

## Part I \* Quiet as the Forest

### Chapter 1

*“Yotsu!”*

The word pierced him like a sharp knife.

“Four-legged animal!”

The taunts and shouts of his schoolmates reddened his face, made him clench his fists in anger and strain to strike back, as waves of tears welled in his eyes. He dashed across the field to recover the soccer ball that had been kicked out of bounds.

He tossed it back to the group and watched from a distance as the other students resumed their play. Why? he asked himself. Why me? Why am I so different? I dress the same as they do, look the same, attend the same school. We are all Japanese, all of us.

*Why?*

Fumio Kosaka dragged a shirtsleeve across his face, removing a layer of sweat and grime while trying to dry his eyes. The hot June sun filtered thinly through a smoggy haze and hammered down on the young boy. He spat out specks of dirt.

Tall for his thirteen years, he crossed his wire-thin arms over a tight, narrow chest, and breathed in deeply. His body was firm and strong, like young bamboo.

He walked slowly back toward the group, eyeing them carefully, watching as they kicked the ball skillfully from player to player. They appeared uniform in size and in shape, down to the same bush of coal-black hair on their heads.

Just like him, only shorter and heavier.

Then it struck him. What his father always used to say, when he was still around.

*Deru kugi ga utareru.*

The nail standing up gets hammered down.

Leaping, Fumio caught the ball on an errant pass, juggled it flawlessly with his foot, and then bounced it back to a classmate nearby. As they moved into a circle to practice passing drills, he tried to rejoin the ring, attempting to sandwich himself between a

pair of fat stomachs. The one to his left they called sumo-chan, because he resembled a sumo wrestler in miniature.

“Out!” sumo-chan cried. He turned and spit in Fumio’s face.

Fumio wiped off the spittle, grabbed a handful of dirt, and with a scream born of fury and despair, threw it in the fat boy’s face.

Sumo-chan spun back from the group, clutching his eyes.

“Get him!” he shrieked.

The circle suddenly broke and the boys flung themselves on Fumio. He lashed out with his hands to protect himself, trying to deflect their blows. He kicked hard with his strong legs, like scissors, in an attempt to cut his attackers down. But they outnumbered him.

One pair grabbed his arms, another his legs, as he struggled to pull himself free. Strong and wiry as he was, he couldn’t jerk loose.

“*Yotsu!*” they screamed.

One by one, they kicked and beat Fumio’s body, watching as he writhed from side to side in pain. Red welts formed on his back, and his skin turned purple where their vicious blows landed.

“Four-legged animal!”

The fat boy scooped up a handful of dirt and rubbed it cruelly into the open wound on Fumio’s back.

Then the whistles blew. The youths scattered, leaving Fumio alone in the sandy schoolyard.

Slowly and painfully, he staggered to his feet. He couldn’t face his teachers. Not now.

As he saw the two playground counselors hurrying toward him, their identical jet-black military tunics stark against the drab concrete building behind, he stumbled away from them.

He had to get home. Had. To.

The nail standing up gets hammered down.

But why? he thought to himself again. Why me?

Then the pain from his wounds all but disappeared as he ran down the dusty access road leading to his village and saw the familiar kanji characters on the shop signs overhead.

The fish shop. The butcher. The *tatami* maker. The tanner.

*The tanner.*

Home.

He burst in through the thin wooden door and threw himself into his mother's arms, no longer able to control his feelings.

Akiko Kosaka dropped her tanning tools to the dirt floor and clutched Fumio to her breast.

"*Nani?*" she cried. "What ... ?"

As she hugged her son tightly, her hands felt the open welts on his back. Suddenly she knew. Without asking, she knew. He sobbed and shuddered uncontrollably now.

"*Yotsu?*" she whispered. She shut her eyes, hoping she was wrong, knowing she was right.

He nodded his head imperceptibly on her chest.

Stroking his long black hair, she soothed and comforted him as only a mother could. She felt the anger begin to well up inside her like boiling lava.

"*They* are the animals," she hissed into his ear. "They force us unto servitude, and keep us separate from the mainstream. As if there were a mainstream anymore."

She paused, feeling the wetness of his wounds. Glancing at her hands, she saw the blood, and drew Fumio across the cramped room to the narrow stone sink in the cooking area.

