

sounds: cries of street sellers, the clack of looms from within the narrow houses, the sharp blows of stone-masons, the snarling bite of saws, and many that I'd never heard before and could not identify. One street was full of potters, and the smell of the clay and the kiln hit my nostrils. I'd never heard a potter's wheel before, or the roar of the furnace. And lying beneath all the other sounds were the chatter, cries, curses, and laughter of human beings, just as beneath the smells lay the ever-present stench of their waste.

Above the houses loomed the castle, built with its back to the sea. For a moment I thought that was where we were heading, and my heart sank, so grim and foreboding did it look, but we turned to the east, following the Nishigawa river to where it joined the Higashigawa. To our left lay an area of winding streets and canals where tiled-roofed walls surrounded many large houses, just visible through the trees.

The sun had disappeared behind dark clouds, and the air smelled of rain. The horses quickened their step, knowing they were nearly home. At the end of the street a wide gate stood open. The guards had come out from the guardhouse next to it and dropped to their knees, heads bowed, as we went past.

Lord Otori's horse lowered its head and rubbed it roughly against me. It whinnied and another horse answered from the stables. I held the bridle, and the lord dismounted. The retainers took the horses and led them away.

He strode through the garden towards the house. I stood for a moment, hesitant, not knowing whether to follow him or go with the men, but he turned and called my name, beckoning to me.

The garden was full of trees and bushes that grew, not like the wild trees of the mountain, dense and pressed together, but each in its own place, sedate and well trained. And yet, every now and then I thought I caught a glimpse of the mountain as if it had been captured and brought here in miniature.

It was full of sound, too – the sound of water flowing over rocks, trickling from pipes. We stopped to wash our hands at the cistern, and the water ran away tinkling like a bell, as though it were enchanted.

The house servants were already waiting on the veranda to greet their master. I was surprised there were so few, but I learned later that Lord Otori lived in great simplicity. There were three young girls, an older woman, and a man of about fifty years. After the bows the girls withdrew and the two old people gazed at me in barely disguised amazement.

'He is so like . . . !' the woman whispered.

'Uncanny!' the man agreed, shaking his head.

Lord Otori was smiling as he stepped out of his sandals and entered the house. 'I met him in the dark! I had no idea till the following morning. It's just a passing likeness.'

'No, far more than that,' the old woman said, leading me inside. 'He is the very image.' The man followed, gazing at me with lips pressed together as though he had just bitten on a pickled plum – as though he foresaw nothing but trouble would spring from my introduction into the house.

'Anyway, I've called him Takeo,' the lord said over his shoulder. 'Heat the bath and find clothes for him.'

The old man grunted in surprise.

'Takeo!' the woman exclaimed. 'But what's your real name?'