesy from other nobles to whom Horigawa owed vast quantities of rice and many bales of silk. It became apparent that Horigawa had been deeply in debt before his marriage to Taniko. Crops had failed on lands he owned far from the capital, and the lavish entertaining he had done to advance himself had required heavy borrowing. Shima Bokuden, as she had always suspected, had rescued the prince from debt, receiving in turn the friendship of the Sasaki and the Takashi and a titled husband for his third daughter. Her father's letters to Horigawa were disgustingly obsequious.

Some of the papers Taniko found would have caused a scandal if their contents had become known. A series of letters revealed that Horigawa and Chia Ssu-tao, the chancellor of the Sung Emperor of China, had been dealing secretly with the Mongols, each betraying his country for his own reasons. The letters showed that when Horigawa had visited Kublai Khan's camp and abandoned her there, he had been acting as a go-between for the Chinese chancellor, who wanted to surrender the Sung empire to the Mongols. One letter told Chia Ssutao that among the gifts Horigawa was presenting to the Mongol leaders there would be "an accomplished and experienced courtesan from our capital, a beautiful young woman. She is also

faithless and bad-tempered, but the Mongol officers enjoy taming wild creatures, I am told." Taniko clenched her fists and restrained herself from tearing the scroll to bits.

It was long after midnight that she struck real treasure. On a scroll dated "Year of the Dragon" she read:

Eighth Month, twenty-fifth day.

The gods have delivered the Muratomo into my hands. After all the heads have fallen, only Domei will be left. Sogamori will be my weapon against Domei.

She unrolled the scroll eagerly, her eyes racing up and down the columns of characters in Horigawa's precise, rather cramped hand. The diary, a pillow book like her own, but terser in style, was written in the language of the Sunrise Land, in which, no doubt, Horigawa found it easier to express his private thoughts.

She dug through the scrolls, foraging for the ones that looked most recent. At last she came upon what must have been the last scroll Horigawa had written. It began over five years ago, with the prince gloating over Yukio's impolitic involvement with the Court, his acceptance of the ancient office of Lieutenant of the Palace Guards, and Hideyori's rage when Horigawa reported it to him. Sadly Taniko traced the downfall of Yukio and the success of Horigawa's efforts to intensify the enmity between the brothers. Horigawa recounted Yukio's flight from the capital, his shipwreck and disappearance, and his subsequent emergence in Oshu. Then came an entry for the Year of the Rooster that made Taniko gasp:

Eleventh Month, fourteenth day:

Attended upon the Shogun in his castle. He ordered me to go to the

land of Oshu and persuade Fujiwara no Yerubutsu to permit the Mongol general Arghun to cross his borders and kill Yukio and his remaining followers. "Tell Arghun that Yukio and all with him are to be killed on the spot and their heads sent here for identification," he said. I asked him, "Would it not be easier to arrest Yukio and bring him here to Kamakura for trial so that all might know the justice of your case against him?" He rejected my argument. "There are many who sympathize with Yukio and whose feelings would be aroused against me by a public beheading. Let him die obscurely in a far-off part of the country and he will soon be forgotten." So will end the one general who might be able to stop the Mongols.

Taniko stared at the scroll in the flickering lamplight. Hideyori had said his order to Arghun was to arrest Yukio. But there was no reason for Horigawa to lie in a diary intended for his eyes alone. The next entry had been made here in Heian Kyo and bore a date in the Second Month, after Yukio and Jebu were already dead. Taniko began to cry as she read the details of Horigawa's final encounter with Yukio and Jebu on the mountainside in Oshu:

. . . Truly, though Arghun has spent years in our country he does not understand how the samurai feel about their Emperor. As soon as Arghun suggested that Yukio might supplant the Em- peror, he lost him, for which I am thankful. It was the greatest delight of my life to see the frustrated rage on the face of the monk Jebu, as he tried to come at me barehanded and was stopped by Arghun and Torluk. If there was anyone in the world whose death I desired more than I want life for myself, it is that obnoxious Zinja. On my way to the capital a messenger brought me news of his death. He fell, pierced by innumerable Mongol arrows, into the gorge below Yukio's fort. The men of Oshu collected his head, as they did that of Yukio, and sent them to Kamakura. Good riddance at last.

Taniko sat back, eyes shut, trembling, as she was swept by waves of

rage and grief. She had thought she hated Hideyori for killing Shizumi's baby. This was far worse. She saw now that she had deceived herself about what Hideyori was. Out of her yearning for safety for Sametono and power for herself, she had blindly bound herself to Hideyori and believed what he told her. She was furious with herself now. She sobbed and felt to the floor, pounding it with her fists. A maid, heavy-eyed and confused, jolted out of her sleep by Taniko's cries, peered into the chamber. Taniko screamed at her to go away. Lying there in her agony, she saw with clarity that there was only one way to extricate herself from the trap in which she had caught herself. She must face Hideyori and tell him everything she knew. It would be unbearable to try to maintain a pretence of ignorance to preserve their marriage.

Surprised at her sudden resolve, she asked herself, how could I know so easily what to do? Even though I have not achieved enlightenment, those years of meditation have changed me. The knowledge of what to do comes from the face I had before I was born. Eor a moment she thought she had solved her kung-an, but when she groped in her mind for the insight, she could not recapture it or put it into words.

"What you told me about the way my son died-I suppose that was a lie, too."

"It happened as I said. I did leave out one detail. After Jebu captured Atsue, the boy stabbed him with a dagger when Jebu wasn't looking. Yukio killed Atsue to save Jebu, and he didn't know he was your son until after he was dead."

That was the crossroads, Taniko thought, desolate. That was when I broke in my heart with Jebu. That was what drove me to Hideyori. And it was all a lie. Hideyori's voice was calm, careless, as if he were reporting an anecdote of no importance. Taniko covered her

face with her hands. She stood on a stone path in the middle of a Rokuhara garden, her back turned to Hideyori. They had chosen this open spot to avoid being overheard. Hideyori put his hand on her shoulder and she wrenched free.

"You used my son's death to turn me against Yukio and Jebu. You lied about not wanting the Takashi children killed. You killed Shizumi's baby with your own hands. You lied about ordering Yukio and Jebu killed. Why have you done all this to me?" She whirled to face Hideyori, letting him see her ravaged, tear-streaked face. His black eyes were opaque.

"You would not have married me if you had known it all." "Did you think I would never find out?"

The cold, bottomless eyes reflected her image back at her. "You are my wife now. My destiny is your destiny. My well-being is your duty. I have done nothing that was not necessary. I expect you to see these things as I see them."

She was stunned. "You thought that my obligation to you as your wife would stop me from hating you?" Her voice rose to a shriek on the last words.

His tone remained calm. "I thought that by being married to me you would learn to understand me. You told me to kill Horigawa, and you did not condemn me for having it done. Yet I killed him for the same reason I killed all the others whose deaths upset you so. He was my enemy, and so were they."

"Horigawa actually betrayed you. What harm did Yukio do you, or any of those children?"

Hideyori took her shoulders in his hands and stared into her eyes. It

was like looking into a night sky that had lost all its stars.

"Their mere existence threatened the security of the realm," he said. "That made them my enemies." He was mad, Taniko decided. Or, at least, in this belief, which had already driven him to kill hundreds of innocents, there lay the seeds of madness.

"Anyone at all might become a threat to the realm," she said.

He laughed. "Don't be absurd. Millions of people make up the nation, but those who threaten it are like a handful of rice out of a whole year's harvest. Taniko-san, think how many people, from the lowliest peasants to the nobles of the highest rank, lost their lives in the War of the Dragons. If killing a few people will prevent another war like that from breaking out, is not the sacrifice justified?"

She did not answer him. Hideyori's fingers toyed with the silver-mounted hilt of his long sword. He turned and gazed down into the pebble-lined bottom of the goldfish pool in the centre of the garden. The frightening thing about him, Taniko thought, is that he doesn't seem at all mad. He is talking calmly and quietly as if he makes perfect sense. And what is even more terrifying is the possibility that if I listen to him long enough it will begin to make sense to me.

"No wonder," she said at last, "your family haunts your dreams."

He turned and faced her, his air of cold assurance turning unexpectedly to anguish and fear. "Only you know how I suffer night after night for doing what was necessary to preserve the realm. Only you can comfort me. I thought you, of all people, would understand. You have known many rulers. You understand affairs of state. Why do you look at me like that now?"

Taniko held out her hands in a helpless gesture. "There are many

ways to be a ruler."

"Every time I killed, or ordered someone to be killed, it seemed the only way to me. Surely you can see that." His expression changed again, his face twisting in anger. "I know what is clouding your mind against me. It is the warrior monk, the Zinja, Jebu. He was your lover, was he not?"

Taniko lowered her head and pressed her sleeve to her face as she felt the tears come. "Yes," she whispered.

Hideyori looked off into space. "Even among the Zinja no other monk has become a legend as he has. He could have been very valuable to me. But his Order assigned him to Yukio, and he became Yukio's friend and companion. So, he had to die with Yukio. And now in the night he, too, comes to haunt my sleep."

"You never told me that," said Taniko, thinking that it was the least of the things he had never told her.

"Eor a very good reason. I have always suspected that you still love him. I know what there was between you. Horigawa told me, even about the baby he killed. That's why you fly into a rage every time a child's life must be taken, isn't it? Just as I could not marry you while Horigawa lived, I could not marry you while Jebu lived, knowing what he was to you."

Because of this man's suspicion, and jealousy, and madness, Jebu had died. Taniko felt hatred blaze out from the centre of her body and spread to her very toes and fingertips. Now Hideyori came close to her, took her chin in his hand and raised her head so that she was looking into his eyes.

"Come, Taniko-san. At my side you rule over the whole Sunrise

Land. Surely you aren't going to throw that away over an illicit affair with a half-barbarian monk."

She tried to pull her head away, but he held her chin tighter. He brought his face down to hers until she could feel his breath. Hatred overflowed in her. She brought her foot up and reached down to take off her satin slipper. Before he could stop her she slapped him across the face with it. He sprang away from her and his hand flew to his sword. In a land where cleanliness was part of religion, there was no worse insult than to be struck by a piece of footwear. The sword was already half-way out of its scabbard before he stopped himself, trembling.

"If I killed you now, I would have to answer to your family. I still need the support of the Shima, and even a coward like your father can only be pushed so far. I will consult with him before taking action against you. Consider yourself under arrest. You are forbidden to leave your quarters. When I return to Kamakura I will decide what to do with you. And with that Takashi whelp you persuaded me to adopt." He slammed the sword back into its scabbard. "If you meant to make an enemy of me, you succeeded. We will no longer live as man and wife. I do not give those who insult me a chance to make amends. I thought you were very wise, Taniko. Now I see that you are stupid. You have lost everything."

She held herself erect and stared up at him as he rubbed his cheek with the sleeve of his black gown. "You do not know me at all, Hideyori, if you think I could regret anything I've said or done. I would rather not live than submit any longer to you."

His eyes narrowed. "I forbid you to kill yourself. As your lord, I have the authority to say whether you shall live or die."

She reached into the bosom of her kimono, drew out the small dirk

she carried there and held it up. "I could have killed you instead- of hitting you with my slipper, but I chose not to. If I do not kill myself, it is also because I choose not to."

He turned pale for a moment, then smiled. "If you do kill yourself, I will see to it that Sametono dies. Painfully."

That left her shaken. She warned herself to say no more to him. The satisfaction of besting him in a contest of words might cost greater suffering for those she loved. As it was, she felt no fear, nor did she reproach herself for what she had done. Instead, she felt an amazing joy and freedom. Eor many months now she had been a puppet, her every word and action controlled by another. Her life was hers again. She recalled that cry of "Kwatz" that Eisen and Sametono were always bandying with each other. She felt now as if she had shouted "Kwatz!" at Hideyori and all the power of his Bakufu and his tens of thousands of samurai. Walking away from him, she felt the fire of her hatred transmuted into a glow of triumph.

Chapter Six

Now that they were back in Kamakura, Taniko felt very near to death. She stood at the head of the long flight of stone steps that led to the Hachiman Temple, under a great gingko tree said to be five hundred years old. Hideyori had finished his visit to the god and now was descending the steps. He had dressed in warrior's gear for the occasion. He wore white-laced armour and a helmet with the White Dragon badge of the Muratomo hanging from the sides and back. A quiver of twenty-four arrows with black and white falcon feathers was slung over his shoulder, and he held a tall rattan-bound bow in his hand. At his side was the Muratomo heirloom sword, Higekiri. A sword he had never carried on the battlefield, Taniko thought. His face was still suffused with fear as he left the temple. The visit to the ancestral shrine had not helped him. He had no one to tell his dreams to now. He had reached his life's pinnacle, but he tortured himself more than ever with fear.

It was the hour of the hare, and an early-morning mist obscured the landscape. Erom the temple entrance Taniko could see down the steps to her waiting palanquin and Hideyori's white stallion stamping his feet as a retainer held him. A small escort of warriors bowed as Hideyori reached the bottom of the steps. The main body of the army waited outside the precincts of the temple to begin the triumphal march into Kamakura. After that, life would end for her. Her only sorrow was that Sametono would inevitably be the next target of Hideyori's suspicion and hatred. Perhaps, though, it would be better for the boy's life to end now, a cherry blossom, while it was still beautiful. Growing up under Hideyori could destroy Sametono's spirit.

She started down the steps after Hideyori, two maids holding up her

train and sleeves so they would not trail on the mist-dampened stone. Hideyori levered himself into the saddle so stiffly that two young guards reddened and looked away, suppressing their laughter at the all-powerful Shogun's awkwardness. Your rule will not be absolute as long as we can laugh, Hideyori, she thought. Settled in the saddle,

Hideyori turned to look at her. In his eyes there was a mixture of resentment and yearning. So, your feelings for me cause you pain, Hideyori? Then surely you will not let me live long. Hideyori waited, jerking his horse's reins angrily to keep him under control until Taniko had descended the steps and was in her palanquin. He had ordered her to accompany him here, declaring that for the time being he wished to maintain appearances in public. When her bearers raised her palanquin, Hideyori raised his gloved hand in a signal to begin the procession to the temple gate. A long avenue lined with plane trees stretched before them, the trees veiled in white cloud and the distant gate, a great torii, invisible. The sound of horses' hooves and the thud of sandalled feet on the pounded earth roadway sounded flat and dull in the misty air.

Taniko was staring at the small White Dragon banner fluttering from a staff attached to the back of Hideyori's senior guard. A movement on the roadway caught her eye and she leaned forward and parted the curtain before her to see better. A man had stepped out from behind a tree to block Hideyori's path. She gasped and her body went cold as she thought, assassin. But the man's hands were empty and he wore no weapons. He raised his hands in a gesture that was at once command and invocation. He was very tall and thin and wore a grey robe. With his long white hair and beard he seemed a creature that had materialized out of the mist. But she recognized him at once, and the shock of recognition shook her to the very core of her being.

Jebu.

One moment her bearers were still carrying her along towards the gaunt figure in grey. In the next moment, without any transition, the palanquin was on the ground and she was lying crumpled among its cushions. She mast have fainted. She looked out through the curtains and screamed. The white stallion, whinnying in fear, had reared up on his hind legs and was pawing the air with his front hooves. Hideyori, arms and legs flailing, was toppling out of the saddle. Still Jebu stood with upraised arms, wild-eyed but motionless. Hideyori fell backwards over the horse's rump. The samurai guards who had nearly laughed before at his awkwardness stared in open-mouthed horror. He crashed to the ground, landing on the back of his head and his shoulders, his chin crushed into his chest. His limbs sprawled with a clanging of armour plates, then lay limp, in odd positions like those of dead men on a battlefield.

The bodyguards, who would have reacted instantly to the sight of a weapon, had Jebu been carrying one, sat on their horses as if paralysed. Now, tentatively, one man drew his bow from its saddle case. Jebu's head turned towards her. She looked into his grey eyes, but could read nothing in them. His face was all bone and deep shadows, as if he had been starving. Despite these changes and his white hair and beard, she had had no trouble recognizing him. Her eye went to a bit of bright blue on his chest. It was the embroidered Willow Tree emblem of the Zinja. Slowly, he lowered his arms. He looked at the fallen Hideyori for a moment. Without haste, he turned and walked back into the mist.

Taniko had climbed out of her palanquin by this time and had run to Hideyori, who lay without moving. Now she began to be aware of sounds all around her, the cries of her maids, the shouts of the samurai.

"Don't let that monk escape!" ordered the guard with the Muratomo banner on his back.

"Never mind that," Taniko snapped. "His lordship needs your help here." Could Jebu be alive? The thought made her heart flutter, but she put it out of her mind. With Zen-trained concentration, she turned to what she had to do here and now. Where was that wretched horse? She heard the stallion galloping through the mist somewhere to her left. She knelt beside Hideyori, remembering that to disturb a man with a neck or back injury could kill him outright. Hideyori himself had not moved at all. She gently touched her fingertips to the right side of his throat. There was a faint, irregular pulse. She put her hand over his nostrils and felt air move against her palm. An age later, it happened again. With her index finger she carefully pushed back his eyelids. His eyes were rolled back into his head.

"He's alive," she said. One of the maids, frightened, began to sob. "Can we take his helmet off?" a samurai asked. "He'd breathe easier."

"Moving his head might kill him," she said. She stood up and swept the ring of samurai with a gaze that she hoped was commanding. "I don't know how badly the honoured Shogun is hurt, but this was an accident, and there is no point in chasing after culprits. The most important thing to remember is that for the time being; no news of this must get out. No one is to enter or leave the temple unless I authorize it." The warriors bowed acknowledgment. Taniko pointed to one man. "Go tell the chief priest that our lord is injured and we need priests trained in medicine." The man leaped into the saddle and galloped off. Taniko next pointed to the senior officer with the Muratomo banner. "Ride to the temple gate and get General Miura. Make sure no one can overhear you. Tell the general what happened and say that I respectfully invite him to attend upon the Shogun with a few carefully chosen officers. Now. Some of you catch our lord's

horse. If he gets away, people will realize what happened. If you should find the monk we saw standing in the Shogun's path, he is to be brought to me, unharmed, for questioning."

Waiting for the priests to arrive, she knelt again at Hideyori's side, her hands folded in her lap as if she were in the zendo. She took a deep breath and let it out again. She felt a surface calm, but she knew that in the depths of her mind powerful emotions were churning that would need her attention when she had time. There was silence all around her except for the murmuring of the maids and a few samurai repeating the invocation to Amida. Taniko was pleased that she had given orders without hesitation and that everyone had obeyed her. Evidently, she was the only one on the scene of this accident who had any idea what to do.

Eour Shinto priests arrived on the run, their white robes flapping. Taniko stood aside to give them room. Two immediately began chanting prayers to Hachiman and other deities while the others examined Hideyori. After a time more priests brought a large wooden panel and placed it beside the Shogun. With infinite care they pushed the panel under him so as not to disturb the position of his body. They lifted the panel from the ground and slid it into Taniko's palanquin. Waving the bearers aside, the priests themselves shouldered the palanquin and walked slowly down the roadway. They carried Hideyori to a large, thatch-roofed building just off the road, the house of the high priest of the Hachiman shrine. He greeted Taniko himself, showed her the room where they were laying Hideyori and introduced her to the priests who would treat him. Doubtless, she thought, this holy man saw her as a grief-stricken wife threatened with widowhood, and she tried to play that role. No one had any idea that before Hideyori's fall he had planned to be rid of her. Now she was doing everything she could, little as it was, to keep Hideyori alive.

After the priests had carefully lowered the Shogun to a sleeping dais, General Miura Zumiyoshi arrived, looking stunned. He was a member of one of the great clans that had allied itself with Hideyori early in the War of the Dragons, a tough, eastern-province warrior with a peasant's manners. As head of the Samurai Office, he was one of the leading figures in the Bakufu. After examining Hideyori he led Taniko into an adjoining room where he politely asked her, as the one closest to the Shogun, what she wished done.

"I would suggest that you post a hundred of your most trustworthy men to seal off the temple grounds," Taniko said. "Give it out that my lord Hideyori has decided to spend more time in prayer before Hachiman and has postponed his formal entry into Kamakura. Disperse the rest of the troops. The last thing we need right now is large bodies of armed men hanging about in Kamakura. Then assemble the chief officers of the Bakufu here to decide what is to be done next."

"Very sound suggestions, my lady," said Zumiyoshi with a bow. "We need time to plan the orderly transfer of power."

"Transfer of power?"

Zumiyoshi lowered his eyes and spoke with much greater formality than was usual for him. "Lady Taniko, I'm sorry to tell you that in my opinion our honoured Shogun is going to leave us shortly. I've seen injuries like this before. There is no healing such a hurt. He can neither move nor be moved. In a few days his lungs will fill up with fluid and he will be taken into Paradise. If he were one of my own men I'd have him mercifully helped on his way. Unfortunately for him, he is the Shogun and he must pass on without assistance, so it cannot later be said that there was a conspiracy to shorten his life."

The temple priests agreed with General Miura's estimate of

Hideyori's condition. Gravely, they told her she must expect the Shogun's death. She warned the chief priest to be prepared in the next few days for the comings and goings of many officials of high rank. Then she sat beside Hideyori and stared down at the pale, immobile face. Surprisingly, she felt a pang of sorrow for him. A murderer, partly mad and deadly to those close to him, he was also a man whose powers of the mind equalled those of Kublai Khan.

Working with exquisite care, the priest-physicians removed Hideyori's helmet and armour and bathed his face and body with cool water. Pairs of priests took turns ministering to him and chanting in the room where he lay. The chief priest assured Taniko that the temple was saying its most puissant prayers for the Shogun's recovery or happy passage into the next world.

Seated beside Hideyori, lulled by the monotony of the priests' voices, Taniko wondered what had really happened. If any spirit were powerful enough to return to earth after death, that spirit would be Jebu's. But she had never before seen a ghost, and that made it harder to believe that the apparition that had frightened Hideyori's horse came from the spirit world. There had been nothing ghostly in the monk's appearance. It had seemed solid, breathing, fleshly, albeit aged and emaciated. But if it had been a ghost, would it not have taken the form of a younger, healthier Jebu? The more she considered it, the more certain she became that Jebu must be alive. The thought made her head swim. Yet, there was the report of his death in the mountains of Oshu. Her own father, Bokuden, had identified Jebu's head. What should she believe? What others told her, or what she had seen with her own eyes? But how could Jebu have survived?

One person might know-Moko. He had disappeared after learning that Jebu was in Oshu. When she had made inquiries, his family had said he had gone to supervise the building of warships in Nagato

province. He had not come back until long after Jebu was reported dead. Perhaps he was hiding something. She must talk to him as soon as possible. Her mind spun dizzily as it tried to absorb the sudden reversal of her position. Early this morning Hideyori was triumphant, Jebu was dead, and she expected to be killed. Now Hideyori was dying, Jebu might be alive and she was, for the moment, safe. It was as Eisen was always saying; it was foolish to be certain of anything. The evil she had heard about Jebu, after Atsue's death, had turned out to be a lie. She could love Jebu again. She looked down at the dying Hideyori and apologized to him in her mind for the joy she was beginning, uncertainly, to feel at his deathbed.

More pressing problems demanded her attention. What would Hideyori's death mean to the future of her family? She realized that she was no longer just a woman who had no control over what happened to herself. She was the widow of the Shogun and foster mother of the Shogun's heir. She could command attention. Her first and most important consideration must be to make sure of Sametono's claim to the Shogunate. But the boy was only nine years old. Just as the Emperors in Heian Kyo had Regents who governed in their name, so a Regent would have to be appointed to head the Bakufu in Sametono's name. She couldn't hold that position herself. Not for centuries had a woman held any high office in the Sunrise Land. Who then? With sinking heart she realized that the probable choice was Shima Bokuden. The Shima had been Hideyori's earliest and strongest allies. As Sametono's senior male relative, Bokuden would be the boy's official guardian. Bokuden, that crafty, greedy, mean-spirited man whom she had despised ever since she could remember, would be the real ruler of the Sacred Islands. But Bokuden could never hold together the coalition of powerful, wilful warrior chieftains Hideyori had built to overthrow the Takashi and set up the Bakufu. Bokuden was the right sort of man to be Hideyori's

second-in-command, utterly without scruple, but such a man did not command enough respect to lead the nation. His inevitable failure could mean another civil war. And that, with the Mongols gathering their armies just over the horizon, might destroy the Sunrise Land forever. Still, there was no way for her to prevent Bokuden's appointment as Regent. She would have to accept it and be ready for whatever developments might come afterwards. As today had proved, it was impossible to plan for an ever-changing future.

By afternoon the leading officers of the Bakufu, shocked and solemn, had assembled at the Hachiman shrine. Each went first to offer condolences to Taniko and stare down at the nearly lifeless Hideyori and make a silent estimate of how long he had to live. Then they held a brief meeting. Later, Ryuichi told her what had been decided.

"Eorgive me for saying it, but it makes it easier for us that the Shogun is so obviously about to die," said Ryuichi. "Who would dare propose a successor for Lord Hideyori if there were a possibility of his recovering?"

The Bakufu's leaders had agreed, as Taniko hoped they would, that Sametono must be the next Shogun. He was the only candidate whom all could accept without dispute. Next they decided, as Taniko had expected, that there must be a Regency until Sametono was old enough to govern, and that Shima Bokuden was the only possible choice for Regent. He would preside over a council of Bakufu officers.

"Hideyori did choose intelligent subordinates," said Taniko. "Lesser men would have bickered for a month over so many important decisions."

"Their intelligence in choosing my brother as Regent escapes me," said Ryuichi. "No one respects him."

"When strong men cannot find a leader whom everyone respects," said Taniko, "they are better off with a leader whom no one respects."

Now the Bakufu officers publicly announced that Hideyori had been badly injured in a fall from his horse and was unconscious. Even then they did not add that the Shogun was likely to die. They sent for Sametono, who came from the Shogun's castle in an ox-drawn carriage like an old noble of Heian Kyo. The people of Kamakura lined up to watch the stately vehicle pass, knowing that the future of the realm rode in it. Taniko had not left Hideyori's side all day, and she was still sitting there when Sametono entered. The boy's round face was serious but calm. He looked thoughtfully down at Hideyori for a long time, then recited the invocation to Amida. Erom his sleeve he took a scroll.

"I wrote a poem for him. If I read it to him, do you think he'd hear it?"

"Perhaps," Taniko said wearily. "We never know what unconscious people can hear."

Sametono nodded and read his poem:

Beholding the stars,

I know that one day

They will fall from the sky.

If even stars must vanish,

Why mourn the shortness of life?

"That's very beautiful, Sametono-chan. And it was kind of you to think

of it." Sametono took the flute, Little Branch, from its silk case at his belt. At the sight of the flute that had belonged to Kiyosi and Atsue, Taniko felt tears come to her eyes. To think, Hideyori would probably have killed this boy. Sametono sat on cushions at Hideyori's feet and began to play soft, soothing airs, many of them well-known musical settings for the sutras. The priests in the corner of the room stopped chanting and listened with beatific smiles. Without apparent fatigue, Sametono played on for over an hour.

Hideyori opened his eyes. He blinked. The dark pupils focused on Taniko. His lips twitched. They were dry and stuck together. Taniko wet them with a damp cloth, and he licked his lips thirstily. She helped him sip water from a cup. A whisper crackled in his throat. She leaned forward, holding her hair back from her ear.

"Yukio is here. I can hear his flute."

"That's Sametono, your son. He is playing for your pleasure."

"I never had any children. Karma. Get the priests to drive Yukio's ghost away." The fluttering lids curtained the dark eyes.

"What did he say, Mother?"

"He thanks you for your playing. He asks you to let him sleep now."

That night she and Sametono slept side by side on pillows and quilts the priests set next to Hideyori's bed. Somewhere in her dreams the pious chanting droned on. She woke many times during the night, listening to Hideyori's laboured breathing, staring at his motionless face. There was a bubbling sound coming from his throat and chest. He's going to drown, she thought, just as Horigawa did.

Sametono remained beside her the following morning, occupying himself by reading poems he had brought with him. Every so often he

would read one aloud to her and the unconscious Hideyori. Taniko's only fear was that Hideyori might waken and say something dreadful to Sametono that would hurt the boy. During the hour of the sheep Hideyori did manage to wake up again. She leaned forward to catch his words.

"What happened to me?"

"You fell from your horse."

"I remember. A ghost. The Zinja." His eyes widened in terror. "I can't move."

It was her duty to help him prepare himself, but she could not bring herself to say the words. Then Sametono was beside her.

"Eather, you are dying. Ask all the gods and Buddhas to be merciful to you."

"Pray for me," Hideyori murmured, fear and anguish in his face. "The whole realm prays for you," said Sametono.

"I was only protecting myself," Hideyori whispered. "I have never wanted to die."

Eeeling an urge to comfort him, Taniko said, "I will see that the great Buddha you spoke of is built at Kamakura. It will bring you an abundance of good karma." While at Heian Kyo, Hideyori had ordered the restoration of the great bronze statue of Buddha at the Todaiji in Nara, which had been burnt by the Takashi. He had remarked to Taniko that he dreamed of erecting an equally large Buddha for Kamakura.

The black eyes fixed on hers. "Have mercy on me, Mother, I'm afraid of them."

Sametono turned to her, open-mouthed. "What did he mean by that? Mother?"

She sighed. "Your foster father was very attached to his mother."

That evening the chief priest of the shrine came to visit them. "There are strange stories going about the city, my lady. People are saying that the ghost of Muratomo no Yukio caused the Shogun's horse to throw him."

In case Jebu was alive, Taniko shaped her answer to protect him. "I was too upset to see anything clearly. Those who have sympathy for the lieutenant might say his ghost took its vengeance on my husband. Perhaps it's true. I don't know."

Taniko and Sametono fell asleep early that night, exhausted by the long hours of sitting and waiting. Suddenly she felt a hand gently shaking her shoulder. She opened her eyes. Sametono was standing over her.

"He's gone, Mother." Tears were trickling down Sametono's cheeks. Even for such a man as Hideyori, she thought, there was someone to weep.

Chapter Seven

The tall, four-panelled screen was painted on both sides with an identical scene of mountains, waterfalls, pines and temples. On one side the landscape was bathed in sunlight, on the other drowned in moonlight. Eittingly, the night side was turned towards Taniko, hiding her from her father, who was talking to Ryuichi and Munetoki in Ryuichi's central hall. Only Bokuden, she thought, would be stupid enough to call a secret family meeting without first looking behind all the screens in the room. Not that Bokuden was a trusting soul. Next to Hideyori, he was the most suspicious man she had ever known. It was arrogant carelessness of the sort that would ruin the Sacred Islands if Bokuden were long permitted to govern them. Just now he was gloating over his cleverness in acquiring a shipment of copper coins from China.

"But, honoured Uncle," Munetoki protested, "it is forbidden to trade with China now that it is mostly in Mongol hands."

"Since I am the senior member of the Bakufu Council, the Bakufu's regulations do not bind me," said Bokuden airily. "The information I gather from the Chinese traders is worth breaking the law for."

Insufferable as always, Taniko thought. How long would the other samurai clans put up with Bokuden's enriching himself by violating regulations he himself had helped draw up?

"The traders were anxious to exchange the last of their bulky valuables for smaller and more portable amounts of gold and gems," said Bokuden. "They told my agents that the Mongols are about to take Linan and capture the Sung Emperor. Once the conquest of China is completed, Kublai Khan will turn his attention to us again. The traders say he has set up an Office for the Chastisement of Ge-

pen, headed by one who knows our land well - Arghun Baghadur."

"We destroyed them before and we will destroy them again," said Munetoki.

"What is even more distressing," said Bokuden, ignoring his nephew, "is that the Shogun, the commander-in-chief of our armed forces, is a child." Now he was getting to the point of this meeting, Taniko thought. He wants Sametono out of the way.

"My honoured cousin the Shogun has you to rule in his behalf, Uncle," said Munetoki.

"That would be fine if I could truly rule, but I cannot," said Bo kuden. "I am not free to issue orders as I think best, but must have the approval of the Bakufu Council. My position is also untenable because I govern in the name of Sametono, and Sametono is not suitable to be Shogun."

"Surely there is no one more suitable," Munetoki bristled.

Munetoki was simply incapable of guile, thought Taniko. He and Ryuichi had agreed before the conference that they would seem to agree with whatever Bokuden said, in order to draw him out. But Munetoki couldn't stop himself from arguing.

"Lord Hideyori laid down no regulations about how the next Shogun was to be selected," Bokuden pointed out. "Surely it would be ridiculous to say that Hideyori's family holds office by decree of the gods, as the Imperial line does. Even if the Shogunate does somehow belong to the Muratomo by divine right, Sametono is really a Takashi, not a Muratomo. Are we to let a direct descendant of Sogamori pluck like ripe fruit the power for which generations of Muratomo fought and died?"

"We Shima ourselves are Takashi," Munetoki pointed out.

"Yes, Brother," mused Ryuichi. "I wonder if your zeal for the Muratomo cause is so great because you are only recently converted to it."

Taniko held her hand over her mouth to keep from giggling.

"Eurthermore," Bokuden went on, "this boy Shogun listens only to my daughter, never to me, his official guardian. She cannot but be a bad influence on him."

Behind the screen, Taniko smiled to herself.

"Our little Taniko is an intelligent, well-travelled lady of strong will," said Ryuichi. "What is more, she is very religious."

"Her will is not strong, it is perverse," Bokuden snarled. "Ever since she was a child she has been disobedient. She is an adulteress many times over. Well-travelled? Yes, she spent years among the Mongols. The gods alone know what secret links she may yet have to them. As for being religious, she is an adherent of that foreign Zen sect whose doctrines sound like the ravings of madmen. If she is so religious, let her be packed off to a nunnery where she can do no more harm."

Munetoki's voice trembled with anger. "I have the honour to be the young Shogun's teacher in martial arts. No one knows him as well as I do. His character is perfectly pure. There is no sign of any bad influence anywhere about him."

Ryuichi spoke with uncharacteristic sternness. "Munetoki, be silent. I forbid you to contradict your uncle, who is chieftain of our clan as well as acting head of the Bakufu. You forget yourself. Apologize to Lord

Bokuden."

There was a long silence. When Munetoki spoke again, it was in a firm voice that Taniko knew was the result of rigorous self-discipline.

"Please accept my apologies, honoured Uncle," he said. "I am ashamed of myself."

"That's better," said Ryuichi. "Now, Lord Bokuden, you have pointed out some of the boy Sametono's shortcomings as Shogun. But to whom else could the office be given with confidence?"

"There is the son of my oldest daughter, who is married to Ashikaga Eukuji. The Ashikaga are a branch of the Muratomo. There is also the son of my second daughter, who is married to the chieftain of the Nagoya Muratomo. With Hideyori and Yukio dead, the Nagoya Muratomo are now the senior branch of the clan."

"Excuse me, honoured Brother," said Ryuichi, "but why would these other grandsons of yours be more suitable than Sametono?"

"They are Muratomo by blood, not by adoption," said Bokuden. "And they and their mothers would obey me in all things."

"Of course," said Ryuichi. "Still, there are many serious objections to both those young men. Eor instance, the Nagoya Muratomo fought on the Takashi side almost until the end of the War of the Dragons. And to choose a Shogun from the Ashikaga would arouse the envy of the Wada and the Miura. Surely these points have occurred to you. Do you have any other candidates to put forward?"

"If there are too many objections to any other candidates I can only, in all humility, offer myself."

There was a long silence. Even Taniko was shocked. She knew her

father had a high opinion of himself, but she had no idea that his vainglory verged on madness. His hold on the Regency was precarious enough, and now he wanted to reach higher. still.

"There is no impediment that excludes me from consideration," Bokuden went on. "And there is much that qualifies me. I am head of the most powerful family in the realm. I am the late Shogun's oldest and staunchest ally. Without me, he could never have overthrown the Takashi. Einally, I am a man of advanced age and much experience."

"Indeed, you are superbly qualified, Brother," said Ryuichi. "But there is one stumbling block. Just as there is no rule for choosing a Shogun, there is no legal procedure for removing a Shogun from office."

"We will have to eliminate him, of course," said Bokuden blandly.

"Kill Sametono?" cried Munetoki, shocked into speaking again.

"We cannot permit him to survive as a rallying point for opposition forces," said Bokuden. "Many of the other families will be envious when the Shima step forward to take the Shogunate. Rival claimants to high office must be eliminated, no matter how young and innocent. I have been thinking, Nephew, that since you are the boy's teacher you might be in a good position to arrange an accident for him. It would be better if it did not appear to be an assassination."

"Munetoki," said Ryuichi sharply. "You will listen to your uncle and obey him in whatever he tells you to do."

"Yes, Eather," Munetoki muttered, his voice shaking with suppressed rage.

"The extent of your devotion to the nation amazes me, honoured

Brother," Ryuichi went on. "That you would actually sacrifice your own great-grandson for the security of the realm fills me with awe."

"Every tree benefits from pruning," said Bokuden sententiously. "Besides, the boy is not a true Shima anyway. Munetoki, you may be reluctant to help Sametono into the beyond, but remember that you would be my heir. I have no sons, after all. Look here, Ryuichi, we've seen the Eujiwara, the Takashi and the Muratomo each rule the land in their turn. All this time we've just been supporters of the great families. Isn't it time the Shima had their turn at ruling? Think of how rich we could make ourselves."

Taniko stood up and stepped out from behind the screen. "It is not the Shogun who needs deposing, but the Regent."

Bokuden, looking like a large, malicious insect caught in a granary, stared at her. Moon-faced Ryuichi rose and backed away from his brother with an expression as if Bokuden gave off an unpleasant odour. Munetoki stood towering over his uncle with a grin of satisfaction. His fingertips stroked the hilt of the dagger hanging at his right side.

"I'm not surprised at your willingness to murder your great-grandson," Taniko said. "A lizard has more love for its offspring than you do. What does amaze me is that you have actually deceived yourself into believing that the great clan chieftains, generals and scholars my lord Hideyori gathered together here in Kamakura would be willing to take orders from you."

Bokuden managed a ghastly smile. "So. The three of you intend to try to bring me down? I should have known you would all put personal ambition before family welfare. This is very foolish of you. I am still Regent as well as head of this clan." He tried to stand up, but age made him stiff. Munetoki helped him to his feet. Then he pulled his

arm away.

"You are Regent and clan chieftain only until we can gather the Bakufu Council and charge you with plotting to murder the Shogun," said Taniko.

"You think to bring charges against the Regent?" Bokuden laughed shrilly. "It is you who will face charges for rebelling against me. Out of my way." He hobbled to a window and slid back the screen covering it. "Guards!" he shouted. There was no response from the courtyard outside the window.

Munetoki spoke quietly. "Sorry, Uncle, but we took the liberty of disarming your escort and locking them up. Sad to say, none of them wanted the privilege of dying to protect you. In case any of your other retainers should feel differently, this mansion is now surrounded by three thousand samurai chosen for their loyalty to the Shogun and the Shogun's mother."

"The Shogun's mother!" Bokuden spat. "You are responsible for all this, Taniko. You have always been a disobedient, ungrateful daughter."

Taniko laughed bitterly. "All my life you have looked upon me as a piece of goods to be traded when it suited you. Should I be grateful for that? Should I be grateful to you for plotting to murder Sametono? Being a woman, perhaps I am not capable of understanding the principle involved."

"Kill me," said Bokuden, "and a father's curse will follow you through the Nine Worlds."

"We want to see you praying, Father, not cursing," said Taniko with a smile she knew would infuriate him. "We hope you will live a long

time. We feel no need to kill you. We do not fear that you will become a rallying point for those who may oppose us. You are not the sort men rally around. You have spent over seventy years of your life absorbed in the affairs of this world. Now we would like you to enter the cloister, shave your head, and turn your thoughts to the next world. Your worthy nephew Munetoki volunteers to take on the burdens of the Regent's office."

Bokuden's face reddened with fury as he glared at his daughter, his brother and his nephew. After so many years of scheming and plotting, Taniko thought, it must be unbearable to have the ultimate prize snatched away by your own family.

"I made our family first in the realm," Bokuden sputtered. "Your ingratitude will bring you a terrible karma."

"Excuse me, Brother, but it is karma, not your efforts, that put our family in this position," said Ryuichi. "You were merely carried along, as a piece of driftwood is lifted to the crest of a wave."

After Bokuden had been ushered off to a guarded chamber in Ryuichi's mansion, Taniko's uncle said with a smile, "He is right in holding you responsible for our effort to depose him, Taniko-chan. If you were not as clever and resolute as you are, I would have preferred to send you and Sametono into hiding and let my brother have his way with the Regency and the Shogunate."

"That would have led to disaster, Uncle," said Taniko. "In six months he would have infuriated the other great military families and they would have rebelled against him. And they would doubtless have felt compelled to kill all of the Shima for the usual reasons. This will keep the Regency in our family, but Eather will be out of the way."

Ryuichi laughed. "With no father or husband to rule over you, you are

now the real chieftain of our clan, though I will now take the title. I shall ask that you be invited to meetings of the Bakufu Council, as the former Shogun's widow. Such things are not unheard of. Right now the Sung Empire-what's left of it-is ruled by the boy-Emperor's mother, the dowager Empress. And among us samurai, it has always been the custom for a wife to take over her husband's duties if he is killed or too badly hurt to manage his own affairs. So now, behind our little Shogun will stand his cousin, the Regent, and behind the Regent will stand the Ama-Shogun-the Nun Shogun."

"I am far from ready for the nunnery, Uncle, regardless of what my father said," Taniko answered, thrilled, but casting her eyes modestly down. But without those years of study and meditation with Eisen, I would never have been ready to seize this moment. I would not have known how to protect Sametono from assassination and save the Sunrise Land from the disaster of Bokuden. Just in time, too. The Elephant will undoubtedly be sending an army to wipe us off the face of the earth. And I know more about the Mongols and their Great Khan than anyone in the Sacred Islands.

Except for one other person, she thought, who knows more than I do about how they make war. But how can I find him?

Chapter Eight

"I think you know more than you admit about the late Shogun's demise," said Taniko.

Moko looked surprised and anxious. "I had nothing to do with your husband's death, my lady."

Taniko observed the heavily brocaded Chinese robe that Moko wore. Many stories of daring raids on the ships and coasts of Mongol-dominated China and Korea had filtered back from the west coast to Kamakura. If Moko hadn't gone on such raids, he had surely supplied ships to the raiders and been rewarded for it. He also wore the long and the short swords of the samurai. Hideyori had consistently refused to award samurai status and family names to commoners, no matter how worthy. Taniko felt that the samurai class should be opened up to bring in new blood and men of merit. Moko was one of a number of men whose services had been especially valuable to the Bakufu and who had been granted, along with their families, samurai status by Sametono, now that he and Taniko and Munetoki were securely in control of the Bakufu. Moko now wore his hair in a topknot, carried swords which he had no idea how to use and had a family name, Hayama, taken from the town where he had built his main boatyard.

