

ISLAND OF EXILES

A MYSTERY OF EARLY JAPAN



I. J. PARKER



PENGUIN BOOKS

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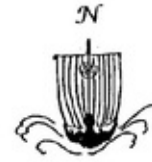
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*For Hannah and Tony,
in hopes that they may grow up to love books*

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CHARACTERS AND PLACES

Sadoshima	Sado Island in the Sea of Japan
Mano	Main port city and provincial headquarters on Sawata Bay
Minato	Village between Lake Kamo and the northeast coast (modern Ryotsu)
Tsukahara	Village near the southern mountains
Sawata	Town on Sawata Bay
Echigo	Northern province of Japan, known as “snow country” (modern Niigata)

PLACE NAMES:

Sugawara Akitada	Minor government official, deputy governor in Echigo
Tora	One of his retainers, presently lieutenant of the provincial guard
Seimei	His aged secretary
Tamako	His wife, the mother of his baby son, Yori

CHARACTERS IN ECHIGO:

Prince Okisada	Aka the “Second Prince,” oldest son of the previous emperor. Exiled for plotting the current emperor’s overthrow
Taira Takamune	His former tutor and fellow exile
Professor Sakamoto	Retired professor of classics, writing a history of Sado Island
Mutobe Toshikata	Governor of Sadoshima
Mutobe Toshito	His son and assistant
Shunsei	Young Buddhist monk and the prince’s lover
Yoshimine Taketsuna	Newly arrived exile with a secret
Jisei	Prisoner recently released from digging “badger holes”
Haseo	Taciturn prisoner with a scarred back
Doctor Ogata	Alcoholic physician and coroner
Lieutenant Wada	The local police authority
Superintendent Yamada	In charge of the prison and the “Valuables Office”
Masako	His daughter
Shijo Yutaka	Head of the provincial archives
Genzo	One of his scribes
Ribata	Nun with a past
Osawa	Tax inspector in search of a wife
Kumo Sanetomo	Local landowner and high constable of Sadoshima
Kita	Kumo’s mine foreman

CHARACTERS IN SADOSHIMA:

Takao	Landlady of the Minato inn and Osawa’s friend
Haru	Owner of lake restaurant Bamboo Grove
Doctor Nakatomi	The prince’s physician
Taimai (Turtle)	Crippled porter
Oyoshi	His sister, hostel keeper, and mother of many children
Little Flower	Childlike prostitute
Ikugoro	Wada’s sergeant of constables

Also: two unnamed but high-ranking officials from the emperor’s private office, cooks, guards, servants, fishermen, monks, elderly gentlewomen, constables, scribes, and an antique flute.

PROLOGUE

The orange sun disappeared behind the top of the mountain range, and a gradual gloom settled over the garden. At the lake's edge, a crane emerged cautiously from the reeds and froze, its small black eye on the five humans in the lakeside pavilion. The brilliant red patch on its head and the elegant black and white plumage were clearly visible in spite of the white mist that was beginning to rise from the darkening surface of the water. The air chilled quickly on Sado Island.

The crane was hungry for a mouthful of fish before seeking its roost. The humans, replete with good food and wine, let their conversation lag in the approaching darkness.

Advancing two slow, considered steps, the crane turned its attention to the lake bottom.

Professor Sakamoto and his four guests watched the bird idly. The professor had retired from the imperial university in the capital and settled here to write a history of the island and its famous exile. This evening his guest of honor was Prince Okisada, a half-brother of the current sovereign and uncle of a future emperor. A frail man in his late forties, the Second Prince was by far the island's most exalted political exile.

Reaching for his wine cup, the prince raised his eyes from the crane to the mountaintop. Gilded by the last ray of sun, it looked as if a line of pure gold had been drawn between earth and heaven. He drank deeply and murmured, "It is time. The light is almost gone." His tone and expression were filled with deep emotion, but he slurred his words a little. Grimacing, he pressed a hand to his stomach. "What did you put in that prawn stew, Toshito?" he asked the young man on his left.

"Nothing, Your Highness. The woman uses just prawns, a bit of seaweed, and herbs. I was told it is your favorite." Mutoke Toshito looked annoyed. He was the governor's son and filling in for his father tonight.

The professor said peaceably, "It smelled delicious, Toshito. I am sure His Highness enjoyed this local specialty. What a thoughtful gesture. We were all pleased to see him eat with a good appetite for a change."

