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Heaven's Net Is Wide

Lian Hearn

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Extract

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Characters

The Clans

The Otori

(Middle Country; castle town: Hagi)

Otori Shigeru . . . . . *heir to the Otori clan*
Otori Takeshi . . . . . *his younger brother*
Otori Shigemori . . . . . *his father, lord of the clan*
Otori Masako . . . . . *his mother*
Otori Shoichi . . . . . *his uncle*
Otori Masahiro . . . . . *his uncle*

Otori Ichiro . . . . . *Shigeru's teacher*

Chiyo . . . . . *head maid of Lady Otori's household*

Otori Eijiro . . . . . *head of a branch family*
Otori Eriko . . . . . *his wife*
Otori Danjo . . . . . *his son*

Harada . . . . . *one of Shigeru's retainers*

Komori . . . . . *a Chigawa man, 'the Underground Emperor'*

Haruna . . . . . *owner of the House of the Camellias*
Akane . . . . . *a famous courtesan, daughter of the stonemason*
Hayato . . . . . *her lover*

Yanagi Moe . . . . . *Shigeru's wife*

Mori Yusuke . . . . . *the Otori horsebreaker*
Mori Yuta . . . . . *his oldest son*
Mori Kiyoshige . . . . . *his second son, Shigeru's best friend*
Mori Hiroki . . . . . *his third son, who becomes a priest*

Miyoshi Satoru . . . . . *an elder of the clan*

Miyoshi Kahei . . . . . *his older son, Takeshi's friend*
Miyoshi Gemba . . . . . *his younger son*

Irie Masahide . . . . . *the sword instructor to the Otori boys*

Kitano Tadakazu . . . . . *lord of Tsuwano: an Otori vassal*
Kitano Tadao . . . . . *his oldest son*
Kitano Masaji . . . . . *his second son*

Noguchi Masayoshi . . . . . *an Otori vassal*

Nagai Tadayoshi . . . . . *the senior retainer at Yamagata*

Endo Chikara . . . . . *the senior retainer at Hagi*

Terada Fumimasa . . . . . *head of the Hagi fishing fleet*
Terada Fumio . . . . . *his son*

Matsuda Shingen . . . . . *a former warrior, now a priest, later the Abbot of Terayama*

The Seishuu

(An alliance of several ancient families in the West; main castle towns: Kumamoto and Maruyama)

Maruyama Naomi . . . . . *Head of the Maruyama clan*
Maruyama Mariko . . . . . *her daughter*

Sugita Sachie . . . . . *her companion, Otori Eriko's sister*

Sugita Haruki . . . . . *senior retainer to the Maruyama, Sachie's brother*

Arai Daiichi . . . . . *heir to the Arai clan at Kumamoto*

The Tohan

(The East; castle town: Inuyama)

Iida Sadayoshi . . . . . *lord of the Tohan clan*

Iida Sadamu . . . . . *his son, heir to the clan*

Miura Naomichi . . . . . *a Tohan sword instructor*
Inaba Atsushi . . . . . *his retainer*

The Tribe

Muto Shizuka . . . . . *Arai's mistress*
Muto Zenko, *Muto Taku* . . . . . *their sons*

Muto Kenji . . . . . *Shizuka's uncle, head of the Muto family, friend to Shigeru*
Muto Seiko . . . . . *his wife*
Muto Yuki . . . . . *his daughter*

Kikuta Kotaro . . . . *Shizuka's uncle, head of the Kikuta family*

Kikuta Isamu . . . . . *his cousin, one of the Tribe*

Bunta . . . . . *a groom*

The Hidden

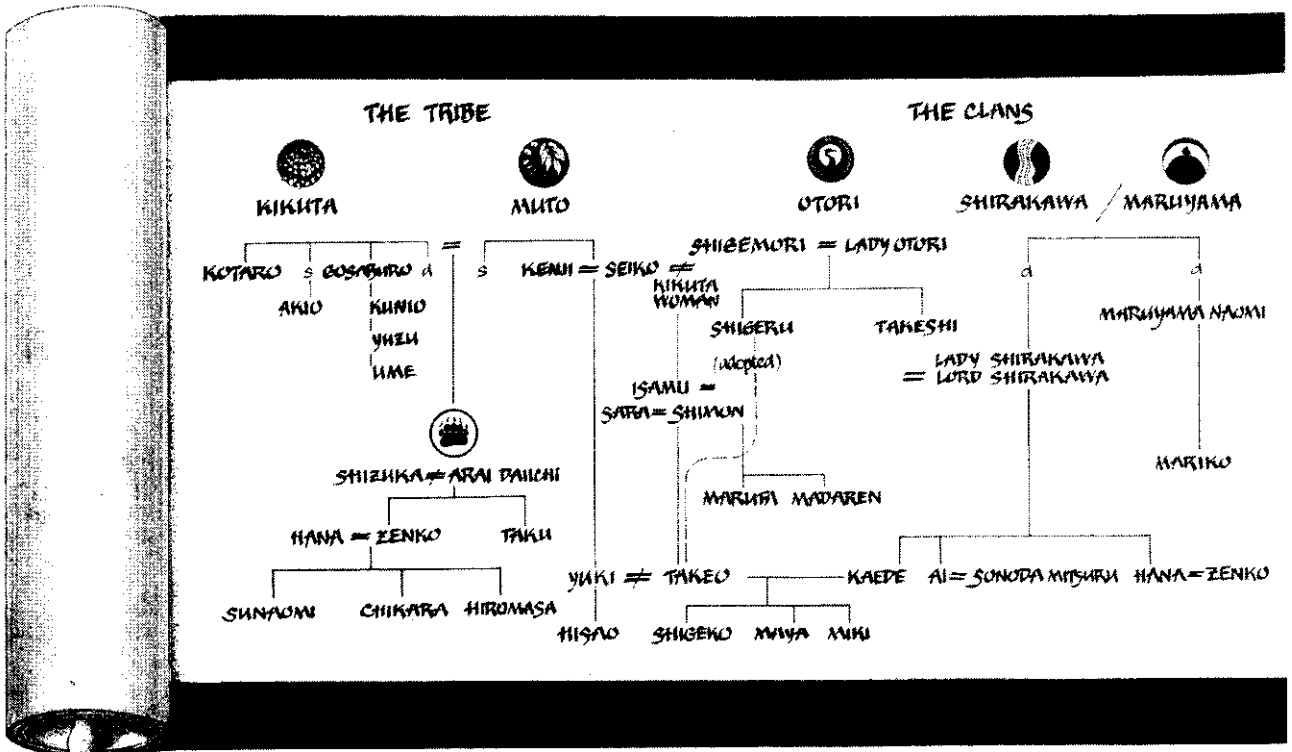
Sara . . . . . *Isamu's wife*
Tomasu . . . . . *their son*

