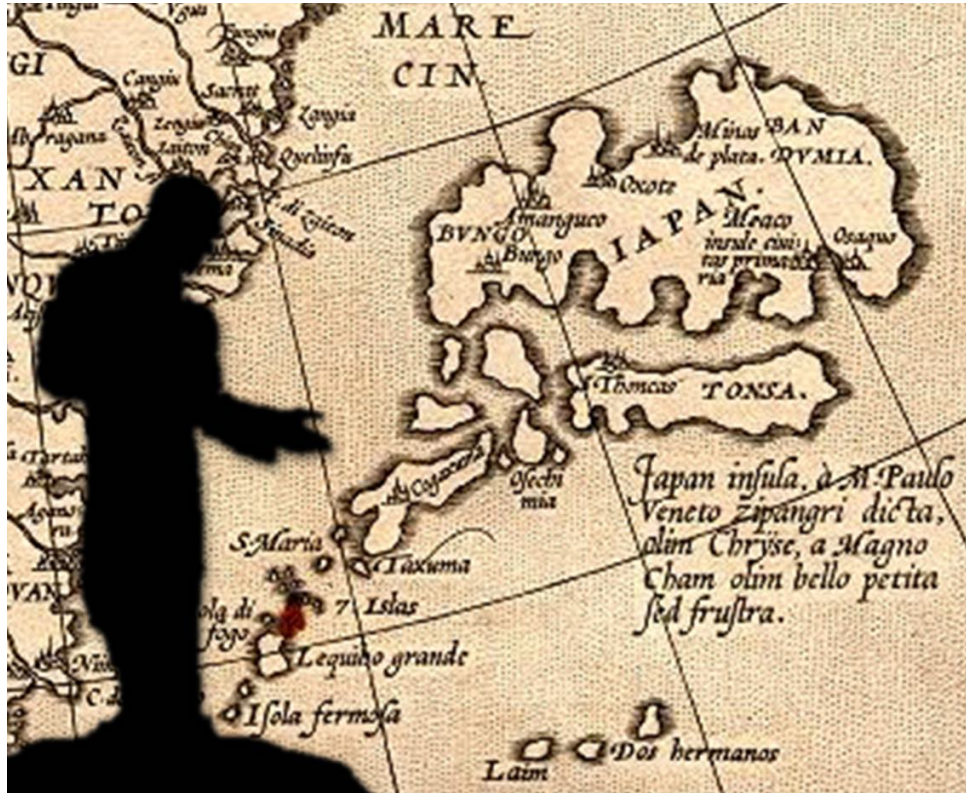


Sumitada Vol. 1: Prologue, Chapter 1



SUMITADA

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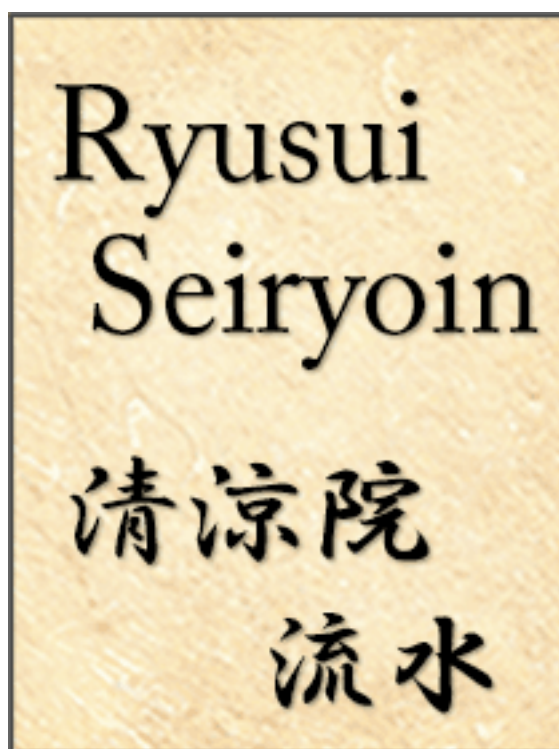
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Territorial Map Around Ohmura



Cast of Characters (as of Vol. 1)

Sumitada Ohmura: The first Christian warlord in the Japanese history. Don Bartholomew.

Takaakira Goto: His childhood name is Matahachiro. Sumitada's foster brother and lifelong archenemy.

Haruzumi Arima: Sumitada's birth father. The most powerful warlord in the Shimo (Northern Kyushu) region. His Buddhist name is Sengan.

Sumiaki Ohmura: Sumitada's uncle and foster father. The 17th master of the Ohmuras.

Hohkinokami Ohmura: Sumitada's mentor. The prime vassal of Sumiaki Ohmura.

Shinzaemonnojo Tomonaga: Sumitada's mentor. The assistant of Hohkinokami.

Sumichika Imamichi: Sumitada's first loyal servant. The prime vassal. Damian.

Sumitoshi "Isenokami" Tomonaga: Sumitada's loyal servant. The head of general affairs.

Sumiyasu "Shinsuke" Tomonaga: Sumitada's loyal servant. A magistrate (*bugyo*) of Yokoseura. Don Luis.

Agon-hoin: Sumitada's loyal servant. The chief Buddhist monk of the Kinsen-ji Temple at Mount Taradake.

Sumitane Ohmura: Sumitada's loyal servant. A giant, fierce general known as the Black Tiger.

Hidemasa Ichinose: Sumitada's loyal servant. Known as the White Dragon. His original family name is Kohno.

Prologue: The Destined Duo

The sea could be viewed from the castle.

Sumitada's original memory was the sea, which was a glittering sea.

He saw the scenery, while being on his hands and knees. So, it might have happened in his early childhood. Otherwise, was it just a view in his dream? The sea, reflecting sunlight and shining dazzlingly, spread over the entire field of Sumitada's vision. The tiny hand, which was stretched forward to try to hold the golden glow, grasped the air several times.

Probably, he saw the glittering sea from a castle. The Hinoe Castle, where Sumitada lived in his early childhood, was standing on a hill and overlooking a magnificent sea in Arima (Shimabara Bay as the entrance of the Ariake Sea).

In the memory, while Sumitada was putting his both hands on a wooden floor and was watching the sea, a huge shadow was moving over the child. It was Haruzumi Arima, Sumitada's father.

"Do you want to grab the light, Katsudohmaru (Sumitada's infant name)? If so, live robustly while taking pride in the great blood of our Arima clan. Be the unbeaten ruler who would never surrender to anyone."

Haruzumi's words were full of vitality. His presence alone could overwhelm people around him, and he possessed the dignity that allowed him to reign over others. He was wild like fierce beasts and filled with the vigor of life like trees in the height of summer. The very presence of his father and the atmosphere that he generated were mysteriously comfortable to Sumitada in his infancy.

One time, Haruzumi brought Sumitada to Mount Hiko, located a bit to the west of the Hinoe Castle. At the summit of Mount Hiko, Haruzumi put Sumitada on his shoulders effortlessly, and pointed at the north-west. Beyond the sea which they were overlooking, the land stretched into the distance. The infant Sumitada felt how huge the world was.

"The land where we can see over the bay is the Isahaya area. Beyond that is the Ohmura area, where your uncle lives. Katsudohmaru, go to Ohmura. I entrust the land to you."

Then, Sumitada was adopted into the Ohmuras.

