

Bundori

A Novel of Japan

Laura Joh
Rowland



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A NOVEL OF JAPAN

LAURA JOH ROWLAND



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EDO



GENROKU PERIOD, YEAR 2, MONTH 3
(Tokyo, April 1689)

PROLOGUE



As the hour of the boar approached, the great city of Edo lay shrouded in a heavy mist that blurred the darkness and muffled sound. A thin spring rain pattered onto the tile roofs of the Nihonbashi merchant quarter, puddling the narrow streets. Yellow lamplight glowed faintly behind the wooden lattices and paper panes of only a few windows; smoke from charcoal braziers rose to mingle with the mist and thicken the air still more. Although the city's many gates had not yet closed, blocking off passage from each section to the next, the streets were already as deserted as if midnight—nearly three hours away—had already arrived.

The lone stalker emerged from the shelter of a recessed doorway in a row of shopfronts whose sliding wooden shutters were closed tight against the hostile weather. The dank chill penetrated his cloak and seeped between the plates of the armor tunic beneath it. Cold moisture gathered under his wide-brimmed hat and inside the iron mask that covered his face. His body, already tense with anticipation, began to shiver. With each shallow breath, he inhaled and exhaled air that smelled of damp wood and earth and the fishy taint of the Sumida River. Keeping to the shadows beneath the roofs' overhanging eaves, he moved sideways, stealthily, until he reached the next doorway. There he paused, all his senses alert for the first sign of his prey.

Moments passed. The night noises—voices from inside nearby houses, distant hoofbeats, the clatter of the night-soil carts making their way toward the fields outside town—gradually ceased as Edo prepared for the closing of the gates and the captivity it would endure until dawn. Quivering with impatience, the stalker peered down the street. His fingers traced the flat guards, shaped like human skulls, of his swords. Would the enemy appear tonight? Would he at last achieve the goal postponed for so many years?

The mist allowed him to see no farther than ten paces in any direction. To his right, he could barely discern the murky glow of a torch that lit the gate at the street's end. The night seemed empty of all movement and presence save his own. Frustration mounted; blood lust consumed him in waves of hot desire. As he waited, his fevered mind projected images at first vague, then more distinct, against the mist's dense blankness. If he squinted—there, just so—he could imagine himself back through the years to that time about which he'd heard so much that he knew it almost as well as his own. The time of constant and glorious civil war, before the village of Edo had burgeoned into a city of one million inhabitants; before the first Tokugawa shogun, Ieyasu,

had subjugated his rivals and imposed peace upon the land.
The time of the greatest warlord who had ever lived.



Kiyosu Fortress, one hundred and twenty-nine years ago. A merciless summer sun blazed down upon the two thousand samurai sheltered within the wooden walls of the stockade. The stalker, though among the humblest of the foot soldiers, felt the unease that permeated their pitifully small army. This day could mean victory and life—or defeat and death—for them all.

“He’s coming!”

The words, whispered from one man to the next, passed through the ranks. Along with his comrades, the stalker knelt and bowed, arms extended, forehead to the ground. But he couldn’t resist a quick glance upward as their feared and beloved lord passed.

Oda Nobunaga, lord of Owari Province, with ambitions of someday ruling the entire land, was resplendent in a suit of armor made from hundreds of metal and leather plates tied together with blue silk cord and lacquered in brilliant colors, and wearing a black iron helmet crowned with a pair of carved golden horns. He rode a magnificent black steed. His expression grave, he dismounted to confer with the three generals who accompanied him into the whitewashed wooden fort.

Another whisper swept the ranks: “Marune has fallen!”

Dread paralyzed the stalker. He gasped with the others. With the capture of Lord Oda’s frontier fortress, nothing stood between them and the enemy Lord Imagawa’s troops, twenty-five thousand strong, who were advancing on them even now. They were doomed. But his fear for Lord Oda overshadowed that which he felt for himself.



The sound of footsteps jolted him back to the present. Relinquishing his lingering terror and the image of the imperiled fortress, he looked into the street. Out of the mist to his left shuffled an elderly samurai, with the customary swords, one long and one short, at his waist.

The stalker savored the heady rise of excitement as he grasped the hilt of his own long sword. Trembling, he waited for the man to draw nearer. He focused his thoughts on the confrontation ahead. But a part of his mind leapt backward to that morning long past.