It was no kitchen. It was a corner of the main room – their only room – in which Akiko did the cooking. She knew they could never have a kitchen. Only *they* had kitchens.

She took a damp cloth and began cleaning Fumio's open sores. His lower back, where the fat one had rubbed in the dirt, was especially hard to clean.

"*Why?*" he whispered. "Why us?"

Akiko's eyes began to moisten. She shook her head. She knew her hopes for her son had evaporated, like the summer rain on hot pavement.

"*Shikata ga nai,*" she said. "It can't be helped. It was my hope, my dream, that once you got through school you could marry one of their girls and assume a normal life. But your uncle, on the main island, refused to take you in. He said he had enough mouths to feed. So we had to wait."

How often had Fumio heard the phrase?

*It can't be helped.*

Was it his fate to endure a lifetime of poverty and prejudice?

"But it gets harder and harder," she went on, wetting a fresh cloth to finish dressing his wounds. She pulled his torn shirt off over his head, and gave him a clean one.

"When your father was still here," she said, "I despaired of finding a way. He was so convinced our fates were sealed. He was outspoken, like the blacksmith's fire. But when he ... when he disappeared, I hoped they would just ignore us and leave us alone."

As Fumio got older, he could slowly begin to understand why his father had left the village, and the anger he felt at first had gradually been replaced by an eager envy. Some said that his father had become a fisherman, hiring out on the tuna boats that went to sea for six months at a time. Others spread the rumor that he had slipped across the Inland Sea from their village on the island of Shikoku to work as a longshoreman at the port in Kobe. Still others joked that he had been recruited by the Japanese army and sent to Manchuria, as forced labor, to work the deep, airless mine pits with captured Chinese to prepare for the coming war.

Fumio shrugged them all off. Still, he was envious that his father had been able to escape from the prison of village life.

"Buy why, *kaa-san*," he asked again. "Why us?"

"Because we are ... we are special village people," she said. Her voice dropped, embarrassed, as if she were afraid someone else might hear through their paper-thin walls.

*Tokushu burakumin.*

Special village people.

He had heard it before, of course. Many times. But he never thought it applied to them. To others, perhaps, like the ghettos of foreigners in Japan. To outsiders, sure. But not to native Japanese like himself.

The *ainu*, for example, confined to the northernmost island of Hokkaido, thought by many to have descended originally from the American Indian, weren't *they* special villagers? They even looked different.

Or the *kankoku-jin*, the Koreans, who were being forcibly extracted from their own country during the Japanese occupation and made to slave in the dark coal mines on this very island, in the shipyards of Osaka and Kobe, or in the hot and dangerous steel mills dotting the coastline, to strengthen Japan's own military effort for the impending war. There were nearly a million Koreans in Japan now, Fumio had learned in school, and he just naturally thought they were the special village people.

But the Kosakas? His own family?

Impossible.

"Not impossible," soothed his mother. "Quite the contrary. We are native Japanese, it's true. Descended from generations of Kosakas that reach back more than two centuries in time, back to the early years of the Edo period, when our Tokugawa shogun reigned supreme. But we have been different from the beginning. Our people were singled out to do society's dirty work – the butchering of animals, the tanning of hides, the manure hauling – that nobody else could, or would, do."

Akiko held him closer. She could feel his strong heart beating against her chest. How she wished she could change their past! How she wanted to change Fumio's future!

"It's not easy," she went on, "to acknowledge our origins. Our ancestors were ... criminals, forced by the elite to do these unwanted jobs. They had no choice – either conform, or die."

Fumio looked up at her tired face. Her thin cotton *mompei* blouse was ragged and worn, the blue vegetable dye having long ago faded into whiteness. Their clothes were always a little ragged, sure, but then they weren't the only ones who were poor. There were others, too.

But not special village people.

Like them.

"Maybe it can't be helped," he said, pushing back. "But that doesn't mean it has to endure."

Akiko nodded, smiling. A soft, understanding smile.

"That's what your father used to say, at first. But his outspokenness finally did him in. He was the nail that stood up. And he got hammered down."

