



# Autumn Bridge

Takashi Matsuoka

*Autumn  
Bridge*

TAKASHI  
MATSUOKA

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# Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[List of Characters](#)

## **I.**

### **Lord Kiyori's Ghost**

[1: The Wraith](#)

[2: American Beauty Rose](#)

[3: The Mongol Trunk](#)

## **II.**

### **Above and Below**

[4: Abbess of Mushindo](#)

[5: The Escape of the Chinatown Bandit](#)

[6: Wild Eyes](#)

[7: The Secret Child](#)

[8: Men of Virtue](#)

[9: The Lord of Apples](#)

## **III.**

### **Tomorrow, Yesterday, Today**

[10: Views from the High Tower](#)

[11: The Curse of the Witch's Mother](#)

[12: Autumn Bridge](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Takashi Matsuoka](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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For my grandmothers  
Okamura Fudé, born in Wakayama in southern Kansai  
Yokoyama Hanayo, born in Bingo Village in Hiroshima Prefecture

For my mother  
Haruko Tokunaga, born in Hilo, Hawaii

And for my daughter  
Weixin Matsuoka, born in Santa Monica, California

With gratitude and respect  
For bringing me as close as I will ever be  
to  
Lady Shizuka

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## List of Characters

### 1281–1311

**HIRONOBU:** *First Great Lord of Akaoka*

**LADY SHIZUKA:** *Wife of Hironobu*

**GO:** *Hironobu's bodyguard*

### 1796–1867

**KIYORI:** *Great Lord of Akaoka, 1796–1860*

**GENJI:** *Great Lord of Akaoka, from 1861*

**SHIGERU:** *Son of Kiyori, Uncle of Genji*

**HIDÉ:** *Genji's Chief Bodyguard from 1861, later Senior General*

**TARO:** *Second in Command of Genji's army from 1861*

**HEIKO:** *A geisha; Genji's lover*

**HANAKO:** *A housemaid of the clan, later Hidé's wife*

**EMILY GIBSON:** *A Christian missionary*

**MATTHEW STARK:** *A Christian missionary, later a businessman in San Francisco*

**KIMI:** *A village girl*

**GORO:** *The village idiot*

**LORD SAEMON:** *Rival of Lord Genji*

### 1882

**JINTOKU:** *Abbess of Mushindo Abbey*

**MAKOTO STARK:** *Matthew Stark's son*

**SHIZUKA:** *Genji's daughter, namesake of the first Lady Shizuka*



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I

LORD  
KIYORI'S  
GHOST



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# 1

## The Wraith

*The Great Lord wields a sharp sword, rides a fierce warhorse, commands unruly vassals. He has taken the heads of ten thousand foes. His martial prowess is the marvel of the realm. But did he not enter this world bawling from a woman's womb? Did he not suckle helplessly at a woman's breast? And when the cold stars sparkle like ice in the winter sky, and the depth of eternity chills his heart, for what does he yearn more than a woman's embrace?*

AKI-NO-HASHI  
(1311)

### 1860, CLOUD OF SPARROWS CASTLE IN AKAOKA DOMAIN

Lady Shizuka had not changed in the slightest in all the years Lord Kiyori had known her. Her complexion was as smooth as the finest Ming porcelain, with the perfect pallor of a courtly woman in the inner chamber, unlined by the passage of time, unblemished by exposure to sunlight or hardship without any telltale signs of inappropriate deeds, thoughts, or feelings. Her eyes, when they were not regarding him—shyly or knowingly or beguilingly, as the case may be—looked off into an imaginary distance, with an expression of imminent pleased surprise, an expression accentuated by her high-plucked eyebrows. Her hair was not arranged into a coiffure of the modern type, with its complexity of folds, stacks, waves, and accessory devices, but simply middle-parted and tied with a light blue ribbon into a loose ponytail at her shoulders, from where it continued to flow down her back in an elegance of lustrous ebony all the way to the floor. Her gowns, too, in polished and crepe silks of contrasting textures, were of the classical type, loosely fitted and layered in complementary shades of blue, ranging from the brightness of a high mountain pool to the near black of the evening sky. She was the very picture of a princess of the Era of the Shining Prince. An era, he reminded himself, many centuries past.

Outside this room, the great military might of outsider nations crowded in against Japan. The gigantic steam-powered warships of America, Britain, France, and Russia now freely entered Japanese ports. Aboard those ships were cannons that could hurl explosive shells as big as men far past the shore, even beyond inland mountains and forests, and shatter armies concealed from sight before they were close enough to know who was killing them. The ocean that separated the islands of Japan from the rest of the world was no longer a defense. The navies of the outsiders had hundreds of such smoke-belching, cannon-bearing ships, and those ships could bring more than bombardment from afar. From distant shores, they could carry tens of thousands of outsider troops armed with more cannons, and with handheld firearms as well, and land them on the shores of Japan within a few months. Yet here in this room in the highest tower of Cloud of Sparrows Castle, the Japan of old lived. He could pretend



at least for a time, that this was the totality of the world.