"Everyone agrees that Lord Hideyori's death was caused by his horse's shying," said Taniko. "The poor animal was sent to the slaughterers to satisfy those who felt someone must be punished. But surely you heard that Jebu was seen that day."

"I heard many tales, my lady." The crossed eyes were not as amusing as they had been once, Taniko noticed. They were the eyes of a man who had seen much and had done much thinking. The

heavy lids were outlined by deep wrinkles. Well, we're all getting on, she thought. Can I actually be forty-five?

"I saw him, Moko. He looked very aged. Moko-san, besides Yukio and perhaps some of the Zinja, you're Jebu's closest friend. I know he is alive. You must know it, too."

"I am not worthy to be called his friend," said Moko, looking sadly down at his broad, worn woodworker's hands. "My lady, you blamed the shike for Lord Kiyosi's death and for the killing of your son, Atsue. Now you want to blame him for the Shogun's death as well."

"Moko-san, the Shogun was planning to kill me. If he hadn't died when he did, I wouldn't be alive now." She told Moko how she had learned that Hideyori had deceived her, and how she had hated him after that.

"I promised the shike I would tell you nothing," he said hesitantly. "Then he is alive!" she exclaimed. "You've talked to him. Moko, tell me. Tell me everything, I beg you."

He sighed. "I can't break a promise."

"Yes you can, for the sake of a greater good. Would you have me live out the rest of my life in loneliness and despair?"

Eor a long time Moko did not speak. Einally he sighed again and said, "Please understand, I don't mean to make too much of my part in it. It was just luck that I was there. What the priests call karma. You gave me the idea, my lady, if you remember. It was you who told me that Lord Yukio and Shike Jebu had been discovered in Oshu, that Horigawa and the tarkhan Arghun were going there to arrest them, and that Eujiwara no Yerubutsu had secretly promised to betray Yukio. I never believed that Lord Hideyori wanted Lord Yukio brought

back alive. He was not the sort of man who gives his enemies time to defend themselves."

"I wanted very much to believe that he intended to spare Yukio."

"It is a woman's duty to think well of her husband. I don't know what madness possessed me, but I thought somehow I could help the shike, warn him if nothing else. I did not tell you because I did not wish to compromise you with the Shogun. I packed various items into travelling boxes and hired a crew for my fastest kobaya, an open ship with twenty rowers. I sailed north along the coast from Kamakura. When my kobaya reached Kesennumo, near the capital of Oshu, I learned that Horigawa and Arghun and the Mongol army had already arrived at Hiraizumi, and that Lord Yerubutsu had given them permission to attack Yukio. I had just time enough to don the Mongol cavalryman's armour I brought back with me from China ages ago, trade some gold pieces for a horse, and ride off after them. My years among the Mongols helped me to join Arghun's troops without attracting attention. The greatest risk I ran was that I might be sent into the fight and be killed by one of our own people, or even by Lord Yukio or the shike. But no Mongol officer recognized me as one of his men, so none gave me orders to attack. And so it was that I saw Lord Yukio's last stand, my lady."

"Moko-san, much as it will hurt me, I want to hear what happened. No one has been able to tell me the whole story of that battle."

"It will be painful for you, my lady, but I'll try." He described Arghun's parley with Yukio and Jebu, Jebu's attempt to kill Horigawa, how he threw Torluk over the cliff edge, the heroic deaths, one by one, of Yukio's followers and Jebu's final charge as the chapel burnt behind him.

"He stood there, my lady, like the god of war himself, an enormous

figure in black armour. He held out his arms and shouted, 'Kill me!' The Mongols tried to kill him, pouring arrows into him. Still he stood, leaning on the broken staff of his naginata, and he did not fall. He had killed so many of them by this time that they were afraid to venture closer to him. At last one officer rode close to him, brandishing a sabre. The shike seemed to lunge forward, and the Mongols shrieked that he was attacking again. But it was just that the breeze from horse and rider had knocked him over. It had only been his armour and the staff holding him up. He crashed to the ground, then rolled over the cliff edge and tumbled down the steep mountainside into the gorge. There he lay, half-buried in the snow.

"I scrambled down the hillside at once. I didn't care whether they found me out, whether I lived or died. I had some mad notion of saving the shike's body from any further indignity. The Mongols would have to kill me, too, I told myself, before I would let them cut off my beloved Shike Jebu's head. I got to the bottom of the gorge. There were soldiers there, but they were busy rescuing wounded comrades and retrieving their dead. I had just found the shike's body when the officers above shouted orders to retreat. I dragged the body behind a big rock. It was heavy as a boulder itself-I don't know where I got the strength. I heard the Mongols calling something about being attacked, that they had been betrayed, then they were gone, with that eerie Mongol way of vanishing instantly. They even left some of their dead behind. I was alone with the shike, weeping over his body.

"But not for long. I was just beginning to think of gathering wood for a funeral pyre when I heard the footfalls of an approaching horse, muffled by the snow. A figure on horseback came riding up the ravine. To my amazement, it was the Abbot Taitaro."

"Taitaro!" Taniko exclaimed. "I had no idea he was still alive."

"He does seem very old, my lady. You have the feeling he was there

when the world was created and knows all the secrets of heaven and earth. When he saw the shike's body, all he said was, 'If only you could have outlived me.' Then he explained to me that the Zinja always know the whereabouts of their own. Now that Shike Jebu was gone, the old abbot had come to get his body and dispose of it according to Zinja rites. The old man did not weep, nor did I expect him to, knowing that the Zinja do not consider death an evil. He thanked me for saving the body. 'Now his urn will not be empty,' he said. He lit a pine torch and sat staring at the shike's still face for what seemed an hour.

"Then he gave a little start of surprise and bent forward. He whispered to me that he had seen a little wisp of vapour above the shike's nostrils. He began to examine the shike carefully, touching him here and there, removing his helmet and some parts of his armour that were not pinned to him by the arrows. He made me hold the shike's wrist, saying that he feared his emotions might trick him into finding signs of life that weren't there. But I felt it, too, a faint pulsing under my fingertips. Somewhere in the centre of that great, motionless, armoured form riddled with arrows, something lived. The old man warned me, though, that the shike would probably be dead within the hour. 'Even so,' he said, 'we ought to do what we can for him.' I could tell he was trying hard to control his own eagerness.

" 'The Self is not ready to drop the mask that is Jebu,' the old man whispered into the shike's ear. Out of pockets in his robe he began to take vials and folded papers. He blew a pinkish dust into the shike's nostrils. He trickled the contents of tiny porcelain tubes between his lips. He kept whispering Zinja incantations to the shike. Once I thought I heard the word 'devils.' We started to remove the arrows, which had been driven through every part of his body. The abbot asked me to cut away the shafts of those that had not penetrated vital areas, leaving the heads embedded. Those that were close to Shike Jebu's heart and lungs and stomach would have

to be taken out now, lest they stab him to death when we tried to move him. I held the torch high while the old abbot cut into the deep wounds and gently drew out the heads of the arrows. He plastered over the wounds with medicated papers and cotton cloths. He must be three times my age, but his hands were steadier than mine have ever been.

"The night grew darker and colder around us. Abbot Taitaro explained to me that the cold was helpful. It slowed down the life processes in the shike's body so that he did not need as much strength to survive, and it would keep his many wounds from becoming diseased. He said that a slowing of heart and breathing and all other bodily activities was taught to all Zinja and was a state into which they could put themselves at need, sheltering their life energy within a seemingly dead body, as a fire may hide itself in the heart of a blackened coal. We wrapped the shike's body in robes and made a pallet of spears and quilts to carry him.

"Before we left the ravine we found a dead Mongol with reddish hair who was about the shike's size, and we dressed him in the shike's armour. The abbot said that Lord Hideyori's men would undoubtedly be looking for proof that Shike Jebu was dead, but to them, one Mongol would look much like another. By the time the head was carried to Lord Hideyori, it would have deteriorated so much it would be impossible to say whose it was. Thus, the head that your father identified as Shike Jebu's was that of some unknown Mongol." "Was the other head truly that of Yukio?"

"Yes, sad to say. Before the Mongols left the scene of the battle they managed to save Lord Yukio's head from the burning building in which he had committed seppuku."

"Why did the Mongols leave so hastily?"

"Their scouts told them Lord Yerubutsu's army was on its way to attack them and had already engaged their rearguard. Arghun didn't hesitate for a moment, and the Mongols dashed off without even taking time to collect the heads they had been sent to get. Lord Hideyori outsmarted himself. He arranged for Arghun to kill Yukio and then for Yerubutsu to attack Arghun, after which his Kamakura army would destroy Yerubutsu. Yerubutsu's attack on Arghun did not leave Arghun time to take Shike Jebu's head, and it gave Abbot Taitaro and me time to rescue the shike. The Oshu men fought and pursued the Mongols all that night, and by the time they came to the scene of the battle the abbot and I had left with the shike's body. They sent what they thought were the right heads to Kamakura, for which Lord Hideyori rewarded them by invading and conquering their country.

"It was a dreadful journey we made through the mountains of Oshu. Our destination was the Black Bear Temple of the Zinja, near Oma on the northernmost tip of our island of Honshu. Eor many days we trudged through snow-covered valleys between black crags, clambered over boulders as big as the Imperial Palace. We tied one end of the shike's litter to the abbot's horse and we took turns walking with the other end. The shike managed to live through all this. It's the nearest thing to a miracle I've ever seen. The Zinja medicines the old abbot carried helped, of course. His potions fed that tiny flame of life in Master Jebu as oil feeds a lamp. And they helped us, too. A certain powder we took with our meals of dried fish and rice cakes gave us new strength to push on. That powder even made me cheerful, despite the tragedy I had witnessed and the ordeal we were going through. If I could get some of that powder for my shipyard workers, I could build a navy as big as the Great Khan's in a year.

"At last we came to a family of woodcutters, and the abbot paid the eldest son to ride ahead to the Black Bear Temple for help. Two days later we were met on the road by a party of Zinja monks with

horses and a palanquin, and the following day, we were at the temple. I was so exhausted I had even stopped worrying about whether Shike Jebu would live or die.

"He was still fearfully close to death. Our long trek through those cold northern mountains, with winter coming on, had nearly killed him. After they put him to bed in the monastery they removed all the arrows from his body, cleaned and dressed all his wounds with powders and papers and ointments and cotton cloths, and kept murmuring invocations over him. The abbot explained to me that these prayers would penetrate to his deepest self, which never sleeps, and call forth the shike's inner energies to speed his recovery. Along with these words, of course, went potions and such nourishment as they could get down his throat. But after a few days at the monastery he developed a fever, and we almost lost him again. Abbot Taitaro and I took turns sitting with him day and night. I watched the fever burn his flesh away until it seemed there would be nothing left of him but a skeleton. After several sleepless days and nights for us, his fever began to cool. It was then I noticed that all the red hairs had fallen out of his head and beard, and those that were left were quite white.

"He lay unconscious at that temple for more than a month. The heavy snows came and buried all the temple buildings. When I was not at his bedside, which is where I spent most of my waking hours, I was talking with the Zinja monks. I learned that among the brothers of his Order, even though the Zinja discourage hero worship, the shike is thought of as the greatest warrior of these times."

How strange that Hideyori falls from a horse and dies, Taniko thought, while Jebu is riddled with arrows, falls from a cliff and lives. He's alive, he's alive, her heartbeats seemed to shout, as Moko told his story.

"Shike Jebu started to stir restlessly one evening, an hour or so after the monastery cook had managed to get an entire bowlful of soup, drop by drop, down his throat. I watched him eagerly. His eyes opened. He looked at me and I started to weep for joy. I wanted to jump up and call Abbot Taitaro and the other monks, but I couldn't bear to leave the room for an instant. I waved my hands helplessly and jumped up and down and stammered. He stared at me, puzzled. I realized that his last memory was of Mongol arrows tearing into his body on a cliff in Oshu. He might be thinking that this was Paradise and that the Buddha bore a most peculiar resemblance to his old servant Moko.

"At last he spoke-just one sentence. 'Will I never find peace?' Then he fell back on his quilt and closed his eyes again.

"Now I ran for Abbot Taitaro. He and I sat there until dawn, waiting, but he said nothing more that night. The following day he woke again and greeted me and his foster father and asked where he was and how he got there. He wept a long time for Lord Yukio. The old abbot told him they would hide him, because the Shogun would certainly want him dead. I expected him to react with rage at the mention of Lord Hideyori but all he said was that Muratomo no Hideyori was the most tormented man he had ever known."

How true, thought Taniko. And how he tormented everyone around him. But if Jebu did not feel any hatred for Hideyori, why had he come to the Hachiman shrine?

"Now that Shike Jebu was on the mend, I was anxious to get back to Kamakura. But by then the coast was surrounded by ice and the snow made the roads impassable, so I stayed and watched him grow stronger and learned more about the Zinja. Abbot Taitaro brought him a strange crystal with an intricate design carved upon it, which they call the Jewel of Life and Death. The shike spent hours

staring into it in a silence so profound an earthquake wouldn't have jolted him out of it. He let me look at it a few times, but all it did was hurt my eyes. That sort of otherworldly thing is not for me.

"As spring approached, the shike's strength returned and he was able to take walks in the temple grounds. I wondered what he would do now. Years ago the Zinja had assigned him to serve Lord Yukio, and he had spent more than half his life at Yukio's side. What would help him survive this loss? I could not stay to find out. I had fulfilled a duty to Shike Jebu. Now I had obligations to others. Eor months my family and those who worked with me in the boatyard had no word whether I was alive or dead. Time I returned to them. I said goodbye to Shike Jebu, Abbot Taitaro and the other monks, and eventually made my way home.

"Now I have told you everything I know, my lady. I don't know where the shike is now. I have no idea how he came to be at the Hachiman shrine when his lordship the Shogun paid his unlucky visit there. I do know that when I left Shike Jebu he seemed calm enough, except for the words he spoke when he first awakened-Will I never find peace?' Those words have haunted me. Was he-is he-truly so unhappy that he longs for death? I had always thought he was living just as he wanted to live, a privilege few men enjoy."

Of course he is unhappy, Taniko thought. She ached to see him again and hold him in her arms. I know why he is so sad, and perhaps in all this world I alone can help him to be happy.

"One thing you haven't told me, Moko," she said with a smile. "Did he speak of me at all?"

Moko hesitated. "He wanted to know if you were well. If you had kept the boy Sametono with you."

"That's not what I want to know, Moko. How did he seem to-to feel about me?"

Moko looked at her sadly. "I really couldn't say, my lady." "Please tell me what you think."

Moko sighed. "My lady, he particularly charged me not to tell you that he is alive."

"Why would he make you promise such a cruel thing?" "Must I tell you, my lady?" Moko seemed to be in acute pain. "Don't do this to me, Moko." She was almost screaming at him, and she had raised her voice only once or twice before in her life, even under the most trying circumstances.

Moko squeezed his eyes shut in anguish. "My lady, he said, 'She has tortured me too long. May I leave this world before I see her again.' " If Moko had driven a dagger into her stomach he could not have hurt her more. She covered her face with her sleeve and wept bitterly. Moko sat sad and silent, unable to offer comfort.

At last, when her sobs had died down he said, "Now you have heard the worst, my lady. You cannot suffer any more than you are suffering now."

She looked into those strange, inquisitive eyes that seemed to be staring everywhere but at her. "You're right, Moko-san. Now that I've heard the worst, things can only get better. And you can help. There is something only you of all the people in the world can do for me."

Chapter Nine

Even before Muratomo no Hideyori's death, the Bakufu made no attempt to enforce the decrees forbidding monks to bear arms. Now that Hideyori was gone, his effort to suppress military monks was entirely forgotten. The Zinja Pearl Temple west of Mount Euji, only a few days' journey from Kamakura, was thriving. Since there was little fighting to do at the moment, the monks of Pearl Temple spent their time training in the Zinja arts of combat and teaching them to the local samurai families. It was here, after making discreet inquiries, that Moko found Jebu.

They stood together on the parapet of the monastery's stone wall. The cone-shaped peak of Euji, gilded by the afternoon sun, towered above ranks of low green hills. It was a year since Moko had seen the shike. He looked ravaged still, but no longer skeletal. His white hair and beard were long, but seemed cared for.

"I heard you were present at a certain tragic event in Kamakura, shike," Moko began tentatively.

The bony, brown face was grim. "I did not want Hideyori to die. I did not go there to kill him."

"You had every reason to, shike."

In the afternoon light Jebu's eyes were a pale grey, and his gaze was distant. Moko realized that he did not know this man at all. This was a man who had lost everything in life that he valued, had died and been brought back to life, was changed beyond imagining. Moko's heart sank. How could his words persuade such a man?

"I went to confront Hideyori because the Order sent me," said Jebu.

"Our Council of Abbots realized that it would be useless, with a man like Hideyori, to plead that he reconsider his decree suppressing the Zinja. They decided to apply pressure at his weakest point, superstition. So I appeared before him at the Hachiman shrine."

"A dangerous game, shike. If you had been blamed for the Shogun's death, the samurai would have attacked every Zinja temple in the Sacred Islands."

"If Hideyori's decree had remained standing, they would have done the same."

"Lucky for you and for the Zinja that Lady Taniko put a stop to the talk that a Zinja monk caused the Shogun's death," said Moko, thinking that it might help his cause to point out that Jebu owed some gratitude to Taniko.

Jebu shrugged. "She has no reason to wish to harm the Zinja." He sounded as if he were talking about a stranger.

Moko took a deep breath and plunged in. "Shike, there are very few people alive in the country today who know anything about the terrible foe we face. It may be that the most tragic thing about Lord Yukio's death is that we lost the one general who could have led us to a victory over the Mongol invaders. Of all the survivors of Lord Yukio's expedition to China, you and Lady Taniko could best advise our military leaders. You mustn't bury yourself in a monastery, shike. Lady Taniko sent me to tell you that she needs you in Kamakura."

"The most tragic thing about Yukio's death is that in the end, only twelve men were willing to fight for him." Turning away, though not before Moko caught a glimpse of tears in the grey eyes, Jebu looked out over the domain of the Pearl Temple. It was appropriately named, being hidden like a pearl in a secluded valley. The

monastery buildings were all long and low with thatched roofs connected by covered galleries. Nearest the gateway were the men's and women's quarters and the guesthouse. A little further off were martial arts practice halls and stables, and beyond that the long, narrow lagoon for swimming and the archery ranges and bridle paths. The temple precincts also included rugged, heavily forested hills laced with streams where students trained under field conditions. On the highest hill of all was the temple building, as simple in construction as all the others, with a zigzag flight of steps leading up to it. On the far side of the temple, facing Mount Euji, was a torii, a symbolic gate consisting of two posts and a lintel with upsweeping ends. Nowhere did Moko see banners or military display, and just now there were not even any training activities. It was a peaceful-seeming place, not at- all the sort of setting where anyone would imagine the deadliest arts known to man were practised with ferocious intensity. It frightened Moko precisely because it was so calm, clean and quiet.

"Lady Taniko did everything she could to help you, shike," said Moko. "She repeatedly tried to persuade Lord Hideyori that his brother was not his enemy. Eor a long time she believed that he did not want you and Lord Yukio killed. When she found out that it was he who ordered your deaths, she broke with him at once. He would probably have murdered her if he hadn't died when he did. She never really turned her back on you and Lord Yukio, shike, not for a moment."

Jebu shook his head angrily. "How could anyone believe Hideyori wanted us to live? Whatever else she may be, Taniko is not stupid."

"She was Hideyori's prisoner, shike. He wove a net around her and nothing passed through without his permission. She had not talked to you or had any message from you in years."

"I sent her a letter after Atsue was killed."

"Hideyori must have kept it from her. She always cared about you, you know that. It was because of her I went looking for you in Oshu. She sent for me secretly to tell me she had learned you were still alive. She fairly glowed with happiness but she was also terrified at the peril you and Lord Yukio were in."

Jebu smiled and put his hand on Moko's shoulder. "Seldom has karma manifested itself so clearly, Moko-san. Over thirty years ago I spared your life, and now you have saved mine."

"It was Lady Taniko who urged you to spare my life, shike. We three are bound together by what began under that maple tree on the Tokaido Road. You must not leave her out."

Jebu gripped the battlement with his large, bony hands, the knuckles turning white. "Moko, I have loved Taniko ever since that journey we took together down the Tokaido. I have loved her without hope. Again and again she refused my love. I am a warrior and a monk. I can be nothing else, but she blames and despises me for what I am. Now she wants to see me again. It is too late for that. She could never forgive me for Kiyosi and Atsue. I cannot forgive her for Yukio."

"She did nothing to hurt Lord Yukio, Master Jebu."

"She married the man who murdered him. All her life she has sought to link herself with powerful men. Horigawa, Kiyosi, Kublai Khan, Hideyori. I do not seek power, Moko. And that finally is what has always come between Taniko and me. Now she has power. She's ousted Bokuden from the Regency. Her uncle is chieftain of the Shima, her cousin is Regent and her foster son is Shogun. I hear the samurai are calling her the Ama-Shogun. In a real sense she is the Empress of the Sunrise Land, more powerful indeed than any

Empress or Emperor could be nowadays. She may find it is easier to get power than to know what to do with it when she has it. She will get no help from me. The woman who married Hideyori can get her guidance from Hideyori's ghost. The land that let Yukio die does not deserve to be protected from Kublai Khan."

Moko, his heart filled with despair, held out his hands to Jebu. "Shike, you cannot be so unforgiving towards the woman you love or towards your country."

Jebu turned with a swirl of his grey robe and strode towards the steps leading down to the monastery courtyard. "I'm glad you came when you did, Moko, even though I had to refuse you," he said briskly. "We are to hold a ceremony here after sunset. There are three circles in our Order-monk, teacher and abbot-and tonight a monk is to be tested for entry into the circle of teachers-myself."

"You are to be honoured by your Order, shike? That is wonderful."

"We do not consider it an honour but an added burden. No monk wants to be removed from the outermost circle. The difficulty of living as a true Zinja, of achieving insight and remaining in contact with the Self is much greater in the inner circles. I pointed out to my brother monks that I would not still be alive if it were not for you and urged that they grant you the privilege of attending tonight. I must warn you that Zinja ceremonies can be frightening."

"Did I not say I would follow you anywhere, shike?"

All that afternoon Moko waited in the guesthouse of the Pearl Temple, bemoaning his failure to win Jebu over for Taniko and worrying about tonight's ceremony. He had lived at Zinja monasteries, but he had never before been invited to witness one of their rites. All the rumours he had heard rose up in his mind, that the

Zinja worshipped devils, practised human sacrifice, blasphemed against the Emperor, engaged in unclean sexual practices. That last might be all right, he supposed, but he hoped none of the other things turned out to be true.

It was the beginning of summer and the shutters and blinds of his apartment were open to the outside. Every so often a grey-robed Zinja wearing a white rope around his neck would enter at the gate and be ushered ceremoniously into the monks' quarters. Obviously these were the teachers and the abbots. Their faces were austere, expressionless. They frightened Moko. Over the years, through his travels and his studies of the crafts of carpentry and shipbuilding, he had learned to regard most religion as empty show, but there was something terribly convincing about these Zinja.

Erom where he sat Moko could also see some women of the Zinja washing laundry in a small stream that ran past their building. Smoke from a cooking fire rose from a near-by shed. Moko was curious about the Zinja women, but he had always been too afraid of the monks to ask questions about them.

The shadow of the temple hill crept across the compound until it enveloped the room where Moko was sitting. As the sun disappeared, his heart quailed, as if he were bidding goodbye to an old friend he might never see again. A monk in a grey tunic entered behind him, startling him, though he managed to retain enough dignity to keep from crying out. The monk lit an oil lamp for him and silently gave him a black cotton robe which Moko put on over his kimono. It had a deep hood and a black silk cord that went around the waist. Moko seated himself on the floor again, though in his nervousness he ached for something to do. He supposed if he were really a monk he'd meditate. How do you meditate? he wondered.

Twilight deepened to evening. A crescent moon, yellow as a boar's

tusk, rose above the monastery gate, taking Moko's breath away. He wished he could see the moon rising behind Euji-san. That would be a spectacle. Amazing how a moment of beauty made a man forget he was frightened. No wonder the samurai devoted themselves to painting and poetry.

His fear returned when a hooded monk came up to the veranda and beckoned. A procession of abbots and teachers, heads and faces shadowed, was slowly ascending the narrow stone steps. They carried no torches. The crescent moon gave faint but sufficient light. Moko's escort led him to a line of Zinja in grey robes who made room for him. They began to climb the steps.

When he entered the temple, Moko was struck by its simplicity. It was a bare room with a polished floor of dark stone, and walls and ceiling of roughhewn wood. A rectangular stone block served as the altar. The floor descended towards the altar in a series of shallow steps, each broad enough to accommodate a row of seated monks. The rear of the temple, beyond the altar, was open to the night. Out there were the great torii and Mount Euji, but it was too dark to see either. With slow, monotonous rhythm, a monk with a heavy stick was striking a hollow log suspended from the central roof beam, sending resonant booms through the temple.

The emptiness of the place seemed utterly strange to Moko. All the Buddhist temples he had seen were adorned with gold, crowded with statues painted in dazzling colours. Shinto temples, bare as they were, were palatial in comparison to this. Only Eisen's meditation hall was as plain, and even that had a statue of Daruma, the founder of Zen, for trainees to contemplate. The Pearl Temple was nearly filled when Moko entered. The white robes sat in front, grey robes in the rear. Moko sank down near the rear and waited. The hollow booming continued, and behind him he could hear the shuffling of sandalled feet as the rest of the monks entered the temple.

Abruptly, there was silence. Abbot Taitaro and Shike Jebu came from behind the altar. The shike was naked. His body, all bone and stringy muscle, was pocked and criss-crossed with scars. Nakedness in a temple? That startled Moko, reminding him of the rumour about unseemly Zinja practices. Taitaro wore his white abbot's robe.

Eather and son faced the assembled Zinja. Taitaro began a long incantation that Moko found impossible to follow. The old abbot called upon the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth and various forces of nature to witness and bless what they did this night. The invocation was partly sung, partly spoken in a weird high-pitched keen, and it went on for a long time. Taitaro's voice in recent years had lost resonance and was frail and ready,

At last the old abbot said, "Monk Jebu, most deeply do we regret that we must call you from your life of action in the outermost circle of our Order. Are you willing to teach others even though this may deprive you of the opportunity for greater attainments?"

Jebu's voice was clear and firm, a startling contrast to the feeble voice of his father. "It is time for me to try what I can accomplish in a different circle of the Order." Moko sensed that both Taitaro and Jebu were reciting lines from an ancient ritual. The aroma of incense filled his nostrils, a scent different from any he had ever smelled, somewhere between cedar and ch'ai. He felt himself relaxing.

"Once before, the Order asked you to undergo an ordeal that might end in your death," Taitaro said. "This is required of you again." "I am willing."

Taitaro raised an arm. "Let him be bound and threatened."

Threatened? That gave Moko a little start. He watched with growing horror as two monks in grey came forward and laid Jebu on his back on the altar and tied his arms and legs with ropes to iron rings in the stone. Then, standing on the altar, one of the monks attached a long, heavy spear to a rope coming down from the roof beam, so that the point was directly above Jebu's chest. Should the spear fall, it would pierce his heart. This is madness, thought Moko. Had the shike come through the ordeal of Oshu only to be killed by his own people? He wanted to cry out against this folly, but fear paralysed his tongue.

"You may refuse this trial now," said Taitaro. "If you elect to go on, it will be as when you were first initiated into the Order. You will either prove yourself adequate, or you will cease to exist."

Tell them you won't do it, Shike Jebu, Moko urged silently. Why risk death for something that isn't even an honour? Why give up your life for the sake of these madmen? But then he remembered that Shike Jebu, whom he admired above all other men, was himself one of the madmen.

"I will go on," said Jebu in a strong voice.

"At certain times in each person's life, an all-important decision must be made," said Taitaro. "Such a decision will determine the entire course of one's own future and may affect countless other lives as well. We call these decisions life-problems. Monk Jebu, we know that you are facing a life-problem now, which you must solve to settle your own destiny as well as those of others. To be admitted to the circle of teachers, you are required to answer two questions. Eirst, what is this life-problem you are facing now? Second, what will you do about it? Your answers must show these assembled teachers and abbots of the Order that you have attained a level of insight that qualifies you to be a teacher. You are given all this night. You will be questioned just before sunrise."

The old monk turned away from the altar where Jebu lay bound and naked with the gleaming steel spear pointing at his heart, and took his place in the front row of white robes. The booming of the stick against the hollow log began again, and the monks raised a chant in some strange, long-lost language. The temple reverberated with their deep droning.

Moko wondered, are we actually going to sit here until dawn? He recalled, from what he had learned in China about heavenly bodies, that this particular night of the Eifth Month was the shortest night of the year. Of course, he wanted the shike to have all the time in the world to find the right answer to old Taitaro's strange questions, but this stone floor was going to be awfully hard by morning. It was painfully hard now. The incomprehensible chanting went on and on, and Moko lost all track of time. He found himself nodding off to sleep. He heard the rustling of robes about him and looked up to see that many of the monks were pacing around the temple. Some of them were conversing in low tones and others were even leaving the building. How could they just stroll about and chat when a man lay bound to that altar stone in peril of death? Those who remained in their places kept up that devilish chant.

After a time, feeling a little ashamed of turning his back on the shike, but realizing that his simply suffering through the night or falling asleep in the temple would do Shike Jebu no good, Moko stood up and shuffled outside. It was a relief, after the sweet incense, to breathe unscented night air and to watch fireflies twinkling like earthbound stars.

"What do you make of this, Moko-san?" said a voice beside him. Moko started and turned. It was Abbot Taitaro.

His bewilderment and indignation bubbled to his lips. "Holiness,

forgive me, but this seems like utter lunacy. I know you love your son. I was with you in the mountains of Oshu when you nearly died yourself, struggling to keep him alive. How can you encourage him to risk his life just so the other Zinja can call him teacher, when it doesn't seem to mean anything as far as I can make out?" A suspicion suddenly dawned in his mind. "Or, isn't he really risking his life at all? You wouldn't let him, be stabbed by that spear, would you?"

"Oh, yes," said Taitaro. "If his answer lacks true insight, I myself will cut the rope with a stroke of my sword, and the spear will fall and kill him."

"Why, holiness? What drives you to this?"

"The belief that only a certain kind of life is worth living." "I don't know what that means, holiness."

"Do not seek to understand everything about an Order whose lifelong members do not always understand it, Moko-san."

"But why kill a man for failing to answer a question?"

"Eor Jebu the problem might lie, not in knowing the correct answer, but in admitting that he knows it." Moko felt Taitaro's hand give his a light, friendly pat, and then the old abbot was gone.

With a twinge of fear Moko remembered Jebu's first plaintive words, which only he had heard, on waking up at the Black Bear Temple. Now he understood the test the Zinja had imposed on Jebu. They were offering what he had wished for. Peace. All he had to do was give an answer that would cause the spear to fall. Moko prayed that Shike Jebu would want to live.

Moko went back into the temple and took his place among the

seated monks. In spite of his anxiety, the chanting and the incense and the booming of the hollow log lulled him, and he allowed himself to drift into sleep. There was. nothing he could do for Shike Jebu except be here. Now he was on a ship, racing over bright blue ocean waves, leaving the Sunrise Land far behind. He was being carried to the sea coast of Persia. His ship plunged like a wild horse, without sail or oar to propel it. The bow smashed upon great, green, transparent rocks like giant emeralds. The Persians were naked women, and they lived in circular towers of polished white stone without doors and rode about on the backs of giant birds. Brandishing sabres, long legs flashing in the sunlight, they came running down to the shore. They surrounded him and raised their swords. They were going to cut him to pieces and feed him to their great birds. He screamed in terror, "Help! Help!"

A comforting hand shook his shoulder gently. The echo of his screams still reverberated in the incense-heavy air of the temple. Monks were staring at him. His face burnt with shame and he bowed his head to hide his embarrassment. They honoured me by inviting me to their ceremony, and I fell asleep and disturbed it, he thought. I have disgraced Shike Jebu. If I were of noble blood I would commit seppuku, but I am not even worthy to do that.

Taitaro's thin voice cut into his agony. "The time has come for you to speak, Monk Jebu."

There was a long silence. With a chill Moko thought, he's not going to answer. That would be the shike's way. He would not wish to answer the question incorrectly. He would rather let his silence announce that he had chosen death. Moko stared down at Jebu's naked form stretched out on the altar stone, silently imploring the shike to speak. Beyond the altar, seen through the open end of the temple, the sky was growing light. The skeleton of the great torii and the cone of Euji were black silhouettes against an indigo sky.

"Just now I heard a cry for help." Jebu's voice was loud enough to hear but easy, casual, as if he were conversing with a few friends. "Earlier today I heard another cry for help. I refused it. The Order taught me when I was a child never to expect anything but pain in life. I am now almost fifty years old. I have loved, and love has brought me torment and loss. I have seen the woman I loved married to my enemy. I have had to kill the man I loved with my own hands. Death brought him peace. I held out my arms and fell into the embrace of death, and I awoke later and found that even death had abandoned me.

"I am not obliged to fight any more, but the woman who leads this country, the woman I formerly loved, has sent for me. This is the life-problem you question me about, Eather. I know there is no correct solution. If I die on this altar, it is correct. If I remain in this temple and refuse to leave, it is correct. If I go to Kamakura to help the lady who sent for me, it is also correct. I have made my decision. It is the right choice for me because I have made it." He paused a moment. "I will be a teacher, but not in a Zinja monastery. I will go to Kamakura."

A blinding glow appeared beyond Jebu, above the tip of Mount Euji, almost as if the volcano were exploding. It was the edge of the rising sun. Moko held his breath as Taitaro strode forward, sword upraised. He wanted to scream, but his throat was constricted by terror. Taitaro's sword flashed down, cutting the ropes that held Jebu to the stone table. Moko's scream came out as a sigh of relief. The old abbot backed away from Jebu, sheathing his sword, and knelt.

"In this decision, the Self is manifested," he said in a barely audible voice. Slowly he bent forward until his forehead was pressed to the floor. Row by row the other monks did the same. Moko bowed too, rejoicing, realizing that not only was Master Jebu's life saved, but he was going to return with him to Kamakura to help Lady Taniko fight

the invaders. Eor a long time Moko kept his head down, while his heart danced with joy. He heard movement around him and looked up at last. The sun had risen fully and looked like a red disk balanced on the black point of Euji-san. The torii framed sun and mountain perfectly. The man who had lain bound on the altar all night was now standing, his arms outstretched in a kind of benediction. Moko realized that the temple and the torii had been placed to provide, at the dawn of the longest day of the year, this view of the sun centred over Euji, and that it was no accident that this ceremony had been held on this particular night.

Taitaro helped Jebu don a long grey robe. "The robe of a teacher is the grey of emptiness," he said.

"At the heart of knowledge is the Void," the monks chorused.

Taitoro placed a white rope tied in a complex knot around Jebu's neck and said, "The universe is bound by one cord tied with one knot."

"The cord is the Self, and it binds the Self," the monks chanted.

Now another monk stepped forward and handed Jebu a thick book bound between wooden covers. "Take The Zinja Manual," said Taitaro. "It holds that part of our wisdom that can be written down. Read it daily and impart its treasures to those who are worthy."

The monks chanted, "Insight is a flame that turns written words to ashes."

"Let us welcome our new teacher into the Order," said Taitaro, and to Moko's amazement the monks threw away all decorum as they scrambled to their feet, laughing and shouting, hurrying forward to crowd around Jebu, to cheer and embrace him. Moko had never

seen behaviour like this among monks. But the exhilaration of the moment swept him along, and in a moment he, too, was in the clamouring circle around Jebu.

When Jebu saw him, he reached out with a smile and took Moko by the shoulder. "Here is the one who brought my life-problem to me."

Moko ducked his head, embarrassed. "Please, shike, I don't want to be stared at."

Taitaro said, "Those made use of by great destiny are often humble people."

Moko turned to Taitaro. "Did destiny have a hand in this, holiness? Or might things have gone otherwise?" He wanted to believe that the shike had never been in real danger, but he also wanted to believe there was a good reason for his fear.

"Tonight's test might well have had a different outcome," Taitaro said. "I could not have predicted how Jebu would choose. But I see a great pattern in these events, a pattern of destiny, if you will. I will tell you about it as we travel to Kamakura."

"Then you're coming with us, holiness? How marvellous!"

"I will go some of the way with you," said Taitaro with a smile. Jebu turned and stared intently at the old abbot.

"Shike," Moko said, "are you not glad now that you made this decision?"

Jebu kept his eyes on Taitaro. "I do not expect to be glad about it, Moko. No matter what path we choose, it leads in the end to sorrow. And on this road, sorrow may come out to meet us."

It suddenly occurred to Moko to wonder whether the shike had ever known a moment of unalloyed joy. Moko found himself aware of an emotion that made him acutely uncomfortable. It was disgraceful for one so humble to feel pity for one so exalted.

Chapter Ten

Hundreds of banners of the Shima family bearing the clan crest fluttered in the breeze from the great ocean all along the seemingly endless line of samurai snaking down the Tokaido. In the centre of the procession a silver palanquin bobbed, preceded and followed by officers on horseback with golden-horned helmets that gleamed in the light of the setting sun. A cousin of Regent Munetoki was travelling to Heian Kyo to occupy the Rokuhara and represent the Bakufu at the capital.

Three men on foot, travel boxes strapped to their backs, stood on the landward side of the road to let the parade pass. Two were bearded Zinja monks in long grey robes, the third a short, cross-eyed man in a handsome brocaded scarlet jacket and trousers. Behind the travellers a broad plain divided into rice paddies stretched to the distant mountains. In the nearest paddy a row of peasants standing in water up to their shins transplanted rice sprouts to the beds where they would grow to maturity. Ignoring the gorgeous procession of the Shogunal deputy, they were racing against the setting of the sun to get all their plants into the earth before dark. In just the way that the foot soldiers tramped down the road to the beat of drums, the backs and conical straw hats of the peasants rose and fell in unison as they pushed the tender roots of the rice plants into the mud to the age-old chant of "Yattoko totcha, untoku na!"

"Those peasants are lucky not to get a whipping or worse for failing to bow to that great lord," Moko whispered.

"The great lord ought to get down from his palanquin and bow to them," said Taitaro. "There is more nobility in planting a rice field than there is in leading an army. The lives of these peasants are tales of misery that have never been written. They and their children

eat wild roots so they can pay their tax of rice. Millions of them labour to feed the thousands of warriors and rulers who consider themselves so important. The peasants are truly the nation."

He pointed to a high, forest-covered hill some distance up the road, overlooking the sea. "With this army in the way we will get no further before sunset. That hill seems as good a place as any to spend the night."

Jebu was in no hurry to get to Kamakura. He was sure he was more serene now than he would be when they arrived. By the time they had climbed the hill and enjoyed the soup and rice he cooked over a small fire, the rumble of the army had faded into the south, the peasants had gone home from the rice paddies, the stars were appearing over the boundless ocean to the east. The seaward side of the hill on which they were sitting was a sheer cliff, dropping straight down to a jumble of spray-wet rocks. The rhythmic boom of the waves was soothing, reminding Jebu of the peasants' chant.

The lines in Taitaro's face were deeply etched by firelight. "Jebu," he said, "tonight I want to tell you and our good Moko here a few things. Einal things. Please bring forth the Jewel of Life and Death."

The same sense of foreboding Jebu had felt three days ago, on the morning of his initiation, gripped him now. Several times Taitaro had seemed to be hinting at some serious illness. Yet, aside from looking very old-Jebu was not sure of Taitaro's age-the abbot seemed in good health. Jebu took the Jewel out of a hidden pocket in the sleeve of his new robe and held it up.

"Let your mind drift and your body relax," said Taitaro. "Let sleep overtake you. The Jewel is an instrument like a mirror, that reflects another world. In that world dwells a kami, a great spirit. In contemplating the Jewel, one can at times become one with this

kami."

I felt I had become one with a kami, thought Jebu, when I stood on that cliff in Oshu, protecting Yukio from the Mongols. Now the Tree of Life appeared in the tracery on the Jewel, expanded, entered into his eyes and seemed to be growing in his mind. A complex tracery of drooping branches formed a structure around him.

"Listen to me, Jebu, but do not hear me," the old abbot went on in a soft voice that seemed to grow out of the muffled roar of the breakers. "Sink into the world of the Jewel. Go where I send you."

Jebu saw Moko's wide eyes, staring through the branches of the Tree, full of concern, the crossed brown pupils reflecting the fire. Then Moko was transformed into a fur-clad giant with green eyes and a red moustache that drooped past the corners of his mouth. Jebu had seen this giant once before in a vision and had not known him. Now he knew that the red hair and light-coloured eyes were the stamp of the Borchikoun, that strain of Mongol men and women from which his own father, Jemuga the Cunning, had sprung. And this was Genghis Khan, founder of the Golden Eamily, grandfather of Kublai Khan, he who had sent Arghun in pursuit of his father and himself. The giant smiled his merciless smile and extended his vast arm. They were on top of a mountain, standing with their feet buried in snow. Below, in all directions, Jebu could see the countries and people of the world as clearly as if he were on a high hill looking down at peasants in a rice paddy.

As he had seen once before, armies of men on horseback, doll-sized from this height, galloped over the Great Wall and rampaged through China, burning cities, slaughtering the masses of troops sent against them. As the horsemen completed their conquests they seemed to change. Their arms and armour became more elegant, and they were joined by hundreds of thousands of Chinese

infantrymen, as well as contingents of special troops with fire-spitting hua pao, great siege machines, and elephants. The conquering army was now many times larger than it had been. The troops piled up at the edge of the sea. They boarded Chinese junks and crossed the barrier of water to the Sunrise Land. Jebu wept and cried out helplessly as he saw the samurai overwhelmed, first Kyushu taken, then the Home Provinces. The Mongols burned Heian Kyo, put all its people to the sword, and drove the Emperor into the east, just as the Takashi and their Emperor had once been driven into the west. The last stand was at Kamakura. Jebu watched in agony as Taniko herself stood on the battlements of the Shogun's castle, shooting arrows into the waves of invaders. When it was hopeless she turned and threw herself into the flames consuming the stronghold.

The leader of the conquerors, Arghun Baghadur, turned his craggy face towards the mountain where Jebu stood and held out his arms, offering up his triumph. Looking up, Jebu saw that the giant beside him was now his old master, Kublai Khan.

Now the defeated people of the Sunrise Land began to work for the Mongols. New cities appeared on the ruins of the old. Ships were built, sailing ships after the Chinese manner but bigger and more seaworthy. They set out from the ports of the Sunrise Land, and from China and Korea. With hua pao mounted on their decks, they were able to demolish enemy fleets from a great distance, just as Mongol horsemen destroyed enemy armies with clouds of arrows. The huge new vessels transported the Great Khan's armies to the shores of the islands and jungle kingdoms to the south. Where mountains or jungles impeded the onslaught of the Mongol cavalry, the Great Khan sent forth troops adept at other styles of fighting, experienced with other kinds of terrain. A new generation of samurai now fought under the banners of the Great Khan, devastating his enemies. The flotillas turned westwards, attacking and conquering lands and peoples of whom Jebu had only vaguely heard.

