

ONE



INCIDENT IN FUJISAWA

ON THE TOKAIDO:
GODS-ABSENT MONTH (NOVEMBER), THE SAME YEAR

The Tokaido, great imperial highway to the eastern provinces, was both heavily traveled and unsafe. The government had established checkpoints or barriers, staffed with military guard contingents, to examine travelers' documents and patrol the surrounding area, but they were few and far between, and highway robbery was a way of life for desperate men.

The two travelers from the capital had come far on their post horses. A tall young man in a faded hunting robe and plain twill trousers rode in front. The fact that he carried a sword marked him as one of the "good people." His servant, a slight old man in a plain dark robe, followed on a packhorse.

The young nobleman was Akitada, impecunious descendant of the famous but ill-fated Sugawara clan, twenty-five years old and recently a mere junior clerk in the imperial Min-

istry of Justice, a position he had won only because he had placed first in the university examination. Now he was on an official commission to investigate missing tax shipments from Kazusa province, an assignment that filled him with extraordinary excitement not only because was it his first journey from the capital, but also because he regarded it as an honor beyond his wildest dreams.

Seimei, who had served Akitada's family all his life, privately thought his young master worthy of any honor but kept this to himself. He was skilled at bookkeeping, had a great knowledge of herbal medicines, and prided himself on his familiarity with the works of Confucius, whom he often quoted to Akitada in his role of fatherly adviser.

His confidence in young Akitada's prospects was about to be severely tested.

Akitada was smiling dreamily, his eyes on a distant blue mountain range while he contemplated the honors awaiting him after the successful completion of his assignment, when a large rock struck his horse on its hindquarters. The animal screamed, tossed its rider into the dirt, and galloped off. Akitada hit the ground so hard, he nearly blacked out.

Instantly, two muscular bearded men, armed with long, stout cudgels, burst from the shrubbery by the side of the road and seized the bridle of Seimei's horse, ordering him down. The old man obeyed, shaking with shock and helpless fury, while his young master sat up, holding his head and gauging the distance to his sword, which was still attached to the saddle. One of the bandits raised his cudgel and made for Akitada. Seimei shrieked a warning and kicked the other bandit in the groin. The man doubled over, howling with pain.

Dazed, Akitada crouched and prepared to defend himself bare-handed against his attacker. He barely dodged the first swing of the cudgel and realized that an ignoble death here by

the side of the road might end his chance to prove his talents as an imperial investigator.

At the moment when the other bandit recovered and raised his cudgel against Seimei, another ragged man arrived on the scene. Taking in the situation at once, he swept up a fallen branch and struck the bandit's forearm with such force that he broke it. He caught the man's weapon as it tumbled from his hand and turned toward Akitada's robber.

This man abandoned Akitada to help his friend, but the newcomer now had a comparable weapon and met the other man's whirling cudgel with such skill that Akitada watched in amazement. He had never before seen men engage in a bout of stick fighting, and while the rough cudgels were not quite as handy, long, or light as bamboo poles, both men were skilled fighters. But the new man was better. He parried even the fastest slashes, seemed to jump quicker than a grasshopper, and feinted so successfully that he inflicted several painful jabs before he saw his opening and struck his opponent's forehead with a backhanded slice, knocking him senseless. At this point the other attacker fled, and the ragged young man tied up his opponent with a piece of rope the bandit had worn around his waist.

"That was fine work you did," cried Akitada, walking up quickly. "We owe you our lives . . ." He stopped in dismay when their rescuer straightened up. He smiled quite cheerfully, but a vicious slash had barely missed his eye and opened his cheek. The blood ran freely. "Seimei," Akitada called. "Quick, your medicine box."

The young man shook his head, still grinning with a perfect set of teeth, and dashed the blood away with the back of his hand. "Don't trouble yourselves. It's nothing. I'll get your horse for you, sir." He ran off and returned a minute later, leading Akitada's mount. "If you don't mind the advice, sir," he said, "you

should wear your sword. It might at least make the next robber think twice before jumping you.”

Akitada flushed. For a vagrant, this young man was amazingly impudent. But he was right, and Akitada swallowed his anger. “Yes. Thank you again. I was careless. Please let Seimei tend to your face.” The man’s face already bore assorted bruises, but it must be handsome under ordinary circumstances. Akitada wondered if their rescuer made a habit of fighting.

But the stranger shook his head stubbornly and backed away from Seimei and his box of ointments and powders.