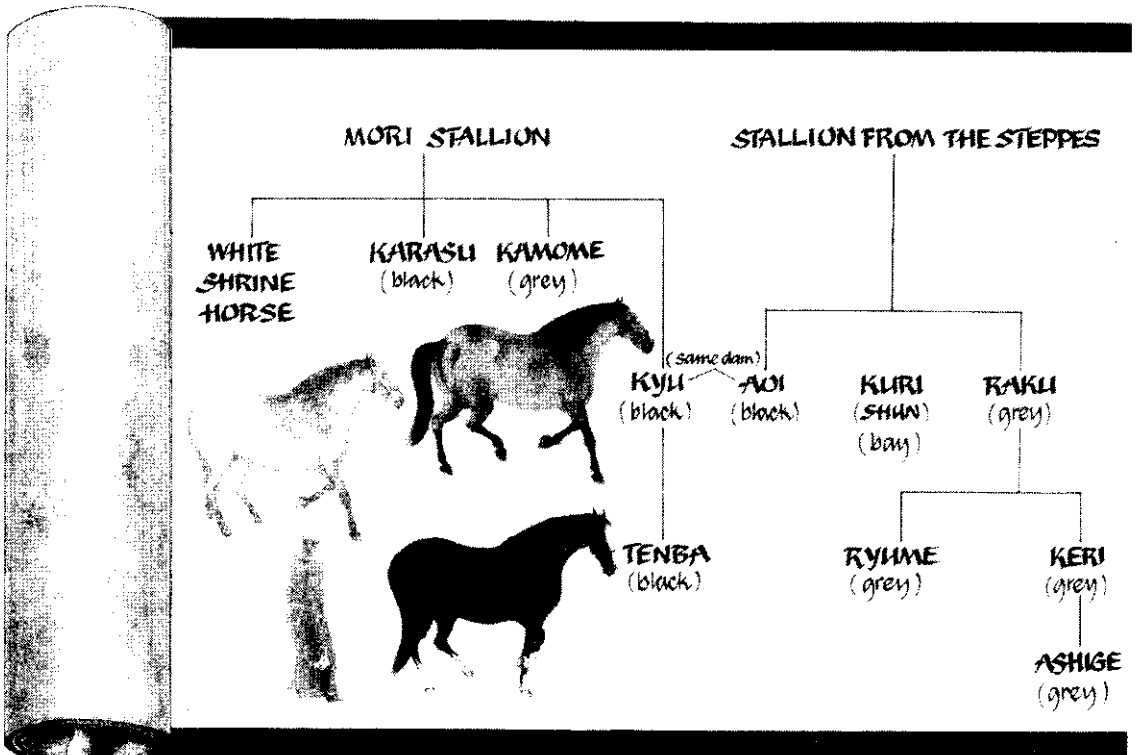
Shimon . . . . . *Sara's second husband*
Maruta . . . . . *their older daughter*
Madaren . . . . . *their younger daughter*

Nesutoro . . . . . *an itinerant priest*
Mari . . . . . *his niece*

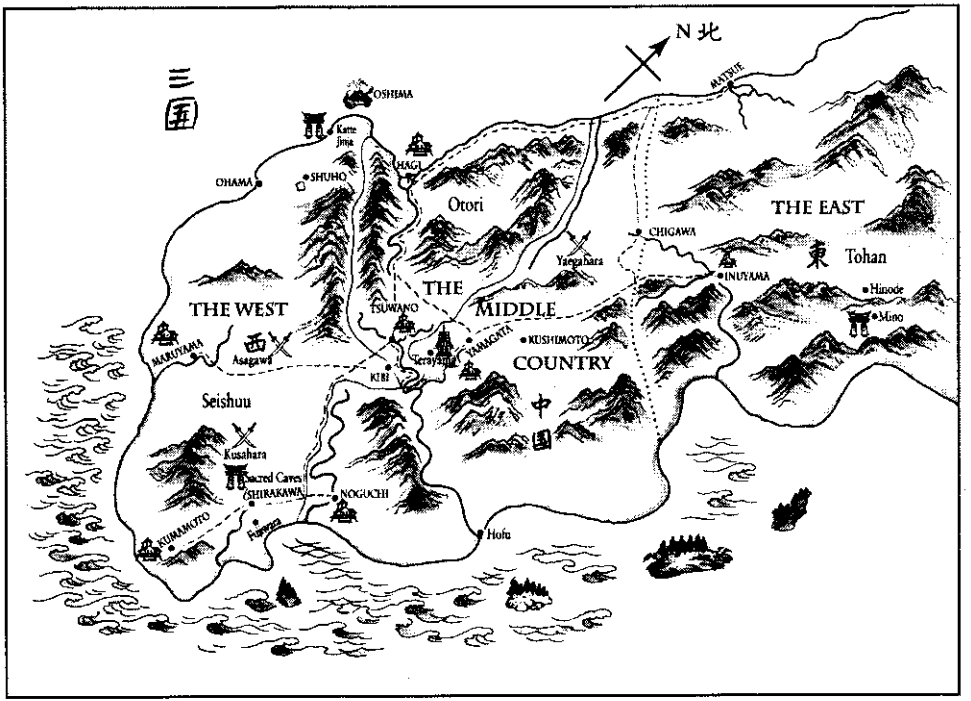
Horses

Karasu . . . . . *Shigeru's black*
Kamome . . . . . *Kiyoshige's black-maned grey*
Raku . . . . . *Takeshi's black-maned grey*
Kyu . . . . . *Shigeru's second black*
Kuri . . . . . *a very clever bay*


THE TRIBE
THE CLANS
KIKUTA
MUTO
OTORI
SHIRAKAWA / MARUYAMA
KOTARO
AKIO
GOSABURO
KUNIO
YUZU
UME
KENJI
SEIKO
KIKUTA WOMAN
SHIGEMORI
LADY OTORI
SHIGERU
(adopted)
TAKESHI
ISAMU
SARA
SHIMON
MARUMA
MADAREN
LADY SHIRAKAWA
LORD SHIRAKAWA
MARUYAMA NAOMI
MARIKO
SHIZUKA
ARAI DAIICHI
HANA
ZENKO
TAKU
SUNAOMI
CHIKARA
HIROMASA
YUKI
TAKEO
KAEDE
AI
SONODA MITSURU
HANA
ZENKO
HISAO
SHIGEKO
AYA
AIKI


MORI STALLION
STALLION FROM THE STEPPES
WHITE SHRINE HORSE
KARASU (black)
KAMOME (grey)
(same dam)
KYU (black)
AOI (black)
KURI (SHUN) (bay)
RAKU (grey)
TENBA (black)
RYUME (grey)
KERI (grey)
ASHIGE (grey)

THE THREE COUNTRIES



fief boundaries

fief boundaries before Yaegahara

high road

battlefields

castle town

shrine

temple

for R

Heaven's net is wide, but its mesh is fine.