“Well, I will not be hammered down,” he said, clenching his fists. He sat across from his mother on one of their two cushions, position on the tight dirt floor in the living area at the base of a low, squat table. He felt his emotions churning inside.

One part of him wanted to smash back at society with a terrible fury, to right the wrongs of centuries. To seek revenge. To vent the anger that boiled inside, red hot and dangerous.

But another part of him wanted desperately to *belong*, to be a member of the group, to be accepted. Because he knew, how viscerally he knew, that only by belonging would he be recognized as a human being. In Japan, validation of one’s identity came from the group. An individual was always an outsider, a stranger, to be shunned and avoided forever.

“It’s that awful religion again, isn’t it?” he asked.

Akiko lighted the single gas jet to heat a pot of water for tea. She brought the canister of aromatic *mugi-cha* over to join her son at the table.

“Buddhism is a religion of much discipline,” she said. Discipline in life, discipline in death. We are constrained from eating meat, but not from preparing it for others. That is the legacy of the foreigners.”

Fumio noticed his mother used the polite expression for foreigner – *gaijin* – which meant outsider – rather than the cruder expression he used with his schoolmates – *teki* – meaning enemy, or barbarian.

“Since early times, from our beginnings as an island country, fish and rice and vegetables were our main diet. There was no need for red meat. Until the barbarians came.”

Fumio flinched. This time she used the cruder form.

“The teki ate red meat all the time,” she said, “which posed problems for our people. Someone had to butcher the cows and prepare the meat, then tan the hides for shoes – our wooden sandals or straw thongs weren’t good enough for them. Then someone had to dispose of the remains, too, and it was all unacceptable for normal people to do because of the Buddhist strictures.”

“Except for the criminals, you mean,” he said. He munched on a rice cracker and sipped some tea, feeling the delicious hot liquid begin to heal the wounds that didn’t show.

“Yes, except for the criminals. Over time, because we worked with the prohibited animals, we were ourselves identified as animals. Yotsu. In the minds of others, we *became* four-legged animals. Outwardly, we were the same, but they knew the difference.”

It came to him again, as he thought about the past. When he went to school barefoot in the hot months, other students would point and snicker behind his back. They would laugh and tell him only animals allowed their bare feet to touch the ground. Since he wasn’t the only one with bare feet, he would ignore them, and shrug off their remarks. But gradually they had isolated him like a leper.

“Yet we are not religious, *kaa-san*,” he said. “Their religion may be Buddhism. Ours is survival.”

His mother stared at the tea in the small brown cup, watching the wisp of steam rise above it in a lazy trail. She smiled again.

“We are captives of their religion,” she said. “Prisoners of their culture. They make the rules, we obey them.”

She drained her teacup.

“But you are still so young. You can persevere. You can wait.”

He shook his head, rejecting the notion out of hand.

“I am thirteen now, mother,” he said, “and my future is no brighter than that of my ancestors. If I simply endure, nothing will change. I will remain a prisoner forever.”

He clenched and unclenched a fist.

Akiko reached across the table and grasped her son’s hand in hers. “As you know, there is much talk of war,” she said. “I do not want to lose you, Fumio. My life in the village is miserable enough now. If you go, I will be alone.”

There was a softness to her voice again now.

“But your life is more important. If you stay, you will always be an outcaste. We must think of a way to make you free.”

*Outcaste.* She used the dreaded slang.

*Eta.* The word that was always whispered.

Outcaste. Outsider. *Non-belonger.*

Fumio thought about the sleek, black Imperial navy warships out in the bay, practicing their maneuvers, preparing for engagement. To him, they represented escape.

Can you help me get to Kobe, *kaa-san?*” he asked. His mind began to race.

“Kobe?” she asked. Tears welled in her eyes. Visions of war flashed through her mind. “It sounds so dangerous.”

Fumio shook his head again.

“I have no interest in running away, to become a fisherman in the far seas, or to emigrate to the land of the barbarians. This is my country, this is my home. I am a Japanese. If the village people are ever to have a sense of belonging, to join the society that is rightfully ours, then revenge must be taken against those who pin us down. I cannot do that if I escape to the sea.”

His eyes widened, flashing with excitement and anticipation.