The fortress gates opened to admit two panting scouts. “Imagawa’s army is in the gorge outside Okehazama village!” they cried, hurrying to convey the news to Lord Oda.

Almost before the stalker or his comrades could comprehend the significance of this information, they were on the march. All two thousand of

them, so few compared to the massive force that awaited them, mounted and on foot; first banner-bearers, gunners, and archers, then the swordsmen and spear-carriers, with Lord Oda and the generals bringing up the rear. They sweltered in the heat that baked the hills and rice fields.

Midday came. At last they stopped behind a hill just short of the gorge and waited for the command to act. From inside the gorge, the stalker could hear voices raised in drunken laughter and song. Imagawa's troops were celebrating their earlier victory. He listened and waited some more. A tense hush gripped the hillside and held him motionless, afraid to breathe.

Suddenly a mass of dark storm clouds boiled up out of the west, hiding the sun. Lightning split the sky; thunder shook the earth like the beat of a great war drum. The first raindrops pelted the earth. As if on this signal from the heavens, Lord Oda raised his great gold war fan and brought it down again, cleaving the air in a decisive motion. The conch trumpet blared the order:

Charge!

In one movement, they rose and ran toward the gorge. Great sheets of rain lashed the stalker as he struggled against the wind. Ahead of him, the first rank had disappeared into the gorge. He heard the boom of gunfire and the startled cries of Imagawa's army. Then, his heart pounding louder than the thunder, he skidded down the slope and into the swirling chaos that filled the gorge.

The storm had driven Imagawa's men to seek shelter under trees. Now they scrambled to load drenched and useless arquebuses, groped for bows, spears, and swords lost in the mud. But it was too late. Oda's troops fell upon them, slaughtering them by the hundreds. The clash of steel blades echoed up and down the gorge. Guns roared, emitting clouds of black smoke. Arrows sang through the air to strike flesh with meaty thumps. Screams of death agony echoed the attackers' murderous shouts. The metallic scent of blood overpowered the summer smells of sweat and rain. Into the raging battle rode Lord Oda. Sword raised high, he made straight for Lord Imagawa, who stood alone and unprotected. One expert slash of Oda's sword, one triumphant yell, and Imagawa lay dead.

Wild with ardor and admiration, the stalker drew his sword and plunged into the melee. "Lord Oda, I offer my life in your service!"



Now the old man had almost reached the doorway. The stalker could hear his wheezy breaths. His sword, already drawn for that battle long past, was in his hand. A fierce eagerness burned inside him as he slipped from the shadows to block his prey's path. The man uttered a whimper of surprise and stood still, one hand lifted in a gesture of greeting, or entreaty.

The stalker raised his sword in both hands and swung it in a swift, sideways arc. The blade sliced cleanly through the old man's neck. It severed his head, which hit the ground and rolled a few paces before coming to a halt faceup in the muddy street. A great gush of blood, black in the dim light, spewed from

the neck as the body crumpled and fell.

Filled with the sweet fire of conquest, the stalker beheld the carnage that lay at his feet. He saw the remains of his present-day enemy; he could also see the fallen bodies of dead and wounded soldiers in the gorge. He longed to stand there and play out in his mind the short remainder of the Battle of Okehazama.

But he must not let his fantasy make him forget where—and in what time—he was, or the danger of remaining at the scene of a murder he'd just committed. Besides, he had much work to do before the gates closed. Sheathing his sword, he picked up the severed head and tucked it under his cloak. Then he hurried away through the misty streets and alleys.



The returning troops swarmed into Kiyosu Fortress on a wave of riotous excitement. Cheers and laughter rattled the stockade walls. Glee replaced the morning's despair. The Battle of Okehazama had ended moments after it began—with Oda the victor. Lord Imagawa was dead; those few of his troops not killed in the gorge had fled in panic. Mikawa, Totomi, and Suruga Provinces belonged to Oda now, and the way was cleared for his march on Kyōto, the capital. The celebration would last through the night, with much drink, song, and revelry. But first would come the solemn ritual to mark Lord Oda's brilliant triumph.