"There is nothing wrong with my appetite, Sakamoto," said the Second Prince irritably, and he belched.

"Is Your Highness feeling unwell?" The other elderly man, on the prince's right, touched his arm solicitously. Taira Takamoto had been the prince's tutor and shared his exile now.

The Second Prince shook off Taira's hand, his face white and drawn. He kept massaging his stomach. "Shunsei," he murmured querulously to the handsome young monk sitting silently across from him, "come closer and massage my neck. You are the only one who gives me pleasure these days. Will you stay the night?"

The young monk flushed and bowed deeply. "I am expected at the temple tonight, Highness," he said apologetically. His voice was soft and his eyes moist with adoration. He got up and went to kneel behind the prince.

The Second Prince fidgeted. "Never mind! Go, if you prefer their company. Is my room ready, Sakamoto?"

The professor got to his feet. "I'll see to it immediately, Highness."

Lord Taira emptied his cup and rose also. "I shall make sure that His Highness has all he needs."

Good night, all.” The two older men walked away toward the house. After a moment, the handsome monk bowed and followed them.

Only young Toshito remained with the prince. He looked after Shunsei with an expression of distaste.

“You d-don’t approve of my lover?” the Second Prince said with some difficulty.

The young man flushed. “I . . . I beg your pardon, Highness?”

“D-don’t bother to pretend. I’ve been aware that you and the governor disapprove of my tastes as much as my politics. It could not matter less to me. We shall prevail against the tyranny of an unlawful regime at last.”

The governor’s son stiffened and said uneasily, “I must remind you, Highness, that you were sent here as a prisoner. You are not likely to leave, certainly not as long as you voice treasonable intentions. And I’m afraid I shall have to report your words to my father, who will, in turn, report them to the emperor.”

The Second Prince did not answer. He turned to look after the others, who had almost reached the house. Suddenly he groaned and bent forward, clutching his belly with both hands.

Toshito jumped to his feet. “What is it? Are you ill?”

“Help me, please!” The prince’s voice rose to a shout of agony. Sweat beaded his face. He reached convulsively for his throat, choking out the words, “Loosen my collar! I cannot breathe.”

The young man approached and leaned down to tug at the prince’s collar, but the brocade robe fit tightly and he had to use both hands. To his horror, the prince began to scream again. His arms flailed wildly, delivering weak blows to Toshito’s face and chest.

Down at the lakeshore, the startled crane had raised its head at the first shout. Now it spread its huge wings and flew off, a flapping fish in its long bill.

The others came running back to the pavilion.

Young Mutobe was still trying to restrain the wildly jerking prince. “Calm down, Highness,” he gasped, and then shouted to Shunsei, “Run for the doctor!” But it was too late. The prince went first rigid and then limp in Toshito’s arms and sagged heavily against him. He lowered the body to the ground.

Shunsei fell to his knees next to the prince and wailed, “Beloved, do not leave me yet.”

Lord Taira was still out of breath, but his face contorted, and he struck the governor’s son so violently in the chest that the young man went tumbling backward and fell against the railing.

The professor knelt to check the prince’s breathing. “He’s dead,” he said.

“Murderer!” Taira pointed a shaking finger at Toshito, who lay where he had fallen, stunned with surprise. “You and your father did this. Did you think we would not hear his scream for help? We all saw you choke him. You killed a son of heaven. Not even the present government will countenance such sacrilege.”

In the shocked silence which followed Taira’s words, the first frog croaked in the reeds of the darkening lake.

CHAPTER ONE

VISITORS

The two high-ranking officials from the capital arrived in the tribunal of Echigo on a late summer afternoon.

When Seimei brought the news, Akitada was sitting on the remnants of the veranda in his private courtyard. He had been practicing his flute, while his young wife played with their baby son in the small enclosed area between their living quarters and the ramshackle assortment of halls and stables which made up the official headquarters of the province. It was no elegant courtyard with stone lanterns, clipped trees, and raked gravel streams, but just a small square of dirt with a few weeds growing in the corners of the broken fence and under the veranda. They had been quite happy that afternoon. Tamako had swung the baby high up toward the limpid summer sky and laughed at the child's delighted gurgling. And Akitada had smiled as he practiced "Dewdrops on the Autumn Grasses." But he had felt a small pang of guilt when her sleeves slipped back and he saw how thin her arms had become.

He should not have brought her here to this inhospitable place where the rain and snow blew into their rooms, and the winters were as cold as their reception had been. But she had come eagerly, putting aside her old life to be a good and loyal wife to a struggling government official.