“But your *koseki,*” she said. “It will anchor you here forever. It can never be changed, Fumio. You know that.”

“We should never say never, mother,” he said. “My official birth registration remains in the village office, it is true. But we have plenty of time to deal with that. I won’t need it as a longshoreman, or as a mechanic to repair our battleships and destroyers.”

Akiko nodded. Her son was right. His future was not here. He did not belong on Shikoku. He didn’t belong in the village.

He simply did not *belong.*

“There was this Korean boy,” Fumio said. “A good student. He managed to pass the entrance exams for the most elite of schools, Tokyo University. Like most Koreans, he used a Japanese name informally instead of his given name, so he could pass himself off as Japanese, to avoid the discrimination and the hatred.”

He paused, looking across at his mother.

“Do you know the story?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“It’s so inspirational. When he – Park, I think his name was – graduated from the university, he applied for a job with several leading Japanese companies and was accepted by all of them on the basis of his grades and recommendations from his professors.”

“They all thought he was Japanese, of course.”

“Of course. He took a job with Matsuzaka, and began working with others from his graduating class. In the meantime, Matsuzaka wrote to his hometown for a routine copy of his *koseki*. When it came, they learned about his Korean ancestry, so despite his elite university credentials, his grades and all the letters of recommendation, they fired him.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” Fumio snapped a bony finger. “They wanted to keep the company pure – no foreign infection, they said. It was another case of outright discrimination against the non-native Japanese.”

“So what did he do?”

“Park was lucky,” Fumio went on. “He went to a lawyer in his community, another Korean, very charismatic, who inspired an outpouring of support and had the guts to sue Matsuzaka. The case went all the way to the High Court, and Park won.”

Akiko sighed.

“Maybe that is a lesson for us,” she said. “If you study hard, and get into the right schools, maybe you can also rise to beat the system.”

She knew it was impossible as soon as she had said it.

Fumio shook his head.

“That way is not for me, mother. I am a doer, not a learner. Besides, Park had the support of the entire Korean community. His case became a national issue. Matsuzaka was clearly in the wrong, because they had violated the laws. There are no laws for us. We are non-people.”

Her head snapped back when she heard him use the word.

*Hinin.*

The cruelest blow of all.

Non-people.

Fumio squeezed his mother’s hand again, and held it tightly.

“No, mother,” he said excitedly. “I want to go to Kobe, to work in the port. I can’t go back to school. That is a dead-end. Help me pack and put me on the ferry tomorrow?”

Akiko held her son’s hand and eyed him with admiration mixed with fear. She knew she would lose her son sooner or later, whether she resisted or not, whether war came or not. But at thirteen, he was still too young. And she said so.

“When you are older,” she said. “And you can defend yourself against the others. But not before.”

He frowned.

“When, then?”

“At seventeen.”

He jerked his hand out from hers and turned aside.

“That is a lifetime away. Fifteen, at most. At that age, I know I can pass for seventeen and get a job at the wharf.”

“All right,” she said. “Fifteen.”

Akiko knew she would be lucky to keep him that long. She took the lid off the brown ceramic pot that held their store of rice. She placed a small wooden dish next to it.

“Every Friday afternoon, for the next two years, we will take one grain of rice out of this dish and put it in the rice cooker with our meal that night,” she said, counting out the exact number of kernels. They glowed in the dim light like tiny pearls.

Fumio’s eyes widened, dancing with excitement.

“When the dish is empty, it will be time to go. Then we will both walk down to the ferry at Takamatsu together.”

Fumio watched his mother fill the small wooden dish with grains of rice. Suddenly, he felt relief, as if a tremendous weight had been removed from his shoulders. Two years would be a long time, but for the first time he could see a means of escape, a solution, a goal.

“Thank you, *kaa-san*,” he said. “I will not disappoint you.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I know.”

He glanced down at the black floor and pinched a fistful of soil, letting it sift through his fingers to the floor.

If he could do anything, he thought, he would never again live on dirt.

He wanted real *tatami*, real straw matting, with that delicious fragrance of freshly cut rice grass, the feeling of soft springs underfoot, just like real Japanese lived and ate and slept on.

Fumio wanted to get out and make his own way.

He wanted desperately to *belong*.