Alone in a cramped room lit by a single guttering oil lamp, the stalker knelt and unwrapped the severed head. Tenderly he washed his bloody prize in a bucket of water and dried it with a clean cloth. Beside him sat a square board with a sharp iron spike thrust up through the middle. He mounted the head on this contraption, grunting with the effort as he forced it down upon the spike. At last the point penetrated the brain, and the neck was flush with the board. Carefully he combed the wispy gray hair and tied it in a pigtail with a piece of white string. He applied rouge to the pale, wrinkled cheeks to restore the color of life, and buffed the bald crown. He prodded the eyeballs with his fingers until they gazed downward in the manner considered most auspicious. Lighting a stick of incense, he waved it around the head to sweeten its odor. Finally he added the most important touch: the white paper label inked with black characters that explained the purpose of his deed. This he fastened to the dead man's pigtail. Then he stood and surveyed his work. His heart swelled with pride as he gazed upon the head.

His *bundori*. His war trophy.



On the ramparts of Kiyosu Fortress, banners swayed in the evening breeze beneath the setting sun's red globe. War drums boomed; singers' chants rose

to the heavens. Flaring torches lit the yard inside the stockade, where Lord Oda Nobunaga, still clad in full armor, sat on a stool, flanked by his generals. Arranged in ranks before him knelt his troops. Lord Oda nodded solemnly, ordering the ceremony to begin.

From the fort came a procession of samurai. Each brought a mounted head, which he placed at his lord's feet, then bowed before returning to the fort to fetch another. The stalker was fourth in line. His spirit soared skyward with the chants and drumbeats; he could scarcely contain his joy. Today he'd distinguished himself in battle by killing forty men singlehandedly. His reward: a place of honor in the procession and the recognition of his lord and peers.

This is only the beginning, he thought deliriously. He envisioned the future, seeing himself first as a commander, then as a general. And, when his end came, he would die in the glory of battle, paying his lord the ultimate tribute: his life.

Now it was his turn to pass before Lord Oda. Squaring his shoulders and looking straight ahead, he stepped forward, his *bundori* extended in both hands.



Outside the mist had thickened; the rain continued. Bent under the weight of the large basket on his back, the stalker hurried through the empty streets toward the resting place he'd chosen for his precious trophy.

"Hurry home now," a night sentry called to him as he slipped through a gate. "Almost time for closing."

The stalker ignored him. He must place the *bundori* where everyone could see and admire it and know the great deed he'd done. His time was rapidly slipping away; every moment increased the risk that someone might stop him. Yet he felt no fear or anxiety—only a yearning for completion.

Quickly he scaled the rungs of a ladder that climbed up a shop's wall, above roof level to the platform of a tall, rickety wooden firewatch tower. The mist enfolded him, obliterating his view of the city below. He opened his basket and took out the head. His mind populated the night with shadowy figures and filled the dripping silence with drumming and chanting. He placed the head carefully on the platform and bowed deeply.

"Honorable Lord Oda," he whispered. An almost sensual satisfaction overwhelmed him. "Please accept this, my first tribute to you."

Then he shouldered his basket and descended the ladder. Head high, he started homeward, feeling as if he'd slain not just one man but a legion of enemy soldiers, all the while dreaming of future victories.

1



In the vast, deep pond at Edo Castle's martial arts training ground, Sano Ichirō trod water furiously, trying to stay afloat. The two swords and full suit of armor he wore—tunic and shoulder flaps made of leather and metal plates, chain-mail arm shields, metal leg guards, helmet, and mask—threatened to drag him to the bottom. In his left hand he held a bow; in the right, an arrow. His lungs heaved with the effort of keeping these and his head above the water. Around him bobbed other samurai, fellow retainers of the shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, attending this morning's training session to practice the skills they would need in case they ever had to make war in a river, a lake, or at sea. At the pond's other end, more men fought a mock battle on horseback. Their movements churned the pond. A big wave washed over Sano's head. Water, foul with mud and horse droppings, gurgled into his helmet and mask. He gasped, spat, and barely managed to gulp a breath of air before the next wave hit him.

"You, there!" the *sensei* yelled from the bank of the pond. A long pole rapped sharply upon Sano's helmet. "Body straight, legs down. And keep that arrow dry! Wet feathers don't fly straight!"

