

'Yes,' I whispered.

'It's happening all over the fief. Iida is stirring up hatred against them everywhere. I suppose you're one of them?'

'Yes.' I was shivering. Although it was still late summer and the rain was warm, I had never felt so cold. 'But that wasn't only why they were after me. I caused Lord Iida to fall from his horse.'

To my amazement the lord began to snort with laughter. 'That would have been worth seeing! But it places you doubly in danger. It's an insult he'll have to wipe out. Still, you are under my protection now. I won't let Iida take you from me.'

'You saved my life,' I said. 'It belongs to you from this day on.'

For some reason that made him laugh again. 'We have a long walk, on empty stomachs and with wet garments. We must be over the range before daybreak, when they will come after us.' He strode off at great speed, and I ran after him, willing my legs not to shake, my teeth not to chatter. I didn't even know his name, but I wanted him to be proud of me, never to regret that he had saved my life.

'I am Otori Shigeru,' he said as we began the climb to the pass. 'Of the Otori clan, from Hagi. But while I'm on the road I don't use that name, so don't you use it either.'

Hagi was as distant as the moon to me, and although I had heard of the Otori, I knew nothing about them, except that they had been defeated by the Tohan at a great battle ten years earlier on the plain of Yaegahara.

'What's your name, boy?'

'Tomasu.'

'That's a common name among the Hidden. Better get rid of it.' He said nothing for a while, and then spoke briefly out of the darkness. 'You can be called Takeo.'

And so between the waterfall and the top of the mountain I lost my name, became someone new, and joined my destiny with the Otori.

Dawn found us, cold and hungry, in the village of Hinode, famous for its hot springs. I was already farther from my own house than I had ever been in my life. All I knew of Hinode was what the boys in my village said: that the men were cheats and the women were as hot as the springs and would lie down with you for the price of a cup of wine. I didn't have the chance to find out if either was true. No one dared to cheat Lord Otori, and the only woman I saw was the innkeeper's wife who served our meals.

I was ashamed of how I looked, in the old clothes my mother had patched so often it was impossible to tell what colour they'd been to start with, filthy, blood-stained. I couldn't believe that the lord expected me to sleep in the inn with him. I thought I would stay in the stables. But he seemed not to want to let me too often out of his sight. He told the woman to wash my clothes and sent me to the hot spring to scrub myself. When I came back, almost asleep from the effect of the hot water after the sleepless night, the morning meal was laid out in the room, and he was already eating. He gestured to me to join him. I knelt on the floor and said the prayers we always used before the first meal of the day.

'You can't do that,' Lord Otori said through a mouthful of rice and pickles. 'Not even alone. If you want to live, you have to forget that part of your life. It is over for ever.' He swallowed and took another mouthful. 'There are better things to die for.'

I suppose a true believer would have insisted on the prayers anyway. I wondered if that was what the dead