

All day the other girls avoided her, talking together in huddled groups, falling silent when she passed them. Two had red eyes; perhaps the dead man had been a favourite or a lover. No one showed her any sympathy. Their resentment made her hate them more. Most of them had homes in the town or nearby villages; they had parents and families they could turn to. They were not hostages. And he, the dead guard, had grabbed her, had tried to force her. Anyone who loved such a man was an idiot.

A servant girl she had never seen before came to fetch her, addressing her as Lady Shirakawa and bowing respectfully to her. Kaede followed her down the steep cobbled steps that led from the castle to the residence, through the bailey, under the huge gate, where the guards turned their faces away from her in anger, and into the gardens that surrounded Lord Noguchi's house.

She had often seen the gardens from the castle, but this was the first time she had walked in them since she was seven years old. They went to the back of the large house, and Kaede was shown into a small room.

'Please wait here for a few minutes, lady.'

After the girl had gone, Kaede knelt on the floor. The room was of good proportions, even though it was not large, and the doors stood open on to a tiny garden. The rain had stopped and the sun was shining fitfully, turning the dripping garden into a mass of shimmering light. She gazed at the stone lantern, the little twisted pine, the cistern of clear water. Crickets were singing in the branches; a frog croaked briefly. The peace and the silence melted something in her heart, and she suddenly felt near tears.

She fought them back, fixing her mind on how much she hated the Noguchi. She slipped her arms inside her sleeves and felt her bruises. She hated them all the more

for living in this beautiful place, while she, of the Shirakawa family, had been housed with servants.

The internal door behind her slid open, and a woman's voice said, 'Lord Noguchi wishes to speak with you, lady.'

'Then you must help me get ready,' she said. She could not bear to go into his presence looking as she did, her hair undressed, her clothes old and dirty.

The woman stepped into the room, and Kaede turned to look at her. She was old, and although her face was smooth and her hair still black, her hands were wrinkled and gnarled like a monkey's paws. She studied Kaede with a look of surprise on her face. Then, without speaking, she unpacked the bundle, taking out a slightly cleaner robe, a comb, and hairpins.

'Where are my lady's other clothes?'

'I came here when I was seven,' Kaede said angrily. 'Don't you think I might have grown since then? My mother sent better things for me, but I was not allowed to keep them!'

The woman clicked her tongue. 'It's lucky that my lady's beauty is such that she has no need of adornment.'

'What are you talking about?' Kaede said, for she had no idea what she looked like.

'I'll dress your hair now. And find you clean footwear. I am Junko. Lady Noguchi has sent me to wait on you. I'll speak to her later about clothes.'

Junko left the room and came back with two girls carrying a bowl of water, clean socks, and a small carved box. Junko washed Kaede's face, hands, and feet, and combed out her long black hair. The maids murmured as if in amazement.

'What is it? What do they mean?' Kaede said nervously.