

THE
POTTER'S
BOY

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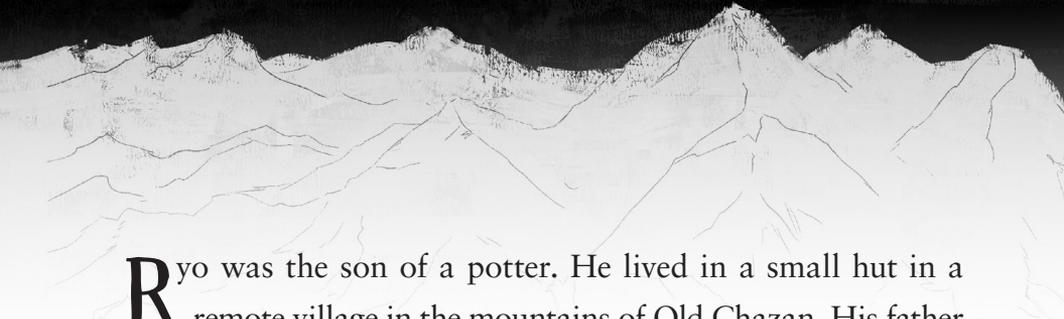
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CHAPTER ONE



Ryo was the son of a potter. He lived in a small hut in a remote village in the mountains of Old Chazan. His father had a little workshop to one side of the family hut. It was there he threw his pots and nearby where he built up his kilns when it was time to fire them. He was a good potter, a skilled potter, and people came from far and wide to buy his wares. It was said that his pots had that “special essence” that good pots should have, which made them more than just pots for everyday use. They were useful, of course. They were necessary. But they were also considered things of beauty. Some people bought them to put in their sacred alcoves, little spaces in their homes where a single vase might hold a simple branch of blossom with a piece of calligraphy above it on the wall. These alcoves were to remind them that they were a part of nature, that they were not separate from the things around them. Even the pots they used for food, drink, and other purposes were made from clay, water, and fire, from the natural processes of the earth they lived on, the earth from

which they grew their food, the earth that supported them wherever they happened to walk. Takumi, Ryo's father, knew all this and put most of his energy into the making of pots and other clayware. The rest of his attention went into his family, into Ryo, his son. And into Emi, his wife, and Hana, his daughter.

So Ryo was, in a way, fortunate. There was always food for him to eat, a warm place to live and sleep, clothes to wear, and people around him who loved him. His family life was simple, but it was safe and good.

I pick up his story when he is twelve. He is just at that age when he is beginning to change from boy to man. In some ways he is still a child, but he has a growing sense of his adult life ahead of him. For some time now, he has been helping his father in the workshop, learning the ways of the clay. Where it comes from, how to prepare it, how to coax a lump of clay on a wheel into becoming a pot worth putting into a kiln for firing. How to mix a glaze to paint it with. And also the beginnings of that most delicate art: how to build a kiln and set and manage a fire that will turn clay into fired and glazed ware.

His father could tell he had the skill, or rather, the grain of rightness in him that would allow him in time to become a good potter. He might even have the makings of a great potter. But that would rely on time, work, intention, and other things more difficult to predict. Besides, Takumi was a man

of some wisdom. So he knew the importance of living well in the present and not setting too much store in the future. Of course, his family needed providing for. He had to be prudent. But he knew not to wish for too much, nor even to rely on too much, especially when it came to other people, who are, always and ever, unpredictable. Even those most known to us can surprise us at times with their sudden decisions and unexpected changes. So he knew that even he, Ryo's own father, who had brought Ryo up from babyhood, watching him carefully with love and caution, could not predict the course that Ryo's life would take.

Ryo's mother, Emi, was quiet, graceful, and dignified. She was also fine-looking, but Ryo barely noticed that. Children tend to take their homes and their parents for granted. It's simply what is, what they grow up with, what they know. How could it be anything but "normal"? Only if things go badly, or some disaster strikes, does it occur to children to question their circumstances or their family members.