Akitada said reassuringly, “Don’t worry. He is quite gentle.”

The stranger shot him a glance and submitted.

“I suppose you live nearby. What is your name?” Akitada asked, watching the operation.

“No, I don’t. I was on my way to look for farm work. You can call me Tora.”

“The harvest is over.” Akitada regarded him thoughtfully. “This may be a fortunate coincidence, Tora,” he said. “We are indebted to you, and I need a servant. Your skill with that stick was impressive. Would you be willing to travel with us to Kazusa province?”

Seimei dropped a jar of ointment and looked at his master open mouthed. The young man thought for a moment, then nodded. “Why not. I’ll give it a try. You two need someone to look after you, and if you suit me, I suppose Kazusa is as good a place to go as any.” He flashed his smile again.

Seimei gasped. “Sir, you cannot seriously think of taking this person along.”

“I suppose you mean him, old man?” Tora, purposely misunderstanding, gestured to the trussed-up bandit. “Don’t worry. He’s not going anywhere. We’ll send the warden from the next village for him. He’ll be glad to earn the head money.”

It seemed a very fair bargain to Akitada. They had an escort and willing servant who expected no more than food and a few coppers to pay for his trouble. And, with Tora running alongside their horses at a steady pace, they made almost as good time as without him.

Crossing Narumi Bay by ferry, they reached the town of Futakawa toward evening and stopped before a large Buddhist temple with a famous Inari shrine to the fox god sacred to rice farmers. A roofed message board for the posting of official messages stood beside the temple gate.

“Look.” Akitada chuckled and pointed to a fresh sheet of paper with large black characters. “‘Mountain Tiger Wanted Dead or Alive for Murder and Robbery—Bandit is seven feet tall, of gruesome appearance and hairy body, and has the strength of a dragon!’ Apparently there is a gang of robbers working the highway.”

Tora grinned widely. “Is that what it says?” He flexed his muscles. “The strength of a dragon? That’s very flattering.”

Akitada turned to him, astonished. “You are this Mountain Tiger? Of course, ‘Tora’ means tiger.”

“Well, in a manner of speaking it may be me,” the young man said, flushing slightly. “But it was all a mistake.”

“What? So now he’s a wanted man?” Seimei cried. “A bandit and a murderer, even if he’s not seven feet tall or very hairy. Pull your sword, sir! We’ll turn him in.”

“Whoever he is, he just saved our lives,” Akitada reminded him and turned back to Tora. “Are you one of the Mountain Tigers or not?”

“No.” The young man met his eyes squarely. “You don’t have to believe me, but I got caught taking shelter in a cave with them. The soldiers tore up my papers, saying they were stolen. Before I knew it, they were putting chains on everyone and talking about chopping my head off. I grabbed the officer’s sword

and made a run for it.” He waited defiantly for Akitada’s decision.

Akitada looked hard at him. “Did you kill anyone while trying to escape?”

“No. Once I had the sword, they wouldn’t come near me. I ran as hard as I could down the mountain, and in the next village I left the sword leaning against the warden’s house.”

Akitada sighed. “Very well. I believe you. But I had better get you some papers before we reach the next barrier.”

Tora looked rebellious. “I’m not setting foot in any tribunal.”

“Nonsense,” said Akitada. “You offered to serve me. I cannot travel with a wanted man.”

Seimei muttered darkly, “You’ll be sorry, sir, if it turns out to be a pack of lies. A hawk does not become a nightingale, and in the service of His August Majesty one does not employ highway robbers.”

Akitada ignored him.

Getting papers for their dubious companion proved surprisingly simple. The local magistrate was awed by Akitada’s credentials and did not question his sudden need to hire an additional servant with the astonishing name of Tora and the appearance of a ruffian.

Tora expressed his gratitude through cheerful and eager service. He looked after the increasingly weary Seimei and found them the best lodgings at the lowest rates. This last was important, for though Akitada traveled on the emperor’s business, he could not afford the usual escort of armed men and was forced to manage with a very small amount of silver and several bags of rice for provision and barter.

But the best part of the bargain for Akitada was that Tora began or ended each day of travel with a lesson in stick fighting. His belief in their new servant’s good character grew by leaps and bounds.

Seimei was scandalized by these lessons, protesting that no gentleman fought with such a weapon. Ignored, he took refuge in grumbling and criticizing Tora's lack of respect at every opportunity.