"My cavalry of the sea," Kublai Khan rumbled.

Wonderingly, Jebu turned and looked in the Eour Directions. The world was no longer a patchwork of countries. Ruled by the Great Khan, the Central Kingdom was now the centre of an empire stretching from ocean to ocean, and the oceans were patrolled by the Great Khan's ships.

Erom above Jebu a metallic voice said, "All people everywhere exist to serve and enrich the Golden Eamily." Jebu turned and looked again and saw that on the mountain-top with him was a giant statue of gold, dressed in the voluminous, stiff robes of a Chinese Emperor. The eyes and lips and hands moved, but the rest was frozen metal. All the people of the earth were walking to the foot of the mountain. There they knelt in their millions and pressed their foreheads to the ground, worshipping the no-longer-human thing towering above him.

"And now, Jebu, return to us," said a voice that seemed to come from the golden status. Then the face became Taitaro's face, close to his own, the brown eyes, sparkling between wrinkled lids that were almost shut, peering into his. Gently, the thin old fingers drew the Jewel of Life and Death from Jebu's hand.

"What did you experience?" asked Taitaro.

"A terrible dream. I've had such dreams before. I remember having many during the time I was nearly dead with wounds."

Taitaro smiled. "Dreams tell you what you already know. But in this vision I added my knowledge to yours to help you see what would happen if the Mongols overun the Sacred Islands."

Taitaro turned and tapped Moko's hand with bony fingers. "Mokosan,

I told you there was a great pattern in the events we have all lived through. The War of the Dragons was necessary. Without the samurai and the Shogunate, who would there be to meet a Mongol invasion? An Emperor who is a holy puppet . . . a venal government knowing nothing of the real world . . . an army made up of untrained courtiers and frightened conscripts. If the Takashi had ruled unchallenged until now, the condition of the country would not be much better. They were rapidly growing soft and corrupt as the Sasaki and the Eujiwara. We Zinja helped prepare the nation for a Mongol attack, first by helping Yukio get to China where he and the other samurai learned the fighting methods of the Mongols, then by helping Yukio and Hideyori win the War of the Dragons."

"Was Yukio's death necessary, too?" Jebu asked bitterly.

"Not at all," said Taitaro calmly. "To unify the Sunrise Land both Yukio and Hideyori were needed. Yukio was a general but no statesman. Hideyori was a statesman but no general. It is unfortunate that Hideyori was the sort of statesman who is afraid of everyone around him and eventually destroys anyone he is afraid of. But that was something we could not control. We could only work with the material available to us."

"I had no idea my mission was part of some larger plan," said Jebu.

"And I did not realize your Order had such power," said Moko.

"We are not so powerful, Moko-san," said Taitaro, shaking his head. "In sheer numbers we are weak and growing weaker, because we have sacrificed our bodies to affect the course of events, as a man might throw himself into the path of a runaway carriage to turn it aside from others. Our only strength lies in the fact that we go a long way back in time and are spread throughout the world.

"We are called by different names in different lands. Here we are known as the Zinja. In China we were once the Ch'in-cha and are now the secret White Lotus Society, which works against the Mongols. Among the Mongols themselves we were formerly shamans. Indeed, it was shamans of the Order who guided and aided Jamuga the Cunning in his rebellion against Genghis Khan. Now we are represented by Tibetan lamas who have the ear of great Kublai and who will have tamed the Mongols in a few generations. In the far western countries we have such names as Hashishim and Knights Templar, which no doubt sound incomprehensible to you, Moko-san.

"What all branches have in common is the effort of each member of the Order to achieve direct contact between his or her own consciousness and the entire universe, which we call the Self because each of us is the entire universe. Eundamentally we believe in no superior beings, no supernatural or magical powers, not even rules of good and evil. We believe that one day humanity will rise above civilization and live as the earliest people did, without priests or kings or warriors. We believe that ordinary mortals are all that ordinary mortals can rely on."

"That's not so different from some of my own ideas, holiness," said Moko. "Respect the gods, I say, but don't depend on them. Still, how can we hope to get along without rules and religious teachers and warriors? Surely you're not suggesting that we stop worshipping our sacred Son of Heaven. And you're both a religious teacher and a warrior. So is Master Jebu. Erankly, holiness, most people don't want to learn the martial arts and fight in their own defence. I've never wanted to."

Taitaro's little bow of acknowledgment was barely visible to Jebu in the dying firelight. "True, Moko. The ordinary man lets the warrior protect him, and soon the warrior has made a slave of the ordinary

man. The Order's answer to this is to produce trained, dedicated military monks who can be trusted not to enslave their fellow human beings."

"Excuse me, holiness, but a warrior who doesn't want power is like a shark that doesn't eat."

"We do not desire power because we are engaged in a far more satisfying pursuit, the achievement of insight."

"Do you mean what the Buddhists call enlightenment, holiness? I have never understood what that is."

"Insight is the same as enlightenment," Taitaro agreed. "It is that contact between one's own consciousness and the Self which I spoke of earlier. It is impossible to describe fully in words. It is the discovery that everything you have been doing all along is the activity of the Self.

"We think that the earliest people did not need rules of right and wrong. They believed that everything happens as it should, even one's own death. It is said that some of them could even decide when to die. They would say goodbye to their loved ones and sit down peacefully and let go of life. It is even said that there have been great masters who did this among those who studied the ways of the old ones.

"We believe that there is a spirit of perfect action which exists in all people even now. It is often at odds with the rules of lawgivers and priests. It prompts slaves to rebel against harsh masters and warriors to show compassion for the helpless."

"You Zinja observe very strict rules, holiness," said Moko. "And though you talk of liberating all men, I know that the Zinja follow the

orders of their superiors in all things. It seems you do not live according to your beliefs."

The fire had gone out, and Taitaro's voice coming out of the darkness was almost a whisper. "We follow the rules of our Order freely, because they help us maintain the state of insight we wish to cultivate. It is just as a samurai avoids drinking the night before a battle, not because drinking is evil in itself but because it would interfere with his fighting ability. We may appear to be disciplined military monks, but the reality of our Order is total liberation.

"Our Order tries to blend in wherever it goes, keeping our knowledge alive and sharing it with those who seem ready for it. We have found that it serves us well to present ourselves in the guise of warrior monks, similar to those of the Buddhist and Shinto temples. We are permitted by custom a certain degree of secretiveness. By training as warriors we have the means of protecting ourselves from suppression. And we can prevent the profession of arms from being the exclusive privilege of a warrior class. Anyone-farmer, craftsman, trader-can join the Zinja and train in self-defence. We must blend in because our ideas are wicked, utterly foreign to the people of the Sunrise Land.

People have been killed for saying openly some of the things I have said here tonight. That is why there are those who say we Zinja are devils."

The. Zinja are devils. Jebu, lounging in the darkness on a soft bed of pine needles, sat up with a start. Was that what it meant, then, that deadly secret Taitaro had imparted at his initiation so long ago? If the Zinja beliefs and their ultimate aims were known, the people around them would think them devils and try to destroy them. And only by knowing that they would appear to be devils could they be kept from the supreme arrogance of trying to impose their beliefs on

people not yet ready for them. It was the ultimate protection from the temptation of power and therefore the Saying of Supreme Power.

Jebu lay back again, turning this new idea over in his mind as he listened to Taitaro explain the Order to Moko. He could hear the weariness in the old man's voice and he wished he would stop and rest. Jebu's mind wandered. He let his thoughts go back to that time with Taniko just after Kublai Khan had released her to him and before he told her how Kiyosi died. Even if he hated her now, there was no harm in remembering a happier time.

It was very late when he heard Taitaro talking about things he had never discussed with Jebu before, and he began to listen again.

"Our ideals require a way of life so strenuous that there cannot ever be many Zinja. And lately it seems to have been our Order's karma to dwindle even more. During the War of the Dragons many of our monasteries were destroyed and more of our men and women killed than we can replace. There are now less than a thousand of us, men, women and children, and we have only six monasteries in all the Sacred Islands.

"So we have decided to disappear, allowing it to seem that we have become extinct. It is a strategy we have resorted to in other parts of the world where the Order's position seemed too precarious.

"You, Jebu, will be one of the last to be known openly as a Zinja. In the future the Order will exist in secret, in the midst of other organizations such as the Zen monks, whose beliefs are in some ways similar to ours, the schools of martial arts and the families who call themselves Ninja, the Stealers-In, whom the samurai use as spies and assassins. Members of our Order have already joined these other groups to prepare the way for our absorption into them. Our most important Ă˘â,ŹÂ˘work will be among the samurai. We

hope to teach them to be something more than professional killers. We will share with them the Zinja ideal of the way of the sword as a ladder to the sublime.

"The world is entering a new time in which new knowledge will spread faster among the nations. The Mongol conquests have speeded this process by breaking down boundaries all across the great continent to the west. And the barbarians of the far west have sent their armies eastwards on religious wars, and their warriors have brought new knowledge home with them. People are on the move everywhere. Through this exchange of ideas the day will come when humanity will have a better understanding of the universe and be ready to hear the teachings of the Order.

"The Mongols will not conquer the world. It frequently happens that after defeating every opponent an expanding empire comes up against some little, fierce, stubborn nation far out on the edge of its territories, and this little nation inflicts on the empire a stunning defeat that puts an end to its spread. It can happen here and now. If any warriors can stop the advance of the Mongols the samurai can. They are the finest fighting men in the world."

Jebu looked out at the dark ocean to the east. The horizon was visible now, and the stars were fading in a sky more purple than black. Taitaro sounded exhausted, Jebu thought. They had, as he had feared, stayed up all of this short night talking. He did not want Taitaro to use up any more of his strength.

"There is one last thing I have to tell you, my son," came the thin whisper from the old man seated opposite him. "The Jewel of Life and Death. It was never really necessary. I might just as easily have given you a crow's feather to meditate on."

Jebu was shocked. Just when he had thought nothing more could

surprise him, he heard this.

"I don't understand, sensei. How can you tell me now that the Jewel has no special power?"

"It is no different from a man who looks up at a cloud and sees the shape of a bird or a fish. The shape is not in the cloud. The man's mind puts it there. I told you that by contemplating the Jewel you could enter another world and become one with a kami. That other world is your own mind, and that superior being is yourself. Let go of the Jewel now, my son. Keep it as a memento of your father, if you like, but do not cling to it for spiritual power. The meaning of the Jewel of Life and Death is that life and death have no meaning, except what we put into them by the way we choose to live and die."

"Is my father saying that the Tree of Life and all the other visions I saw were only in my mind?" Jebu asked, feeling that he had lost something infinitely precious.

There was amusement in the fragile voice coming from the figure in white. "Why do you say only, my son? Is it not a marvellous mind that has such visions in it?"

It was almost dawn. "Let us watch the sun rise," said Taitaro, "entering and exploring the miraculous worlds of our minds."

Clouds piled on the horizon turned a glowing pink. The first blinding radiance of the sun burst over the edge of a calm sea. Jebu thought, how beautiful it is. Then he saw that the beauty was not there in the sunrise, but in the mind of him who beheld it.

"I am going to die now," Taitaro said softly.

The words were a fist striking straight at Jebu's heart. "Eather, no. What is it? What's wrong?" I knew I shouldn't have let him exhaust

himself talking, Jebu thought.

"Nothing is wrong. I have decided that today is my day to die." "No!" Jebu cried. He did not doubt for a moment that Taitaro could die whenever he wished.

Moko was on his feet, standing over the old man, who sat staring serenely ahead, his long white beard blowing in the breeze from the sea. The carpenter reached out to Taitaro, as if to hold him back from the Void, but he drew his hands away before touching the old man, as if Taitaro were already a corpse and therefore taboo.

"Holiness," he wept, "of all the Zinja madness I've seen in the last few days, surely willing yourself to die is the maddest of all. You can't leave us now. We need you."

"It is my privilege to die when I choose to," said Taitaro calmly. "I have earned it, and some day you and Jebu may feel as I do today. Jebu-chan, I have transmitted to you everything I can tell you. I have freed myself from all attachments to this world. Even better, I have freed myself from all the foolish fears that beset the elderly. My choice of death is right for me, Jebu, just as your choice of going to Kamakura and the Lady Taniko is right for you. You no longer need me, any more than you need the Jewel. If you want counsel, go to the Zen monk Eisen, whose temple is just outside Kamakura. You met him once, and he was one of us long ago."

With a sigh Taitaro stood up and climbed a few paces to the pinnacle of the cliff where they had camped the night before. He looked out at the waves and the rising sun. After a moment he sank into a cross-legged seated position with his hands folded in his lap. He is looking at the last sight he is ever going to see in this world, thought Jebu. It was too much for him. He threw himself to the ground. The first few sobs forced themselves through clenched teeth.

Then the tears began to run freely from his eyes, and he opened his mouth wide and let out a wailing cry of pain and protest.

Taitaro turned and looked down at him calmly. "Come, come, is this any way for a man almost fifty years of age to behave? A Zinja monk, at that?"

"You are the only person I have left in the world to love," Jebu sobbed. "Do not abandon me now, I beg you. You gave me the choice between life and death a few days ago, and I chose life. Will you make a mockery of my choice?"

"What you say about love is foolish, my son. The world is full of people whom you love. One is right beside you. As for mockery, I would indeed mock your choice if I refused to make a choice of my own when one is called for. Life and death are the same to a Zinja. The resolve is all. This old body of mine is worn out. The Self is ready to drop it. Accept, accept. All happens as it should."

"I don't want you to die," Jebu wept.

"Your passions are a gale, my son, always threatening to blow away everything we've taught you. You know that freedom from the fear of death is the key that unlocks humanity's chains. Yet you treat my passing as a fearful, sorrowful thing. You disturb the calm of this moment with your ignorant wailing." Eor a moment the gruff strength Jebu remembered from his childhood came back into Taitaro's voice. "Be silent now."

Jebu climbed to his feet and stood with bowed head, ashamed, realizing that his father's admonition had the weight of Zinja teaching behind it. Yet beneath the stern tone he heard love. His father wanted him to be calm, invulnerable, a true Zinja. He also wanted him to be human, and to be human he must suffer.

"I'm sorry, Eather," he said. Eor the first time he heard a strange sound beside him and realized it was Moko, bent double, muffling his sobs. Jebu put a comforting hand on Moko's shoulder.

"Sit and meditate with me, Jebu and Moko," Taitaro said. This brought a moan from Moko, but at the gentle urging of Jebu's hand on his shoulder, the carpenter sank to the ground. The sun was now well above the grey-blue sea, and its radiance was blinding. Jebu felt himself wanting to ease Moko's sorrow, and in that wish his own pain lost some of its sharpness. Eor a long time they sat in silence.

Taitaro said almost in a whisper, "This mild wind blowing from the sea will carry me off. I will become the Self. No longer will there be any separateness at all. I will return when needed, and I will bring the wind with me. I have always loved my Sacred Islands. Truly they are a gift of the gods to the world."

Jebu seemed to forget time and death as the sun gradually rose higher, warming him with its summer heat, while the soft sea breeze dried the tears on his cheeks. After a while there was a stillness about Taitaro that made Moko and Jebu turn questioningly to each other.

"Let me look," Moko said, the tears running down his cheeks like a waterfall. Jebu bowed, though he already knew what Moko would find. Moko stood up and climbed to the pinnacle where Taitaro sat with his back to them. He peered into the abbot's face, then turned to Jebu a face full of woe.

"He has left us, shike. He has truly left us." Moko fell into a crouch beside Taitaro, sobbing.

As if it were a parting gift from Taitaro, Jebu suffered no longer. He felt utterly serene. Some time during the long meditation, as Tai-

taro's breath went out of his body, the sorrow had drained out of Jebu like poison being drawn out of a wound. He had done his mourning while his father was alive.

"We will build a pyre for him here and scatter his ashes in the sea," he said. And in time an empty urn would move into its place in some Zinja monastery.

Now Jebu made himself go up to the top of the cliff and see his father's dead face. It was like that of a porcelain monk. Taitaro's eyes were lightly closed, his head was sunk on his chest, his hands were clasped together in his lap. Jebu lovingly touched his father's shoulder, and Taitaro's body started to slump forward. Moko and Jebu lifted the body, light as a doll's, and carried it back a little way from the edge of the cliff.

They plunged together in silence into the forested slope leading up from the Tokaido Road. Moko, as always, was carrying with him his box of carpenter's tools, his Instruments of the Way. Even though he now wore a samurai sword, he never went without the tools of his original trade. Each of them took a saw and began cutting down small trees. By noon they had made a waist-high platform of crossed tree trunks and bamboo poles, the spaces between them filled with pine boughs. They laid Taitaro's body on it and built a thick canopy of poles and branches over it, peaked like the roof of a shrine.

At the hour of the ape the sun was in the western sky, and they were ready. Moko lit a branch with flint and tinder and handed it to Jebu. Jebu walked around the pyre and in five places set fire to the boughs at its base. Swiftly the flames, almost invisible in the bright sunlight, curled up around the wood and met in a peak above it. It had been a dry summer, and the pyre burned with a fierce hissing, sending up thick white smoke. The wind had shifted during the day and now blew from the land towards the sea. The smoke stretched out in a long

white plume over the waves. Jebu and Moko stood back from the shimmering air around the fire.

"The smoke reminds me of his beard," said Moko sadly. He was calmer now, having emptied himself for the time being of tears for the old abbot.

Jebu slowly recited aloud a prayer he had been taught long ago, the Prayer to a Dead Zinja. "Death is not the enemy of life. Life is the mountain, death is the valley. As the snowflake that falls on the mountaintop is carried at last to the river, so your self has at last rejoined the Eternal Self. I congratulate you, Brother, on a life well lived. You have seen all the arrows fly, you have seen all the swords fall. You will remember nothing and you at last will be forgotten. But in remembering the Self, we remember you. The Self never forgets." Eor the first time Jebu realized that this prayer, like other Zinja prayers for the dead, was not addressed to the one who, after all, had ceased to exist, but to the one who spoke the prayer.

"Homage to Amida Buddha," Moko declared, as if both prayers were part of the same ritual.

It was late afternoon by the time the fire had burnt down to the blackened rock. Moko, weeping again, used his Instruments of the Way to perform the final office of pulverizing the skull and remaining pieces of bone. Then, with pine branches, they swept the ashes from the cliff edge. The wind caught them and carried them down to the sea.

Jebu stood looking out over the ocean as Taitaro had only this morning, feeling on his back both the warmth of the setting sun and the cool wind blowing from the west. Long shadows purpled the waters below. The wind reminded him of the battle of Shimonoseki Strait. Yukio and Taitaro, the two men dearest to him, both gone.

They had melted back into wind, fire, earth and water, of which all things are composed. Yet it was impossible not to think that their spirits were somehow still intact, that Yukio and Taitaro could still watch and love the Sacred Islands and could, as Taitaro had said, return at need.

He looked down at the ocean and thought, we appear, run our course, and vanish again, like waves, while the ocean remains. How sad we are, wishing we could go on forever. Some people manage to attain a spirit of accepting death, but others are cut off before they even have time to do that. The young samurai try to learn acceptance by comparing themselves to cherry blossoms. The life of a blossom is only a day, but it is complete. Atsue, I think, must have known that kind of acceptance. But Yukio, young as he was, lived fully. He did the greatest deeds possible, and wanted to die when the time finally came. And my father Taitaro-if ever I have seen a life ended in the fullness of days, it was his. Men like Yukio and Taitaro are not blossoms, they are golden fruit, falling in ripeness. If it were not that all partings are sorrowful I could almost say that the death of my father was a happy occasion, as I know he wanted it to be. Teach the samurai, he said. I must teach them what is best and truest in the way of the samurai, their own way. We do not have to win wars, we have only to achieve insight and liberation. I must help them understand this.

He heard heavy feet pushing through the woods below. He looked down and saw movement and the flash of metal among the pines. Armed men. Uneasily, Moko moved to stand next to him. A few moments later three samurai of the lowest rank, foot soldiers armed with spears, emerged from the forest. Their bearing was respectful when they saw they were dealing with a monk and a man who appeared to be a well-dressed samurai, albeit not of very military bearing.

"What's happening here, shike?" one of them asked. "We saw your fire a long way off. It was too big to be just an ordinary campfire."

"My father, Abbot Taitaro of the Order of Zinja, died here this morning," said Jebu. "We have been performing funeral rites for him."

The samurai frowned. "Things aren't done that way any more, shike. You don't just dispose of your dead in the wilderness. You're expected to report a death to the proper authorities." He turned to his comrades. "We'd better take them to the general."

Moko spoke up grandly. "The highest authorities of all require our immediate presence in Kamakura. You'll regret it if you delay us."

Though he was not samurai by birth and had never drawn the sword that hung at his belt, he knew he outranked these three.

"General Miura will sort things out, sir," said the samurai, forcing himself to be polite. "Please come with us."

Taking a last look at the spot where Taitaro had died, Jebu shouldered his travel box and started down the hillside. Moko pointed out his own box to one of the warriors.

"I have had to make this journey without servants, but there is no reason for me to carry luggage when there is one of lower rank to do it for me. Since you force me to go out of my way, you may carry my box." The samurai Moko singled out responded with a murderous look, but after a gesture from his superior he reluctantly strapped Moko's box to his back.

A small company of foot soldiers and cavalry was lined up on the road at the base of the hill. Moko and Jebu were led to their splendidly dressed general, a black-bearded man who sat on a

brown and white horse. Over his armour he wore a light blue cape bearing a white disk, the badge of the Miura family.

"You're the two I've been sent to fetch," said General Miura Zumiyoshi when they identified themselves. He spoke in the accents of an eastern warrior. "What were you doing starting fires up there in the hills? Surely you know that's dangerous in dry weather like this."

Jebu explained the funeral pyre and apologized for not having followed proper procedures. "We monks are not always aware of new regulations. The world passes us by."

"I'd believe that if you weren't a Zinja." Zumiyoshi laughed, his teeth flashing white in his beard. "In any case, shike, my sympathies. I know what it is to lose a father."

"If there's nothing else the honoured general wishes, we should be getting on our way," said Jebu. "We are expected in Kamakura."

"Indeed you are," said Zumiyoshi. "And I've come to speed you on your way. Be good enough to mount the horses we've provided. We'll travel by torchlight. I'm to take you at once to her ladyship, the AmaShogun."

Chapter Eleven

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

The Ama-Shogun. I both like and dislike that nickname. To be thought of as Supreme Commander of the samurai even though I am a woman-what woman has ever achieved so much? There have been Empresses who ruled alone, but they inherited the title, and they ruled so badly that no woman will ever be permitted to occupy the throne again. So the historians say. Of course, the historians are all men.

How well I and my family rule will soon be tested. The people and the samurai are strong enough, and the gods are surely on our side. What it comes down to is whether we, who happen to be leading the country now, can lead well during this coming invasion. It is hard to believe, but there are moments when I miss Hideyori's cleverness in matters of state.

Our agents in China and Korea report that the southern Sung capital, Linan, has surrendered to the Mongols without a struggle, and the child who is Son of Heaven has knocked his head on the floor in homage to Kublai and has been carried off into captivity. I'm glad Linan surrendered. It would have been a horror beyond imagining if that magnificent city had been destroyed and its millions slain.

But some Chinese fight on. The war party has crowned the younger brother of the captured Emperor, and they still occupy the coastal provinces. They have a huge navy. The longer they hold out, the more time we will have to prepare for our own ordeal. A naval war between the Mongols and the Chinese will destroy many ships Kublai could use against us.

But, the Nun Shogun? I am far from being a nun. I know that now more than ever, as I tremble with anticipation at seeing Jebu again. He must come. I have sent Moko after him to the Zinja Pearl Temple, and I sent Zumiyoshi with troops and horses after Moko. Jebu may be here at any moment. Here. At last, after all these years, with all barriers between us gone. My love for him has arisen like the phoenix and soars in the heavens.

Someone knocks at the door of my chamber. Perhaps Jebu is in the castle even now. I feel all the eagerness I should have felt, but did not, on either of my wedding nights.

-Fifth Month, twenty-fifth day

YEAR OF THE RAT

It was late in the evening when she received them in her personal audience chamber, the Lilac Hall. She wondered if anyone had told Jebu that name and if so, whether it would mean anything to him. As etiquette required, she sat on the dais behind a screen. It was a warm night. She had ordered the shoji panel on the east side of the room opened, permitting a glimpse of the moon floating among the branches of pine trees, as if caught by them. A double row of councillors in red and green kimonos lined the length of the room, seated under the murals of lilac bushes that gave the hall its name. Even though no one could see her except the one lady-in-waiting who relayed her signals to the servants, she had dressed with care in a white silk outer jacket printed with the red Shima crest, shades of green showing at her neck, sleeves and hem. In her hair was her mother-of-pearl butterfly, the lucky ornament that had gone with her to China and back. She needed luck tonight, she thought, feeling a hollow in her stomach. She signalled to the lady-in-waiting that she was ready.

Miura entered first, his helmet tucked under his arm. Then came Moko in his rich robes. Her eyes leaped to the tall figure beyond them. Her first sight of him struck her like a physical blow, and she gasped. He looked splendid in his long robe. The skin of his hands and face was a rich dark brown against the grey cotton. He dropped to his knees beside the others, and all three pressed their foreheads to the polished wood floor. Jebu sat back, eyes cast down, hands folded in his lap, waiting. One advantage of a screen, Taniko thought, was that she could avidly drink in the sight of him and no one need know. Her heart was hammering furiously in her chest, like a prisoner trying to escape. He was so near, for the first time in over ten years. Other than that strange, brief glimpse of him at the Hachiman shrine, this was her first look at him in all that time. There were many more wrinkles around his eyes, whose grey she could not see because he kept them determinedly fixed on the floor. His white hair was parted in the middle and fanned out stiffly to his shoulders, giving him the look of a lion in a painting. The ends of his moustache hung down to his white beard. Anyone looking at him would see a fierce-looking middle-aged monk, but to her the young man she had met the day she began her first journey down the Tokaido was clearly visible.

She spoke at last, first thanking General Miura and Moko for bringing Jebu safely and quickly to Kamakura. Moko's eyes flickered nervously back and forth between Jebu and the screen behind which she was sitting.

At last it was time to address Jebu. The mere thought of saying his name aloud intimidated her. She hoped there would be no quaver in her voice.

"My most profound gratitude to you, Master Jebu, for your willingness to leave the peace of your temple. You must find this military capital a noisy, discordant place after the quiet of monastic life."

Now, for the first time, he lifted his eyes, and again she felt as though she had been struck by a club. He was looking straight through her screen, as if he could see into her eyes, even though she knew he couldn't. She almost felt like fainting, as she had at the Hachiman shrine. The eyes were impenetrable as granite. There was not a trace of feeling in them. They saw into her and told her nothing-and thereby told her everything. Oh no, she thought. The hollow in the pit of her stomach turned to a sinking iron ball. The joyless grey eyes told her that he was not happy to be here, that he hadn't wanted to come to her, that he hated her.

He spoke now, thinly masked disdain curling his beard and moustache back from his teeth. "My lady, a summons from one as exalted and powerful as you honours this lowly monk." The voice was hoarser than she remembered it, but softer. The sound of it made her shiver.

"I cannot seem to find peace anywhere in this world, and I am more used to the ringing of steel on steel than the chiming of temple bells. Eor every night that I have slept in a monastery, I've spent a hundred nights on the ground. As for this capital of yours, it is a strong, fierce city, worthy of samurai. Of all its edifices, the grandest is this residence of yours, my lady, the Shogun's castle. The Shima family mansion, where I left you long ago, before I joined Lord Yukio to fight at his side during the War of the Dragons, was an admirable palace. But this castle dwarfs it utterly. My lady has risen far in this world."

He had never forgiven her for being ambitious. The other men in the room were all staring at Jebu. He had committed an offence by mentioning Yukio, whose reputation was still under a cloud here in Kamakura. She was sure it was Jebu's way of reminding them that he had fought for Yukio to the end and did not regret it.

"My lady, we're worn out from travelling such a great distance in such a short time," Moko stammered. "We have not eaten all day. Might it not be better to meet again when we're fresh?"

Dear Moko was trying to protect Jebu by blaming his discourtesy on fatigue. It made her want to laugh in spite of her sorrow.

"Don't be absurd, Moko. We've only begun this conversation," she said.

"My apologies, Lady Taniko," said Jebu, still staring steadily at her screen. "Of course the name of Muratomo no Yukio should never be mentioned in this castle." That implied she had approved of Yukio's persecution and death. She could not answer the accusation in front of her councillors, because that would require her to criticize Hideyori, whom she was obliged as a respectable widow to defend. But she could not let the charge go unanswered.

"I accept your apology, Monk Jebu," she said in the pleasantest tone she could muster. "Your loyalty to your friend and lord of so many years is 'commendable." She chose her next words carefully. "The dispute between my lord Hideyori, the late Shogun, and his brother Lieutenant Yukio, was a great sorrow to me, and I never understood the reason for it. Now that both are gone, let the quarrel be buried with my husband's ashes at the Hachiman shrine, where karma took him from me. Let both lords be remembered only as two of the greatest heroes of the Muratomo clan. With the passing of time we forget the reasons for our bloody quarrels. We remember with respect all the great warriors of the Sunrise Land, even the mighty ones of the Takashi family, as well as those who slew them. If only all our heroes were alive today we would not have to fear the most terrible enemy our nation has ever known." There, she thought, that message was clear enough: I, too, sympathized with Yukio. See, I publicly call him lieutenant, the title Hideyori forbade. Let us forget all

past grievances. I do not blame you for the deaths of Hideyori or Kiyosi or Atsue. I need your help.

Jebu smiled, a smile without humour or kindness. "I quite agree, my lady. Yesterday's enemy, today's friend." Meaning, You are no better than all the other samurai, with their ever-shifting loyalties. The answer bitterly disappointed Taniko. She had hoped to have his love to sustain her. Instead, if she wanted him near her, she would have to live with his contempt. She felt as if an earthquake had split the ground open and she were falling into the fissure. This situation was impossible. They must come to terms of some kind, even if he could no longer love her. She realized that she owed him much for the years of suffering she had inflicted on him by sending him away after he confessed to killing Kiyosi, and that she should be patient now. She could endure his scorn for a little while. Perhaps if they talked alone, she could make a peace of sorts with him.

"The Zinja honours the samurai by quoting an old saying of ours," she said. "I am hoping that Zinja and samurai knowledge combined will help us to win this war. I would like to discuss this further with Shike Jebu. I will not hold the rest of you." With formal salutations to Moko, Zumiyoshi, her councillors and most of her court women, she cleared the Lilac Hall. Eor appearances' sake she remained behind her screen and kept an elderly lady-in-waiting, whose discretion she trusted, sitting at a corner of the dais.

"Come closer, Jebu," she said. "Now that we are alone there is no need for you to sit so far away." He rose fluidly, halved the distance between them and dropped to his knees again. No man moves so gracefully, she thought. He made the samurai look like waddling ducks. Her hunger for him was actually physically painful. She could not take her eyes off his long brown hands.

"What does my lady require of me?" he asked in that hoarse, soft

voice that made her spine tingle.

She forced her mind to the business at hand. "We know the Mongols will attack somewhere along the west coast. The Bakufu generals are preparing our defences. You can help them by teaching them whatever you can remember from your years of fighting among the Mongols. You can tell them how to train our men. You yourself can set up a school in which samurai can be taught new tactics. Scattered all over the Sacred Islands there must be surviving samurai who fought under you and Yukio in China and Mongolia. You must find them and make teachers of them."

"There will not be many of them, my lady," said Jebu coldly. "Only about three hundred came back with us from China. Many of those were killed during the War of the Dragons. More died when your noble husband made war on those who remained loyal to Lord Yukio."

"Well, you will tell all who supported Lord Yukio that the past is done with and their nation needs them now," said Taniko, despairing as she saw that Jebu was not going to let the subject of Yukio alone.

"If the rules of your Order permit, I wish you also to train our men in the Zinja martial arts. By this I mean the Zinja philosophy as well as the specific techniques. Erom what you told me of it long ago, I believe the Zinja philosophy could be most valuable to the samurai." She gave Jebu what she hoped was a winning smile, momentarily forgetting the screen between them and then cursing it when she remembered.

"Perhaps you can also help our officers with planning," she went on. "The Mongols could attack anywhere along the coast of Kyushu or Honshu, and that is a terribly long line to defend. Our forces will be spread so thin that a Mongol attack will be like punching through a

paper wall."

"Then I suggest you build a wall of stone," said Jebu.

"A stone wall all along the coasts of two islands? Impossible." Jebu shook his head. "It will only be necessary to build it around Hakata Bay. That is where the Mongols will land."

"How can you possibly be sure of that?"

"They need a very large harbour to accommodate a huge fleet. The harbour must be as close to their ports of embarkation as possible, so that their ships, already overloaded with men and horses, won't have to carry provisions for a long voyage. The landing site must also be close enough to the heart of our country that the Mongols will not have to fight their way across the whole island of Kyushu or down through the mountains of Honshu to get at the Home Provinces and Heian Kyo. There is only one harbour that fulfils all those conditions, Hakata Bay."

"If we put all our troops and defences there, the Mongols are sure to learn of it," said Taniko. The conversation was going much better now. The bitterness was gone as they discussed the problem that faced them.

"They will still land there, even if they know we are waiting for them. They will be confident that they can overwhelm us. A shrewd strategist would try to land at an undefended place, but when a man has conquered as vast an empire as Kublai Khan's he expects to win by throwing all his troops against all the enemy's troops in one tremendous encounter. Such a man feeds his overly exalted notion of his own power with adventures like that."

Taniko saw the smiling face of Kublai Khan in her mind. A man

before whom nations had trembled from the time he was a small boy. A man who could dream of building his own green mountain with one tree of each kind in the world on it. Jebu was right; such a man would probably land his troops at Hakata because it suited his convenience, even if every warrior in the Sunrise Land was waiting there for him.

"Do you think we can possibly win, jebu?" she asked anxiously.

"You are the only fighting man, of all those around me, who has any idea of the Mongols' real power."

"They have never failed in any war they have undertaken," said Jebu. "Still, Kublai Khan is attempting the most difficult and hazardous of all military operations, an invasion across a wide ocean. His ability to send reinforcements will be limited, especially if his fleet is forced to remain at anchor on our shores. If we can hold his army to the water's edge, they will need their ships as a base to operate from. They won't be able to send the ships back to ferry more troops across. That is why I suggest a wall. As to whether we can win, no one can say. There are too many uncertainties. We Zinja believe in throwing ourselves into the struggle with all our energy, without concerning ourselves about who wins or loses."

"If they win, I do not intend to live," said Taniko.

"I know," said Jebu with a smile. "You will take a bow and arrows in your own hands and die fighting." The moment was almost companionable. Thinking of the wall he had suggested, she remembered the half-ruined Chinese Great Wall, where they had stood together and looked north, into the wind, at the land that bred the Mongols. The lamps in the Lilac Hall burned low, and the lady-in-waiting who was there for respectability's sake seemed to be asleep.

"Oh, Jebu, when you spoke of a wall, I could not help remembering the time you and I saw the Great Wall in China together. We had just been reunited after so many, many years apart, and I have never been happier, before or since. You must remember. This is happening again now. We're together again. We can be happy."

Her voice faltered. There was a long silence as Jebu stared at her. Beneath the granite eyes she sensed volcanic fires. The brown hands resting on his thighs were tense.

At last he spoke. "I am prepared to serve you, my lady, but only in this war. I do not think it accomplishes any purpose to discuss a past that no longer exists."

She cringed back, glad of the screen between them that hid from him her look of dismay. "Why so fierce, shike?" she pleaded. "Erom the moment you entered this hall, I have felt your anger. I do not think I have done anything to deserve such hatred. Whatever the reason, I beg you to forgive me. How else can we work together? Surely you would not have come here if you hate me as much as you seem to."

Jebu's reply smashed her hopes. "There are many reasons why I am here, but the most important is Yukio. He was my life. I am doing what he would want me to do if he were alive. He would be in command of our defences now if he had not been murdered by the man you married-my lady." He spoke through bared teeth.

I do not have to humble myself before anyone, she thought, much less this rude monk. I am the mother of the Shogun. Samurai by the tens of thousands would die to defend me. The Regent turns to me for advice.

"Thank you for explaining yourself to me so clearly, Shike Jebu," she said in a steely voice. "Please leave me now. This audience is

ended."

"My lady." He stood up, bowed, and backed out of the room with an elaborate display of courtesy.

She sat with her fists clenched. I will not let that man have anything to do with defending the Sunrise Land, she thought. Let him go back to his monastery. I hate him.

Chapter Twelve

At noon the next day Taniko sat in the moon-viewing chamber, a room on the top floor of the highest tower in the castle, which she often used for meditation. The sun was bright on the lower rooftops near by, their gold dolphins reflecting a blinding radiance. Her feelings were more divided than ever. She had to accept Jebu's help, now that she had asked for it. The good sense of his plan to build a wall around Hakata Bay proved how useful he could be. And in spite of his anger at her, she could not get his face out of her mind.

Then there was the problem of what to do about the sword presentation. Ever since Hideyori's death she had kept the Muratomo heirloom sword, Higekiri. She thought it fitting that it go to Sametono, and was planning to give it to him in a ceremony at sunset today. She had intended Jebu to be a guest and to meet Sametono and Munetoki. His presence at the presentation would symbolize the reconciliation of the Shogunate with the followers of Yukio. But since she and Jebu could not be reconciled, it might be better to hold the ceremony without him. She both wanted, and did not want, him to be there. After so many years, her need to be near him was so great that she wanted to see him despite his hatred. She thought of asking Eisen's advice. He would be invoking the blessing at the ceremony. But Eisen did not know Jebu. Moko did. She quickly wrote a note asking Moko to come to the castle immediately and sent one of her guards off to his house.

Moko came to Taniko's private chamber at the hour of the sheep. He was perspiring under layers of kimonos, each more heavily embroidered than the next. Being old friends, they met without either screens or ladies-in-waiting to protect Taniko's virtue. Taniko's quarters were as austere as they had been when Hideyori was alive.

The principal decoration in the room was the calligraphic copy of the verse from the Diamond sutra Sametono had made years ago, which she had mounted on a scroll and hung in her personal altar. Today there was a vase of white roses beside it. As usual, Moko took a moment to admire Sametono's artistry and to read the verse.

"No such thing as goodness," he said. "You know, the old sage Taitaro said something like that just before he died."

"Taitaro dead?" Taniko was shocked. "Jebu didn't say a word to me about it. That wonderful old man. Oh, how sad!" Taitaro's appearance in Shangtu long ago had given her the first ray of hope that she might one day be rescued and return home. Taitaro had seemed like a father to her-a real father, not like Bokuden-during her sojourn with Jebu in China. Tears sprang to her eyes. How could Jebu have failed to tell her that? Did he hate her that much? "Homage to Amida Buddha," she whispered in Taitaro's memory. "How and when did he die, Moko?"

Moko told her of Taitaro's almost miraculous departure from this world.

"The Tokaido," said Taniko, wiping her eyes with the pale green sleeve of her outer kimono. "So much that is important to us has happened along the Tokaido. Do you remember how you swore you would always be the messenger between us, Moko-san?"

"I do, my lady," Moko's eyes were large and liquid with sadness.

"Moko-san, you saw how he spoke to me at the audience last night. I feel that I should never have sent for him. What do you think?"

"My lady, I am sure Master Jebu still loves you. His rages prove it. He is a man who has been learning all his life to accept calmly

everything that happens to him. Yet, towards you he is an earthquake, a tidal wave, a tai-phun. Even a fool like me can see that he loves you."

Encouraged, Taniko stopped crying. "What about the sword ceremony, Moko? Shall I invite him?" Amazing, she thought. The leaders of the nation turn to me for advice, and I turn to a cross-eyed carpenter.

"Let me take your invitation to the shike, my lady. I will persuade him not to behave like a bear in springtime."

"Oh, Moko, how can I thank you enough?"

"I have another reason for doing this, my lady. Since your son was gracious enough to raise my family to samurai class, my eldest son must now carry our new family name, Hayama, into battle. I want him to be trained by the shike. I can think of no better way to ensure that he comes out alive."

The Great Audience Hall of the Shogun's castle was hung with the banners of the great families that supported the Bakufu. On the top level of the dais, wearing a jewelled head-dress and almost buried in crackling, gold-embroidered robes, was the ten-year-old Shogun, Muratomo no Sametono. Behind him hung a huge silk cloth bearing the embroidered Muratomo White Dragon. At his side was the hilt of a gold-mounted sword which many in the hall recognized, some with reverence, some with indignation. Kogarasu. It was the first time Sametono had openly worn the Takashi sword. At Sametono's left sat the Regent, Shima Munetoki. The lower levels were occupied by the principal officers of the Bakufu, by the great clan chieftains and, behind a tall folding screen, Taniko. Even though she had arranged and planned the ceremony down to the last detail, Taniko was expected to remain behind the screen throughout.

She could see Jebu and Moko on the floor of the hall, near the dais. She had broken protocol to seat Jebu there, where she could look at him. Eisen stood up now and recited a blessing. Munetoki spoke from his seated position beside Sametono, telling the history of Higekiri and the tragic way it came into the possession of the Shogun's widow.

"She who next to the Empress herself is the most highly honoured lady in our realm now chooses to present this treasure to her exalted son, our Lord Shogun, Muratomo no Sametono."

Munetoki rose and went over to Taniko's screen and received from her the sword box, a work of art in itself with mother-of-pearl birds in flight inlaid on gold lacquer. Reverently, Munetoki carried the sword box across to Sametono, kneeling and bowing as he held it out to him. Sametono took the box and opened it. He took out the sword and held it up so that people could admire the black-lacquered scabbard wrapped with bands of silver and the hilt with its silver dragon. He drew the ancient straight blade one third of the way out of its scabbard as was customary for sword viewing, studying the perfectly polished steel and its wavering, shadowy temper line.

"I have written a poem for this occasion," Sametono said, putting the sword back in its box. His ten-year-old voice, as he recited, was boyish, but firm and strong. Taniko's heart soared with love and pride.

Two souls at war,

Duelling in a single breast

To capture the heart.

But one mind will persuade both To turn against the true foe.

There were polite cries of appreciation from the guests. Everyone understood that the "souls" were the two swords, Kogarasu and Higekiri, the sword being traditionally the soul of the samurai. These two "souls" contended for the heart of Sametono, whose heritage combined Takashi and Muratomo. "Mind," with which Sametono would put an end to the conflict, was the awakened mind, the Buddha nature, which Sametono, like many young samurai, was cultivating in his Zen studies. Through the search for enlightenment the country could put past feuds behind it and unite itself against the invaders. Eor a ten-year-old, thought Taniko, it is a brilliant poem. She looked at

Jebu and saw that he was sitting with his spine rigid, weeping unashamedly. If only he and I could have had such a son, she thought. In a way, this is our son. Jebu rescued him from death and gave him to me.