Sumitada was born in 1533 AD, one year before Nobunaga Oda (considered as the most significant revolutionary in the Japanese history) was born. Sumitada Ohmura was "the other revolutionary" and the only daimyo with more progressiveness than Nobunaga. He belonged to the same generation as Nobunaga did and lived in the same era. He was born in the Hinoe Castle in the Arima area as the second son of Haruzumi Arima, regarded as the strongest figure in the Kyushu region back then. When Sumitada was five years old (in 1538), he was adopted by Sumiaki Ohmura, who was the master of the Ohmura area under the rule of the Arimas.

Sumiaki was also Sumitada's uncle (an elder brother of his mother). So, he had visited the Arima area several times and known Sumitada before he adopted the infant child. For political reasons, the Ohmuras and the Arimas had married their sons and daughters with the others' since the ancient times. Still, Sumiaki Ohmura, who made the transition from Sumitada's uncle to his adoptive father, consistently maintained a low profile in front of Haruzumi Arima, Sumitada's natural father. Even though Sumitada was just an infant child, he already understood the fact that it clearly showed the master-servant relationship between his fathers.

Sumiaki, his foster father, gave Sumitada a warm reception after he joined the Ohmuras. It was obvious that his adoptive father recognized the giant figure of Haruzumi Arima, his natural father, looming behind his back.

“Katsudohmaru has nerves of steel. Of course, he is the child of that Master Arima.”

In such ways, Sumitada was often compared with Haruzumi Arima, his biological father. To have his bloodline being recognized as that of the Arima clan made him feel happier than anything. Even though he joined the Ohmuras, he always understood in his mind that his root was from the Arima clan.

Sumitada had one elder brother and younger brothers in the Arima area. Since they all got along well, Sumitada felt lonely about leaving the brothers to come to the Ohmura area. But, to his joy, Sumitada got a foster brother in Ohmura, who was the first legitimate son of his foster father Sumiaki and one year younger than Sumitada was. His name was Matahachiro.

When running around the fields and spending time in Ohmura Mansion, the two of them were always with each other. Whatever they did, they were happy. Those days were filled with joy and laughter.

Before Sumitada signaled, “Matahachi, let’s go,” the foster brother Matahachiro was always waiting near Sumitada with a smile. While calling Sumitada “Brother” or “my Brother,” Matahachiro was deeply attached to his adoptive brother. Sumitada himself felt Matahachiro was adorable and regarded the foster brother as his non-detachable alter ego like his shadow that was cast on the ground. For Sumitada at that point, the foster brother Matahachiro was definitely a part, or rather a major part, of his life.

The seashore of the Arima area was wildly beaten with the waves. Conversely, the sea of the Ohmura area (Ohmura Bay) was very gentle and quiet enough to be called the “Harp Sea.” The rough sea of Arima reminded Sumitada of his birth father Haruzumi. The beauty and gentleness of the Harp Sea in Ohmura had Sumitada recall the warmth of his natural mother, who embraced him tightly with her selfless love.

Sumitada often lay on a steep slope of Mount Konpiradake with his foster brother Matahachiro side by side, overlooked the calm, mirror-like surface of the Harp Sea. Then, they talked with each other.

“Hey, Brother. When we grow older, which one of us will inherit the Ohmuras, I or you, Brother?”

The importance of the question by Matahachiro could not be understood by either of them back then, obviously. It was a thought-provoking question about their future.

“I am one year older than you. So, I think I will.”

While he answered so, Sumitada was not actually sure of that. He thought he was adopted to inherit the Ohmuras. However, the legitimate son of the Ohmuras was Matahachiro, even though Sumitada was senior to him by one year.

“My father was the second son, but he inherited the Ohmuras.”

When Matahachiro pointed it out, Sumitada made a slip of the tongue.

“It was because our father had the blood of the Arima clan.”

At any moment Sumitada viewed the Harp Sea glittering under the sunshine, he always recalled the days he had once spent in the Arima area. Despite being in Ohmura, Sumitada never forgot the pride of the Arima clan.

“Why do we need the Arima blood? We are the Ohmuras! It’s nonsense!”

The younger foster brother raised his upper body and shook his fist as if he was making a protest.

Because the Arima clan has the greater power. Sumitada thought so, but hesitated to speak so to his foster brother.

Although he was still young, Sumitada managed to come to an understanding gradually, as he grew older year by year. There were not only the differences of personal abilities between Sumiaki Ohmura (his adoptive father) and Haruzumi Arima (his natural father), but also the gap of both families' social standings.

Behind the Arima clan, which had been consistently gaining momentum, the Ohmura clan was always on the defensive. Sumiaki's mother and his wife were both from the Arima clan. Since Sumiaki's position had been close to the Arima clan, he was able to utilize the prestige and inherit the Ohmuras in spite of his being the second son. The fact made Sumiaki feel indebted to the Arima clan, rather than just to the individual named Haruzumi Arima. Moreover, he felt somewhat reserved even with his adopted child Sumitada.

Sumitada himself understood the political machinery, or the relationship between his foster father and the Arima clan. But he was hesitant to tell Matahachiro about it as it was.

"If Brother inherits the Ohmuras, what will happen to me? Will I become your vassal?"

When Matahachiro asked it, Sumitada could not answer.

If Sumitada's foster brother becomes his prime vassal to support him, Sumitada could not imagine anything better than that. He innocently wanted to flourish in the Ohmuras by cooperating with each other. It was not only for the Arimas, which he was from, but also for the Ohmuras. He earnestly thought so. If Matahachiro was always with him, Sumitada believed that they could do anything no matter how daunting it was.

However, Matahachiro was the legitimate son of the master of the Ohmuras. As for Matahachiro, being a vassal of Sumitada might have not been the reality that he could accept so easily. When Sumitada noticed it for the first time, he surely had an ominous feeling.

A sense of foreboding like dark mist was eroding his mind.

"I entrust the land (Ohmura) to you."

Haruzumi Arima, his birth father had once said so to Sumitada. So, he believed that he was the one to inherit the Ohmuras, because it had been supposed to be the reason why he came to Ohmura. But, inhering the Ohmuras could worsen the relationship between his foster brother and himself. He had not thought about it before the time due to his childishness.

The days with his foster brother were too happy for Sumitada to imagine a future in which their relationship would get hostile. It was ... Just that was ... the worst future that Sumitada wished never to happen.

In the year of 1545, it was decided that Matahachiro would be adopted into the Gotos, the ruling clan of the Takeo area. When Sumitada heard it from his adoptive father Sumiaki in his own room of Ohmura Mansion, he could not say anything and stiffened with disbelief.

"Matahachiro ... To Takeo ...?"

Clenching his teeth, quivering his fists on his knees, Sumitada could not move for a while. As he was absent-minded, his foster father disappeared from his sight before he knew it.

At last he got his feelings under control and approached his adoptive father's room, Sumitada heard the voices of Sumiaki and Matahachiro from inside the room and stopped walking.

“... I can’t! How can I part from my brother?! Never!!”

Matahachiro was screaming, but Sumiaki was admonishing his son in an unbelievably unemotional voice.

“Matahachi, everything is for the sake of protecting our clan. The Ohmuras will be inherited by Katsudohmaru ... I mean, Sumitada. By doing so, we will get the support from the Arimas and be able to protect the Ohmuras. I beg you to understand it, please.”

Sumitada had never heard such a cold voice of his foster father’s. He was overwhelmed by the guilty feeling for mistakenly gazing into the world of adults which children should never peep into.

“I am the first son of Father! Why do I have to leave Ohmura?!”

Matahachiro suddenly rushed out of the room, and bumped into Sumitada, who then staggered.