Sometimes he wished Tamako were a little less correct about her duties. Before the birth of his son there had been intimacy between them. In their nights together she had begun to open up to him, to share her secret thoughts after sharing her body. Because he was quite deeply in love with this slender intelligent woman, he wanted her to be more to him than a dutiful wife and mother of his children. He loved his new son dearly but was jealous of the attention she lavished on him. It seemed that she had little time left for her husband now, that all her love and devotion were given to the child. But these feelings he kept to himself.

When old Seimei shuffled out on the veranda with his news, Akitada laid down his flute with a regretful glance toward his young family. "More messengers from Heian-kyo?" he asked, looking up at the thin white-haired man, who was servant, secretary, healer, and teacher to all of them. "I'm running out of reasons why we cannot increase the rice taxes and corvee at the same time. You would think they would know that the men are needed to work the fields if there is to be a harvest."

Seimei looked mysterious. "Not this time, sir. These are really important visitors."

Tamako's face lit up. "Important visitors?" Cradling the baby to her chest, she joined them. "Really? From the capital? Oh, it must be good news at last."

"Well, who are they?" Akitada asked, getting to his feet and brushing the wrinkles out of his second-best silk trousers.

"They did not give me their names, sir. I hope it is good news. It's been six months since you finished your tour of duty. A dreadful winter, especially for your lady."

"It has not been so bad," Tamako said quickly, but she hugged the child a little closer and looked toward the broken shutters of their house.

It had been dreadfully hard for them all. Akitada had feared for their lives, his young wife's because

she was with child, and Seimei's because he was old. What had started as a temporary assignment to take care of legal matters and paperwork for an absent governor had quickly turned into a nightmare. Akitada had been only a junior clerk in the ministry of justice when his stubborn pursuit of a murderer brought him to the notice of a powerful noble. When his name was put forward for the job in Echigo, Akitada had been flattered and excited by the distinction. He had taken his young and pregnant wife to this snow country, expecting to serve for a few months and then return to a better position in the capital.

But they had spent a long and bitter winter fighting the climate and hostility against imperial authority without support from Heian-kyo, and now they were apparently forgotten. Another winter loomed, though Akitada had written many letters to ask for his replacement and his back salary, for they were also nearly destitute by now.

Perhaps, he thought hopefully, his letters had borne result and they could finally leave this godforsaken place behind forever. Perhaps a duly appointed governor was about to arrive with his own staff and take over the duties that had overburdened Akitada. But even as he clung to this thought, he doubted it. It was very strange that the visitors had not given Seimei their names. Akitada glanced at his wife and saw the naked hope in her eyes.

"Oh, Akitada," she breathed. "Oh, I do hope it is the recall. Your mother's letters have been so worrying. She says her health is poor and that she will die before she sees her grandson."

Actually, the older Lady Sugawara was an ill-tempered tyrant who demanded total obedience from her son and everyone else in her household. She was at least part of the reason Akitada had welcomed this assignment. He had thought it would get them away from his mother long enough to give his marriage a chance.

He said diplomatically, "Yes. It will be good to return to the old home."

Seimei cleared his throat. "Sir, the gentlemen seemed very anxious to speak to you."

"Such haste after all this time?" Akitada mocked, but he adjusted his collar, touched his neatly tied topknot, and followed Seimei to the tribunal.

"I seated them in your office and served them some herbal tea," Seimei told him on the way. "Mint and ginger root to refresh the mind after a long journey, and a bit of ground-up iris root to purify the sluggish blood. They seemed out of sorts."

Seimei's herbal teas, changed according to the season and the recipient's needs, were not the best way to put important visitors at ease. They tended to be malodorous and bitter to the tongue, but since the old man believed they promoted good health and a long life, Akitada and his family submitted to his concoctions to make him happy.

The tribunal hall was the main building in the provincial compound. Here the provincial governor held his receptions, heard court cases, maintained the provincial archives, and conducted the business of the province. Today the hall was empty and the corridors lay silent. Such peace was a welcome change after the hectic days of the past winter. Akitada glanced around the cavernous hall critically. The floors were swept and the worst holes in the rafters had been closed with new boards, the repairs paid for from Akitada's private funds. In the archives his three clerks were bent over their desks studiously copying documents. And in the main courtyard outside he could hear the voices of his two lieutenants drilling the constables. He hoped this orderly regimen had impressed his visitors favorably.

