

WHEN evening came, there was a knock at the door. Behind it stood two visitors whom not everyone recognised immediately, but Kyara soon made sure nobody was left in doubt about who they were.

“Hanzō Hattori!” she exclaimed, leaping to her feet in surprise. “And Lord Tokugawa!”

“Ah, so this *is* the place!” said the latter. “Informed as ever, Hanzō.”

“Can we help you?” said Chōjirō.

“I heard you were looking for someone to assist with your meal preparation,” said Lord Tokugawa.

They all cast confused looks at the two visitors, trying to understand from their expressions what he could possibly be talking about. Hanzō looked rather gruff and sullen – although it was already clear to those who had met him earlier in the day that this was nothing out of the ordinary. Tokugawa, on the other hand, seemed to be in good spirits.

“Don’t tell me Lord Tokugawa’s sending his top shinobi to cook for us,” Ennosuke hazarded.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Kyara, but as she spoke, Tokugawa chuckled. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “Hanzō’s cooking is delightful, but it’s for me alone. No, I rather wondered if I myself might take that role.”

There was a general gasp at his words. Hanzō’s frown deepened; he seemed quite uncomfortable.

“You’re very kind, sir,” said Enju, “but shinobi can’t have anyone else cook for them. Isn’t that right?” Her gaze flicked towards Chōjirō, who nodded.

“Yes, I had thought of that,” said Tokugawa pleasantly. “I shall have to ask one of you to work alongside me, then. Who among you is most skilled in this area?”

Nobody said anything, but everyone looked at Gekkamaru.

“I ... suppose that would be me, sir,” he said at last.

Tokugawa nodded. “Very good. Then let us to the kitchen. Hanzō, you will have to keep the rest of them entertained: don’t frighten them too much, now.”

Hanzō stepped forward towards the Kōga shinobi, still looking especially grim; it was now quite obvious that he wasn’t enjoying himself at all. He moved towards Gekkamaru, who was too baffled to have thought about standing up.

“Go on,” Hanzō muttered once he got close.

“Um –” said Gekkamaru.

“Are you trying to argue?” Hanzō snarled.

Gekkamaru leapt to his feet. “No! Sorry.”

He stumbled towards Tokugawa, who smiled and said to the room at large, “I am sorry about Hanzō – he’s an acquired taste. He seems rather on edge this evening. Perhaps you could ask him to show you his calligraphy – that usually calms him down.”

By this point, Hanzō looked absolutely murderous. Tokugawa seemed not to notice, though, and placed a hand rather

alarmingly on Gekkamaru's shoulder, adding, "Shall we begin?"

Gekkamaru gulped. "Yes," he said at last. "All right."

Once they had retreated to the side room that served as a kitchen, Lord Tokugawa produced a small, sharp knife from the folds of his haori and began to chop some of the vegetables the Kōga shinobi had already acquired, smiling to himself as he did so.

"Um," said Gekkamaru, "what do you want me to do?"

Tokugawa looked at him; it seemed to take him a moment to remember Gekkamaru was even in the room with him. "Oh!" he said at last. "Whatever will make you feel you have had some part in this, I suppose. There's really no need to trouble yourself."

"Right," said Gekkamaru doubtfully.

He watched for a while; Tokugawa was methodically working through the vegetables, laying each small pile of nearly chopped pieces aside with a contented expression. After a few iterations of this, Gekkamaru found that he could no longer hold himself back from asking the question that had been on everyone's minds since the very beginning of this strange visit.

"I don't mean to probe, sir," he said, "but why are you doing this?"

"This?" said Tokugawa.

"The cooking," said Gekkamaru, "*our* cooking. Why did you come here just to make dinner for us?"

“Ah,” said Tokugawa, “that is a good question, I suppose. Well, you see, it’s quite straightforward: I simply don’t get the chance to cook in my position. I seem to have acquired vast numbers of servants who insist on seeing to my every need. It does get rather tiresome. Sometimes I wish I could just step away and do something like this for an hour or so – I was lamenting that very thing today, when dear Hanzō was kind enough to remind me of our visitors from Kōga, and to note that you may have been looking for some assistance. I do so enjoy cooking, you see.”

“Really?” said Gekkamaru.

“But of course,” said Tokugawa. “Don’t you? Everyone seemed keen to designate you as the most accomplished cook of the group. You must have taken a liking to it.”

Gekkamaru shrugged. “Not especially. I just learned to cook so I can do it for Enju-sama – in case she ever needs me to. If we’re sent on a mission together, I want to be able to provide for her.”

“Do you indeed?” said Tokugawa, pausing his vegetable chopping for a moment. “Most interesting. This Enju ... I met her earlier. She is the daughter of Lord Ueno, is she not?”

“That’s right,” said Gekkamaru.

“And you have sworn to protect her?”

“Yes,” he said firmly. “Ever since I was a child. I want to dedicate my life to her service.”

