

MARA'S ADVOCATE
by
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CHAPTER ONE
Capturing the Moon

Mt. Toba
Japan
1190

Father was across the shallow stream where Mother was digging for arrowroot, and I was searching for pretty pebbles. Father watched us from behind a withered pine, then faded away and appeared next to a straight cypress closer to the water's edge. He tried to cross over to our side, and I stood very still, not daring to breathe, but something held him back, a tether he could not break. He reached around his neck, fumbled to untie himself, then gave up and waved his hands at me. I raised both arms above my head. *Here! I'm here!* But he ran back—in that direction he was free—all the way to his horse resting from a long, hard ride. He grabbed its braided reins, led it to the stream, and let it go, swatting it to cross over, pointing its way to me, but the horse balked against an unseen fence.

Father's beard was long and tangled, but I recognized his real face behind it. He took off his helmet and removed the rest of his armor, a thick tapestry of iron strips laced together by silk cords and leather bindings dyed purple, red, blue, and black, so many colors to ward off as many dangers. Down to his white cotton robe, he walked on a quilt of air, floating like a seagull to the edge of the stream. *Fly over! Fly over!* I shouted, but he shook his head and held both arms out. I ran across the shallows to meet him on his shore.

Father picked me up, and twirled around with me, laughing into the sky. I clutched his sleeves and shrieked. He tucked me under his arm and mounted his horse with one hand,

swinging me up with the other. *Don't drop me! Please!* He pressed me against his chest, and I caught the scent of warm earth.

He leaned away to get a better look at me, and I thought I heard him ask my age. I held up seven fingers. He looked at me for a long time before he had to turn away. Mother told me, whenever I was upset, that warriors never cried.

He flicked the reins, and the horse trotted in a slow circle. I called out to Mother, but she did not look up. I shouted again, but she could not hear me.

Look! I'm riding a horse! With Father!

The horse returned to our starting point, and Father set me down, ever so gently next to the heap of his armor. Never taking his eyes off me, he loosened his bow from the saddle, held it over my head, pulled it back without an arrow and let it snap. He took careful aim at another spot. Snap! Snap! I covered my ears and ducked my head. At all points around me, he shot unseen shafts to protect me from evil spirits. He touched my head lightly with one finger, mumbled something, then flicked the reins again and rode away, passing so easily through a gate of grass.

I screamed and ran after him.

Come back! Come back! Don't leave me!

My tears would stop him, for sure, but they spilled uselessly onto the grass. I kept running until I tripped and fell to the ground. It smelled of rotting mud.

I splashed across the stream back to Mother, and told her what had happened. She looked to the other shore, then back at me with wonderment. She pointed to a bird on a branch, and asked if I thought it would burst into a blossom. She soaked a small rag into the water and wiped my muddy face and hands.

“You silly boy. No one is there. Your father went to a far away place and is never coming back. Remember?”

She wiped her brow, picked up the basket of arrowroots, and we started toward home. “Silly boy. A ghost, you saw a river ghost. You have such a wild imagination. Uncle says you will make a fine monk someday.”

We walked in silence and stopped to rest on a flat, smooth rock. She lifted me onto her lap and brushed the tears from my cheeks. “Actually,” she confessed, “even warriors sometimes cry. But you...you will learn the Buddha’s secret.”

“Secret?”

“That’s what Uncle said.”

“Uncle knows a secret?”

“No, no.” Mother smiled and passed her slender fingers through the hair over my forehead, pushing it back. “Uncle said he’ll never know the secret, even though he’s a monk. But you, my precious one, you’re different. You see, Uncle has never seen a ghost.”

She pressed my head against her, and I heard wheezing in her chest.

Uncle could not see ghosts, but he could speak their language. Mother called it chanting, but she didn’t fool me. I knew he was really talking with them, making them feel good and not cause trouble. Trained at Mt. Toba, that scary place in the mountains, where demons jump out of mists and chase you down the road, Uncle knew the rituals of Naido, the Inner Path, and could summon the gods and buddhas to increase yields of rice, calm stormy seas, curse all enemies as surely as he blessed friends. He could make lovely magic, yes, he could, even without the Buddha’s secret.

But Uncle had his own secret. He told it to me, that's how I knew. He served our Yuasa clan chieftain, who knew the limits of weapons drawn from the earth—iron, stones and staffs—and relied on Uncle to ride with him into battle, rallying the forces of heaven to their side. Though he never told the chieftain, Uncle knew the limits of his craft, and always carried a small dagger hidden in his sleeves. Don't tell anyone about this, he confided to me. But talk about silly! What could Uncle do with a knife good for slicing persimmons? He'd be better off with his ghost-talk to scare enemies away. *Om bazara bazara haagh!* He could shape his fingers into a curse, and shake it at them, turn them into slimy worms. He wasn't trained like the fighting monks, who knew only conventional tricks, like ripping your eyes out if you were foolish enough to blink.