The day they caught their first distant glimpse of Mount Fuji, Akitada stopped his horse in wonder. Hazy and ethereal, the great snowcapped cone swam into sight as on a cloud. His heart filled with such awe and pride in his homeland that he could not speak.

Seimei remarked that there seemed to be smoke coming from the mountain's top.

"Ha, ha!" Tora laughed. "You should see the great spirit at night. He spits fire like a dragon."

"Fire and snow," marveled Akitada, his eyes moist with emotion. "It must be very high."

"Oh, it reaches all the way to the sky," said Tora, stretching up an arm to illustrate. "People who climb to the top never return. They go directly to heaven."

"There is no medicine against foolishness," snapped Seimei, irritated beyond forbearance by the reprobate servant's know-it-all manner and lack of decorum. "Keep your tongue between your teeth until you learn who your betters are."

Tora looked hurt. "What? Don't you believe in the gods in that great capital of yours?"

Seimei did not bother to answer.

At Mishima they began the long ascent to Hakone. This mountain pass was the longest and highest on the Tokaido. The skies clouded over and a heavy silence seemed to hang in the air among the dark pines and cryptomerias.

A government barrier had been erected between the steep mountainside and Hakone lake, a desolate sheet of water mirroring sky and mountaintops. Here, for the first time since they

had left the civilized world of the capital, they encountered evidence of harsh frontier justice. Displayed at eye level on shelves near the barrier were the heads of criminals, each accompanied by a plaque describing his misdeeds, a lesson and a deterrent to would-be offenders.

Akitada, though nauseated by the sight, forced himself closer to read the plaques, nearly twenty of them. Murder, rape, robbery, fraud, and one case of treason. The authorities in this eastern province took their responsibility for checking travelers seriously.

He rejoined the others, profoundly uneasy about Tora's fate, should the barrier guard decide to question his identity. There was no guarantee that his own status was sufficient to save his new servant's head, if Tora was arrested for his supposed crimes.

He looked around. About twenty people ahead of them awaited their turn. The line moved slowly. No one escaped scrutiny at the Hakone barrier.

A guard approached and asked for their papers. After glancing at them, he motioned them past the waiting line and into the inspection office.

Ducking under a curtain, they found themselves in a large room with a packed dirt floor, facing a low bench in front of a raised wooden platform. Tora and Seimei went to kneel on the bench. Akitada remained standing.

On the platform sat a uniformed and fiercely mustached captain of the guard with three soberly dressed officials behind him and a scribe at a low writing desk off to the side.

The guard handed Akitada's papers up to his commander with a whispered comment. The captain ran his sharp black eyes over Akitada, then scrutinized Seimei and Tora. Then he read all the documents, some of them twice.

Akitada felt beads of perspiration on his upper lip and his palms. This was a far cry from the deferential reception he had come to expect at checkpoints. He jumped a little when he heard a curt bark. "Approach, sir!"

Akitada's official standing meant that he should give the orders, not the other way around, but he could not risk drawing attention to Tora and so he obeyed without protest.

"I see from your documents that you are on special assignment from the capital to Kazusa province?"

Akitada nodded.

"The men with you are your servants and you vouch for them?" The captain's beady eyes left Akitada's face and rested on Tora again—more thoughtfully than before.

"Yes." Akitada tried to make his tone casual, though his heart was pounding. "The older man is called Seimei, the younger Tora."

"I see. Why did you get papers for the man Tora in Futakawa?"

Akitada felt himself flush. "Ah," he stammered, "the trip proved harder than expected and . . . er . . . Seimei is unused to traveling. We had some difficulties, and, well, it seemed a good idea to hire another servant."

The captain gave him a long look. "Difficulties?" he said with what amounted to a sneer. "No doubt you're not used to travel. You have actually come quite far without an escort. A lot of the young gentlemen from the capital turn tail long before they reach Hakone."

Akitada flushed again, this time angrily, but he bit his lip and said nothing.

"What is your business in Kazusa?"

"I travel under imperial orders, as you can see, Captain . . . ?"

"Saito is the name. You are not, by chance, looking into the missing tax shipments from Kazusa, are you?"

Akitada's instructions were to use the utmost discretion, but this man might have valuable information. "I am," he admitted. "What do you know of the matter?"

"I know that no goods from Kazusa province have passed here in years. Plenty of things going the other way—Buddhist scrolls and statuary, parcels for the governor—but no tax convoys from Kazusa for the emperor." The captain turned to one of the clerks. "Bring the ledgers for the past two years and copies of the correspondence about the Kazusa tax shipments!" Reaching for an open ledger, he turned some pages, then pushed the ledger toward Akitada. "See for yourself! When they did not show up at the usual time again this year, I reported the matter to the capital. Again."

