

When I said nothing, just shrugged and smiled, the man snapped, 'He's a halfwit!'

'No, he can talk perfectly well,' Lord Otori returned impatiently. 'I've heard him talk. But he saw some terrible things that silenced him. When the shock has faded he'll speak again.'

'Of course he will,' said the old woman, smiling and nodding at me. 'You come with Chiyo. I'll look after you.'

'Forgive me, Lord Shigeru,' the old man said stubbornly – I guessed these two had known the lord since he was a child and had brought him up – 'but what are your plans for the boy? Is he to be found work in the kitchen or the garden? Is he to be apprenticed? Has he any skills?'

'I intend to adopt him,' Lord Otori replied. 'You can start the procedures tomorrow, Ichiro.'

There was a long moment of silence. Ichiro looked stunned, but he could not have been more flabbergasted than I was. Chiyo seemed to be trying not to smile. Then they both spoke together. She murmured an apology and let the old man speak first.

'It's very unexpected,' he said huffily. 'Did you plan this before you left on your journey?'

'No, it happened by chance. You know my grief after my brother's death and how I've sought relief in travel. I found this boy, and since then somehow every day the grief seems more bearable.'

Chiyo clasped her hands together. 'Fate sent him to you. As soon as I set eyes on you, I knew you were changed – healed in some way. Of course no one can ever replace Lord Takeshi . . .'

Takeshi! So Lord Otori had given me a name like that of his dead brother. And he would adopt me into the

family. The Hidden speak of being reborn through water. I had been reborn through the sword.

'Lord Shigeru, you are making a terrible mistake,' Ichiro said bluntly. 'The boy is a nobody, a commoner . . . what will the clan think? Your uncles will never allow it. Even to make the request is an insult.'

'Look at him,' Lord Otori said. 'Whoever his parents were, someone in his past was not a commoner. Anyway, I rescued him from the Tohan. Iida wanted him killed. Having saved his life, he belongs to me, and so I must adopt him. To be safe from the Tohan he must have the protection of the clan. I killed a man for him, possibly two.'

'A high price. Let's hope it goes no higher,' Ichiro snapped. 'What had he done to attract Iida's attention?'

'He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, nothing more. There's no need to go into his history. He can be a distant relative of my mother's. Make something up.'

'The Tohan have been persecuting the Hidden,' Ichiro said astutely. 'Tell me he's not one of them.'

'If he was, he is no longer,' Lord Otori replied with a sigh. 'All that is in the past. It's no use arguing, Ichiro. I have given my word to protect this boy, and nothing will make me change my mind. Besides, I have grown fond of him.'

'No good will come of it,' Ichiro said.

The old man and the younger one stared at each other for a moment. Lord Otori made an impatient movement with his hand, and Ichiro lowered his eyes and bowed reluctantly. I thought how useful it would be to be a lord – to know that you would always get your own way in the end.

There was a sudden gust of wind, the shutters creaked, and with the sound the world became unreal for me