After Father had been killed in a battle with our bitter rival, the Yoshida clan (*yo-shi-i-da, shishi-i-i-da, pee on you!*), Uncle arranged my future. I was seven then, and when, in the following year, my mother passed away, Uncle placed me in the care of his old friend, Master Kakuzen, a Yuasa himself, who would keep me safe at Mt. Toba, far above the fields of contention. Master the arts of heaven, Uncle said, and leave matters of the earth to those with no imagination. He tried to speak child-talk to me, softly, and when I asked him to explain the word contention, he did not reply.

Many of the boys at the temple were orphans like myself, all of us from the Yuasa clan. The best monks, we were told, trained from an early age when our minds were like clay, easily shaped and hardened in the fires of discipline. Yet it seemed no different, at first, from working on a farm, and I cleaned floors, carried water, weeded the garden, and obeyed orders. The older monks were more interested in training our bodies than our minds, but that changed with time,

and with each passing year, they made us mold our thinking around Japanese words and Chinese characters, ideograms shaping reality, defining categories and meanings we repeated endlessly, burning them into our memories until they were hard as bricks stacked ever higher into soaring towers, wider into magnificent rooms, and deeper into secret passageways, an entire city built of the Buddha's words of wisdom. I wandered lost in the streets, blind alleys often, and escaped as often as I could into a quiet courtyard, where I could read about kings and queens, talking dogs and flying monkeys, Prince Genji and the ladies, who always talked about their feelings, especially about men. The older monks scolded me for letting those make-believe stories excite my imagination too much. Lies, they said, the stories were lies; only the Buddha told the truth.

And so they made us read more Buddhist texts in Chinese, twisting our minds with impossible Buddha-talk like Form and Emptiness, the Unconditioned, the Simultaneity of Cause and Effect. For a whole month, Master Kakuzen lectured on the Three Thousand Worlds in a Single Moment of Thought. "A single moment of thought is the true entity of all phenomena manifested repeatedly in moments of infinitely short durations, the time it takes for a dharma to rise and fall, and all of this takes place in your mind, which is exactly the same as but not identical with—two but not two—the three thousand worlds, which is the ten realms in ten mutual possessions in ten factors in three states of existence: ten times ten times ten times three, three thousand in all, exactly, no more, no less." And on and on and on, making me sleepy. He always ended with an assurance that these blurry abstractions would become clear when we gained the ability to see their shapes, no less than rocks and trees, in meditation. Shapes of abstractions?

Later I asked Senior Monk Enshun if he understood any of this, and he laughed. Suddenly he became serious and clapped his hands in front of my face. "Get it?" he asked. "Get

it?” I stared back at him, and wished I were back in the garden with Mother. “Listen,” he said, “turn your thinking into contemplation, and you’ll see. And I mean *see*.”

I closed my eyes, the better to see, determined to take up each of the three thousand worlds, one by one, until I had them all. The first world, hell, was easy to see: fire, demons, boiling pots filled with naked people screaming for the mercy they had denied others. In the second realm of greed, I saw men and women, rich and poor, stuffing their mouths with leaves, tearing their hair out. This is easy, I thought. It’s not hard to see the three thousand worlds. It just takes time, like picking up pebbles one by one. Then I walked into a vast plain of caked mud, parched and cracked and brittle. Three thousand ice stones dotted the field misted with white. I touched the hell stone, and it turned red; greed sparkled with gold. Every stone took on its own hue, colors I’d never seen before, and they rolled toward a single spot, where they stacked themselves into a dazzling mountain: three thousand worlds in a moment of thought! I was about to call Enshun to tell him I’d seen its shape, but I saw one rock missing at the very top, the three thousandth. It was rolling about in the field, carefree, changing colors, unable to decide what world it wanted to be, as if it had a choice. One more rock! Just one. I ran to it and picked it up, but it melted in my hands. First a trickle, then a torrent, and the entire mountain sloshed into water of no color, turning the dried mud back into black muck. I sank slowly, tried to move my feet, and went deeper the more I struggled. I yelled for help, and Enshun woke me up.

“Silly boy,” he said, and I looked around for my mother.

When I turned twelve, I assisted with rituals, preparing altars, lighting candles, burning incense, and chanting mantras, the meanings of which, we were told, could be seen in their

power to change blue skies into rain, catfish into dragons, death into life. We laughed at the older monks and said that they were the ones given over to fairy tales.