Sametono made a little speech thanking his mother for the gift of Higekiri and expressing his hope that he would be worthy of the long line of ancestors who had worn it. "But the time will soon come for both the honoured Higekiri and the noble Kogarasu to be retired among our national treasures. The holy monk Eisen, with us today, is collecting subscriptions for the rebuilding of the Todaiji, the great Buddhist temple at Nara which was tragically burnt to the ground during the War of the Dragons."

Sametono did not mention that it was his great-grandfather, Takashi no Sogamori, who had caused the burning of the temple. Listening to Sametono but unable to take her eyes off Jebu, Taniko noticed that he was now looking at the boy with an ironic smile. She wondered what special meaning the Todaiji had for Jebu.

Sametono continued, "I propose, after we have been victorious in

this war, to donate both swords to Eisen Roshi, to be kept among the most precious objects in the Todaiji. I take this occasion to humbly ask that the monks of the Todaiji, as well as all other people of high and low rank, pray unceasingly to the Buddha, the saints and all the gods and goddesses for victory."

Again there were loud cries of approval from the warriors and officials gathered in the hall. Taniko looked at Jebu and saw that he was weeping again. He did not bother to wipe his eyes with his sleeves, as most people did, but let his tears flow openly down his hard brown cheeks and into his white beard. If he cares that much for Sametono, she thought, can he not find a place in his heart for Sametono's grandmother?

Now the guests rose and formed a line to present themselves to the Regent and the Shogun. Taniko could have left the hall, but she stayed behind the screen, watching Jebu, who towered over all others in the room, patiently waiting his turn.

Finally Jebu knelt and prostrated himself to Munetoki, identifying himself. "Welcome," Munetoki rumbled. "I have heard much about you, shike, from my honoured cousin, the Ama-Shogun." Taniko watched Jebu eagerly for a reaction to Munetoki's mentioning her. The white-bearded face remained mask-like.

"Shike Jebu!" Sametono exclaimed before Jebu could kneel to him. The boy Shogun stood up and, in spite of .his eight layers of robes bounded down the steps to throw his arms around Jebu's waist. There were gasps of astonishment from all over the hall at this unseemly behaviour. Taniko noticed that Eisen, who stood near by, beamed approvingly.

Munetoki, as Regent, stood in place of father to Sametono. "You must return to your place at once, Your Highness," he said in a

reproachful voice.

"I am Supreme Commander of the samurai," said Sametono. "I do as seems best to me, not as ceremony dictates. Cousin Munetoki, this good Zinja monk saved me from being murdered years ago. I told him I would never forget it, and I won't. Come up, Shike Jebu, sit on the dais near me." There was wonder and a little anger among the other guests at a Zinja monk's receiving this unusual honour. There was even more murmuring when Sametono added, "You, too, Uncle Moko." Only a few people knew that Moko was a close friend of Taniko and that Sametono had known him very well for years. Jebu and Moko seated themselves a little uncomfortably on the dais below Sametono. The boy now conducted a disjointed conversation with them while greeting other guests. This Zen spontaneity that Eisen encourages in his students could go too far, Taniko thought, but she recalled how Kublai Khan did whatever he wanted, without fear of censure. If a leader couldn't make his own rules, how could he truly lead?

"Not only do I owe you my life, shike," said Sametono, "I owe both these swords to you."

A cloud passed over Jebu's face. "I should ask your forgiveness, Your Highness, considering how I came by the swords."

"My honoured mother told me about the death of Takashi no Atsue, Master Jebu. I know very well that war makes enemies of people who should be friends."

"Your mother is most kind," said Jebu, glancing over to the screen where Taniko sat, sending her heart whirling upwards like an autumn leaf caught in the wind.

Sametono said, "It's true that the blood of three great Takashi

gentlemen flows in my veins, but in my own humble person I represent the union of the contending clans, wouldn't you agree?"

"Bosh," said Eisen, a twinkle in his eye, having come up to the Shogun. "Sametono is Sametono. Takashi and Muratomo are names and nothing more."

Sametono laughed, a clear, metallic sound. "No matter how high I climb on the ladder of Truth, Eisen-sensei is always above me."

"Look up at my rump," said Eisen, "and you'll see the face of the Buddha." He turned casually to Jebu, ignoring the shocked stares of Munetoki and Moko and said, "We meet again, Monk Jebu."

"My father recommended that I see you, sensei," said Jebu.

"How is the aged, honoured Taitaro?"

"Dead," said Jebu flatly.

Eisen smiled. "The tide rises, the tide falls. We must talk when there is more time, Monk Jebu." He patted Jebu's hand, bowed to Sametono and turned away.

"There's something I've always wanted to ask a Zinja monk," said Sametono. "I've heard that you Zinja monks can kill at a distance just by pointing a finger at an enemy or shouting at him. Can you really do that? Could you teach it to me?"

"Those are old stories that go all the way back to the martial arts schools of China, Your Highness," said Jebu with a smile. "We Zinja train very hard, but we can't kill by magic."

But he looked at Hideyori, Taniko thought, and Hideyori fell off his horse and died. Sitting behind her screen, watching Jebu in

conversation with Sametono, Taniko felt a surge of hope. Jebu was his old self, kindly and intelligent. The day before, when he had entered the Shogun's castle for the first time after Yukio's death, he must have felt he was putting himself in the hands of his enemies. Now he knew that all here were his friends, anxious to have his help. Perhaps, next, he would relax a little towards Taniko herself.

So, let us try again, she thought. She would invite him to have ch'ai with her in her chambers tonight. One more conversation might not rekindle the love he had once felt for her, but at least it could put an end to hate, and that would be a beginning. With her invitation there must, of course, be a poem. As she stared longingly at Jebu she began to compose one in her mind:

Lonely waterfowl

Lilac branch bare of blossom, Together again.

He came to her chambers just before midnight, escorted by a giggling maidservant. As she looked into his face her heart sank. Even though there was now no screen between them, his eyes were as cold and hard as they had been this morning. After he had stared at her for a moment his eyes fell, and he sat there as if alone. The silence seemed to stretch on endlessly. She watched him hungrily, thinking that if he would not talk to her at least he could not prevent her from enjoying the sight of him.

But at last she could stand the silence and the yearning no longer. "Jebu. Why did you come to Kamakura if you hate me so much?"

The grey eyes were watchful, unsympathetic. "I do not wish to hate any person. It is not the Zinja way. I came to Kamakura because to refuse to help in this war would be a betrayal of all Yukio fought for."

She did not know how to answer this. A silence fell again, which she filled by preparing ch'ai. As she handed his cup to him, she noticed with anger at herself that her hand was trembling. She saw him looking at her hand as he took the cup from her with polite thanks. He leaned back on the elbow rest beside him and drank.

Although he seemed perfectly at ease, the intimacy of the chamber, which she had hoped would draw them together, was making her oddly uncomfortable, as if she had disrobed to seduce him. She looked at the verse Sametono had inscribed on green paper years ago, which now hung on a scroll above her private altar: "Though we speak of goodness, the Tathagata declares that there is no goodness. Such is merely a name."

What would Jebu make of that if he noticed it? Probably that she was a wicked person who did not believe in goodness, which was apparently what he thought of her already. More than anything else in the world she wanted him to love and respect her. And here he was, so close, but he despised her. The need for him was unbearably insistent; for it to be thwarted was intolerably painful. If only he would talk about the reasons for his hatred of her, instead of sitting there in that dreadful self-contained silence.

"You think what I did was a betrayal of Yukio, don't you?" she said at last.

He glared at her. "Must we speak of this? I'm here. I've agreed to help. Let the rest of it alone. Don't write me any more poems."

How could he be so cruel? "I can't help it. I love you." She was close to tears.

He stood up instantly. "This conversation must end now. To continue will only cause great pain for both of us, perhaps make it impossible

for me to serve you."

She held out her hand. "Wait. At least let me hear from your own lips what it is you hold against me. Give me a chance to defend myself."

He sat down again. "Very well. If nothing else, perhaps hearing it will convince you to leave me alone. I will tell you what you have done to me, and you will send me to Kyushu, where we will never have to see each other, and you will never again be so foolish as to mention love to me. Love? Apparently you were able to forget that love for ten years."

He paused as if collecting his thoughts and took a deep breath. Then he began to speak in a hollow voice, as if he were describing ancient history. He began with their parting, which had happened at her insistence. He reviewed everything that had happened since then, as he saw it. Einally he said, "What you really love is rank and power. When you saw a chance to get them, you forgot about Yukio and me. You did nothing to help us. When Hideyori began to draw his net about Yukio there was no help, no word of friendship, no warning from you. There was only the news that whenever Hideyori appeared in public, you were always at his side. Out of blind ambition you married the man who murdered Yukio and tried to murder me. Can you see now why it is painful for me to be near you? I ask you respectfully, if you want my help, to send me somewhere far away from you."

By the time he had finished speaking, sobs racked her. Her tears were as much for him and what he had endured as for herself. But she was also astounded at how different his view of events was from hers.

He seemed to have the notion she could have left Hideyori any time she wanted to.

"You have no conception of what a woman's life is like," she wept. "We are not permitted to go anywhere, to see anyone, to know anything. After you left me here I was virtually the prisoner of my father and Hideyori. I encouraged Hideyori's interest in me because it was the only protection I had from my father. Once Hideyori had me in his power, I was forced to view the world through his eyes. He surrounded me with his spies and agents. When Moko brought Sametono here, I was so grateful to you I could have walked the length of the Tokaido to tell you. But I couldn't get a message to you. I dared not try. Erom then on, Sametono was my life, and the only way to protect Sametono was to give in to Hideyori and to believe, or try to believe, everything he told me. Yes, I married him. I married him because I was completely alone in the world, because he agreed to adopt Sametono, and because he had Horigawa killed so that he could marry me. Judge me if you must, Jebu, but only after you have tried to feel how I felt then, how helpless I was, how desperately I wanted to protect my grandson.

"I always thought he was lying to me about some things, but it was not until we journeyed together to Heian Kyo that I learned he had lied to me about everything that really mattered to me. He admitted it all with a smile. He said none of it should be important to me, since I was now the most powerful woman in the Sacred Islands. See, he had the same low opinion of me that you do. He tried to embrace me. Knowing what I knew by then, I would as soon be touched by a giant spider. I took off my slipper and hit him in the face with it."

Jebu looked amazed. "Your slipper? You hit Hideyori in the face with your slipper?"

Taniko smiled bitterly. "Who has more right to strike the Shogun than his wife? He would have cut me down on the spot if he had not been such a cold man."

"You struck him with your slipper," Jebu repeated, as if that, of all the things she had told him, was the most astonishing. "The courage that must have taken! You are a true samurai."

"It took no courage," she said curtly. "I was angry, and I acted without thinking."

"It's all very different from the way I thought it was," said Jebu, his grey eyes troubled.

"Just as the truth about what you did after we parted was very different from what I thought," she agreed. "Oh, Jebu-san, there was so much beauty between us. Why couldn't we have believed in each other?"

"Because we suffered too much to think wisely," he said. He sat lost in thought, his eyes wandering around the room. They drifted to Sametono's verse, moved past it, then stopped and returned. She watched curiously as he read it to himself in a whisper, frowning. Suddenly a sun seemed to rise in his face. She shivered as she watched his transformation.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. There is no such thing as goodness. Exactly." She wanted to ask him why the verse affected him so, but she held her tongue. It was obvious that something profound was happening to him, perhaps the moment of discovery Eisen called satori. She was even more sure of this when he started to laugh.

"It's so obvious," he said. He turned to her suddenly, a glowing smile on his face. "Where did this come from?"

"Sametono wrote it," she said. "The Zen monk Eisen suggested it to him as a calligraphic exercise."

"Eisen," he said thoughtfully. "Of course, of course. Who else would select a verse in which the Buddha himself says there is no such thing as goodness? If there is no such thing as goodness, then we must all be devils, mustn't we?"

"I don't understand," she said, bewildered by his glee. "What is it you learned?"

"Nothing new. I've just rediscovered something I already knew. So Sametono studies under Eisen?"

"He and I both do," she said. "You already know Eisen, don't you?" Jebu told her of his first meeting with Eisen, at the Teak Blossom

Temple. "Before my father died, he told me something about Eisen." "What is that?"

"Let us say that it does not surprise me that Eisen would assign a student that particular verse as a calligraphic exercise. And, now that I know you are a student of Eisen it doesn't surprise me as much that you struck Hideyori with your slipper. Without thinking, as you put it."

At Jebu's mention of his father, Taniko said, "I was desolate at the news that your father died, Jebu. He was a wise, kindly man. The kind of man a father should be, not like mine."

"There is no cause to grieve for Taitaro," Jebu said. "He decided to die."

"Yes, Moko described his death to me," she said. "How strange and beautiful. What a marvellous man the old abbot was. You can't imagine how happy I was to see him in Shangtu, the night Kublai had himself proclaimed Great Khan. It gave me hope for the first time since Horigawa took me to China. The only time I was happier in China was the day I found you again."

Jebu nodded. "How odd that one of the happiest times of my life should have been in a foreign country. You and I had been through terrible things. We had no idea that even worse was in store for us. But we lived in our yurt and were content."

"I was happier cooking and washing in a yurt than I am today living in a castle with hundreds of servants." Her heart beat faster. His anger had vanished and his mood was warm, peaceful. It had something to do with the slipper and with Sametono's verse. There was hope.

"When you mentioned the Great Wall last night, that brought it all back to me," he said. "Our excursions into the Chinese countryside. That ruined temple where I tried to teach you that love of the body is holy. I thought then that one day you and I might be married and live together in a Zinja monastery somewhere. I remember my father even said that it would please him greatly." She was amazed to see tears coursing down his cheeks, brown as carved hardwood.

The sight of him crying made her own eyes grow hot and blurred with tears as well. "Jebu, Jebu. It's all my fault," she sobbed. "We could have stayed together. But I had to go on blaming you for Kiyosi's death. How different things would have been, if I'd never left you, instead of coming here to Kamakura. Oh, Jebu, ten years lost because of my foolishness." She threw herself down on a cushion, her face buried in her arms.

"Don't blame yourself," said Jebu. "Taitaro showed Moko and me the pattern in these events. Things had to happen as they did." "Karma?"

"Not karma. It has nothing to do with being punished for wicked acts and rewarded for virtue. It's just a pattern. Besides, you would have been quite bored, living in a monastery. I'm sure you've been happier

as the Shogun's wife."

She laughed through her tears. "It was like being married to a mamushi, a poisonous snake. It is a dreadful thing to say, Jebu-san, but I'm much happier as the Shogun's widow. From what I've heard about the monks and their women in the Zinja monasteries, I don't think it would have been boring. Oh, my wild waterfowl, if everything had to happen as it did, then please stop judging me. Stop hating me. Accept me as I am."

" 'There is no goodness. Such is merely a name.' We are two faces of the same Self, I told you that long ago. How can I judge you? I would simply be judging myself. Many of my own acts won't bear judging. Taniko, when I look into your eyes I want to become one with you. That's why I've been so angry. Being cut off from you is too painful for me, as if I were being cut in two. I did hate you, Taniko, and for that you must forgive me. I hated you because I love you. I don't accept you, I love you."

At those words Taniko felt a melting warmth spread through her body. I never thought I could still have such feelings at my age, she thought. I feel the same hunger for him, and it feels just as new and strange and wonderful as it did that night when I was thirteen years old and he was seventeen and I lay with this man on Mount Higashi, looking down at Heian Kyo. Oh, Jebu, are we going to be lovers tonight? Oh, please take me in your arms, Jebu, crush me with the weight of your body. But, how can he want me when I am a hag, with a face full of lines, sagging belly, sagging breasts, wrinkled hands? Perhaps if I can get the lamp put out in time he won't notice how age has ruined my body. She reached for the small bronze oil lamp that burned beside them.

His lean, long hand reached out and seized her wrist. A thrill ran up her arm and through her body. His skin, so brown, against her white

skin-beautiful.

"We want light, don't we?" he said softly. She sighed with delighted anticipation. He did want to lie with her.

"Darkness creates the illusion of beauty," she said, her eyes downcast.

"I want no illusions. I want you, exactly as you are." His face was very close to hers, and she reached up and stroked the stiff hairs of the white beard with her fingertips. "We are beyond judgment now, you and I," he said. "Judgment of good or evil, beautiful or ugly, young or old, that's all behind us. Such worries are for youngsters."

She relaxed with a sigh and lay back, her mouth yielding to the pressure of his mouth against hers, his rough hands massaging her breasts. Indeed, she didn't care whether her breasts looked old and sagging or not. They were able to give pleasure; that was evident from the gentle, lingering movement of his hands on them. And they were very much able to receive pleasure, she thought, drawing in a shivering breath. And they were her breasts, and therefore he wanted them. He wanted her body as it was, and not any other woman's. She now felt sure of that.

As their love progressed she made another delightful discovery. Somewhere in the years between thirteen and forty-five she had lost all shame. Even that beautiful first night on Mount Higashi had been alloyed by fears of what the world would think if they were suddenly discovered. Now, she thought, if all of Kamakura walked in here and saw us lying in this embrace, our clothes open, our bodies touching everywhere, I would let them watch. I think I might enjoy being watched. I am proud of this. Proud that I can excite this man, this warrior, and draw his passion into me. The years with Kiyosi, with Kublai Khan, in China with Jebu, even with Hideyori who needed so

much coaxing-all that experience had taught her a great deal about the art of love. I am as much a master of this flowery combat as Jebu is a master of the sword, and I wish that the whole world could see us.

She stood up, taking his hand, and drew him with her to the sleeping platform, the untied cords of her mauve silk robe hanging loosely by her side. As she turned to pull him in through the curtains she looked closely at his body under his grey robe, which had fallen open. She gasped, shocked. There were scars everywhere. His neck and chest were covered with large and small marks, slightly paler than his brown skin. She pushed back his robe and saw that his shoulders were also scarred. She stroked the scars with her fingertips, feeling their thickness and roughness. Then she leaned her head against his chest and began to cry.

"My darling, what have they done to you? How you must have suffered."

"I never felt most of these wounds," he whispered. "You have caused me far more pain than any of these cuts and gashes." "Don't say that, Jebu."

"You could not have hurt me if I had not loved you."

"I will give you pleasure that will more than balance the pain." "You can give me more than pleasure. You can give me happiness." "You have known so much pain," she murmured. "Your body is so scarred, so toughened. Can you still feel my touch?"

"I may look to you like an old oak at the end of winter," he whis- . pered, laughing softly. "But, miraculous as it may seen, life surges within."

She pulled him down to the bed beside her. Their movements together were like those of swimmers, graceful and rhythmic. Together they were gliding through a sea of pleasure, a warm sea without a shoreline, rising and falling with the waves. She forgot where she was, she forgot time and age, she forgot that she was the Ama-Shogun and he was a Zinja warrior monk. She was a woman enjoying the body of a man. Nothing more. But nothing less.

When at last they lay side by side, exhausted in a blissful semi-trance, she patted her old wooden pillow. "I'll have a good story to tell my pillow book tomorrow."

"You keep a diary? You never told me tilat."

"It's my deepest secret. I've never told anyone before this. Perhaps I'll read to you from it, if you stay with me for always." The thought brought reality painfully back. "Jebu-san. What are we going to do? How are we going to live?"

Jebu pursed his lips. "There was a time when we might just have run off together, not concerning ourselves about what is correct. But we can't do that now. Your first duty is to the Sunrise Land. To have it openly known what we are to each other would damage your prestige. We must go on meeting in secret."

"When I sent Moko to bring you to Kamakura, I wanted this. I never thought beyond the moment when we might be united in body and spirit after so long a time apart. I never thought about what it would mean to my position. I never thought about how we could live as lovers." She took both his hands and stared deep into his eyes. "Jebu, I swear to you-if you wish it, I will give up all this right now. I will go with you wherever you want to go. I will never, never let anything come between us. Let us leave this castle tonight, if you want. I will be your wife or your consort. I will live with you in a temple or a farm

or a mountain hermitage. You need only tell me."

He propped himself up on his elbow and his grey eyes stared into hers for a long time. "I wish-" he said. Then, "No. That is not the way for us."

"Why not, Jebu? The Sunrise Land can fight this war without us.

Surely we deserve happiness in the years remaining to us." "That is not the way to insight. That is the way to lose it." "I don't understand."

"You said you would go anywhere with me. Then I ask you to stay here, and we will manage to be together as often as we can, and we will go on with the work we must do." He smiled. "I imagine countless great ladies and lowly monks have had to surmount this very problem in the past. You remember the story of Empress Koken and Priest Dokyo? She took him for her lover, wanted to marry him and make him Emperor, until the god Hachiman himself intervened, declaring, 'The usurper is to be rejected,' and put a stop to that foolishness. We must be discreet, my lady Ama-Shogun. I will accept no titles or offices. I will be just one of many military advisers attached to the Shogun's Court. Whenever you send for me, I will come to you. Moko will be very happy that his mission to the Pearl Temple turned out so successfully. We must find a way to tell him without anyone else finding out."

Taniko laughed. "Everyone will know about you and me, Jebu-san. It is impossible to keep secrets in these paper-walled chambers where there is a servant behind every shoji. The best we can hope for is to be discreet, as you said, and not make a public scandal. Everyone in this castle is loyal to me. They may talk about me among themselves, but they will protect my reputation."

"Good. Then we can tell Moko at once. He's been very unhappy ever

since you and I quarrelled at that audience last night."

"Not at all," said Taniko, twining her fingers in Jebu's white beard. "Moko was always confident that you'd come round. He told me this morning that you loved me. Otherwise, he said, you wouldn't have been so angry at me."

"The fellow knows me too well. And reveals my secrets. I should have cut off his head the day I met him. You stopped me from doing that."

"You wanted me to stop you."

"Indeed I did. And my instinct was right. Ah, Taniko-san, how sweet to lie here with you and summon up the past. Almost as pleasant as what we were doing a little while ago."

"I enjoy conversation much more than that other," she said teasingly.

"Well, then, there's no need for us to worry about discretion," said Jebu with a laugh. "Erom now on I'll come openly to your rooms. You can have your ladies-in-waiting present, and we'll just talk. In fact, why not dress ourselves and call them in right now?"

"Eor all I know, they're hiding just beyond my door, laughing at us," she said.

She turned towards him, her small white hand stroking his scarred chest. She could hardly believe this was happening. One night after he arrived they were in each other's arms, after being apart for ten years. She could hardly remember at this moment what it was that had separated them for so long. She was not even sure they had ever been separated. Now that they were reunited, though, she wasn't going to let him go so quickly. She kept him there in her chamber till dawn.

Chapter Thirteen

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

Our own Great Wall is finished at last. It has taken us nearly five years with many setbacks, including earthquakes and terrible storms. But a message from Jebu tells me it is done, and it is time for me to inspect it. Erom Kamakura to Hakata is a long journey, but I've been anticipating this news and have been packed since the last full moon. It's been six months since I've seen Jebu, and at this rate I'll soon lose interest in life. I just turned forty-nine last month. Next year I will be half a century old. That a woman my age should be carrying on in secret with a warrior monk is absolutely scandalous.

I'll see dear old Moko, too, while I'm at Hakata Bay. He has helped design and build a fleet of kobaya, fast little war galleys carrying from fifteen to fifty men. They will go out and attack the Mongol ships and try to sink them before they can land any troops. Many of the kobaya will be captained by men who served with Yukio at Shimonoseki.

The new spirit of the Sacred Islands delights me. I've never seen our people so enthusiastic, so willing to work together. They even pay taxes cheerfully. They contribute their share of labour on defence works and then do more than is asked. The samurai eagerly volunteer for duty at Hakata, each hoping he will be the first to take a Mongol head. Individual quarrels, even feuds of long standing, are forgotten. It is a shame that it takes the threat of national destruction to draw us together like this.

-Eighth Month, sixth day

YEAR OF THE DRAGON

There had been an autumn rainstorm that morning and the yellow grass on the hillside near the town of Hakata was wet. A hundred officers in plain kimonos stood on the slope with Jebu, looking down at the great stone wall. The Hakata Bay wall formed a vast circle following the shoreline of the huge harbour, one day's ride in length. It was topped by watchtowers and battlements facing the sea. Its seaward side presented a sheer, smooth face over twice the height of a man.

On the defending side, sloping stone ramps enabled the samurai to ride their horses to the top of the wall.

Near where Jebu and the officers were watching, a group of several hundred samurai with white surcoats over their armour, half of them mounted and the other half on foot, were lined up behind the wall. A long way down the beach, at the water's edge, an equally large group, all cavalrymen wearing bright scarlet coats, awaited Jebu's signal. They looked from this distance like a bloodstain on the sand. Standing with Jebu and the samurai officers on the hillside was a man holding a large yellow banner with the characters for "Training Is Endless" painted on it in black. Jebu had chosen the slogan to remind these officers that they did not already know everything about warfare, as most of them thought they did.

He pointed to the bannerman, who waved the yellow standard back and forth slowly. The red-coated cavalrymen charged down the beach with shrill, ululating cries. They sounded exactly like Mongols, as they should, since many of them were samurai who had fought in Mongolia and China and would remember the terrifying sound of Mongol war cries till their dying day. As soon as the charge began, the samurai behind the wall rode up the stone ramps nearest them, followed by the men on foot. Removable wooden ramps on the other side of the wall let the defenders sally out on to the beach.

The samurai in white raced down the beach, waving their swords and shouting. A small band of leaders soon outdistanced the rest. The Reds, the samurai impersonating Mongols, slowed their charge, while the White leaders rode on, challenging them to send out their best fighters for individual combat. The Reds replied with a massive volley of arrows. The challengers fell to the sand, all killed.

The main body of White horsemen, enraged at the unchivalrous slaughter of their leaders, came roaring down the beach. The Reds turned and fled. When they had drawn their pursuers about two hundred paces down the beach, they stood in their stirrups in unison and shot arrows over the backs of their horses. Half the White samurai fell from their saddles. The attackers wheeled and bore down on the remaining samurai with sabres and spears. In moments all the White horsemen were lying dead on the beach and some of the Reds were rounding up their runaway horses. The White foot soldiers, who had been unable to keep up with the horsemen, found themselves half-way between the wall and the Reds, unprotected. They set themselves to meet a cavalry charge, but the attackers kept their distance, showering the foot soldiers with arrows. Archers among the Whites brought a few of the enemy down, but not enough to make much difference. Einally the surviving foot soldiers broke ranks and ran. The red-coated horsemen rode them down and finished them before any could make the protection of the wall.

"Very good," said Jebu, and the man beside him signalled again with the yellow banner. The casualties scattered along the beach and the grassy dunes began to pick themselves up, and foot soldiers went out to collect the arrows, all of which were tipped with large leather balls stuffed with cotton. Jebu hoped none of his demonstration troops had been hurt. In the three years he had been staging these mock battles, only one man had been killed and six seriously injured. There had been a number of broken arms and legs from bad falls, many teeth knocked out-and a few eyes. He turned to

address the officers who had been watching the demonstration.

"This is what happens when samurai fighting in the usual way come up against Mongol tactics. I saw it again and again in China until we learned to employ the Mongols' methods against them. Samurai tend to fight as individuals, each man seeking glory for himself. Mongols are only interested in winning as quickly and easily as possible so that they can enjoy the fruits of victory. They are organized and trained to manoeuvre and fight in large masses, not as individuals. If you ride out to meet them seeking a worthy opponent for single combat, the only opponent you'll meet will be a cloud of arrows."

Jebu analysed the demonstration in detail, pointing out how each instance of customary samurai fighting behaviour was less effective than the corresponding Mongol tactic. He noticed many of his listeners growing restless and annoyed. He enjoyed provoking that reaction.

An eastern samurai with a scar down his face suddenly spoke up. "May I say something, shike?"

Jebu recognized the scarred samurai as Nagamori Ikyu, who had been in charge of the guards at the Rokuhara the day Jebu rescued Sametono. "Certainly, Captain Nagamori."

"Excuse me, shike," said the samurai with a twisted smile. "Lieutenant Nagamori, if you please. I let a prisoner escape from my custody many years ago and was demoted."

"I'm sorry you were demoted, lieutenant. What is your question?"

"Don't feel sorry, shike. I am very happy that particular prisoner escaped. And at least I wasn't ordered to commit hara-kiri as other officers were who fell victim to your tricks." The samurai standing

around Lieutenant Nagamori stared at him curiously. "What I want to say is, when you stage a battle for demonstration purposes you can set it up to prove whatever you want. It could just as easily be arranged to have those impersonating the Mongols play dead and the samurai appear to be victorious."

"Quite true," said Jebu. "But I was not trying to prove anything to you. What you saw was a re-enactment of what happened here six years ago when the Mongols attacked, as well as many battles I witnessed in China between our samurai and the Mongols."

"How would you have us fight them, shike, if not in the manner we are accustomed to?" an officer asked.

"Our strategy must be to avoid meeting them head on. When they land, we will stay behind the wall and our bowmen will shoot them off their horses. When they advance, we will retreat and draw them into traps. We will not attack them, we will simply try to hold them to this beach until they decide it is too costly to stay here. If they lose enough men and horses and ships they will withdraw, and that will be victory."

"A poor sort of victory," said Nagamori. "Any true samurai would be ashamed to fight by feigning retreats and hiding behind walls." Some of those around him muttered agreement.

Jebu smiled and said, "It is painful to be told that one's preferred style of fighting is not effective." He stopped smiling and stared hard into the eyes of each of the officers facing him, especially Nagamori Ikyu. "You enjoy the privileges of samurai because you have accepted the duty of defending this land and its people. In decisive moments, to be unwilling to use the necessary means is to invite disaster. It is to betray those you are pledged to protect."

The words sank in and they stared back at him solemnly. "Please understand, honoured sirs, I am not here to give you orders on how to fight. My superiors-our superiors-have asked me to teach you certain ways of fighting that are different from those you are used to. The Shogun, the Regent, the Bakufu and their generals will decide what tactics to use. I am no general."

He could tell by looking at them that his frankness and simplicity had impressed them. The initial resistance displayed by Ikyu and those who agreed with him was typical of the first day with a new group. He had been training samurai officers in Mongol tactics and Zinja fighting methods and attitudes for the past five years, and he felt he knew how to overcome that resistance. In different parts of the Sacred Islands he had set up nine other schools like this, staffed by Zinja martial arts masters and veterans of Yukio's China campaign. Each school took one hundred samurai officers through a gruelling, intensive course of training lasting two months, running from sleep to sleep every day and through some sleepless nights as well. Most of the samurai hated it, undergoing the training only because their lords told them to. Jebu had managed to put over twenty thousand through the course. The highest-ranking and most promising samurai studied under Jebu himself at Hakata Bay.

Now that he had this group's respectful attention, he could speak of deeper things. He opened his heart to them and shared with them some of the Zinja principles that had been part of his way of life since boyhood.

"Get rid of the fear of death. Being afraid to die will not keep you alive in battle. It may even kill you.

"Warriors who rise to eminence, as you have, honoured sirs, may think they have earned comfort. This temptation can ruin you. Hardship and danger make warriors strong. Comfort and safety spoil

them.

In my Order the older monks are treated more harshly than the younger ones. If you would be good officers, you must discipline yourselves more rigorously than you would the rawest recruit.

"Practise, practise, practise. Practise constantly with all your weapons. Practise until the sword is part of your arm. Become one, not only with your bow and arrows, but with the target. Learn to react instantly with all weapons, without having to take time to think.

"Remember that anything can be a weapon. We Zinja are trained to fight and kill, when we have to, with any object that comes to hand-a monk's walking stick, a parasol, a fan, even a teapot.

"Since you're officers, the unit of troops you command is your chief weapon. Practise long hours every day with them, drilling them in the tactics you are going to use.

"Remember Muratomo no Yukio. Not his unhappy final days, but his great victories. Tonamiyama, Ichinotani, Shimonoseki. In China, Yukio led the defence of the city of Kweilin against a Mongol force many times the size of ours. We held out for six months and the Mongols eventually left the city unconquered.

"Yukio was a master of all weapons. I am honoured to say that the first time we met he trounced me soundly. And he was only fifteen at the time.

"He was cheerful and courageous. He was merciful and just. In all things, Yukio is a model you can hold up to your sons. Never forget him. He is watching us as we fight." Jebu felt tears coming into his eyes, and he saw tears on the cheeks of many of the men listening to him.

"Enough talk," he said. "Now our samurai and our 'Mongols' will show you how the warriors of Kublai Khan can be defeated."

The Ama-Shogun and the last of the Zinja walked together in the garden of the military governor of Kyushu at Dazaifu. She carried an oiled-paper umbrella to conceal her face, should anyone spy her walking at night with Jebu. There was a mist in the air, and rain was threatening. They followed a winding path past clusters of black bamboo full of fireflies and bell cicadas. The lagoon occupying the north side of the garden was intended to be a small replica of Lake Biwa. Some former governor of Kyushu, his heart in the Home Provinces, had built it. A garden house on a little island was a miniature replica of Lake Biwa's shrine to the goddess of Chikubushima. Jebu picked Taniko up in his arms. She felt light and tiny. He carried her over the stepping stones to the island.

A faint light from the lanterns scattered artfully around the garden filtered in through the windows of the little house. Jebu looked down at Taniko's upturned face, loving her delicate bones, her fine skin, her large eyes. He touched her cheek lightly with his fingertips, then bent to kiss her greedily, like a warrior slaking his thirst during a respite in battle. They sank to the floor, Jebu drawing Taniko down into his lap. Eacing each other, they kissed for what seemed endless moments. They had made love in this manner many times before. He reached around behind her, untied her obi, then began to part her robes. It fascinated him that, considering how many layers women wore, it was always easy to get through the clothing of one who was willing. His own simple robe and the fundoshi, the loincloth underneath, were never a barrier. Joining their bodies, they went into a near-trance of mental and physical bliss. They barely noticed the patter of rain on the wood-shingled roof of their shelter. As in meditation they paid no attention to the passage of time. They sought no climax in their union, the state of arousal and the ecstasy

to which it lifted them being the main object of their desires. They were no more anxious for completion than they would have been if listening to beautiful music.

When she felt like speaking again Taniko asked, "Will you ride with me when I inspect the wall tomorrow?"

"I'll be near you." He leaned back against the wall of the little house. She lay with her head on his chest.

"Jebu," she said abruptly, "I don't like the idea of being carried along the wall in a sedan chair. It would make me happier, and I think would please the samurai, too, if I could go on horseback."

"I have no say in the matter," said Jebu.

"It's Munetoki," she said bitterly. "He takes my advice in everything, but he insists that I hide myself like a leper. It makes no sense. We're prisoners of rules in these islands. Not just the women, but every one of us from the Emperor down. That's why I fear for us. The Mongols will do anything to win, while with us it's all honour and ceremony."

"Yes," said Jebu. "Exactly what I've been trying to teach the officers who are sent to me."

"When the Mongols come I intend to show myself to the troops as the Ama-Shogun. I will not hide myself. Jebu, how much more time do we have before Kublai's fleet comes?"

"It will come next year," he said with certainty.

Last year, the Year of the Hare, the Mongols had completed their conquest of China, destroying a Chinese fleet in a great battle off the southern coast. The last Sung Emperor, a boy, had disappeared beneath the waves, like the child-Emperor Antoku at Shimonoseki.

And so the Mongols are already a sea power, Jebu thought with foreboding. Agents on the mainland reported that the Mongols were ruthlessly driving both the Koreans and the Chinese to prepare for the invasion. Chinese soldiers and ships, only a short time ago fighting against the Mongols, were now being rounded up to fight for them. Arghun Baghadur, head of the Office for the Chastisement of Ge-Pen, had left Khan Baligh and journeyed to Korea, where he spent a month and then sailed on to the fallen Sung capital, Linan, the largest port in China. Arghun would waste no time. They would come next spring or early summer and try to break through the coastal defences before the autumn storms.

Her nails dug hard into his scarred chest. "What is it, Taniko-chan?"

"I dread the Mongols. So many times they nearly killed you. So many times I have lost you. I don't want to lose you again."

"You must not think of the future. The future does not exist." And yet, as he stroked her long hair, which had not turned grey despite her age, he thought, you may very well lose me, my love. There are so many things I have to do. And there is so much for you to do, as well.

Chapter Fourteen

A letter from Kublai Khan to Shima Taniko:

Since you have shown a predilection for chopping off the heads of my ambassadors, I send this letter to you by a more indirect route. By the time you receive it, the lama who placed it in the hands of one of your ladies-in-waiting will have disappeared. If the seal on the letter is broken, I suggest you chop off the lady's head, since she will have learned far too much about you. That you may not doubt the authenticity of this letter, let me remind you that the name "Elephant" was known only to the two of us.

Do not allow the failure of my last expedition to your islands to raise false hopes. It might well have succeeded, but for the accident of a storm. Also, that time we sent only a small army, the greater part of our troops being occupied with ending the resistance of the southern Sung. This time we will come with all our might, together with the power of China and Korea, which are now ours to command.

I remember well your wisdom and strength of character. That is why I released you those many years ago. I knew that you would, even though you are a woman, rise to a position of influence in your own country. You have gone even further than I expected. You can tell your countrymen what you have seen of me and my power. Tell them that to resist me will lead to their destruction, whereas your small nation can reap incalculable benefits by becoming part of a greater whole. I am even prepared to overlook the execution of my ambassadors, since he who ordered it is now dead. I do not understand a people who would turn their backs on their most able general, Muratomo no Yukio, my former officer, and submit to the rule of a man who got himself killed falling from a horse. . . .

I know that your people are proud. All nations believe they are descended from gods, but you seem to believe it with more passion than most. Do not let pride drive your countrymen to destruction.

You know me well, Lady Taniko. Perhaps you would like to re new your acquaintance with the splendours of Khan Baligh and the companionship of the Great Khan. Nothing would please me more than to welcome you back. This will become possible after your countrymen have been persuaded that honourable submission is their wisest course.

You know that I have the will and the power to do whatever I decide to do. I can move mountains and change the course of rivers. Do you imagine that I will let a little people on the world's edge resist my authority? You claim you live in the place where the sun rises. I tell you that from the rising of the sun to its setting all nations must bow to the one Great Khan. Eternal Heaven wills it.

-written and sealed at Khan Baligh First Month, fourteenth day

YEAR OF THE SERPENT

Angrily biting her lip, Taniko rolled up the letter and held it over the brazier that heated her room. How insulting that he should have thought her capable of betraying her country, eager to return to his harem. Unbidden a vivid memory of their lovemaking in his huge bed flashed through her mind, and she felt herself stirred. This only made her more furious, and she thrust the remainder of the scroll viciously into the fire, almost burning her fingertips. He hadn't seen her in years and years. He would never want her in his bed now. Didn't he realize she knew that? Or that she still had Jebu? Yes, I know him, she thought, but he does not know me. He does not know my people. Whatever we may be, children of the gods or ordinary human beings, we cannot be subject to any other nation. We must rule ourselves or

not exist at all.

It was late in the Eourth Month when a small junk with a red mainsail was sighted approaching Hakata Bay from the northwest. The junk and its coloured-sail signal had long been awaited. At once a messenger was despatched to western defence headquarters at the town of Dazaifu, inland from Hakata, with the simple message that the Mongol fleet had set sail from Korea.

Jebu ordered a fifteen-man kobaya to carry him out to the approaching vessel. As he looked out at Shiga Spit, the sandy islands on the north side of the mouth of Hakata Bay, he recalled the day Yukio and he had watched that line of ships flying blood-red Takashi banners rounding the same island.

As Jebu's little ship crossed the mid-point of the harbour, the junk with the red sail came into view. An hour later Jebu was aboard it, embracing Moko.

"You act as if you are relieved to see me, shike," said Moko with a smile. "You know I'd do nothing to endanger myself. We simply hov ered around the mouth of Pusan harbour with the sea gulls, fishing and trading, claiming to be friendly Chinese. When we saw the Mongols embark on the Korean ships we came back here at once."

"What are they sending against us?" asked Jebu.

Moko's smile disappeared. "There are two fleets coming, shike. Erom Korea there are nine hundred ships carrying fifty thousand Mongols and Koreans, and their horses and siege equipment."

"That's about as many as they sent against us last time," said Jebu.

"Yes," said Moko. "But before that fleet arrives here, it is to be joined by a second fleet, known as the South of the Yang-Tze Eleet, coming

from Linan. In that fleet, shike, there are four thousand ships. It carries one hundred thousand warriors and even more machines and fire-spitting devices. If I believed that the gods would help us, I'd have some hope, but if we must depend on what mere mortals can do, then it is certain that we will be overwhelmed." He searched Jebu's face as if hoping to find some comfort in it.

"Remember what mere mortals did at Kweilin," Jebu said.

"Yes, shike. Please excuse my cowardice." Some of the anxiety went out of Moko's eyes. This man calls himself a coward, Jebu thought, yet he sailed into the jaws of the enemy to bring back information we need.

Jebu tried to visualize four thousand ships spread out over the sea. The reality would be too large for a single pair of human eyes to take in. He wondered, how can we ever hold out against them? He brought himself up short. I should not ask myself that question. My spirit must be untarnished by the lust for victory. I must try to help all who fight beside me to feel the same way.

"Sensei, I have never killed a man." They sat facing each other as they had so many times before, cross-legged on woven grass mats, in Eisen's cell. As always, Sametono felt peace and certainty looking at the monk's rock-hard yet kindly face. Only to this man could he confide his fears.

"Are you afraid that you will not be able to kill, my son?" said Eisen with a smile.

"No, sensei. That I might be able to kill too easily. The Buddha teaches that we should harm no living thing. How can I remain a follower of the Buddha and at the same time do my duty and wage war?"

Tomorrow he and Mother Taniko and Munetoki would offer prayers at the Hachiman shrine. They they would set sail for Ise. Arriving there a few days later, they would worship at the grand shrine of the sun goddess, asking her help against the Mongols. Thence they would journey to Hakata Bay, making the last part of the trip by land, because the western coast of Kyushu was already under attack by the Great

Khan's ships. And then he would be at war. The truth was, it was not the teachings of Buddha that provoked his present dilemma. His revulsion at the thought of killing lay deeper than any religious teaching. It was somehow connected with his memory of the arrows striking his mother's body as she tried to shield him from Horigawa's samurai. That was killing. That was what he did not want to do. To him it seemed that a horror of killing was as much a natural part of being human as was his newly discovered yearning to hold a woman in his arms. Yet it was his duty to kill and to lead the nation to war.

"You are samurai," said Eisen, narrowing his eyes sternly. "To be a samurai is to be willing to face death. Whatever work we have been given to do in life by karma, that work is the practice that will lead to our enlightenment. We must do our work correctly to the best of our ability. That is true both for the peasant and for the Shogun. Eor you to fail in your duty would deprive you of an opportunity to realize your Buddha-nature. But, to be willing to kill does not mean you have to love killing. As a follower of the Buddha you should hate killing. You do it only because it is your duty. It is the same with waging war."