Seimei flung back the door to his office and announced proudly, "Lord Sugawara."

The title was his due, for Akitada was a direct descendant of the great Sugawara Michizane, but the Sugawaras had fallen on hard times after his famous ancestor's exile and death, and his present station in the world was more than modest. Not only was he poor and without influence, two serious shortcomings for which he tried to make up by carrying out his duties to the letter, but he had managed to irritate his superiors.

Two middle-aged men in ordinary dark travel robes and black caps sat on the threadbare cushions near Akitada's scratched and dented desk. They had to be of considerable rank, for neither rose at his entrance, merely turning their heads to stare at him curiously.

One of the men was tall and thin, with a long, yellow-tinged face which looked vaguely disapproving. His shorter companion had an unnaturally ruddy complexion and glowered. Akitada's heart sank, but he reminded himself that they had come a long way. Exposure to sun and wind during long journeys had unfortunate effects on the normally pale features of noblemen and probably also on their temper. And, to judge by their rudeness, these two must possess considerable rank and irritability.

Their rank was a problem. Etiquette prescribed that Akitada adjust his greeting to bridge the distance between his own rank and theirs precisely, but they were complete strangers to him and neither wore the colors of his rank on his plain black cap. His heart beating uncomfortably, he decided on a modest bow to each before taking his seat behind his desk. His visitors' cool response boded ill.

The shorter man made a face. "Well, you took your time, Sugawara," he complained, then waved his hand impatiently at the waiting Seimei. "What are you standing about for? Leave us alone."

Seimei bowed deeply and backed from the room.

When the door had closed, Akitada said, "Allow me to bid you both welcome," and faltered, looking from one forbidding face to the other. Apparently they resented his casual greeting, but he was at a loss how to address them.

"Not much of a welcome," grumbled the short one. "This tribunal looks a disgrace. The walls are falling down, your constables look like scarecrows, and your stable is unfit for horses. And what is this poison your senile servant tried to palm off on us?"

Akitada flushed. "Just some herbal tea. It is considered very healthful. No doubt Seimei—who is my secretary, by the way—felt that you might need a restorative after your long journey."

The short stranger turned down the corners of his mouth. "He must be demented. Do you drink that stuff?"

Akitada assured him that both he and his family had found Seimei's teas most helpful in the past.

"Then you must be demented also." He turned to the thin man. "I think we are wasting our time here."

Akitada was beginning to hope so, too, but the tall man shook his head. "No. I think not." His voice was dry and he barely moved his thin lips when he spoke. "And keep in mind that we have no choice." The other man subsided with a frown.

Somehow this was not encouraging. Akitada offered, "Shall I send for some wine instead?"

"By all means," said the thin man, with a smile that was almost jovial. He looked at Akitada with an interest which reminded him uncomfortably of a cat eyeing a fat sparrow.

Akitada clapped his hands for Seimei. "Some wine please, Seimei."

Seimei removed the full teacups with a little sniff but mercifully did not argue the point. When they were alone again, Akitada searched for polite words to ask who his visitors were. "I am afraid," he began, "that I have not had the pleasure of meeting . . . Your Excellencies in the capital." He paused.

His visitors exchanged glances.

The short man said, "It is not necessary for you to know who we are."

Stranger and stranger. Akitada decided that this could not have anything to do with his inadequate administration of the chaotic affairs in Echigo. Neither, sadly, did it sound as though they were bringing his release. He cleared his throat nervously. "May I ask, then, what brings you here?"

The short man said, "In due time. First we have some questions ourselves. And we have yet to be offered adequate refreshments."

Akitada flushed. He was becoming annoyed with their rudeness and wished they would get to the point and leave.

They sat in silence until Seimei appeared with a large tray holding three small pitchers of wine and three cups. They were unmatched, badly chipped, and of the cheapest clayware. Bowing to each gentleman in turn, Seimei poured wine into a cup, presented it, and placed the small pitcher before him.

Akitada asked if there were any plum pickles left.

Shaking his head, Seimei offered, "I could slice some fresh radish from my garden."

The short man, who had made a face when he tasted his wine, muttered, "Fresh radish? What do the fool take us for?"

Akitada bit his lip. Considering their probable rank, their rudeness to him was one thing, but he was fond of Seimei, who had been like a father to him and served him still with unflinching love and devotion. On the other hand, these men were potentially powerful and he could not afford to offend them. He said, "I regret extremely the poor hospitality. Had we known of your arrival, we might have prepared more suitable refreshments, though this poor province has little with which to please someone like yourselves."