Matahachiro looked back at his adoptive brother. Tears were welling up in his eyes, trickling down, and wetting his cheeks. He was gazing reproachfully at Sumitada with his eyes wide open. It was the first time for Matahachiro to look at Sumitada with such a glare.

Sumitada tried to say something to him. But Matahachiro turned his back on his foster brother and ran away. Sumitada reached his hand out for Matahachiro’s back, but only to grab the empty air. Matahachiro left the Ohmura Mansion, vanished into somewhere, and never came back again.

It was several days after the event that Sumitada heard Matahachiro had departed for the Gotos in the Takeo area, accompanied by the vassals.

When he was informed of the fact that Matahachiro had left Ohmura, Sumitada felt as if a huge cavity was made in his mind. Matahachiro, his foster brother, was his alter ego, and the memories of the eight years that he had spent with him was so vivid to that extent.

“Sumitada, I am leaving the Ohmuras up to you. Please take care of it to the best of your abilities.”

Sumiaki, his adoptive father, said so to Sumitada. Since Sumiaki had sent off Matahachiro, his natural son, his word “please” sounded heavier than it did at any other time. However, even the word was not cast to Sumitada directly. It was obvious that Sumiaki saw the imposing shadow of Haruzumi Arima behind his foster son.

In the year of 1550, Sumitada became the 18th master of the Ohmuras at the age of 17. It was one year before Nobunaga inherited the Oda family estate, and one year after Francis Xavier propagated Christianity in Japan for the first time in the history. Then, Matahachiro, who inherited the Gotos, was renamed as Takaakira Goto.

Sumitada Ohmura and Takaakira Goto.

The former foster brothers started walking the paths of different destinies to become the lifelong archenemies to each other.

Chapter 1: The Night of the Tengu – Prison In the Deep Mountain

It was one night in midsummer when Matahachiro was still in Ohmura.

Sumitada and Matahachiro slipped out of the Ohmura Mansion in the middle of the night to explore the nearby mountains.

“Matahachi, why don’t we go and search for a tengu (an imaginary demon, or heavenly dog being, which Japanese people believed)?”

“Brother, do tengu really exist? Rumor has it that a tengu inhabits a deep mountain.”

“If it does, then we will encounter it. Let’s go and check it out.”

At first, Sumitada was hearing the footsteps of his foster brother following him. But, while he was absorbed in pushing his way into the darkness of a mountain path, the footsteps for two humans became those for just one person before long.

Sumitada paid close attention to the surrounding noise carefully, but could not catch any sound, as if even insects were sleeping.

“Matahachi ... Where are you?”

The foster brother would never leave Sumitada of his own will.

Has something happened to Matahachiro ...?

Do not tell me that he has just been abducted ... by a tengu.

Sumitada looked around to search for his foster brother in the thick darkness.

“Matahachi ... Where are you? Can you not hear me? ... Matahachiiiiii!”

Sumitada’s voice was sucked into the darkness of the deep mountain and disappeared. Mysteriously, there was no response from Matahachiro.

As he got deeper into the mountain, the branches and leaves of the densely crowded trees covered above Sumitada and shut out the lights from the moon and stars. He was having an illusion as if the both hands of a gigantic tengu shrouded and erased the world around Sumitada.

As he walked while groping in the darkness, in which he could not see even his own body, he was getting closer to forgetting who he was and where he was.

Were Sumitada and Matahachiro, his foster brother, both taken away to another world by the sorcery of a tengu? Still, he could barely hear the sound of his stepping on the ground, which kept Sumitada from forgetting the actual existence of himself and the real world.

“Is a tengu putting me to the test ...?”

Only the footsteps were wandering in the darkness. Then, suddenly, the field of vision opened up.

It was a circular space made by cleared trees, at the center of which Matahachiro was standing with his back toward Sumitada. The foster brother was rendered frozen in motion, while looking up at a grotesque wooden statue looming up mysteriously under the pale moonlight. It was as if he was fascinated by the idol.

“So, you have been in a place such as this, Matahachi? I have been looking for you for quite a bit.”

Sumitada walked toward and spoke to the back of the foster brother. Matahachiro seemed to have finally come to by the voice. With a surprised look in his face, he turned around.

“Oh, Brother. Forgive me ... I got lost in the middle and found myself here.”

“Are you being fascinated by ... the Marishiten idol?”

The idol of Marishiten, which was worshipped as the god of war by people, was standing at the north side of the middle part of Mount Torikabuto. The two boys first entered the south side of Mount Torikabuto near the Ohmura Mansion, and, before they knew it, moved toward Kayaze Valley, the opposite side of the mountain.

They had visited the Marishiten idol in the daytime. But, the wooden statue looming under the moonlight looked completely different from that in the daytime. It appeared so eerie that they thought it would put itself into the motion, take the two boys, and fly away into the night sky. At the same time, it also was encased in an ethereally enchanting atmosphere ...

“Brother ... Does the identity of the tengu, which people are afraid of and detest, happen to be Marishiten?”

“If so, it is not our enemy. Rather, it is our guardian deity. I mean, here, it has just made us meet each other after we got lost.”

When Sumitada said so, the shaded face of the Marishiten idol looked as if it was smiling.

The presence of tengu, which Sumitada had been sensing in the darkness, vanished, once he saw the foster brother again. The relief made Sumitada feel the fatigue all of a sudden. They started walking side by side, so as not to get lost again, down to Kayaze Valley. Then, they went back to the Ohmura Mansion on a path along Kohri River lit by the moonlight.

Sumitada occasionally recalled that particular night, when he sensed the tengu in the darkness. The several years of time, after his foster brother left Ohmura, was similar to that “night of the tengu”, when he groped and wandered in the darkness. For that occasion, he felt the anxiety about the disappearance of Matahachiro, but he could soon get united with him again. However, in the current situation, his foster brother had not come back so far ...

A little before Matahachiro parted from the family, Sumiaki, the former master of the Ohmuras, tended to be ill in bed. As he entrusted his official duties to senior vassals, Sumiaki's influence in the clan was getting weaker and weaker. There were as many as 18 hereditary vassals, who had abandoned Sumiaki and transferred to the Gotos (which Matahachiro was a part of) of the Takeo area, in the span of five years until Sumitada inherited the Ohmuras. Even the remaining vassals were not monolithic and united. Some supported young Sumitada, who was under the guardianship of Sumiaki, the former master. But, others supported Seia, which was the Buddhist name of the retired Yoshizumi Ohmura, Sumiaki's elder brother. (*Japanese people in ancient times tended to value the tradition of using their Buddhist names after the retirement. It was a way of signifying the estrangement from worldly things.) The tendency in which the vassals were split in two factions was getting clearer day by day. Moreover, since Sumiaki was sick in bed, those who practically supported Sumitada were Hohkinokami Ohmura, the prime vassal, and Shinzaemonnojo Tomonaga, the assistant of Hohkinokami.

From his sickbed, coughing over and over again, Sumiaki asked Sumitada to get closer to his pillow. In a feeble, quivering voice, Sumiaki said to the one who was appointed to be the master of the next generation.

“Sumitada, when you need help, ask Hohkinokami or Shinza. The two of them can talk amicably with those who are close to my elder brother Seia. I am sure that they are going to support you in a good way.”

Since Sumitada was only 17 years old back then, he could never deal with senior vassals, many of whom were twice or three times as old as he was. Moreover, the senior vassals were in a state of serious confrontation with each other about whether they should support Sumitada or Seia, to the level that they could start internal conflicts at any moment. How could the young master with little experience in the domestic affairs handle such senior vassals alone?