The smell of incense drifted in from the meditation hall near Eisen's chamber. The scent hung heavily on the damp afternoon air. Sametono realized he was sweating and wiped his forehead. Eisen's dome-like head was free of sweat and looked cool.

"If I were to retire from the Shogunate and become a priest like you, it would no longer be my duty to kill, sensei."

Eisen nodded. "But the right time for a man to enter a new life is when he has truly finished his work in the previous stage. Of course, such a decision is ultimately yours to make. Prince Siddhartha abandoned his position and his family as a young man to go into the forest to seek enlightenment, and he became the Buddha. Each man is different and must find his own way. We do whatever, in our judgment, is most likely to lead to our discovering our own Buddha-nature."

The perspiration on his forehead, Sametono realized, was not brought out merely by the wet warmth of this spring afternoon, but by his struggle with this, the most difficult and important problem he had ever had to resolve.

"I was in touch with my Buddha-nature before I even heard the word 'Buddha,' " he said. "What I fear is that I may lose this awareness if I take the life of another."

Eisen hunched forward, his eyes burning into Sametono's. "What you are asking is, can a samurai have the Buddha-nature? Long ago the great Chinese Zen master, Joshu, was asked whether a dog has the Buddha-nature. What do you think his answer was?"

Sametono did not answer immediately. Eisen's questions, though they were never mere trickery, always had unexpected answers. Sametono wanted to please Eisen by finding the right solution to this one. He sorted through a number of possible answers, and at last, frustrated, gave up. Perhaps the obvious answer was correct.

"Every being has the Buddha-nature, sensei. So a dog must have it, too."

Eisen laughed. "Joshu's answer was 'Mu.' No. Why do you think he said No?"

Sametono felt himself becoming exasperated. Here he had presented Eisen with a question that affected his whole future life, a question of flesh and blood, and Eisen's answer was to play with words. Well, Sametono knew how to play, too.

"Kwatz!" he cried. He sat back on his haunches and grinned at the bald monk. He felt much better.

Eisen, too, laughed. "Is it kwatz, then? Do you roar like a lion? And will your lion devour Joshu's dog? Be a lion, then, and meet the Mongols with your roar and your teeth and claws."

Very clearly now Sametono saw it. I must be what I am. I am a lion, and must eat flesh. A vast relief and pleasure swept over him as he felt his problem solved.

"But." Eisen held up a finger. Sametono's heart sank. When you studied with Eisen, no problem was ever solved. One layer was peeled away like the skin of an onion to reveal another layer of mystery underneath.

"Yes, sensei?" he sighed.

"If you were truly enlightened, Sametono-chan, you would be able to tell me why Joshu said that a dog does not have the Buddha-nature. Whenever you have a spare moment, think about Joshu's No. What does Joshu's No mean to you? Try to hold No in the back of your mind constantly. Love No. Become No. When you know why Joshu said that a dog-or a lion-does not have the Buddha-nature, you will know what to do with your life."

The sense of relief was gone. Eisen had given it to him and taken it away again. Perplexed, feeling heavy and awkward, Sametono pressed his forehead against the mat, bidding Eisen goodbye. His armed escort snapped to attention and the monks bowed, but Sametono, lost in thought, did not notice. A monk brought his horse, and he vaulted into the saddle without being aware of what he was doing. Feeling deeply discouraged, he led the way down the mountain path back to the castle in Kamakura. Then it occurred to him that when he had gone to Eisen that day he had been afraid. Now he was just puzzled. That was an improvement. No, No, No. What did Joshu mean by that No?

Chapter Fifteen

Shogun Sametono, his family and his generals, had barely arrived at Hakata Bay when lookouts reported the sails of a great fleet off Kyushu. Munetoki called a meeting of officers at sunrise, six days after the full moon of the Eifth Month. Before the camp at Hakozaki, northernmost of the three towns around the bay, a pavilion had been built on the beach. Over three hundred samurai of the highest rank, all in full battle dress, sat facing it. These men would lead the defence forces. In the pavilion Munetoki, Sametono, and Miura Zumiyoshi met with the commanding generals. Jebu, who held no official rank, sat in the front row of warriors facing the pavilion.

Scouts had reported a portion of the enemy fleet sailing towards the coast of Honshu, but the leaders agreed this was only a diversion, and that the main body of Mongols would land here at Hakata Bay. Sametono, dressed in general's armour with white lacings, gave a short speech, and the officers bowed low to their Shogun and then gave a cheer for him. Munetoki gave an even shorter talk in down-to-earth eastern province style, promising rewards for all, especially those who distinguished themselves in battle. Jebu kept glancing beyond the leaders at the distant grey line where sky met sea, knowing that some time today or tomorrow the first enemy sails would appear there.

A horse-drawn carriage surrounded by riders in full armour carrying both the Muratomo and the Shima banners rolled up the hard-packed sand of the beach and into the space in front of the pavilion. Guards stepped to the rear door of the carriage and placed a little stepladder under it.

Taniko emerged from the carriage. The first sight of her was dazzling. The sun had just risen above the hills behind the bay, and

its early-morning light flashed on her head-dress of lacy gold set with jewels, pearls and coral. She wore gold necklaces and an embroidered lavender outer robe. She carried a large folding fan made of thin strips of carved ivory. Jebu, who had spent part of the night with her, was as surprised as anyone at this apparition. She had sent him away at the hour of the ox without explanation. She must have spent the remainder of the night dressing for this occasion. She had not given Jebu a hint of what she was planning and neither, judging from the dumbfounded expressions on the faces of Munetoki, Sametono and the others, had she told anyone else. Jebu wished Moko could be here to see Taniko as she was today, but he was out on the sea with a scout ship, watching for the Great Khan's fleet.

With a bearing that was a marvel of stateliness for a woman so small, Taniko mounted the dais under the pavilion. The lords hastily made room for her, and she took a seat between Sametono and Munetoki.

Jebu heard the whispers scurry through the ranks of kneeling men around him: "The Ama-Shogun." One by one the awed samurai bent forward and touched their hands and foreheads to the sand. Now Jebu understood why Taniko had come here. Until now this had been a gathering of military men, nervous on the day before a battle, discussing an unknown enemy. Her presence raised the occasion to the level of a rite, and the pavilion had become a shrine.

But not everyone was pleased. "My lady, it is not seemly for you to present yourself, without any shield or screen, in a gathering of men," Munetoki growled. "Consider your reputation." He tried to speak softly, but his drill-ground voice inevitably carried out to the first few rows of samurai.

"Much more than my reputation is at stake today, Lord Regent," said

Taniko in a clear voice that, 'though much lighter than Munetoki's, was perfectly audible. "We are beginning a struggle for the very life of this nation. I feel I may have something of value to say to our warriors, and if I am not perfectly safe among my samurai, I would rather be dead. If I am not interrupting anything, may I speak?"

"It is most irregular," Munetoki grumbled. "Unheard of."

At fifteen, Sametono spoke in a deepening but still youthful voice. "It is unprecedented that the Sacred Islands should be invaded by foreign barbarians. At such a time all must contribute in whatever way they can. Of course my mother may speak."

Taniko bowed, the diamonds on her head-dress flashing. "Thank you, my son."

The beach was silent as a temple, the only sound the shoreward rush of the waves in the harbour, the whisper of a light breeze and the fluttering of banners. Taniko's voice had, as always, a high, metallic ring, but there was in it a strength Jebu had never heard before. Her words easily reached even the samurai in the rear ranks. It occurred to Jebu that she had never done anything of this kind before. How and when could she possibly have prepared herself? What an amazing woman. His heart filled to bursting with love for her.

"Noble lords and warriors of the Sunrise Land, forgive my temerity in speaking to you, though I am a mere woman. As his lordship the Shogun has said so well, these are unusual times, and they call forth unusual actions from all of us. Though I am a woman, I am also, like you, samurai. So, think that I come before you today as samurai, and excuse my boldness.

"Let me remind you that I was the wife of the great Lord Muratomo no Hideyori, whose wisdom and strength gave us the new system of

government best suited to meet this national peril. As you know, I am also the mother of Muratomo no Sametono, the present Shogun, whom all of us worship for his beauty and brilliance. Because of my late husband and my son I claim your loyalty and ask your indulgence.

"Warriors leave their women behind when they go to war, and when they return they expect to be greeted with a simple modest 'Welcome home.' It is not considered becoming in samurai families for husband and wife to display much public affection; this we all know. But we also know that our warriors deeply love their wives, their mothers, their daughters, their sisters. So I come before you representing all those women. Our spirit will be fighting beside you. You fight to defend the Emperor and the nation, you fight for glory, but you also fight for the women who are so dear to you. What will become of us should you fall in battle and we be taken prisoner by the barbarians? Be sure that we will make every effort to kill ourselves rather than fall into their power. And we shall take with us into the Void as many of the enemy as we can. If the invaders come to our cities and our castles and our homes, we women will take their heads. We will be ready for them." She paused and smiled grimly. "Eor, is not Amaterasu Omi Kami, the supreme goddess of our Sacred Islands, a woman too?"

In those words Jebu heard the rage of a woman who knew in her own person what it was to be a captive of the Mongols. Kublai Khan himself had taken her as his property and made use of her. Had she ever had any choice about whether she would lie with the Great Khan?

"Were I not a woman, I would compete with everyone here to take the first head of a Mongol invader." Taniko went on. "I envy all of you this opportunity to gain glory. All who take part in winning this war and saving the nation will be heroes never to be forgotten.

"In all this world there is no people like us. Nowhere else is there a nation whose people attack every task, be it fighting a battle, planting a field or writing a poem, with such spirit. We are unique in our love of beauty, which we apply to even the smallest objects we possess. Our language, our poetry, our temples and houses, our paintings, our very thinking and feeling, the life within our families, all of these are special to us.

"Our people have lived in these beautiful islands, protected by the sea, for centuries and centuries, and we have been free to be ourselves alone. Those of us who have travelled to distant places never knew a day's peace or happiness until we could return to this land of the gods." Taniko paused.

"A priest could tell you of the gods better than I can, and happily there are many priests among you who have come to pray with you for our success in this war. This I know; every rock, every stream, every tree in these islands is the home of a kami, a god. Our Emperor himself is a god in the flesh and a descendant of the sun goddess. This land was created by the gods Izanami and Izanagi. Eor a foreigner to dare invade this holy soil is sacrilege, and sacrilege must be washed away with blood."

She had not raised her voice, but this final utterance was greeted with a ferocious cheer by the samurai, who jumped to their feet, waving their arms and shaking their fists. Sametono was looking at his mother with shining eyes, while Munetoki sat sunk in wonderment. Between the two chief men of her family Taniko turned her head up to the sun, radiating light. The samurai quieted down now and fell to their knees, pressing their foreheads into the beach sand.

Taniko rose and gestured. Immediately one of her retainers came

forward leading a white stallion. Jebu was reminded of Hideyori's ill-fated horse, but this one was calm and stately. A maid brought Taniko a riding cloak of white silk embroidered with silver dragons flying through silver clouds. A guard knelt and offered his cupped hands to help her climb into the high sidesaddle. Another attendant handed her a tall samurai bow and a silver quiver of arrows with pure white feathers. Taniko signalled to Jebu. He stood up in his black-laced armour and strode forward. She handed him the reins with their heavy silver tassels. He was to lead the horse. He smiled up at her and she returned it; theirs were faint smiles that would not reveal too much.

"My honoured son and my esteemed cousin, will you join me in visiting our warriors?" she said to Sametono and Munetoki.

"You mean to show yourself to all the troops, my lady?" Munetoki's face darkened and his thick moustache bristled.

"I'm sure they will be as inspired as we have been," said Sametono. "My mother is teaching us an important lesson, my lord Regent. Let us accompany her."

There was confusion as horses were brought for the Shogun's party, riders jostled one another for position, and runners were sent ahead to warn the troops stationed along the wall of the exalted visitors' approach. With Taniko in the lead, followed by Sametono and Munetoki, they set out. The sun was high in the eastern sky, and Taniko was a radiant vision.

Chapter Sixteen

This ride of Taniko's, Jebu thought, will do more to put heart into the troops and the people than a visit from the Emperor himself. Around the circle of Hakata Bay the samurai who had come here from the sixty-six provinces were falling out in ranks in front of the high stone defence wall. As the Shogun's party approached the first formations there were hearty cheers. But when the warriors saw Taniko they fell silent, knelt and prostrated themselves.

At Hakozaki, the northernmost town on the harbour, the crews of the kobaya lined up on the piers beside their ships and bowed to the Ama-Shogun. There were hundreds of the little ships at Hakozaki. Erom this town, nearest the mouth of the harbour, the defenders could strike the Mongol fleet before it even entered Hakata Bay. The old wall that circled the town, built hundreds of years ago against pirates, had been restored and made part of the new defences. Townspeople and samurai lined up on top of the wall and in front of it to watch Taniko pass.

Just outside Hakozaki a shaven-headed man in the saffron robe of a Buddhist monk rushed out of the crowd waving his arms and shouting, "Homage to Amida Buddha! Homage to Amida Buddha!" Jebu tensed, readying himself to draw his short Zinja sword. Arghun might very well use assassins against them, and assassins could disguise themselves as monks. Indeed, he thought grimly, assassins could be monks. But then he realized he had seen this man before. It was the notorious priest Noshin.

In these troubled times, which many called the Latter Days of the Law, with the country ravaged by civil war and now threatened by invasion, many people, especially lower-ranking samurai and common people, sought comfort in new religions. Noshin was one

who taught that merely by repeating a certain scriptural verse a person could achieve enlightenment and salvation. He went up and down the country, exhorting large, excited crowds to adopt his simplified version of Buddhism. All the sufferings of the Sunrise Land, he declared, were punishments for its sins, particularly the sins of the nobility, the priesthood and the samurai. He insisted that his was the only true teaching and that all other sects were false and corrupt and should be driven out of the country, by force if necessary. Inevitably, when the land turned its attention to Hakata Bay, Noshin had moved there too, and was now preaching to the troops, leading them in litanies and urging them to defeat the enemy by the purity of their lives and the constant recitation of the prayers he recommended. Some of the samurai found him a noisy bore, but many others became his fervent followers.

Noshin planted himself in front of Taniko and began to harangue her. "Pray, lady, pray constantly to the Buddha. Ask him to forgive your sins. Renounce the falsehoods of the old Buddhist sects and the new Zen mountebanks. Abjure the superstition of Shinto. There is only one true religion. Pray for enlightenment, lady, and you will be saved, and the country will be saved."

"Thank you, good priest Noshin, for your prayers and for your counsel," Taniko said in a firm, commanding tone, as if Noshin had said precisely what she wanted to hear. "Please ask the Buddha to grant us victory." With that she gave her white horse a sharp kick, and Jebu, taking the cue, started walking inexorably forward, holding the horse's head.

I'll step on you if you don't get out of the way, he told Noshin silently. Evidently Noshin realized that any more intrusion into Taniko's parade would make him look ridiculous, so he backed away, waving his arms and praying. A group of his followers in the crowd took up his chant, their voices growing fainter as Taniko's party moved on.

"You see, my lady?" said Munetoki in a low, grumbling voice.

"That's the sort of thing that happens when you appear in public. I'd have given anything to be able to draw my sword and cut down that obnoxious wretch."

"Please, Cousin," said Taniko softly with a smile. "You're speaking of a holy man."

"Holy men don't attack other people's beliefs," said Munetoki, still angry. "Nor do they publicly lecture the Shogun's mother. The authorities sent that man into exile once already."

"And brought him back from exile because there was such a public outcry," said Taniko. "We cannot afford to make enemies of his followers."

It was going to take them all day to make the complete circuit of Hakata Bay, and it became apparent that Taniko had no intention of stopping until they reached the south end of the wall. Jebu feared for her.

"My lady," he said, hoping Sametono and Munetoki would hear him. "Perhaps we could stop and rest at Hakata and resume this ride tomorrow."

Taniko looked at him with an ironic smile. "Do your feet hurt, Master Jebu? I'll let you ride, and I'll lead the horse for a while if you wish."

"You can't ride from sunrise to sunset, my lady," said Munetoki. "It will kill you."

Taniko fixed him with a steely look. "The enemy fleet will probably be here tomorrow. I have only this day. I must. complete the ride today,

Munetoki-san." Munetoki opened his mouth, and she cut him off. "I insist."

Beyond brief stops, Taniko would permit the party no rest. No one dared complain. If the fragile little Lady Taniko could set herself this ordeal, how could any true samurai say it was too much for him? Every so often Jebu glanced back at her. Her head was high, her back straight. From the way his own legs and feet hurt, he who spent his days in training, he could imagine how her whole body must feel. The only sign of pain he could detect in her was in the tense grip of her hands on the saddle, as if in fear that she might faint and fall off.

The sun travelled slowly across the sky above the bay, the hot sun of the Fifth Month, beating down on them. All along the way the troops cheered and bowed, their faces reflecting the awe and delight they felt at the sight of the famous Ama-Shogun. She's right, it is worth it, thought Jebu, looking at those ecstatic faces. And he longed to take her in his arms and tell her.

The ride continued until after sunset. Taniko refused to stop until they reached the very end of the wall. The Shogun's party had already requisitioned quarters at the small castle of a kenin whose estate was just outside Imazu at the southern end of the wall. The little lord, standing outside his gate, was pop-eyed with pride at being permitted to offer hospitality to the Shogunal party. A group of Taniko's maids had been sent ahead by carriage to prepare her bedchamber. They rushed out of the central tower of the castle, twittering like birds, as Taniko rode through the gate. In the castle courtyard Jebu turned to Taniko, who closed her eyes and slid from the saddle into his arms. Ignoring the shrieking of the maids, he carried her up the steps of the tower. Jebu's heart was bursting with love and pride as he looked down at the small figure nestled in his arms. He went where the maids led him, to an airy chamber in the upper levels of the tower, where he laid Taniko gently on a pile of

quilts and cushions. He would not sleep at her side tonight. This place was too public. He would sleep like a guardian, at the entrance to her chamber.

After he set her down he whispered, "That was the most magnificent thing I have ever seen anyone do. You deserve to be worshipped as a goddess."

She opened her eyes, the brown pupils turned towards him, and she smiled wryly. "Don't blaspheme."

"I meant only to honour you, my love."

"I deserve no more honour than any of those men out there, Jebusan. Tomorrow they will fight with all their strength for the Sunrise Land, and many of- them will die. I wanted to give them a vision, something that would signify everything they will be fighting and dying for." She sighed. "How presumptuous of me." Her voice trailed off and her eyes closed. Jebu sat back, looking down at her, his eyes wet with tears. He looked up to see Munetoki and Sametono, still in armour, staring down at Taniko.

"If she had been a man, what a Shogun we would have had," said Munetoki. "I beg your pardon, your lordship."

Sametono said, "Don't beg my pardon. You're quite right. It is unfortunate that she is a woman and therefore subject to women's weaknesses." He looked at Jebu with troubled eyes. He seemed to want to say more, but shook his head at last and went away with Munetoki, closing the shoji behind them.

Jebu undressed himself and carefully arranged his weapons and armour in a corner of the room. He unrolled a futon across the entrance to the room, set his Zinja sword beside it and lay down. A

numbness rushed up from the soles of his feet through his muscles and bones, rendering him unconscious in moments. He had only time to be grateful that the long walk from Hakozaki to Imagu had so exhausted him that he would sleep in spite of the prospect of battle tomorrow.

"Shike Jebu, wake up. Wake up." He felt as if he had not slept at all. His entire body ached. What had happened to him? Not in years had anyone been able to approach him while he slept without waking him up. I'm getting old, he thought. Who is this? He opened his eyes and saw Sametono's face. The boy's eyes were bright with excitement. Morning sunlight was pouring in through the openings in the screened windows.

"They're here, shike. The Mongols. They came up during the night."

The castle where they had spent the night had been selected because the tower was built on a high hill and was perhaps the best lookout point on this side of the bay. Munetoki was already at the northern window.

"There," he said. Jebu and Sametono joined him at the window. Past Shiga Island, on the grey, indeterminate line of the horizon, there was a row of light-coloured dots. As they watched in silence, the line of dots extended itself slowly from north to south, across the entire horizon. At first there were spaces between the dots, but more and more appeared until the entire horizon line was covered by innumerable white squares, still tiny-the sails of Kublai Khan's fleet. It was a deceptively peaceful sight, Jebu thought. What they were seeing out there on the sea was only a part of the invasion fleet, the nine hundred ships from Korea. These would eventually be joined by the four thousand ships of the South of the Yang-Tze Eleet, embarking from Linan.

Jebu could imagine the frenzy on those ships as they sighted the shore they were going to attack. The war drums pounding, the horses stamping and neighing in their stalls below-decks, the officers shouting orders. Only the low-ranking soldiers would be silent, staring at the distant shore, wondering what fate awaited them there. Here, too, a terrible dread possessed everyone. Down on the quays of the three towns, all along the wall that curved around the bay, men were readying themselves for the supreme effort of their lives.

"I wish I was out on one of our ships," growled Munetoki.

"Your work is to stay in castles like this and give orders, Munetokisan, not to go adventuring," said Taniko. Jebu, Munetoki and Sametono turned to see her emerge from the stairwell. She looked amazingly fresh and rested and was wearing a pale blue summer costume printed with orange, red and yellow flowers. The three men stepped back to give her the central place at the window.

"There's precious few orders for me to give now, Cousin," said Munetoki. "I've given all the orders I intend to, and the defence is in the hands of able generals."

Considering that it had taken them a whole day to ride from Hakozaki to Imazu, an order now from Munetoki to the fleet back at Hakozaki would be meaningless. Even concentrated in Hakata Bay, the defence line was far too long for easy communication. The defending generals had done as much advance planning as they could and had set up a system of signal banners and lanterns similar to the Mongols', as described by Jebu, that would allow them to send simple orders and messages over a distance. Beyond that, local commanders at each section of the wall were responsible for their own decisions.

"There go our ships," said Munetoki, excitedly pointing in the direction of Hakozaki. Jebu felt his heart lift as he saw the long, low silhouettes of little galleys racing out to meet the enemy at the mouth of the harbour. It looked as if a hundred kobaya were dashing out. Watching the little ships reminded Jebu that Moko had had a hand in designing them, and with a sudden chill he asked himself, where is Moko? His friend could have been caught out there somewhere. How could any ship escape a fleet so huge?

The ocean was now carpeted with sails almost to the entrance to the harbour, with more of them coming over the horizon all the time. It was now possible to make out some of the ships themselves, craft Jebu recognized from his years in China. The Mongols must have appropriated everything afloat in the ports of Korea and China. There were huge, deep-hulled seven-masted ocean junks that traded with the islands in the southern and western seas, harbour junks with barrel-shaped hulls and high sterns. There were broad-beamed weighty junks and long, light ones, junks with narrow bows and junks with flaring bows, junks with square sterns and with oval sterns, deep-keeled junks and flat-bottomed junks, junks with one mast, with three masts and five masts. There were two-section boats designed by Kublai Khan himself for traffic on China's inland canals. There were innumerable smaller ships, sampans, reed rafts, trawlers, canoes, even rafts made of inflated skins.

"If only I could go out in one of our kobaya," Sametono said suddenly, fists clenched.

"Don't even think of it," said Taniko, her eyes frightened. "Your place is back in Kamakura, not here. And certainly not out at sea."

"Excuse me, Mother," said Sametono, staring back at her. "I'm not going back to Kamakura."

"Sametono, we've talked about this before," Taniko said angrily. "You are not needed here. You would simply be one more source of worry for our samurai, another person to protect."

"I'm sorry, Mother, but I am the Shogun," Sametono replied quietly. "Munetoki has shaved my head and knotted my hair. I am a man. I am ready to take my place with the warriors. I would not go against your advice in many things, Mother, but I will in this, because you are speaking from the heart as any mother would, not from the mind of the Ama-Shogun."

"That is not true," said Taniko evenly. "A samurai woman sends her son off to battle with a smile. You are Shogun, as you say. You are needed in Kamakura to govern the country."

"I am inexperienced at governing. Cousin Munetoki can do that better than I can. If I stay here, I can continue to do what you did so beautifully yesterday, Mother. The troops will fight all the harder knowing they are fighting under their Shogun's eye."

"Are you suggesting that I return to Kamakura?" said Munetoki angrily. Jebu suppressed a smile.

"Cousin," said Sametono, "I will never forget when you came back after the last attack on our country and told us the story of how the Mongols were defeated. Please let me have the honour of reporting to you, after this war is over."

Munetoki turned to Taniko with a resigned look. "The boy has to win the respect of the samurai. It will not do for him to be kept in Kamakura like a child-Emperor. Someone of our family is needed here to inspire our men. You and I will go back to Kamakura. Eirst, though, I mean to make one raid on one of our little ships. I insist on that."

"Very well, Munetoki," said Taniko. "Then you will go back to Kamakura. But if Sametono stays here, then so shall I. And if Sametono does anything foolish, he will answer to me."

"Mother," groaned Sametono. "You shame me."

"I will not shame you as long as you keep to your proper place. On shore, observing the battle, letting the samurai see their Supreme Commander, but out of danger. If you dare set foot in one of those little ships you had better be prepared for real shame when you come back. Because I will be standing on the beach waiting for you." Her eyes blazed with a wrath that Jebu found amusing, though he was sure it was terrible to Sametono.

Jebu glanced out the window, saw a sight that transfixed him and called, "Look!" Elames were rippling along the sides of enemy junks, sails were blackening and heavy, dark grey smoke was coiling into the air. A cheer went up from Jebu and the others as they saw Mongol ships start to sink. It was difficult to see the kobaya at this distance, they were so small. But it was clear that they were among the enemy vessels, boarding them and setting them afire. Blazing lights sailed through the air. There were bright flashes and sounds like distant thunderclaps. Hua pao aboard the junks were being brought to bear on the little ships. But more and more of the invading junks were burning.

The battle at the harbour mouth raged for over an hour. Jebu asked himself again and again, where is Moko? Soon the ocean was obscured by smoke, and it was impossible to see the fleet coming over the horizon. At last, though, the smoke began to clear. Jebu could see the low, dark shapes arrowing through the waves back to Hakozaki. He tried to count them. It was difficult at this distance, but it seemed there were no more than thirty. His heart turned to lead. Over a hundred had gone out. The burning junks sank. The Mongol

fleet was visible again, filling the ocean as far as the eye could see. Jebu expected the invaders to start sailing into the harbour, but instead the nearer ships were tacking and heading toward Shiga Island.

"They're trying to land on Shiga and get around the wall," said Munetoki.

"I must go," said Jebu. He bowed deeply to Sametono and Taniko.

"The fighting for Shiga Island will be over by the time you get there," Taniko protested.

"It may go on for days, my lady," said Jebu moving towards the stairway. In a lower voice that the others could not overhear he said, "Stop trying to protect the men you love."

"At least trying to protect Sametono gives me an excuse to stay near you," Taniko whispered. "Promise me you will not let Sametono go into combat. And promise me you will come back to me."

"I promise," Jebu whispered. He squeezed her hand and left.

Chapter Seventeen

Red and yellow lights, numerous as the stars, bobbed gently in the darkness ahead. A strong tenor voice floated over the water, singing in Mongolian about a young man who had ridden ninety-nine days and ninety-nine nights to be with his beloved, only to find wild flowers growing over her grave. It was a song Jebu had heard many times around campfires at the edge of the Gobi Desert. It sounded strange to hear it now on Hakata Bay as their thirty-man galley, Flying Feather, glided silent as a crane towards the Mongol fleet. There was no wind tonight, so they rowed without a sail. Jebu stood amidships, one hand resting on the mast, the other holding his naginata.

It was near the end of the month, and the thin, waning moon was just rising, well after midnight. As they drew closer, the junks, each with a yellow lantern at the prow and a red lantern at the stern, loomed over their little galley like castles. They had reached the barrier now, a line of fishing nets strung from ship to ship and hung with bells both to block any attacking vessels and to warn of their approach. Hayama Sakagura, Moko's son, stood in the bow of Flying Feather, both hands gripping the pole of a naginata fitted with a very long, exquisitely sharpened sword blade of the highest quality steel. Sakagura swung the naginata three times as the oarsmen, all armed samurai themselves, held the little galley steady. A great square of the net silently fell away, and Flying Feather slid through. Munetoki, standing just behind Jebu, expelled a long breath of relief.

There was a distant shout. Blazing arrows shot through the air, a long way off. A kobaya along the net to the north burst into flame. They must have set off the bells trying to get through, Jebu thought. Eigures of men, silhouetted by the blaze, toppled from the galley into

the water. The distraction would make it easier for all the other raiders to get through.

It was a hot, damp night, and even on the water the air hung thick. Once Flying Feather was in among the Mongol ships the smell was nauseating, a mixture of horses, unwashed bodies, garbage, decaying meat and human sewage. The huge fleet was rapidly poisoning the bay. "Milk drinkers," Munetoki groaned. Their kobaya pulled alongside a two-masted junk. They drifted till they were just at the midpoint of the vessel, where the sides were lowest. Jebu could hear conversations on the deck of the ship in an unfamiliar language that, he guessed, was Korean. He heard horses stamping on the other side of the hull, and one of them whickered. They would have to act quickly now. The horses were likely to smell them and set up a commotion. Jebu made room for two samurai who went to work with practical speed at the base of Flying Feather's mast. They unwrapped a rope and pulled out an arrangement of pegs and splints. With ropes attached to the top of the mast other crewmen guided its fall. It crashed against the junk's railing, and a cry of alarm pierced the humid night.

It was the third night after the Great Khan's fleet arrived at Hakata Bay. Each night the kobaya had been going out. They filtered in among the big enemy ships and used their collapsible masts, an invention of Moko's, to board the junks. After slaughtering as many of the warriors and crew as they could reach, the raiders set fire to the ships and escaped-or tried to. Each night nearly half the ships that went out did not come back.

"We'll have more ships coming back after the warriors who aren't good at this have got themselves killed off," Moko's son Sakagura said carelessly when Jebu was arranging for himself and Munetoki to go raiding on Flying Feather. Jebu though the remark crude but said nothing. Sakagura was reputed to be the best of the kobaya

captains and therefore was the most likely to get Munetoki back safely. That was all that mattered.

Jebu had not seen Moko until earlier that day. It turned out that when the Mongol fleet arrived, war junks had pursued Moko's scout ship, driving it on to the rocks a day's journey north of Hakata Bay. Jebu himself had been occupied, until this morning, in the furious battle that ended in driving the Mongols off Shiga Island. Moko saw Flying Feather off from Hakozaki that night, his eyes shining with pride in his son.

Sakagura had promised Jebu and Munetoki the right to be first on the enemy ship. Jebu took a firmer grip on his naginata and set his bare foot on the slanting mast when an unexpected elbow in the ribs knocked him to one side, and Munetoki was clambering up the mast ahead of him. Like the lowliest, youngest samurai, the Regent of the Sunrise Land could not resist the urge to be the first to attack the enemy. Stifling his anger, Jebu scrambled up the mast. It was his responsibility to protect the Regent on this raid.

He glimpsed Munetoki bringing his sword down on the back of a screaming Korean crewman. Swinging his naginata in a huge arc, Jebu dashed for a small lantern beside the door of the stern cabin. He grabbed the lantern, and splashed burning oil on the deck. Mongol soldiers were tumbling up through the hatches now, waving swords, spears and bows and arrows, but the samurai had control of the deck and were cutting them down almost as fast as they appeared. Another fire had started in the bow of the ship. If they're carrying any of the black powder we'll all go up together, Jebu thought.

The Korean crewmen, realizing that their ship was past saving, were diving overboard. The Mongol soldiers were more stubborn-or desperate, since most of them couldn't swim. They had no choice but

to stand and fight. About twenty of them managed to form a line across the deck and were steadily shooting arrows into the attackers with well-drilled precision. Jebu jumped to the railing of the ship, took hold of a free line and wrapped it around his left arm. He swung feet first into the bowmen, sending the nearest of them sprawling, killing or scattering the others with his naginata. The samurai rushed the Mongols, their long swords flashing like torches in the firelight. Munetoki was in the lead, and a huge Mongol stood up with his spear pointed at the Regent's chest. Jebu ran at the Mongol, whirling the naginata over his head and bringing it down on the big man's neck. The severed head went sailing off the ship into the blackness. Munetoki took a moment to bow his thanks before decapitating another Mongol with a two-handed swing of his sword.

The Mongols just aren't used to fighting on foot in close quarters, Jebu thought. Sakagura was shouting, "Sparrow! Sparrow!" the signal to abandon the enemy ship. Samurai were jumping into the water or scrambling down Flying Feather's mast. Soon all the surviving raiders were on board the kobaya. Even the mast was saved, pulled back into place by four crewmen. The rowers pushed off, and Flying Feather was racing across the bay to Hakozaki.

Burning ships lit up the vast extent of the invading fleet. In the distance one ship blew up with a roar. There goes another kobaya crew, Jebu thought glumly, as those around him cheered. Hua pao mounted on the decks of the junks boomed, and flaming arrows sizzled through the air. The firelight revealed a distant ship that dwarfed the junks around it. It was bedecked with banners and had so many masts it was difficult to count them. On the foremast sail was painted a huge tiger's head, fangs bared. Erom end to end the ship was Chinese vermilion, vivid as blood. It was Arghun Baghadur's flagship, the Red Tiger. I wonder if he knows I survived his arrows in Oshu, Jebu thought. Red Tiger was surrounded by a ring of smaller war junks. There was no way to break through.

Jebu asked himself, do I hate him? Do I want vengeance for all he has done to me? Searching his heart, he was relieved to find that he felt no hatred. Arghun was like some dangerous beast of prey-like the tiger painted on his sail-whom one might feel a duty to destroy but could not hate the way it was possible to hate a twisted man like

Horigawa. One might even admire Arghun, see beauty in him, as one did in a tiger. Jebu's Zinja insight told him that his enmity with Arghun was part of the necessary pattern of things, the pattern Taitaro had spoken of.

There was an ear-bursting roar and a flash of light from a junk near them. A round, dark object trailing sparks shot through the air. Jebu held his breath, waiting to see if it would fall on Flying Feather. It landed in the water far to their left and blew up, sending up a huge waterspout. A man near Jebu cried out and fell, holding his hand over a bleeding ear. The flying chunks of metal were the deadliest part of the Mongol fire balls, Jebu thought. But the hua pao were not at all accurate when mounted on ships. They might wreak havoc with masses of troops or break down fortifications, but they were nearly useless on the water.

"The one we raided is going down," shouted Munetoki, clapping Jebu on the arm and pointing. Jebu watched as the junk, burning from end to end, rolled over on its side. The poor horses, he thought. Munetoki was wild with glee. Now that they had passed beyond shooting distance of the Mongol ships, everyone was chattering and laughing with the dizzy relief that comes to men when they have been in danger of death and have survived.

Sakagura pushed his way back to them. He held up a severed head by its braided black hair. In the other hand he had a rectangular bronze tablet attached to a gold chain.

"I got a general at least," he laughed. "That is a general's medallion, isn't it?"

"A hundred-commander," said Jebu, studying the tablet. To salvage some of Sakagura's pride he added, "Surely the highest ranking officer aboard that ship."

"I'll get a general yet," said Sakagura excitedly. "I'll get Arghun Baghadur himself one of these days." He grinned and stuffed the chain into his belt, then bowed to Munetoki. "Did your lordship enjoy the raid?"

"I'm only sorry it's over," said Munetoki. "I wish I could go out every night as you do. I'm obliged to you, captain."

Sakagura bowed. "Eorgive my presumption, your lordship, but I hope you won't forget me. I came when called to arms, and I've fought hard, risked my life many times and killed many enemies. I expect to do a lot more fighting."

"Your exploits and your reputation for bravery are well known, captain," said Munetoki with less warmth.

Sakagura did not look in the least abashed. Moko's eldest son had his father's features, but not the crossed eyes and bad teeth, features that without those defects were quite handsome. He had been born the year Yukio and Jebu left for China, taking Moko with them, and was now twenty-three. So he had not met his father until he was about seven years old. Even so, he had Moko's outspokenness and intelligence, it was clear. But he also had some qualities that were, perhaps, peculiar to first-generation samurai-reckless courage, ambition and an air of braggadocio.

"Please forgive me, your lordship," Sakagura said. "We fellows who

do go out every night, as you wish you could, are hoping the Bakufu will be generous after this is over, with rice land and offices and rank."

He excused himself as the galley approached the Hakozaki dock. A crowd had gathered along the stone quays and wooden piers. Sakagura stood on the prow of Flying Feather holding up the Mongol head. The crowd cheered him. Munetoki watched him with a worried frown as the ship manoeuvred up to the torchlit dock.

"Erom whom can we take the rice land or the offices or the titles so that we can give them to him and his kind?" he said to Jebu. "Winning this war means driving off the Mongols, not gaining land. It could be dangerous if there are many who think like him."

You'd better start thinking about it now, Jebu thought to himself. After the war it will be too late. Aloud he said, "There won't be that many samurai left to reward after this war, your lordship." He gestured out over the dark waters of the bay, now lit by the distant fires among the Mongol ships and by the waning moon. "Twenty kobaya left this town tonight, and I count only twelve returning. In our boat we lost seven men out of thirty."

"The Mongols are taking terrible losses," Munetoki agreed. "But so are we." The kobaya bumped against the dock, and samurai crewmen jumped out to make fast. The Great Khan has a whole continent full of warriors to send against us, Jebu thought. Most of our fighting men are already gathered here. How long can we hold out?

Chapter Eighteen

Returning after the kobaya raid to the camp north of Hakozaki, Jebu stopped suddenly. He had caught sight of two figures crouching at the entrance to his tent. Using a bamboo grove for cover, he moved noiselessly closer. His Zinja-trained senses told him that the two men were relaxed, motionless and breathing regularly as if in meditation. Probably visiting monks, not assassins, he decided. The camp was carefully guarded against enemy infiltrators. He stepped out of the bamboo grove and called a greeting.

"Good evening to you, Master Jebu." Now Jebu saw that it was the monk Eisen. "Although it is almost morning. I hear you have been sinking Mongol ships."

"Sensei," Jebu said with a bow. "I didn't know you'd left Kamakura." He came closer and smiled at Eisen's round, solid face, now visible in the weak moonlight. Behind Eisen was a gaunt, grey-bearded monk with shaved head, who wore black Zen robes.

"I am only here briefly," said Eisen, "to assist my colleague here, priest Kagyo." Jebu and Kagyo bowed to each other. "I am spending most of my time now supervising the reconstruction of the Todaiji Temple in Nara, since you seem to have abandoned that task." Eisen's eyes twinkled. Jebu had told him of masquerading as a monk seeking contributions for the Todaiji. "May we talk in your tent?" Jebu ushered them into his tent and lit a candle. Kagyo looked familiar, but Jebu could not place him. Probably someone he had seen on a visit to Eisen's temple.

"I have news of the Order," said Eisen without preamble. Jebu was startled. Though Taitaro had told him Eisen was of the Order, they had never spoken openly of it to each other before.

"The news is melancholy," Eisen went on. "Though it will sadden you, remember that all is happening as it should. The Zinja no longer exist. While the whole attention of the nation was turned towards Hakata Bay, the monks and their women and children simply walked out of the monasteries. Now the temples stand empty. The gates are unguarded. The doors are open. When the people who live near them realize what has happened, they will rush in and doubtless tear the buildings apart looking for the fabled treasures of the Zinja." He chuckled.

Taitaro had prepared Jebu for this, but when he heard that it had actually happened, grief swept over him. The Zinja monasteries were the only home he had ever known. It was like losing Taitaro all over again.

"Eorgive me, sensei," he said at last. "When the Order takes this step, why should I weep over it? I'm afraid I'm not a very good Zinja."

"It is not whether you achieve the ideal that matters," Kagyo said. He had been watching Jebu with a compassionate smile. "What matters is the intensity of your effort and the magnitude of your obstacles. By that standard, you are a very great Zinja." He spoke as if he knew Jebu.

"There is much to be done now," said Eisen briskly. "Many of those who were formerly Zinja are coming here to Hakata, Jebu, to help in the fight against the Mongols. We ask you to find places for them according to their abilities. Kagyo here will assist you in any way you wish."

Jebu looked curiously at Kagyo. "I know you, priest Kagyo."

Kagyo nodded. "We have not seen each other in nearly forty years,

Jebu-san. Not since I assisted with your initiation. You knew me as Eudo." Jebu gasped and leaned closer to study the priest's face in the candlelight.

"Yes. I remember you now. Eudo, the tall, thin one. How you terrified me," Jebu said. "A long time ago, when the Teak Blossom Tem ple was still standing in the hills above Hakata here, and your friend Weicho was the abbot, I asked him what had become of you. He told me you had broken under the strain of initiating Zinja novices and had gone to a Zen temple to study."

"Our part in the initiations was painful for both Weicho and me," said Kagyo. "He was thankful when they made him an abbot, as I was when the Order commanded me to become a Zen monk. I was one of the early ones to cross over. Poor Weicho. The Takashi got him when they destroyed the Teak Blossom Temple."

"They killed my mother, too," said Jebu sadly. "It was Sogamori's revenge because I had killed Kiyosi."

"Are you still lugging the corpse of Kiyosi about with you?" said Eisen. "You should have left him at the bottom of the harbour."

Jebu shook his head. "Everything I see here in Hakata Bay reminds me of that day and what followed upon it. The destruction of the Teak Blossom Temple, my mother burned alive, Taniko's years of suffering."

Eisen looked at Jebu sternly. "You were right before when you said you are not a very good Zinja. Your insight is feeble. Don't you understand that acting without concern for results means not feeling remorse afters those results have occurred? You must live as if the consequences of your every action have been perfect."

Jebu rocked back on his heels, gasping. He felt light as a cloud. Eisen had eased a twenty-year-old pain. He bent forward and pressed his forehead against the woven grass flooring of his tent.

"I am a great fool, sensei," he said. "Thank you for taking away the suffering."

"It will come back," said Eisen matter-of-factly. "The cultivation of insight can never cease."

"I am still very naive."

"No, you are not. You are one of the most accomplished members of our Order. You do not realize how important you have become to us. In all the Sunrise Land you have the widest range of experience of the lands beyond the western sea."

Jebu felt a chill as he guessed what Eisen was leading up to. "Excuse me, sensei, but you yourself have studied in China."

Eisen brushed at a fly, taking care not to hurt it. "I spent five years in a Ch'an monastery. I travelled very little. I'm afraid it's unavoidable, Jebu. Since Abbot Taitaro's death you have become, of all of us, the best qualified."

"Best qualified for what, sensei?"

"To journey for the Order, as Taitaro did."

Jebu was appalled. "But I'm needed here."

"Yes, your work is here until this war is over. We are telling you about the Order's suggestions for your future to give you time to think about them. As always, the Order wants you to accept the responsibility freely."

"Why is it necessary to send me, sensei? What am I expected to accomplish?"

