

the presence of a princess. Her hair reached the ground in one long sweep of black silkiness. Her skin was as pale as snow. She wore robes of deepening shades of cream, ivory, and dove grey embroidered with red and pink peonies. She had a stillness about her that made me think first of the deep pools of the mountain and then, suddenly, of the tempered steel of Jato, the snake sword.

'They tell me you don't talk,' she said, her voice as quiet and clear as water.

I felt the compassion of her gaze, and the blood rushed to my face.

'You can talk to me,' she went on. Reaching forward she took my hand and with her finger drew the sign of the Hidden on my palm. It sent a shock through me, like the sting of a nettle. I could not help pulling my hand away.

'Tell me what you saw,' she said, her voice no less gentle but insistent. When I didn't reply she whispered, 'It was Iida Sadamu, wasn't it?'

I looked at her almost involuntarily. She was smiling, but without mirth.

'And you are from the Hidden,' she added.

Lord Otori had warned me against giving myself away. I thought I had buried my old self, along with my name, Tomasu. But in front of this woman I was helpless. I was about to nod my head, when I heard Lord Otori's footsteps cross the courtyard. I realized that I recognized him by his tread, and I knew that a woman followed him, as well as the man who had spoken to me. And then I realized that if I paid attention, I could hear everything in the inn around me. I heard the horse boy get up and leave the kitchen. I heard the gossip of the maids, and knew each one from her voice. This acuteness of hearing, which had been growing slowly ever since I'd ceased to speak,

now came over me with a flood of sound. It was almost unbearable, as if I had the worst of fevers. I wondered if the woman in front of me was a sorceress who had bewitched me. I did not dare lie to her, but I could not speak.

I was saved by the woman coming into the room. She knelt before Lady Maruyama and said quietly, 'His lordship is looking for the boy.'

'Ask him to come in,' the lady replied. 'And, Sachie, would you kindly bring the tea utensils?'

Lord Otori stepped into the room, and he and Lady Maruyama exchanged deep bows of respect. They spoke politely to each other like strangers, and she did not use his name, yet I had the feeling they knew each other well. There was a tension between them that I would understand later, but which then only made me more ill at ease.

'The maids told me about the boy who travels with you,' she said. 'I wished to see him for myself.'

'Yes, I am taking him to Hagi. He is the only survivor of a massacre. I did not want to leave him to Sadamu.' He did not seem inclined to say anything else, but after a while added, 'I have given him the name of Takeo.'

She smiled at this – a real smile. 'I'm glad,' she said. 'He has a certain look about him.'

'Do you think so? I thought it too.'

Sachie came back with a tray, a teakettle, and a bowl. I could see them clearly as she placed them on the matting, at the same level as my eyes. The bowl's glaze held the green of the forest, the blue of the sky.

'One day you will come to Maruyama to my grandmother's tea house,' the lady said. 'There we can do the ceremony as it should be performed. But for now we will have to make do as best we can.'