“Hohkinokami, Shinza ... You are the only ones whom I can trust and ask for help. Assist this prematurely incomplete one that I am, please.”

When Sumitada candidly begged them for help, the two senior vassals showed wrinkled smiles like those which grandpas would give their grandsons, and nodded to the young master several times.

“Indeed. You need not worry, our Young Master. As long as this Hohkinokami is with you, everything will be just fine. Do you not agree, Shinza?”

“Yes, most definitely. Until our Young Master becomes independent, this Shinza will do his best to support you with Hohkinokami. You don’t need to worry about anything.”

Sumitada’s days in Ohmura had always been with his foster brother Matahachiro in the past. The foster brother had already left for the Takeo area and the foster father, whom he originally had to ask for help in many matters, was sick in bed. In this situation, only those whom Sumitada could count on were the two senior vassals: Hohkinokami and Shinzaemonnojo. For Sumitada with little opportunities for being taught by the former master, the two senior vassals were not only his supporters but also experienced mentors who were indispensable for him to become the proper master of the Ohmuras.

“Thank you. I am deeply indebted to you.”

The disease that Sumiaki was suffering from was steadily deteriorating his health. Since Sumitada became the master, Hohkinokami Ohmura and Shinzaemonnojo Tomonaga both seemed to be making every effort to manage the domain and to mediate the relationships between the vassals. However, the explosive situation of the political rift among the vassals could not be easily settled, and it deepened young Sumitada’s anxiety. Among the Seia faction, not a few vassals bluntly ignored Sumitada, and ostentatiously paid visits to Seia to get even closer to him.

At first, Hohkinokami and Shinzaemonnojo said with confidence, “Do not worry.” But, they had to admit that the situation was not drastically improving. Then, one day, the two supporters gave their opinion to Sumitada in the following manner.

“Your Young Majesty is similar to Master Arima (Haruzumi), your natural father, in terms of the wisdom and courage. However, to our regrets, you are still young. Because another Young Master Matahachiro, the birth child of the Great Master (Sumiaki Ohmura), left for the Gotos in Takeo, vassals have been confused so far. Also, among the vassals close to Master Seia, there seem to be inexcusable ones who are plotting to hold control of the Ohmuras while taking advantage of this opportunity. There is no doubt that we have to unify them in order to make Ohmura the land to be governed by Your Young Majesty with ease. We will devote ourselves to the duty for a while. So, we would like Your Young Master to rest up in a peaceful and quiet place.”

“If you two propose so, I have no objection. Sorry to bother you about this and that.”

“Please do not say such a thing. It’s nothing to us, because serving you is our duty, Young Master.”

Following the senior vassals’ proposition, although he was the master of the Ohmuras, Sumitada ended up starting a secluded life in a deep mountain. Until the disturbance among the vassals would be subsided, he started the days in a small castle named the Kiritsume Castle, located at the deep end of Kayaze Valley, on the hillside of Mount Taradake, and he intended to continue the stay.

During the period around which Sumitada started the secluded life, both Hohkinokami Ohmura and Shinzaemonnojo Tomonaga visited the Kiritsume Castle twice or three times a month to see their master. But, as time had passed, they came once a month, once in two months, and then finally, only their messengers paid visits just for the sake of political gestures of making token greetings to him once a season.

One year after Sumitada entered the deep mountain, he received the information that Sumiaki, the former master of the family, had passed away. However, although he was the current master of the clan, Sumitada was not invited to the funeral. Instead, he was asked to go on with the secluded life. His frustration continued to build up, as days passed by.

“Has the conflict among the vassals yet to be settled?!”

As he asked the question to the messenger, all he got was, “I apologize for your inconvenience, Master. Hohkinokami is doing his best to take care of business.” Sumitada could not specifically know what was going on in the Ohmura clan. Eventually, he would come to feel that asking the messengers questions was meaningless and absurd.

There were only a few attendants to take care of Sumitada at the Kiritsume Castle, to support his daily life. They could not know what was going on among the Ohmuras. Since it was a life in a deep mountain, they had few things to talk about. Exploring the mountain and training by hunting were the only parts of the daily life of Sumitada.

While walking in the deep mountain, he sometimes felt as if Matahachiro was just beside him. He found himself uttering, “Mata ...” The absence of his foster brother made him sad. Also, when he was moving in the mountain, he occasionally felt the presence of someone or something hiding in a nearby bush.

“Who ...? Is anybody there? Nay. Is it a beast ...?”

One time, a beast was actually hiding in the close vicinity, and Sumitada hunted it. Another time, although he surely felt something hiding, the sign of it mysteriously vanished into thin air. He thought a tengu had been watching him from the other side of the bush. *Is the tengu the incarnation of the Marishiten idol?*

He occasionally recalled the unforgettable “night of the tengu”, climbed down from the Kiritsume Castle to Kayaze Valley, and then visited the Marishiten idol in Mount Torikabuto.

“Marishiten, let me ask. Am I destined to finish my life like this in the mountain? Can I not fight for the Ohmura clan or govern it?”

The Marishiten idol just gave him the soft smile. No answer was returned.

At the center of the Ohmura area, plain lands spread over like the shape of a fan at the foot on the west side of Mount Taradake, which was towering and overlooking throughout the Shimo region (the northern part of Kyushu Island and around it). The Kiritsume Castle, where Sumitada was living, was a small mountain castle built on a col of the hillside of Mount Taradake. It was far closer to the ground level than to the summit.

The Kinsen-ji Temple, one of the most prestigious Buddhist temples in the Shimo region, was quietly standing on the mountaintop of Mount Taradake. Sumitada had visited the temple several times. Agon-hoin, the chief priest of the temple, was the figure worshipped not only by the vassals of the Ohmuras but also by other masters governing adjacent areas. If possible, Sumitada wanted to consult with the priest, because he had no other to rely on around him. Unlike the Marishiten idol, Agon-hoin might be able to give him some advice.

When looking up toward the sky far above the Kiritsume Castle on a sunny day, he could always recognize a small glitter, the reflected sunlight in the clear blue sky. It was probably from the roof tiles of the Kinsen-ji Temple. But, it was not so easy for him to visit the temple, because he needed one whole day to reach the summit. In the first place, considering Agon-hoin was a lofty figure and was apart from the world due to his being a religious leader, Sumitada thought Agon-hoin was not the right one to consult about his unusual circumstances, in which he was confined leniently by his senior vassals despite his being the master of the Ohmuras.

If he climbed up from the Kiritsume Castle to a slightly higher place, he could view the Harp Sea, the symbol of Ohmura, in the distance. However, only a small part of the sea was visible, because the view was limited by Kayaze Valley ahead and Kayaze Basin further beyond.

Now, the glittering sea just looks small in the distance ...

The days in the deep mountain remote from any sign of civilization gave Sumitada an illusion as if he was becoming a prisoner confined in the “Prison of Time”. One time, he caught a beautiful bird, put it in a birdcage, and spoke to it, “You and I are similar to each other. Don’t you think so?”

At that time, Sumitada was just like a bird that could not escape from a birdcage.

The days of obscurity in the Prison of Time named the Kiritsume Castle was a mud-like despair, sinking Sumitada physically and mentally, little by little. At first, it might only be his being robbed of the freedom around his feet. As things kept going that way, his lower body might get buried, and then his whole body in the end.