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She saw him looking at her and smiled. Her expression was simultaneously innocent and conspiratorial. How did she manage it? Even the most brilliant of geisha could rarely blend the two into a single look. Demurely, she lowered her gaze and covered her girlish smile with the wide sleeves of her antique Heian kimono.

“You are embarrassing me, my lord. Is something amiss in my appearance?”

“How can there be?” Lord Kiyori said. “You are and will always be the most perfectly beautiful being in all the realm.”

A playful expression came into her eyes.

“So you say, again and again. Yet when was the last time you did me the honor of visiting me in my chambers?”

“I asked you never to speak of that again.” He knew by the heat in his face that he was blushing. How shameful for a man of his dignity and years to respond like a smitten boy. “That it happened at all is a regrettable error.”

“Because of the difference in our ages?”

Anyone seeing her would take her to be no more than eighteen or nineteen, in the first bloom of womanhood, a highborn lady without doubt, possibly even a virgin. Anyone looking at him would see a man of advanced years, posture unbent by age or defeat, standing in relaxed readiness, his white-streaked hair arranged in the elaborate style of a samurai lord.

The difference in their ages. Yes, there was that, too, wasn't there? It wasn't something he even thought about anymore.

He said, “It will never happen again.”

“Is that prophecy?” Her tone was mocking, but not harsh, as if she were inviting him to share in a joke rather than having one at his expense.

“You know very well it is not.”

“Are you not Okumichi no kami Kiyori, Great Lord of Akaoka? Then surely you are a prophet, as the leader of your clan in every generation.”

“So people say.”

“People say so because your actions are often not explicable except through foreknowledge. If you are not a prophet, then how can you know the future?”

“How indeed.” He had always felt the burden of the curse of prophecy, but lately, for the first time in his life, he had begun to feel the weight of time as well. Seventy-nine years. According to the

records of the ancients, men of old—heroes, sages, the blessed of the sacred gods—often lived to be hundred and more. He couldn't imagine it for himself. Indeed, it was a marvel he had lived as long he had, all things considered. He had acceded to the rule of the domain at fifteen, married at eighteen had sons late, and had lost his wife at forty. During all that time, he had secretly kept company with Lady Shizuka. How long had it been? This was the fourteenth year of the Emperor Komei. They had met in the seventeenth year of the Emperor Kōkaku, whose reign had lasted thirty-eight years. After him, the Emperor Ninkō's twenty-nine years intervened before the ascension of the present sovereign. Was it sixty-four years ago? Out of habit, he double-checked himself using the outsiders' calendar. The seventeenth year of the Emperor Kōkaku was A.D. 1796. This was A.D. 1860. Yes, sixty-four years.

She had said she was sixteen when they met. She said she was nineteen now. In Kiyori's eyes, she had not changed at all. He felt a chill not brought on by the mild winter morning.

"How should I know?" Shizuka said. "You are the one with the visions, are you not?"

"Am I?"

"Surely you are not suggesting it is I who sees?"

"You have always made the claim," Kiyori said.

"And you have always denied it," Shizuka said. Concentration brought the slightest of furrows to her brow. She looked boldly into Kiyori's eyes. "Are you finally conceding the possibility?"

Kiyori was prevented from answering immediately by a voice outside the door.

"The tea is ready, my lord."

"Enter."

He distractedly watched the young housemaid, Hanako, silently slide the door open, bow, quickly survey the room, and pause. How thoughtless of him. By standing idly by the window, he gave her no point of reference. She would not know where to serve the tea. But before Kiyori could seat himself across from Lady Shizuka, Hanako went precisely where he would have guided her, at the midpoint between where he stood and where a guest would naturally seat herself in relationship to him. Hanako never ceased to impress him. From the first, when she had entered his service as a nine-year-old orphan, she had exhibited a quick intelligence and a strong intuition superior to that of most of his samurai.

"Thank you, Hanako. You may go."

"Yes, lord." Hanako bowed. Walking in reverse so as not to turn her back on the lord, she began to withdraw from the room.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Shizuka said, her voice so faint a whisper it could have been imaginary.

“Hanako. One moment.” What had he forgotten? Oh, yes. “When the courier returns to Edo tomorrow, you will accompany him. There you will join Lord Genji’s household staff at Quiet Crane Palace.”

“Yes, lord.” Although the command had come without warning, Hanako showed no sign of surprise. She assented unquestioningly, which was exactly the correct response.

“You have served me very well, Hanako. Your parents would be proud of you.” Kiyori, of course, neither made apologies nor gave explanations for sending her away with no prior notice.

“Thank you, lord. You have been very kind to put up with my failings for so long.”

He ignored the formal expression of humility. “I will be very grateful if you serve my grandson well.”

“Yes, lord. I will do my best.”

When she had gone, Kiyori said, “Why am I sending her to Quiet Crane?”

“Are you asking me, my lord?”

