

Prologue to *Mokusatsu*

Gordon T. Allred

“YOU SHALL NOT DO IT,” she said. A mere murmur, those words, deceptively soft, even gentle. Almost subliminal, though distinctly determined to anyone who knew her as he did. She had, in fact, employed the imperative form of the verb: *iccha*. At nineteen, some four years his junior, Midori possessed a remarkable vocabulary and a spectacular intellect, both matched only by her will power and determination.

For some time he gazed at her in wonderment—half vexed, half amused, then fondly indulgent. “Shall not do it?”

She barely nodded, and again her very restraint evoked resolution. “*Hai . . . iccha dame!*” The tip of her tongue glistened between the final words. They were sitting upon cushions covered in velvet of midnight blue, separated by an oval-shaped table two feet high. In its center was an ivory chess set, to the left, a china teapot, its spout faintly steaming, the matching turquoise-colored cups still empty and expectant in their saucers. To the right lay an ancestral dagger with its smooth gold handle, its steel blade engraved down the center with tiny chrysanthemums, sixteen petals each.

For a time he simply gazed into her eyes, remarkably large, dark, and pellucid. Captured now within their depths were the high, light-filled window panels, the somber pines of the hillside taking on the beginning day at their tips. The northern outskirts of the city three miles beyond were beginning to shimmer.

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His own eyes were extraordinarily keen, more so than those of nearly all his compatriots within the Matsuyama Air Force Wing to which he would shortly be returning. From only three feet away, he could actually descry his own reflection in her pupils against the sharply angled light of morning. Twin replicas of himself, yet somehow not himself, staring back with a steadfastness remarkably earnest. For some reason they made him want to cry.

“You presume to command me?” he inquired, speaking as quietly as Midori had, almost as gently. It was an attempt at irony, levity to lighten the strain, to forefend against the sense of glistening at the edges of his tear ducts. A descendant of the samurai did not cry. And was he not, indeed, a member of the proud and honored Yamato race? His very name, like her own, was in fact Yamato. Unbidden, the words were echoing within his mind now, words he had repeated often at moments of far greater emotion. Repeated in sonorous and chanting unison with his fellow pilots, especially those who were about to embark upon their rendezvous with the gods of annihilation—of *kamikaze*, the divine wind:

The airman’s color
is the color of the cherry blossom . . .
See, oh see, how the cherry blossoms fall
on the hills of Yoshino.
If we are born proud sons of the Yamato race,
let us die fighting in the skies.

In reality, of course, it would not be death in the skies, not for a *kamikaze*. Like many of his compatriots, he would die instead, if he were skilled and brave enough, unwavering in his desperate mission, within a mere fleeting instant, a mere second of profound and ultimate realization. He would plunge his bomb-laden aircraft into an American ship off Okinawa, and they would all die together. His friends his enemies, his enemies his friends. Who were they really? Who was he? In the end, perhaps it made no difference, for their ashes would drift at the command of forces beyond the control of frail mortals from the beginning. Perhaps some of them would mingle indiscriminately at times within the restless bosom of the sea.

“What?” he asked, wrenched from his reverie.

“I said ‘yes,’” her voice repeated. “I command you.”

Laughing despite himself, he reached out, wincing slightly, knocked over some of the ivory chessmen with the sleeve of his kimono, and placed his hand, deeply tanned, a knuckle badly scarred, upon her own. A small hand, achingly graceful, exquisitely manicured and vulnerable, the color of the daylight. "You?" he inquired. "A mere girl? You? My cousin?"

"I am not a mere girl," she proclaimed at last. "I am now a woman." And suddenly the truth of her words surged unexpectedly within him, almost seemed to thrum like startled wings.

Midori's kimono, in contrast to the slate-like drabness of his own, was somehow quite miraculous. Green and blue, silver and shimmering with flecks and eyelets of pink and lavender. It was not the usual attire for anyone attending the Yoshitaka Women's College—a formless long-sleeved blouse and skirt, both an almost dingy black.

Why, he wondered, had she dressed in her most expensive and exotic attire on such a day as this? Momentarily he felt rising amusement. If anyone alive were the stark antithesis of obese Japanese womanhood, it was his cousin. But why the kimono? To commemorate somehow their pending separation two days hence when his sick leave would be over? To savor and celebrate this special time of absence and nostalgia there in her father's household, everyone gone but the two of them? Surely, one way or another, it had to be for him. And yet . . . it seemed there was something more.

Creative like her mother, Midori had early on broken with the gracious yet stereotypical art forms of Japanese heritage. "We have more than enough paintings of snow-capped Fujiyamas," she had once asserted during one of his brief leaves from the military, "toris, glowing lanterns, and snow flakes, or adorable little chickadees flitting about among the cherry blossoms. And of course . . ." even more emphatically, casting up her lovely young hands like swallows, "all those impossibly fragile ocean waves, scrolled and crinkled with froth like lace at their edges."

