

herself. But the men were so strong. She was tall for a girl – too tall the other girls said maliciously – and not weak – the hard work saw to that – but once or twice a man had grabbed her in play and held her just with one hand, and she had not been able to escape. The memory made her shiver with fear.

And every month it became harder to avoid their attentions. Late in the eighth month of her fifteenth year a typhoon in the west brought days of heavy rain. Kaede hated the rain, the way it made everything smell of mould and dampness, and she hated the way her skimpy robes clung to her when they were wet, showing the curve of her back and thighs, making the men call after her even more.

‘Hey, Kaede, little sister!’ a guard shouted to her as she ran through the rain from the kitchen, past the second turreted gate. ‘Don’t go so fast! I’ve got an errand for you! Tell Captain Arai to come down, will you? His lordship wants him to check out a new horse.’

The rain was pouring like a river from the crenellations, from the tiles, from the gutters, from the dolphins that topped every roof as a protection against fire. The whole castle spouted water. Within seconds she was soaked, her sandals saturated, making her slip and stumble on the cobbled steps. But she obeyed without too much bitterness, for, of everyone in the castle, Arai was the only person she did not hate. He always spoke nicely to her, he didn’t tease or harass her, and she knew his lands lay alongside her father’s and he spoke with the same slight accent of the West.

‘Hey, Kaede!’ the guard leered as she entered the main keep. ‘You’re always running everywhere! Stop and chat!’

When she ignored him and started up the stairs he shouted after her, ‘They say you’re really a boy! Come here and show me you’re not a boy!’

‘Fool!’ she muttered, her legs aching as she began the second flight of stairs.

The guards on the top floor were playing some kind of gambling game with a knife. Arai got to his feet as soon as he saw her and greeted her by name.

‘Lady Shirakawa.’ He was a big man with an impressive presence, and intelligent eyes. She gave him the message. He thanked her, looking for a moment as though he would say something more to her, but seemed to change his mind. He went hastily down the stairs.

She lingered, gazing out of the windows. The wind from the mountains blew in, raw and damp. The view was almost completely blotted out by clouds, but below her was the Noguchi residence, where, she thought resentfully, she should by rights be living, not running around in the rain at everyone’s beck and call.

‘If you’re going to dawdle, Lady Shirakawa, come and sit down with us,’ one of the guards said, coming up behind her and patting her on the backside.

‘Get your hands off me!’ she said angrily.

The men laughed. She feared their mood: they were bored and tense, fed up with the rain, the constant watching and waiting, the lack of action.

‘Ah, the captain forgot his knife,’ one of them said. ‘Kaede, run down after him.’

She took the knife, feeling its weight and balance in her left hand.

‘She looks dangerous!’ the men joked. ‘Don’t cut yourself, little sister!’

She ran down the stairs, but Arai had already left the