“I am only thinking out loud,” Kiyori said. “A bad habit that has given me a reputation for more eccentricity than I deserve.”

“It is good you have thoughts on the matter, since the decision is yours.” She paused before adding, “Is it not?”

Kiyori smiled sourly. He was in the same fix he always got himself into whenever he had conversations with Shizuka. His reasoning in these matters, no matter how logical, was almost always wrong. Such was the difference between logic and prophetic guidance.

He said, “I am sending Hanako to my grandson because now that he has assumed most of the formal duties of the Great Lord of our domain, he is in greater need of reliable servants than I am. This is particularly so because three more Christian missionaries are scheduled to arrive in Edo any day now and they will live in Japan under our protection. Their presence will trigger a crisis that will determine the future of our clan. Beyond this immediate matter, I am hoping for a mutual blossoming of affection between Hanako and Genji. She is precisely the kind of woman he needs beside him in this perilous age.”

“How consistent you are, my lord. Such clarity of thought, always.”

“I take it I am mistaken.” Kiyori poured tea for them both, a polite formality since Shizuka, as usual, did not take hers.

“The great difference in their social status is not an impediment?”

“Because the future will bring chaos, character is far more important than status.”

“How wise,” Shizuka said, “how liberated from the artificial strictures of social convention, how keeping with the times.”

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“You disagree?”

“Not at all. My views are antiquated, and I know so little of the outside world, yet it is clear even one with such constricted understanding that inherent merit is now far more valuable than inherited rank.”

“You agree, yet you seem amused by my words. I take it Hanako and Genji are not destined for each other.”

“There is always more to know,” Shizuka said. “Whether it should be known is another matter. Do you wish to know more?”

“I wish to know no more than what I must know to insure the well-being of our clan.”

“Then you know enough,” Shizuka said.

Kiyori sipped his tea. His expression was placid, hiding the immense irritation he felt at her failure to satisfy his obvious curiosity. Would Hanako and Genji fall in love? He could not ask her, not because the question was inappropriate—it concerned the succession of the prophetic power to the generation after Genji, a singularly important matter, and not one of mere romantic speculation—but because the asking itself raised an implication he had managed to avoid for sixty-four years. If she was going to tell him, she would have to do so without any request from him.

When it became obvious that he would not continue the conversation, a look of sadness came into Shizuka’s eyes. She became very still. This happened not infrequently during their times together. In such moments of melancholy repose, her beauty was particularly ethereal. Could a man behold a vision so exquisite it alone was enough to drive him mad? If so, it would explain much, would it not? He had seen her at her most enchanting many, many times.

As he rose to leave, Shizuka surprised him. She said, “I have never asked you for a favor, my lord, nor will I ever ask another. Will you grant this one?”

“What is it?”

“If you will consent, you must do so without knowing.”

To hesitate would be unmanly. “Then I consent.”

Shizuka bowed deeply, her head to the floor before her. “Thank you, my lord.”

Kiyori waited for her to continue. She kept her head down for a long time without speaking. When she looked up, her eyes were wet. He could not remember ever having seen her cry before.

Tears streaming, she said, “Take your evening meal here, then stay the night with me.”

“This is a most unfair request,” Kiyori said, genuinely aggrieved. “You have tricked me into agreeing to do what I have pledged my life and honor not to do.”

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“I ask only that you share my chamber, not my bed. My blood is as purely samurai as your own. I would never deceive you into violating a pledge.”

Kiyori was still upset. He may not start the night in her bed, but being in the same room with her for an entire night, could he avoid ending there? Though his resolve was strong, he was a man, with all a man’s weaknesses. But there was no choice. He had already agreed. “Very well. Just this one night.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Shizuka said. She looked up and smiled at him through her tears.

Kiyori did not return her smile. It would be a very long night.

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Hanako packed her belongings for the trip to Edo. She could hear two of the younger maids chattering in the next room.

“Lord Kiyori has ordered that dinner tonight be served to him in the high tower.”

“No! How many settings?”

“Two! And he specifically said there was to be no sake.”

“Dinner in the high tower. And no sake. How strange. He would only have dinner there if he intended to see an important guest in private. But for such a guest, he would order sake, wouldn’t he?”

“Perhaps he doesn’t expect a guest of the usual kind.”

“You don’t mean—”

“Yes!”

“His wife, do you think, or the other?”

This had gone too far. Hanako put down her folded clothing, went to the door dividing the two rooms, and slid it open. The two maids jumped, saw who it was, and sighed in relief.

“Oh, it’s you, Hanako.”

“Yes, it’s me, fortunately. What if it weren’t? What if it had been Lord Kiyori?”

“Oh, he never comes into the maids’ quarters.”

“Nevertheless, stop gossiping,” Hanako said. “Or, if you must, then do so more discreetly.”

“Yes, you’re right,” one of the maids said. “Thank you for reminding us.” They both bowed to her.

Hanako began to close the door between the rooms again when one of them spoke up quickly, in a loud semblance of a whisper.