At seventeen, I was fully ordained according to the Precepts of the Buddha, and committed myself to his rules forbidding pleasure. I wore an orange surplice, and was confirmed by my clerical name, Myozen, meaning Bright and Good, a reminder, Master Kakuzen said, of what I was and should be. It was not easy to be good, but I followed the Precepts strictly, forswearing meat, spices, intoxicating drinks, the thought of girls and all other gratifications. I managed to control my outward behavior, what I did with my body, but I was constantly frustrated by my attempts to discipline my mind drifting like snow asking not where to fall.

The problem was my imagination. I tried to tame it through meditation, to make it see buddhas instead of ghosts. But I could not control it, and it rushed off on its own, a jungle elephant dragging me helpless behind it, a wild monkey dancing in the trees, daring me to catch it.

Once I sat in front of a carved cypress Buddha and closed my eyes, trying to keep the Enlightened One in sight. He was fragrant, but after a few moments, I stumbled into a stinking crowd of strangers. They swarmed around me, pushing me with their sweaty bodies wrapped in dirty rags, shouting and spitting all over the place, crowding out my view of the Buddha. One man howled at me, his jackled snout baring crooked black teeth, his eyes burning with veins. He lurched toward me and reached for my throat with fat fingers, scaled and clawed like a hawk's. I backed away, right into the saving arms of a warrior smelling of fresh earth, but the demon slashed his eyes, and the warrior let me go. I ran across hot sands, over jagged stones, and into a long night forest until I emerged again in front of the cypress Buddha glowing in soft candlelight, staring down at the temple floor where I had curled up, my head buried against my

knees. Ghosts, dressed as buddhas, all around me, out to kill me. It's no use, I admitted to Master Kakuzen. The buddhas hate me, and I'm afraid of them.

For six months after my ordination, Master Kakuzen forced me into my fears and made me meditate from midday to midnight, assuring me it was possible to get past my fright. Assurances, assurances, useless as colored brocade worn on a dark night. But he was right, though not in the manner of his intentions, and instead of demons I soon saw seated buddhas stand up and become dancing girls, smelled roasting chickens in the incense smoke, and heard wild drums as I chanted slowly. Better than fear, but still a failing, as all of this gave me so much pleasure. It was the same delight I felt with reading about Genji's love for Yugao, and I even saw the storied kings and queens, lions and tigers. Once a beautiful princess walked by my side, giving me slices of sweet persimmons as she sang a song about the stars. I awoke when the older monks shouted at me to stop singing. The fanciful tales ruined my meditations, and I renewed my resolve to master my mind, to make it perceive as I commanded it.

Enshun was our Senior Monk, older than I by several years. He was my tutor and my best friend. Skinny but surprisingly strong, he had hands like a farmer, although his father was a river fisherman. "What about your mother?" I asked. "Oh, she ran away," he said, and left it at that. He didn't belong to any clan, and, untethered by name, had been free to move about the countryside. A wandering monk recruited him to become a temple warrior, his height and wiry frame being perfect for an archer. But he could not keep an arrow properly nocked, and his shafts flew off in wild directions. After he shot a fellow archer in the arm, the trainer monk sent him to Master Kakuzen's temple.

I teased him about the bump on his head, a natural protrusion he liked to rub, saying it contained secret knowledge. His ears were funny too, sticking straight out like open fans, never

missing anything said. Maybe he was so smart because his bump knew everything and his ears missed nothing. Enshun was my tutor, and took care of me as a brother. What I felt for him was warm and powerful and sometimes puzzling, and I liked him because he saw in me what my uncle had known and the Master would recognize later.

“Have you ever ridden a horse?” he asked as we sat down for meditation.

“Yes, once, with my father.”

“Then you know what we are after. Meditation will give you the power to direct your mind as easily as a warrior rides his well-trained horse.”

“So far,” I complained, “I have managed only to fall off.”

“No one can succeed without failure,” Enshun said in a confident voice. “A little failure is not enough. You must have a lot to pile in a heap up to the heavens. Your mound is high enough already, and you are ready to do the Moon Meditation.”

The Meditation on the Moon was the first exercise for ripe monks. Ripeness had nothing to do with age. Some were ready at seventeen, others not till thirty, and for many, never. Enshun said I was the youngest monk to be ripe for the moon. He said my pile of failures was high enough, and he smothered me with a lecture about reverse causation. None of it made any sense. Monk-talk, monkey-talk, chit, chit, chatter.

“Simple,” he said, “here’s how it’s done.” He made me sit in front of a moon mandala, a hanging scroll of white paper inscribed with a circle made with a thick brush and black ink.

“Drew it myself. Now, capture it in your vision, pull it off the mandala, place it on your chest, expand it into the universe, and sit in the center of a cosmic luminescence. Just like the Buddha. That’s why he’s called the Enlightened One. Get it?”