While looking at the clouds floating in the distant sky, Sumitada frequently recalled Matahachiro, who was already in the Takeo area, and his blood parents and brothers living in the Arima area. *If I were to be confined in such an isolated castle of the deep mountain anyway, was it really worth coming to the land of Ohmura? Although I live a lonely life in the deep mountain even after the former master has passed away, can I still insist that I am the master of the Ohmuras?*

His days of anguish continued for so long as three years.

There was no herald of the upcoming events.

One day, things started changing suddenly.

“Young Master, one man is coming to our direction by horse.”

One of his attendants reported, and Sumitada looked down at a mountain path. To be precise, he was no longer the “Young Master” anymore, since the former master had already passed away. Still, the current of time at the Kiritsume Castle remained still.

From a road between Kayaze Valley and the Kiritsume Castle, one horse with a man mounted on it was running up vigorously. It was not the time for normal messengers to make the customary visitation. The atmosphere was obviously different from usual. Sumitada remembered the face of the unexpected visitor.

“It’s Sumichika. What a rare case. What is up with you, with the stern look?”

The samurai, who was a little younger than Sumitada, was Sumichika Imamichi. Because of his young age, he was still virtually at the lowest rank of the vassals. But he respected Sumitada earnestly with affection, to the level that his attitude somewhat reminded Sumitada of that of Matahachiro in the past. It was the reason why Sumitada remembered Sumichika well. And it was the first time for Sumichika Imamichi to exert his special presence in Sumitada’s life.

Sumichika swiftly jumped off the horse and knelt down on the ground.

“Master, a seriously major matter is happening. Hohkinokami Ohmura and Shinzaemonnojo Tomonaga, who have been confining Your Majesty in such a desolate place, are the ringleaders to plan the takeover of the Ohmuras. I am sure of that because some companions of mine overheard their plotting. I cannot sit still, and I have come here for that reason to report the situation to you.”

“What are you talking about? Is that true ...?”

Sumitada asked with rage. Sumichika looked up straight at his master and nodded without any hesitation, without being overwhelmed by the master’s fury. Just by looking into the clear eyes, Sumitada could obviously tell that the young samurai was telling the truth.

As Sumitada lamented his ill fate of being confined in an isolated castle in the deep mountain, he thought he had been trying to accept his destiny. It was based on his appreciation for the two senior vassals, who he believed sincerely worried about future of him and the Ohmura clan. But, if they had turned out to be the ringleaders of the cunning plot, what would become of the three years that Sumitada had been enduring in seclusion?

Sumitada imagined the two senior vassals talking about him behind his back and sneering at him.

“The Arima’s little brat is so naive and really idiotic. He never knows our plot.”

“Very obedient and ignorant. We should just keep him there for life until it meets its quiet death under custody.”

Sumitada’s warrior blood, which he inherited from his birth father, came to a boil in an instant.

“Those traitors! ... Sumichika, I am going back to the Ohmura Mansion immediately. Come with me!”

Sumitada leaped onto the horse, which Sumichika was riding on, made its nose turn to the opposite direction, and held out his right hand for his younger loyal retainer.

“Master, are you allowing me to ride with you?”

Sumitada momentarily recognized the memory in the past, in the eyes of Sumichika, who was looking up at him.

“Master, I’m honored to greet you for the first time. I therefore take this opportunity to announce to you that my name is Sumichika Imamichi.”

Sumitada could remember the figure of Sumichika, who prostrated himself before Sumitada, as if the event just occurred the day before.

“Sumichika, thank you for your formal greeting. Our ages seem to be close to each other. I would like you to support me, from now on.”

When Sumitada said so, Sumichika’s presence was not yet that special in his mind.

Several years after meeting for the first time, Sumitada finally noticed one thing. Senior vassals and other vassals had always called him “Young Master”. (His attendants still did so.) But, only Sumichika had been calling him “Master” from the very beginning. Even before the former master Sumiaki passed away,

Sumitada had been Sumichika's one and only "Master", without making any distinctions such as "Young Master" and "Grand Master".

Sumichika extended his hand hesitantly. Sumitada grabbed it firmly.

"Of course. Thank you for informing me of that. Sumichika, let's go together!"

Sumichika widened his eyes in wonderment and joy. Sumitada recognized in the young servant's face that of Matahachiro in the past. Sumitada shook off the illusion of Matahachiro, let Sumichika ride on the horse behind him, and made the horse gallop.

The horse, which was carrying Sumitada and Sumichika on its back, climbed down from the Kiritsume Castle to Kayaze Valley and ran through Kayaze Basin that was spreading ahead of it. The people in a nearby village were all astounded by Sumitada, who suddenly appeared with anger like a demon, and every single one of them was pointing at the young master of the Ohmuras and his loyal servant.

When they reached the plain of the Ohmura area, the view, which had been obstructed by the valley and the basin, opened up. The quiet and fertile Harp Sea of Ohmura dominated their sights. Although the sea was shining on the fine day, Sumitada could not afford to appreciate his favorite glittering sea for that day.

"Hohkinokami! Shinza! Where might you be?! Show yourselves right now!!"

As soon as Sumitada rushed into the Ohmura Mansion, his roar literally shook the building. The vassals, who were inside, bolted out of the rooms, one after another in a panic. Hohkinokami and Shinzaemonnojo were too astonished by Sumitada's wrath to keep on standing. They knelt down hastily, and rubbed their foreheads against the wooden floor.

"Young Master ... No, Your Master ... Sir, what brought you here so suddenly ...?"

"There are those who surely heard your plots to take over the Ohmuras. If you have your version of the reasoning, speak up right now. Depending on how you make an excuse, I will chop your heads off here. This is not an empty threat."

Sumitada was holding the grip of his *katana* sword, and his intention to kill froze everyone within the vicinity. The overwhelming power, which was as if he was possessed by Haruzumi Arima, his birth father, made the vassals kneel down one by one and prostrate themselves before their young master, who had just come back to the mansion suddenly. It was partly because Sumitada had been training in the deep mountain daily during his adolescence and had grown up to become far more vigorously robust than he was previously. Even the vassals, belonging to the Seia faction and having once ignored Sumitada candidly, were scared to death, and were finding themselves keeling down. Some of them could not stop quivering.

Hohkinokami and Shinzaemonnojo could not say a single word to make an excuse. Instead, they just rubbed their foreheads onto the wooden floor.

"How despicable you scoundrels are. Get out of my sight! And never come back to me!"

As Sumitada bellowed at them, they sprang up hastily and ran away at full speed.

"If anyone else wants to speak the complaints about something, say it to me right here. I, Sumitada, am the master of the Ohmura! Remember that from now on!"

Sumitada shouted the proclamation in front of the vassals. Everyone prostrated himself again before the master.

After he had struggled for three arduous years as a young master, and after eight grueling years had passed from Matahachiro's departure from the Ohmura family, it was the very moment at which Sumitada became the real master of the Ohmuras.

He had always been wandering in the darkness like that of the "night of the tengu" for several years since the parting of the ways with Matahachiro, his foster brother. Finally, his life was starting to see the shine again.

Hohkinokami Ohmura, the head of the senior vassals, and Shinzaemonnojo Tomonaga left for Takaakira Goto (Matahachiro) in the Takeo area after the return of the master, Sumitada. The incident in which Sumitada, the master of the Ohmuras, banished the two senior vassals was effective enough to temporarily subside the hostile deeds of the Seia faction. However, not only Matahachiro but also the senior vassals, whom he believed were his only guardians, had ended up leaving the Ohmura clan. His foster father had already passed away. Among those involved in the current Ohmuras, Sumitada had almost no one to depend on.