“Who do you think it is, Hanako? His wife? Or the other?”

“I don’t speculate about it. Nor should you.” She closed the door on the wide-eyed girls. After a few moments of silence, she heard them whispering to each other again.

In truth, Hanako had an opinion, of course, though she would never speak it. It would have been less distressing if Lord Kiyori were meeting his wife, Lady Sadako. But Hanako doubted that he was. During the thirteen years she had been in the service of the Okumichi clan, she had overheard bits and pieces of Lord Kiyori’s private conversations many times. When he was with his unseen visitor, he never said Lady Sadako’s name. And the voice he always used then was the hushed and secretive one characteristic of clandestine lovers. He was not meeting his wife’s ghost. He was meeting the other.

A chill ran through her body. It stopped under her skin just short of a shudder, and bumps rose on the skin of her arms, back, and neck as if tiny needles were poking her from within.

She wondered if Lord Genji would also meet with the other. Then she wondered whether he already had.

#### 1311, CLOUD OF SPARROWS CASTLE

Shizuka sat in meditative silence for several minutes after Lord Kiyori left the room. Then she rose and went to the window where he had stood and looked outside. Had he seen what she now saw? The evergreen hills of Shikoku Island, the heavy gray sky, the white fringes of waves whipped to life by distant ocean storms and winter winds? She should have asked him. Perhaps tonight she would. They would stand together by this window in the high tower of their castle, and they would look out over their domain of Akaoka. It would be their last night together. They would never see each other again.

“My lady.”

“Enter.”

The door slid open. Her chief lady-in-waiting, Ayamé, and four other attendants bowed at the doorway. None of them bowed in the normal ladylike manner, with both hands placed on the floor and the forehead lowered gracefully nearly all the way down. Instead, they knelt on one knee only and bowed at a slight incline from the waist, the bow of warriors on the battlefield. They were dressed in trouserlike *hakama* instead of the elaborate, flowing kimonos of women of the inner chamber, and the sleeves of their abbreviated jackets were tied back out of the way, so their arms could more freely wield the long-bladed *naginata* lances they carried. In addition to the *naginata*, each of the attendants had a short *wakizashi* sword tucked into her sash. Ayamé alone had two swords at her waist, a long-bladed *katana* in addition to the *wakizashi*. Except that she was a young woman of seventeen, she was the picture of a heroic samurai. Even her hair had been cut, no longer flowing to the floor and behind her, but truncated into a ponytail that stuck out barely ten inches from her head. Man or woman, how easy it would be to fall in love with someone so handsome.

Ayamé said, “It is as you said it would be, my lady. Lord Hironobu has not returned from the hunt. No messenger has come from him. And here at the castle, none of the samurai known to be loyal to the lord and to you can be found.”

“My lady,” said one of the attendants behind Ayamé, “it is not too late to flee. Take a horse now and ride to Lord Hikari’s castle. He will surely protect you.”

“Lord Hikari is dead,” Shizuka said. She went on as shocked gasps came from her ladies. “So is Lord Bandan. And their heirs and all their families. Treachery has reached almost everywhere. Tonight, their castles will go up in flames. Tomorrow night, the traitors will be here.”

Ayamé bowed, again the short military bow of the battlefield, her eyes locked with Shizuka’s. “We will take many of them with us, my lady.”

“Yes, we will,” Shizuka said. “And though we will die, they will not triumph. Lord Hironobu’s line will continue long after theirs have been extinguished.” She felt the child kick and placed a palm on her swollen belly. Patience, child, patience. You will enter this tragic world soon enough.

Her attendants bowed their heads and wept. Ayamé, the bravest of them, fought back her tears. They welled in her eyes, but did not fall.

It was as dramatic as a scene in one of those Kabuki plays that Lord Kiyori sometimes mentioned. But, of course, there was no such thing now. Kabuki would not be invented for another three hundred years.

#### 1860, CLOUD OF SPARROWS CASTLE

Shigeru alternated between great stillness and sudden movement, sliding from shadow to shadow through the corridors of his own clan’s castle as stealthily as an assassin. Though the ordinary eye could apprehend him if it alighted upon him, he moved in such a way that neither servants nor samurai noticed him. If they had, they would have acknowledged his presence, greeted him respectfully, and bowed. He in turn, seeing what was not there, would draw his swords and cut them down. This was his fear and the reason for his stealth. His control was slipping and he didn’t know how much he had left.

His ears resonated with a demonic cacophony. His eyes struggled to ignore transparent images of torture and slaughter. Though he could still distinguish the world he walked through from the world that emanated from his mind, he doubted that he could do so for much longer. He had not been able to sleep for days and the visions that kept him awake pushed him ever more strongly toward insanity. He was widely considered to be the greatest warrior of the present era, the only samurai in two hundred years worthy to be mentioned in the same breath as the legendary Musashi. With neither excessive pride nor false modesty, he believed his reputation was valid. But all his martial skills were useless against this enemy within.

