The Last Concubine

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Extract

Part I

The Village

1

Kiso Valley, 1861

Oshikaraji
kimi to tami to no
tame naraba
mi wa Musashino no
tsuyu to kiyu tomo
Princess Kazu, 1861

Without regret,
If it is for you, my lord,
And your people,
I will vanish with the dew
On the plain of Musashi

I

'*Shita ni iyo! Shita ni iyo! Shita ni . . . Shita ni . . .* On your knees! On your knees! Get down . . . Get down . . .'

The shout came drifting across the valley, so faint it might have been the rustle of leaves carried on the wind. At the head of the pass, where the road dipped towards the village, four tousle-haired children bundled in faded, patched kimonos stood listening for all they were worth. It was one of those late autumn days when everything seems transfixed, as if waiting. The pine

trees that fringed the highway were uncannily still and the lightest of breezes barely lifted the mouldering red and gold leaves that lay swept into tidy piles well away from the verges. A hawk circled lazily and for a moment a flock of wild geese filled the sky. From around a corner in the road the familiar smell of woodsmoke mixed with horse dung, human waste and miso soup wafted up. From time to time a cockerel crowed and the village dogs replied with a chorus of baying. But apart from that, the valley was silent. Normally the highway would have been crammed with people, palanquins and horses, as far as the eye could see. That day it was completely empty.

That was how Sachi always remembered the day, when she thought back to it years later – the pine trees so tall and dark, soaring endlessly upwards, the bowl of the sky so blue that it seemed close enough to touch, far closer than the pale mountains that shimmered on the horizon.

Sachi was eleven, but small and slight. In summer she was as tawny as one of the famous Kiso horse chestnuts but now her skin was startlingly translucent and pale, almost as white as her breath in the frosty air. Often she wished she was brown and sturdy like the other children, though they didn't seem to care. Even her eyes were different. While theirs were brown or black, hers were dark green, as green as the pine trees in summer or the moss on the forest floor. But secretly, though she knew it was wrong, she rather liked her white skin. Sometimes she would kneel in front of her mother's tarnished mirror and look at her pale face glimmering there. Then she would take out the comb that she kept tucked in her sleeve. It was her talisman, her good luck

charm, beautiful, shiny and sparkly. It had always been hers, ever since she could remember, and no one else had a comb like it. Slowly, pensively, she would comb her hair until it was shining, then tie it neatly back with a piece of bright red crepe.

A couple of summers earlier some travelling players had arrived in the village. For a few days they performed ghost stories on a makeshift stage, sending shivers down everyone's back. The children squatted together, frozen with fear, watching a drama about a deserted wife who dies from grief. At the end of the play the dead woman suddenly appeared floating in the air before her faithless husband, her face ghastly white. As she combed her long black hair, it fell out in clumps. The children screamed so much that no one could hear the actors' words. Now when the others wanted to tease Sachi they told her that she must be a ghost too.

'Sickly' was what her grandmother called her. Sometimes she heard her berating her mother. 'That child of yours, that Sa,' she would grumble. 'You spoil her! How do you expect her to get a husband, so pale and sickly as she is? And so vain, always combing that hair of hers. No one wants a wife who spends all her time in front of the mirror. You need a daughter with big child-bearing hips who knows how to work, that's what. Otherwise you'll be stuck with her.'

'She's delicate,' her mother would say mildly, smiling her tired, patient smile. 'She's not like the other children. But at least she's pretty.' She always took her side.

'"Pretty",' her grandmother would reply. 'That's all very well. What good is "pretty" for a farmer's wife?'

Rubbing her hands and blowing on them, Sachi shifted from foot to foot. Despite the layers of rough

cotton, the thick wadded jacket her mother had managed to find for her and the scarves wound around her head, she was still cold. The only thing that provided a little warmth was the baby tied in a sling on her back. She was fast asleep, her head flopping like a rag doll. Huddled next to Sachi was her friend Mitsu. The two had been inseparable since they were tiny. In appearance she was almost the exact opposite of Sachi, so brown and squat she was almost like a monkey, with small eyes and a pug nose.

When she was born, her mother had told the midwife to kill her. 'She's so ugly, she'll never get a husband,' she had said. 'And then what will we do with her?' The midwife nodded. It was a sensible request. Many babies were killed at birth. She spat on a bit of paper, put it over the baby's mouth and nose, then wrapped her up tightly in rags. But just as they thought she was dead, she started to wriggle, then to howl and bawl. The gods, it seemed, had decided she was to live. 'And who were we to interfere with the gods?' her mother said, spreading her work-reddened hands expansively. She seemed to love her daughter all the more because of her miraculous escape. Mitsu, a cheerful, down-to-earth, motherly girl, was not at all worried by the story. Like Sachi, she carried one of her siblings on her back.

The sounds from the far side of the valley were growing louder. Listening hard, the children made out the crunch of feet, the muffled clatter of hooves shod with straw, the jangle of iron on iron and iron on stone. Above the hubbub rose a chorus of voices, at first a babble, then clearer and clearer until they could hear every syllable, repeated again and again in sing-song tones: '*Shita ni iyo! Shita ni iyo! Shita ni . . . Shita*

ni . . .' The marchers were still deep in the forest, hidden beneath the dense thatch of foliage that clothed the mountainside, yet the voices never stopped, not for a second. It was as if they expected everything – the tall trees with their thick cap of leaves, plants, wolves, foxes, deer, the lumbering black bears and ferocious mountain boars with their sharp tusks – to get down on their knees.