Astonished and mystified, Zenji had laughed, replying that perhaps there would never be enough of such things, that they were and always would be an intrinsic part of Nippon's identity, its essence and mystique. Once the tradition was gone, he argued, what remained? Ironic indeed that they should hold such opposing views considering their backgrounds. Midori as usual, however, was not to be dissuaded. Tradition, why, of course, she had countered, but to be constantly and permanently immured in the past was neither to live nor to die. It was merely to exist.

How did one truly live without freedom and without the power to innovate?

The nearby wall, in fact, contained a compelling, indeed imposing, example of her artistic iconoclasm: an abstract oil three feet wide and eight feet high of something that might, Zenji reflected, have been born of fire. But what? He was never sure—a bird-like creation, unquestionably, rising in triumph heavenward. Part flamingo perhaps, part pheasant, even peacock, and who knew what else? Eagle as well? All of it wreathed in voracious flames of scarlet, orange, and yellow that dazzled the eye and startled the heart. It might, Zenji mused, even scorch the fingertips of a blind person, just before it cooled along the edges with aquamarine and blue, smoke of muted purple-gray. Definitely no dear little chickadee!

“So then, what is it?” he had once inquired, immediately mindful of his crassness.

“What would you like it to be?” came the reply, leaving him at a momentary loss for words. “I must confess,” she mused reluctantly, “that it was inspired in part by the ancient phoenix legend, but it is also intended to be a highly personal matter.”

“It shows tremendous talent in any case,” he had assured her.

“True, I am your cousin,” Midori now observed, returning him to the present, “but I am also a good deal more than that.”

Zenji’s thick, dark eyebrows rose. “Oh?”

“Yes,” she said. “Always have been.”

“Ah *so desuka!*” He managed a tone of good-humored indulgence. Outward calm and feigned indifference. Inwardly, a rising turmoil. “Do you wish to—ah—explain?”

Her head was bowed slightly, her eyes gazing into the mirrored surface of the table. “No, the time is not ripe.” A flight of crows drifted by the vaulted windows, cawing, rising upon the thermals, their feathers a lacquered black in the gathering light. Momentarily Zenji felt a sense of foreboding. “But it has always been so,” she murmured, “from the days of my earliest childhood. Before you ever left this land . . . to become an American.”

“I am no longer an American,” he replied, finding it difficult to keep his voice steady. “I never was, in fact—not officially. I couldn’t become one if I wanted to. Having been born in Nippon, I am not deemed worthy of U. S. citizenship.”

Her glance rose, regarding him once more. “You still do not know

who you are, Zenji." A long and simmering pause. "And that is the heart of our problem."

"Our problem," he said, half question, half confirmation.

"Yes, *our* problem." Eyelids lowering, she reached for the teapot, deftly pouring them each a cup of the steaming liquid. "That is only one reason of many, however, why you must not volunteer." She placed the teapot back on its pad. "For one thing, you are still too badly injured to fly."

"Not that badly," he insisted, knowing that she was probably correct.

"You are. I can see it in your every movement, your face and eyes. You need a lot more time to convalesce. Special care. Besides, what earthly good will it do?" It was a question she had reiterated one way or another frequently since his return from the air base on Shikoku. But now it came with unexpected passion. "Is it not enough—" Her voice fractured. For a time, she sat there, refusing to look at him, "that my brother whom you love as I do—that my brother was blasted from the sky and into oblivion at the mere touch of a stupid button? Nothing left . . ." The words clotted, and she began to weep almost inaudibly.

"Stop, Midori, please." His throat was filled with alum.

"The spirit that was . . ."

"Don't! I am telling you," he commanded. "It has already been hard enough." Suddenly, relentlessly, the obsession had returned. And he was back there again in the skies of Yamaguchi, the American fighter wildly banking and rolling, Shigeru tenaciously pursuing in his Mitsubishi Zero, cutting inside the enemy's immense and desperate arc through feathery clouds of morning pink.

"The face that was once my brother!" she gasped in a desperate sob.

He winced, as much from heart pang as his own recent injury, feeling a sharp acidic twinge, hoping fervently to avert the image. No use. For suddenly, two Mustang P-51s had materialized, seemingly from the void—energy transformed into matter. Diving unexpectedly out of the sun at steeply opposing angles, they were pumping a steady stream of lead into his cousin's cockpit. Fifty caliber bullets ravaged his body in an instant, tore away the top of his leather helmet and skull, blasted free the entire canopy, and sent it tumbling back into the slipstream, shearing off a wing as though it were made of cardboard. The wing vaulted and flipped end over end, its brave red circle, insignia of the rising sun, intermittently flashing and vanishing in the emptiness below.