The short man grunted, but the thin one raised his brows, and Akitada realized that he had not sounded at all deferential. He fell silent again and waited.

"We have had worse wine on our journey here, Mototsune," said the thin man thoughtfully.

The short man smirked. "Once, *To*."

Akitada stared at the thin man. He was not certain he had heard right. *To* was the title of the emperor's two first secretaries, the highest position in the sovereign's private office. Each held the fourth rank. How could a man of such illustrious status be sitting in his office in the ramshackle tribunal of a remote province like Echigo?

"Are you acquainted with the Second Prince?" the thin man asked him.

The question was unexpected and flustered Akitada even more, but he managed to nod. The Second Prince was really the eldest son of the late emperor and had once been crown prince and emperor designate. But when he had been in his twenties, his father had suddenly decided to make another son by a secondary empress his heir, and Okisada had become the Second Prince. Angered, he started an intrigue against his much younger half-brother, and the emperor had punished him by sending him

Kyushu. Okisada had apologized and been allowed to return to the capital to live there in power, comfort and luxury for the next ten years. Then his father, worried about his health, had abdicated in favor of Okisada's half-brother. One of the court nobles, a Lord Miyoshi, discovered that Okisada was involved in a plot to kill his half-brother and seize the throne. This time his punishment had been permanent exile to Sadoshima, where he had remained for the past decade.

"Well? Have you lost your voice?" the thin man demanded.

"I beg your pardon, Excellency. I was waiting for you to explain further. I know something of Prince Okisada and once, when I was a boy, I saw him in passing. He is at present living in exile on Sadoshima."

The thin man shook his head. "Incorrect. The prince is dead. He has been murdered."

Akitada sat up. This was extraordinary news. A murder of an imperial prince on the island of exiles? What could be going on there? Sadoshima was in the Sea of Japan, about twenty miles north of the coast of Echigo. Exile to Sadoshima was the most severe form of punishment short of execution. Only very violent or politically dangerous criminals were sent there. But what did this have to do with him?

The thin man smiled. "Ah," he said. "I see we finally have your attention. You have the reputation of being clever at solving murders. We want you to go to Sado Island and find out what happened."

Akitada's eyes widened, but he shook his head. "I am sorry, Excellency, but I have no authority to leave my post. Neither do I have the power to meddle in the affairs of another province. I expect Sadoshima's governor has already begun an investigation into the crime."

"Pah! The investigation is tainted. The murderer is Governor Mutobe's son."

"What?" Akitada stared at his mysterious visitor. "Are you certain, Excellency? Or do you mean that he has only been accused of the crime?"

The thin man made an impatient gesture. "Accused, arrested, and up for trial. Apparently the prince was poisoned by some food the young man provided. The facts are not disputed."

That was a tricky situation, and Akitada was thoroughly intrigued, but he said again, "Even so, I regret that I am not able to accede to your request."

The short man turned a deeper shade and blustered, "Must I remind you that you are nothing but a clerk in the ministry of justice on temporary assignment here?"

Akitada bowed. "That is very true and I regret extremely not to be able to do as you wish. But my instructions state precisely that I am to take my orders only from my superior or a representative of the emperor."

They looked at each other. Then the lean gentleman took some rolled-up documents from his sleeve. As he sorted through these, Akitada saw the yellow silk ribbons used for imperial documents and felt his skin crawl. The thin man looked up, saw Akitada's expression, and smiled. He unrolled one of the yellow-ribboned papers partially and displayed the large crimson seal of the sovereign's private office. "Do you recognize the seal?"

"Yes, Excellency." Akitada bowed to touch his forehead to the desk. Perhaps, he thought, he should prostrate himself, but he did not quite know how to move from behind the desk and stretch out on the floor without getting up first. An imperial seal represented His Majesty, and one never stood before such an object.

“Good,” commented the thin man. “I assume you are satisfied that I have the power to send you Sado Island?”

Akitada sat back on his heels. “I am afraid not, Excellency. I do not know you or how you may have come by imperial documents or what the documents pertain to.”

“Are you calling him a thief and a liar?” cried the short man. “How dare you?” He turned to his colleague. “You see? That is what comes of sending unsuitable persons to fill crucial posts in the provinces. I shall certainly report this impudent fellow’s lack of cooperation to the great council of state.”