However, Sumichika Imamichi, his younger servant, was the only exception. After Sumichika informed Sumitada of the takeover plot by the two senior vassals, he had lost a place among the vassals.

"Hohkinokami and Shinzaemonnojo are exiled from Ohmura, no thanks to the brat named Sumichika. Although it is impossible for the inexperienced Young Master to govern Ohmura alone, Sumichika does not understand at all what he should have done as a vassal. The stupid deed of that thoughtless bum destroyed the political balance of the vassals!"

Some said so deliberately at a place where Sumichika himself could hear it. If Sumichika stopped and bowed when he passed by others, most of the vassals did not even look at his eyes. Some tutted on purpose when he passed by Sumichika, and another even whispered hatefully, "You, traitor ..." into his ear.

Sumichika did not think he did the wrong thing. So, even though he had almost no supporter among the vassals, he was not disappointed about it. In the first place, Sumichika was the youngest one among the vassals for the Ohmuras, and had not been treated fairly with respect to start with. The only one whom Sumichika could trust was Sumiyasu "Shinsuke" Tomonaga, who was at the same age as he was.

Both the Imamichi clan and the Tomonaga clan were long-time vassals of the Ohmuras, and the clans had held the close relationship with each other. So, Sumichika and Shinsuke had known each other since they were young kids. But, they got along closely mainly because the two of them were the youngest ones among the current vassals and were isolated from others.

Sumichika was never satisfied until he did what he had decided to do, and he was just that type of person. In that aspect, Sumichika was very similar to Sumitada, his master. On the other hand, Shinsuke always was smiling, quiet, and gentle. Sumichika was like an animal because he did something before he thought. Shinsuke was calm and even peaceful like a pretty flower blooming in a field. Sumichika was interested in the Shinsuke's character, which was right opposite to his own. Moreover, Shinsuke was a precious friend whom Sumichika could talk with about anything. As he always did so, Sumichika was visiting a mansion where Shinsuke lived with his elder brother, and asked him on a wooden veranda.

"Senior vassals have kept away from me. Shinsuke, do you think I have done something wrong?"

After thinking for a while, Shinsuke shook his head horizontally.

"No, the senior vassals who cheated Master Ohmura and confined him in the deep mountain are the ones who have done the wrong deeds, not you. It is difficult for me to believe that they had the intention of bringing back Master Ohmura someday."

“Shinsuke, thank you. I feel relieved to hear your telling me so.”

“Sumichika is not wrong. That is the trust I have in you.”

Shinsuke’s eyes, which were looking straight at Sumichika, were perfectly clear with no sign of hesitation.

If Shinsuke understands me to that extent, then I can’t ask for anything more than that. Sumichika thought.

As for Sumichika, he did not have any intention to gain the favor of Sumitada. But, since that day, Sumitada spoke to Sumichika very often and invited him to whatever he did. The more they spent the time together and talked to each other, the more they could notice the common points of their personalities. Both of them felt, *We can get along intimately.*

“Sumichika, that brat, by betraying the senior vassals, succeeds in gaining the favor of the young master.”

Sumichika heard such new backbiting, but Sumitada told him, “You need not worry about the slanders from the harmful old people.” So, he tried not to care about what they said.

Sumitada and Sumichika frequently went out together for hunting or outing by their horses. Sumitada especially loved to run around Kayaze Valley and Kayaze Basin, which were close to the Kiritsume Castle where he had been confined in the past.

“Running to Kayaze Valley reminds me of what used to be the miserable existence of myself, when I was confined. Then, coming back here again makes me recall the day when I finally got out of the place with you ... It is the reason why this is my favorite route.”

Sumitada occasionally spoke so to Sumichika.

One day, the two of them dismounted their horses at a place beside a creek running through a quiet forest. The location, which was close to the entrance of Kayaze Basin, was called Sakaguchi. Sumichika was following Sumitada, who was approaching the brook.

“This creek is a tributary of Kohri River, I presume. The water must be flowing from the area near the Kiritsume Castle. Thinking about it, I have a vaguely nostalgic feeling ... You know, I was confined in such an isolated castle in the deep mountain for as long as three years ... Looking back now, those were really bizarre days back then.”

Sumitada sniggered wryly in self-deprecation, scooped up the clear water from the creek with both hands, and was fascinated by the surface reflecting the sunbeams streaming through the tree leaves. It was as if he were carefully holding the glittering sea which he had seen when he was a child.

“Master ... Let me make a sincere apology again for our confining you in the Kiritsume Castle for no less than three years. It was the fault of us, all the vassals. I cannot apologize enough.”

“You need not apologize, Sumichika. Thanks to you, I could manage to escape from the Prison of Time ... In this Ohmura area, I had only one close acquaintance, Matahachiro. I did not have any other supporters, was too inexperienced to discover the cunning plot by the traitors, and was deceived as easily as taking candy from a baby’s arm ... What a stupid master ... Currently, in this Ohmura area, I have only one person whom I can believe and trust from the bottom of my heart ...”

Saying so, Sumitada drank up the water in his right hand and had Sumichika drink that in his left hand. Sumitada was looking straight at his servant as if he was trying to express something in his heart. Sumichika was captured by his master’s impressive gaze.

“Hey, Sumichika. What do you think about ... my brother ... No ... Never mind. Forget it.”

Sumitada was about to say something but hastily stopped. The words he was saying might have been those which the Master of the Ohmuras should not speak of so casually. Sumichika could not specify what his master was about to say at the very moment.

To begin with, whom did my master indicate by the word “my brother”? Is it Master Matabachiro (or Master Takaakira Goto), his former foster brother, who left for the Takeo area? Or, is he referring to his birth brothers who live in the Arima area?

It is not that he wanted to tell me, “Convey my message to my brothers that I care about them,” or something like that, is it?

After contemplating it for a while, Sumichika noticed the impulse which his master was about to show him.

My master might have tried to say something like this.

“What do you think about you becoming my brother from now on?”

It might have been just Sumichika’s wishful figment. But the imagination was powerful enough to make this young samurai become a loyal servant for life.

“Master, this Sumichika ... Only I will be with you whenever, all the time. As long as Master wishes so, whatever happens in the future. When I make that statement, I would like you to believe that.”

At the moment, Sumichika dared not to kneel down, although he knew it was rude not to do so to his master. The natural gesture was based on his wish, “If possible, I would love to live as my master’s brother.”

Sumitada smiled with more bliss than anything, and put his hand gently on Sumichika’s shoulder.

“Sumichika! What a flattering gesture! So, I will swear, too. Whatever happens in the future, you will be my lifetime prime vassal!”

Witnessing his master’s pure and innocent smile like that of a boy’s made Sumichika’s body emanate the mysterious heat from within.

What a pure entity my master is ...! His smile is shining like the dazzle of the Harp Sea and with no single stain. I have to guard my master at any cost. If I die, if it is for this master, there will be no remorse, no regret ...

When he made this “Vow in Sakaguchi”, Sumichika Imamichi, the prime vassal of Sumitada Ohmura, found the way to walk in his life. Since then, he had never lost his way until he died.

By banishing the two traitors, Sumitada restored his dignity. He obtained the best servant named Sumichika Imamichi. With his help, Sumitada started reorganizing the vassals.