Mustering his strength, Sano gamely tried to follow the orders. His legs ached from executing the circular kicks necessary for maintaining an upright position. His left arm, recently wounded in a sword fight, throbbed; the other arm had gone numb. Each painful breath felt like his last. And he was freezing. The uncertain spring weather hadn't warmed away the pond's winter iciness. How much longer would this torture last? To take his mind off his physical distress, he squinted upward at his surroundings.

Man-shaped straw archery targets dotted the grassy space beside the pond. To Sano's right loomed the dark green pines of the Fukiage, the forested park that occupied the castle's western grounds and surrounded the training area. On his left, he could see the stands of the racecourse, from which came shouts, cheers, and hoofbeats. In the distance directly ahead of him rose the high stone wall that surrounded the inner castle precincts, where the shogun, his family, and his closest associates lived and worked in luxurious palaces.

Sano kicked harder to raise himself an infinitesimal distance higher above water level. The brilliant sunlight made dazzling jewels of the droplets that sprayed his eyes. He blinked them away and tilted his head back to look up at the castle keep: five splendid stories of whitewashed walls and multiple gleaming tiled roofs and gables that soared against the blue sky. A visible

symbol of the complete and overwhelming Tokugawa military power, Edo Castle filled Sano with awe. After two months of living within its walls, he still couldn't believe that it was home to him now. Even less could he believe in the fantastic series of events that had brought him here.

The son of a *rōnin*—a masterless samurai—he'd earned his living as an instructor in his father's martial arts academy, supplementing his family's meager income by teaching reading and writing to young boys. Then, just three months ago, through family connections, he'd attained the position of *yoriki*, one of Edo's fifty senior police commanders. He'd lost that position, suffered disgrace, dishonor, and physical agony, solved a puzzling murder case, saved the shogun's life—and ended up as Tokugawa Tsunayoshi's *sōsakan-sama*: Most Honorable Investigator of Events, Situations, and People.

The appointment was an undreamed-of honor, but Sano's move to the castle had created an enormous upheaval in his life. Cut off from everything and everyone he knew, he'd found himself adrift in a strange landscape filled with unfamiliar faces, swamped by new and confusing regulations and rituals. The training pond wasn't the only place where he had to struggle to keep his head above water. But the changes in his life hadn't stopped there. His father, whose health had been poor for many years, had died just fifteen days after Sano had left his family's house. With a sorrow still fresh and raw, Sano remembered his father's passing.

Kneeling before his father's bed, he'd pressed the old man's withered hand to his chest. Through the grief that swelled his throat, he tried to express the love and esteem he felt for his father, but the latter had shaken his head, demanding silence. "My son ... promise ..." The cracked voice faded to a whisper, and Sano leaned closer to hear. "Promise me that ... you will serve your master well. Be the living embodiment ... of Bushido...."

Bushido: the Way of the Warrior. The strict code of duty, honor, and obedience that defined a samurai's behavior, during battle and in peacetime, which he mastered not once and for all, but through confronting the innumerable challenges it presented throughout his life.

"Yes, Father, I promise," Sano said. At whatever cost to himself, he would strive to mold his independent, unruly spirit to Bushido's tenets. This deathbed promise was the most serious obligation he'd ever owed his father; it must be fulfilled. "Please rest now."

With another shake of his head, his father continued. "The aim of a samurai ... is to perform some great deed of bravery or loyalty that ..." He took several slow, painful breaths. "That will astonish both friend and foe alike, make his lord regret his death, and ..." A coughing spell stopped him.

"And leave behind a great name to be remembered for generations to come," Sano finished for him. The lesson was one of the many aspects of Bushido that his father had taught him in childhood, indoctrinating him with this philosophy, which had evolved over the course of six hundred years.

"Promise ..."

Sano gripped his father's hand tighter, as if to physically keep death from

claiming him. Tears stung his eyes. He knew it grieved his father that the miraculous deed he'd already performed for the shogun must remain forever a secret. "Father, I promise I will secure our family's name a place of honor in history," he said.

Satisfied, his father relaxed and closed his eyes. Shortly afterward, he lapsed into the final throes of death.

Sano felt as though his father's passing had removed the foundation of his life, his link with his heritage, the font from which his strength and courage flowed, and the inner compass that guided him. Bereft, unsure of himself, he longed for his father's presence. Still, the promises he'd made hadn't seemed rash or extravagant then. As *sōsakan*, he would have countless opportunities to distinguish himself.