Simultaneously, the decimated remains of Shigeru's Zero spiraled into a vast and groaning barrel roll, vomiting smoke which spawned a ferocious orange fireball and obliterated all that remained of man and plane. Nothing but particles, some still faintly flickering like the remains of holiday fireworks in their descent toward the ocean. Water, in the end, as always, prevailed over fire.

All this, Zenji had viewed from a mere two hundred yards, such stark and swift violence that he'd scarcely had time to react. Only a sensation in his gut like the impact from a lead pipe—that and utter incredulity. Before he had closed the distance in pursuit, the Mustangs were sweeping upward in an immense, exultant gyre, vanishing into a cloud of celestial whiteness, so luminous with the morning sun that it hurt his eyes. For a mere slivered instant, however, he had spotted one of the pilots giving the other a two-fingered "V" for victory, teeth bared in a savage grin of triumph, goggles flashing like heliographs.

Luckily, they had not detected him, for by then he was too devastated over the sudden annihilation of his cousin for a rational response.

"Shigeru awaits us at the Yasakuni Shrine in Tokyo," he said quietly, struggling to contain himself. "Your parents may be visiting there this very—"

"The Yasakuni Shrine!" Midori wailed. "That is not *good* enough!" Her cry was so sudden and desolate he jerked as though slapped. "Who is Shigeru now, really? What has he become? "Religious answers are all so . . ." For a moment she gazed upward as though seeking a sign, demanding one. "So elusive. Like smoke, like mist, that vanishes in the morning sunlight."

"Many people have found great comfort in religion," he reminded her, "highly intelligent people including your own parents, in fact."

"True," she agreed. "But I cannot. And like so many others, they embrace both Buddhism and Shintoism. They pick and choose from each whatever best suits their emotional needs. Covering all bases. Isn't that how they say it in America? Last week, in fact, just before they were leaving, Mother told me she hoped that Shigeru was now a guardian warrior in the spirit world."

He watched her, waiting. "So?" A stubborn pause. "What did you tell her?"

"I didn't answer, Zenji. I bit my tongue. But guarding what and why?" Her laughter was cold, almost metallic. "What in the name of

heaven is he guarding, and from whom? America? Australia and England? Will they be bombing us there in the next realm, if there actually is one, as well? And if so, why can't the million and one gods of Shintoism do a little guarding on their own for a change?"

"You are very irreverent, Midori," he said, realizing simultaneously that his observation was a bit hypocritical.

"I don't care," she countered. "I only care about the truth." She drew a deep, shuddering breath, holding it, staring into her teacup as though it were a talisman. "Who knows?" she added with seeming irrelevance. "Perhaps some day I may join you in your curious little Utah religion." A pause. "For want of anything better," she added indifferently.

He stared. "My curious little *Utah* religion? Are you joking?" She shrugged again, still absorbed in the teacup. "Why? To spite your parents and your ancestors?"

"No, not to spite them by any means, but I cannot reconcile their views with my own, Zenji. Never have, never will."

"Because we have lost Shigeru?" he persisted. She failed to reply, her features seeming to dissolve. "Besides, you know almost nothing about Mormonism."

"Nor do you," Midori retorted. "Not nearly as much as you should, in any case." Momentarily he felt irritated, insulted, yet also had to admit that it was true. "But sometimes I just feel things," she murmured.

The tops of the hillside pines were now rinsed in a light the color of lemons, and several crows had returned, settling there. One had landed on a locust branch beside the nearest window. There it teetered for a moment, fluttering its wings and bending its tail a time or two. Its eye, glossy and dark purple like a ripe currant, regarded them steadily except for an occasional dimpling. The nictitating membrane, Zenji reminded himself, something learned in his high school zoology class from the pink-faced, silver-haired Albert Pendleton. A man of gentle good humor and benevolence who had also been his ward bishop.

"I must leave now to pick up my report card and yearbook," Midori said, relatively calm once more. Her graduation was scheduled for the next evening, and Zenji planned to attend, along with two of their uncles and aunts. "But I will not remain for the autographs and all those trite and sentimental messages."

"You might regret it," he warned, remembering his own yearbook at graduation time, the Ogden High School 1940 *Classicum*, with its rows of

familiar faces in black and white, the ink-scrawled messages in pencil or fountain pen—corny, half-baked, some sentimental, some laughable, yet also endearing and already redolent with the past. At the moment he recalled especially that flamboyant scrawl above his photo with the wrestling team: “Hey, Champ—way to go at State!!! What say we grab some babes and hit the beach at Pine View now school’s out??? Your Buddy Always—Danny Boy.”