Genzaburo, the unchallenged leader of the children, scrambled up a tree and edged along a branch until he was swaying precariously above the road. A wiry, long-limbed boy with skin burned almost black by the sun and an impish grin, he was forever getting into scrapes, sneaking away to catch fish or swim in the river when he should have been working. He was adept at sneaking up behind a horse and snatching a few hairs from its tail then darting off with the groom chasing after him. Grey hairs made the best fishing lines because the fish could not see them, so it was always a particular challenge to grab a few when a grey horse came by. Genzaburo had also made a name for himself by wrestling a wild boar that had charged into the village one day, terrorizing everyone, when he was only ten. He had punched it and kicked it again and again until the beast turned tail and ran back into the woods. He sometimes showed off the scar where the tusker had gored his arm. It was his badge of honour.

Only Chobei, the youngest of the children, Sachi's brother, a grubby little boy with spiky hair, swathed in a thick brown kimono, paid no attention to the approaching commotion. He crouched by the road, examining a lizard that had crawled out of the undergrowth.

Genzaburo worked his way further along the branch, screwing up his eyes and peering into the distance.

'They're coming! They're coming!' he shouted.

In a minute everyone could see the first banners poking above the trees, red, purple and gold, fluttering like petals. Shards of light glanced off the steel tips of standards and lances. The children watched intently, their hearts thumping. They all knew exactly what '*Shita ni iyo!*' meant. It was the first lesson they had ever learned. They had all felt their fathers' big rough hands on their heads, pushing them down on to their knees until their faces were in the dirt, and could almost hear their fathers' voices barking, 'Get down, right now! You'll get yourself killed.'

No one had forgotten the dreadful fate of Sohei the drunkard. A few years earlier, after a few too many sakes he had gone staggering out into the path of a procession. Before anyone could pull him back, a couple of samurai whipped their swords out of their scabbards and cut him down, right there in the street. The villagers lugged his body out of the way in numb silence. It just went to show how cheap life was. The samurai were their masters; they had power of life or death over them. That was how it had always been and how it would always be.

But the banners were still far away. The children gazed and gazed, mesmerized by the thrill of doing something so forbidden and so dangerous.

In the distance tiny figures in blue and black were swarming out of the woods. Shading their eyes, the children made out battalions of soldiers tramping along in close formation, warriors on horseback with the horns on their helmets glinting and long lines of porters

humping gleaming lacquered trunks. The figures grew larger as the column of marchers drew nearer. The jangle of the metal rings on the guards' staffs, the shuffle of feet, the crunch of hooves and the ominous chorus – '*Shita ni iyo! Shita ni iyo! Shita ni . . . Shita ni . . .*' – grew louder and louder.

Suddenly the spell was broken. Grabbing each other's hands, tripping over in their panic, the children turned and raced helter-skelter down the slope, the babies on the girls' backs bobbing and bouncing.

The mountain that shadowed the village was so high and steep that the first shafts of sunlight had only just begun to pierce the icy air, although it was the hour of the horse and the sun was almost at its height. As they reached the beginning of the street, the children paused for breath. They had never seen it so crowded with people. The rickety inns that lined each side seemed to teeter under the crush. The innkeepers had thrust the slatted doors right back and clouds of woodsmoke swirled out of the cavernous interiors. Gangs of bow-legged porters in wadded cotton jackets and leggings hustled in and out, slurping bowls of barley gruel. Grooms grappled with bad-tempered horses no bigger than ponies, strapping saddles on to them and tying straw horseshoes on to their hooves. Other men bobbed through the throng in straw cloaks, like moving haystacks. Many just stood waiting, fondling their long-stemmed pipes. Some were from villages round about and always turned up when porters or grooms were needed, but most were strangers, gnarled men from villages deep in the hollows of the mountains, who had hiked for an entire day to get there.

Standing in the middle of the mob was a tall man

with a broad, calm face and a thatch of thick hair tied back like a horse's tail. He was bellowing orders, waving his arms, sending people running here and there. Sachi and the others burrowed through the crowd, ducking under arms, and grabbed his sleeves.

'The princess is coming! The princess is coming!' they chorused.

He grinned down at them and slapped their heads approvingly.

'Good, good,' he barked. 'Now get back inside to your mothers, right now!'

II

Jiroemon was Sachi's father and the village headman. He was responsible for everything that went on in the village, as his family had been for as long as anyone could remember. He had taken over the job ten years earlier, when his father became old and infirm. In the past the family had worn the two swords that marked them as samurai but the privilege had been revoked centuries ago, though Jiroemon still carried a short ceremonial sword to mark his superior status.

He was a big man, big at least compared to the other villagers, who were squat and brawny, true Kiso 'mountain monkeys'. He was probably less than forty years old – few adults in the village kept track of their exact age – but his face was already furrowed from years of mediating between the villagers and the authorities. All the Kiso land belonged to the local lord and the villagers were allowed to cut only one small section of forest for their own use. Every year people desperate for firewood chopped down trees. Officially