Emi looked after the home and tended a small garden behind it where she grew vegetables and a few flowers to place in the family alcove. She also kept chickens for their eggs or for meat if they stopped laying. The other thing she did, to supplement the family income, was to offer tea and rice to travelers in exchange for a few coins. A road led through the village, so from time to time a traveler or two would pass through. Seeing the sign above Takumi the potter's door, they would often

be glad of a rest and some tea. In summer they would sit out under the shade of the straw awning. In winter they would come into the simple front room to warm themselves by the small charcoal fire they would find burning there.

And Ryo's sister, Hana, what of her? When Ryo was twelve she was barely nine, so there was a three-year gap between them. They were fond of each other. But the difference in their age and the fact of their being boy and girl was enough to create a distance between them. Ryo followed his father, while Hana stayed close to her mother. It was like that then. Boys were to be men, and girls were to be women, and their lives were marked out for them by that. Whether that was better than it is now, I can't say. But that was how it was then, when my story takes place.

It was into this world of accepted order that the Stranger stepped. He was not expected. He just came into the village one day, like one of the many travelers who happened to pass through the village. Looking back, Ryo, his mother, and his sister might think, yes, he did have a special presence, a certain dignity and composure unusual in one so humbly clad. But then in our culture, especially back then, wandering poets, hermits, and sages were not so uncommon. They embraced a life of what was called "refined poverty," which is to say that while they avoided the outer richness of material things, they cultivated a kind of inner richness of heart, of spirit, of soul. In a way, they were like monks, so you could call them

religious. But they belonged to no order. They served no god. They were individuals who moved freely through the world, through the cosmos, as they might say, for that is how they tended to see things.

It was while the Stranger was sitting quietly in the shade of the awning, sipping a bowl of wheat tea, that the brigands arrived. They swaggered into the village with their swords and knives clinking against their armor. Their hair was long and wild, their beards were unkempt, and they seemed savage and frightening. You could almost feel the village itself shrink back in terror.

There were three of them. But they occupied the space of ten. Their trade was creating fear, and they did that to great effect. Their gestures were big, their voices were loud, even their facial expressions were larger than life. And they convinced any onlooker that they would do harm to anyone who came between what they wanted and what they got.

The three brigands took up a stance in the center of the village, in the middle of the road. They looked around them ferociously. It was clear their intention was to intimidate the villagers. The biggest of the three, who seemed to be the leader, called out, turning as he spoke so as to address anyone within hearing distance.

“Bring us money and anything of value. And bring us food also. Place it on the ground in front of us. If you bring enough, we will leave you unharmed until the next time we pass

through. But do not keep us waiting. We are not patient men. Bring it quickly, now.”

As he finished speaking, the village seemed filled with a deep silence. For a moment all was still. It was a stillness of fear and uncertainty. Nobody wanted to face the brigands. It was into this silence that a single word was heard, loud and clear, like a pebble dropped into a pond. It rang out, firm and confident, and rippled across the silent village.

“No!”

There was a gasp that followed. Perhaps many villagers actually gasped out loud and what was heard was the collective gasp of many. But there was also a snarl of outrage that came from the brigands themselves.

“What?” growled the head brigand. “Who dares defy me? Come out and fight me, if you dare.”

Nothing stirred. Nobody moved. The faintest of breezes rippled the awnings in front of the huts. And this merely exaggerated the sense of expectant hush. Who had spoken? Who had answered the brigands back with such confidence?

“Come out at once, or we shall take a villager and slay him here before you all. Come out and face us.”

A plain figure stepped lightly out across the dust road toward the brigands. Ryo realized that it was the Stranger, who had risen silently and left the shadow of their awning to confront the brigands. Ryo wanted to say, “No, these are brigands. They will harm or kill you. They are vicious and cruel.” That

is what his father had always told him. And now he wanted to pass this warning on to the Stranger. But the words stuck in his throat, and, besides, the Stranger was now standing in front of the brigands, leaving just a little distance between himself and them.

It made a strange yet vivid picture, and one that never left Ryo's memory from that time on. The three stout brigands, large and hairy and armed to the teeth with dangerous weapons. And the slight, simple figure of the plain man dressed in the ragged robe of a wanderer. It was incongruous. They seemed so unevenly matched. The brigands seemed so solid, so heavy, so powerful. And the Stranger looked like a shadow, like the wisp of a being that might be blown away by the next breeze.