“Then you would do well to take lessons from Hanzō,” said Tokugawa. “He is an extraordinarily faithful servant. Watch this.” He raised his voice. “Hanzō!”

“My lord?” came the immediate reply. Startled, Gekkomaru turned to find that Hanzō was right behind him; he had somehow arrived in an instant.

“It’s nothing,” said Tokugawa airily. “Stand down.”

“As you wish,” said Hanzō, and he disappeared again.

“You see?” said Tokugawa to Gekkomaru. “Absolute obedience. I need never speak to him twice.”

“That’s ... quite something,” Gekkomaru replied.

Tokugawa nodded. “Isn’t it? And do you enjoy a similar relationship with your lady Enju?”

Gekkomaru considered; he wasn’t sure whether, though, whether he really would *enjoy* it. He wanted to be able to talk idly with Enju, after all, and not just follow her orders without the slightest space for getting to know each other better. But it would be wrong to suggest Hanzō was anything other than an absolute model of servitude.

“I aspire to do so, my lord,” he said.

Tokugawa hummed in approval. He had finished work on the vegetables, so he set about lighting a fire for the pot while Gekkomaru wiped the bowls. They were already clean, but he found himself determined to avoid the slightest blemish. He wondered if this counted as contributing to the cooking, and

then decided he just wouldn't tell the others about the exact division of labour in the kitchen.

"Excuse me for a moment," said Tokugawa after a while; he made his way back to the main chamber.

Gekkamaru waited by the simmering pot, carefully checking the rice to make sure everything was in order – and then, suddenly, he heard a voice. Enju's voice, calling his name.

He looked up, immediately alert – then he looked back at the pot. It wouldn't be good to leave it unattended. But Enju was asking for him, he reminded himself. He had to see what the matter was; perhaps there was trouble. Maybe the visit of Lord Tokugawa and his most renowned shinobi had in fact been a pretext for something sinister – Chōjirō and the others would be able to deal with it, surely, but Gekkamaru's duty was still to protect Enju –

Realising he had wasted too much time thinking, he hurried to her side. She seemed not to be in immediate danger, at least; she was simply sitting on the floor with the rest of them. "Enju-sama," he said, "what is it? What's the matter?"

"Oh," she said, with a little hesitation, "it's nothing."

Gekkamaru frowned. "What – really? I thought something had happened! Are you sure nothing's wrong? Do you need help?"

She shook her head. "Really, Gekkamaru, I'm fine."

"But –" said Gekkamaru, and he found himself interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat in an undeniably

refined manner.

He turned his attention away from Enju at last, and found Tokugawa and his servant sitting there, both refusing to meet his gaze. Hanzō had lowered his head, but there was an unmistakable smirk on his face. Tokugawa seemed to be stifling laughter.

“Oh,” said Gekkamaru, realising. He turned back to Enju, and mumbled, “As you command.”

As he made his way back to the kitchen, he caught Koroyuki’s eye – that was a mistake. His brother let out an amused snort, and Gekkamaru heard Enju behind him whispering, “I told you it was mean! I feel bad now!”

The rice was still simmering away, at least.

Tokugawa returned not long afterwards. “Well, I’ve taken care of my business out there,” he said unconvincingly. “It must be nearly time to serve this food, mustn’t it? What do you think?”

Gekkamaru sighed, but then decided dwelling on his faux pas wouldn’t be becoming. “Of course,” he said. “I’ll get the bowls ready.” He laid them out next to the pot; they were probably cleaner than they’d ever been.

Tokugawa distributed the rice and vegetables among five of the bowls, and then said, “Well, then. Shall we take these in?”

“What about the other two?” said Gekkamaru. “There are seven of us, aren’t there – us five from Kōga, plus your lordship

and Hanzō-sama.”

“Oh, Hanzō and I shan’t be eating with you,” Tokugawa explained. “My palate is rather more refined than this. In fact, Hanzō himself has promised to cook for me tonight. Such a treat. I’m sure it’ll be splendid.”

“Oh ...” said Gekkamaru.

“I had no idea you had become so fond of my company,” said Tokugawa.

Gekkamaru frowned. He hadn’t become fond of Tokugawa’s company at all; it was just that quite apart from coming to cook for them in the first place, it seemed even more ridiculous that someone of such high status would do so when he had no intention of eating the meal himself. He was starting to wonder whether Lord Tokugawa was of sound mind. Maybe conquering so much land had had an adverse effect on him.

He took the bowls to his friends anyway, and sat down next to Enju, doing his best to smile when she told him the food was lovely.

“Well, we shall be going,” said Tokugawa; Hanzō had stood and moved to his side, his expression having reverted to its customary frown. “Please enjoy your meal. Perhaps I shall see some of you over the next few days – I hear they’re to be quite eventful.”

He waved, and stepped outside, leaving Hanzō to cast a final suspicious look at the assembled Kōga ninja as he closed



the door behind him.