As his malady worsened, he had resisted turning to the only person who could possibly help him. His father. As Lord Kiyori’s only surviving son, Shigeru had been too ashamed to confess such weakness. In every generation of the Okumichi clan, one was born with the gift of prophecy. In the

generation before, it had been his father. In the generation after his own, it was his nephew, Genji. In his, the burden had been placed on Shigeru himself. For over sixty years, Kiyori had used prescience to guide and protect the clan. How could Shigeru go crying to him the moment his own visions began?

Now, almost too late, he realized he had no choice. Visions did not come in the same way to everyone, nor could every seer cope with them on their own. He was being inundated with a hallucinatory deluge. Gigantic freakish machines resembling monsters of fable and legend writhed over the landscape, consuming passive lines of people dressed in bizarre uniform clothing. Air of colorful, putrid layers smothered the castle and the town. At night, the sky itself growled like the belly of a huge invisible beast and gave birth to a rain of fire that washed over screaming victims below.

What did this mean? If they were visions of the future, in what direction did they point him? Only someone with a similar experience could understand.

The conversations of maids told him where Lord Kiyori was. In the high tower. Because he was compelled to avoid being seen, it took Shigeru the better part of an hour to travel a distance that would normally have taken only a few minutes. But he congratulated himself on getting there undetected. No one had greeted him, so no one had died. Also, during the prolonged journey, his visions had abated. They would surely return soon enough, but the respite was welcome. He was just about to announce himself to his father when he heard him speak.

“I am sending Hanako to my grandson,” Kiyori said, “because now that he has assumed most of the formal duties of the Great Lord of our domain, he is in greater need of reliable servants than I am.”

Kiyori paused as if listening to a response, then spoke again. He continued in this way for some time. Outside the door, Shigeru focused his entire attention as carefully as he could, but did not succeed a single time in hearing the voice of whoever was with his father.

“Because the future will bring chaos,” Kiyori said, as if answering a question, “character is far more important than status.” Then after a short pause, “You disagree?” And after another pause, “You agree, yet you seem amused by my words. I take it Hanako and Genji are not destined for each other.”

Hanako and Genji? Shigeru was shocked. Hanako was a maid in the castle. How could she be destined for a lord? Surely his father was not plotting some kind of devious mischief against his own grandson? Shigeru had to see Kiyori’s companion. Whenever he spoke, Shigeru could tell the direction in which Kiyori faced by the waning and waxing of his voice. He waited for the appropriate moment and silently moved the sliding door enough to create a sliver of an opening. Moving across from side to side, he scanned the room within as the conversation continued.

“I wish to know no more than what I must know to insure the well-being of our clan.”

Kiyori sat in the center of the room sipping tea. The setting was for two. Another cup, filled, sat untouched across from Kiyori. Shigeru completed his survey of the room. There was no one else there. Had the person left through a secret passage unknown to Shigeru? That seemed unlikely. But he remembered that Kiyori had designed the tower himself, and no one else had seen the plans. Whoever had met with him certainly had not gone out the window. The only other way down was past Shigeru.



“What is it?” Kiyori said.

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Thinking he had been seen, Shigeru went to his knees and bowed. He hesitated for a moment, not knowing what to say, and during his hesitation Kiyori spoke again.

“Then I consent.”

Shigeru rose quickly. So someone was still there. Again, he looked into the room. Kiyori looked straight ahead and spoke again as if addressing someone directly in front of him.

“This is a most unfair request,” Kiyori said. “You have tricked me into agreeing to do what I have pledged my life and honor not to do.”

Shigeru shrank back, suddenly cold.

“Very well,” he heard his father say. “Just this one night.”

Shigeru retreated, moving with care at first, then he fled from the castle as swiftly as he could. His father could not help him, for he, too, was insane. Kiyori had been speaking to a woman. It might have been Lady Sadako, Kiyori’s wife and Shigeru’s mother. That was bad enough. Lady Sadako had died shortly after Shigeru’s birth. But he didn’t think the lady in question had been his late mother. Kiyori had spoken of a broken pledge in a peculiar, conspiratorial manner. He would not use such a tone with his own wife, not even the ghost of his wife.

The high tower of Cloud of Sparrows Castle, where Kiyori always spent so much time alone, had long had the reputation of being haunted. It was said the uncertain shadows of twilight there often resembled ancient bloodstains. Such stories always arose around places of ancient tragedy, and which castle in Japan had not seen its share? In this case, the tragedy had been treason, assassination, and gruesome murders that had nearly extinguished the Okumichi clan in its earliest days. That had been in the fall of the tenth year of the Emperor Go-Nijō.

The witch and princess, Lady Shizuka, had spent her last hours in that very room of the tower.

His father was consorting with a ghoul dead for more than five hundred years.

### 1311, CLOUD OF SPARROWS CASTLE

Shizuka and Ayamé looked out the windows of the high tower and watched the three streams of warriors moving toward Cloud of Sparrows.