More than four years ago, wafted off and away like bright balloons on the wind. What, he often wondered, had become of Danny? Most likely in the military now. Army Air Force? Some irony, that one! What about Dolly Murasaki and “J Town,” Ogden’s own little Japanese community? Everybody carted off to Lord knew where along with his father?

“No, definitely not.” Midori shook her head, retrieving him from the embrace of nostalgia. Clearly, there was no sense in discussing the matter. “I will return in about two hours, and we shall have a late breakfast. Something special.”

She peered at him inquisitively as though in imitation of the crow, reading his thoughts perhaps. “So? Will your stomach wait?”

He grinned. “It has waited all night. What is another hour or two?”

“But . . .” Her countenance grew mournful, and he knew that she would not be denied. Now, within the few minutes remaining, she would force a showdown. “You must promise me, Zen, upon your honor, that you will not even think of such insanity. Never again.”

“It may be insane to you—” he began, but she cut him off.

“Promise me, that under no circumstances will you volunteer for such a flight, insist on casting your life away in such a dubious cause. A lost cause, to tell the truth.”

Tucking in his chin, he savored his tea, eyes half closed. “Whether this country’s cause is lost or not remains to be seen. But when I return to Matsuyama, I may ask to be assigned.”

“But why? Zenji, that is so stupid! So blind and stubborn! Because of Nishizawa?” He took a deep breath, the memory rife with bitterness and pain, magnified constantly now by his injury. Nishizawa, his mentor and hero, the greatest Japanese fighter pilot of all time, over a hundred enemy planes to his credit. Late member of the Matsuyama Wing now, along with her brother Shigeru. The wing to which Zenji himself still belonged for at least a brief season. “Because he volunteered instead of waiting to be

summoned?" she asked. "You may be summoned all too soon regardless, without rushing headlong into it."

He merely shrugged, breathing still more deeply. Increasingly, the pressure of life and of death was so great he could not seem to get enough air. "Volunteered, yes, immediately after our first suicide attack at Leyte Bay," Zenji replied, "but there is great irony in the manner of his death."

"How so?"

He paused. "Despite Nishizawa's wishes, our deputy commander would not permit him to die in that manner. He insisted that a man of such phenomenal talent would be a greater boon to his country as a living fighter pilot than a dead kamikaze."

"Why, of course! That makes perfect sense. And so would you."

"I am hardly a Nishizawa," he replied. "Never could be."

"Maybe, maybe not, but you are one of the best."

Zenji shook his head, his lips clamped. "Anyway, no one knows for certain what became of him. The day after that first attack, he was assigned to fly some of our pilots to the Philippines in an unarmed transport plane. The plan was to pick up more Zeros and return with them to Matsuyama. That was the last we ever heard of him. Any of them."

"And no one knows what happened?"

Again, he shook his head, repeated, "The last we ever heard." He added, "But we have a good idea. Probably shot down by Hellcats. Whole area's lousy with them."

"Oh!" Midori gasped. "What incredible irony!" Steam wreathed faintly from the teapot spout. "And what a senseless waste, this whole abominable war."

He offered no reply. "Nishizawa knew, in any case, that he was going to die, had a premonition—told his closest friends he had only a day or two left. Some of them say he had a death wish."

"And does my dearest Zenji also have a death wish?"

In silence they watched the steam as though it might condense into a glimpse of the future. *Dearest*, he mused. Her use of the word touched him deeply and unexpectedly. "I don't know," he said at last, "but maybe, poor as I am by comparison, I can become Nishizawa's proxy. Maybe I can play some small part in avenging his death and the death of Shigeru. Gain a little revenge for the betrayal and imprisonment of my father, of our grandparents and friends, the entire Japanese population in the American West by the very country we all trusted, honored, and loved."

Midori closed her eyes and sighed. "Revenge, always revenge. Where would we be without it? Where would the world be?" For a moment he regarded her curiously, her lowered lids so delicately veined and faintly trembling. Then her eyes opened, more luminous than ever within the burgeoning light.

"That's all well and good," he said, "easy for you to say. But sometimes we just do what we have to do."

"Oh, yes, of course!" Half in accusation, half in lament. "We do what we have to do, business as usual. Blindly chart our course, no matter where it may take us. That's the whole essential problem."

"I suppose," he sighed, unwilling to pursue the matter. "As you have pointed out, I don't know who I am. I have nowhere to turn in the end, no place to call home." His ribs were aching bitterly beneath their bandages, several of them fractured two weeks earlier from a near-crash landing on the great carrier *Kamamutsu* during a storm. A day later he had been consigned to the Second General Army Hospital because of internal bleeding.