Akitada turned cold. Such a thing would surely end his career.

The thin man cleared his throat, then leaned closer to whisper something to his companion. The other man still glowered but nodded reluctantly.

Akitada watched them and wished that this day had never happened. Nothing good could come from this meeting, no matter how diplomatic he was with these men. He had no idea what he was getting into, except that it involved the emperor, high treason, and murder.

The thin man sorted through his papers again, then passed a letter to Akitada, who recognized the handwriting. It was from Soga Ietada, minister of justice and Akitada’s immediate superior. The letter appeared to answer some question about Akitada’s background. Soga had written, “Sugawara, a junior clerk in our archives, performed his simple duties adequately, though without enthusiasm. He has a regrettable and obstinate tendency to become involved in investigations of low crime in his spare time, a situation which often strains relations between the capital police and our ministry.”

When Akitada looked up, the thin man smiled his thin smile. “When I knew we would pass through Echigo, I contacted Soga. You see, we know of your interest in murder from an unimpeachable source.”

Akitada handed back the letter. “This bears no superscription. I still do not know who you are, sir.”

The short man made an impatient noise, but his companion raised his hand. He looked at Akitada who looked back and compressed his lips stubbornly.

“So. You still do not trust me. But how can I trust you?”

“If you came to me knowing only what Minister Soga told you, you cannot,” Akitada said bitterly.

The thin man chuckled. “Oh, Soga was not my only source. Let me see. I also heard that you placed first in your university examination. An uncommon distinction which means you have above-normal intelligence and learning.”

“I was fortunate.”

“Hmm. I believe you received your present appointment because you solved a complicated crime affecting another member of the imperial family?”

That was only known to a very few people. Akitada said cautiously, “It is true that my humble efforts may have brought me my present assignment,” adding silently that, if he had known better, he would have refused it.

“Whose side are you on, Sugawara?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“In the matter of Prince Okisada.”

Akitada was an imperial official and thought the answer should have been obvious. “Oh. His Majesty was duly chosen by the previous emperor. There can be no question about the legality of the succession. The ruling sovereign designates his successor from among his brothers or sons, provided that his choice is capable of carrying out the duties of an emperor. There is a precedent for this case. In 438, another crown prince was considered unfit and passed over in favor of his younger brother. May His Majesty’s reign last a thousand years.” Akitada bowed.

“Spoken like a legal scholar. Very well, I suppose I have no choice but to trust you. I cannot reveal details, but you may have a look at our original commission. I hope you will treat the information with the utmost secrecy. No one must know our purpose.”

His companion objected. “I am opposed. Sugawara’s character is dubious from all we have heard. He has disobeyed orders and taken matters into his own hands before. If he persists in refusing an order, I say we go back and investigate the case ourselves.”

“Neither you nor I have the expertise to investigate a murder, nor sufficient background in the law nor in the details of provincial administration. Sugawara does and he is close enough to reach Sadoshima Island quickly.” The thin man selected one of the imperial documents and passed it across to Akitada.

Akitada sat lost in amazement at what these two officials expected of him. The thin man raised his brows and gave a meaningful nod at the document roll in his hand. Belatedly, Akitada extended both hands to receive it and raised the imperial seal respectfully above his head, before undoing the silk ribbon with trembling fingers. The emperor’s private office used heavy, cream-colored mulberry paper of the finest quality, and Akitada’s hands were sweating. He wiped them surreptitiously on his robe, and then read. The handwriting of the imperial scribe was most elegant, so elegant in fact that he had trouble deciphering it. But flowery language and floating brushstrokes aside, he saw that his two visitors were both advisors to the emperor. He recognized their names and knew that they held the fourth and fifth ranks, respectively, but they worked in too exalted an office to have come in contact with a mere junior clerk in the ministry of justice. The letter instructed them to travel to Sadoshima in order to visit Prince Okisada and discuss “certain matters” with him on behalf of His Majesty. The faint signature at the end was the sovereign’s. Akitada again raised the document above his head, before rolling it up carefully and retying the silk ribbon with clumsy fingers. He returned it with a deep bow. “Please forgive my earlier lack of courtesy, Your Excellencies,” he said humbly.

The short man grunted, but his thin colleague smiled. “Never mind. I like a cautious man. You will need to be wary in Sadoshima. We suspect a great deal of trouble is brewing there.”

“Trouble? Forgive me, Excellency, but when did the prince die?”