Now, however, Sano despaired of ever fulfilling the promise. For the entire two months since his arrival at Edo Castle, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi had completely ignored him. Sano had seen his new master only from a distance during formal ceremonies. Instead of solving problems of vital national importance, he was now a clerk in the castle's historical archives. He spent his excess time and energy on the one avenue of Bushido open to him: martial arts training for a war that might not come in his lifetime. He seemed destined to become one of the government's countless bureaucrats, who did trivial work in exchange for generous stipends—a parasite, fattening off the Tokugawa wealth.

"Ready! Take aim!"

The *sensei*'s voice interrupted Sano's thoughts. At last the exercise was nearing its end. Exhausted, Sano aligned his body with one of the straw targets. His heart hammered in protest inside his chest. His armor and weapons now weighed as much as the Great Buddha statue of Kamakura. Every part of his body ached; his stomach churned, sickened from overexertion. He raised his bow and fitted the arrow to it. Despite his frantic kicks, his head sank below the water. Blindly he aimed.

"Fire!"

Sano let his arrow fly. Without looking to see where it landed, he swam to shore. He no longer had the strength to care how well he'd performed the exercise. He couldn't determine how he might become the ideal samurai and confer everlasting honor upon his family name. All he wanted to do was rest, on dry land. Dripping and shivering, he heaved himself onto the bank, where he lay motionless on his back, eyes closed. He was dimly aware of the men around him, some resting, others talking while they removed their armor. The sunlight warmed him. Then he heard footsteps approaching. Someone stood at his feet, blocking the sun. Removing his mask, Sano raised his head, expecting to see the attendant who helped him in and out of his armor.

Instead he saw two of the shogun's senior officials. Dressed in colorful flowing silk robes, oiled hair tied in sleek looped knots, crowns freshly shaven, they gazed down at him in mild disdain.

"*Sōsakan-sama?*" one of them said.

Sano struggled to his feet. “Yes?” Water ran out of his helmet and armor. He bowed, feeling uncouth beside their elegance.

“The shogun wishes your presence at once, in the No theater,” the other official said.

Sano’s heart leapt. After two months of silence, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi wanted to see him! “Did he say why?” he asked eagerly. Already yanking at the fastenings of his armor, he beckoned the attendant to come and assist him.

Both officials shook their heads gravely, bowed, then turned and walked away.

With the attendant’s help, Sano shed his armor. In the dressing shed he removed his wet garments, rinsed in clean water, and wiped himself with a towel. He donned his everyday clothing: long, full black trousers, a dark red kimono stamped in gold with the triple-hollyhock-leaf Tokugawa crest, and a black surcoat bearing his own family crest of four interlocked flying cranes. He sat impatiently while the attendant dried his shaven crown and reknotted his hair. Finally he fastened his two swords to his sash.

Maybe the shogun had a task for him to perform, Sano thought, one by which he could fulfill his promise to his father. Anticipation rose in his chest. He fought it down, cautioning himself that maybe the shogun, as a courtesy to the man who had served him well, merely planned to bestow a moment of attention on him before consigning him to oblivion thereafter. But he couldn’t help hoping otherwise.

On his way to the gate that led from the training grounds to the castle’s inner precinct, he glanced toward the archery targets. The other men had already collected their arrows. Only his remained. Sano looked away. Sticking up out of the grass an arm’s length short of the target, it did not seem an auspicious omen.

A battery of armed guards recorded Sano’s name in their log, examined him for hidden weapons, and finally let him through the inner precinct’s iron-banded gate. Once on the other side, he followed a circuitous stone passage that ran between parallel stone walls topped with continuous lines of whitewashed guardhouses. He circled the perimeter of the inner precinct to its eastern side, where the shogun’s palace lay. The passage gradually ascended, following the contours of the hill upon which Edo Castle perched. Every few hundred paces or so, Sano came to a checkpoint. There other guards inspected him before letting him past yet another gate. Through the windows and gunholes of every guardhouse, he could see more men on duty; still more patrolled the passage or escorted visitors and officials. Even in peacetime, with the chance of a siege remote, no one moved unwatched through the castle. Sano couldn’t get used to the constant surveillance. He sometimes thought that Edo Castle, for all its splendor and elegance, was nothing but a huge prison.