Again? Akitada bent to read.

The clerk returned with a large document box that he set down. The captain took out two more ledgers and turned to the end of the entries. "Last year. Nothing. There you are." He pointed to a line of brushstrokes. "And here the same," he said, shoving a third ledger at Akitada. "And here are copies of the reports I sent to the capital."

Akitada looked, then looked again in disbelief. "There has not been a single tax convoy from Kazusa for three years or more?" he asked. It seemed incredible. Worse, the documents proved that no one had bothered to investigate the matter until now.

"Three years precisely," corrected the captain. "Before then everything was always in order and punctual as geese flying south in the winter."

"How do you account for it?"

"I cannot," the captain said. He appraised Akitada and compressed his lips. "I simply do my duty. My men got instructions to question everyone coming from the east about incidents on the road. There was never even the vaguest rumor of either

gangs or piracy. It would take a small army to fall on a tax convoy under military escort. In my opinion—and, mind you, it is just an opinion—the goods never left Kazusa. Hrrmph.” He cleared his throat and gave Akitada another of his disconcerting stares. “Confirmed by the fact that the imperial authorities have taken their sweet time to investigate.” A corner of his mouth twitched. “Until now,” he added with deliberate sarcasm.

Akitada felt himself flush hotly. He knew what the man thought. Nobody wanted the shipments found. By sending an inexperienced junior clerk to investigate a matter of this magnitude, the government had signaled the fact that they wished the whole thing forgotten. And for what reason but to protect the provincial governor who was a Fujiwara and a distant relative of the chancellor? Unfortunately, he also happened to be the cousin of Akitada’s best friend Kosehira. They had attended the university together and become close because both had been friendless, Akitada because he was poor and Kosehira because he was short and fat.

Resenting the captain’s manner, Akitada snapped, “Thank you. I must be on my way. If you are quite finished with us . . . ?”

The captain grinned. “Of course! Of course! I won’t keep you. Good luck, sir.” He bowed with mocking deference.

“Seimei, the bell tokens!”

A soldier received the tokens to be exchanged for two horses and rushed away.

They were headed out the door when the captain called after them, “The weather is turning. You would be well advised to spend the night in our quarters.”

Akitada turned and said stiffly, “Thank you, but I think we will press on.”



They made the descent in daylight, but the rain began soon after they had left the lakeside barrier and fell coldly and steadily all the way down the mountain. Its gray sheets obscured what would have been magnificent views; its icy wetness insinuated itself through layers of clothing to their skin. Soaked, chilled, and exhausted, they broke their journey in Odawara at the foot of the mountain and spent the night in an inn that was overrun by rats, sleeping on mats of moldy, stinking straw, covered by their own wet clothes.

The next day they awoke to more gray clouds and sheeting rain, but set out again covered by their wet straw cloaks and limp straw hats. The road wound through foothills until it approached the coast again. They could smell and taste the salt of the sea on the cold wind miles before they set eyes on it.

When they emerged from the last protective belt of forest and saw the wide expanse of open ocean before them, they were sucked into a frigid, whirling gray mist. Above them the wind swept ragged smoky clouds along; before them the charcoal-dark ocean boiled and subsided with a continuous roar, vomiting up dirty yellow foam and swallowing it again; and all about them swirled and blew the spray and the everlasting rain, tearing at their cloaks and slapping the wet, salt-laden wisps of their hats against their stinging cheeks. Seimei developed a nagging cough.

After Oiso the road veered away from the coast and they entered a huge plain, most of the year a rich and verdant source of rice for the nation. Now, in this late season, the rice paddies, lying fallow, were black sheets of water between dams, dotted here and there as far as the eye could see by farms or hamlets huddling dejectedly under gloomy trees. The Tokaido crossed this submerged plain on a raised dam, planted on both sides with pines drooping mournfully under the weight of their wet needles.

Finally, toward evening of that dismal day, the rain eased to a drizzle. Battered and weary, they reached Sagami Bay and the harbor town of Fujisawa. From there Akitada had planned to journey by water, taking a boat across the bay to Kazusa province. They would save five or six days that way, arriving in the provincial capital in two days.

Fujisawa was a sizable and bustling town with its own post station and small police force. It was a major port for boats sailing across Sagami Bay, and on the nearby island of Enoshima was a famous shrine.