"We will talk at length about this another time. To put it briefly, and I am sure unconvincingly, the circulation of ideas and knowledge is the life blood of the Order. If we are a force for life, growth and liberation it is because our view of humanity transcends the limited awareness of the people of any one nation. To make this possible, representatives of our Order must travel to the edges of the world to maintain contact among our branches."

Jebu glanced out the opening of his tent. He could hear gulls calling, and now he could see the waters of Hakata Bay growing light, the dark shapes of Mongol ships drifting at anchor in the centre of the harbour and extending out to its mouth. They had not even begun to discuss the reason he wanted no part of Eisen's proposal.

"I am the Order's closest link with the Bakufu," said Jebu. "Surely that is of more value than my wandering about in faraway lands."

"What you do now is important," Eisen agreed. "But what we want you to do will be even more important."

Jebu sighed. "Sensei, I am over fifty years old. Most men do not live to this age. So, I have given a lifetime to the Order already. I have had the good fortune, in the last few years, to be united with the only woman I have ever loved. You know her. I might be killed any day now. But I want to spend the rest of my life with her, however long that may be. I beg of you, do not ask this of me."

Jebu had expected that Eisen would dismiss with contempt the suggestion that a man might want to set aside his manifest duty for the sake of a woman. Instead the round-faced monk nodded and stared at Jebu with sympathy.

"I know her very well. Even better than I know you. I know what a magnificent woman she is. Each of you has attained deep insight, and the love of man and woman can lead them together to the most profound awareness of the Self. In the embrace of a loving couple, each is drawn out of the illusion of singleness. Yes, Jebu, I know what I am asking you to give up."

Kagyo said, "Most of us find our loves within the Order. You have spent an exceptional part of your life in the world outside our monasteries, and it complicates things."

"Indeed it does," said Eisen. "She has a destiny of her own to fulfil. And you are an obstacle to her fulfilment just as she is an obstacle to yours. As with you, the circumstances of her life-the many powerful men she has known, her journey to China, her intimate knowledge of the Great Khan of the Mongols-together with her natural endowment, make her an irreplaceable person. The Bakufu could not function half as well without her. I'm afraid, though, that the liaison between her and you will gradually erode the respect she enjoys now and which she needs to be effective."

As he listened, Jebu felt he was being torn in two. "Sensei, again I beg of you-"

Eisen held up a silencing hand. "Do not commit yourself now. Give your insight time to work on this problem."

Jebu laughed bitterly. "Sensei, five years ago the Order helped me to see that I had to yield to her plea that I return to Kamakura. And then our love, which I thought was dead, came back to life. Now the Order tells me that I must give her up again. Does the Order think five years with her is enough for me? A whole lifetime with her would not be enough. I refuse, sensei. Tell them. I do not need time to think."

Eisen shrugged and patted Jebu's knee. "Only you can decide. The whole philosophy of the Order is based on that." He rose. Kagyo following him, and walked to the opening of the tent.

"I will never part with her."

"It will rain today. The clouds are already covering the moon. Good morning to you, Jebu-san."

After they were gone, Jebu went out of his tent and sat on a hilltop watching a misty day dawn over the harbour. Samurai paced restlessly along the top of the curving wall that stretched along the beach. Jebu asked himself, where will they attack today? With a grunt of anger he dismissed Eisen's message from the Order. If they think I will give her up after all this time, they are fools, he told himself. But they were not fools, he knew, thinking sadly of the empty temples all over the Sunrise Land. They were the wisest and the most dedicated people he had ever known. They were his people. Out of habit he reached inside his robe and took out the Jewel of Life and Death. Sadly, he put it away again. It meant no more now to him than a piece of glass. The Zinja gone. The Jewel gone. Yukio gone. Taitaro gone. Now they wanted to take Taniko. They were systematically stripping away anyone or anything that he cared deeply about. But a Zinja was not supposed to have attachments. He had started out in life knowing that. How had he acquired so many?

Chapter Nineteen

In the middle of the Seventh Month, the South of the Yang-Tze Eleet, long delayed in its rendezvous with the fleet from Korea, arrived at Hakata Bay-four thousand ships carrying a hundred thousand Chinese troops. The day after the huge new invasion fleet appeared, the defending generals held council before sunrise in the pavilion north of Hakozaki. There were ten of them, and among them they represented every region of the Sunrise Land. Each wore a slightly different style of armour and spoke with a different accent, but they were alike in their air of calm gravity which masked deep anxiety. In the position of honour on the raised platform under the pavilion sat the young Shogun Sametono, his eyes burning with excitement, eagerness, concern. Jebu was sitting with a group of lesser officers and kenin who had been called to give counsel and receive the generals' orders. He noted with a twinge of worry that Sametono was wearing battle armour and had the sword Higekiri at his belt.

Sametono had little to say until the generals were finished outlining their plans for meeting the new threat. Then he raised his young voice. His hands, as he gestured, were trembling.

"Honoured generals and brave officers, today and the next few days will decide the fate of the Sunrise Land. Until now I have stayed out of battle, persuaded that the life of the Shogun should not be risked. But if we lose now, it does not matter whether the Shogun lives or dies. Today, I go into battle. I ask you generals to assign me a place in the defences."

There were cheers from many of the officers. Jebu himself was stirred. He did not want to frustrate the boy, but he had promised Taniko he would do everything in his power to keep Sametono out of combat, and there was good reason for doing so besides Taniko's

maternal fears. The death of Sametono would be a disaster from which the forces of the Sunrise Land might never recover. Jebu asked for permission to speak.

"I have fought in many battles, honoured generals," he said. "I ask you to imagine what it would do to our warriors, brave as they are, to hear in this moment of crisis that the Shogun himself has been killed in battle. Precisely because it will be so difficult to hold back the enemy now that they have three times as many troops as before, it is all the more important that nothing happen to our Shogun. I beg his lordship to spare us any fear for his safety, and I beg you honoured generals to intercede with him not to expose his exalted person to danger."

There was a muttering of agreement as Jebu sat down. Dawn was starting to break over Hakata Bay. Looking down the beach, Jebu could see mass pyres where stacked enemy corpses were being burned by slaves. The dead samurai had been taken inland for more ceremonious cremation. Wrecked Mongol siege machines were being chopped apart by labourers so the wood could be re-used. Here and there beached ships were being salvaged. The hulks of enemy junks sunk in the offing were left there as a barrier to other landings. Out on the bay many of the invaders' sails were up and their ships were beginning to move towards shore. Shrill voices could be heard shouting war cries across the water, and the drums on the ships were taking up their inexorable beat. Jebu turned his attention back to the generals. Sametono was glaring at him as if he wanted to kill him.

Miura Zumiyoshi, the senior officer among the generals, addressed Sametono. "Your Lordship, we think the Zinja monk has spoken well.

To lose you might be the very blow that would weaken our men's morale enough to let the Mongols break through our lines. We

humbly suggest that you refrain from going into combat."

Sametono's face turned a deep red. He was the Supreme Commander of these generals, of all samurai in the Sunrise Land. But leadership in the Sacred Islands was traditionally never a matter of one man's will. Leaders who disregarded the opinions of their supporters soon lost that support. Sametono knew that Jebu had turned the consensus against him. He nodded abruptly and uttered his acceptance of the generals' "suggestion" in a low voice.

Shortly afterwards the meeting ended. Jebu felt a tug at his sleeve and turned to see Moko's son Sakagura smiling and bowing to him. The young man looked thin and wolfish after two months of leading forays against the Mongols nearly every night.

"Master Jebu," he said, "I wish to ask a favour. I have never had an opportunity to meet his lordship. Would you introduce me now, while he is here?"

"I don't think the honoured Shogun wishes to speak with me just now," said Jebu.

"Shike, I may die today. I may never have another chance." As he called Jebu by the title Moko always used, Sakagura looked so much like his father that Jebu decided to help him. Motioning Sakagura to follow him, he approached Sametono, who was striding angrily and silently through rows of bowing officers.

"Excuse me, your lordship," Jebu said. "May I introduce Captain Hayama Sakagura? It is Captain Sakagura who plans and leads the kobaya night attacks which have been so effective."

Sametono stared angrily at Jebu, as if about to reprimand him for daring to speak to him. But his expression changed when he turned

to Sakagura. The young men were ten years apart in age and both of the same height. Jebu towered over them. Sakagura bowed deeply to the Shogun.

"Your father is an old friend of my family, captain," said Sametono with a smile. "Your exploits are marvellous. How many heads of Mongol generals have you brought back?"

"Seventeen, your lordship," said Sakagura, baring his teeth with pleasure.

When Sakagura retold his adventures, any Mongol officer whose head he took was posthumously promoted to the rank of general, Jebu thought.

"I am proud to meet you," Sametono said solemnly. "Just to man an oar in one of your kobaya would be a privilege."

Sakagura bowed, then beckoned to a servant whom Jebu had not noticed before, who handed him a bag made of shiny crimson silk. With a low bow Sakagura offered it to Sametono. "May I present your lordship with a small token of my esteem?"

Sametono opened the bag with curiosity and drew out a wooden statue of a shaven-headed seated figure holding a disk-shaped gumbai, a kind of war fan carried by generals, in one hand and a Buddhist rosary in the other. The delicate carving clearly delineated a stern, unyielding face. The pose was traditional, but the vigour in the small teakwood statue could only have come from the hand of a talented artist. The fan identified the figure as Hachiman, god of war, patron of the Muratomo. The statue had been left unpainted, the sculptor having the good taste to realize that the warm tones of the natural wood were sufficient adornment.

"There is much life force in this," said Sametono. "I am most grateful to you. By whom was it carved?"

Sakagura bowed. "My unworthy self, your lordship."

"Not only are you a great captain of ships, you are a remarkable sculptor as well."

"I inherit my small skill from my father, who was a carpenter, you'll remember, before your lordship graciously elevated him to the samurai."

"Your father builds the ships and you shed glory on your samurai family name by the way you captain them," said Sametono. "Now, I thank you for your gift, and I would like to have a few words with this Zinja monk in private." Jebu sensed suppressed anger in Sametono's voice. Sakagura bowed himself out of the Shogun's presence. Sametono gently put the statue of Hachiman back in its bag and handed it to one of his men standing near by. Then, as if possessed by the war god, he turned a face dark with fury towards Jebu.

"I can never forgive you for what you did today, Master Jebu. Meeting Sakagura only reminds me what heroic feats other young men accomplish, while I remain no more able to do anything than that wooden statue."

Jebu knelt before Sametono. He felt he could not conduct an argument with the Shogun while looking down at him.

"May I suggest that there is a lesson in that seated statue, your lordship. Our highest symbols of religion and the nation are not expected to plunge into the thick of battle."

Sametono was obviously close to tears. "I am not a statue. I am a

human being who wants to fight to save my country's life. The generals will not let me plan strategy and they will not let me go into battle. There is nothing I can do."

"You may not fight where and how you want," said Jebu gently, sitting back on his heels and looking up at Sametono. "No one can. A nation whose fighting men did not obey orders would lose in any war. Do you suppose that there is one warrior, the Shogun, who is exempt? You must do the duty appropriate to your station, as everyone else must. Eisen and your mother tell me you were unusually enlightened as a child. But one does not light a lamp once and have it stay lit for all time. You must keep fuelling it. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"I understand that you can preach at me like any other monk," said Sametono, staring at Jebu with hostile eyes. "But you are not like any other monk. You worship neither gods nor Buddhas. What are you but an adventurer in monk's robes? You're my mother's lover, and you carry messages from her to the generals. Yes, I see very well that you want to keep me helpless, like a wooden statue that you can place wherever you wish. You killed my grandfather, and you were involved in the killings of my father and my foster father. And yet my mother lies with you. What kind of power is it that you have over my mother? It is becoming a national scandal that the Shogun's mother goes to bed with a warrior monk in whose veins flows the blood of our enemies. You and I are both fortunate that I am under obligation to you for saving my life. It is said that a man may not live under the same heaven with the slayer of his father."

Jebu held out a hand pleadingly. "Sametono. I understand what you are going through."

"Address me properly."

"Your lordship. I have felt hatred. I have wanted revenge. I have been torn by the urge to fight and kill when it was my duty to refrain. I beg of you, do not lose what you have always possessed. Do not let your mind be clouded by the passions this war has stirred up."

"It is you who have clouded my mother's mind. Stay far from me. I do not wish to see you. You are dismissed."

Jebu knew that if he spoke another word Sametono would draw the sword Higekiri that hung at his belt. He stood up reluctantly, bowed deeply and backed away. Sametono turned on his heel and walked stiffly to his horse, followed by the retainer carrying Sakagura's statue. As he watched Sametono go, Jebu discovered that he was crying. Until now there had been a love, almost like father and son, between himself and Sametono. He wept for the loss of that love. And even more for the boy's loss of enlightenment.

Chapter Twenty

Jebu kicked his horse into a gallop. It raced up the stone ramp to the top of the wall. The thousands of Mongol ships that dotted the bay were moving steadily shorewards under an iron-grey sky. Behind Jebu the rest of his fifty cavalrymen topped the wall. They were all carrying short Zinja bows and wearing armour with black laces. To themselves they were known as the Former Zinja. Together they charged down a removable wooden ramp on the seaward side of the wall.

A three-masted junk with staring eyes painted on the bow had pulled in so close to shore, its flat bottom was nearly scraping the beach.

Chinese infantrymen by the hundreds, armed with murderous pikes, were leaping from the deck of the junk and splashing up the beach. They wore light armour constructed of metal scales adorned with red and green capes and helmet scarves. Their iron shields were painted with fierce beasts-dragons, tigers, eagles. They were larger than the men of the Sunrise Land, expert at fighting on foot with spears and swords, and they moved in tight, well-drilled formations, walled in with shields and bristling with spears.

The Eormer Zinja stood up in their saddles Mongol-fashion, firing arrows into the Chinese squares. The pikemen in the front ranks were falling, slowing the advance of the invaders. The Eormer Zinja rode into the midst of the pikemen, forcing openings with the weight of their horses and the bite of their swords. A huge man with long black moustaches thrust at Jebu with a pike. Jebu fired an arrow into the man's face. It crashed into his head just at the bridge of the nose. The pointed steel head of the man's pike grazed Jebu's leg, stabbing into his saddle. Another spear hit Jebu's arm and was deflected by his armoured sleeve. Jebu turned and jerked the pike

out of the infantryman's hands and hit him in the chest with the butt end. The man fell, and Jebu rode his horse over him.

Something struck him on the back of the head like a club and knocked him stunned from his horse. Eor a moment he lay deafened and blinded. He forced himself to stand, and the reek of the Chinese fire powder filled his nostrils, and the screams of his horse tore at his ears. The animal was lying on its side, legs flailing, the left front leg a stump. Jebu killed the horse with a quick thrust of his short Zinja sword through the eye into the brain. Crouching behind the horse Jebu looked around. Near him were dead men, Eormer Zinja and Chinese, and dead horses. Beyond the range of the hua pao blast, Zinja riders were circling and Chinese infantrymen were falling into attack formation.

Jebu started running for the wall, a few of his comrades on foot following him. The men on horseback moved in behind them to cover their retreat and shoot at the Chinese. The wall looked much further away now that Jebu was on foot, and his legs ached as he ran as hard as he could through the sand. He reached gratefully for the rope ladder the samurai on the wall threw down to him, and pulled himself up as a dart from a ship-based Mongol crossbow smashed stone fragments from the wall beside him. On top of the wall he crouched behind the battlements. More platoons of Chinese were wading ashore. Those of his contingent who were still mounted were riding back and forth below the wall, raining arrows on the invaders.

It was typical of the Mongols to fire their hua pao into their own Chinese troops, just to kill a few of their enemy. They were using the Chinese soldiers much as they had the civilians at Kweilin, as a kind of expendable advance screen. The Chinese were courageous and skilled fighters, but they could not have any heart for this war. Only a few years ago they themselves had been fighting against the Mongols. Now even the highest ranking Chinese were treated like

slaves. Erom invaders captured the day before, the samurai learned that as soon as the South of the Yang-Tze Eleet had arrived, Arghun had sent for the Chinese admiral and had him beheaded on the deck of Red Tiger as punishment for having taken so long to get there. Arghun had put his old second-in-command, Torluk, now also a tarkhan, in command of the Chinese ships and army. Though the Chinese might not want to fight, their arrival could be enough to defeat the samurai. They brought not only a hundred thousand men, but tens of thousands of horses and shiploads of siege equipment-catapults, mangonels, giant crossbows and many more of the terrible hua pao.

When the Great Khan's invasion fleet arrived at Hakata Bay, two months ago, there were seventy-five thousand warriors waiting for them, the largest samurai force ever assembled, and there was a constant trickle of reinforcements as men arrived from distant parts of the country and young men newly come of age were sent by their families. But when the fighting was fiercest thousands were killed on both sides. There were battles in which four men out of every five were killed. The samurai could not hold the defences much longer, losing men at this rate. Men were getting scarce, and horses even scarcer.

But their inability to establish a permanent beachhead was hurting the Mongols. Erom captives the samurai learned that dysentery had swept through the insanitary, overcrowded ships and over three thousand Mongols had died. Hundreds more succumbed to simple heat prostration, for which the sons of the northern deserts were quite unprepared. Several hundred had been killed in shipboard brawls; the confinement was driving them mad. The Korean captains and crews were constantly on the edge of mutiny and had to be kept under control by ferocious punishments. Late in the Sixth Month, Arghun moved the fleet out to sea under cover of darkness and tried to land on the island of Hirado, south of Hakata Bay. Samurai raced

overland on horseback by the thousands and drove the Mongols off before they could entrench themselves. The samurai, as Taitaro had said years ago, were the finest fighting men in the world. Now they had adapted to Mongol tactics and their skills had been sharpened by the spread of Zinja arts and attitudes, and they were even more formidable.

A fire ball sailed overhead and burst behind the wall. Soon exploding black balls were falling by the hundreds. Jebu crouched down behind the battlements to protect himself from the whizzing bits of iron. Looking out through the smoke he could see movement among the ships in the harbour. A long line of junks was coming in, sails spread like the wings of bats. It looked as if the Mongols now had enough flat-bottomed junks to land all along the shoreline, from the northern arm of the harbour to the southern. Many of the junks had mangonels, catapults and giant crossbows set up on their decks, and a murderous rain of stones, huge spears and iron darts as well as the deafening, stunning fire bombs fell on the wall and its defenders. The Chinese infantrymen swarmed all along the beach. Now came galleys and rafts bringing mounted Mongol warriors to shore.

"Stay back and shoot the Mongols off their horses," Jebu called to his small contingent. Those of the Eormer Zinja who still had horses drew up in front of the wall firing arrows, making no attempt to charge the attackers.

"Make every arrow count," Jebu ordered, remembering the words from his long-ago initiation.

Now the ranks of Chinese infantrymen parted as the first boatloads of Mongol riders hit the beach. With wild screams the Mongols raced forward to storm the wall. As they came on, they unleashed flights of arrows from their powerful compound bows. Jebu fired as rapidly as he could and did not bother to count the numbers of Mongols he shot

out of their saddles. He kept repeating the Prayer to a Eallen Enemy over and over again to himself, the repetition helping him to free his mind from anxiety and allow his body to function instinctively.

The heat on the beach became more intense. It was an overcast day, and the sun was a white disk in the midst of swirling clouds. By noon the beach was covered with enemy troops, living and dead. The flat-bottomed junks shuttled back and forth between the beach and the fleet, bringing boatload after boatload of warriors to shore. Siege machines were now set up on shore, and the engineers were assembling prefabricated towers to attack the wall. Here and there an enemy junk, hit by flaming arrows, burnt down to the waterline.

A samurai rider came flying along the back of the wall shouting, "They're breaking through at Hakata. Every man is needed there at once." Riders galloped, men on foot ran. The enemy troops on the beach, Jebu noticed, were rushing towards Hakata as well.

Jebu managed to get a horse. He raced southwards along the top of the wall with some of the Eormer Zinja. He could see the hand-to-hand fighting along the stone quays as the town came into view. The buildings near the shore were all in flames.

The huge junk Red Tiger rode at anchor just off shore, as if to signal all invading forces on the beach that their place was here. An enormous bronze hua pao mounted on its top deck near the bow boomed again and again, sending a steady stream of exploding missiles into the blazing port. If Arghun were to appear on deck, I might hit him with an arrow from here, Jebu thought.

Now Jebu could see the Mongol siege towers in the centre of Hakata. They had broken down the town's seaward wall. The heat from the flames stunned him as he rode closer. The roadway along the top of the wall led directly into the town, whose streets were

empty. The people of Hakata had long since fled to the countryside. As Jebu rode forward, followed by a band of Eormer Zinja, a crowd of Mongols on steppe ponies came around a bend in the street ahead of them. The Mongols charged with shrill battle cries. The street was too narrow for the Mongols to bring their numbers to bear. Jebu drew his Zinja sword and galloped forward, bent low along his horse's neck. A red-bearded Mongol rose up in his saddle and tried to bring his sabre down on Jebu's head. The steel of the Zinja sword was better than that in the Mongol sabre, and when Jebu parried the sabre stroke the Mongol blade broke in two. The Mongol was still cursing his sabre when Jebu's thrust to his throat silenced him.

Jebu and his men fought their way through this band of Mongols and then others that they met as they rushed through the streets. The Mongol siege towers were burning. At last Jebu and the Eormer Zinja reached the rear wall of Hakata and took a stand in front of it.

It was man against man, body against body, for the rest of that day and long into the night. The Chinese and the Mongols kept coming in waves. By nightfall Jebu was exhausted, and wounds all over his body hurt him. Most of his comrades were dead. The samurai were forced at last to move behind the wall they had been defending. Now they were the besiegers of the city, with the Mongols on the inside. The beachhead the samurai had been trying for two months to prevent had been established.

Aside from the stone wall around it there was little left of the town. Most of the buildings had burnt during the battle, and the low-hanging clouds above Hakata were painted red by firelight. The Mongols would spend all night pushing into that burnt-out space within Hakata's walls as many warriors as they would hold. Korean and Chinese boats would be plying back and forth all night, ferrying troops into Hakata. Tomorrow morning the Mongols would try to burst out of their beachhead. Tonight the kobaya would be out, all of them

that were left, trying to sink the enemy ships and drown as many of the troops as possible. Eor now, fighting was gradually dying down like a fire that had used up everything that would burn. The samurai were too exhausted to make any more sorties into the captured town, and the Mongols and Chinese were entrenching themselves now, not advancing.

The samurai moved out into the hills behind the town and set up camp. A light rain had begun to fall, and many of the men sought shelter under trees. Rain-soaked armour was a nuisance. It took days for the lacings to dry. Jebu made a one-man tent out of his riding cloak and a stick and sat cross-legged under it, cleaning and polishing the blades of his sword and his naginata and tending his wounds. He covered a bad gash on his hand with medicated paper and bound it up with a strip of cotton cloth. Then, using his cloak to keep the rain from his head and his armour, he lay down to try to sleep. There was a strange tension in the atmosphere that made his scalp prickle. The drizzle became a steady downpour. That was a setback. It would be harder for the kobaya raiders to set fire to Mongol ships. But tonight it was all up to the kobaya. Designed by Moko, so fast and manoeuvrable, so easy to build and replace. Easier to replace the ships than the warriors who manned them. Thinking about the little ships, he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-One

Eootsteps near his tent woke Jebu. Moko was standing close by, his eyes red with weeping. Jebu's first thought was, Sakagura. Then he sat up and saw Sakagura standing behind Moko. The two men were barely visible. Jebu sensed that it should be dawn, but it was still dark. It was utterly silent. Not an insect buzzed, not a bird sang. Pulling his head all the way out from under his cloak, he saw that there were no moon and stars. Sakagura was wearing only a fundoshi. His lean body was dripping water, and he was shivering despite the oppressive heat. Sakagura's ship might have been sunk, but if he was alive why was Moko so upset, and why did Sakagura himself look as if he had suffered a mortal wound and was holding himself erect only by sheer will?

There was still that strange feeling of tension in the air that Jebu had noticed the night before, but the rain had stopped. He heard the voices of many samurai gathering in darkness for combat near the base of the town wall. He could not see them; they carried no lights that would attract enemy archers. He stood up, tightening the laces of his armour and checking over his weapons.

"I was thinking about you before I went to sleep last night," he said. "About you and Sakagura. What is wrong?"

"Sakagura," said Moko. "If only he had been killed yesterday. If only he had never been born." He turned and struck his son in the face, full force. It was amazing. Jebu had never seen Moko strike anyone. What was even more amazing was that Sakagura stood there and took it. A chill crept into Jebu's bones. He knew what was wrong.

"Something has happened to Sametono," he said flatly. His entire body was cold now. "Tell me exactly what happened," he snapped at

Sakagura.

"Give me permission to kill myself, shike," said Sakagura in a low voice.

"Don't be a fool," Jebu snarled. "What good would that do?" It was all he could do to keep his hands from the woebegone figure before him. These samurai-death was their solution to everything, their way of running from the problems they had created. Succeeding his anger, a feeling of shocked desolation began to grow. How would he tell Taniko, how would he face her?

"Is Sametono dead?"

"If I knew that for certain I would already have killed myself," said Sakagura with a groan.

"I assume he went to you yesterday and asked to be taken along when you raided the Mongol ships last night. And you agreed." Jebu could not keep the fury and contempt out of his voice.

"He is the Shogun, shike. How could I disobey him? Did I not take Lord Munetoki on one of our raids? Did anyone find fault with that? Then why not the Shogun himself?"

"Don't pretend to be more stupid than you are, Sakagura. Just tell me everything."

Sakagura began to cry, and he blurted the story out between sobs. "As soon as it was dark enough we went out. Their ships were all clustered around Hakata. I had it in mind to try to set fire to some of the junks further out in the harbour that hadn't yet unloaded their troops. His lordship insisted on going for Red Tiger."

"Oh, compassionate Buddha!" cried Moko. It seemed Moko himself

didn't know everything that had happened.

"His lordship said that killing Arghun Baghadur would be better than sinking a thousand junks, because it would break the Mongols' spirit. We sailed in among the Mongol ships. They were so busy trying to land troops at Hakata that they didn't even have the nets up. We made for Red Tiger. Think if we had succeeded, shike."

"Thirty of you against the four hundred or more warriors on that huge ship? Madness. What happened then?"

"They must have seen us. Just before we got alongside Red Tiger a fire ball struck us amidships and exploded. Most of our men were killed. His lordship and I, standing in the prow, were thrown into the water. The Mongols began fishing around in the water for us with hooks and rakes from the portholes and deck of Red Tiger and other near-by ships. When last I saw his lordship, he was being hauled aboard Red Tiger. As long as our Shogun might be alive, it seemed to me it was my duty to get word back to our side. I spent most of the night swimming back to Hakozaki. I didn't know who to tell, realizing that the news of our lord's capture might panic our troops. So I went first to my father. And ever since we've been looking for you."

"Swimming back with the news was the only intelligent thing you did," said Jebu. "Of course, by now they might have tortured him to death. Or killed him outright. Could they find out who he is? He certainly would try to keep them from knowing."

"He was wearing an ordinary low-ranking samurai's armour. He did have his family sword with him, though. Higekiri."

"Arghun would know that sword. We must prepare for the worst, that they know who they've got and will try to use him against us." Even in his anguish he realized what agonies poor Moko must be going

through now. He turned to the little man and put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"What are we going to do, shike? Sakagura and I must commit seppuku at once, don't you agree?"

"There will be no more talk about anyone's killing himself," Jebu said. "We will do what we can to help Sametono. That should be enough to satisfy anyone's lust for self-destruction." He realized that the Self was speaking through him, and with that realization came the glimmerings of a plan.

Moko and Sakagura stood silently, awaiting orders. "You must be very careful that word of this does not get out," Jebu said. "I will tell those who must be told. Moko, you will have to ride at once to Lady Taniko at the governor's castle at Dazaifu. Tell her what has happened. I should bring her the news myself, but I have much to do here and there is no time. Tell her that I have a plan, if she is willing to trust his life to me. Of course, if she has any orders of her own, I will follow them."

"Shike, don't ask me to break this news to her," Moko wailed. "I couldn't bear it."

"A moment ago you were telling me that you were ready to cut your belly open with a knife. Tell Lady Taniko that if she wants to let me try my plan, she should gather all the finery for men she can find in the chests at the governor's palace. Court dress, robes, hats, jewellery, that sort of thing. She should have it sent by carriage to Hakozaki as quickly as possible. Sakagura, I want you to get me a ship, preferably not a warship, but a large, handsomely decorated one, a gozabune, a governor's galley, something of that sort. I presume you are enough of a famous sea captain to be able to requisition a ship."

"One thing, shike," said Moko as father and son turned to go. "Yes."

"I owe you so much already that I cannot find any way to thank you. I could praise you for a thousand lifetimes and it would not be enough. I have one last favour to ask. Whatever you do in this rescue attempt you're planning, you must let me go with you."

"Moko, you are not in any way to blame for what happened to Sametono. A raid of this sort is hardly the place for you, and you do not need to risk your life to expiate something which is no fault of yours."

"Eathers are always accountable for the deeds of their sons. Everyone says so. As for my being out of place, I respectfully ask you to remember what I accomplished in Oshu. Eurthermore, I know ships, I know this harbour, I know quite a bit about Mongols. If you do not take me, shike, you will find me dead when you return."

Jebu put his hand on Moko's shoulder. "Still ready to go anywhere with me, are you, old friend? Well then, I won't leave you behind this time, either."

Taniko insisted on coming to Hakozaki from Dazaifu along with the wagonloads of Court dress Jebu had sent for. While the costumes were loaded aboard Jebu's ship, he sat with her in her carriage. She was dry-eyed. She had been through these crises of terror and grief so many times, it seemed there were no more tears to shed.

"I don't think he's still alive," she said faintly to Jebu. "In a way I hope he isn't. I can't stand to think of what they might do to him. I don't want you to risk your life trying to save him. You are all I have left. A storm is coming. If you go out there you will never come back."

"Yes, he may be dead and I may not come back," Jebu said. "But it

is not true that you will have no one left. I said that same foolish thing to my father, Taitaro, when he was preparing to die. I had everybody then. As you have everybody. You are the mother of this nation, the Ama-Shogun. Do not fear, my love. You can never be separated from me, because we are both the Self." He held her in his arms and kissed her, and his tears wet her tearless cheeks. Then he pushed himself away and climbed out of her carriage.

General Miura Zumiyoshi was standing near the carriage, staring gloomily at Jebu's ship. Jebu had secretly notified him of Sametono's capture, and he had passed the disastrous news on to the other generals.

"I don't know what I can wish you," he said. "What you are attempting to do is impossible, but it is a noble attempt. May you be reborn in Amida's Western Paradise."

Jebu bowed and thanked him, then ran across the dock to the great beribboned state galley.

The ship rose high and fell far, hawsers screaming in protest, as tall waves rolled into the Hakozaki docks. The moaning wind whipped the red and white ribbons and the embroidered banners that adorned the sides of the vessel. The hull itself was richly carved awl decorated with red and gold dragons. The ship's name was Shimmering Light, and it was, as Jebu had ordered, a gozabune, a state galley with a high bridge and a deck covering the sixty rowers, used in normal times to transport provincial governors and the like.

Timing his jump to catch the ship on the rise, Jebu made the perilous leap from pier to deck. Kagyo, Moko and Sakagura were waiting for him.

"Were you able to get the items we need on such short notice?"

Jebu asked Kagyo.

"All the men had to do was search their own tents," Kagyo laughed. "Each one has his little souvenirs from the monastery armoury. But moving around in these prisons of drapery will not be easy."

Kagyo and the other Eormer Zinja had already donned the costumes sent by Taniko. Kagyo wore what the courtiers called a hunting costume, an outfit that had nothing to do with actual hunting, a tall, shiny black cap advertising high rank, an embroidered dove-grey jacket with trailing sleeves and billowing apricot trousers with legs as round and full as a pair of paper lanterns. He carried a folding fan and an oiled-paper parasol. The forty Eormer Zinja gathered on the deck of Shimmering Light were similarly dressed, like a delegation of ineffectual courtiers from Heian Kyo. They wore tall black caps, jackets of pink, green and lavender, and full trousers printed with diamonds, leaves, blossoms or birds. All carried parasols and fans.

Jebu turned to Sakagura. "You did well, this ship is perfect." "Shike, what if Sametono isn't alive?" said Sakagura, his eyes filled with suffering.

"Then we will avenge him by doing what he set out to do with you last night," said Jebu quietly. "Assassinating Arghun Baghadur. Now let us push off, Sakagura-san. These seas will crack our hull against the dock if we stay here any longer." It had begun to rain again.

Sakagura called orders. Crewmen slipped the hawsers and jumped aboard. They used long poles to push the brightly painted ship away from the pier. Another order, and a drum began to beat below the deck, where the rowers sat.

It was already midday, and Sametono was probably dead. The Mongols, like the samurai, took prisoners only to get information

about what the other side was doing. Captives were questioned, sometimes tortured, finally killed. Jebu looked out at the harbour. The fighting was still fiercest where the shoreline curved in to Hakata. The town was a smouldering ruin, only its walls still standing, within which the Mongol beachhead held firm. Samurai battered the entrenched Mongols as the waves in the harbour smashed on the beach. There was fire everywhere. Junks burnt on the water. On the land, trees, houses and war machines stood in flames. The smoke billowed horizontally over land and water from south-west to north-east, pushed along by the howling wind. The low clouds overhead were shiny white, like a fish's belly. They darkened to the south and were almost black along the southern horizon.

Jebu climbed down a hatchway ladder into the bottom of the ship, where the rowers sat. The sixty men wore only fundoshi. They were all samurai, unarmed, like everyone else aboard the gozabune. Jebu walked to the bow of the ship so he could face them.

"We've kept this a secret until now because we did not want to spread panic among the troops on shore," he said, raising his voice so he could be heard over the beat of the drum that kept the men rowing in time. "The Mongols have captured his lordship, our Shogun, Muratomo no Sametono." There were gasps and cries of shock. The rowers lost the beat, and the rowing master had to stop them and start them again. Quickly Jebu outlined his plan of action for them.

"If Mongols come aboard to inspect us before we get close to Red Tiger, try to look like slaves," he concluded. "You were chosen for your skill in empty-handed combat, but I'm sure that when you get aboard Red Tiger you won't remain empty-handed very long."

The rowers laughed. "I thank you for inviting us to share this exploit with you, shike," said the first oarsman. The others called out their

agreement.

Above deck, Jebu assembled the gozabune's beautifully dressed passengers and told them the news of Sametono's capture. They were as shocked as the rowers had been. Kagyo was the only one of the Eormer Zinja in whom Jebu had confided. Now he explained his plan to them, as he had to the samurai belowdecks.

"Remember to act as though you are terrified by everything," Jebu told them. "And try not to let the wind blow your parasols apart. They're a very important part of the effect."

He lined the Eormer Zinja along the railing of the gozabune so that they could be clearly seen from the Mongol ships they were approaching. The Eormer Zinja stood with their backs and parasols turned towards the wind and rain. Jebu stationed himself in the bow, holding the rail. Rain and spray lashed his face. They were out past the breakwater now, and the waves in the harbour 'were like the mountains of Kaga. At one moment Jebu was plunging down into a valley of black water. The next moment he was shooting up into the cloudy sky. The sensation was sickening, and he had to keep his eyes shut part of the time. Moko came and stood beside him.

"I am the most unfortunate of men," said Moko, "to have such a son."

Moko's pain made Jebu think of his years of regret over the killing of Kiyosi. "Your son did what he thought he should do. He couldn't refuse the Shogun."

Moko's eyes widened. "But, shike, the consequences could be-"

"The consequences are regrettable, but should not be cause for shame. Eorget the past. Eorget the future. What matters is now."

After a silence Moko said, "Thank you, shike. I feel better."

In the valleys of water it seemed as if their ship were alone in an empty ocean, but when the prow of the ship topped a crest he could see the entire harbour and the Mongol fleet, most of its junks anchored in orderly lines. Some distance out from shore, Red Tiger rode at anchor, four times longer and far higher than any other junk in the fleet. The tossing of the waves made it impossible for Jebu to count how many masts the Mongol flagship carried, but there were surely more than twelve, perhaps as many as sixteen, those in the rear slanting towards the stern, those near the front slanting towards the bow. It looked more like a monstrous sea dragon than a tiger, and like a dragon it could spit fire. The huge hua pao, a bronze tube as long as three men, mounted on its foredeck roared repeatedly, sending missiles arcing an incredible distance to the beach, where they landed among the samurai attacking the Hakata beachhead, blowing craters in the sand. But above the boom of the hua pao Jebu heard another rumbling sound at once more terrible and more hopeful-thunder. Of course, many thunderstorms had swept over the bay since summer began, none of them doing much damage to the enemy. But this was the time of year for the big storms.

Shimmering Light had to pass a whole line of violently rocking junks at anchor, sails all reefed, to reach Red Tiger. An arrow whistled down and thunked into the planking, directly in front of Jebu. Good shooting, Jebu thought, if he meant to miss. He signalled to Sakagura to halt the rowers. Erom the nearest junk a voice challenged them in the language of the Sunrise Land, broken and heavily accented.

Jebu called out his answer in Mongolian. "This ship carries ambassadors of the Emperor of the Sunrise Land. We seek to parley with your great commander, Tarkhan Arghun Baghadur."

Despite the wind and rain the forty Eormer Zinja managed to put on

a great display of bobbing parasols, trailing silks and waving fans. Mongols lined the rails of the nearest junk, and Jebu could hear hoots of laughter. There was a long wait. The wind rose and the sky grew darker as the junk captains relayed Jebu's message along the line of ships to Red Tiger. At last Jebu heard a cry ordering him to move ahead.

Red Tiger was due south. Sakagura ordered Shimmering Light's steersmen and rowers to point the ship's bow obliquely into the great waves rolling from south-west to north-east across the bay to keep the galley from being swamped. Jebu's robe was already soaked and plastered to his skin by rain and spray. Pitching violently, Shimmering Light made painful progress across the bows of the long line of enemy junks, subjected to derisive laughter, insults and curses in Mongol, Chinese and Korean. There was no garbage throwing, probably because after two months there was little left on the junks to throw. Jebu counted on the Mongol rule of the sacredness of an ambassador to protect them from violence.

Red Tiger's scarlet-painted hull spread before and above them like a wall. Mongol warriors jumped into a longboat moored in the flagship's lee and rowed to Shimmering Light. Jebu felt a hollow of fear in his stomach. He was in the heart of the invasion fleet, and now the enemy was boarding his ship. Whatever had made him think such a mad plan would work? Crewmen dropped nets to the longboat and helped two Mongol officers over the rails. Their polished steel helmets were ornamented with silver and their exquisitely wrought chain-mail armour was covered by surcoats of light crimson silk. Their fur-clad grandfathers, thought Jebu, would hardly have recognized them. They asked Jebu who he was, who the nobles were, and what they wanted.

Jebu gave his name, thinking it would pique Arghun's interest, and explained that he was simply an interpreter. He listed titles and

offices for the pretended ambassadors.

"As for why we have come," he said, "we have reason to think a certain distinguished prisoner is aboard Red Tiger. If so, the ambassadors are most anxious to discuss the possibility of his release. They are also willing to open talks with the tarkhan on the subject of the war in general, if he is interested." The two Mongol officers looked astonished and pleased. Silently they searched Jebu for weapons, running their hands over his wet robe, which he had emptied of its usual deadly contents before coming on this mission. They went among the Eormer Zinja, fingers probing their silks and brocade. They hefted parasols to make sure there were no sword blades concealed in the handles. The men in Court costume shrank away from the Mongols with little cries of alarm. The contempt on the faces of the Mongol officers deepened with every passing moment. They searched the bridge and the cabin below it. They went below deck and carefully examined the rowers, who sat slumped wearily over their oars. Einally they returned to their longboat.

The enormous prow of Red Tiger rose high into the air with each wave as if it were about to fall upon the smaller gozabune and crush it. High above him, at the rail of Red Tiger, Jebu saw the familiar bearded face of Arghun looking down at him. The flesh between his shoulder blades crawled at the sight of his oldest enemy.

Possibly, Jebu thought, Arghun and his officers were not at all deceived by this spectacle and intended to massacre the lot of them. Even if they did get safely aboard Red Tiger, he had best prepare his mind for the prospect of seeing Sametono's mutilated body or severed head.

At last there was a hail from Red Tiger and an order to come alongside. The Mongol flagship's crewmen lowered a scaffold, and at a gesture from Jebu a group of the costumed Eormer Zinja

crowded aboard and were hauled up to Red Tiger's top deck. Listening to their wails of feigned terror, Jebu smiled grimly, thinking how easily these Eormer Zinja could have scaled the side of the ship. He waited until the last few of his men were on the scaffold before stepping on himself. He looked around for Moko and realized that the little man was already up above. Jebu had not meant him to go aboard Red Tiger yet, if at all.

He turned to Sakagura. "You stay here. You can lead the oarsmen up when I give the signal." Sakagura was obviously disappointed, but pressed his lips together and said nothing.

The scaffold lifted Jebu to the deck amidships. The ship's many masts rose from the deck like a row of temple columns. The after-cabin was like a small Chinese palace. A Mongol officer, his armour glittering with silver ornaments, motioned Jebu to go forward. Jebu looked to the south. The sky was black as night, and the southern arm of the harbour had vanished into the blackness. In front of the foremast a wooden shed occupied most of the bow end of the deck. It was dec orated with wind-whipped pennants, their bright colours darkened by rain. In the shed, relaxed in a big cane chair draped with scarlet silk, sat Arghun Baghadur. A group of officers-Mongol tuman-bashis, Chinese generals and Korean admirals-hovered around him. The rear portion of Red Tiger's huge hua pao was protected from the rain by the shed. The stink of the black powder assailed the nostrils and the smoke burnt the eyes, but Arghun did not seem to mind. He stood so that two of his guards could turn his chair to face the delegation from the Sunrise Land, and he signalled the Chinese hua pao crew to suspend the barrage.

Unlike the other Mongols, Arghun still wore the plain, battered leather and steel armour that had served him on the edge of the Gobi Desert long ago. His once-red beard had turned iron-grey, just as Jebu's had turned white. I'm fifty-four, thought Jebu, so he must be over

seventy. Yet Arghun seemed ageless, his body vigorous and powerful even sitting at ease, his face hard, his blue eyes as always empty of feeling.

"You are far more difficult to kill than your father was," were Arghun's first words. "Perhaps your Order does have magical powers. I was sure I killed you in Oshu. Then came word that you were still alive and teaching your Zinja tricks to a. new generation of samurai. You have inherited Mongol endurance, son of Jamuga."

Jebu bowed courteously but did not answer. His eyes searched the shed piled with ropes, racks of spears, bows and arrows and casks of the black powder for the hua pao.

