

framed between the shrine gates. I had never seen him before in my life, but my mother had held him up to us as a sort of ogre with which to frighten us into obedience: *don't stray on the mountain, don't play by the river, or Iida will get you!* I recognized him at once. Iida Sadamu, lord of the Tohan clan.

The horse reared and whinnied at the smell of blood. Iida sat as still as if he were cast in iron. He was clad from head to foot in black armour, his helmet crowned with antlers. He wore a short black beard beneath his cruel mouth. His eyes were bright, like a man hunting deer.

Those bright eyes met mine. I knew at once two things about him: first, that he was afraid of nothing in heaven or on earth; second, that he loved to kill for the sake of killing. Now that he had seen me there was no hope.

His sword was in his hand. The only thing that saved me was the horse's reluctance to pass beneath the gate. It reared again, prancing backwards. Iida shouted. The men already inside the shrine turned and saw me, crying out in their rough Tohan accents. I grabbed the last of the incense, hardly noticing as it seared my hand, and ran out through the gates. As the horse shied towards me I thrust the incense against its flank. It reared over me, its huge feet flailing past my cheeks. I heard the hiss of the sword descending through the air. I was aware of the Tohan all around me. It did not seem possible that they could miss me, but I felt as if I had split in two. I saw Iida's sword fall on me, yet I was untouched by it. I lunged at the horse again. It gave a snort of pain and a savage series of bucks. Iida, unbalanced by the sword thrust that had somehow missed its target, fell forward over its neck and slid heavily to the ground.

Horror gripped me, and in its wake panic. I had unhorsed the lord of the Tohan. There would be no limit to the torture and pain to atone for such an act. I should have thrown myself to the ground and demanded death. But I knew I did not want to die. Something stirred in my blood, telling me I would not die before Iida. I would see him dead first.

I knew nothing of the wars of the clans, nothing of their rigid codes and their feuds. I had spent my whole life among the Hidden, who are forbidden to kill and taught to forgive each other. But at that moment Revenge took me as a pupil. I recognized her at once and learned her lessons instantly. She was what I desired; she would save me from the feeling that I was a living ghost. In that split second I took her into my heart. I kicked out at the man closest to me, getting him between the legs, sank my teeth into a hand that grabbed my wrist, broke away from them and ran towards the forest.

Three of them came after me. They were bigger than I was and could run faster, but I knew the ground, and darkness was falling. So was the rain, heavier now, making the steep tracks of the mountain slippery and treacherous. Two of the men kept calling out to me, telling me what they would take great pleasure in doing to me, swearing at me in words whose meaning I could only guess, but the third ran silently, and he was the one I was afraid of. The other two might turn back after a while, get back to their maize liquor or whatever foul brew the Tohan got drunk on, and claim to have lost me on the mountain, but this other one would never give up. He would pursue me for ever until he had killed me.

As the track steepened near the waterfall the two noisy ones dropped back a bit, but the third quickened his pace