As soon as they entered the town, Tora left to find a room in an inn, while Akitada and Seimei continued to the post station to return the horses. Progress through Fujisawa's narrow streets was difficult on horseback. Because of the drizzle, shoppers carried oilpaper umbrellas, and the horses shied, while the Fujisawans cursed or screamed.

The post station was near the harbor. At its gate stood the usual roofed notice board. This one carried one very large and official-looking proclamation that, unlike the rest of the messages, was yellowed and torn. The writing had faded almost into illegibility, but there were faint traces of a red government seal, and Akitada went to read it. As far as he could make out, it requested information about robberies of government shipments and offered a substantial reward. The seal was that of the governor of Kazusa. Clearly no one had applied for the reward for many months, and the offer had not been renewed.

Akitada returned to Seimei. "An old posting about the lost taxes. This is looking worse by the minute for the governor. He is not even making a token effort to investigate the loss. How can we accept the man's hospitality when he is our prime suspect?"

Seimei sneezed. "I don't know, sir," he croaked dismally, his teeth chattering.

Akitada searched the old man's face. He looked unnaturally flushed and huddled in his saddle. "Are you feeling all right, old fellow?" he asked with sudden concern.

Seimei shivered and coughed. "Just a little cold. I'll be better once I'm off this horse and can stretch my legs a bit."

They turned the horses over to the post station's grooms and left their saddlebags in the office after removing their valuables.

The rain had stopped, but it was quickly turning dark because of the overcast sky. Everywhere lanterns were being lit, and fires and candles glowed from the many places of business catering to visitors. Mouthwatering smells of hot foods filled the streets. Akitada and Seimei made their way slowly through the crowds, stopping from time to time at inns to ask for Tora.

But it was as if the rain had swallowed him up.

In an unsavory and nearly deserted part of town, Akitada became aware of Seimei's lagging steps. He stopped. "Seimei," he said, "we have spent an hour searching. It is time we went back to an inn, got a room, and rested. You need a hot bath, some warm wine, and dry bedding."

To his astonishment, Seimei objected. "Please, sir," he quavered through chattering teeth, "couldn't we just try a bit longer? I have a very uneasy feeling about this. It isn't like Tora."

"Nonsense. He is young and strong. Perhaps he simply got tired of our company and took off."

"Oh," Seimei cried, wringing his hands, "I hope not. Oh, dear. It is all my fault."

"Why your fault?"

"It is said 'Cold weather and cold rice may be endured, but not cold looks and words.'" The old man hung his head. "I have been very unkind to that boy."

"Nonsense!" Akitada repeated, somewhat absently. He peered down a dark alley. At its end torches flickered and he could hear excited voices. "Something is wrong down there."

“If there are people, let’s go ask one more time.”

“Very well. But after that we get some rest.”

When they reached the torch-lit scene, they found that a crowd had gathered because of a crime in a dilapidated two-story house with the ill-written sign “Fragrant Bower of Beauty” dangling lopsidedly from a single nail. A red-coated police constable stood guard at the doorway, glaring impartially at a knot of poorly dressed people clustered before him.

Akitada pushed through the curious and demanded, “What happened here?” Just then the door opened and two more constables appeared, bearing a body on a stretcher. It was covered by a woman’s bloodstained gown.

The constable, seeing a tall, official-sounding stranger before him, puffed himself up. “A vagrant slashed a whore’s throat,” he barked. Then he grinned, baring crooked yellow teeth. “But he didn’t get very far, and there’s plenty of women left inside, so help yourself, sir.” He winked, stepped aside, and strode off after his colleagues.

Seimei stumbled after him. “Constable! Wait!” he croaked hoarsely through another bout of coughing. The constable did not hear him, and Seimei returned to seize Akitada’s sleeve, his face flushed and tense. “You must follow, sir. It’s a murder. You know all about murder, and I have a feeling it has something to do with Tora.”

“Nonsense. You are ill and exhausted, and I cannot get involved in a murder investigation here. I am on assignment to Kazusa.”

“Please, sir. At least we could ask about him at the police station. It would make me feel better.”

With a sigh, Akitada gave in. The police station was near the center of Fujisawa, its entrance marked by a large paper lantern bearing the characters “Police.” Inside they found a lieutenant

and two clerks occupied with questioning a fat man in a greasy blue cotton robe.