"You will always belong to this home," she said quietly. "And you will always belong to . . ." Again the corners of her eyes grew moist.

"Always belong where? To whom?"

Silence. He waited, watching her intently.

"Oh, never mind," she murmured. For an instant her voice was a faint little singsong of petulance. Perhaps a hint of irony as well. "You would not care to understand. Never have."

"I care to understand or I wouldn't have asked," he said.

She sighed exactly as he had seconds before and changed the subject. "I am not in any way minimizing the gravity of your dilemma." The words now were so quiet he strained to hear them. In their aftermath, he could detect only the tone-deaf ringing of the day. "But others have faced even greater ones and still survived—even found happiness."

"It is not a question of surviving," he said a bit stiffly. "Or finding happiness. What good is survival or happiness if a person fails to do what he thinks is right, if he fails to live with honor?"

"Honor!" Her eyes flashed. Sometimes she actually scared him a little. "I hate it! I hate the honor that comes from blind tradition, that requires the mindless taking of human life, including one's own. Absolutely abhor it! Do you realize, Zenji, that just this past year three of my school friends, all with bright, happy—yes, happy!—futures, killed themselves in

the name of honor? And for what? Because they didn't do well on their final examinations. Didn't fail, mind you! Simply did not do 'well' according to some arbitrary standard that has almost nothing to do with actual intelligence, whatever that is. That has virtually no relevance whatever to life itself."

"You express yourself most impressively for a girl of nineteen," he said. For a moment Midori closed her eyes again, breathing deeply, sucking in her cheeks so that the bones stood out. "I'm sorry," he added hastily. "I shouldn't have said that last. For a woman of—a *person* of any age. And I'm very sorry about your friends, truly."

"Thank you," she said, still breathing unevenly, eyes remaining closed, accentuating lashes that were strikingly long and thick and dark. She was still a bit dangerous. "But I don't really care about expressing myself well, only to the degree that I may convey thoughts of value and of truth." The crow beside the window fluttered awkwardly upon the branch then flapped upward cawing. "Besides," she added, warming to a lighter tone, even a nascent smile, "I'm much closer to twenty than nineteen. Tomorrow, in case you've forgotten, is not only my graduation. It is also my birthday."

"How could I forget? I have your whole day planned, in fact."

"You do?" Unfeigned child-like delight, her entire countenance brimming with it.

"Including a special place for dinner after the ceremony. I mean, unless you already—"

"I don't," she interrupted happily. "I'm free as the summer breeze."

"Nothing with anyone else?" His smile became more quizzical. "No Toshifumi?" he added mischievously, referring to a young male admirer who had been spared from military service thanks to severe myopia. An all-too-visible presence about the Yamato domicile in recent months.

"Toshifumi and I have undergone a parting of the ways," she murmured. "He needs someone far more acquiescent, for one thing. As, in fact, do nearly all Japanese males. While I, on the other hand, need someone who actually enjoys thinking once in a while. Not some walking platitude."

A burst of laughter. "Is walking worse than sitting?"

"Why, of course!" she giggled. "If walking, there's no escape!"

He shook his head, still grinning almost savagely. "*So desuka.*" Poor, decent, good-hearted, platitudinous Toshifumi. For the moment Zenji

was feeling quite happy, unaccountably so. Pleased as well that he had already purchased her a present. Nothing lavish but rather expensive, and perhaps appropriate, everything considered. A tiny golden bottle of perfume elegantly lettered in black with the brand name *Kinsuru*—a rare find at this stage of the war. Acquired from a withered *oba-san* in an obscure little shop off Shiratori Street following his release from the hospital the previous afternoon.

“Anyway,” he said at last, “I’m sorry about your friends, but at least you’ve never had to worry about doing ‘well’ on the tests. You have been head of your class so consistently, from the very beginning, that everybody takes it for granted. You even have some of your *sensei* intimidated.” Midori merely smiled, shrugged almost imperceptibly. During her senior year in high school, she had received scholarship offers from some of the nation’s top universities. Much to her father’s disgruntlement, however, she had elected to enroll at Yoshitaka, a private two-year women’s college only three miles distant, a quasi-elitist institution at best and never rated highly in terms of accreditation. As everyone knew, in any event, her decision stemmed entirely from a fear of leaving home.

Despite her intellectuality and sophistication, Midori’s reluctance to be separated from her family was almost phobic, a source of no small amusement to those of her inner circle. Once a few months earlier, staying with a friend for the weekend only a short distance beyond the city, she had feigned illness her first night away and called home for deliverance. Shigeru, there on one of his rare military leaves, had promptly come to her rescue in the family limousine.

