

'Though how you dared stand up to Sadamu when you're too scared to say a word to me . . .'

I wasn't exactly scared of him – more like in complete awe. It was as if one of God's angels, or one of the spirits of the forest, or a hero from the old days, had suddenly appeared in front of me and taken me under his protection. I could hardly have told you then what he looked like, for I did not dare look at him directly. When I did sneak a glance at him, his face in repose was calm – not exactly stern, but expressionless. I did not then know the way it was transformed by his smile. He was perhaps thirty years old, or a little younger, well above medium height, broad-shouldered. His hands were light-skinned, almost white, well formed, and with long, restless fingers that seemed made to shape themselves around the sword's handle.

They did that now, lifting the sword from where it lay on the matting. The sight of it sent a shudder through me. I imagined it had known the intimate flesh, the life blood, of many men, had heard their last cries. It terrified and fascinated me.

'Jato,' Lord Otori said, noticing my gaze. He laughed and patted the shabby black sheath. 'In travelling clothes, like me. At home we both dress more elegantly!'

*Jato*, I repeated under my breath. The snake sword, which had saved my life by taking life.

We left the inn and resumed our journey past the sulphur-smelling hot springs of Hinode and up another mountain. The rice paddies gave way to bamboo groves, just like the ones around my village, then came chestnuts, maples and cedars. The forest steamed from the warmth of the sun, although it was so dense that little sunlight penetrated to us below. Twice snakes slithered out of our

path, one the little black adder and another, larger one, the colour of tea. It seemed to roll like a hoop, and it leaped into the undergrowth as though it knew Jato might lop off its head. Cicadas sang stridently, and the min-min moaned with head-splitting monotony.

We went at a brisk pace despite the heat. Sometimes Lord Otori would outstride me and I would toil up the track as if utterly alone, hearing only his footsteps ahead, and then come upon him at the top of the pass, gazing out over the view of mountains, and beyond them more mountains stretching away, and everywhere the impenetrable forest.

He seemed to know his way through this wild country. We walked for long days and slept only a few hours at night, sometimes in a solitary farm house, sometimes in a deserted mountain hut. Apart from the places we stopped at we met few people on this lonely road: a woodcutter, two girls collecting mushrooms who ran away at the sight of us, a monk on a journey to a distant temple. After a few days we crossed the spine of the country. We still had steep hills to climb, but we descended more frequently. The sea became visible, a distant glint at first, then a broad silky expanse with islands jutting up like drowned mountains. I had never seen it before, and I couldn't stop looking at it. Sometimes it seemed like a high wall about to topple across the land.

My hand healed slowly, leaving a silver scar across my right palm.

The villages became larger, until we finally stopped for the night in what could only be called a town. It was on the high road between Inuyama and the coast, and had many inns and eating places. We were still in Tohan territory, and the triple oak leaf was everywhere, making