

as an animal will when it runs uphill. We passed by the shrine; a bird was pecking at the millet and it flew off with a flash of green and white in its wings. The track curved a little round the trunk of a huge cedar and as I ran with stone legs and sobbing breath past the tree someone rose out of its shadow and blocked the path in front of me.

I ran straight into him. He grunted as though I had winded him, but he held me immediately. He looked in my face and I saw something flicker in his eyes: surprise, recognition. Whatever it was, it made him grip me more tightly. There was no getting away this time. I heard the Tohan man stop, then the heavy footfalls of the other two coming up behind him.

'Excuse me, sir,' said the man I feared, his voice steady. 'You have apprehended the criminal we were chasing. Thank you.'

The man holding me turned me round to face my pursuers. I wanted to cry out to him, to plead with him, but I knew it was no use. I could feel the soft fabric of his clothes, the smoothness of his hands. He was some sort of lord, no doubt, just like Iida. They were all of the same cut. He would do nothing to help me. I kept silent, thought of the prayers my mother had taught me, thought fleetingly of the bird.

'What has this criminal done?' the lord asked.

The man in front of me had a long face, like a wolf's. 'Excuse me,' he said again, less politely, 'that is no concern of yours. It is purely the business of Iida Sadamu and the Tohan clan.'

'Unnh!' the lord grunted. 'Is that so? And who might you be to tell me what is and what is not my concern?'

'Just hand him over!' the wolf man snarled, all politeness gone. As he stepped forward, I knew suddenly that

the lord was not going to hand me over. With one neat movement he twisted me behind his back and let go of me. I heard for the second time in my life the hiss of the warrior's sword as it is brought to life. The wolf man drew out a knife. The other two had poles. The lord raised the sword with both hands, sidestepped under one of the poles, lopped off the head of the man holding it, came back at the wolf man, and took off the right arm, still holding the knife.

It happened in a moment, yet took an eternity. It happened in the last of the light, in the rain, but when I close my eyes I can still see every detail.

The headless body fell with a thud and a gush of blood, the head rolling down the slope. The third man dropped his stick and ran backwards, calling for help. The wolf man was on his knees, trying to staunch the blood from the stump at his elbow. He did not groan or speak.

The lord wiped the sword and returned it to its sheath in his belt. 'Come on,' he said to me.

I stood shaking, unable to move. This man had appeared from nowhere. He had killed in front of my eyes to save my life. I dropped to the ground before him, trying to find the words to thank him.

'Get up,' he said. 'The rest of them will be after us in a moment.'

'I can't leave,' I managed to say. 'I must find my mother.'

'Not now. Now is the time for us to run!' He pulled me to my feet, and began to hurry me up the slope. 'What happened down there?'

'They burned the village, and killed . . .' The memory of my stepfather came back to me and I could not go on.

'Hidden?'