

## PROLOGUE



# THE FATAL ARROW

ECHIGO PROVINCE, JAPAN:  
LEAF-TURNING MONTH (SEPTEMBER), A.D. 981

The evening sun slanted through the branches of tall cedars and splashed across a bloodred maple on the other side of the clearing. From the valley below came sounds of horses and shouts of men.

A young woman emerged from the trees, leading a child—a boy, no more than three years old, in bright blue silk and with his hair childishly parted and tied into loops over his ears. The young woman was slender and beautiful, and dressed in a costly white silk gown embroidered about the hem and full sleeves with nodding golden grasses and purple chrysanthemums. Her long hair, which almost reached the hem of her dress, was fastened with a broad white silk ribbon below her shoulders.

In the middle of the clearing the child pulled free to chase a

butterfly. The young woman called out anxiously, then laughed and ran after him.

From the thicket, Death watched the two with hot eyes, clasping the large bow with his left hand, while the right slowly reached over his shoulder to pull the long, black-feathered arrow from the quiver slung across his back.

The boy lost the butterfly and turned toward the woman, who sank to her knees and spread her arms wide to receive the child.

Death bared his teeth. He was close, his bow powerful, the arrow special. With luck it might take only the one shot. He placed it into its groove, pulled back firmly, and aimed.

With a shout of laughter the boy hurled himself into the waiting arms, and Death released the long steel-tipped missile. He watched as it found its mark just below the silken ribbon in the woman's black hair, heard the muffled blow clearly in the sudden silence, and watched as she fell forward, slowly, burying the small figure of the child beneath her. Heavy silken hair slipped aside, and a large red stain appeared on her white silk gown, spreading gradually from the black-feathered arrow like a crimson peony opening its petals in the snow.

Even the birds had fallen silent.

Death remained frozen for a few moments, watching, listening. But there was neither cry nor movement under the white silk, and he slowly lowered the bow.

The silence was broken by a small bird's voice, then by the humming of insects and distant shouts of the hunting party in the valley. Death quickly left the clearing.