Lao Tsu

One

The footfall was light, barely discernible among all the myriad noises of the autumn forest: the rustle of leaves scattering in the northwesterly wind, the distant beating of wings as geese flew southwards, the echoing sounds of the village far below, yet Isamu heard it and recognized it.

He put the digging tool down on the damp grass, along with the roots he had been collecting, and moved away from it. Its sharp blade spoke to him and he did not want to be tempted by any tool or weapon. He turned in the direction of his cousin's approach and waited.

Kotaro came into the clearing invisible, in the way of the Tribe, but Isamu did not bother concealing himself in the same fashion. He knew all his cousin's skills: they were almost the same age, Kotaro less than a year younger; they had trained together, striving always to outdo each other; they had been friends, of a sort, and rivals their entire life.

Isamu had thought he had escaped here in this remote village on the eastern borders of the Three Countries, far from the great cities where the Tribe preferred to live and work, selling their supernatural skills to whoever paid them highest and finding plenty of employment in these times of intrigue and strife among the warriors. But no one escapes the Tribe forever.

How many times had he heard this warning as a child?

How many times had he repeated it to himself, with the dark pleasure that the old skills induce, as he delivered the silent knife thrust, the twist of the garrotte or, his own preferred method, the poison that fell drop by drop into a sleeping mouth or an unprotected eye.

He did not doubt that it echoed through Kotaro's mind now as his cousin's shape came shimmering into sight.

For a moment they stared at each other without speaking. The forest itself seemed to fall quiet and in that silence Isamu thought he could hear his wife's voice, far below. If he could hear her, then Kotaro could too, for both cousins had the Kikuta gift of far-hearing, just as they both bore the straight line of the Kikuta that divided the palm of the hand.

'It took me a long time to find you,' Kotaro said finally.

'That was my intention,' Isamu replied. Compassion was still unfamiliar to him and he shrank from the pain it awakened in his newborn heart. He thought with regret of the girl's kindness, her high spirits, her goodness; he wished he could save her from grief; he wondered if their brief marriage had already planted new life in her and what she would do after his death. She would find comfort from her people, from the Secret One. She would be sustained by her inner strength. She would weep for him and pray for him; no one in the Tribe would do either.

Following a barely understood instinct, like the birds in this wild place that he had come to know and love, he decided he would delay his death and lead Kotaro far away into the forest; maybe neither of them would return from its vastness.

He split his image and sent his second self towards his cousin, while he ran swiftly and completely silently, his feet hardly touching the ground, between the slender

trunks of the young cedars, leaping over boulders that had tumbled from the crags above, skimming across slippery black rocks below waterfalls, vanishing and reappearing in the spray. He was aware of everything around him: the grey sky and damp air of the tenth month, the chill wind that heralded winter, reminding him that he would never see snow again, the distant throaty bellow of a stag, the whirr of wings and the harsh calls as his flight disturbed a flock of crows. So he ran, and Kotaro followed him, until hours later and miles from the village he had made his home, Isamu allowed his pace to slow and his cousin to catch up with him.

He had come further into the forest than ever before; there was no sun. He had no idea where he was; he hoped Kotaro would be as lost. He hoped his cousin would die here in the mountains on this lonely slope above a deep ravine. But he would not kill him. He, who had killed so many times, would never kill anyone again, not even to save his own life. He had made that vow and he knew he was not going to break it.

The wind had shifted to the east and it had become much colder, but the pursuit had made Kotaro sweat; Isamu could see the gleaming drops as his cousin approached him. Neither of them breathed hard, despite their exertions. Beneath their deceptive slight build lay iron-hard muscles and years of training.

Kotaro stopped and drew a twig from within his jacket. He held it out, saying, 'It's nothing personal, cousin. I want to make that clear. The decision was made by the Kikuta family. We drew lots and I got the short piece. But whatever possessed you to try and leave the Tribe?'

When Isamu made no reply Kotaro went on, 'I assume

that's what you are trying to do. It's the conclusion the whole family came to when we heard nothing from you, for over a year, when you did not return to Inuyama or to the Middle Country, when you failed to carry out tasks assigned to you, commissioned – and paid for, I might add – by Iida Sadayoshi himself. Some argued that you were dead, but no one had reported it and I found it hard to believe. Who could kill you, Isamu? No one could get near enough to do it with knife or sword or garrotte. You never fall asleep; you never get drunk. You have made yourself immune to all poisons; your body heals itself from all sickness. There's never been an assassin like you in the history of the Tribe: even I admit your superiority, though it sticks in my gullet to say it. Now I find you here, very much alive, a very long way from where you are supposed to be. I have to accept that you have absconded from the Tribe, for which there is only one punishment.'

Isamu smiled slightly but still said nothing. Kotaro replaced the twig inside the front fold of his jacket. 'I don't want to kill you,' he said quietly. 'That's the judgement of the Kikuta family, unless you return with me. As I said, we drew lots.'

All the while his stance was alert, his eyes restless, his whole body tense in expectation of the coming fight.

Isamu said, 'I don't want to kill you either. But I will not return with you. You are right to say I have left the Tribe. I have left it forever. I will never go back.'

'Then I am under orders to execute you,' Kotaro said, speaking more formally as one who delivers a sentence of justice. 'For disobedience to your family and to the Tribe.'

'I understand,' Isamu replied, equally formally.

Neither of them moved. Kotaro was still sweating profusely despite the cold wind. Their eyes met and Isamu felt

the power of his cousin's gaze. Both of them possessed the ability to induce sleep in an opponent; both were equally adept at withstanding it. The silent struggle continued between them for many moments before Kotaro brought an end to it by pulling out his knife. His movements were clumsy and fumbling, with none of his usual dexterity.