“Perhaps I don’t have to worry about ‘doing well,’” she mused, “but that creates other problems, doesn’t it?” He failed to comprehend. “Pride, for example. Sometimes I am a very prideful person. Is that not a sin? And what if some day I should fail after all—not live up to the expectations of those I care about most? Of my parents and family? Or my own expectations?” He merely shrugged, holding out his palms. “Should I therefore go out into the garden and kill myself? End my pathetic little life in the glorious and time honored fashion with this—” reaching out with infinite deliberation, as though mesmerized, Midori withdrew the dagger from its sheath “—this splendid family heirloom?” The blade glittered.

“That would be insane,” he said.

“Oh, would it?” She pounced—an obvious checkmate. “Then we must be a nation of crazy people, don’t you agree? Maybe the ‘stupid west-

erners' from your other country are right after all. Maybe we truly are fanatics of the worst order." He began to reply, but she persisted. "*Hara kiri*, perhaps, the time-honored and highly respectable death of choice. Self-disembowelment. Wouldn't that be enchanting? Imagine the sight countless families have returned home, or perhaps awakened, to throughout the long centuries, Zen. Or, better still, why not *yuba kiri*? I could bleed to death by biting off my own tongue."

"All right, all right," he muttered, "I get the idea."

"Do you? Really and truly get it? And think what a fitting way to go for one so garrulous!" She paused but for an instant, then persisted remorselessly. "Only months ago, Keiko's father," she added, referring to the father of her best friend, "slashed open his stomach with perfect precision, the perfect inverted 'L', six by six inches. And why? Because his business failed, though from no fault of his own. He nearly worked himself to death. The fault of the war, actually. His family all tried to dissuade him, tried desperately. But no, the great god honor had its day as always. It took him six hours to die, bleeding like a slaughtered pig in all that gore, his insides spilling out."

"Don't talk that way," he said. "That's too much."

"It is not too much!" she flared, "never ever enough until the lunacy is over. Honor? Face? Tradition? Or sheer barbarism and perversion? Anyway, in addition to pride I would also have to worry about compassion."

"You have immense compassion," he said. "Too much if anything."

"Not really, Zen. I will never have enough." She inspected herself critically in the narrow mirror of the blade. "And what about generosity?" Her slender shoulders rose and fell. "What about love?" The final word barely uttered. "All of the virtues, really. And, of course, one never fully arrives, at least one shouldn't."

Unexpectedly she regarded her painting, her glance slowly rising. "I have never really liked that frame."

"The frame? Well then, why not get another?"

Her smile was wryly amused, almost condescending. "Not *any* frame. At least not for that painting. I mean, once you have arrived, where is there to go? Once progress ends, it ends, in my view; and when there is nothing ahead, one has not attained heaven."

"Ah *so desuka*." Zenji nodded steadily, very faintly, staring into the table. "Most interesting. My own 'little Utah religion,' incidentally, teaches that very strongly. I know that much."

“Good. That’s a distinct mark in its favor. But we are avoiding the issue. So I make my petition again, for the hundredth time whether it angers you or not.” Once more she paused, marshalling all her remaining resources. “I am almost late, so you must promise—absolutely promise me, Zenji—that you will not volunteer, that you will, at the very least, await my parents’ return from Tokyo.” He offered no reply. “It is utterly foolish to do anything unnecessarily until we have learned whether my father’s views have any weight with the premier and his cabinet. Because one thing is at last certain. Japan is losing. That is an inescapable fact, and it is time to end the war without further destruction, without further sacrifice of countless innocent lives. On both sides.”

He could smell incense, the first tendrils wafting in through an open window at the rear. Upon rising, she must have lighted a stick of it in the urn beside the family shrine there in the back garden, then knelt, head bowed in prayer. Prayer for whatever might remain, if only the memory, of Shigeru. “Father, despite all his former militancy, is passionately convinced of that now,” she continued. “You know that as well as I.” Her gaze drew vaguely inward. “I thought it would never happen, but even he—the last of our family samurai—even Father, has come to understand that there is no honor in dying for a lost cause. In dying for the mere sake of dying. Do you not agree?” He waited, knowing that she had trapped him. “How in the name of rationality, of humanity itself, can you not agree?”

For a time he looked down, lost in the red dragon adorning the straw tatami floor covering. He himself was actually seated within its jaws. Reluctantly, he gave one long, descending nod, chin almost prodding his chest.

“And all those thousands of kamikaze,” she persisted. “What have they accomplished except to die and leave their families in sorrow? All those sad little letters and tender poems, those locks of hair, even fingers, sent home to be cremated, ashes for the family shrine. And what will it do to your family if you insist upon dying yourself? Our grandparents? Your own dear father? Will it liberate them from bondage? Will your loss be their happiness?”