On a day like this, however, it was a beautiful one. A fresh spring breeze

swept down from the mountains to whisper through the pines that swayed above the tiled roofs of the guardhouses along the inner walls. Through the windows of the outer ones, Sano caught occasional glimpses of Edo, spread across the plain below. A haze of pale foliage added brightness and life to the city's drab brown thatched or tiled roofs. Cherry trees, in full blossom now, spread rosy clouds over the banks of the many canals, formed solid bands of radiant color along the broad, muddy Sumida River, and turned the hills beyond the castle into a breathtaking wash of pink and green. Their fragrance scented the air with an elusive, poignant sweetness. In the distance, high above the city to the west, rose Mount Fuji's serene, snowcapped peak. Sano hurried on his way. Another time he would savor the beauty of the castle. Another day he might grow comfortable within its walls.

"Wait, if you please, Sano-san!"

The call, accompanied by hurrying footsteps, came from behind him. Sano turned and saw Noguchi Motoori, his immediate superior, huffing and puffing along the path. He waited, then bowed in greeting when Noguchi reached him.

Noguchi, Edo Castle's chief archivist, perfectly fit Sano's picture of the samurai-turned-scholar. His loose trousers and surcoat covered a short body gone soft and pudgy from lack of physical activity. The two swords at his waist seemed like unnatural appendages for a man so awkward and hesitant in his movements and so disinclined to quarrel, let alone fight, with anyone. About fifty years of age, Noguchi had small, vague eyes set in a round, childlike face. When he frowned, as he did now, the wrinkles in his forehead climbed all the way up to his shaven crown. Sano had liked Noguchi from their first acquaintance. The man was kind, helpful, and tolerant, and shared his love of history. Yet Sano, upon assuming the position in which he hoped to make his fortune, had craved a harsher taskmaster.

"Oh, my, I am glad I caught up with you," Noguchi said, panting.

Hiding his impatience, Sano slowed his pace to match Noguchi's. He must spare a few moments' courtesy for his superior.

"You will be pleased to know that your marriage negotiations are proceeding quite satisfactorily," Noguchi continued. "The Ueda have agreed to a *miai*—a meeting, so that you and Miss Reiko and your families can become acquainted."

The news did please Sano. "Your efforts on my behalf are much appreciated, Noguchi-san," he said, offering the formal but heartfelt expressions of gratitude dictated by convention.

Sano, single at the advanced age of thirty-one, yearned for a wife and family—especially a son, who would carry on his name. He also harbored a romantic, albeit unrealistic wish for the emotional intimacy that an arranged marriage might, but wouldn't necessarily bring. He hadn't yet married because his father, eager to improve the family's economic and social status, had refused to let Sano take a wife of their own class, instead sending proposals only to daughters of wealthy, high-ranking samurai affiliated with

major clans. All the proposals had been rejected. But now, with his advancement, Sano found his prospects much improved. And Noguchi, acting as his go-between—as a samurai’s superior often did—had done well by him. Ueda Reiko’s family were hereditary Tokugawa vassals, her father the south magistrate of Edo and a very rich man.

“If all goes well with the *miai*,” Noguchi said, “why, then, very soon—after the period of mourning for your father is over, of course—I shall have the pleasure of attending your wedding. Oh, my.”

He smiled, but his frown-wrinkles slid higher on his head. Sano waited, sensing that the archivist had concerns unrelated to the marriage negotiations.

Finally Noguchi said, “Sometimes it is possible to convey, without actually saying in so many words, that although you would be glad to perform a task, your time might be spent more profitably otherwise.”

He’d switched from direct speech to the circumspect style used by many members of the refined upper classes. Watching Sano closely, he continued circling his point. “It is also possible to leave the impression that a task would be better given to someone else. Without, of course, casting any doubt upon one’s own willingness or ability. Even not knowing the particular circumstances, I believe that a clever man might manage to bring others around to his own point of view, without risking censure or loss of face.”

Sano was utterly mystified. “Yes, I see,” he said, but only because Noguchi was looking up into his face and leaning against him as they walked, the pressure of his body an unspoken plea for understanding.

Noguchi bobbed his head for emphasis. “And of course, you will remember that His Excellency is a very busy man. Small matters must inevitably slip from his memory now and then. But this is not an entirely bad thing.” His earnest gaze held Sano’s as they reached the gate that led to the palace precinct.