“How many do you think they are?” Shizuka said.

“Six hundred from the east, three hundred from the north, another hundred from the west,” Ayamé said.

“And how many are we?”

“Your sixteen ladies-in-waiting are within the tower. Thirty men, all personal retainers of Lord Hironobu, await the traitors at the gates of the castle. They came as soon as they were summoned. Messengers have been sent to find him. Perhaps he will arrive before the assault begins.”

“Perhaps,” Shizuka said, knowing he would not.

Ayamé said, “I find it difficult to accept that Go has betrayed Lord Hironobu and yourself. Is there no other possibility?”

“Go has arranged for Chiaki to be away from here at the critical moment,” Shizuka said, “because he knows his son’s loyalty is unshakable. Chiaki’s absence is the proof. Go does not wish to kill him when he kills me.”

“How cruel life is,” Ayamé said. “Lord Hironobu would have died in childhood if not for Go. He would not have lived to become a Great Lord without Go’s steadfastness and courage. And now this. Why?”

“Jealousy, greed, and fear,” Shizuka said. “They can destroy heaven itself if the gods are lax for even a moment. How much more vulnerable are we here below.”

They watched the enemy multitude merge and form a huge pool of warriors. Well before the sun fell behind the mountains, campfires sprang to life among them.

“Why do they wait?” Ayamé said. “They have an overwhelming advantage. One thousand against less than fifty.”

Shizuka smiled. “They are afraid. Night falls. It is a time of power for witches.”

Ayamé laughed. “Such fools. And they aspire to rule the world.”

“Such is the aspiration of fools,” Shizuka said. “Tell my attendants and Chiaki’s samurai to rest. We are safe for a while.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“You need not return right away, Ayamé. I will be fine. Spend time with your sister.”

“Are you certain, my lady? What of the child?”

“She’s well,” Shizuka said, “and will arrive when she should and not before.”

“She?”

“She,” Shizuka said.

If it was truly possible to feel great joy and great sorrow in a single moment without distinction, then perhaps Ayamé managed it then, as tears fell from her eyes and her face brightened with a perfect smile. She bowed low and departed in silence.

Shizuka composed herself and awaited Kiyori's arrival.

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## 1860, CLOUD OF SPARROWS CASTLE

Hanako walked through the central garden of the castle. She would not usually presume to do so. The garden existed for the benefit of the lords and ladies of the clan, not for servants. But she was willing to risk censure. Tomorrow she would leave for Edo. Who knew when she would return. Perhaps never. She wanted to see the roses before she left. They blossomed here in such profusion, the castle was sometimes called Rose Garden Keep, instead of Cloud of Sparrows. She preferred the flowery name.

One blossom caught her eye. It was smaller than the rest, but fully petaled, and so red it could have been that color's definition.

Its brilliance in the fading light of day was irresistible. She reached out to touch it. An unseen thorn pricked her. When she drew her hand away, she saw a single drop of blood, the exact color of the petals, forming a tiny rosebud on her fingertip.

Hanako shuddered. Was it not an omen?

She hurried away to resume her evening duties.

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"What are you doing here?" Kiyori said.

Hanako and a second maid carrying the settings for dinner entered as he expected. Behind them, unannounced, came Shigeru.

Shigeru bowed at the threshold of the doorway.

"I apologize for appearing without your prior approval."

His quick survey of the room revealed no one other than his father. The dimensions of the room were unchanged, so no secret compartments had been installed since he had last been here. Yet tonight, as earlier in the day, he was sure his father had been talking to someone.

Kiyori did not like to be surprised. Hanako should have alerted him before she opened the door. He cast a disapproving look her way. But her startled expression showed that she had been unaware of Shigeru's presence. That could only mean that Shigeru had used stealth to remain undetected behind her. He noted his son's newly gaunt facial features and excessively bright eyes. Under other circumstances, his bizarre behavior and the clear outward signs of a deep inner turmoil would make Shigeru the immediate center of his focus. Tonight, however, Lady Shizuka must have his full attention. For all the years he had been seeing her, her visits had been no more often than twice a year at most. During the past week, he had seen her every day. This was surely a sign of his own mental deterioration. Okumichi prophets with rare exception were immolated by their prophetic powers at the end. Why should he be an exception? But he was determined not to shame himself and his clan. If he

own time had come, and he was no longer of use to anyone, he would put an end to his own life rather than die a madman. He would have to deal with Shigeru later. If there was a later.

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“Well, what is it?”

“I had hoped to speak with you on an important matter. However, I see that you are expecting a guest, so I will not intrude further. I will ask for your indulgence at another time.” Shigeru bowed and departed. He had already done what was necessary earlier while the food was being prepared. He had come only to verify what he suspected. The guest was visible to no one other than his father.

• • • • •

“The turning points of his life have already been reached,” Lady Shizuka said after they were once again alone. “There is no more to do but to await the inevitable unfolding.”

“That is not encouraging,” Kiyori said.

