

Samurai Artist

Chapter One: 1831 Sixth Month 9th day

“You are a disgrace to your grandfather.”

Which one? Tokubei thought to himself, disciplining the anger inside.

Matsudaira Noto-no Kami intoned from his raised platform, “Ando-san would be ashamed of the so called ‘art’ that you produce, those prints that only the commoners buy. What kind of job is that for a samurai?”

Tokubei knew Matsudaira was mistaken, but kept his head submissively bowed and his hands before him on the tatami. He said very quietly, “My Grandfather Ando apprenticed me to a woodblock artist. That was approved by the authorities.”

That authority was you! Tokubei added to himself.

Matsudaira slapped his fan on the record book on his desk, bluntly reminding Tokubei of this officious samurai’s power over him. Officers of the shogun’s bureaucracy all too often wielded their limited power with threats.

“And now you want permission to accompany the samurai who will escort the Shogun’s gift horses to the Emperor.” Matsudaira’s voice dripped with contempt.

Tokubei steadied his breathing, a gift from his father’s archery lessons. He kept his voice low and respectful, his emotions under strict restraint.

“Yes, Matsudaira-sama. The Yayosugashi Guards will serve the shogun next year. They are the guards in my barracks. I would like to serve with them.”

“You gave up your samurai stipend seven years ago. You are no samurai.” Matsudaira’s clerk shifted at his desk and made a note. Tokubei wondered what he thought of this interview. The fat clerk sat to the side in the large old reception hall with its high ceiling, dark wooden beams, faded paintings on the screens and musty tatami mats.

“Matsudaira-sama, my fire-fighter’s position was transferred to Ando Nakajiro when my grandfather’s true son came of age. That is the rule.” Tokubei had anticipated this tactic and was ready – he was the son of an adopted son-in-law; grandfather’s second wife had born his grandfather a son, Nakajiro. Tokubei sat up straight now and looked directly at Matsudaira as he emphasized, “I did not give up my samurai status. I am a samurai loyal to the Shogun.”

“Why couldn’t you be a painter like Okajima Rinzai? He’s an officer in your brigade.” Matsudaira changed directions, as he knew Tokubei was a samurai for life, unless declared ronin. And the pompous official knew there had never been any stain on the samurai artist’s record that would bring down that punishment.

“Matsudaira-sama, I studied with Okajima-san, but he did not admit me to his studio.” Again to himself, Tokubei remembered how he hated the Chinese themes from the past, the symbols required to be worked into the elegantly brushed Kanō School paintings and the limited subjects those literati artists repeated endlessly. He had not tried very hard to conform.

“Okajima-san creates paintings that are displayed in many daimyo and hatamoto mansions. They are perfect for elegant tea ceremonies, quiet and refined.” Matsudaira said admiringly but then continued with venom. “Your woodblock prints are heavy with black lines and too many bright colors.”

Tokubei hid his reactions but thought proudly, *My prints are alive! They are full of the energy of the people of the great city outside these cold castle walls and the rigid bureaucrats inside.*

Matsudaira Noto-no Kami again slapped the record book. “This is a very unusual request. I will check that this letter from your Captain Takeda, giving you permission to join the procession, is authentic. Wait for my reply. You are dismissed.”

Hating the rigid formalities, Tokubei crawled backwards on his hands and knees that required him to keep the posture of obedience even as he left the august presence of the official. It was a long way back to the door. Once in the hallway, he bowed one more time before the guard slid the door shut. He stood, but kept his head down preferring not to see the disdain on the guard’s face. To him Tokubei was only a low-ranked samurai from the outer barracks, just another insignificant petitioner.

Tokubei walked down the corridor at a dignified and steady pace. Finally out in the hot June sunshine, he continued toward the massive gate that protected this inner courtyard. He showed his pass to the guards then repeated the procedure at two more gates before he reached his home and birthplace, the Yayosugashi Brigade compound. But he passed that gate and continued out the last gate of the castle grounds, crossed the bridge spanning the outer moat and walked east into Nihonbashi, the center of commoner life in the great city of Edo. This was his second home.

Two months, two months! Tokubei’s mind boiled. It took one day to get Captain Takeda’s permission to be hired as a guard. It took two months to get this interview! How long will it take to get the permission that I need from Matsudaira? In just twelve months the procession leaves for Kyoto.

He walked the six blocks to the Tōkaidō through the flow of morning street vendors, shoppers and tourists. Storefronts of fruit sellers and candy makers didn’t tempt him. He had no idea where he was going. He just knew that he needed to keep moving. He walked faster, turning left at the Tōkaidō. A few entertainers were already performing to small crowds. He passed them all, though normally he’d linger.

At the center of the great Nihonbashi Bridge he stopped and leaned against the railing. Below on the east river bank, boats unloaded at the back of the hundreds of stalls at Tsukiji Fish Market. On the west, more boats unloaded ceramics, fabrics, furniture and all sorts of regional specialties at the warehouses of the great dry goods stores. *This, not those stale Chinese themes, this is real life,* Tokubei thought defiantly. *I know this city and its people – high and low. I want to know the people outside Edo, the innkeepers and farmers, honest merchants and rouges.*

His gaze traveled up the river to the Shogun's castle towers, high above the city. In the distance the perfect cone of Mount Fuji stood clear against the deep blue sky, a mantle of clouds draped around its crown. How he wanted to travel the countryside, every mile on the great road that connected Edo with Kyoto – the Tōkaidō. He wanted to taste the local foods, drink saké with travelers in the bustling inns, and savor the views of every majestic mountain, swift-flowing river, rugged sea coast and quiet farm.