Now his meaning became clear to Sano. Many officials, Noguchi included, were so afraid of disgracing themselves or getting in trouble that they went to great lengths to avoid doing anything, good or bad, that would draw the shogun’s notice. They wouldn’t openly advise their subordinates to ignore a direct order. But Noguchi, having evidently heard that the shogun had summoned Sano—although not the reason—was telling him to use every means available to escape whatever task given to him. Or, failing that, to wait before acting, in hopes that Tokugawa Tsunayoshi would forget about it. Sano understood, but couldn’t share Noguchi’s attitude.

He waited until they’d cleared the checkpoint and entered the palace garden. Then he said, “I appreciate your concern, Noguchi-san, but whatever our lord orders, I must do, without evasion or delay.”

Noguchi gasped at Sano’s bluntness. “Oh, no, I never meant to imply that you should disregard a command from His Excellency!” he blurted. Then he clapped a hand over his mouth and looked around to see if anyone was listening.

The palace garden wore its full spring glory. Guards patrolled white gravel paths that wound through a fresh green lawn studded with flowering cherry and magnolia trees. Gardeners swept the paths and tended azalea bushes bright with red blossoms. Officials and their attendants strolled the garden, their brilliant garments adding more color to the scene. Still more officials lingered outside the palace, a low, vast building with whitewashed plaster walls, dark wooden doors, beams, and window lattices, and a many-gabled roof of gleaming grey tile. Sano knew why Noguchi feared eavesdroppers: even a hint of disobedience or disloyalty could be interpreted as treason and punished by exile or death. Edo abounded with spies and informers, many within the castle itself. Any of those officials or servants could be a *metsuke*—one of the shogun’s intelligence agents—or simply someone eager to advance himself by discrediting his colleagues.

“I was merely giving you the benefit of my experience,” Noguchi finished in a loud whisper.

Sano couldn’t follow the advice, coming as it did from someone seeking only to live out his remaining years in peace. But Noguchi meant well. “Yes, I know. Thank you for your advice, Noguchi-san. I’ll keep it in mind.”

They reached the palace entrance. After they’d made their farewells, Noguchi shook his head and said in parting, “Young men. You are all so rash and impetuous. I hope you will not come to regret your actions, Sano-san.” Then, more cheerfully: “Well, *gambatte kudasai!*” Do your best, and good luck.

Sano gained admittance from the guards posted at the palace’s massive, carved door. As he removed his shoes and hung his swords in the huge entry hall, he thought about Noguchi’s warning and felt a twinge of trepidation. He had much to learn about life at the heart of the Tokugawa *bakufu*—the military government that ruled the land. Would he be making a mistake by trying to do his duty to both his lord and his father? The idea seemed fantastic. He walked along the polished cypress floors of the corridors that led through the building’s outer portion, which served as government offices, trying to shed his unease. But his heart was racing, and his hands turned clammy with nervous sweat. Reaching the heavily guarded doors that led to the No theater, he paused, bracing himself for his encounter with the nation’s supreme military dictator.

“*Sōsakan* Sano Ichirō, to see His Excellency,” he said to the guards.

They bowed, slid open the doors, and stood aside to let him enter. Swallowing his apprehension, Sano went in.

He found himself standing on a veranda overlooking a huge gravel courtyard bordered by rows of pines. Ahead of him to his left stood the No stage, a raised wooden platform with a roof supported on four pillars, which faced right. Seated at the rear of the stage, three drummers and two flutists played a solemn, archaic melody. Under a small potted cherry tree at center stage lay an actor dressed in the striped robe of an itinerant monk, presumably asleep; the chorus and other actors sat in the wings. Sano turned his attention to the man he’d sworn to serve.

The sliding doors of the building opposite the stage stood open. Inside, Tsunayoshi, the fifth Tokugawa shogun, occupied a dais. Seated upon piled cushions, he wore an opulent silk kimono patterned in shades of gold, brown, and cream under a black surcoat with broad padded shoulders, and the cylindrical black cap that marked his rank. He held a closed fan. He was smiling, nodding his head in time to the music. Tsunayoshi, Sano had heard, enjoyed No above all the other arts he patronized. He seemed unaware of the bored expressions of the ten retainers who, forced to watch with him, knelt on either side of the dais.