“Last week. We were greeted by the news when we arrived.”

“Only last week?” Akitada rearranged his thoughts rapidly. They had not been sent to him from the capital. The government was still pleased to ignore him. They—or rather the thin man (though he knew their names, Akitada preferred to think in anonymous terms), had come to him on his own initiative. He felt mildly flattered but also worried. “Then why did His Majesty send you there?” he asked.

“We cannot talk about matters which concern the sovereign,” protested the short man.

The thin man sighed. “Can you not simply go and find out if the governor’s son, a young man called Toshito, is truly guilty?”

Akitada hesitated. Sometimes it is better not to know too much, and he got a distinct feeling that

this was one of those times. But he could not help himself. “You mentioned trouble and the need to be wary. I cannot be wary if I don’t know what the trouble is. Your visit to Sadoshima suggests that there was serious concern about another plot against His Imperial Majesty. I think that is what the letter alludes to when it speaks of ‘certain matters’ and why you undertook such a long journey in the first place. But when you arrived you found that Prince Okisada had been poisoned by the son of the governor. Some might wonder if this Toshito had acted on behalf of His Majesty.”

The short man sucked in his breath sharply. They both stared at him as if he had suddenly been transformed into something alien, as if a field mouse had turned into a fox before their eyes.

Then the thin man chuckled softly and said, “Bravo! That was quite clever of you. You will do very well.”

The short man made a face. “Let us be careful,” he warned.

“Never mind. Sugawara is quite right. He will need to know a little more. The danger of an insurrection may be over now that the prince is dead, but what if it is not?” He paused to pour himself another cup of wine and drank.

“It all began three months ago when we—I refer to the private office of the emperor—heard rumors of some trouble between the governor of Sado Island and its chief constable. As you may imagine, His Majesty is vitally interested in anything which pertains to the tragic situation of his brother. It is a pity that we are not kept better informed.” He harrumphed. “But that is neither here nor there. We checked into the matter and found that the quarrel was unrelated to the prince. Apparently Mutobe, the governor, in a bout of ill-advised zeal, overstepped his powers and interfered with law enforcement on Sadoshima.”

“Forgive me, Excellency, but I do not understand what this has to do with the prince’s murder.”

The thin man bit his lip and exchanged a glance with his friend. “We traveled to Sado to verify the facts.”

Akitada shook his head. “I do not think so. The journey to Sado Island from the capital is long and dangerous. In this instance, Your Excellencies appear to have undertaken the journey without escort and incognito. Would a minor squabble between two provincial administrators really cause His Majesty to send his most trusted advisors on such an assignment?”

“Look here, young man,” blustered the short visitor, “you ask too many questions. We have explained as much as you need to know. Now it is up to you to find out who killed the prince and why.”

Akitada bowed. Nobody said anything for a while.

Finally the thin man sighed again. “As you know, Sadoshima is a notorious haven for pirates who ply the ocean up and down the coast. Not far to the north from here, our armies are fighting the Ezo warlords again. With the prince on Sadoshima, you can see what our enemies might do.”

“You were afraid that the prince might become a hostage to the Ezo?”

“That was *one* possibility,” agreed the thin man.

Akitada suddenly saw the real danger and the full dilemma faced by his two noble visitors. The other, unspoken and unspeakable, scenario was that Okisada himself had been negotiating with the Ezo in another attempt to seize the throne. Akitada felt a cold shiver run down his spine. The bloodshed along the path of such an army led southward by a claimant to the throne would be

unimaginable. The people of Echigo and his own small family would certainly be victims in such war.

The Ezo, their hostile barbarian neighbors to the north, had threatened the peaceful life of Japanese peasants for hundreds of years. Recently their chieftains had submitted to the emperor in Dewa and Mutsu Provinces, but the military strength and expertise of these warlords had grown. They rebelled often, and still posed a continuous threat to the nation.

“Will you accept the assignment?” asked the thin man.

Akitada bowed. “Yes, Your Excellency, provided that my doing so is properly authorized by you in His Majesty’s name.”

“It is not likely that you will be told anything if you go there in an official capacity. Much better that you travel incognito.”

Akitada said, “Perhaps I could travel as a peddler or peasant, carrying my papers sewn into my clothing. Nobody pays attention to common people. But I must have properly authorized documents.”

They did not like it, but the thin man finally agreed. “Let us sleep over it. We are tired and you wish to make preparations.” He looked at Akitada. “May I suggest that you stop shaving? Otherwise you will hardly convince anyone that you are a peasant or vagrant.”