“Why must you be encouraged or discouraged?” Shizuka said. “Facts are clearest when emotional qualities are not unnecessarily imposed upon them.”

“Human beings,” he said, “always feel emotions, though by training, inclination, or circumstance they cannot and do not always act upon them.”

“Human beings,” she said. “Was it my imagination, or did you emphasize those words?”

“I did. I don’t know what you truly are, but you are not human.”

She raised a sleeve to cover her mouth and laughed, her eyes sparkling with an almost childish merriment.

“How alike we are, my lord, and how unlike. At the end of our time together, you have reached a conclusion similar to the one I reached at the beginning, when you first appeared to me.”

It was several moments before Kiyori recovered enough to speak. “When *I* appeared to *you*?”

She rose, the silk of her layered kimonos rustling ever so slightly, the sound of wisteria leaves gently touched by a light breeze, and went to the eastern window.

“Will you indulge me, my lord?”

Kiyori, too shocked to resist, rose and stood beside her. She gestured out at the landscape.

“What do you see?”

“Night,” he said.

“And what features of the night stand out?”

He struggled to center himself. Regulating his breathing, slowing his racing heart, ignoring the storm of thoughts that pressed against his eyes and temples, he concentrated on the night. At sea, vigorous onshore wind raised whitecaps the height of a man and threw them against the rocky shore below. The same wind had blown the sky clear, and the stars sparkled unobstructed by clouds or mist. Inland, the sound of the wind in the trees drowned out the call of nightbirds.

He said, "A strong wind, a clear sky, rough seas."

She said, "It is night, but there is no wind at all. Mists roll down through the valleys, drift eastward over the campfires, and out into the ocean. In the morning, it will return to land as heavy fog. In the hour of the dragon, when the fog lifts, I will die." She smiled. "Of course, that means nothing to you since you believe I am already dead, and have been for five hundred years."

"I see no campfires," he said.

"I know you do not," she said, "because just as I am not really there, you are not really here." She moved suddenly with unexpected speed, and before he could evade her, she touched him briefly. He felt, not the warmth of another's hand, but instead—

"A chill," she said, completing his thought, "not on the skin but deep within the bones, not like the chill brought by a northern wind, but sharper, as of a premonition of disaster."

"Yes," he said. "And for you?"

"The same," she said. "Listen. What do you hear?"

"The wind, rising."

"I hear a flute," she said. "Lady Ayamé, playing 'The Unseen Moon.' "

"I know the song," he said. "When Genji was a child, he played it often."

"What does it sound like?"

He felt that chill again.

He said, "The wind, rising."

"Yes," she said. "The wind, rising."

• • • • •

Shigeru knelt before the altar of the temple in the dim light of a single candle. Only one course of action remained open to him. Had he not been so caught up in his duelist's ambition for so many years, he might have noticed that something was amiss with his father. Perhaps he would not have been so quick to ignore the rumors he had heard. Now it was too late.

He lit the first of the one hundred and eight sticks of incense he would burn during this sitting. Or

hundred and eight were the afflictions of man, one hundred and eight were the eons he would spend one hundred and eight hells for the crimes he had begun to commit this night. By now, his father was already dead, poisoned by the blowfish bile Shigeru had put into his food. After his repentance ceremony was completed, he would find his wife and children. Then only his nephew, Genji, would be left. Soon the opportunity would come and Genji, too, would die. The curse of prophetic vision would end. That the Okumichi bloodline would also end was an unavoidable consequence.

With a reverent bow, Shigeru placed the incense on his father's funerary altar. "I am sorry, Father. Please forgive me."

He took a second stick and repeated the procedure.

"I am sorry, Father. Please forgive me."

The curse would end. It must.

"I am sorry, Father. Please forgive me."

The future was not meant to be known. When it was, it turned and devoured the knowers.

"I am sorry, Father. Please forgive me."

He hoped Lord Kiyori had not suffered. Before it brought death, blowfish bile induced hallucinations of the most vivid kind. Perhaps he had imagined himself in the embrace of his ghostly lover for the last time.

Shigeru lit the fifth incense stick. Smoke began to fill the small temple.

Outside, in the sky above, clouds had been blown ashore by the rising wind. The moon, full and bright an hour ago, was now hidden and unseen.

#### QUIET CRANE PALACE IN EDO

Okumichi no kami Genji, next in line of succession to the rule of Akaoka Domain, reclined on the floor in his usual unmartial manner, propped up on an elbow, a cup of sake in his hand, a faint smile on his lips. Most of the dozen geisha in attendance were dancing and singing and plucking out gay tunes on the strings of their *koto* and *shamisen*. One sat by his side, ready to pour should his cup need refilling.

She said, "Why have you stopped singing, my lord? Surely you know the words. 'The Abbot and the Courtesan' is one of the most popular songs of the season."

He laughed and raised his cup to her. "In a contest between singing and drinking, I fear singing must always lose." He lowered his cup after taking only the slightest of sips from it. His manner was that of an inebriated man, but his eyes, clear and bright, were not.