He could, he *would* produce the best landscapes that would appeal to customers and help publishers boost sales. He knew that he would do it better than Hokusai or Eisen! Though he was Ando Tokubei to those bureaucrats, he was better known in Edo as the artist Utagawa Hiroshige. There were now publishers coming to him for designs.

He noticed that people were edging away from him and realized that he was still in his formal kimono and two swords he'd worn to the discouraging interview. Shogunal officials! They were petty bureaucrats who created needless paperwork and delays. They stood in his way. He began walking again, striding across the bridge and into the crowds around the fish market. The anger propelled him past shop after shop. He didn't even stop at the bookstores to check on sales of his prints. He wasn't in a fit mood to talk to anyone.

Now the babble of accents from all over Japan caught his ear. *I need to get out of Edo, out to the cities and towns and villages. There is so much more to see, so much more to do! It's the only way to paint real life. As a shogun's samurai, I'm a prisoner in Edo – forbidden to go beyond the city gates!*

Perspiration began to trickle down his neck. His patient wife, Okiku, wouldn't say anything when he returned home in sweaty clothes. He felt guilty for creating more work for her. But he had to walk off this anger, away from the castle, away from other samurai, away from his family.

By the time he reached Shinobazu Pond, he'd gone four miles. He stopped at the Moonflower Tea House at the edge of the pond. From his seat at an outdoor table under the trees, he finally made his agitated thoughts slow down, reminding himself that there would be setbacks in his plan, but he would prevail. He knew he needed patience and determination.

"Hiroshige-san, welcome!" Nao greeted him with a smile, a cool cup of tea and a slice of fruit. "It's so good to see you. Where's your sketchbook?"

Hiroshige smiled, happy to be recognized by his artist's name. As he filled his pipe and lit it from the nearby smoking box, she eyed his formal kimono and swords. "It must be a special day."

Hiroshige took a few puffs of his pipe and willed himself to be pleasant. "Nao-san, thank you. I had an appointment with one of the shogun's bureaucrats this morning. It was not as successful as I hoped it would be."

"I'm so sorry, Hiroshige-san. Please rest and refresh yourself." She slipped away to serve another customer who had arrived.

He sipped his tea and admired Nao-san as she walked away. She was lovely, young and pretty. But also important to him, she was straightforward and honest. When publishers hired him to

paint the “beautiful and famous” geisha and courtesans, they were too often beautiful outside and mean inside – haughty, manipulative and conceited. Sometimes they seemed empty, just a smiling shell. He didn’t want to think of them. Nao, though, was truly beautiful. But she wasn’t as beautiful as his first love, Reijo or his wife, Okiku.

The print of Shinobazu Pond was selling well, he remembered. Maybe he should return and paint the great lotus beds on the pond. They were in full bloom, a field of white blossoms floating above dark green leaves. Swallows dipped and soared overhead. Kabuki actors, geisha in the newest fashions and warrior prints of long-dead heroes, that’s what buyers had wanted. Now those subjects weren’t selling well. Publishers demanded something new. His landscapes seemed to be what they wanted. The first two prints of his series, *Famous Views of the Eastern Capital*, were selling steadily.

He left his money on the table, folded in a soft sheet of paper. When he stood up he noticed another customer, a neatly dressed older man, looking him up and down. Hiroshige knew what the commoner saw – a samurai a bit less than average height, a thirty-four year old man of slender build with a long nose and prominent eyes, pleasant but yes, plain. Hiroshige smiled, bowed slightly to the man and left.

A few people were strolling towards the great Benzaiten Shrine in the middle of Shinobazu Pond, connected to the shore by a broad causeway and bridge. The reflection of the large red wooden building glinted in the water. He tucked his purse in his obi and decided to join them.

Benzaiten, Goddess of Water, Eloquence, Music and Good Fortune, hear my prayers. Hiroshige stood before the shrine, rang the bell twice and prayed silently with bowed head. Grant me the good fortune to travel the Tōkaidō with the Emperor’s gift horses next year. I don’t make the money I need to travel. If I work as a guard, I can travel the Tōkaidō and create a true picture of the life of the great highway.

He bought a bundle of incense sticks, lit them and added them to the great bronze urn in front of the shrine, then rubbed the incense smoke on his head and hands. *May I have the words to convince the officials to let me make this journey and the skill to draw the true life of the Tōkaidō.*

Before he returned to the causeway, he bought a small charm decorated with Benzaiten and the other Seven Lucky Gods. He would need all of their help to fulfill his dream, their help and a lot of his own hard work. He hadn’t expected it would take months to get permission to travel. He knew that convincing publishers to fund an expensive, innovative project like this would be very difficult. Then there was the money; he’d need to save like never before for the trip and for Okiku while he was gone over two months.

Ando Tokubei was a samurai born to discipline and self-control. As the artist Utagawa Hiroshige, hard work and constant practice had honed his skills and won him recognition. Life had prepared him for these new challenges. After all, he had survived devastating deaths in his early childhood, overcome struggles to become an artist, reconciled himself to losing his first love and built a happy marriage after suffering a life-changing injury. He was strong. He would succeed.

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