“If I act alone like before, I might be caught off guard again by another traitor. So, Sumichika, keep an eye on them as I do. I believe that deceiving two persons is much more difficult than cheating only one man ... If we band together with the bonding of steel, we need not worry about anything.”

When Sumitada told him so, Sumichika thought, *If nothing strange had happened in the past, Master Matahachiro would have played the role that is currently given to me.*

But the Matahachiro had left for the Takeo area, and was not with Sumitada anymore. It was fortunate for him to have been given the role to the level that it gave him shivers. Each time he thought about the good luck that he was experiencing, Sumichika appreciated it.

Then, whom should we invite to our side, from now on?

After the contemplation for who were the best picks, the first candidate who came up in Sumichika’s mind naturally was, Sumiyasu “Shinsuke” Tomonaga, his best friend who was at the same age.

“Shinsuke is an honest, straightforward man. He is amazingly gentle to everyone. He is so benevolent that he cannot even kill insects. Sumitoshi “Isenokami” Tomonaga, Shinsuke’s elder brother, is said to be so solemn that he seldom smiles. We can even say his earnestness is the greatest one found among all the vassals. Master, I think we can count on the brothers.”

“If Sumichika says so, let’s talk to them and discuss the proposition.”

If they met at the Ohmura Mansion, where Sumitada lived, it would be conspicuous enough to provoke the Seia faction. So, Sumitada and Sumichika visited a mansion where the Tomonaga brothers lived, by pretending that it was a coincidence. Since the Tomonaga brothers did not have any close relationship with Sumitada prior to that, they were surprised by their master’s sudden visit. Still, the brothers welcomed the unexpected visitors because Shinsuke and Sumichika had already been close friends to each other.

“I’m really surprised. How can I expect Master Ohmura to visit here?”

As Shinsuke smiled, his expression and his voice were surely both filled with kindness. Shinsuke was small in stature and his facial features were mild and gentle. He looked as if he were an adorable girl. Sumitada was convinced that Shinsuke was the close friend of Sumichika’s because of the purity that they shared in common. But unlike Sumichika who also possessed the gallantry, this Shinsuke surely looked too gentle to kill even insects, let alone humans and animals.

Shinsuke efficiently lined up *zabuton* cushions for four persons in a crisp manner. It was like that of a tactful wife. Such a subtle deed of his seemed to be not from his sense of duty but from his rather mysterious affection to others. Sumitada was quite moved emotionally.

He is indeed the person whom Sumichika recommends. Without doubt, I can trust this Shinsuke as firmly as I would Sumichika. I am impressed by the fact that there are such valuable human resources politically buried among the vassals.

On the other hand, Isenokami, the elder brother, showed a difficult look even when he was inviting his master. He said, “Master, what can I do to help you today?”, in a rather bothersome tone. However, for some reason, the demeanor was still looking funny from the point of view of Sumitada. If he was trying to gain the favor of Sumitada, he could have forced himself to generate a smile. He was showing the attitude that was the opposite of what might be expected. The demeanor convinced Sumitada to trust him.

“I’m not good at speaking in a roundabout way, so I just omit a preliminary statement. Isenokami, and Shinsuke. As the cores of the Ohmura vassals from now on, will you support me, along with Sumichika?”

Sumitada's words made the Tomonaga brothers gape at each other. They had not been in particularly important posts of the vassals until then. Among the Tomonaga clan, the prestigious clan of the Ohmura vassals, they did not quite belong to the main bloodline of the family. It was natural for them to show the reactions of surprise.

"Master Ohmura, why are you making such an offer so suddenly?"

Shinsuke, who asked so, looked truly bewildered. As for Isenokami, he was crossing his arms, frowning even more, and beginning to ponder.

"The two of you and I have yet to know each other too well. But I can trust Sumichika at any time. Sumichika assures me that you two are reliable. That is enough of a reason for me. As you know, this Sumitada has been repelled by some old-time vassals of the Ohmuras because of my Arima blood. It is the reason why I need the vassals whom I can have faith in unconditionally, regardless of the current respective positions among the vassals and their bloodlines. If you two have the trust in me ..., I too will put the trust in you all the way at the risk of my life, my very existence. I swear I will attach the greatest importance to you two as well as Sumichika and always assign you all to the center of the vassals."

Shinsuke seemed to be emotionally moved by the earnest proposal from Sumitada. "Master Ohmura ...", He wetted his eyes with tears, and lowered his head. Isenokami, the elder brother, was contemplating for a while with his eyes closed. But, he finally opened his eyes and nodded while frowning solemnly.

"Since Master Ohmura is speaking so to such a degree, then I have no objection. I cannot thank you enough for putting that much of confidence in the inexperienced ones that we are. Although my abilities are limited, I promise that this Isenokami will do his best, Master."

Following the elder brother, Shinsuke spoke, "Master, I too would love to oblige, of course," and bowed over and over again.

"Oh, thank you! Well, anyway, everything is good!"

As he always was, Sumitada was in high spirits like a young boy. Sumichika, sitting next to his master, smiled happily, which made Shinsuke and even the difficult Isenokami break into broad smiles. The four of them stood up on their knees, put their both hands together, and swore they would cooperate with each other from that point on.

In this way, in addition to Sumichika Imamichi, Sumitada newly acquired two loyal servants: Sumitoshi "Isenokami" Tomonaga and Sumiyasu "Shinsuke" Tomonaga. However, there were still matters of concerns that involved the acquisition of able personnel for military purposes. Sumitada and Sumichika had not put any thoughts about the issue seriously, until they had to reorganize the Ohmura vassals as soon as possible. They had learned the truth that each person had his own aptitude. Isenokami and Shinsuke were both extremely talented at clerical works. But Sumitada could not expect them to fight bravely in a battlefield. The Tomonaga brothers themselves admitted it and made apologies to Sumitada.

"We would like to be fully committed to supporting Master Ohmura in clerical works. However, we are not good in combat. Please pardon us for that."

Even the difficult Isenokami seemed to be having a sense of guilt for the matter. As for Shinsuke, he was feeling sorry to the level that he might start crying at any moment.

"I am simply incapable of killing humans ... Master Ohmura, I would like to make a sincere apology about that."

"Isenokami, Shinsuke, never mind that. I really expect you two to support me in clerical works."

Although he told them so, considering that Sumitada had to lead the new Ohmura vassals with Sumichika, he needed as many personnel who were combatively capable as possible. However, many of the old-time vassals still supported Seia, who was the elder brother of the former master. Sumitada was not certain that they would be loyal to him. *So, what shall we do?* Sumitada and Sumichika were worrying about the matter.

“Isenokami and Shinsuke are incomparably excellent as clerical workers, but we cannot expect their contribution in a battlefield. Sumichika, what do you think about that?”

“There are those who have won their names for their bravery. But they all belong to the older generation than ours and have close relationship with Master Seia. It might be difficult for us to ask them to fight alongside the younger generations that are as young as their children or grandchildren, such as what we are.”

“I think you are right. So, what can we do about that ...?”

They could not find a proper solution easily. One day the two of them went out by horse as usual, and during that particular outing, they visited the Marishiten idol in Mount Torikabuto. As if Sumitada received the assistance from the god of war, his face suddenly brightened up.

“Oh, I got something. Sumichika, how about the Black Devil of Miyamura Village?”

“Master, you said, the Black Devil of Miyamura Village? But, that one is ...”

The proposal from his master was so surprising that Sumichika could not come up with a proper response immediately.