'You must do what you have to do,' Isamu said. 'I forgive you and I pray Heaven will too.'

His words seemed to unnerve Kotaro even further. 'You forgive me? What sort of language is this? Who in the Tribe ever forgives anyone? There is either total obedience or punishment. If you have forgotten this you have turned stupid or mad – in any case the only cure is death!'

'I know all this as well as you. Just as I know I cannot escape you or this judgement. So carry it out, knowing that I absolve you from any guilt. I leave no one to avenge me. You will have been obedient to the Tribe and I . . . to my lord.'

'You will not defend yourself? You will not even try to fight me?' Kotaro demanded.

'If I try to fight you I will almost certainly succeed in killing you. I think we both know that.' Isamu laughed. In all the years that he and Kotaro had striven with each other he had never felt such power over the other man. He held his arms wide, his chest open and undefended. He was still laughing when the knife entered his heart; the pain flooded through him, the sky darkened, his lips formed the words of parting. He began the journey on which he in his time had sent so many others. His last thought was of the girl and for the warm body in which, though he did not know it, he had left a part of himself.

Two

These were the years when the warlord Iida Sadayoshi, who employed so many members of the Tribe, including Kikuta Kotaro, was engaged in unifying the East of the Three Countries and compelling minor families and clans to submit to the triple oak leaf of the Tohan. The Middle Country had been held for hundreds of years by the Otori, and the current head of the clan, Lord Shigemori, had two young sons, Shigeru and Takeshi, and two discontented and ambitious half-brothers, Shoichi and Masahiro.

Takeshi had been born the year Lady Otori turned thirty-two; many women were already holding their grandchildren by that age. She had been married to Shigemori when she was seventeen and he twenty-five. She had conceived a child almost immediately, giving great hope for a swift guarantee of succession, but the child, a boy, had been still-born, and the next, a girl, lived only a few hours after birth. Several miscarriages followed, all water-children consigned to the care of Jizo: it seemed her womb was too unstable to carry a living child to full term. Doctors, then priests, were consulted, and finally a shaman from the mountains. The doctors prescribed foods to strengthen the womb: sticky rice, eggs and fermented soybeans; they advised against eating eel, or any other lively fish, and brewed teas that were reputed to have calming

properties. The priests chanted prayers, and filled the house with incense and talismans from distant shrines; the shaman tied a straw cord round her belly to hold the child in, and forbade her from looking on the colour red, lest she revive the womb's desire to bleed. Lord Shigemori was privately advised by his senior retainers to take a concubine – or several – but his half-brothers Shoichi and Masahiro were inclined to oppose this idea, arguing that the Otori succession had always been through legitimate heirs. Other clans might arrange their affairs differently, but the Otori, after all, were descended from the imperial family, and it would surely be an insult to the Emperor to create an illegitimate heir. The child could of course have been adopted and so legitimized, but Shoichi and Masahiro were not so loyal to their older brother that they did not harbour their own ideas about inheritance.

Chiyo, the senior maid in Lady Otori's household, who had been her wet nurse and had brought her up, went secretly into the mountains to a shrine sacred to Kannon, and brought back a talisman woven from horse hair and strands of paper as light as gossamer and holding within it a spell, which she stitched into the hem of her lady's night robe, saying nothing about it to anyone. When the child was conceived Chiyo made sure her own regime for a safe pregnancy was followed: rest, good food, and no excitement, no doctors, priests or shamans. Depressed by her many lost babies, Lady Otori held little hope for the life of this one; indeed, hardly anyone dared hope for a live child. When the child was born, and it was a boy and furthermore showed every sign of intending to survive, Lord Shigemori's joy and relief were extreme. Convinced it was born only to be taken from her, Lady Otori could not nurse the child herself. Chiyo's daughter, who had just

given birth to her second son, became his wet nurse. At two years old the child was named Shigeru.

Two more water-children were consigned to the care of Jizo before Chiyo made another pilgrimage to the mountains. This time she took the living baby's navel cord as an offering to the goddess, and returned with another woven talisman.

Shigeru was four when his brother was born. The second son was named Takeshi – the Otori favoured names with *Shige* and *Take* in them, reminding their sons of the importance of both the land and the sword, the blessings of peace as well as the delights of war.

The legitimate succession was thus secured to the great relief of everyone except possibly Shoichi and Masahiro, who hid their disappointment with all the fortitude expected of the warrior class. Shigeru was brought up in the strict, disciplined way of the Otori, who valued courage and physical skill, keen intelligence, mental alertness, self-control and courtesy in grown men and obedience in children. He was taught horsemanship; the use of sword, bow and spear; the art and strategy of war; the government and history of the clan; and the administration and taxation of its lands.

These lands comprised the whole of the Middle Country from the northern to the southern sea. In the north, the port of Hagi was the Otori castle town. Trade with the mainland and fishing the rich northern seas made it prosperous. Craftsmen from Silla on the mainland settled there and introduced many small industries, most noteworthy the beautiful pottery: the local clay had a particularly pleasing colour, which gave a flesh-like lustre to the pale glazes. Yamagata, in the centre of the country, was their second most important city, while trade was also con-

ducted in the south from the port of Hofu. Out of the Three Countries, the Middle Country was the most prosperous, which meant its neighbours were always eyeing it covetously.

In the fourth month of the year after Kikuta Isamu's death, the twelve-year-old Otori Shigeru came to visit his mother, as he had done once a week since he had left the house he had been raised in and gone to live in the castle as his father's heir. The house was built on a small point near the conjunction of the twin rivers that encircled the town of Hagi. The farms and forests on the opposite bank belonged to his mother's family. The house was built of wood, with verandas all around it, covered by deep eaves. The oldest part of it was thatched, but his grandfather had had a new wing constructed with a second floor and a roof of bark shingles, an upstairs room and a staircase made out of polished oak. Though Shigeru was still a few years off his coming-of-age day, he wore a short sword in the belt of his robe. This day, since his visit to his mother was considered an occasion of some formality, he wore appropriate clothes, with the Otori heron crest on the back of the large-sleeved jacket and divided wide trousers under the long robe. He was carried in a palanquin, black lacquered with sides of woven reeds and oiled silk curtains, which he always raised. He would have preferred to ride – he loved horses – but as the heir to the clan certain formalities were expected of him, and he obeyed without question.