Her gaze was utterly uncompromising. “Can the common people of this country truly believe that our terrible losses throughout the Pacific, especially at Iwo Jima and now Okinawa, are simply part of some grand and cunning strategy designed to lure the Americans closer and closer un-

til Japan can suddenly turn and pounce? Utterly overwhelm them? That would be hilarious if it wasn't so pathetic."

"Not necessarily," he replied. In some respects the idea reflected valid military strategy: Lure one's enemy to the point of over-extension, beyond his sources of supply . . . then the consummate, gargantuan counterattack with everything at one's disposal. But he had to admit that little remained at Japan's disposal for anything, only the tattered remnants of its once proud military. That and its people. People bereft of almost an entire generation of their young men. People with nothing left soon but bamboo spears and their own frail flesh.

The B-29s especially symbolized America's power. Winged Super Fortresses, aptly named, one of which had nearly sent him down, annihilated two of his comrades, then escaped virtually unscathed. Those same aircraft, like a plague of fire-spewing monsters, had burned much of greater Tokyo to ashes in a single incendiary raid five months earlier.

"I really must leave," Midori persisted. "But not until I have your answer." Still, he hesitated. "Zenji, the surrender may be only days away!"

Yes, possibly, he thought, depending on who prevailed in Tokyo. Depending ultimately upon the Emperor himself. But what would happen to Japan once surrender occurred? If loyal Americans like his father and grandparents could be incarcerated along with thousands of others simply because of their ancestry, what would become of Japan itself? Did not his own integrity demand the courage to fight on at any cost, to join in one final and consummate effort to turn the tide?

He sat there, head bowed, staring fixedly at the dragon teeth, then glanced up. Midori was regarding him with auger-like intensity, her cheeks sucked in, eyes unblinking, fairly smoldering, yet moisture was collecting in their outer corners, glimmering at the apex of one cheek bone. "I cannot promise such a thing," he said.

"Very well." Her voice was thick, scarcely audible. Slowly, with great deliberation, she raised the dagger, placing its tip, sharp as the corner of a razor blade, against the right carotid artery directly below the angle of her jaw line.

Zenji's eyes bulged. "What are you doing?"

"I am doing . . ." she began and flinched, blinking rapidly as the blade point nicked the pale skin, directly against the very throbbing of her pulse.

"Idiot!" He reached out to restrain her, gritting his teeth from the pain in his ribs, the electric spasm in his whip-lashed neck.

"Don't touch me!" she commanded. "I am doing what needs to be done."

He stared, mouth half open, hand half extended. "My God, girl, you've cut yourself! You're bleeding!" A tiny red line was curving its way down the artery, bifurcating and enlarging as it neared her collar bone. "Put down the stupid knife and let me at least . . ." Again, he reached out, thinking perhaps to stanch the flow with his finger tips, only to be forestalled with an even sharper admonition. "Midori, please. You're going to bleed on your beautiful kimono. What kind of craziness is this?"

"It is a craziness that pales beside your own," she said, "and countless others. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

For a time he continued to stare in disbelief. "All right," he assented at last, the words hissing between his teeth in vexation. Or was it relief? Or both? The whole business was inordinately complex. "All right! For now—" frowning profoundly—"I will observe a policy of *mokusatsu*." He paused, allowing the word to germinate.

Midori eyed him uncertainly, suspiciously, lowering the blade a mere half inch. "The word has two essential meanings. Which is it? To refrain from comment?" She searched his face. "Or to ignore?"

"The first meaning, of course," he assured her. "To refrain from comment, to ponder. I will take time to reflect, to consider the possibility, but that is the best I can offer."

"All right then," she sighed and lowered the dagger, placing it carefully beside the chess board. The blade tip was still faintly rimmed with red. Shifting, Zenji half rose, rounding the table. Kneeling beside her, he reached into his pocket, extracted a clean white handkerchief, and pressed it gently against the tiny wound, cupping the back of her neck with his other hand.

"It is a mere nick, little more than a pin prick," Midori assured him, gazing upward, almost wonderingly now, into his eyes. Her glance contained a rare and remarkable sweetness, a spirit looking out. Something hovered fleetingly on the rim of his consciousness that he had heard long ago from his mother, about the eyes being the window of the soul. "And certainly worth it, considering," she added in little more than a whisper.

"You really had me worried," he confessed. "Please don't ever do such a thing again."

Then they were standing up as Zenji, hurting more than ever, gingerly lifted her by the arms. "I will observe a policy of *mokusatsu*," she said. "That is the best I can do." Her smile was highly mobile and again silvery, almost as though flowing with mercury. The girl was definitely too much for him, and now she was heading toward her room with rapid, delicate little steps across the red of the dragon, the flames of its mouth. One hand was pressed to her throat.