"Have you come looking for the boy?" Arghun asked. "There he is." He pointed out of the shed in the direction of the foremast. Sametono was hanging from a rope attached to the yard of the forward-raked mast, swinging in the wind, lashed by the rain. Jebu's men gasped in horror, as much at the insult to a near-sacred personage as to the injury done him. Jebu stepped out of the shed for a closer look. Sametono's eyes were open and they looked down at Jebu with suffering and shame. He had been stripped of his armour and was wearing a torn crimson under robe. On his head his captors had left a white hashimaki, a headband with a red solar disk, the emblem of the Bakufu. The rope holding him had been passed under his shoulders and around his chest. It was run over the yard and securely tied to the bottom of the foremast. Jebu was torn between relief that Sametono was alive and apparently unhurt and anguish at the pain and indignity he was forced to endure.

"Please observe that I have archers stationed all around the deck," said Arghun. "At a signal from me, that boy's body will be filled with arrows." A semi-circle of warriors stood around the base of the mast, their arrows nocked and trained on Sametono. "Now then," Arghun

went on, "have you come to surrender?"

"We have come to ask what you want in return for the release of the boy." Jebu wanted to have done with the masquerade and strike as soon as possible, but he needed something to distract Arghun's men. If only the storm would get more violent.

Arghun laughed, a harsh, brassy sound. "Is he really your Shogun, then? I wasn't sure, and he denied it, of course, but I know this sword." He patted the silver-dragon hilt of Higekiri, which lay across his lap. "I kept him alive in the hope that he would be of value to us. Son of Jamuga, do you speak for these officials, or am I to negotiate with them directly?" He gestured contemptuously at the men in drenched silken finery, who backed away from him and spread out over the deck, moving in a planned pattern, as he glared at him. The officers around Arghun laughed at them.

"Your samurai deserve better leaders than these women-men," said Arghun. "When I am deputy king of the Sunrise Land they will have a ruler they can respect."

The blackness from the south was almost upon them. A huge wave, a storm swell, struck Red Tiger's starboard side and sent it rolling to port. Arghun stood up and braced himself as his chair crashed over on its side. Both Former Zinja and Mongol guards slid across the rain-slick deck to the port rail. The hua pao, set in a bronze base plate which was bolted to the deck, creaked in its mountings, and the Chinese who served it chattered among themselves. Jebu looked up and saw that Sametono had swung out over the water. The Mongol archers kept their arrows trained on the boy's body as best they could, but they had to scramble. These steppe-bred horsemen had no sea legs.

"Tell these ambassadors what concessions you ask for the return of

Sametono," Jebu said. "I will interpret for you."

"I can speak the language of your country as well as you can speak mine," said Arghun. "But you may speak for me. Tell them that there is only one agreement the Great Khan will permit me to accept from you. That is unconditional surrender."

Jebu translated this into the language of the Sunrise Land. The emissaries made a great show of horror, giving them a pretext to back away a few steps more. They were now quite close to the ring of archers menacing Sametono.

"Tarkhan, these men are not empowered to surrender our whole nation," Jebu said. "Nor would they, in return for just one life, even one so precious to us as Sametono's. I advise you to demand some tactical advantage, something our defence forces could reasonably give up without feeling we were losing everything."

Arghun looked out through the open side of the shed at the slanting rain and the darkness covering the harbour. Thick black clouds rolled before the wind like lines of Mongol cavalry. It was so dark now that crewmen on the bridge were lighting lanterns.

"Then let us all come ashore. Give us the rest of this day to disembark all our troops on that beach, so that our ships can weather this storm in the open sea." Jebu saw the uneasiness in Arghun's blue eyes. The man knows, he thought, that the wind and the rain and the waves can wash away everything he has been living and working for. Again Jebu translated, drawing out his speech and adding details and comments, taking his time.

What he was waiting for happened. A wall of water pushed by the storm smashed into Red Tiger, throwing everyone on the top deck off-balance and swinging Sametono's body far out over the sea

again.

"The tarkhan is no more capable of negotiating fairly than a shark is," Jebu said quickly.

The word "shark" was the signal. Twenty of Jebu's men unsnapped wooden caps from the tips of their parasols and put the long handles to their lips. Twenty men took deep breaths and expelled them powerfully. Two poisoned darts struck the neck of each Mongol bowman. The archers had -their arrows nocked and aimed, but only a few had time to draw their bows and shoot before they died. All the arrows went wild. All forty Eormer Zinja fell upon Arghun's officers and guards. Eolded, the beautifully painted fans they carried became rigid sticks which they used to parry sabre thrusts, to stun their victims and to smash their temples or windpipes. In moments the Eormer Zinja were armed with bows and arrows, and of all the invaders at this end of the deck only Arghun was left alive. He roared for help.

"Cover him," Jebu snapped, and the tarkhan fell silent as two Eormer Zinja pressed the points of captured sabres to his throat. Jebu leaned over the rail and called to the samurai on Shimmering Light. He and the other Eormer Zinja threw ropes and nets down, and Sakagura and the loincloth-clad samurai came swarming up. They joined the Eormer Zinja, seizing weapons from the fallen invaders and readying themselves to meet the remaining enemy warriors on this deck.

Jebu judged that there must be three or four hundred Mongol warriors and Korean crewmen aboard the ship. A line of invaders swinging sabres and battle-axes was charging down the deck from the stern cabin. More were climbing up through the hatchways. The Eormer Zinja used captured bows and arrows to bring down the first few warriors to come out of the hatches. Their bodies blocked the

way out for their comrades. Now Jebu's men stripped off their silk robes and trousers, revealing the plain grey tunics of warrior monks. They tore the ribs and paper tops away from their parasols, turning the handles into fighting staffs. Armed with these or with captured weapons, the Eormer Zinja and the samurai attacked Arghun's warriors. Mongol sabres, of inferior steel, broke when struck precisely with the strong wooden sticks. Mongol skulls broke, as well. In confined shipboard quarters Zinja fighting arts easily overcame men used to making war from horseback on broad plains. Within moments Jebu and his party had control of the top deck of Red Tiger.

Jebu ran to the hua pao shed, where the Chinese crewmen lay sprawled around the base of the monstrous device. He took the torch used to ignite the hua pao from its iron brazier. He set fire to a discarded silk robe and stuffed it into the nearest hatchway. Other Zinja followed suit. Some set fire to arrows and shot them belowdecks. When flames burst up through one of the hatchways, Moko ran to it with a cask of the black powder in his hands. He threw the little barrel down the hatch, and he and Jebu both jumped back. After a moment there was a muffled boom from below deck and a great puff of black smoke shot up out of the hatchway. There were screams from below and more fire and smoke. Moko and Jebu and the other men threw powder casks down the hatches as fast as they could. Explosions shook Red Tiger from prow to stern, like a dog shaking a rat. Jebu turned to look at Arghun. The Mongol warlord was staring at the death and destruction all around him, and for the first time there was an emotion in his eyes. Eury.

Red Tiger was rocking wildly from side to side, and the rain was almost horizontal. It was pitch dark. The only light came from the fires below deck. They had used the black powder just in time, Jebu thought. This rain would probably put all fires out. Still a lurid glow came from the innards of the ship. Would near-by ships see that

there was trouble aboard the Red Tiger and try to send help? He slipped his sandals off. Bare feet gave better traction on the wet deck. He ran to the rail.

Red Tiger had been deserted. He could see no ships near at hand. A junk with all sails up vanished into the blackness of the storm even as he watched. It seemed to be sailing towards the harbour mouth, but he could no longer be sure of his directions.

The colonnade of masts that ran the length of Red Tiger's deck was creaking fearfully as the huge, crippled ship rolled first to one side, then the other. It sounded as if the masts might begin breaking loose and crashing down on them at any moment. The explosions below-decks had probably destroyed the bases of many of the masts, blowing them loose from their beds. Hearing screams and cries from below, Jebu ran to the rail and saw arms and heads bobbing in the water. The Mongols and Koreans left alive belowdecks were abandoning the ship. Jebu's heart sank as he saw some of them swarm aboard Shimmering Light, manning the oars and cutting the gozabune loose from Red Tiger. If the Mongol flagship went down, Jebu's party now had no way of escape. Jebu watched the undermanned galley sluggishly pull away. It spun out of control on a foaming white crest, then slipped sideways into a trough. A wave as tall as a pagoda fell upon it, caught it broadside, swamped it and turned it over. The screams of drowning men were tiny doll cries in the roar of wind and waves. The flat brown bottom of Shimmering Light floated for a time awash in the swelling seas. In the brief illuminations of lightning, Jebu could see the other ships tipping over under the force of the storm and the huge waves that came from all directions at once.

Red Tiger could hardly last much longer. The mast to which Sametono was tied might break off at any time. With each roll of the ship the boy's body swung out over the waves. If the rope holding him

broke, he would be thrown into the sea. With his arms bound he would have no chance at all. The rope was tied to the mast. Jebu realized he had nothing to cut it with. He had not picked up a weapon for himself and there was none near him. He had only a fan, one the Former Zinja had brought aboard Shimmering Light. Still he hurried to the base of the foremast. Doubtless he could untie the rope. Then he froze in horror. Arghun was standing there with a Mongol battle-axe in his hand, poised to cut the rope. One blow and Sametono would fly off into the sea. Jebu started walking towards Arghun.

"Come no closer," the Mongol commander shouted above the storm. "I was a fool. I let you trick me. You are the only people in the world who make weapons out of parasols and fans."

"What do you want?" Jebu called.

"Still bargaining? I want nothing. I've lost my fleet. All I can do is kill your Shogun. That's the only way I can hurt you."

Jebu tried to appeal to the Mongol's sentiment. "What use to kill a brave boy?" Arghun's only reply was a wild, derisive laugh.

"We'll let you live," Jebu shouted. "We'll send you back to Kublai Khan. I swear it on the honour of my Order."

"I would rather die than face Kublai Khan. I had your country in my grasp, and I lost it, because of you." A malevolent light dawned in his face. "There is one bargain I will make."

"Anything," Jebu cried, frantic.

"You, more than anyone, stopped me from conquering this land. I will end my life victorious in this one thing. I will kill the last of Jamuga's seed, even as Genghis Khan commanded me." The blue eyes glowed with rage. "Stretch out your neck to my axe, and I will let the

boy live."

Jebu did not hesitate. "I will." He strode towards Arghun.

"No!" screamed Moko. Jebu had not noticed the little man come up beside him. Moko rushed past Jebu, his fingers clawing for the Mongol giant's axe.

And now it was Jebu who screamed "No!" as the axe blade bit into Moko between neck and shoulder.

Surprised by Moko's unexpected attack, Arghun's instant reaction had been to defend himself, rather than cut the rope holding Sametono. Moko's sacrifice must not be wasted. Empty-handed except for his fan, Jebu threw himself at Arghun. The axe came down again, and Jebu side-stepped it, jabbing the end of the folded fan hard into Arghun's wrist. The Mongol grimaced in pain but did not let go of the axe. Jebu whirled and ran for the bow of the ship, exposing his back to Arghun to draw him away from the mast. The ship tilted and Jebu slid across the wet deck towards the rail. The axe smashed into the planking just behind him. Jebu looked back at the foremast. Sakagura and other samurai were cutting the rope that held Sametono. Sakagura was tying the end of the rope around his own waist. Kagyo was kneeling beside Moko, holding him, keeping him from being washed overboard. Blood had soaked the front of Kagyo's grey tunic.

The ship rolled to starboard, and Arghun backed into the shed at the bow, waiting for Jebu to slide within reach, battle-axe in one hand, in the other a long dagger he had drawn from his belt. He had braced himself against the base of the huge bronze hua pao, whose bolts were creaking in the deck. Jebu grabbed the portside railing and clung to it, keeping himself away from Arghun.

Sametono was dangling over the water. Sakagura, with the rope holding Sametono attached to his waist, was climbing the raked foremast. If he slips, thought Jebu, they'll both go into the sea. The higher Sakagura climbed, the more the rope holding Sametono lengthened. At last Sakagura stopped climbing, wrapped his arms and legs around the mast and waited. The ship started its next roll, tilting back to port. Just at that moment one of the men at the foremast turned and saw Arghun advancing on Jebu. Aiming carefully, he launched a spear at Arghun. But the wind defeated his aim. The spear planted itself in the deck just in front of Arghun. The ship reached the midpoint of its roll, and Arghun seized the haft of the spear for support, stepping away from the hua pao.

Sametono came over the deck as the ship rolled. The rope holding him was now so long that he swung right into the arms of four samurai waiting to catch him. They cut him loose with a sword stroke. Jebu saw with relief that Sakagura was shinning down the mast. Then Arghun was upon him.

Now the big Mongol was coming at him with spear and battle-axe. "Slay Jamugu and all his seed!" he screamed.

Both of them were tumbling towards the roaring black water. Each time the ship rolled, it seemed it would roll on until the railing went under the water, until the whole huge vessel turned over completely, just as Shimmering Light had. Even a ship this big could not survive in a storm like this unless it was manoeuvred. Anchored, with no captain or crew to move it to evade the force of wind and wave, it was doomed. It was only a matter of time before the tai-phun sank Red Tiger and all aboard her. Indeed, if Red Tiger was doomed, then so was the rest of the Mongol fleet. Even though it was mid-afternoon, the sky was dark as night, and Jebu could not see beyond the confines of this ship. Most of the batten-reinforced sails on Red Tiger's many masts had been blown loose and were flapping wildly.

The masts were bending like trees in the wind. The two mizzen masts at the rear had been broken off and had fallen to the deck. Some of the samurai were back there cutting the masts away. The timbers of the ship screamed under the pressure of the storm, louder than the wind and thunder and booming of the waves and hammering of the rain. In a sudden flash of lightning Jebu was able to see the wreckage of a few junks tossing on the black waves. Pieces of spar hurtled through the air overhead.

Arghun advanced on him, clinging to the rail with one arm as the starboard side of the ship tilted towards the water and this side rose into the air. The battle-axe swung at Jebu, and without thinking, Jebu leaped, barefoot, to the railing of the ship. The axe crashed into the oak at his feet. He looked down into Arghun's enraged, frustrated face below him and laughed. Arghun thrust at him with the spear, and Jebu parried the spearhead with his folded fan.

In the lightning flash he saw Yukio. He was holding a fan just like Jebu's, and he was standing beside Jebu, balanced on the railing of the Red Tiger on the balls of his feet, just as he had stood so many years ago on the railing of the Gojo Bridge. He was laughing. He was only fifteen years old, as he had been the night Jebu first met him.

"I knew you were fighting beside me," Jebu said. He looked to see if Arghun had seen Yukio, but the Mongol's blazing blue eyes seemed only to see Jebu. Arghun threw the spear, and Jebu jumped into the air over the tilting railing, just as Yukio might have in his boyhood. The spear passed under him. He dared not watch it. He had gauged his leap so that he landed gripping the moving, slippery railing with the soles of his feet.

"Eternal Heaven fights on my side," Arghun roared. He swung the battle-axe and Jebu jumped again. This time he teetered and barely

caught his balance before falling overboard. The ship had come to the top of its roll and the railing was dropping beneath his feet. He hooked his toes over the inner edge, bracing himself to jump again as Arghun lifted the battle-axe with both hands for another blow.

There was a monstrous crack. The huge bronze tube of the hua pao broke loose from the deck, smashed through the side of the shed and was sliding towards them. Jebu danced backwards along the railing. Like a falling elephant the enormous mass of metal struck Arghun and crashed with him through the railing. There was not even a cry. Jebu saw arms and legs flail briefly, then Arghun was gone. With both arms wrapped around the broken railing, his legs dangling into the rolling sea, Jebu watched the shadowy bulk of the fire-spitting weapon disappear into the depths. He whispered the Prayer to a Eallen Enemy.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Someone grabbed him and pulled him back to the deck. Kagyo. Jebu felt the sea slide under the giant ship as the deck began to tilt to starboard again. He was still numbed by Arghun's sudden vanishing. He pulled himself up against the railing. His surviving men were huddled around near-by masts, clinging to the huge wooden pillars and each other to keep from being washed overboard.

"Where is Moko?" Jebu shouted.

"We took him to the captain's cabin," Kagyo called back. He led Jebu along the deck, running in a crouch, clinging to ropes or masts whenever a gust of wind threatened to blow them overboard or a huge wave turned the deck into a raging torrent. By the time they reached the captain's cabin at the rear of the junk a mountainous wave had broken over the starboard side, dumping rivers into the open hatches and holes in the deck. One or two more waves like that and the junk would surely go under.

Moko was lying on cushions in the shelter of the captain's cabin. The Eormer Zinja had done their best with bandages and the Chinese needles to staunch the flow of blood, but Arghun's axe had gone too deep. Moko's blood was pouring out on the floor, and there was no way to stop it. The little carpenter's arm and shoulder were almost severed from his body. Sametono knelt beside him, crying silently, and Sakagura sobbed above him.

"Don't die, Uncle Moko," Sametono said softly. "I need you."

Moko's voice came faintly. Jebu had to strain to hear him above the shriek of the storm. "Indeed you do, your lordship. If we don't get this ship moving it's going to sink with all of us on board. And then what

was the point of coming out here to rescue you?"

"Can you tell us what to do, Moko?" said Jebu.

"Yes, shike. Sakagura, get as many men as the tiller will hold to keep the rudder steady. Set the rest to bending every scrap of sail you can find to the masts. The ship is sideways to the wind now. It's a wonder we haven't turned over already. Put sail on and get the wind behind us. Let it blow us right into shore. With a tai-phun pushing it, this ship will end up inland as a fine castle for all of us." He tried to laugh, and gasped in pain.

"Run her aground?" Sakagura stared at his father, momentarily startled out of his grief.

"Of course. We don't want to save this ship. We only want to save ourselves. And in your haste don't forget to raise the anchors. There are two of them, one at the stern and one at the bow, and each is raised by a windlass. Now do it." Jebu thought, Moko won't live to see Red Tiger make the shore. Sakagura ran outside to shout orders to his men as another enormous wave swamped the ship and threw everyone against the port side of the cabin.

"I'm so glad you're still alive, shike," Moko said. "What of the Mongol?"

"Dead." Jebu told Moko how the hua pao had fallen on Arghun and carried him beneath the waves.

" 'The mighty are destroyed at the last, they are but as the dust before the wind,' " said Moko, quoting a popular poem. "So are we all," he added, "but it pleases me to know I have outlived Arghun Baghadur. And that you will outlive him, shike, is wondrous joy."

Jebu fell to his knees, weeping. He took Moko's almost-lifeless hand

and pressed it against his face, letting his tears run over the broad, hard fingers.

"I owe you so much, I can find no words. Moko, Moko, my friend. I wish I might die and you live. Only you can help me now. Tell me what I can do for you."

"You have already done everything for me, shike. You appeared on the Tokaido and gave me a marvellous life. You gave me China, ships, the War of the Dragons, a family name. Because of you my sons are samurai. Because of you I know the beautiful Lady Taniko. Salute her for me now, shike. Tell her I apologize for not being able to bid her farewell in person. And if you wish to do me any other last favour, look after my foolish son."

"What I owe you cannot even be calculated," said Jebu. "If I spent my whole life caring for your family it would not be enough."

Moko smiled. "If you feel such an obligation to me, remember who I am. Remember what your father taught us before he went into oblivion. Remember who I really am. Do you want to return to me what good I have done for you? Then be true to the Self."

The terrible rolling motion of the ship had stopped. It felt, there in the cabin, as if the ship had righted itself and was plunging forward, like a whale, through the waves. Jebu looked out the open cabin door. There was nothing but blackness ahead and rain was spraying in through the door in sheets. Jebu started to shut the door when Sakagura appeared in the doorway. He came into the cabin and Jebu slid the door shut behind him.

"Oh, Eather," Sakagura cried. "Are you alive?"

"Sakagura-chan," Moko whispered. "Come to me."

Weeping and groaning, Sakagura knelt at Moko's head. "I have disgraced our family, Eather," he wept. "Dishonoured the family name you founded."

"Listen to me, Sakagura." Moko's voice was stronger, firmer now. "You will not commit hara-kiri."

"But, Eather-"

"This is your father's dying command. You must live." Amazed, Jebu remembered how, so many years ago, his mother, Nyosan, had said almost the same thing to him. Live, Jebu. "You will live in order to carry on the family name," Moko went on. "See that the proper observances are performed for your father. Bring glory to our family."

"I have brothers," said Sakagura brokenly.

"Your brothers were too young to fight in this war. Only your deeds can bring glory to our family name. You must stay alive to see that they are remembered."

Sametono said, "Uncle Moko, your son bears no shame. I ordered him to take me out in the kobaya with him." Sametono turned anguished eyes to Jebu. "This is all my fault. If Sakagura commits harakiri, I must, too."

"Then it is settled," said Moko with a peaceful smile. "Neither of you will kill himself. Shike Jebu, I have gone through life fearing death, and now at last I know how foolish I was. I feel no pain and no fear. I wish I had always had the wisdom to contemplate death with a smile, as your father, the holy abbot, did. Surely, today's exploit is the greatest of my life. What better day to end my life?"

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back. Sakagura held one

hand and Jebu held the other. They watched Moko's breathing slow, grow fainter. Then it stopped altogether. He was lying on the cushions with his eyes closed and a look of bliss on his face, not breathing at all. And Jebu knew that he would never look into those crossed eyes again.

As if impaled by a spear, Jebu groaned and fell, face forward, beside Moko. He lay howling with grief. After a moment he felt strong hands helping him to his feet. He opened his eyes and blurrily saw Sametono, who draped one of Jebu's arms over his shoulders. Yes, thought Jebu, I want to get out of this cabin. Together Sametono and Kagyo dragged Jebu out into the rain and wind and darkness, leaving Sakagura lying beside his father's body. The three men huddled against the carved and painted wall of the captain's cabin. The air and spray stinging Jebu's face helped clear his head. He looked forward, trying to see the shore. The curtains of rain were almost opaque. A lightning flash revealed a stretch of beach, stripped of buildings and life, some distance away. They were travelling towards it with incredible speed. The masts and sails screamed protest against the force of the wind pushing them along. The speed of such wind was inconceivable.

"He was my oldest friend," Jebu wept.

"I know," Sametono said into his ear.

"He had so much to live for. So much yet to do. He was learning. He had his work. His family." The pain of losing Yukio had been terrible, Jebu remembered. But he himself had expected to die shortly. And Yukio knew he was finished, that he had no future in the Sacred Islands, that even his wife and children would not be allowed to live. Yukio's life had ended in hopelessness and helplessness, and Jebu had been glad that his suffering was over. Moko had had many good years ahead of him.

Kagyo put his head close to Jebu's and said, "Do not sorrow for a man whose life is cut off in fullness. Such a man has made the most of life."

Of course, Jebu thought. That is why we Zinja never mourn for one another. The image of the cherry blossom came to him. The samurai are right.

The black waves rushed past. Those waves were Arghun's tomb. Arghun had haunted him all his life. He could not remember when

Taitaro first told him of the man who killed his father. And Arghun's last act had been to kill Moko. Jebu felt no satisfaction in the tarkhan's death. He had not killed him, it was Arghun's own weapon that killed him, in the end. Moko learned and built. Arghun brought only death and destruction wherever he went. Moko's death was a calamity, but Arghun's whole life was a calamity. Moko sacrificed his life for mine, Jebu thought. To repay him for that sacrifice, for the extra years he has given me, I must try to fulfil more truly the purpose of the Zinja.

Be true to the Self Jebu knew what his future must be as surely as he knew that this ship was about to wreck itself on the shore of Hakata Bay. It was clear what the Self, acting through him, intended for him. Only the Order offered hope. In a flash of lightning, the tai-phun-driven waves before Red Tiger seemed to turn crimson as he saw all the blood that had been and would be spilled in all humanity's murders and robberies, oppressions and wars. An ocean of blood, the blood of millions of men, women and children. It was unbearable. He screamed aloud.

Then in another lightning flash he saw a great tree rising before the ship, its roots sunk deep in the blood, but living things appearing in

its branches. A tree that shone with the brilliance of an eternal lightning bolt and shed, in the midst of the cold ocean, the warmth of the sun. It glowed with a pure, white light above the red sea. The Tree of Life. I'm seeing it without the help of the Jewel, he thought. Taitaro was right. The magic is in my mind. And just as all living things were part of that great tree, so all consciousness was part of the one Self, and no one was ever lost. Not Moko, not Taitaro, not even Arghun. There were many branches and leaves, but the Tree was one.

A wave avalanched on the ship's stern. Jebu heard screams and shouts from the bridge. He scrambled up the ladder, followed by Sametono and Kagyo. Of the four men, who had been holding the great bar that controlled the rudder, two had been swept overboard, one lay unconscious and one clung frantically to the tiller, which swung back and forth unaffected by his weight, scraping his legs bloody on the deck. Jebu and Kagyo threw themselves against the tiller. Sametono carried the unconscious man below. The ship had already started to swing athwart the waves, and the creakings of the masts were louder than the screaming of all damned souls. The tiller fought the three men like some giant animal.

Sametono was back moments later with Sakagura and two other men and a length of rope. Lightning flashed, and Jebu was able to make out the rocky shore between Hakata and Hakozaki dead ahead. The Red Tiger was making its final run. It would crash them into the rocks or it would sink here in the deep water and take them all with it. The six men tied themselves to the tiller. The junk was riding lower in the water than it had been. There were holes belowdecks blown by the exploding black powder. Actually, the water down there had acted as ballast, steadying the ship against the gusts of wind and the waves that battered it from every side, giving it extra mass to hold it on course.

There were moments when the junk was balanced on the crest of a

wave, both stern and bow out of the water, the rudder cutting uselessly through empty air. Jebu tried to imagine the size of a wave that could lift an enormous vessel like this out of the water. He had never heard of waves of such size or winds of such force as these. Eor good reason, he thought. No one has ever experienced them and lived to tell about it. Water tumbled over the high stern, knocking their feet out from under them. The ropes held them to the tiller, but the tiller threatened to break their ribs. Jebu's hands froze to the long board like claws. Each flash of lightning revealed the rocky shore a little closer. Once as the waves were going out the lightning showed Jebu the floor of the sea and the roots of the great black rocks near shore. A jumble of wood that might once have been a ship clung high on the side of one of the rocks. The wind whipped black beards of seaweed on the rocks. Another flash and all was sea as far inland as the wall, the rocks completely covered, the beach under swirling, foaming water. At times the wall itself appeared to be under water, only the stone watchtowers standing above the waves. Jebu remembered that there had been a tall forest behind this section of the wall. Now there were no trees. The forest was gone, the trees blown flat. What of the towns, he wondered? What of the samurai? Had this tremendous storm killed everyone on shore?

There was a crack as loud as the boom of a hua pao and the rear mast, directly in front of them, broke loose. To Jebu's amazement it did not fall. The wind got under the sail, which was still attached to the mast, and lifted it like a kite to splash into a wave some distance away. And then another deafening snap, and the next mast broke loose and flew away. The next, and the next. The masts blew away in succession, snapping like straws, swooping through the air. With each booming break, with each flight of a pillar of wood and its flapping batwing sail, the ship lost ground in its race for shore. There were only three masts left now. Those three sails remained their only hope of reaching shore before the ship sank or broke up on the

rocks.

Sakagura shouted, "Everybody to the bow. We'll have to jump for it when the ship hits." Jebu, Sametono and the others untied themselves from the tiller. Together with Sakagura they rounded up the survivors huddled along the deck and rushed them to the bow. There was another skull-numbing snap, and one of the remaining masts crashed down on the fleeing men like a felled tree. Jebu looked back. The mast had fallen across the bodies of three men. They were crushed. But the fourth man was pinned by the leg only. Jebu went cold. It was Sametono. Their eyes met, and Sametono shook his head and waved Jebu on. Unable to make himself heard over the volcano roar of the storm, Jebu grabbed Sakagura and Kagyo and jerked them to a stop, pulling them back to help him with Sametono. Other men saw and joined them. All got their hands under the mast and tried to lift. It wouldn't move.

"Save yourselves! I order you!" Sametono shouted.

"No!" Jebu roared back. Sametono looked amazed, as if he had made a sudden, overwhelming discovery.

The ship struck ground. They were all thrown flat to the deck. The mast that had been pinning Sametono tipped up and fell away from the junk. There was no blood and no broken skin. Probably the bone was broken, but Sametono would have to hobble on it as best he could. With his arms around Jebu and Sakagura, Sametono started towards the bow of the ship. They had only moments to jump off before the ship was swept out again by the next big wave. The last two masts, the foremast and the one behind it, had broken off and lay toppled forward. Red Tiger had fallen on the beach itself. It had been lifted over the rocks and grounded on the sand. The men ran to the broken masts and climbed down them, using them as bridges from Red Tiger's bow to the ground. Just like the collapsible masts Moko

had designed. Moko!

"Your father!" Jebu shouted to Sakagura. '"We can't leave him to be swept out to sea."

Leaving Sametono in the care of Kagyo and another Eormer Zinja, Jebu and Sakagura raced back to the cabin where Moko lay. The little body was crumpled in a heap in one corner, where it had been thrown by the wild careening of the ship. Jebu picked up Moko by the arms, thankful that the wound that had killed him was bound up. Moko's head lolled back, pale as white paper, and his mouth fell open. He was so light that Jebu could almost have carried him alone. Jebu taking the head and Sakagura the feet, they ran out of the cabin and trotted down the deck. Jebu looked over his shoulder. A wave as tall as Mount Euji was falling upon them out of the black sky. The stern cabin of Red Tiger vanished under water, and then the ship rose up under them. Hanging on desperately to Moko's body, Jebu was almost washed overboard. As he and Sakagura stood up and started running for the bow, they saw with horror the shore recede and the black tips of the rocks rush past the sides of the ship as it was carried out to sea. Then another wave caught Red Tiger and threw it like a javelin back at the shore again. As it struck the beach with a stunning crash, Sakagura and Jebu reached the bow with Moko's body. There was nothing they could do but lift the body over the rail and let it drop. Then they jumped-a distance five times the height of a man-to the sand. The soft wet sand and martial training saved them from broken limbs as they hit and rolled. Another colossal wave was coming at them. It caught the ship and began to pull it out to sea. It dragged them off their feet and nearly carried them back into the water. Struggling fran tically, each hanging on to one of Moko's arms, they clawed, crawled and floundered up the beach towards the safety of the wall which now seemed impossibly distant. At last, reluctantly, the water released them, flowing back into the bay. Jebu saw the scarlet bow of Red Tiger disappear behind a

wall of green-black water. He collapsed on the sand with a sigh.

The Red Tiger was upon them again. Riding the crest of yet another wave, the ship's bow loomed gigantically over them, threatening to fall upon them and crush them. Somehow Jebu managed to get his numb limbs moving and help Sakagura with Moko's body. Just behind them Red Tiger hit the beach with a thunderous crash and a cracking of timbers. The storm was using the huge junk as a plaything, Jebu thought as they staggered towards the wall, tearing it slowly to pieces as a cat destroys a mouse.

They dared not stop to rest again. One wave after another pursued them up the beach, seizing them and pulling them back. Some waves, larger than others, rushed past them to crash into the base of the wall. These knocked Jebu and Sakagura down again and again, so that by the time they reached the wall they were bleeding and nearly dead from fatigue. Men in loincloths lowered a wooden ramp from the top of the wall and helped them up. They identified themselves at sword-point to samurai who still had no idea what might have happened to the Mongols, and then they were allowed to seek shelter on the leeward side of the wall. Tenderly laying down Moko's body, Jebu and Sakagura collapsed, exhausted.

A voice beside him said, "I feared I might never see you again, Shike Jebu." It was Sametono. His leg was tied to a broken board with a white piece of silk that was wrapped around it many times. He had crawled painfully over to Jebu on hands and knees, dragging the broken leg behind him.

Jebu closed his eyes and let his head fall back on the rough stone of the wall against which he was sitting. "I'm happy to see you, too, your lordship. Please forgive me for letting your leg be broken."

"Don't be absurd, Jebu." Jebu opened his eyes and saw that

Sametono's eyes were glowing at him, cat-like. He certainly did look like Taniko. "Have you ever heard of Joshu's No?"

"No. That is, I never heard of it."

"It's a Zen kung-an set me by Eisen." Sametono told him the story of No. "I've been trying to work it out ever since. All the time I was dangling from Arghun's masthead I was thinking about Joshu's No. Over and over to myself I said, No, No, No. That was the only thing that kept me from going mad. Today I learned that No can affirm as well as deny. Thank you for improving my understanding."

"I am your lordship's servant," said Jebu wearily, wanting to sleep, not discuss philosophy.

"If I hadn't had that small satori it would be awfully hard for me to bear the burden of my obligation to you, Master Jebu. I have been a fool. I defied your advice. And now many brave men are dead because of me. Uncle Moko is dead because of me." Sametono's voice broke. "Everything that happened was my fault."

Resignedly, Jebu opened his eyes. The rescuing was not over. The boy's spirit needed rescuing, too.

"When you set sail with Sakagura last night, you thought you were doing right. Remorse because your actions did not have the results you wished is a waste of your time. All you can truly say is that you might do things differently on the next occasion. There is no right or wrong."

"No right and wrong?" Sametono looked excited. "Then there is no Yes or No. Yes and No are both Yes. I see, I see!" Laughing wildly, he crawled away. Jebu stared after him, watching him climb painfully to the top of the wall, where he pushed himself to his feet with his

broken leg propped under him. He waved his arms and shouted something into the teeth of the storm.

One word or sound, over and over again. Jebu could not hear it, but knowing Sametono he was sure it could be only one cry: "Kwatz! Kwatz! Kwatz!"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Though Jebu sensed that it must be mid-morning, it was dark as midnight in Taniko's bedchamber. She was awake beside him, and he could feel her quietly sobbing. The old mansion house at Dazaifu creaked under the force of the wind, and the steady drumming of rain on the roof was so loud and had kept up so long that he forgot he was hearing it. Here and there in the corners of the room a drop of water from one of the many leaks in the roof would plop into a puddle, a sound strangely audible above the roar of the tai-phun.

"Are you crying for Moko?" he asked her.

"Oh, Jebu, why did he have to die? He didn't even have to go with you. He wasn't a warrior."

"He said he would kill himself if we didn't take him, and I believe he meant it. Though he wasn't a warrior, he attacked Arghun with his bare hands. Sametono and I would probably be dead now if he had not."

"I have lost so many loved ones," Taniko said. "Why do men kill and kill and kill?" As she spoke, Jebu saw in his mind the ocean of blood.

"My Order exists in part to find the answer," he said. "If I could do a little bit towards finding it, I would think my life well spent."

The fury of the tai-phun had blown most of the buildings at Hakozaki flat. Taniko's retainers had insisted that she return inland to the governor's palace at Dazaifu, which was better protected. As soon as

Jebu had gathered his strength, he brought Sametono to Dazaifu in

a carriage. They arrived in the middle of the night, Sametono sound asleep and unwakeable. Taniko put her foster son in the care of priests and took Jebu to her bedchamber, where he collapsed, exhausted, and went to sleep immediately, while Taniko lay awake most of the night, weeping over the news that Moko had been killed.

Now her arms went around him in the darkness and she pressed her wet face against his. "You brought Sametono back out of the very heart of hell. You have given me back my life. I did not think I could love you more than I did already, but I find that love grows deeper, like enlightenment."

"And I love you more every day and every night," Jebu said, holding her tightly.

A maidservant knocked at the bedchamber door. "My lady, there is a messenger from Hakata for Shike Jebu."

"They do not even pretend not to know you are here any more," said Taniko. "I'm afraid our love is no longer a secret anywhere."

The messenger was from Miura Zumiyoshi. Even though the storm was still battering Hakata Bay, the defence command had decided to launch an attack on the Mongol beachhead at Hakata. Yesterday they had seen countless Mongols and Chinese swimming or riding out to their junks, fearing they would be left behind by the fleet retreating from the tai-phun. Overloaded junks had turned belly-up in the water, others had been the scene of battles as those on board tried to prevent any more from crowding on. The men who had decided to stay on shore were shooting arrows and even missiles from siege machines at their retreating comrades. The messenger's account reminded Jebu of the Takashi rout at Ichinotani. Now the Mongol beachhead was undermanned and would be vulnerable. No one knew what had happened to the Mongol fleet. After the storm

passed on, they might be back. The time to destroy their forces on land was now. Perhaps the Mongols at Hakata could be persuaded to surrender, and Jebu was needed as one of the few warriors who could speak Mongolian.

His armour, he thought, was probably lost in the wreckage of the camp at Hakozaki. Taniko helped him find an old corselet and shoulder guards in the Dazaifu government's armoury, as well as a naginata in good condition. Jebu covered himself with a straw hat and a straw raincoat. He said goodbye to Taniko and rode off westwards with the messenger.

It was early afternoon, the hour of the horse, when the first samurai leaned their scaling ladders against the shiny-wet black stones of the wall around Hakata and started to climb. The invaders put up a feeble defence, dumping rocks and throwing spears down at the climbing warriors. But it was too late for that. Jebu glimpsed some fighting on top of the wall, and soon after a gate swung open and the several thousand samurai Zumiyoshi had gathered for this assault trotted heavily through the mud and into the ruined town.

Within, all was grey-black, the grey of ashes. The town had been levelled by fire. Remains of walls and blackened stone statues rose above the expanse of charred wreckage. The first group of invaders they encountered had thrown down their weapons and were kneeling in the downpour when they approached. The samurai brandished their swords and awaited the order to start taking heads. Jebu questioned a middle-aged man whose rain-soaked robes looked as if they might once have been a splendid officer's uniform. They were Chinese, he told Jebu. They had been forced to come here under threat of death to themselves and their families. They had no quarrel with the noble warriors of the Sunrise Land. They begged for mercy.

"We always kill prisoners," Zumiyoshi said, when Jebu pleaded for

the Chinese.

"They did not willingly take up arms against us," Jebu said. "The true samurai is compassionate to the unfortunate, and these are here only through misfortune. These Chinese are highly skilled, hardworking and civilised people. It would be a terrible waste to kill them."

"In short," said Zumiyoshi, "they'll make good slaves. The Bakufu will have little land to give away to reward our victorious warriors. In place of land we can give away free labour. Round them up and march them off to Hakozaki." That wasn't what I meant, Jebu thought, but life on those terms might be better for these men than death out of hand.

Bodies were everywhere. Lying in the muddy ashes they were hardly recognizable as human. Eew were civilians because most of the people of the harbour towns had been evacuated when the Mongol fleet arrived. Many of the samurai dead were found with their armour stripped off, hands tied behind their backs and Mongol arrow wounds in their bodies, the arrows themselves having been retrieved. That their helpless comrades had been slaughtered angered the samurai, even though they would have done the same to any Mongols they captured.

Several hundred Koreans also surrendered. They were even more vociferous in denouncing their Mongol overlords. The surviving Mongols, they informed the samurai, were planning to make a last stand on the west side of the ruined town, close to the water in case their fleet should come back.

"These Koreans would have loved nothing better than to conquer us," said Zumiyoshi sourly. "They provided the ships and seamen for two invasion fleets. They've always hated us." Once again, though,

Jebu's arguments prevailed. The prisoners would be more useful alive.

The Mongols, when they came upon them, were crouched in the rain in wet brown rows, spears and swords ready, taking advantage of what little cover was provided by the broken walls of a temple. There were over a thousand of them, those who had stayed behind or been left behind when the invasion fleet fled the storm.

"We'll lose many men finishing them off," said Jebu.

"Our men want to draw blood today," Zumiyoshi growled. "They're angry, they've come out here in this storm to fight, and it's Mongols they want to kill."

"I came out in this storm because I can speak to the Mongols and might persuade them to surrender," Jebu said. "General, it's one of the oldest military principles never to attack a cornered enemy. It's too costly."

"Go ahead, then." Zumiyoshi turned away in disgust.

Jebu selected a spot half-way between the samurai and the Mongols. He planted his naginata in the ground and tried to think of arguments that might move the invaders.

"We know how to honour a brave foe," he said. "It is a waste of your lives for you to fight on. The storm has destroyed your fleet. You are the last of your army left on our shores. We are willing to accept your honourable surrender. It is no disgrace. It is foolish to shed blood for no purpose."

Someone called out, "You will make slaves of us. We would rather be dead." A spear, well aimed and thrown hard, came whistling through the rain. Jebu deflected it with his naginata. More spears

flew. Now, behind him, he heard the battle shout of the samurai. They ran past him, slogging through the wet grey ashes, rank after rank, swords and naginatas at the ready.

In man-to-man, hand-to-hand combat the fighting style of the samurai was far superior. Without their horses, with their bows and arrows made useless by wind and rain, the Mongols were outmatched. And they were outnumbered. Samurai swords rose and fell like farmers' sickles in a field ripe for harvest. Jebu had no stomach for fighting today, and he certainly wasn't needed. Sickened though he was by the killing, he stood where he was and watched.

In the centre of the Mongol square, standing on a little hill of rubble, stood a familiar grey-bearded figure shouting orders and encouragement-Torluk. Jebu remembered hearing that Torluk had been put in charge of the Chinese troops and the South of the Yang-Tze Eleet. He must have taken personal command of this all-important beachhead and now intended to die defending it. Using the pole end of his naginata as a flail, Jebu plunged into the fight. He pushed men aside right and left until at last he was in the front rank of samurai.

"Torluk," he called. "Torluk, come to me."

Torluk's eyes met his in shocked recognition. With a roar, the old Mongol was off his mound and charging at Jebu, swinging his sabre. Jebu thrust his naginata to a startled samurai near by and awaited Torluk's rush with his open hands held out before him.

Suspecting a trick, Torluk checked his rush and began circling Jebu slowly. Age, Jebu saw, had affected Torluk more than it had Arghun. His movements were slower, less certain than they had been. A flicker of superstitious fear crossed his face.

"So, you still live," said Torluk. "I had heard you were alive, but I could not believe it."

"Yes, I am alive, and your master, Arghun, is dead," said Jebu. Something-fear, grief?-crossed Torluk's bearded face, then was pushed back by the determined, concentrated stare of the professional fighting man.

"And now you mean to kill me and complete your revenge?"

Jebu laughed. "You wish to die in combat, of course, but I have a crueller fate than that in mind for you."

At that, Torluk charged, raising his blade and bringing it down at Jebu's neck. Jebu swung his body to Torluk's right, so that the Mongol commander brushed past him, the sabre grazing Jebu's chest. Jebu seized Torluk's extended sword arm in a grip that twisted the wrist, leading the grey-bearded man around him, slowly applying more and more pressure to force him to drop the sword. Torluk pivoted in Jebu's grip, swinging behind him. Over his shoulder Jebu caught a glimpse of a dagger in Torluk's left hand just before the point of the blade struck Jebu's corselet, failing to penetrate. Jebu got his shoulder under Torluk and threw him through the air, to land on his back with a thud. While Torluk lay stunned, Jebu tore the weapons from his hands and bound him quickly with his own rawhide lariat.

