

me afraid to go out in the streets, yet I felt the people at the inn recognized Lord Otori in some way. The usual respect people paid to him was tinged by something deeper, some old loyalty that had to be kept hidden. They treated me with affection, even though I did not speak to them. I had not spoken for days, not even to Lord Otori. It did not seem to bother him much. He was a silent man himself, wrapped up in his own thoughts, but every now and then I would sneak a look at him and find him studying me with an expression on his face that might have been pity. He would seem to be about to speak, then he'd grunt and mutter, 'Never mind, never mind, things can't be helped.'

The servants were full of gossip, and I liked listening to them. They were deeply interested in a woman who had arrived the night before and was staying another night. She was travelling alone to Inuyama, apparently to meet Lord Iida himself, with servants, naturally, but no husband or brother or father. She was very beautiful, though quite old, thirty at least, very nice, kind, and polite to everyone but – travelling alone! What a mystery! The cook claimed to know that she was recently widowed and was going to join her son in the capital, but the chief maid said that was nonsense, the woman had never had children, never been married, and then the horse boy, who was stuffing his face with his supper, said he had heard from the palanquin bearers that she had had two children, a boy who died and a girl who was a hostage in Inuyama.

The maids sighed and murmured that even wealth and high birth could not protect you from fate, and the horse boy said, 'At least the girl lives, for they are Maruyama, and they inherit through the female line.'

This news brought a stir of surprise and understanding

and renewed curiosity about Lady Maruyama who held her land in her own right, the only domain to be handed down to daughters, not to sons.

'No wonder she dares to travel alone,' the cook said.

Carried away by his success the horse boy went on, 'But Lord Iida finds this offensive. He seeks to take over her territory, either by force or, they say, by marriage.'

The cook gave him a clip round the ear. 'Watch your words! You never know who's listening!'

'We were Otori once, and will be again,' the boy muttered.

The chief maid saw me hanging about in the doorway, and beckoned to me to come in. 'Where are you travelling to? You must have come a long way!'

I smiled and shook my head. One of the maids, passing on her way to the guest rooms, patted me on the arm and said, 'He doesn't talk. Shame, isn't it?'

'What happened?' the cook said. 'Someone throw dust in your mouth like the Ainu dog?'

They were teasing me, not unkindly, when the maid came back, followed by a man I gathered was one of the Maruyama servants, wearing on his jacket the crest of the mountain enclosed in a circle. To my surprise he addressed me in polite language. 'My lady wishes to talk to you.'

I wasn't sure if I should go with him, but he had the face of an honest man, and I was curious to see the mysterious woman for myself. I followed him along the passageway and through the courtyard. He stepped on to the veranda and knelt at the door to the room. He spoke briefly, then turned to me and beckoned to me to step up.

I snatched a rapid glance at her and then fell to my knees and bowed my head to the floor. I was sure I was in