Minutes later she had returned, clad in her amorphous black uniform, the garb of calculated conformity. A mere college girl now. "I must hurry," she announced. "The bus has already gone. But my bicycle is in good working condition, and luckily it's all downhill. I'll get there in less than ten minutes if I really give it my best."

"Right." He had little doubt that she would really go for it. All out. "It will be a little more taxing on the return trip, though."

"That doesn't matter," Midori replied, "because you will still be here. And because—" she angled a glance toward the windows "—we made each other a promise." Unexpectedly she reached out, placing her hands, light as butterflies, on each side of his shoulders. He could see the cut clearly now, a miniature eye the color of raw meat that pulsed and puckered as she canted her head. Unbandaged because it wasn't necessary, but also as a special little reminder. Indeed, an ongoing warning. He knew that without question. "And now . . ." Her tone was suddenly impish, playfully mocking, for she was also an actress. "I think it would be an excellent thing if we were to seal that promise with a kiss. Isn't that what they do in the West?"

"At times, I guess, but . . ."

"But what? Because it is not appropriate?" Her gaze lifted, utterly uncompromising, yet not bereft of its ineffable sweetness. "I fear greatly that we shall all die from appropriateness one of these days. Kiss me, then, for my coming birthday, for my coming graduation at the head of the class. That will be my finest reward. The kiss, I mean. Even if it is . . . well, strictly platonic." Her hands remained upon his shoulders, ever so lightly. His own, Zenji scarcely realized, were on each side of her waist. Still, he hesitated, filled with something akin to superstition. "Am I really that repellant?" For an instant her smile wavered.

"Don't be silly," he replied, "you're not at all re—" Then, somehow, with no real sense of transition, they were embracing, their lips highly tentative, barely brushing each other.

"Very gently," she murmured, "I don't want to hurt you." Her scent was that of lilacs.

"Nor I you," he replied. Then, tentatively at first, inquiringly, their lips were melding in a strange and magical alchemy. Her own, cool and pliant, flavored with something that generated the faintest tingling burn as though traced with peppermint, or even wintergreen.

"Well, now," she said withdrawing slightly, striving to contain a faintly quivering inhalation. "That wasn't as platonic as I expected. Certainly not as terrible, I hope, as you expected." Then, before he could reply, she brightened. "Anyway, my fine young man, *sayonara*." He laughed, shaking his head in wonderment. Withdrawing and darting toward the alcove, she slid back the wood and papered panel with its fading imprints of hummingbirds and daffodils, then made her exit.

He followed her, gazing toward the narrow concrete road, cracked in places, crumbling here and there along the edges. It was already casting off heat waves in its distant descent, waves that somehow blended with the awakening hum of a cicada. "Oh, by the way!" She paused astride her bicycle, adjusting her skirt and plucking a particle of lint from the hem, poised there to thrust off into the embrace of gravity and into something else that he could not fathom, that sucked away his breath. "What has become of your other friend and hero, the great Sakai?"

"Saburo Sakai? He was finally injured in an air battle, as I said in my letter. He lost an eye and may never fly in combat again. Yet even so, he is alive."

"I'm glad," she said, "that he's alive, I mean. That's rather important, isn't it? And, oh . . ." On the very rim of momentum she caught herself for a final instant. "You said that he recently married a beautiful young woman who also happened to be his cousin. Is that not so?"

"Yes, that is so!" he replied. "I attended the celebration with fifty others from our wing."

"Hmmm, most interesting." Then, she was on her way, pedaling earnestly, already sixty and seventy yards down the hill, passing a procession of multi-colored rose bushes and occasional dancing dragonflies. "I was just curious!" she called. Her voice fading, tender and high and lyrical, like something out of a dream. He could almost hear the sound of *samisens*. "Merely wondering!" The final word—faint, fading, and mysteriously attenuated—actually seemed to echo.

He stood there, his own smile an unconscious duplication of the

sound itself, watching her etherized in the distance, vanishing around a long, steep curve. Then there were only heatwaves shimmering across a bend in the road. That and the increased humming of the cicadas, scarcely distinguishable from the high-pitched keening within his own ears. It was, for a moment, as if she had passed through a bend in the ever-mysterious continuum of time itself, and once again he wanted to cry. Unthinkingly he touched a finger to his lips, then tasted them with the tip of his tongue.

The city of Hiroshima below was awake and vibrantly alive now, ringed by its verdant, ever-protective mountains, its gleaming and sinuous rivers, a bright and beckoning blue. The date was August 6, 1945.