

Junko opened the box and took out a round mirror. Its back was beautifully carved with flowers and birds. She held it so Kaede could see her reflection. It was the first time she had looked in a mirror. Her own face silenced her.

The women's attentions and admiration restored her confidence a little, but it began to seep away again as she followed Junko into the main part of the residence. She had only seen Lord Noguchi from a distance since her father's last visit. She had never liked him, and now she realized she was afraid of the meeting.

Junko fell to her knees, slid open the door to the audience room, and prostrated herself. Kaede stepped into the room and did the same. The matting was cool beneath her forehead and smelled of summer grass.

Lord Noguchi was speaking to someone in the room and took no notice of her whatsoever. He seemed to be discussing his rice allowances: how late the farmers were in handing them over. It was nearly the next harvest, and he was still owed part of the last crop. Every now and then the person he was addressing would humbly put in a placatory comment – the adverse weather, last year's earthquake, the imminent typhoon season, the devotion of the farmers, the loyalty of the retainers – at which the lord would grunt, fall silent for a full minute or more, and then start complaining all over again.

Finally he fell silent for one last time. The secretary coughed once or twice. Lord Noguchi barked a command, and the secretary backed on his knees towards the door.

He passed close to Kaede, but she did not dare raise her head.

'And call Arai,' Lord Noguchi said, as if it were an afterthought.

*Now he will speak to me*, Kaede thought, but he said nothing, and she remained where she was, motionless.

The minutes passed. She heard a man enter the room and saw Arai prostrate himself next to her. Lord Noguchi did not acknowledge him either. He clapped his hands, and several men came quickly into the room. Kaede felt them step by her, one after another. Glancing at them sideways, she could see they were senior retainers. Some wore the Noguchi crest on their robes, and some the triple oak leaf of the Tohan. She felt they would have happily stepped on her, as if she were a cockroach, and she vowed to herself that she would never let the Tohan or the Noguchi crush her.

The warriors settled themselves heavily on the matting.

'Lady Shirakawa,' Lord Noguchi said at last. 'Please sit up.'

As she did so, she felt the eyes of every man in the room on her. An intensity that she did not understand came into the atmosphere.

'Cousin,' the lord said, a note of surprise in his voice. 'I hope you are well.'

'Thanks to your care, I am,' she replied using the polite phrase although the words burned her tongue like poison. She felt her terrible vulnerability here, the only woman, hardly more than a child, among men of power and brutality. She snatched a quick glance at the lord from below her lashes. His face looked petulant to her, lacking either strength or intelligence, showing the spitefulness she already knew he possessed.

'There was an unfortunate incident this morning,' Lord Noguchi said. The hush in the room deepened. 'Arai has told me what happened. I want to hear your version.'

Kaede touched her head to the ground, her movements