

Lord Otori came into the room, followed by two of the girls carrying trays of food. He looked at me and nodded. I bowed to the floor. It occurred to me that he, Otori Shigeru, was the heron and I was the little wriggling thing he had scooped up, plunging down the mountain into my world and swooping away again.

The rain fell more heavily, and the house and garden began to sing with water. It overflowed from the gutters and ran down the chains and into the stream that leaped from pool to pool, every waterfall making a different sound. The house sang to me, and I fell in love with it. I wanted to belong to it. I would do anything for it, and anything its owner wanted me to do.

When we had finished the meal and the trays had been removed, we sat by the open window as night drew in. In the last of the light, Lord Otori pointed towards the end of the garden. The stream that cascaded through it swept under a low opening in the tiled roof wall into the river beyond. The river gave a deep, constant roar and its grey-green waters filled the opening like a painted screen.

'It's good to come home,' he said quietly. 'But just as the river is always at the door, so is the world always outside. And it is in the world that we have to live.'

Two

THE SAME year Otori Shigeru rescued the boy who was to become Otori Takeo at Mino, certain events took place in a castle a long way to the south. The castle had been given to Noguchi Masayoshi by Iida Sadamu for his part in the battle of Yaegahara. Iida, having defeated his traditional enemies, the Otori, and forced their surrender on favourable terms to himself, next turned his attention to the third great clan of the Three Countries, the Seishuu, whose domains covered most of the south and west. The Seishuu preferred to make peace through alliances rather than war, and these were sealed with hostages, both from great domains, like the Maruyama, and smaller ones, like their close relatives, the Shirakawa.

Lord Shirakawa's eldest daughter, Kaede, went to Noguchi castle as a hostage when she had just changed her sash of childhood for a girl's, and she had now lived there for half her life – long enough to think of a thousand things she detested about it. At night, when she was too tired to sleep and did not dare even toss and turn in case one of the older girls reached over and slapped her, she made lists of them inside her head. She had learned early to keep her thoughts to herself. At least no one could reach inside and slap her mind, although she knew more