He was accompanied in a second palanquin by his teacher Ichiro, a distant cousin of his father's, who had been in charge of his studies since he was four years old and had begun his formal education in reading, writing

with the brush, history, the classics and poetry. The palanquin-bearers jogged through the gates. The guards all came forward, and fell to their knees as the box was set down and Shigeru stepped out. He acknowledged their bows with a slight inclination of his head, and then waited respectfully for Ichiro to extricate himself from his palanquin. The teacher was a sedentary man and was already smitten by pains in the joints that made bending difficult. The old man and the boy stood for a moment, looking at the garden, both affected by the same sudden gladness. The azaleas were on the point of flowering and the bushes were brushed with a red gleam. Around the pools, irises bloomed white and purple, and the leaves of the fruit trees were a bright fresh new green. A stream flowed through the garden and red-gold carp flickered below its surface. From the far end came the sound of the river at low tide, a gentle lapping – and the familiar smell, beneath the scent of flowers, of mud and fish.

There was an arch in the wall, a conduit through which the stream flowed into the river beyond. A grille of bamboo rails lashed together usually stood against the opening to prevent stray dogs entering the garden – Shigeru noticed it had been pulled to one side and he smiled inwardly, remembering how he used to go out onto the riverbank the same way. Takeshi was probably playing outside, engaged in a stone battle, no doubt, and his mother would be fretting about him. Takeshi would be scolded later for not being ready, dressed in his best clothes, to greet his older brother, but both mother and brother would be quick to forgive him. Shigeru felt a slight quickening of pleasure at the thought of seeing his brother.

Chiyo called a welcome from the veranda, and he turned to see one of the maids kneeling beside her on the

boards with a bowl of water ready to wash their feet. Ichiro gave a deep sigh of satisfaction and, smiling broadly in a way he never did at the castle, walked towards the house – but before Shigeru could follow him there was a shout from beyond the garden wall, and Endo Akira came splashing through the water. He was covered in mud and bleeding from cuts on his forehead and neck.

'Shigeru! Your brother! He fell in the river!'

Not so long ago, Shigeru had engaged in similar battles, and Akira had been one of his junior officers. The Otori boys, along with Akira and Takeshi's best friend Miyoshi Kahei, had an ongoing feud with the sons of the Mori family who lived on the opposite bank and considered the fish weir their own private bridge. The boys fought their battles with round black stones, prised from the silt at low tide. They had all fallen in the river at one time or another, and had learned to deal with it in all its treacherous moods. He hesitated, reluctant to plunge into the water, disinclined to dirty his clothes and insult his mother by making her wait for him.

'My younger brother can swim!'

'No. He hasn't come up!'

A lick of fear ran round his mouth, drying it.

'Show me.' He leaped into the stream and Akira came after him. From the veranda he heard Ichiro call in outrage, 'Lord Shigeru! This is no time for playing! Your mother is waiting for you.'

He noticed how low he had to bend to go beneath the arch. He could hear the different notes of the water, the cascade from the garden, the splash of the stream as it flowed through the conduit onto the beach by the river. He dropped onto the mud, felt it close malodorously over his sandals, tore them off, and his jacket, and his robe,

dropping them in the mud, hardly noticing, aware only of the green empty surface of the river. Downstream to his right he saw the first column of the unfinished stone bridge rising from the water, the incoming tide swirling between its footings, and one boat, carried by the same tide, steered by a young girl. In the instant his eyes flashed over her he saw she was aware of the accident, was rising and stripping off her outer robe, preparing to dive. Then he looked upstream to the fish weir where the two younger Mori boys were kneeling, peering into the water.

'Mori Yuta fell in too,' Akira said.

At that moment there was a splashing disturbance in the water and Miyoshi Kahei surfaced, gasping for breath, his face pale green, his eyes bulging. He took two or three deep breaths, then dived again.

'That's where they are,' Akira said.

'Go and get the guards,' Shigeru said, but he knew there was no time to wait for anyone else. He ran forward and plunged into the river. A few paces from the bank it deepened rapidly, and the tide was flowing back strongly, pushing him towards the fish weir. Kahei surfaced again a little in front of him, coughing and spitting water.

'Shigeru!' he screamed. 'They're stuck under the weir!'

Shigeru thought of nothing now except that he could not let Takeshi die in the river. He dived down into the murky water, feeling the strengthening power of the tide. He saw the cloudy figures like shadows, their pale limbs entwined together as though they were still fighting. Yuta, older and heavier, was on the outer side. Pushed against the wooden structure of the weir, in his panic he had forced Takeshi further between the piles. His loincloth seemed to be snagged on a jagged piece of wood.

Shigeru was counting under his breath to keep himself

calm. The blood was beginning to pound in his ears as his lungs demanded air. He pulled at the sodden cloth but it would not come free. He could not get Yuta out of the way to reach Takeshi. He felt a movement in the water next to him and realized he was not alone. He thought it was Kahei but saw the pale outline of a girl's breast against the darkened wood and the green weed. She grasped Yuta and jerked at him. The cloth broke free. The boy's mouth was open: no bubbles came from it. He looked already dead – Shigeru could save one but not both, and at that moment he could think of no one but Takeshi. He dived further in and grabbed his brother's arms.

His lungs were bursting, his vision red. Takeshi's limbs seemed to move, but it was only the river's current rocking them. He seemed extraordinarily heavy: too heavy for an eight-year-old, far too heavy for Shigeru to lift. But he would not let go. He would die in the river with his brother before he left him alone in it. The girl was alongside him, dragging at Takeshi, lifting them both upwards. He could just make out her eyes dark and intense with effort. She swam like a cormorant, better than he did.

The light above was tantalizingly near. He could see its fractured surface but he could not reach it. He opened his mouth involuntarily – maybe to breathe, maybe to call for help – and took in a mouthful of water. His lungs seemed to scream in pain. The river had become a prison, its water no longer fluid and soft but a solid membrane closing round him, choking him.

Swim up. Swim up. It was as if she had spoken to him. Without knowing how, he found a tiny amount of strength left. The light brightened dazzlingly, and then his head broke through the surface and he was gulping air.

The river relaxed its serpent grip and held him up, and held Takeshi up in his arms.

His brother's eyes were closed and he did not seem to be breathing. Treading water, shivering, Shigeru placed his mouth over his brother's and gave him his breath, calling on all the gods and spirits to help him, rebuking the river god, rebuking death itself, refusing to let them take Takeshi down into their dark world.