“I admit I was wrong about the color of his jacket, Officer,” the obese man was saying, spreading small hands with fingers like fat slugs. “But you couldn’t miss the scar on his face. I swear it’s the same man. Poor Violet! She was just building a nice clientele, too. A big loss, that, Officer. And who will indemnify me? I paid six rolls of the best silk for that girl four years ago. I fed her, trained her, and was just realizing a small profit when . . . poof . . .” His hands flew into the air, encircling emptiness, when his eyes took in the weary, travel-worn figures of Akitada and Seimei. “It is really too bad how much riffraff is allowed to travel the great Eastern Road nowadays. An honest businessman is no longer safe in this town.”

The police lieutenant turned. “What do you want?” he asked peevishly. “Can’t you see I’m busy? If it’s about travel permits or directions, you’ll have to come back in the morning.”

Akitada was tired and frustrated. He knew Seimei was feeling worse, and he had no intention of wasting any more time. “Pass the man my papers, Seimei,” he snapped, and watched impatiently as the lieutenant unrolled them and paled as he read the imperial instructions to give the bearer all possible assistance. After raising the document reverently to his brow, he fell to his knees and apologized.

“Get up!” said Akitada wearily. “We sent our servant Tora ahead to arrange for lodging. He seems to have disappeared. I wish him found immediately.”

The lieutenant jumped up and asked for particulars. When Akitada gave a description of Tora, his face grew longer and longer. The fat man cried out in astonishment also, and the clerks sat watching with round eyes.

“We took such a person into custody a short while ago,” the

lieutenant admitted. "For murdering a prostitute. He was arrested not far from the scene of a murder on the word of this eyewitness here." He pointed to the fat man, who suddenly looked nervous.

"Well," the fat man stammered, "it was getting dark, but I recognized the scar when I saw his face at the noodle stall. Perhaps these gentlemen are not aware of the violent character of their servant."

"Can we see the prisoner?" Akitada asked the officer.

"Certainly. Right away, Your Excellency!" The lieutenant clapped his hands.

A few moments later Tora stood before them, chained, bloodied, bruised, and held firmly on either side by two brawny guards.

"Sir!" he cried, and took a step toward Akitada. The constables jerked him back by his chains.

Akitada said, "There has been some mistake. This is my servant. Set him free instantly."

"But, Excellency," protested the officer. "He has been positively identified by a respected citizen of this town. I'm afraid—"

Akitada glared. "I said, set him free."

Tora was released and came to them, rubbing his wrists and muttering his thanks.

Akitada growled, "I hope you won't make a habit of this, Tora. We've spent hours looking for you. If it hadn't been for Seimei's insistence, you might have rotted in this jail." He saw Tora's eyes moisten and relented. "What happened?"

"It serves me right, sir," Tora said humbly. "I was hungry and cold and thought there was plenty of time, you being delayed at the post station. I stopped for some noodles in hot broth. I was just finishing them when all hell broke loose. The next thing I know, I'm on the ground with four constables beating and kicking me."

Akitada turned to the lieutenant. "When did the crime take place?"

The fat man and the officer answered simultaneously, "Four hours ago."

"How do you know?"

The lieutenant scowled at the witness who subsided into a dejected lump. "She was still a little warm when we got there, and that was almost two hours ago. Toyama here is her employer and he came straight to us after finding her dead."

"But four hours ago it was not yet dark," said Akitada, regarding the fat man suspiciously. In spite of his fatigue and against his best intentions, his interest was aroused. He wished he could see the body and question the dead woman's friends. "When did this man see the murderer?"

The fat man spoke up nervously. "I saw him at the noodle stall on my way back with the constables. I knew right away he was the man. You see, the girls described Violet's customer to me. The scar on his face, that's what gave him away. The clothes . . . as I said, we could be wrong about those. Anyway, when I saw him standing there, eating noodles as if he hadn't a care in the world, I cried out and told the constables."

"Ridiculous," snapped Akitada. "If the murder happened four hours ago, my servant was still with me and my secretary several miles outside Fujisawa. I suggest you bring in your witnesses—and I don't mean this man—and have them verify that this is not the man they saw. Then I expect my servant to be released with an apology. Tora, you will join us at our inn."

"That will be the Phoenix Inn, sir. It is said to be the best," Tora offered helpfully. But Akitada was reluctant to leave. He opened his mouth to offer advice to this obviously bumbling policeman, when Tora cried out and he heard a thud behind him. Turning, he saw Seimei's frail body stretched out, unconscious, on the cold dirt floor.