

'You have honoured me, lord,' she replied.

'But I think that pleasure is to be ours no longer. I have lost two men on your account. I'm not sure I can afford to keep you with me!' He chuckled, and the men in the room laughed in echo.

*He's sending me home!* The false hope fluttered in her heart.

'You obviously are old enough to be married. I think the sooner the better. We will arrange a suitable marriage for you. I am writing to inform your parents who I have in mind. You will live with my wife until the day of your marriage.'

She bowed again, but before she did so, she caught the glance that flickered between Noguchi and one of the older men in the room. *It will be to him*, she thought, *or a man like him, old, depraved, brutal*. The idea of marriage to anyone appalled her. Even the thought that she would be better treated living in the Noguchi household could not raise her spirits.

Junko escorted her back to the room and then led her to the bathhouse. It was early evening and Kaede was numb with exhaustion. Junko washed her and scrubbed her back and limbs with rice bran.

'Tomorrow I will wash your hair,' she promised. 'It's too long and thick to wash tonight. It will never dry in time, and then you will take a chill.'

'Maybe I will die from it,' Kaede said. 'It would be the best thing.'

'Never say that,' Junko scolded her, helping her into the tub to soak in the hot water. 'You have a great life ahead of you. You are so beautiful! You will be married, have children.'

She brought her mouth close to Kaede's ear and

whispered, 'The captain thanks you for keeping faith with him. I am to look after you on his behalf.'

*What can women do in this world of men?* Kaede thought. *What protection do we have? Can anyone look after me?*

She remembered her own face in the mirror, and longed to look at it again.