But he looked at them directly, as if unmoved, unimpressed by their ferocity. And quite simply he repeated the one word he had spoken before, "No."

The head brigand's eyes widened. His jaw dropped. He turned from side to side to exchange glances with his fellows. And then he laughed. He laughed out loud from his belly.

"This is the village fool. Quite clearly this poor idiot does not know the situation he finds himself in. But we shall have to teach him a lesson anyway, if only to show the others we mean business . . ."

"No!" repeated the Stranger, this time a little louder so that all who were watching could hear it.

And now the head brigand grew angry. "I have had enough of this foolery. You have asked for this."

He drew his sword smoothly, with the movement of a skilled fighter. Here was a man who could handle his weapons, a professional. And yet when he cut at the Stranger's head with speed and accuracy, his blade failed to meet its target, and he lost his balance and stumbled clumsily. The Stranger had moved so swiftly, at the last moment, that the blade had missed. There was a murmur of surprise from the watching crowd and the brigand's two accomplices looked startled.

But the head brigand's anger was up now, and he regained his balance and turned in fury on his adversary. He stepped toward him and cut once again with his sword. What Ryo saw next made him start with amazement and admiration. The Stranger simply made a deft sidestep, placed his foot by that of the brigand, and pushed him firmly with both hands.

The brigand went down in a clatter of armor and weaponry, and his sword fell from his hand. The Stranger was quick upon it and had it in his own hand in one swoop. And now he was standing with the sword at the brigand's throat, like a snake that might strike at any moment. The brigand's fellows had drawn their own blades, but the Stranger flashed them a warning glance.

"You are three, yet I can take nine before I am outnumbered. I do not advise you to enter this fight. I can read from here that you are not up to it. See, even your feet are wrongly

placed. Your balance is poor.” He nodded to the nearer one. “I could take you in three moves.” He nodded to the other. “And you in two more. I have your measure. Do not try me.”

Ryo watched from the awning. He was rapt. The Stranger had moved with such grace, more like a dancer than a fighter. Yes, it was like watching a dance, the way the man moved with absolute precision. What did it remind him of? Ah, that was it. It was like watching the way his father’s fingers could lift a lump of clay into the form of a beautiful pot or vase. It was a seemingly effortless grace that seemed to emerge from nowhere, out of nothing. Yet out of that nothing it could create something.

And now the Stranger was speaking. He was addressing the brigands. He did not shout or bully or even order them. He spoke plainly and evenly.

“Be sensible. I am one, but I can bring more. More who know how to fight like me. Do not try us. You will lose. This village is under our protection. We shall not be here, but we shall be listening. If we hear of any harm that comes to this village from your hands, we shall be upon you. And we will come quietly, by stealth, from the shadows. You will not hear us until our knives are at your throats. You will be safe nowhere. This is a warning, not a threat. Mend your ways. Try to make a more honest living. Those who live by the sword soon die by the sword. Stay out of trouble.”

“Who are you?” murmured one of the brigands uneasily.
“Where have you come from?”

“Some call us ‘the Hidden Ones.’ You would be hard-pressed to find us. But you might meet us anywhere, as today. Now take your weapons and go. Put them to better use than frightening poor, hardworking villagers.”

The brigands did not look happy. They had been shamed in front of the whole village, and they were still shaken by their encounter with fighting skill far greater than theirs. They felt foolish. Everyone watched them as they shuffled off out of the village, muttering quietly as they went.

As they disappeared around the bend in the road, people turned to find the Stranger, to thank him and to honor him. But he had gone. He seemed to have slipped away while they were watching the retreating figures of the three brigands.

Ryo looked the other way, to see if he could catch a glimpse of the Stranger heading off in the other direction, along the single road that led through the village. But he was not there. Odd. Ah, the hill track, he thought. He has taken the hill track. How did he know about that? Only the villagers know that track. How did he find it?

Ryo slipped through the gap between two huts and was off up the hill track at speed. His feet knew this track. He could run it with his eyes shut and had done so in a game he’d played with the other village children when younger. But

today his eyes were wide open and scanning for a glimpse of the Stranger.

