

than one of them longed to. Which was why they slapped her so often on her body or face.

She clung with a child's single-mindedness to the faint memories she had of the home she had left when she was seven. She had not seen her mother or her younger sisters since the day her father had escorted her to the castle.

Her father had returned three times since then, only to find she was housed with the servants, not with the Noguchi children, as would have been suitable for the daughter of a warrior family. His humiliation was complete: he was unable even to protest, although she, unnaturally observant even at that age, had seen the shock and fury in his eyes. The first two times they had been allowed to speak in private for a few moments. Her clearest memory was of him holding her by the shoulders and saying in an intense voice, 'If only you had been born a boy!' The third time he was permitted only to look at her. After that he had not come again, and she had had no word from her home.

She understood his reasons perfectly. By the time she was twelve, through a mixture of keeping her eyes and ears open and engaging the few people sympathetic to her in seemingly innocent conversation, she knew her own position: she was a hostage, a pawn in the struggles between the clans. Her life was worth nothing to the lords who virtually owned her, except in what she added to their bargaining power. Her father was the lord of the strategically important domain of Shirakawa; her mother was closely related to the Maruyama. Since her father had no sons, he would adopt as his heir whoever Kaede was married to. The Noguchi, by possessing her, also possessed his loyalty, his alliance, and his inheritance.

She no longer even considered the great things – fear,

homesickness, loneliness – but the sense that the Noguchi did not even value her as a hostage headed her list of things she hated, as she hated the way the girls teased her for being left-handed and clumsy, the stench of the guards' room by the gate, the steep stairs that were so hard to climb when you were carrying things . . . And she was always carrying things: bowls of cold water, kettles of hot water, food for the always ravenous men to cram into their mouths, things they had forgotten or were too lazy to fetch for themselves. She hated the castle itself, the massive stones of the foundations, the dark oppressive-ness of the upper rooms, where the twisted roof beams seemed to echo her feelings, wanted to break free of the distortion they were trapped in, and fly back to the forest they came from.

And the men. How she hated them. The older she grew, the more they harassed her. The maids her age competed for their attentions. They flattered and cosseted the men, putting on childish voices, pretending to be delicate, even simple-minded, to gain the protection of one soldier or another. Kaede did not blame them for it – she had come to believe that all women should use every weapon they had to protect themselves in the battle that life seemed to be – but she would not stoop to that. She could not. Her only value, her only escape from the castle, lay in marriage to someone of her own class. If she threw that chance away, she was as good as dead.

She knew she should not have to endure it. She should go to someone and complain. Of course it was unthinkable to approach Lord Noguchi, but maybe she could ask to speak to the lady. On second thought, even to be allowed access to her seemed unlikely. The truth was there was no one to turn to. She would have to protect