Guards from the house had appeared on the riverbank and were splashing into the water. One of them took Takeshi and swam strongly back to the shore. Another plucked Kahei up and helped him swim back. A third tried to help Shigeru, but he pushed him away.

'Mori Yuta is still down there. Bring him up.'

The man's face blanched and he dived immediately.

Shigeru could hear the youngest Mori boy sobbing on the weir. Somewhere in the distance a woman was screaming, a high sound like a curlew. As he swam to the shore and staggered from the water, Shigeru was aware of the ordinary peacefulness of the late afternoon, the warmth of the sun, the smells of blossom and mud, the soft touch of the south wind.

The guard had laid Takeshi face down on the beach and was kneeling beside him, pushing gently on his back to empty the water from his lungs. The man's face was shocked and sombre, and he kept shaking his head.

'Takeshi!' Shigeru called. 'Wake up! Takeshi!'

'Lord Shigeru,' the guard began, his voice trembling. He could not speak the terrible fear, and in his emotion pressed more strongly on the child's shoulders.

Takeshi's eyes flickered and he coughed violently. Water streamed from his mouth, and he choked, cried out and retched. Shigeru raised him, wiped his face and held

him as the boy retched again. He felt his eyes grow hot, and thought Takeshi might weep from relief or shock, but the boy struggled to his feet, pushing Shigeru away.

'Where's Yuta? Did I beat him? That'll teach him to come on our bridge!'

Takeshi's loincloth and sleeves were full of stones. The guard tipped them out, laughing.

'Your weapons nearly killed you! Not so clever, was it!'

'Yuta pushed me in!' Takeshi cried.

Despite Takeshi's protests, the man carried him back to the house. News of the accident had travelled fast; the maids from the household had come running into the street and were crowded on the bank.

Shigeru gathered up his clothes from the mud and put them on. He wondered if he should bathe and change before he saw his mother. He looked back at the river. The girl had climbed back into her boat and dressed herself again. She did not look towards him but began to row downstream against the tide. Men were still diving repeatedly for Yuta. Shigeru remembered the clinging, stifling embrace of the river and shivered, despite the warmth of the sun. He bent again and picked up one of the smallest stones – a round black pebble, water-smoothed.

'Lord Shigeru!' Chiyo was calling to him. 'Come,' she said. 'I'll find you fresh clothes.'

'You must apologize to my mother for me,' he said as he vaulted up onto the bank. 'I am sorry to keep her waiting.'

'I don't believe she will be angry,' Chiyo said, smiling. She took a quick look at Shigeru's face. 'She will be proud of you, and your father too. Don't be sad, don't fret over it. You saved your brother's life.'

He was weakened by relief. The enormity of what might have happened was still too close. If he had not been in the garden; if Akira had not found him; if he had called the guards first; if the girl had not dived down after him . . . He had been brought up to have no fear of death, nor to grieve excessively over the deaths of others, but he had not yet lost anyone close to him, and he had not realized how fierce was his love for his brother. Grief came close to him with its grey numbing breath and its array of insidious weapons to flay the heart and torment the mind. He saw how grief was an enemy to be feared far more than any warrior; he realized he would have no armour against its assault. And he knew that the rest of his life would be a struggle to hold grief at bay by keeping Takeshi alive.

Three

The following day, Mori Yuta's body was washed up on the opposite bank, a little downstream from his family home. Whatever their own grief might have been, his parents hid it in their shame and remorse for nearly drowning the son of the lord of the clan. Yuta was twelve; almost a man. He should not have been indulging in childish games, causing danger to an eight-year-old. After the funeral, his father sought and was granted an audience with Lord Otori.

Shigemori and his younger brothers were seated in the main hall of the Otori residence, which lay within the castle grounds, surrounded by gardens leading down to the great stone walls that rose directly from the sea. The senior retainers were also in the room: Endo Chikara, Miyoshi Satoru and Irie Masahide. The sound of the waves and the smell of salt washed through the open doors. As summer progressed, every day became warmer and more humid, but here the air was cooled by the sea, as well as by the dense forest that covered the small hill behind the castle. At the top of the hill was a shrine to the sea god where a huge bronze-cast bell hung, said to have been made by a giant; it was struck if foreign ships were sighted or a whale stranded on the beach.

The three Otori lords were dressed in formal robes and wore small black hats, and each held a fan in his hand.

Shigeru knelt to one side. He also wore formal robes – not the ones that had been mud- and water-stained; they had been carefully washed and then presented to the small shrine near his mother's house where the river god was worshipped, along with many other gifts of rice wine and silver, in the hope that the spirit would be placated. Many in the town murmured that the god was offended by the building of the new bridge and had seized the boys in anger – it was a warning: the construction should be stopped at once. The stonemason was spat upon, and threats made to his family. But Lord Shigemori had set his heart on the bridge, and would not be dissuaded from it. The footings for the arches were in place and the first arch already rising from them.

All these thoughts flashed through Shigeru's mind as Mori Yusuke prostrated himself before the three Otori brothers. He was a horseman, and taught Shigeru and the other warriors' sons. He bred and broke the Otori horses, who were said to be fathered by the river spirit; now the river had taken his son in return. His family were middle rank, but wealthy. Their own ability and their water meadows had brought them prosperity. Shigemori favoured Yusuke to the extent of entrusting his son's education to him.

Yusuke was pale but composed. He raised his head on Shigemori's command, and spoke in a low, clear voice.

'Lord Otori, I deeply regret the pain I have caused you. I have come to offer you my life. I ask only that you will permit me to kill myself after the fashion of a warrior.'

Shigemori said nothing for a few moments. Yusuke lowered his head again. Shigeru saw his father's indecisiveness: he knew its causes. The clan could not afford to lose a man of Yusuke's competence, but the affront had

to be addressed or his father would lose face and be perceived as weak. He thought he saw impatience in his uncles' expressions, and Endo was frowning deeply too.

Shoichi cleared his throat. 'May I speak, brother?'

'I would like to hear your opinion,' Lord Otori said.

'The insult and grievance to the family are unpardonable in my view. It is almost too much of an honour to allow this person to take his own life. The lives of his whole family should also be required, and the confiscation of his lands and property.'

Shigemori blinked rapidly. 'This seems somewhat excessive,' he said. 'Masahiro, what are your thoughts?'

'I must agree with my brother.' Masahiro ran his tongue over his lips. 'Your beloved son Lord Takeshi nearly died. Lord Shigeru was also endangered. Our shock and grief were extreme. The Mori family must pay for this.'

