

knew Lord Otori. They ran out to greet him with exclamations of delight, and flattened themselves to the ground in front of him. The best rooms were prepared, and at the evening meal course after course of delicious food appeared. He seemed to change before my eyes. Of course I had known he was of high birth, of the warrior class, but I still had no idea exactly who he was or what part he played in the hierarchy of the clan. However, it was dawning on me that it must be exalted. I became even more shy in his presence. I felt that everyone was looking at me sideways, wondering what I was doing, longing to send me packing with a cuff on the ear.

The next morning he was wearing clothes befitting his station; horses were waiting for us, and four or five retainers. They grinned at each other a bit when they saw I knew nothing about horses, and they seemed surprised when Lord Otori told one of them to take me on the back of his horse, although of course none of them dared say anything. On the journey they tried to talk to me – they asked me where I'd come from and what my name was – but when they found I was mute, they decided I was stupid, and deaf too. They talked loudly to me in simple words, using sign language.

I didn't care much for jogging along on the back of the horse. The only horse I'd ever been close to was Iida's, and I thought all horses might bear me a grudge for the pain I'd caused that one. And I kept wondering what I would do when we got to Hagi. I imagined I would be some kind of servant, in the garden or the stables. But it turned out Lord Otori had other plans for me.

On the afternoon of the third day since the night we had spent on the edge of Yaegahara, we came to the city of Hagi, the castle town of the Otori. It was built on an

island flanked by two rivers and the sea. From a spit of land to the town itself ran the longest stone bridge I had ever seen. It had four arches, through which the ebbing tide raced, and walls of perfectly fitted stone. I thought it must have been made by sorcery, and when the horses stepped on to it I couldn't help closing my eyes. The roar of the river was like thunder in my ears, but beneath it I could hear something else – a kind of low keening that made me shiver.

At the centre of the bridge Lord Otori called to me. I slipped from the horse's back and went to where he had halted. A large boulder had been set into the parapet. It was engraved with characters.

'Can you read, Takeo?'

I shook my head.

'Bad luck for you. You will have to learn!' He laughed. 'And I think your teacher will make you suffer! You'll be sorry you left your wild life in the mountains.'

He read aloud to me, 'The Otori clan welcomes the just and the loyal. Let the unjust and the disloyal beware.' Beneath the characters was the crest of the heron.

I walked alongside his horse to the end of the bridge. 'They buried the stonemason alive beneath the boulder,' Lord Otori remarked offhandedly, 'so he would never build another bridge to rival this one, and so he could guard his work for ever. You can hear his ghost at night talking to the river.'

Not only at night. It chilled me, thinking of the sad ghost imprisoned within the beautiful thing he had made, but then we were in the town itself, and the sounds of the living drowned out the dead.

Hagi was the first city I had ever been in, and it seemed vast and overwhelmingly confusing. My head rang with