

keep. She heard his voice in the yard and was about to call to him, but before she could get outside, the man who had spoken to her earlier stepped out of the guardroom. She stopped dead, hiding the knife behind her back. He stood right in front of her, too close, blocking the dim grey light from outside.

'Come on, Kaede, show me you're not a boy!'

He grabbed her by the right hand and pulled her close to him, pushing one leg between hers, forcing her thighs apart. She felt the hard bulge of his sex against her, and with her left hand, almost without thinking, she jabbed the knife into his neck.

He cried out instantly and let go of her, clasping his hands to his neck and staring at her with amazed eyes. He was not badly hurt, but the wound was bleeding freely. She could not believe what she had done. *I am dead*, she thought. As the man began to shout for help, Arai came back through the doorway. He took in the scene at a glance, grabbed the knife from Kaede, and without hesitation slit the guard's throat. The man fell, gurgling, to the ground.

Arai pulled Kaede outside. The rain sluiced over them. He whispered, 'He tried to rape you. I came back and killed him. Anything else and we are both dead.'

She nodded. He had left his weapon behind, she had stabbed a guard: both unforgivable offences. Arai's swift action had removed the only witness. She thought she would be shocked at the man's death and at her part in it, but she found she was only glad. *So may they all die*, she thought, *the Noguchi, the Tohan, the whole clan*.

'I will speak to his lordship on your behalf, Lady Shirakawa,' Arai said, making her start with surprise. 'He should not leave you unprotected.' He added, almost to

himself, 'A man of honour would not do that.'

He gave a great shout up the stairwell for the guards, then said to Kaede, 'Don't forget, I saved your life. More than your life!'

She looked at him directly. 'Don't forget it was your knife,' she returned.

He gave a wry smile of forced respect. 'We are in each other's hands, then.'

'What about them?' she said, hearing the thud of steps on the stairs. 'They know I left with the knife.'

'They will not betray me,' he replied. 'I can trust them.'

'I trust no one,' she whispered.

'You must trust me,' he said.

Later that day Kaede was told she was to move to the Noguchi family residence. As she wrapped her few belongings into her carrying cloth, she stroked the faded pattern, with its crests of the white river for her family and the twin cedars of the Seishuu. She was bitterly ashamed of how little she owned. The events of the day kept going through her mind: the feel of the knife in the forbidden left hand, the grip of the man, his lust, the way he had died. And Arai's words: *A man of honour would not do that!* He should not have spoken of his lord like that. He would never have dared to, not even to her, if he did not already have rebellion in his mind. Why had he treated her so well, not only at that vital moment, but previously? Was he, too, seeking allies? He was already a powerful and popular man; now she saw that he might have greater ambitions. He was capable of acting in an instant, seizing opportunities.

She weighed all these things carefully, knowing that even the smallest of them added to her holding in the currency of power.