Sano felt a touch of surprise when he looked at Tsunayoshi, whom he didn't remember as looking quite so small or benign, or so old for his forty-three years. He had to remind himself that this was the descendant of the great Tokugawa Ieyasu, who, less than a hundred years ago, had triumphed over many warring clans to bring the country under his control. And Tsunayoshi himself commanded the authority he'd inherited. His word was law; he held the power of life and death over his subjects.

A young actor carrying a sword came down the bridgeway that led from the curtained door of the dressing room. He wore a long, flowing black wig, tall black cap, gold brocade robe, and broad, divided scarlet skirt. Taking up a position at the left front of the stage, he performed a slow, stylized dance and sang:

*“Driven by my worldly shame,
In ghostly guise I come
To the place where I died,
Taking the shape I had
When I lived upon the earth,
To tell this sleeping monk
My tale of long ago.”*

Sano recognized the play as *Tadanori*, written almost three hundred years earlier by the great dramatist Zeami Motokiyo. Tadanori, lord of Satsuma, had been a poet-warrior of the Heike clan. When the Imperial House compiled an anthology of great poetry, they included one of Tadanori's poems unsigned, because the Heike were regarded as rebels. Tadanori died in battle, lamenting the exclusion of his name. In the play, his ghost tells a traveling monk his sad story so that his fame as a poet need not be forgotten.

*“My poem, 'tis true, was chosen for the Great Book,
Alas! Because of my lord's displeasure,*

It does not bear my—”

The shogun rapped loudly on the dais with his fan. The actor, halted in midverse, stumbled in his dance.

“Not like that,” Tokugawa Tsunayoshi shouted. “Like this!” He sang the

lines himself, in a high, reedy voice at odds with his exalted status. Sano failed to see any improvement over the actor's rendition, but the rest of the audience murmured in approval. "Never mind, ahh, you are dismissed. Next!"

The actor slunk off stage. The music resumed, and another actor started down the bridgeway. Now Sano understood that this wasn't a performance given by the shogun's troupe of professional actors, but an audition for amateurs, those among the Tokugawa vassals and daimyo clans—families who governed the country's provinces—who curried favor by catering to their lord's taste in entertainment. A sudden awful thought occurred to Sano: Did Tsunayoshi want *him* to audition? His visions of performing some feat of great courage began to fade, and he took an involuntary step backward. Then the shogun beckoned.

"Ahh, *Sōsakan* Sano," Tokugawa Tsunayoshi called. "Approach." To the actors and musicians: "Go away until I call you."

The men on stage bowed, walked down the bridgeway, and disappeared into the dressing room. Sano, self-conscious before the curious gazes of the watching officials, crossed the courtyard and knelt before the dais.

"I await Your Excellency's command," he said, bowing with his forehead touching the ground and his arms extended straight in front of him.

"Rise," the shogun ordered, "and come closer."

Sano did. He locked his knees to still their trembling as Tsunayoshi studied him. Risking a direct glance at the shogun, he wasn't surprised to see lack of recognition in the mild eyes, or puzzlement creasing the thin, aristocratic face. If he'd forgotten Tsunayoshi's features, so must the great dictator have forgotten his.

"Well, ahh," Tsunayoshi said at last. "You seem an able-bodied and able-minded samurai, just right for the task I have in mind. In fact, I cannot think why I have not utilized your services thus far."

He looked around at his attendants, who offered noncommittal murmurs.

"However, I shall do so now," Tsunayoshi said. "Kaibara Tōju was murdered last night. His head was severed from his body and mounted like a, ahh, war trophy."

The nature of the crime shocked Sano, as did the victim's identity. The taking of trophy heads was a war tradition, not normally practiced in peacetime. Kaibara Tōju was a *hatamoto*, a hereditary Tokugawa vassal—one of many soldiers whose clans had served the shogun's for generations and held time-honored positions in his vast empire. But neither piece of news disturbed Sano as much as his heart-sinking realization that the shogun was going to ask him to investigate the murder. Too many lives had been ruined or lost during his first and only other case. But Sano's interest stirred in spite of himself. A not wholly unpleasant surge of fearful anxiety made him feel more alive than he had in months. Without his realizing it, his short-lived police career had given him a taste for danger and adventure. And he'd always had a yearning to seek and find the truth. Lately he'd had no chance to satisfy either desire. But now ...