But my mandala moon would not cooperate. The painted disc made faces mocking me, daring me to capture it. One night it danced on the mandala, evading my grasp. Its eyes sparkled, nose upturned. I returned its grinning with defiance, grabbed it in the trap of my gaze, but it glowered with pursed lips and fading eyes. It took two nights for me to wipe the smirk off my moon, to restore its snowy desolation. I finally managed to wrestle the moon into submission and was ready to lift it off the mandala. I held my breath, turned vision into a razor, sliced a perfect circle around it, and freed it from the paper. It was loose, dropped slightly but I lifted it back up. Hold it, hold it, don't let it move, not yet, take another breath, hold it, now draw it forward. The moon wanted to dance in transit, but I forced it steady and drew it closer by a snail's pace. Why was it so difficult? What force worked against me? At the moment of my wondering, it was gone. Vaporized. Poof.

I lifted it off again, and it went lopsided, then ran away into the night. Every night for three months I failed. I could not tame my imagination and found only the dancing girls, roasting chickens, and wild drumming.

Seeing my difficulty, Enshun sat beside me and took out a small bronze bell. "Maybe this will help," he said.

Running his finger on its thin edge and striking it with a technique only he had mastered, he made the bell sing, "*chi-rin, chi-rin, chi-rin.*" It was as close as bronze could get to the human voice saying, "*Ga-chi-rin,*" the word for the full moon. From his sleeve pocket, Enshun took out a special incense and lit the sticks in a burning candle. He held them under my nose.

"Breathe deeply, and let the smell perfume your mind."

"*Chi-rin, chi-rin, chi-rin.*"

The moon jumped off the mandala and settled easily on my chest. Yellow at first, it turned white as it dropped in front of me and rolled forward in a straight line. On and on it went, unwinding itself like a giant ball of string into a path of streaming light. It crossed a wide plain, then went up the side of a mountain. I stood up and took a step, but stopped when I saw Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy, walking toward me.

She held a lotus blossom in one hand, a peach in the other. She wore silken robes in many-colored layers trailing from her arms, fluttering from her waist. Crowned by a diadem of rubies and jade, her hair was tied in several orbs tightly combed without a single strand loose.

Forging compassion into her senses, the Goddess could *see* the sounds of all living beings crying out for help, *taste* the sights of their misery, *hear* the flavors of their unseasoned food, and she comforted them as her own children. All across India, in every province of China, throughout the kingdoms of Korea, and in every field in Japan, the Goddess of Mercy, handmaiden of the Buddha, transformed his words into boons and blessings.

“O blessed Myozen,” she said, “this is the path to perfect enlightenment, the liberation from all cares, the freedom from everyday thinking, the bliss exceeding all pleasures, the secret of the Buddha, who delights in silence and speaks only to say that serenity cannot be explained. Slaves and emperors, mired in their miseries, crave this exquisite joy, but they can only dream of it and awaken in the harsh light of day to chase satisfactions of the moment. But you, Myozen, will enter the Inner Path and taste the endless pleasure of unbounded freedom.”

I inhaled the incense again, and watched Kannon come closer. “*Chi-rin, chi-rin, chi-rin.*” Her tightly fixed hair came undone and fell loosely to her waist, releasing the scent of jasmine instead of musk. Her silken robe unraveled into a thousand threads and wove itself back into a courtesan’s kimono of birds and flowers of shimmering colors. The courtesan dropped the lotus

flower and peach, and reached for my hands. She drew me closer, wrapped both of her arms around me, slid her body down mine, and lowered herself to her knees. She pulled me down to her, eased me onto my back and caressed every part of my body. Every part.

I was confused. Was this the pleasure I had pledged to destroy, or was it the bliss of unbounded freedom? Was this the Buddha's secret? I hungered for more freedom and allowed myself to slip my hand into her kimono, feeling her rounded flesh, smooth and warm. She took off her kimono, and pressed herself against me. I accepted her invitation and reached down between her thighs. I closed my eyes to heighten my touch.

Something was wrong. I pulled my hand back in horror, opened my eyes in disgust, and pushed him away. The man laughed hysterically, delighting in total derision.

“O stupid monk! Foolish, blind, stupid, stupid monk! Nothing but an ordinary man hiding in sacred garments. Hah!” The naked man jumped up and down victoriously.

“You tricked me!” I screamed. I picked up a rock and smashed it into his head, bashing him over and over and over, but he laughed all the harder and smeared his blood on my face.

“Kill me? You think you can kill me? Stupid, foolish monk! YOU CANNOT KILL MARA!”

Enshun slapped his hand over my mouth, knowing the other monks would hold him responsible for my disruption of the night. He grabbed my flailing arms and held me until I no longer struggled, though I was breathing as if I had been running through the woods.

“Are you all right?”

“I...I think so.” I rubbed my hands together, trying to remove the slime I could still feel.

“Rest a moment, then go and tell Master Kakuzen what happened.”