Genji's hair, elaborately and formally arranged as befitted that of a high lord, was in slight disarray.

with a stray lock falling across his forehead. It not only emphasized his air of mild drunkenness, also suggested a certain effeminacy, a quality suggested as well by the kimono he wore. It was much too brightly colored and intricately embroidered for a serious samurai of twenty-four, especially for one who was destined to be a Great Lord someday. In all Japan, there were only two hundred sixty of them, each an absolute ruler in his own domain. In Genji's case, the inappropriateness of his attire was further highlighted by his face, which bordered perilously on prettiness. Indeed, his smooth skin, long lashes, and delicately shaped lips would have improved the appearance of any of the geisha present. Except one. It was she who had Genji's full attention at the moment, though he disguised his interest well enough to conceal it.

Mayonaka no Heiko—Midnight Equilibrium—sat on the opposite side of the room, playing shamisen. She was this season's most celebrated geisha. Genji had heard of her reputed perfection repeatedly during recent weeks. He had not given it much credence. Such reports were bandied about regularly every season. Last year's incomparable beauty was inevitably eclipsed by a new one the next year, just as this year's would give way to yet another next year. Finally, he invited her to his palace less out of interest than in order to maintain his reputation as the shallowest, most unserious lord in a city of the Shogun's capital city of Edo. Now here she was, and to Genji's great surprise, she surpassed even the most fevered descriptions he had heard.

All true beauty transcended the merely physical. Yet her every action was so exquisite, he was not entirely sure whether he was seeing or imagining. The closing and opening of the delicate fingers in her hand, the inclination of her head in one direction or another, the slight parting of her lips as she inhaled in polite surprise at someone's supposedly clever remark, the way her smile began, not at her mouth, but in her eyes, as every sincere expression did.

This is not to say she was physically deficient in any way. Her eyes were the perfect shape of elongated almonds, her skin as unblemished as the nocturnal snow falling in the light of the full winter moon, the subtle curves of her body in her kimono an ideal complement to the fall of the silk, the small bones of her wrists suggestive of a tantalizing bodily fragility.

Genji had never seen a woman so beautiful. He had not even imagined one.

The geisha next to him sighed.

"Oh, that Heiko. Whenever she is around, it is impossible for the rest of us to keep anyone's interest. How cruel life is."

"Who are you talking about?" Genji said. "How can I see anyone else when you are so close?" His gallantry would have been more effective if he had said her name, but in truth, he could no longer remember it.

"Ah, Lord Genji, you are so very kind. But I know when I am defeated." She smiled, bowed, and made her way across the room to Heiko's side. They exchanged some words. Heiko passed her shamisen to the other geisha and came to sit beside Genji. When she crossed the room, the eyes of every man there followed her. Even Saiki, his dour Lord Chamberlain, and Kudo, the commander of his bodyguard corps, could not restrain themselves. If any of his samurai were traitors, as he

grandfather suspected, now would have been the ideal moment to assassinate Genji. Except, of course, even the traitors, if there were any, were also watching Heiko. Such was the power of beauty, overwhelmed even discipline and reason.

“I did not mean to interrupt your performance,” Genji said.

Heiko bowed and sat beside him. The slight silken rustle of her kimono reminded him of the sound of waves receding gently from a distant shore.

“You have not interrupted me, my lord,” Heiko said.

This was the first time he had heard her speak. It took all of his considerable self-discipline to keep from gasping in awe. Her voice had the quality of chimes, not in an exact sense, but in the way that their reverberations seemed endless even as they faded away. Now that she was close, he saw a hint of light freckles beneath her makeup. She could easily have concealed them, but she had not. The slight flaw brought to mind the necessary imperfections of life itself, its brevity and unpredictability, and imbued her beauty with a perfect hint of melancholy. Was she really so ravishing, or was his pretense of drunkenness more authentic than he had intended?

“I have interrupted you,” Genji said. “You are no longer playing the shamisen.”

“That is true,” Heiko said, “but I am still performing.”

“You are? Where is your instrument?”

She opened her empty arms as if presenting something. Her smile was as slight as it could be and still exist. She looked him directly in the eyes and did not turn away until he blinked, surprised by her words as well as her gaze.

“And what is the nature of your performance?”

“I am pretending to be a geisha who is pretending to be more interested in her guest than she really is,” Heiko said. Her smile was slightly more apparent now.

“Well, that is very honest of you. No geisha I have known has ever made such a confession. Isn’t it against the rules of your craft to admit even the possibility of insincerity?”

“It is only by breaking the rules that I will attain my goal, Lord Genji.”

“And what is your goal?”

Above the sleeve that Heiko lifted to cover the smile on her lips, her eyes smiled brightly at Genji.

She said, “If I told you that, my lord, there would be nothing for you to discover but my body, and how long would that hold your interest, seductive and skilled though it may be?”

Genji laughed. “I have heard of your beauty. No one warned me of your intelligence.”



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