“There is one other small problem,” Akitada said nervously. “I have not received my salary since I arrived here with my family. My retainers have not been paid, though they have carried out the duties of secretary of the tribunal and constabulary officers. I have exhausted my own funds making repairs and cannot leave my people destitute.”

They looked at him in amazement. It occurred to Akitada that they were probably so wealthy that they would never find themselves in his desperate situation.

The short man said, “But why did you not draw on the provincial treasury for salaries and expenses? Everybody does.”

“I had no authorization, Excellency.”

The short man blurted, “That old law? Nobody follows that any longer. Don’t you know anything? It boggles the mind that—” The thin man put a restraining hand on his sleeve, and he concluded, “Hmph. Well, do so immediately. Collect what is owed you and enough to see your family and staff through the next week or two. You should be back by then.”

The thin man said more gently, “These days provincial administrators are expected to draw funds from the local treasury, Sugawara. That is why they send an examining official to settle accounts when you leave your post.” He nodded to his companion, and they got to their feet.

“Thank you.” Akitada was not sure whether he felt more ashamed of his ignorance or happy that his financial woes were solved. He decided on the latter. “Allow me to offer you my quarters,” he said in a spirit of wanting to share his good fortune. “They are not much, but my wife and I will do our best to make you comfortable.”

The short man cast a glance at the patched ceiling and broken shutters of Akitada’s office. “Thank you, but we have already taken rooms at the local inn.”

Akitada accompanied them to the front of the tribunal hall. From the height of its veranda, they could see across the tribunal walls and the roofs of the provincial capital all the way to the sea. On the clear day, it was just possible to make out the long hazy outline of Sadoshima on the horizon.

seemed another world.

In the courtyard, the constables were just finishing their drill. When Tora, one of Akitada's own men and their temporary lieutenant, looked up and saw them, he called the constables to attention. Arranging his cheerful face into sterner lines, he saluted stiffly as the two noble gentlemen descended the steps to the courtyard and passed on their way to their horses.

Akitada breathed a sigh of relief. The constables had actually looked pretty sharp, in spite of the lack of proper uniforms, a matter he would remedy immediately. But Tora spoiled the good impression he had made by shouting up to Akitada, "Well, sir, are we going home at last?"

The short visitor, almost at the gate, froze in his tracks for a moment before continuing.

"Report to my office, Tora," snapped Akitada, and walked back inside.

Time was when Tora had been a mere peasant and foot soldier. Then he had fallen on even worse times and was hunted by the authorities as a deserter and bandit. He owed his change in fortunes to the day Akitada had offered to take him on as a servant.

Tora had almost turned down the offer. In those days, he had hated officials almost as much as the injustices his family had suffered. But his master had been as intolerant of injustice as Tora, and they had built a strong friendship, one in which Tora expressed his opinions freely. They had saved each other's lives repeatedly and risen in each other's esteem through mutual tolerance of the other's shortcomings, namely Tora's womanizing and Akitada's rigidity about the law.

Now Tora ran after him, boots pounding on the wooden planks and startling the clerks in the archives. "Well?" he demanded again.

"Why did you shout at me?"

"Because you were too far away." Tora grinned with his usual impudence.

Akitada sighed. Tora was incorrigible, but the fault was his. He had treated him from the start more like a brother than a servant. "I shall have to leave for a week or two," he said. "There is some trouble in Sadoshima. The former crown prince was murdered. I am to investigate the murder charge against the governor's son."

Tora whistled. "The governor's son? What's the world coming to? Shall I start packing my things?"

"No. I am going alone. You and Genba will look after things here. I should be back in a week."

Tora looked disappointed, but he accepted the decision, especially when Akitada promised to pay his back wages before he departed.

After Tora left, Akitada walked back to his residence. He did not like to leave Tamako and his son but had no choice in the matter. Even if he could have refused such an order, doing so would have ended his career for good. On the other hand, if he managed to solve the problem, he hoped the two imperial secretaries would put in a good word for him in the capital.

Seimei and Tamako were waiting anxiously. Their faces fell when they saw him. Akitada hated to see the hope drain from Tamako's eyes.

"We are to stay here?" she asked.

"For the time being. I am to go to Sadoshima to investigate a murder."

"That place?" she cried. "Where they send all the worst criminals?"

"Don't worry. I shall not be gone long, and perhaps something good may come of it."

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