

again. It was as if a voice spoke inside my head: *This is what you are to become*. I wanted desperately to turn back time to the day before I went mushrooming on the mountain – back to my old life with my mother and my people. But I knew my childhood lay behind me, done with, out of reach for ever. I had to become a man and endure whatever was sent me.

With these noble thoughts in my mind I followed Chiyo to the bathhouse. She obviously had no idea of the decision I'd come to; she treated me like a child, making me take off my clothes and scrubbing me all over before leaving me to soak in the scalding water.

Later she came back with a light cotton robe and told me to put it on. I did exactly as I was told. What else could I do? She rubbed my hair with a towel, and combed it back, tying it in a topknot.

'We'll get this cut,' she muttered, and ran her hand over my face. 'You don't have much beard yet. I wonder how old you are? Sixteen?'

I nodded. She shook her head and sighed. 'Lord Shigeru wants you to eat with him,' she said, and then added quietly, 'I hope you will not bring him more grief.'

I guessed Ichiro had been sharing his misgivings with her.

I followed her back to the house, trying to take in every aspect of it. It was almost dark by now; lamps in iron stands shed an orange glow in the corners of the rooms, but did not give enough light for me to see much. Chiyo led me to a staircase in the corner of the main living room. I had never seen one before: we had ladders in Mino, but no one had a proper staircase like this. The wood was dark, with a high polish – oak I thought – and each step made its own tiny sound as I trod on it. Again, it seemed

to me to be a work of magic, and I thought I could hear the voice of its creator within it.

The room was empty, the screens overlooking the garden wide open. It was just beginning to rain. Chiyo bowed to me – not very deeply I noticed – and went back down the staircase. I listened to her footsteps and heard her speak to the maids in the kitchen.

I thought the room was the most beautiful I had ever been in. Since then I've known my share of castles, palaces, nobles' residences, but nothing can compare with the way the upstairs room in Lord Otori's house looked that evening late in the eighth month with the rain falling gently on the garden outside. At the back of the room one huge pole, the trunk of a single cedar, rose from floor to ceiling, polished to reveal the knots and the grain of the wood. The beams were of cedar, too, their soft reddish brown contrasting with the creamy white walls. The matting was already fading to soft gold, the edges joined by broad strips of indigo material with the Otori heron woven into it in white.

A scroll hung in the alcove with a painting of a small bird on it. It looked like the green-and-white-winged flycatcher from my forest. It was so real that I half expected it to fly away. It amazed me that a great painter would have known so well the humble birds of the mountain.

I heard footsteps below and sat down quickly on the floor, my feet tucked neatly beneath me. Through the open windows I could see a great grey and white heron standing in one of the garden pools. Its beak jabbed into the water and came up holding some little wriggling creature. The heron lifted itself elegantly upwards and flew away over the wall.