Shigeru did not know his uncles well. He had barely seen them when he lived at his mother's house. They were both considerably younger than his father, born of a second wife who still lived with her oldest son, Shoichi; he knew they had young children of their own, still toddlers or infants, but he had never set eyes on them. Now he saw his uncles' faces and heard their words as he would a stranger's. The expressions were those of loyalty to their older brother and devotion to the family, but he thought he discerned something deeper and more self-serving behind the soft-spoken phrases. And his father was right: the punishment demanded was far too harsh; there was no reason to ask for the lives of the family – he recalled the boy sobbing on the weir and the other brother; the woman who had screamed like a curlew on the bank –

unless his uncles coveted what they had: Yusuke's fertile land and crops, and above all his horses.

His father broke into his thoughts. 'Lord Shigeru, you were the most immediately affected by these unfortunate events. What would be, in your opinion, a punishment both just and sufficient?'

It was the first time he had ever been asked to speak during an audience, though he had been present at many.

'I am sure my uncles are prompted only by devotion to my father,' he said, and bowed deeply. Sitting up, he went on: 'But I think Lord Otori's judgement is correct. Lord Mori must not take his own life: rather he must continue to serve the clan, which benefits highly from his loyal service and his skills. He has lost his oldest son and has therefore already been punished by Heaven. Let him make recompense by dedicating one of his other sons to the river god, to serve at the shrine, and by donating horses to the shrine also.'

Shoichi said, 'Lord Shigeru displays wisdom beyond his years. Yet I do not believe this deals with the insult to the family.'

'The insult was not so great,' Shigeru said. 'It was an accident that happened during a boys' game. Other families' sons were involved. Are their fathers to be held responsible too?'

All the fathers involved were present in the room – Endo, Miyoshi, Mori and his own . . . Something sparked anger in him, and he burst out, 'We should not kill our own. Our enemies are eager enough to do that.'

His argument sounded hopelessly childish in his own ears and he fell silent. He thought he saw scorn in Masahiro's expression.

Lord Otori said, 'I agree with my son's judgement. It

will be as he suggests. With one addition. Mori: you have two surviving sons, I believe. Let the younger go to the shrine, and send the older one here. He will enter Shigeru's service and be educated with him.'

'The honour is too great,' Mori began to protest, but Shigemori held up a hand.

'This is my decision.'

Shigeru was aware of his uncles' hidden annoyance at his father's judgement, and it puzzled him. They had all the advantages of rank and sufficient wealth yet they were not satisfied. They had desired Mori's death not for the sake of honour but for darker reasons of their own – greed, cruelty, envy. He did not feel able to voice this to his father or to the senior retainers – it seemed too disloyal to the family – but from that day on, he watched them carefully without seeming to, and he lost all trust in them.

Four

Mori Kiyoshige became Shigeru's closest companion. While his younger brother had been sobbing on the weir, Kiyoshige had run to his home to fetch help. He had not cried then or later: it was said of him that he never shed tears. His mother had been prepared for her husband's death and the family's ruin; when Yusuke returned home alive, and with the news that Kiyoshige was to go to the castle, she wept in relief and joy.

Kiyoshige was small in stature, but already immensely strong for his age. Like his father he had a great love of horses, and great skill with them. He was self-confident almost to the point of brashness and, once he had got over his shyness, treated Shigeru in the same way as he'd treated Yuta, arguing with him, teasing him, even occasionally scrapping with him. His teachers found him irrepressible – Ichiro in particular found his patience stretched to the limit – but Kiyoshige's good humour, cheerfulness, physical courage and skills at horsemanship endeared him to his elders as much as he irritated them, and his loyalty to Shigeru was complete.

Despite their relative prosperity, the family had been brought up with great frugality and a disciplined way of life. Kiyoshige was used to rising before sunrise and helping his father with the horses; then working in the fields

before the morning's lessons. At night, while his mother and sisters did sewing work, he and his brothers were expected to study, if they were not engaged in more practical tasks like making sandals from straw while their father read to them from the classics, or discussed theories of horse breeding.

The Otori valued two sorts of horses above all others: blacks, and pale greys with black manes and tails. Mori bred both sorts and ran them in the water meadows. Occasionally a grey would be so pale as to be almost white, with white mane and tail. When the horses galloped together, they were like a storm cloud of black and white. The year Kiyoshige went to the castle, his father gave a young black colt to Shigeru, a black-maned grey the same age to his son, and presented a pure white horse to the shrine along with his youngest son, Hiroki. The white horse became a sort of god itself. Every day it was led to a stall in the shrine grounds, where people brought it carrots, grain and other offerings. It became very fat and rather greedy. The shrine was not far from Shigeru's mother's house, and occasionally he and his brother were taken to festivals there. Shigeru felt sorry for the horse that could not run free with the others, but it seemed perfectly content with its new divine status.

'Father chose this one because of its placid nature,' Kiyoshige confided in Shigeru one day that summer, as they hung over the poles at the front of the horse's stall. 'It would never make a warhorse, he said.'

'The god should have the best horse,' Takeshi said.

'It is the best-looking.' Kiyoshige patted the snowy-white neck. The horse nuzzled him, looking for treats, and when it found none drew back its pink lips and nipped the boy on the arm.

Kiyoshige smacked it; one of the priests who had been sweeping the entrance to the shrine came hurrying over, scolding the boys. 'Leave that holy horse alone!'

'It's still just a horse,' Kiyoshige said quietly. 'It shouldn't be allowed to get away with bad manners!'

Hiroki, his younger brother, trailed after the priest, carrying two straw brooms that were taller than he was.

'Poor Hiroki! Does he mind having to be the priest's servant?' Takeshi said. 'I'd hate it!'

'He doesn't mind,' Kiyoshige whispered confidentially. 'Father said that too – Hiroki is not a warrior by nature. Did you know that, Shigeru? When you gave your opinion?'

'I saw him dance the heron dance last year,' Shigeru said. 'It seemed to move him deeply. And he cried when your older brother drowned, while you did not.'

Kiyoshige's face hardened and he said nothing for a few moments. Finally he laughed and gave Takeshi a punch on the shoulder. 'You have already killed – and you are only eight. You've outstripped both of us!'

No one else had dared say this aloud, but it had occurred to Shigeru too, and he knew others thought it.

'It was an accident,' he said. 'Takeshi did not mean to kill Yuta.'