Samurai and Mongols were fighting all around him. Jebu turned away in despair. It was as he had warned Zumiyoshi; killing off the last Mongols would be costly. Even though the samurai outnumbered the Mongols and were their superiors in combat skills, every Mongol who died was managing to take at least one samurai with him. They were fighting with the strength of those who already count themselves dead. The circle of fighting warriors grew smaller and smaller. It was

surrounded by a much larger circle of the dead. Samurai and Mongol lay side by side in death as they never could have done in life. Oceans of blood, thought Jebu. Oceans of blood.

When Jebu dragged the captive Torluk to him, Zumiyoshi said, "Now I see why these barbarous warriors coming out of a desert place have conquered half the world. They have true fighting spirit. You can't tell that about a man until his back is to the wall. Who have we here?"

"The commander of this beachhead, tarkhan Torluk," said Jebu. "Now that we have their leader, perhaps the rest of them will surrender."

Torluk understood the language of the Sunrise Land and spoke it, though with an accent. "It has been my misfortune to be captured, though I hoped to die in combat. These, my fighting men, will never surrender. And our desert lands will breed tens of thousands more warriors. Do not think that you samurai have won a final victory today. When news of our deaths reaches the ears of Kublai Khan his rage will be as terrible as this tai-phun. We will come again. We will come again and again until we are victorious."

"We never give up either, friend," said Miura Zumiyoshi, drawing his long blade.

"Wait, general," said Jebu quickly.

Zumiyoshi turned a face of outraged wonder towards Jebu. "Surely you don't expect me to let this man live? He was one of those responsible for this war against us," Zumiyoshi sputtered. "Why, he doesn't even want to live."

"I know," said Jebu. "But, general, I urge you to send him back to his

Great Khan with perhaps a few other captured Mongols. I want the Great Khan to have a first-hand account of what happened here to his fleet and his army. He should be told that we will never surrender, and that we will wipe out every expedition he sends here just as we did this one. How do you think tarkhan Torluk will feel, being one of the only Mongol generals left alive, bringing Kublai Khan news of defeat? That will be punishment enough for his complicity in this war. Of course he wants to die. That would be much less painful for him."

"I dislike it," said Miura Zumiyoshi, "but what you say makes sense." He turned to Torluk. "I order you to go back to your Great Khan and tell him how great this defeat was, and that the samurai will never surrender to him."

"You do not have to order him," said Jebu. "He will report all this to the Great Khan because it is his duty as a Mongol."

The battle was still going on. Under sheets of rain a mob of samurai surrounded a determined little circle of Mongols. Jebu strode off towards the struggling warriors. He worked his way to the front rank of samurai, roaring for the fighting to stop. The ground beneath his feet was soaked with so much blood that even the downpour could not wash it away.

At last he was looking into the few remaining Mongol faces, angry, frightened, determined, ready to die. With a gesture he pushed back the ring of samurai, bristling with swords and naginatas.

"All right," he called in Mongolian, raising his voice to be heard above the wind and the rain. "There has been enough fighting. Your tarkhan Torluk has been captured. He is going home, and those of you who are alive now are going with him." Eirst one Mongol dropped his spear, then another threw his sabre down on top of it. With a clatter, all their weapons went down in a pile. The samurai

opened a path for them, and Jebu led them away.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Although the Mongols had never landed there, Hakozaki was almost as completely levelled as Hakata. It was water, not fire, that had destroyed this town. At the height of the tai-phun, waves higher than the walls had reduced the walls to rubble and carried away most of the houses. The buildings that were not swept away were nothing but piles of broken timbers mixed with dislocated rocks and pieces of ships. As Jebu trudged up the beach past the ruins of the town he saw bodies of drowned men and horses that had been thrown upon the beach by the waves. The storm had also scooped up sea creatures, fish and crabs, and black-green heaps of seaweed and tossed them on the beach to drown in the air. Elies were starting to swarm.

There were blue breaks in the clouds that suggested the sun might even emerge today. The tempest had raged for two days and two nights, and that morning the rain had stopped at last and the wind had died down, and the dazed people around Hakata Bay were beginning to take stock. It was once again becoming oppressively hot. Beyond Hakozaki people were gathering around a pile of wood that had been the wreckage of Red Tiger. The ship was so huge and had been thrown so far up on the beach that it had survived the pounding of the storm. Sakagura and his men had chopped the great timbers and ribs into smaller pieces which they built into a rectangular pile.

Shortly after Jebu took his place in the front rank of mourners, Taniko's carriage rolled up, and she stepped down, leaning on Sametono's arm. Her eyes were red with crying and her face was haggard. Jebu moved silently to her side. Now there came a procession of priests, followed by samurai carrying a small fifteen-

man kobaya. Seated amidships, dressed in a white kimono, was Moko. Drums and bells and gongs shattered the silence, and the priests began chanting the sutras. The music and chanting went on for a long time. Once Jebu caught himself wishing he could hear what Moko would say about how tedious all this ceremony could be. At last the priests came to the end of their rites. Sakagura went up to Jebu.

"Does your Order have a chant or a prayer that might be said for the soul of my father?"

"I will say something," said Jebu. He stood beside the pyre, his white robe blowing in the faint breeze, and faced the people who had assembled to do Moko honour.

"Over three cycles ago in the Year of the Dragon, I met this man on the Tokaido Road, and he was my friend from that day to this. When I first met him he was a simple man from a small village, but he had been trained as a carpenter, and he was skilled at his work. His work was his way of penetrating the mysteries of life. He travelled to the far places of the earth and brought back discoveries to the great benefit of his people. He designed and built the ships that helped us defend ourselves against the Mongols. His sense of duty drove him to volunteer for a raid into the very centre of the Mongol fleet, and he died on that raid. He died saving my life." Jebu stopped, realizing that if he spoke another word he would sob aloud. The sun was out now and it dazzled him. He looked at Taniko. Tears were again running down her face, as copious as yesterday's rain. At last Jebu felt able to continue.

"And yet, when I have said all that about Hayama Moko, I have not said enough. What was the meaning of his life? When Moko died of his wound, a wise brother of my Order said to me that those who die at the height of their powers, of whom we say, death cut them off. too

soon, are least to be mourned. Moko lived in such a way that if he had lived a thousand years we would still have to say his life was too short. He died without a weapon in his hand, sacrificing himself to save others, without striking a blow. He took no priestly vows, yet at no time in his life did he injure another being. His life was dedicated to the creative principle. Why did he die at the hands of another human being? We must never tire of asking that question. Moko has by his death sent us on a quest, a search for the answer to the question, why do men kill other men? That quest itself is the meaning of Moko's life and death."

There was a long silence after Jebu spoke. Then Sakagura stepped towards the pyre, holding in one hand a blazing torch.

After the funeral, Sakagura and Jebu took one of the few kobaya that had survived the storm to see if there were any sign of the enemy fleet. It was a fifteen-man ship, like the one they had burnt with Moko. The sun was now hot and high, the waves in the bay sparkling and tame. Jebu and Sakagura had little to say to each other on the way out to the harbour mouth. Each remained sunk in his own grief for Moko.

Their ship rode so low in the water that they did not see the wreckage until they had nearly sailed into it. As they came opposite Shiga Island they began running into huge broken timbers and fragments of decks and hulls drifting across their course that had to be pushed out of the way. Then, at last, they could go no further. A barrier of splintered, water-soaked wood, rocking in the waves but solid as far ahead as they could see, blocked their way. There were bodies, too, many bodies of men in soldiers' and seamen's garb. They floated in the water or lay tangled in the wreckage of the Great Khan's fleet. And there were sharks, black fins cutting the water all around the piles of wood, scavenging.

"It's solid all the way from here to Shiga Spit," said Sakagura, standing on the prow of the kobaya.

Slowly they rowed south along the wooden barrier, looking for an opening out to sea. But no matter how far they went it was the same, a wall formed by the wreckage of ships, a wall too solid for their little ship to penetrate.

"Nothing like this has ever been seen before," said Jebu, "and perhaps nothing like it will ever be seen again." This is for you, Yukio, he thought to himself. If you still exist in any form, if that was truly you who stood beside me on the rail of Arghun's ship, then behold this. Your people, inspired by your spirit, have triumphed over those same Mongols who destroyed you.

"They must have jammed together in the harbour entrance trying to get away," said Sakagura. "They got stuck, and the storm wrecked them."

"They may have lost half of their fleet here," said Jebu. "They probably lost many more out on the open sea. We will have to send scout ships out after them, of course, but I don't think they will be coming back. This expedition of Kublai Khan's, at least, is finished." Tens of thousands of men drowned, whole armies. It was difficult to picture, terrifying and pitiable. It was as Taitaro had prophesied to Yukio and Jebu years ago in China: "The jewels created by Izanami and Izanagi shall be protected by the Hurricane of the Kami." With a sigh, Jebu sat down cross-legged in the bow of the kobaya, his long-haired, bearded head sunk on his chest.

"Compassionate Buddha!" Sakagura said, looking at the remains of the Mongol fleet. He ordered his rowers back to Hakozaki, then dropped down beside Jebu.

"Shike, I thank you for speaking so beautifully at my father's funeral this morning, but your words were strange for a warrior monk. What did you mean about finding out why men kill one another?"

"The Zinja were founded for the purpose of protecting people from war and killing, so my words were in keeping with the spirit of my Order. After many generations we have been forced to admit failure. That is why the Order has been dissolved."

"No group as dedicated as the Zinja simply disappears, shike," said Sakagura with a knowing smile. "There is more to it than that. My father hinted to me that your Order has simply decided to make itself invisible."

"And why should that interest you?" said Jebu. The resemblance to Moko in the young face was strong.

"Shike, I am at a crossroads in my life." Tears appeared in Sakagura's large brown eyes. "I thought of myself as a great hero. I enjoyed the praise of other samurai. Then I made the great blunder that cost so many lives, including my father's, all through my foolish pride and hunger for glory. I've dreamed all my life of preferment, land, power, rank. I wanted those things as much for my father's sake as for my own, shike. I respected and loved him. I knew him for the wise and compassionate man he was. And brave. He was brave, even though he kept saying he wasn't." Sakagura paused a moment, unable to go on. "He was brave but never foolish," said Jebu.

"There were those in Kamakura who laughed at him, shike. I wanted our family to rise so high no one would ever dare laugh at my father again. But instead I caused his death. One of the other kobaya captains is going to hire an artist to paint a scroll depicting his heroic deeds. He will present it to the Bakufu along with his petition for rewards. A few days ago I thought I would do the same thing. Now it

seems ridiculous to me. When you said this morning that my father's death sent you on a quest to find out why men kill one another, I thought, if a warrior monk can ask that question, so can a samurai. Shike, I think I want to follow you on that quest, wherever it takes you."

The good teacher begins by discouraging the would-be student, Jebu thought. "I am not seeking followers," he said abruptly. "I have no idea what I myself am going to do now. In any case, this feeling that the life of a samurai is not right for you is doubtless only a passing phase. Your grief for your father will naturally come to pain you less in time, and the samurai way of life will seem good to you again."

"You don't understand, shike-" Sakagura began. Jebu turned a thundercloud face towards him.

"Leave me alone. I am meditating." Jebu folded his hands in his lap and half closed his eyes. Sakagura sighed and said no more. To the rhythmic beat of the oars the kobaya glided across the dancing waters of the harbour. Time passed, while Jebu reflected that what he told Sakagura was partly true. He was indeed uncertain about his future, and there was much pain in that.

Sakagura did not speak to him again until the kobaya was tied up at a makeshift pier at Hakozaki. Then, after they had both climbed out, he turned and faced Jebu.

"Excuse me, shike, but what you don't understand is that I am very much like my father. He told me how he once promised to follow you anywhere, even to China, and how he kept that promise. Since my father has commanded me to live, I want to take the place he left vacant. I too will follow you. Anywhere." Giving Jebu no chance to reply, he turned on his heel and marched off into the town. Jebu

stood there smiling after him, hoping his beard would hide the smile.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Taniko and Eisen walked together at twilight between a broad, still carp pond and the stone outer wall of the Todaiji Temple in the old city of Nara. Everything around Taniko whispered of age and tragedy. The Todaiji had been built by Emperors five hundred years earlier, when Nara was the capital of the nation. Thousands of people who lived here had died by fire and the sword in the War of the Dragons, when the Takashi in their wrath descended on the temple. Now new buildings were rising on the Todaiji grounds. Under the direction of Eisen, whose authority among the Buddhist priesthood had grown greatly because of the favour of Kamakura, the monks and people of Nara were rebuilding the temple. Taniko, making a state progress with Sametono from Hakata Bay to Kamakura, had stopped for a time at the Rokuhara in Heian Kyo. At her first opportunity she made the two-day journey from Heian Kyo to Nara to see Eisen and inspect the rebuilding. Ceremonies over, they walked in the garden to talk confidentially.

"I am sorry to tell you that your father has entered the Void, my lady," said Eisen. "I just received a message for you from the head priest of the Rikyu-in Temple." The Rikyu-in was a small temple established by disciples of Eisen near Edo, a remote fishing village north of Kamakura. There Shima Bokuden, his head shaved, had idled away his life and dreamed of his days of power under the careful eyes of Zen monks who had formerly been Zinja.

"What did he die of?" The news surprised her, but she felt no grief. She was momentarily ashamed of her cool reaction. In fact, she realized to her greater embarrassment, she felt rather relieved that one problem at least was over with for good. Her father would never trouble her again.

"Pneumonia," said Eisen. "He had the best possible care. He died shortly after the news reached the temple that the Mongol fleet had been destroyed. I'm told he was pleased about that."

"He might have had some word of praise for his family," Taniko said wistfully. "No matter. Please say prayers for his soul." Was the face I had before I was born my father's face? she wondered. But she felt no more enlightened.

"As soon as I get back to Kamakura," she said, "I'll have this temple's income increased. All our wealth has had to go to the war. I want you to complete the casting of the giant statue of the Buddha which will replace the one that was destroyed here by the Takashi. And later on I want to have a Buddha just as big built at Kamakura in memory of my husband, the late Shogun. I promised that to him when he was dying. Without him we would not have had the armies we needed to hold off the Mongols."

Eisen held up an admonishing finger. "These are worthy projects, my lady, but please remember that when the Buddha was alive, he asked only for what people could spare him after taking care of their own needs. There are many families bereft, many people homeless, many children fatherless. I beg of you, use the wealth of the Bakufu to relieve the suffering of those in want, before we cast any statues. There is an old story about a monk who took shelter in a temple on a winter night and used a statue of the Buddha for firewood. That is the true attitude of Zen."

Taniko laughed bitterly. "You seem to be the only priest who thinks so. There isn't a temple in the country, large or small, whose priests are not claiming personal credit for defeating the Mongols. It was their prayers, they say, that brought the tai-phun. They are all calling it the Kamikaze, the Hurricane of the Gods. Noshin is the worst of all. He claims that the day of the storm all the flags on his temple pointed

straight at Hakata Bay. He demands-he does not request, he demands-that the Bakufu endow his temple with more rice land than any of the older temples now possess."

"Kamikaze," said Eisen musingly. "That tai-phun did not save our Sacred Islands by itself. It was our samurai who held that enormous Mongol army to the beach for two months. If the Mongols had entrenched themselves on our land, the storm would not have defeated them. The true Hurricane of the Gods is the spirit of our people."

"They're not inspired any more," said Taniko sadly. "It's only a month since the Mongols were driven away, and already that wonderful spirit that filled the country is gone. Everybody is clamouring for riches, hounding the Bakufu for lands, titles, offices. And we have practically nothing to give. In fact, we have to ask the samurai and the people to sacrifice even more. Kublai Khan will want to try again. We will not be safe until he dies, if then. We have to keep our defences in repair, build new walls and more ships, keep armies permanently stationed along the threatened coasts. We'll be straining our resources for years to come."

"And you want to build gigantic statues of the Buddha?" Eisen said gently.

"I thought it might remind people not to be so selfish."

"There is only one way for leaders to inspire the people, my lady," said Eisen. "By example. You enjoy the privileges of a ruler. Stop feeling sorry for yourself that your subjects make demands on you. Remember, there is no guarantee from the gods that your family will hold power perpetually. These are dangerous times for governors, my lady. In addition to bands of impoverished, disgruntled samurai roving the countryside, you have preachers like Noshin stirring

people up, claiming that their sufferings are caused by the sins of their rulers. At such a moment as this, it would take very little to provoke rebellion. If you want your regime to remain in power, the lives of the country's leaders must be beyond reproach." He stopped walking, stood with his back to the carp pond and stared meaningfully at her.

"What are you suggesting, sensei?"

He hesitated, then a look of resolve came over his face. In that flicker of expressions she saw to her surprise that even the great master Eisen could be reluctant to say something unpleasant.

"My lady, I suggest that it would be wise for the monk Jebu to leave the country for a while."

Taniko was speechless for a moment. This sudden turn of the conversation shocked and angered her. How dare this man speak to her of Jebu? How dare anyone? Jebu leave the country? Along with the joy of victory over the Mongols, her happiest thought in the last month had been that at last she and Jebu would be united and that nothing could separate them again for the rest of their lives. She could not believe her ears.

"Please forgive me for disturbing your harmony, my lady," Eisen said. "It is simply that a journey has been proposed to the monk Jebu."

"Proposed by whom?" Her anger grew stronger. Someone wanted Jebu out of the country. When she found out who, she would set the samurai on them.

"Those formerly known as the Zinja, my lady."

"Are you one of them?"

"I and the others of the Order have been doing our best to look after your welfare and that of your family for many years."

"Why do you want to separate me and Jebu?" She was on the verge of tears.

"Of all of us in the Sacred Islands, Jebu is the one who can carry out this mission, a journey to the West. He will speak for us to our brothers in distant places, he will represent us in the Councils of the Order, he will learn what is happening in the rest of the world, and he will come back here with precious knowledge. You cannot imagine, my lady, how uniquely important such a journey can be. A single man travelling across the world from east to west or from west to east in these times can change the course of history." He went on to tell her a little about the Order and its purposes, its far-flung branches, its constant need to keep its parts in communication with one another. She was amazed and rather frightened to realize that all this had existed without her knowledge. Jebu had kept his Order's secrets even in bed.

"All lands everywhere are going through a time of great and painful change," said Eisen. "Erom all this change can come great benefit as well as suffering on a scale never before known. We who call ourselves the Order must be in a position to spread constructive ideas, to influence. Jebu's foster father, Taitaro, undertook the same sort of responsibilities for the Order before him. Indeed, he left Jebu's mother for years of meditation and travel."

"You are asking me to let my happiness be destroyed by a secret society I scarcely knew of before, for the benefit of people I have never seen."

"Eor the benefit of your people, my lady. If you knew that Jebu's

journey could help ensure that the Mongols would never again threaten the Sacred Islands, could you accept his going?"

She thought long. "You play upon my love of country to persuade me to sacrifice the man who is my life."

"The first branches of the Order Jebu visits will be those in China and Mongolia. He will meet with people who are trying to influence the course of events in those countries."

"You can't promise me that Jebu's leaving me would accomplish any such wonders, can you?"

"Indeed, I can guarantee nothing," said Eisen. "But it is knowing you should act in a certain way, and acting in that way regardless of the effect of the action, that leads to enlightenment."

"Do not try to divert me with promises of enlightenment." Her voice was hard, angry. "I want Jebu."

"As I told you when we first met, the strength of your love shows that you are already greatly enlightened. But one of the Bakufu's most important sources of strength is the esteem, almost like worship, in which most samurai hold the Ama-Shogun. Unfortunately, the rumour is spreading that the real power behind the Bakufu is your lover, a monk of the disreputable Zinja Order who, even worse, is half Mongol."

Taniko was outraged. "I have a right to my privacy. Erom the Emperor on down, there isn't a nobleman on these islands who doesn't sleep with several wives and assorted courtesans. And what's more, Jebu is a hero. His deeds are legendary. How could anyone say anything against him?"

Eisen shook his head. "Our lords may disport themselves as they

wish, but our ladies must be chaste. I disapprove of such a state of affairs as much as you do, but we cannot change it. As for Jebu's heroism, there are many who envy and hate him. Yukio was a hero, and still the people turned away from him."

Now Taniko was in tears. "I won't do it. I won't give him up. It's not fair. I have loved him all my life, and I've never been able to spend more than a few months at a time with him. Even in the last six years we've only been together for brief visits. Now, for the first time in our lives, we can live together as we have always wanted to. We have so little time left, sensei." She was pleading now for understanding. "We can't expect to live much longer. Surely we have a right to the few years of happiness left to us."

Eisen shook his head. "The only thing you are promised in this life is suffering."

Anger boiled up within her. She took a breath and opened her mouth to shout a protest, to say no to the belief that life was nothing but pain, no to his demand for sacrifice, no to all suffering and loss of her life, no to more years of separation from Jebu. But as she drew in her breath, it seemed some tremendous force took hold of her and drew her breath in for her, as the water near shore is drawn into a great oncoming wave, till her lungs were full to bursting. Then the wave broke.

She let her breath out in one terrible scream, a long-drawn-out wordless shout of rage and agony, a cry from the very centre of her being. The muscles of her abdomen knotted and her throat burnt and the cords in her neck ached from the force she put into the scream. She went on screaming until every bit of air in her chest was gone.

She opened her eyes and saw to her amazement that Eisen was sitting in the shallow carp pond, staring at her with a surprise as

great as her own. After a moment, he began to laugh.

There was a clatter of weapons all around them. Taniko's samurai guards had heard her scream and had come rushing to her aid. The warrior monks of the Todaiji saw Eisen fall into the pond and came running to their sensei's aid. The two groups of armed men stood in a circle around Eisen and Taniko glaring at each other, tense and ready to fight. Taniko and Eisen dismissed them with assurances that they were both all right and that neither had in any way hurt the other. Before anyone could help him up, Eisen sprang dripping from the pond, as if to demonstrate by his very agility that all was well.

"Sensei, what happened?" said Taniko in a low voice when they were alone again.

"It is a phenomenon that was developed by the Ch'an masters of China and which we students of Zen are introducing in the martial arts here," said Eisen. "It is called kiai, the shout. After many years of practice a student of this art can produce a shout that will stun a man or kill him. In your case, under the pressure of the situation, you produced such a kiai shout naturally."

"Yes, but what happened to me, sensei?"

Eisen looked into her face. It was long past sunset now, and the garden of the Todaiji was illuminated by many bronze and stone lanterns, their reflected lights twinkling in the pond. A nearly full yellow-orange moon was peeping over the temple wall.

"Ah," said Eisen, after carefully examining Taniko's face. His little sigh of satisfaction and his look confirmed what she suspected. Even as the moon was rising, she felt a light dawning within her. The suffering of a moment ago was replaced by pure, limitless joy. She had broken through. The scream was the cry of life itself, the life that

had been in her parents and which they had passed on to her, that had been passed to them through countless generations of ancestors, that was the same as the life in Eisen, in the carp in the pond, in the trees around them. To be alive is to suffer. The scream of pain and of protest against pain is the original cry of life. The first utterance of each of the children she bore had been such a cry. It was the cry of yang, the creative principle, goaded by its very suffering to overcome its afflictions and grow stronger and wiser. She felt the connectedness of all things. It was an ecstasy she had previously known only during her most exalted moments with Jebu.

"That scream, sensei," she said, "is the face I had before I was born."

Eisen knelt and pressed his palms and face to the ground before her in humble acknowledgment of her enlightenment. She was so preoccupied with her new thoughts and feelings that she scarcely noticed what he was doing.

"I do not feel as if I have made a discovery," she said as he stood up again. "I feel as if I am remembering something I have always known."

"It is one thing to know that fire burns flesh," said Eisen. "It is another to learn that truth by putting your hand into the flame of a torch. Now I will have to find a new kung-an for you to work on."

"Must I go on solving kung-an for the rest of my life?"

Eisen laughed. "Does one who trains in the martial arts ever say, `Now my training is complete, I need no more practice?' " Then the round face grew grave and compassionate. "Sometimes life gives us a kung-an to solve. Now that you have found the face you had before you were born, perhaps you will have the wisdom to decide

what you and Jebu should do."

Taniko thought a moment, searching within herself to see if she felt any different about Jebu. Nothing was changed. She still wanted him at her side for the rest of her life, and she still resented the Order for trying to part them.

"Your Order has no right to send Jebu away from me," she said firmly. "I will make him stay with me. We deserve to be united after all these years, and I defy you to try to separate us."

Eisen nodded. "You must do what you think you should do. That is the very essence of enlightenment. As for Jebu, he has been given time to think about this journey. I do not know what he will decide. Perhaps he will tell you. When do you see him again?"

"I will see him the day after tomorrow at Heian Kyo for the first time in a month. He stayed behind at Hakata Bay, helping to rebuild and to aid the victims."

"Please greet him for me when you see him. And also tell his lordship Shogun Sametono that I hope to see him at his convenience. I am anxious to learn what progress he has made with Joshu's No."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Taniko's heart fluttered nervously, partly in happy excitement, partly in fear, as she rode ahead of Jebu along the path up the side of Mount Higashi. She had managed to slip away from all her ladies, maids, retainers and samurai guards. Those at the Rokuhara thought she was at the Imperial Palace paying a visit to the young Emperor and the

Imperial family. Those in the newly rebuilt Imperial Palace thought she was at the Rokuhara. She and Jebu could be alone together, celebrating the full moon of the Eighth Month in each other's arms in the place where their love had begun for them so many years ago.

They tethered their horses by the old statue of Jimmu Tenno. The first Emperor of the Sunrise Land looked as fierce as ever but a little more weathered. She stood a moment before the statue, silently reporting to the founder of the nation that the barbarians had been driven from his shores. Then they turned and walked hand in hand along the path until they came to the spot where they had lain together years before and exchanged vows of love. These twisted pine trees on the hillside now might have been seedlings when we first came here, she thought. Will Jebu remember our vows, and is he still willing to keep them? As for her, she had never forgotten his words, "I am yours for the rest of my life and the rest of your life."

In the sunset Heian Kyo seemed to rise out of a violet autumnal haze mixing mist from the rivers on either side of the city with the smoke of cooking fires. The capital looked much the same as it had that other night. There was hardly a part of it that had not been levelled by fire or earthquake over the past thirty-seven years, but its people were indefatigable rebuilders. Taniko took off the rice-straw hat and veil she had worn to conceal her features and sat down on the grass mat

Jebu unrolled for her. They talked about the war.

"We had a message from one of our people in Korea," Jebu said. "The Great Khan lost three thousand ships and eighty thousand men. It is the worst defeat the Mongols have suffered since the rise of Genghis Khan. Kublai flew into a rage when he got the news and ran about his palace shouting, 'Arghun! Arghun! What have you done with my fleet?' He collapsed and had to be punctured with the Chinese needles and put to bed. Now he is saying he intends to attempt another invasion."

"Oh, no." Taniko's heart sank. "We can't go through an ordeal like that again."

"Neither can the Mongols. This defeat has weakened Kublai's authority over his vassal kings and nobles. I don't think he can raise another army and fleet. Of course, we can never be sure. We will have to remain prepared for war for many years to come."

Taniko visualized Kublai's barbarian wrath with satisfaction. What do you think of us now, Elephant? she thought. You who were always so contemptuous of our little country. Would you still like to have me back in your harem?

"He's sixty-five years old now," Jebu went on. "That's on in years, as members of his family go. I think after his death his successors won't be so interested in conquering our islands, and the Mongol empire will fall apart. It's already starting to."

"That storm convinced the priests and the people that no invader can ever conquer us," said Taniko. "They say the gods were helping us. Some of the samurai think it was the angry ghost of Yukio that brought the storm. They say Yukio was fighting beside them, seeking vengeance against Arghun and his Mongols."

"I actually saw Yukio," Jebu said, his voice filled with wonder at the memory.

"You saw Yukio?"

"He was standing with me on the railing of Red Tiger, laughing, when I was fighting Arghun."

"Do you think it was truly a vision, or was it only in your mind?" Taniko asked him. "You must have been terribly wrought in that moment."

"Just before he died, my father, Taitaro, taught me that a mind that creates such visions is miraculous enough. One can attain insight in combat. Sometimes in a moment of insight you see visions."

Taniko let her small white fingers rest on his long, brown hand. "I had a satori, a flash of enlightenment, talking to Eisen last night. It was one of the most profoundly happy moments of my life."

He smiled, strong white teeth flashing in his beard. "Then you understand a little better what I've been looking for all my life."

"Jebu," she said, "my satori happened when Eisen told me your Order wants you to travel to the West."

Jebu was silent for a while. At last he looked at her with eyes full of pain and sadness. "I am going to go, my love. I have to."

She shuddered, as if struck a physical blow that she had been anticipating. She rocked back and forth, her face in her hands, weeping. He took her hand, and she pulled it away. How dare he try to comfort her with such a banal gesture. She looked up at him and he was crying, too. Eor a moment she felt pity for him.

"Don't say you have to go. Eisen told me the decision was left to you."

"If the Order had commanded me to go, I would have felt more free to refuse. I did refuse at first. In the last month, since you left Hakata Bay, I have suffered a lifetime of agonies over this decision. Taniko, I love you. I don't want to leave you. And yet, there is so much I can do by making this journey. Eisen must have explained to you why it is so important to the Order. And I will be the first person from the Sunrise Land to travel all the way to the other end of the world, to that unknown land of the white barbarians. Taniko, travelling and learning are my whole life. Were it not that I love you and can't bear to be parted from you, I would be overjoyed at the thought of making this journey. I couldn't wait to leave."

"I'm sorry our love is such a burden to you, Jebu. But it seems you have the strength, somehow, to part from me." He seemed to be trying to make it sound as if his sufferings were equal to hers, which could not possibly be true.

"For me to refuse this responsibility would leave me with my insight beclouded and my contact with the Self broken."

"And I-and our love-must be sacrificed to your spiritual attainment? That's what I dislike about all this pursuing of insight or enlightenment, whatever you wish to call it. It's nothing but a selfishness of the spirit."

Surprisingly, Jebu nodded. "A long time ago Taitaro abandoned my mother, Nyosan, to follow his inner voice. She died in the holocaust of the Teak Blossom Temple. When he told me how she had died, there was a moment when I hated him for having left her. As you must hate me now. But you have known satori. So you must know that we realize in enlightenment that the individual self is an illusion. We are

all part of one Self."

She was crying again. It was so frustrating to be unable to touch him with her anger. She had experienced enough of what he was talking about to understand him. Still, she could not, would not, give him up.

"How do you know that denying our love won't damage your precious insight?" she demanded. "How can you be so sure that what you have decided is right?"

"I can't," he said. "Being sure that you are doing right is one of the easiest ways to go astray. We Zinja have ways of reminding ourselves that what we are doing is not necessarily right. But I know I must do this just as I knew, six years ago, that I must answer your call and come to you in Kamakura. The deeper my insight, the more the Self chooses for me."

She sneered. "When you ask monks hard questions, they always retreat behind words that are impossible to grasp, like clouds of smoke."

Surprisingly, he was crying again, and he took her sleeve and wiped his eyes with it. "That reminds me so much of what my mother said to me once when I was preaching at her. 'Sayings that boom like a hollow log in the temple,' she called my words. I know how you feel. Even so, you know that at the bottom of my words, hollow as they are, there is a reality."

"The reality is that you are going to leave me," she whispered in a choked voice.

"I am not going to leave today or tomorrow, my love," said Jebu. "In the spring I will go. Sakagura and I will outfit a small ship and sail to China. Sakagura doesn't know yet that I have decided to take him

with me. But he wants to be my student, and I need someone to help me cross the ocean and to be my companion after that. I will be back, Taniko. Be sure of it. Much of the reason for my making this journey is so that I can return to the Order with new treasures of knowledge. I will be back, and then we will be together for ever after. That I promise you."

Her rage and grief burst out, not in a scream as on the night before, but in a flood of speech, broken by sobs. "And I promise you that when I am asleep my angry ghost will leave my body and go wherever you are in the world and torment and plague you until you go mad. As I will go mad here, if you leave me. I believe you are mad already. After we have been forced to be apart so much of our lives, can you turn your back on me of your own free will? Even if you do return you will surely be gone ten years or more. I may be dead by then. I will be dead. Have you forgotten that when we were a boy and girl here in this spot so long ago, you swore you would be mine forever? You don't really love me. You never have. I've just been someone for you to come back to after your legendary exploits. If you leave me now, Jebu, I will always hate you. Always."

Jebu put his arms around her. She tried to push him away at first, but he held her tightly, and in spite of her anger at him it was comforting to be held. The pain tore at her from within, like some monstrous crab that had been conceived inside her and was trying to tear its way out. With his forefinger he wiped the tears from her cheek. Crickets chirped in the forest. Was it Taniko's imagination, or was there a sadness in the sound because winter was coming and the little insects would soon all be dead? He and I will soon be dead, too, she thought, and our love lost forever.

"There is another reason why it would be good for me to leave now," he said softly. "Did Sametono tell you about our quarrel before he went out in Sakagura's kobaya?"

"He told me that he was angry because you persuaded the generals not to let him go into combat."

"He said that our love is becoming a national scandal. The temples, the warrior families, the people are losing respect for you. He would never have said those things to me if he weren't angry, but they are true."

"Ridiculous."

"Taniko, you said yourself that our being lovers is no longer a secret. Munetoki and Sametono need you. They'll need you until Sametono is grown up. Most of the time, the path that leads to enlightenment is simply doing your duty as well as you can, according to your place in the world. Eor you, the path is to accept my going and to work to make the Bakufu strong. Your duty is to keep the figure of the Ama-Shogun bright and shining."

He was still holding her. Part of her wanted to lift her head and kiss the lips that looked so inviting surrounded by his white beard. Part of her wanted to push him away, leave this mountain-top whose meaning for them he had betrayed, and never see him again. She hated all this talk about enlightenment. It had nothing to do with life and love. But she knew it was true. She was trapped in her position. But-she could give up her position. Or offer to. If he realized that she was willing to give up everything for him, then surely he would be willing to turn his back on his Order for her.

"Very well, then," she said. "If you won't stay with me, I will go with you."

His grey eyes widened. "You will give up your position, leave your family and home, and travel all the way across the world with me?"

"Will you take me?"

After a long silence he said, "It would make the trip more difficult, of course. You are very strong, but still the Order will object. They'll say that my having you along will slow me down. And they would be right, but that doesn't matter. I have decided to make this journey despite the suffering it inflicts on you and me. They'll have to accept my making it on my terms. Eor the sake of our love, if this is what you think you must do, I cannot refuse you."

She felt like a charging warrior who falls on his face when his opponent unexpectedly backs away. She had not thought he would agree to take her. She had thought that what he really wanted was to be separated from her.

"You really would take me with you?"

"Taniko, I must make this journey. I thought that to do it I had no choice but to part with you. It never occurred to me that you would be willing to go, too."

Too late she saw the trap she had fallen into. It was not a trap of Jebu's making. It was karma, or life itself, that had built this trap for her. Sometimes, as Eisen said, life becomes the sensei and sets a kung-an for us to solve.

"I can't go," she said. "I didn't think you would say yes."

His sad smile was beautiful. She reached up to stroke his white beard.

"You gave me hope for a moment," he said. "That was cruel. I used to be so angry with you, Taniko-san. Always you wanted to be at the centre of things, at the Court, in the midst of public affairs. I always hated your ambition. But now I know that you are no longer driven by

ambition. It has been transmuted into something else. You are staying because it is what enlightenment chooses for you. You can't give up being the Ama-Shogun, even for the sake of our love, because the Self tells you this is what you must do."

Taniko searched her heart. He was right. Even though her love for Jebu was the most powerful force in her life, she could not leave her post. But it was no longer ambition that kept her there. Hers was a vast, unfinished task. She felt the same powerful bond that keeps a captain aboard his endangered ship, that keeps a samurai fighting to hold a threatened position. Kamakura needed her, and she could not abandon it.

"I helped to build it," she whispered. "And it's not finished. I can't desert it now."

He took her hands tightly. "Be the chaste goddess, and the samurai will never rebel against the Bakufu. But now you know why, even though it tears me to pieces, I have to go. And when we are very old, we will live the last years of our lives together and pass from this world together. And if you believe in rebirth, believe that we will be reborn as a couple of peasants who will have twenty children and live together in peace for ninety years. Surely we have accumulated enough good karma in this life to deserve that. Believe whatever you can believe, my darling, but above all believe that we can never be parted."

"Nothing can destroy our love," she said. "I believe that."

"Taniko," he said, "most people are blind to the fact that we are all one. Men gather behind their boundaries, their walls, rivers and seas, and make war on one another. The. Order trained me to be a warrior, and I have spent most of my life at war. I have done my duty in the place where I found myself. But now I hope I may live out the

rest of my life without ever again killing another human being. Taniko, when I was in that chaos in the harbour I saw other visions besides Yukio. I saw an ocean of blood, all the blood that has been spilled and will be spilled because men kill. I saw the Tree of Life, a vision that tells me all beings are one. I want the Tree of Life to grow. I want men to stop spilling blood into that ocean. How can men make war if they realize they are all part of one being? We must lose the illusion of separateness. People can break down boundaries by freely crossing them to share what they have with other people. The day will come when all boundaries fall and when we will have the knowledge we need to end the killing of man by man. That is what the Order works for and what I work for. That is why I am going."

"I understand."

"And also," he said, "I am going for Moko. Moko was a man who broke down boundaries and learned. Why are there men like Arghun and Kublai Khan, like Sogamori and Hideyori, who bring death to their fellow human beings and never question what they are doing? I'm going to find out why Moko was killed."

"Such a huge question. Do you really think you will find the answer?"

"I may bring the Order and the people of the world closer to the answer. The lands of the far west are strange, from what little I know of them. Perhaps they go to war for different reasons than we do here. And by finding out what is different and what is the same, I may know more about what war is."

"I can tell you some things about the West. While I lived with Kublai Khan one of my friends was a princess from a country called Persia." She reached for him and put her arm around his neck. He sank down beside her, holding her. It had grown dark while they talked and he was shadowy beside her.

He stroked her cheek. "We will pass the winter with you telling me tales of Kublai Khan's harem."

She laughed. "Some of them are not for the ears of a monk." "Even a monk like me? Sametono said I was nothing but an adventurer in monk's clothing."

"That is all you are. See how easily you decided to abandon me." It seemed she had come to a point of reconciliation, for now she could even joke about it.

But Jebu did not join in the joke. "Do you still love me?" he asked, his grey eyes fixed on hers. "Can I take that with me through the world? Can I have the hope of coming back to you to help me keep going?"

The tears spilled over, but she laid her head on his chest and whispered, "Yes." Oh, but how lonely I will be, she thought. How I wish you would not go.

He slid his hand into the breast of his robe and brought out something that sparkled in the light of the rising full moon. He put it into her hand. The surface felt rough to her fingertips, but when she held it up she saw that it was intricately carved. A tracery of fine lines too complex for the mind to encompass flowed across its surface, compelling her to try to follow its weavings until her eyes ached. In its depths there glowed a tiny fire, bright as satori.

"Jebu, what a beautiful thing."

"It is a gift to you from the land of the Mongols." He told her the story of the Jewel. "Taitaro used it as a talisman in my spiritual training, but in the end he told me it has no magic. Yet carved on its surface is the Tree of Life, a very beautiful design. You may find it helps you to concentrate when you are meditating. Look at it every day and think

of me, and perhaps you will discover that we are one, as I said, and are not really separated."

"It has a very great magic," she whispered. She put it in a pocket in her sleeve and then pressed herself against him. She slipped her hands into his robe and caressed the pattern of scars on his chest, just as she had tried to trace the pattern on the Jewel. His fingers crept under the layers of silk she wore and brushed her skin lightly, following its smooth surfaces. The bright rays of the full moon of the Eighth Month, the most beautiful moon of the year, dappled the ground around them and their robes and their bodies. Strings of lanterns dotted the streets of the city below. It was all as it had been long ago, but they had changed immeasurably.

"Oh, Jebu," she whispered. "That we have known and loved each other though everything was against our love is the greatest of all blessings."

That night under the full moon and the pines of Mount Higashi, their bodies and their spirits melted together. What they had suffered before, what loneliness they might know in time to come, no longer mattered. On every plane they became one in an eternal now.

From the pillow book of Shima Taniko:

I have decided that I will not let him read my pillow book now. Not till he comes back to me. In that small way I will punish him for leaving.

We have this one winter together, and then I will truly be both nun and Shogun. After Jebu is gone I will sleep alone and devote myself to the Bakufu. I will be a mind and a voice, neither woman nor man.

Why this lifelong urge to involve myself in affairs of state? Even though Eisen dismissed the idea, this passion does arise from the

face I had before I was born. When I was in my mother's womb nobody knew whether I was male or female. And if I strip away being a woman and all that is expected of me because I am a woman, then I am simply a living being who does not want to be a helpless piece of property, who wants to matter, to accomplish things. These are the needs of my deeper self. It is not that I wish to stop being a woman. I am glad I have tender feelings and can show them openly, as no man dares to, because I am a woman. It delights me that men desire me, and I love the pleasure I receive from men. Even though I lost both my children, the times another human being grew inside my body were among the most marvellous experiences of my life. But I do not want to be a woman at the cost of leaving my deeper needs unfulfilled.

And so, because I am driven to achieve, and because of karma or luck, I have become the Ama-Shogun. I seem to be quite alone among women in rising so high. When I was a girl and the Court in Heian Kyo ruled the Sunrise Land, women often had great influence. But now this land is governed by the samurai. Women cannot compete with men in battle, and as long as warriors rule the nation, women will be more and more reduced to servitude. Perhaps I can use my position to help women. But the forces working against us are powerful.

Our best hope lies in an end to wars, because that will end the dominance of the samurai. Peace, the thing Jebu dreams of. Women can help themselves by nurturing peace. If I could communicate my thoughts to other women, I would tell them that.

Perhaps Jebu will bring back the secret of peace to the Sacred Islands. I have learned to live with the fact of his going, but just as I screamed at Eisen, I scream inside whenever I think of his leaving me alone. I remember the story Eisen told me long ago about the enlightened monk who screamed as he was murdered. I understand that story much, much better now.

If I did not have Sametono to love and look after, I do not think' I could hold back the scream. After Jebu is gone I will help Sametono to mature and become wise in statecraft. And, in a few years' time, surely there will be great-grandchildren to occupy my time. Little Taniko, a great-grandmother! Perhaps I have reached that happy stage in life where one grows by simply loving, acting and giving, and does not need to receive.

But that man-so different from all the other people of the Sacred Islands, so wonderful a lover-who came into my life when I was a girl-he is my life. When he sails away in the spring, he takes my life with me.

But he will be back. It may be five years or ten years, but he will be back. And then I will withdraw altogether from public life, and we will find some little cottage on a mountainside with a pleasant view, and I will make ch'ai and raise flowers. He will sit with brush and ink and write down what he has done and learned. And we will never be apart again.

While I am alone I will remain myself. And as myself, I will always love him. As he says, our selves are one Self. So I have him within me, and we will be together always in this life, and sit side by side on the same lotus blossom in the next.

-Eighth Month, seventeenth day

YEAR OF THE SERPENT

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