And then he saw him. That slight, lithe figure, so plainly dressed, so nondescript, climbing the winding track up the hill. Who would have guessed that anybody, but especially a nobody like that, could contain such skill and power? He could have been any traveler, on any day, on any track.

“Hey, mister! Wait for me. Please stop!” Ryo heard his voice call out before he had even planned what he intended to say or do.

The figure paused for the briefest moment, then went on walking up the track.

“Mister, please. It’s me, the potter’s son. From the village where you stopped for tea. Please stop for a moment.”

The figure halted and turned slowly to take in the sight of the young boy coming up the track toward him. He waited in silence, still. Ryo also paused for a moment. Now that the Stranger had stopped, Ryo suddenly realized he did not quite know what he was going to say to him. He only knew that he had to discover more about this man, this stranger, about where he came from, about how he could do what he could do . . . Yes, that was it. Ryo wanted to know where he could learn such skills. Ryo wanted to know and own such power as he’d seen this man wield. Ryo wanted to be like him. How could this be achieved? Where could he go to learn? What must he do?

Ryo's thoughts were in a whirl. So he just blurted out the first words that came into his mind. "Take me with you. Teach me to be like you. Show me. I am young. I am smart. I can learn . . ."

The man looked down at Ryo. He did not smile. It was as if he was taking the earnest young boy's words seriously. He looked into Ryo's eyes for a few moments before he spoke. "You cannot come with me. I can take you nowhere. You belong in the village and you have a family. If I let you come with me, and I cannot do that, but if I did, your parents would worry. They might think that the brigands had taken you, out of revenge. And, besides, you are not ready. You have only the clothes you stand up in. And what's more, you are too young. How old are you?"

"I'm twelve, see. Nearly a man. I'm not a child anymore. It's almost time for me to seek my way in life. And today, when I saw you deal with the brigands, I knew, I realized. I thought to myself, that's my way. That's what I want to be and do. I want to be a fighter like that." Ryo paused and waited for an answer.

"Fighting is not a good way," said the man thoughtfully. "It leads to a life of loneliness and takes you to bad places where there is unhappiness, misery, grief. Your father is a potter. You could be a potter like him. That is a good life, a rich life, a rewarding life, a life of making things and bringing pleasure and meaning to people. That is so much better

a life than that of a fighter. A good potter is valued by his people.”

“But so is a hero,” Ryo said quickly. “And I should like to be a hero, like you.”

“Listen,” said the Stranger decisively. “You cannot come with me. Do not even think to try. You know my skill. I can easily outwit you. I can make myself disappear into the undergrowth so you can never find me. I shall go on. And you shall go back to your village. And you will probably never see me again.”

“But I shall never forget you,” said Ryo certainly. “And when I am older I shall find a way to learn to be like you. Somewhere there must be someone who can teach me such things as you know. I will find them and learn. One day I will be like you.”

“Well,” said the man. And a sigh entered his voice, a sense of surrender. As if, perhaps, he had heard the note of true earnestness in this young lad. “All right. If you are determined, listen and remember. I will say it once. Give it a year. Until you are beyond thirteen. Then, if your parents permit, pack yourself a traveling bundle with clothes and food. And go to Cold Mountain. Look for the Hermit. If you find him, tell him what you want, if you still want it. If you can’t find him, return home and learn to be a potter, for that would probably be the better way for you. But you will do what you will do. That is for you to decide.

“Now let me go. I have a journey to make and a promise to keep. I must be on my way. Go back to the village before your people start to worry about you. They have had a shock. You should be with them. Go and be with your family. Go now.”

The man’s words were so clear, so firm, and his manner was so certain, that Ryo knew he had to obey. As the man turned, they glanced at one another and Ryo felt as if something special passed between them, as if their lives were somehow now linked. It was a strange feeling, an intuition. There was no proof to be had. But Ryo felt that today his life had changed, had turned a corner. It was as if things would never be the same again for him. Was this what they called “growing up”? Or was it something else? Something less usual? Something distinct? He couldn’t know. But it was a different Ryo who turned back to his village from the eager young boy who had run out in pursuit of the Stranger. He had run out desperately, swiftly. His return was slow and thoughtful. When he got home, his people were relieved to see him safe. But they saw no difference in him.