'Maybe I did,' Takeshi muttered, his face fierce. 'But he was trying to kill me!'

They dawdled under the shade of the curved eaves of the shrine building. 'Father can't help putting the horse first,' Kiyoshige said. 'Even if it's a question of an offering to the gods. The horse has to have the right nature to be an offering – most of the horses would be miserable standing in a stall all day, never having the chance to gallop.'

'Or to go to war,' Takeshi said longingly.

To go to war. The boys' heads were full of it. They trained for hours with the sword and the bow, studied the history and the art of war, and at night listened to the older men tell stories of the ancient heroes and their campaigns: they heard of Otori Takeyoshi, who had first received the legendary sword Jato – the Snake – from the Emperor himself hundreds of years earlier, and who had slain a tribe of giants single-handed with the same sword. And all the other Otori heroes right down to Matsuda Shingen, the greatest swordsman of the present era, who had taught their fathers the use of the sword, who had rescued Shigemori when he had been ambushed by the Tohan clan, five men against forty on the border with the East, and who had been called by the Enlightened One and now served him at the temple at Terayama.

Now Jato had been passed down to Shigeru's father, and one day it would be his.

Above their heads hung carvings of the long-nosed goblins that lived in the mountain. Glancing up at them, Kiyoshige said, 'Matsuda Shingen was taught the use of the sword by goblins. That's why no one else came near him.'

'I wish I could be taught by goblins!' Takeshi said.

'Lord Irie is a goblin,' Kiyoshige replied, laughing – their sword instructor did have an abnormally long nose.

'But the goblins could teach you all sorts of things Irie doesn't know,' Takeshi said. 'Like making yourself invisible.'

There were many stories about men with strange powers: a tribe of sorcerers. The boys discussed them endlessly with a certain amount of envy, for their own skills emerged slowly and painfully out of rigorous training.

They would have loved to be able to escape their teachers through invisibility or other magic skills.

'Can people really do that?' Shigeru questioned. 'Or is it just that they can move so fast it's as if they were invisible. Like Lord Irie's pole when it hits you!'

'If it's in the stories, someone at some time must have been able to,' Takeshi said.

Kiyoshige argued with him. They talked in whispers, for the sorcerers from the Tribe could both hear and see from afar. The other world of goblins, ghosts and inhuman powers lay alongside their own; occasionally the membrane between the two worlds thinned and one rolled into the other. There were stories too of people who strayed into the other world and then came back to find a hundred years had passed in a single night. Or of beings that came from the moon or the sky and seemed like women, and made men fall in love with them. There was a road leading towards the south where a beautiful woman with a long neck like a snake enticed young men into the forest and fed on their flesh.

'Hiroki used to cry about the goblins,' Kiyoshige said. 'And now he's living here among them!'

'He cries at everything,' Takeshi said scornfully.

Five

Isamu's body was buried first by falling leaves and then by snow, and lay undiscovered until the following spring when the village boys began to search the mountains for mushrooms and birds' eggs. By that time his murderer, his cousin Kotaro, was long back in Inuyama, the clan capital of Iida Sadayoshi and the Tohan, where he ran a business making soybean products, lent money and behaved much like any other merchant of the city. Kotaro told no one of the precise details, only that the execution had been carried out and Isamu was dead, and he tried to put the whole affair out of his mind with his customary callousness, but at night Isamu's face floated before his eyes and he was often woken by his cousin's fearless and incomprehensible laughter. He was tormented by the fact that Isamu had refused to defend himself, had spoken of forgiveness and obedience to some lord. Death had not removed his rival, the traitor; it had made him more powerful; indeed, invincible.

Kotaro had at his command a network of spies, for the Tribe operated throughout the Three Countries, working at this time mainly for the Iida family as they tightened their grip on the East and began to consider how they might expand into the Middle Country and beyond. The Iida family kept a close watch on the Otori,

whom they correctly judged to be their main rivals; the clans in the West were less warlike, more prepared to make alliances through marriage. The Middle Country, moreover, was rich, had many silver mines and controlled fishing and trade in the northern and southern seas. The Otori would not relinquish it lightly.

Kotaro began to make enquiries about the villages that might lie near where he had tracked Isamu down. None was recorded on any map, nor counted as a source of taxation by any domain. There were many places like this throughout the Three Countries; the Tribe had a few themselves. Two things made Kotaro uneasy. The lingering fear that Isamu might have left a child, and the gradual uncovering of something he had known little about: a secret sect who lived unrecognized among the poorest – peasants, outcasts, prostitutes – where people had too hard a struggle of their own to concern themselves overmuch about their neighbours; for this reason sect members were known as the Hidden.

Kotaro began to gather fragments of information about them, information he was careful to pass on to his contacts among Iida's warriors, in particular a man called Ando, whose lineage was obscure but who had come to be one of Sadayoshi's most trusted retainers on account of his cruel tastes and brutal skill with the sword. The two main facts that emerged about the Hidden – that they would take no life, including their own, and that they paid allegiance to an unseen god, greater than any lord – were both serious affronts to the warrior class. It was not hard, through Ando, to inspire Sadayoshi's son, Sadamu, with hatred for this sect and to initiate the drive to eradicate them.

Kotaro never found the village but he trusted that sooner or later Iida Sadamu and his warriors would, and any children Isamu might have left behind would be dealt with.

Six

The colts grew and at three years old were broken in by Lord Mori with Kiyoshige's help. The routine of study and training continued. Shigeru and Kiyoshige were joined by the two sons of Kitano Tadakazu, Tadao and Masaji. Tadakazu was the lord of Tsuwano, a small castle town three days' journey to the south of Hagi, in the shadow of the main mountain range that divided the Middle Country. It was an important stopping place on the high road to Yamagata, the second city of the Otori clan, and had many inns and eating places. The Kitano family had a residence in Hagi, where the boys lived while pursuing their education with the others of their generation. They became a close-knit group, encouraged by their teachers not to compete with each other but to form strong ties of loyalty and comradeship that would be the basis of the future stability of the clan. Their different abilities were recognized and fostered: Shigeru with the sword, Tadao with the bow, Kiyoshige with horses, Masaji with the spear.

As they began to grow to their adult stature, they also experienced together the first urgencies of desire. Shigeru dreamed often of the girl in the river, though he never saw her again, and found himself gazing with longing at the form of a maid kneeling in the doorway, the white nape of her neck, the curve of her body beneath the soft robe;