

slow, her thoughts racing. She had Arai in her power at that moment. And Lord Noguchi had not called him captain, as he should have done. He had given him no title, shown him no courtesy. Did he already have suspicions about his loyalty? Did he already know the true version of events? Had one of the guards already betrayed Arai? If she defended him, was she just falling into a trap set for them both?

Arai was the only person in the castle who had treated her well. She was not going to betray him now. She sat up and spoke with downcast eyes but in a steady voice. 'I went to the upper guard room to give a message to Lord Arai. I followed him down the stairs: he was wanted in the stables. The guard on the gate detained me with some pretext. When I went to him he seized me.' She let the sleeves fall back from her arm. The bruises had already begun to show, the purple-red imprint of a man's fingers on her pale skin. 'I cried out. Lord Arai heard me, came back, and rescued me.' She bowed again, conscious of her own grace. 'I owe him and my lord a debt for my protection.' She stayed, her head on the floor.

'Unnh,' Lord Noguchi grunted. There was another long silence. Insects droned in the afternoon heat. Sweat glistened on the brows of the men sitting motionless. Kaede could smell their rank animal odour, and she felt sweat trickle between her breasts. She was intensely aware of her real danger. If one of the guards had spoken of the knife left behind, the girl who took it and walked down the stairs with it in her hand . . . she willed the thoughts away, afraid the men who studied her so closely would be able to read them clearly.

Eventually Lord Noguchi spoke, casually, even amiably. 'How was the horse, Captain Arai?'

Arai raised his head to speak. His voice was perfectly calm. 'Very young, but fine looking. Of excellent stock and easy to tame.'

There was a ripple of amusement. Kaede felt they were laughing at her, and the blood rose in her cheeks.

'You have many talents, Captain,' Noguchi said. 'I am sorry to deprive myself of them, but I think your country estate, your wife and son, may need your attention for a while, a year or two . . .'

'Lord Noguchi.' Arai bowed, his face showing nothing.

*What a fool Noguchi is, Kaede thought. I'd make sure Arai stayed right here where I could keep an eye on him. Send him away and he'll be in open revolt before a year has passed.*

Arai backed out, not looking even once towards Kaede. *Noguchi's probably planning to have him murdered on the road, she thought gloomily. I'll never see him again.*

With Arai's departure the atmosphere lightened a little. Lord Noguchi coughed and cleared his throat. The warriors shifted position, easing their legs and backs. Kaede could feel their eyes still on her. The bruises on her arms, the man's death had aroused them. They were no different from him.

The door behind her slid open, and the servant who had brought her from the castle came in with bowls of tea. She served each of the men and seemed to be about to leave when Lord Noguchi barked at her. She bowed, flustered, and set a cup in front of Kaede.

Kaede sat up and drank, eyes lowered, her mouth so dry she could barely swallow. Arai's punishment was exile. What would hers be?

'Lady Shirakawa, you have been with us for many years. You have been part of our household.'