The Black Devil of Miyamura Village. It was the nickname of a boy, who had killed several adults with his bare hands several years ago in a village named Miyamura, located near the northern edge of the Ohmura area. His real name was Sumitane Ohmura. He was not executed because he was a member of the Ohmura clan. But due to his dangerous nature, he had been confined in a *zashiki* prison (Japanese-style prison for a single inmate). He was such type of figure. Although everyone knew the existence of the being, they were afraid of speaking the name. When adults scolded their children, they even threatened the young ones like this: “If you do not behave yourselves, the ‘Black Devil of Miyamura Village’ will come to get you and take you away.”

“The man may be dangerous. But he is my cousin. He may be able to support me. Don’t you think so?”

Once he came up with proposals, Sumitada never stopped. He brought Sumichika, who was being unusually hesitant, to Miyamura Village. The feudal lord of the village was Sumiatsu Ohmura, who was Sumitada’s uncle, a younger brother of his birth mother. Since they hardly met, Sumiatsu was surprised by the sudden visitation of his nephew.

“Sumitada, what brought you here, Miyamura Village? You seem to be having hard times in unifying the Ohmura vassals. I won’t change my mind about supporting my brother Seia ... Are you here to ask me for my help?”

“I am not attempting to change your mind, Uncle. However, I just want to meet my cousin Sumitane.”

Sumitada’s remark rendered Sumiatsu speechless. He replied in a dumbfounded tone.

“Other than Hidemasa, I cannot believe that there is actually someone who is crazy enough to want to meet that lad. You may do as you like. Bring him somewhere, if you want to. However, I will not hold any responsibility for anything, if you end up being killed by that brute. Brother Seia would be happy, if things turn out to go that way.”

Sumichika got angry at Sumiatsu's provocation and stepped forward. Sumitada gestured for his royal servant to step back.

As suggested, they visited a deserted house at the edge of the village, whose vicinity was filled with terrible odor. After Sumitada and Sumichika went inside, the odor became even worse.

The space, lit by afternoon sun through a window that was designed to let the light in, was just a *zashiki* prison for one person and a narrow passage. In front of a wooden lattice door, a tall, well-built, and broad-shouldered young man was standing. He noticed Sumitada, showed a surprised look, and knelt down.

"Master Sumitada Ohmura, you must be, I presume. I have seen you once in the past, Master."

"Oh, and you are ..."

"I am a former vassal of Sumiatsu Ohmura. My name is Hidemasa Kohno."

As if in responding to their conversation, a groan like that of a beast echoed from the inner side of the *zashiki* prison. Sumitada looked at the interior through the lattice door, and found a huge black silhouette sitting in the thick darkness of the shadow. The one, whose hair and beards did not seem to have been taken care of for years, was the source of the terrible odor. He had to be the Black Devil of Miyamura Village. But his face could not be seen due to the dimness of the lighting.

"Master Sumitada ... Is my cousin visiting here ...?"

The black silhouette asked in a hoarse voice, while sitting without moving.

"We are cousins to each other. Sumitane, will you be of assistance to me?"

Sumitane Ohmura held a breath in the *zashiki* prison, and so did Hidemasa Kohno in the passage. Hidemasa got down on all fours, and lowered his head toward Sumitada.

"Master Sumitada, please recruit this man. I beg you to let him out of the prison."

"What ...? Your name is Hidemasa Kohno, correct? Why are you making the plea?"

"He has been confined in this prison because of my fault."

Sumitada and Sumichika looked at each other, and they requested for the explanation. Hidemasa started talking about the events that occurred in the past.

Sumitane Ohmura was the only child of Sumiatsu Ohmura, the master of Miyamura Village. Hidemasa Kohno was a son of Hidetatsu Kohno, a servant of Sumiatsu. The two boys belonged to the same generation and grew up as childhood friends. They fought against each other very often, because they were very intimately acquainted. If they would go on to become adults without anything in particular happening to them, they would have had a master-servant relationship with each other, like their fathers had.

About ten years ago, an incident occurred, when Sumitane and Hidemasa were still in their early teens.

One night, Kohno's house, where Hidemasa lived, suddenly became noisy despite its being the middle of the night. Some adults with torches in their hands were rushing into the house.

Someone kicked Hidemasa's body and yelled, "Hidemasa, get up!" He got up, and found adults wearing demonic miens looking downward at him in a *futon* bedding.

At first, Hidemasa did not understand what was going on. When he came to, his father Hidetatsu was lying on his back beside him. His father was covered with blood and a blood-stained hoe was on the floor. Hidemasa's hands and his *kimono* were both soaked in blood. He screamed.

"This goon is a devil's child who just killed his father!"

Hidemasa was dragged out of the house, surrounded by the adults, and beaten thoroughly with squared lumbers that were intended for use as building materials. Hidemasa was confident of his physical strength and hand-to-hand combative ability because he always fought against Sumitane, a muscular giant. But if he was attacked by adults with weapons right after being forced to wake up from sleep, he could not possibly muster any resistance at all.

I am about to be killed ... That was when Hidemasa was getting ready for his death.

"Hey, what's going on?! Let go of Hidemasa!"

Sumitane rushed to the scene, and fought against the adults. Although he came close to being subdued, Sumitane shook them off and knocked them down, one after another. When Hidemasa regained consciousness, bloody adults were lying down on the ground around Sumitane.

Sumiatsu and his servants appeared at the scene. Then, they confined Sumitane and Hidemasa in the *zashiki* prison. However, there were some witnesses. It was soon revealed that the killer of Hidetatsu Kohno was the one who called Hidemasa "the devil's child". Hidemasa's innocence was proved and he was released. But Sumitane was not forgiven and not let go from the prison, because he beat to death not only the murderer of Hidetatsu Kohno but also a few unrelated parties. Hidemasa begged Sumiatsu for mercy on Sumitane, insisting, "He did so to save me." Sumiatsu did not accept the claim. Since then, the exaggerated legend of the "Black Devil of Miyamura Village" spread out of control as if it started growing its own wings.

Hidemasa regretted the powerlessness of himself. If he were stronger, then he would have taken care of the raiding adults on his own. If things went that way instead, Sumitane would not have suffered from the imprisonment due to the accusation of murder on him. Sumitane did not blame Hidemasa for that matter at all, and it further deepened Hidemasa's guilt.

I want to become stronger than anyone else someday in the future, in order to help out Sumitane. Fortified with the resolve, he started training himself physically, while focusing especially on the handling of spear weapons. He wanted to master the handling of rod-like objects, because of his experience in which he could not take the stand against the assaulters using the squared lumbers.

He did not remember how many times he tried to destroy the lattice door of the *zashiki* prison to get Sumitane out of the confinement. But, each time Hidemasa was about to try the rescue, Sumitane himself refrained him from doing so. Sumitane stubbornly stated, "I won't go out of here until my father (Sumiatsu) forgives me."

"Please believe me. Sumitane did not do anything wrong. Everything is my fault. So, I would like Master Sumitada to let him out of the prison ...!"

Hidemasa begged while rubbing his forehead on the muddy floor and shedding tears. Sumitada put his hand on Hidemasa's shoulder.

"Hidemasa, that's okay. I understand. I am emotionally moved by the bond between you two. Sumitane, and Hidemasa ... Be loyal and serve me, starting from now."

Tears welled up in Hidemasa's eyes. But the black silhouette in the *zashiki* prison had yet to move.

“Master Sumitada ... I appreciate your offer ... However, as long as my father does not forgive me ... I cannot get out of here ... And, I think my father will never forgive me ...”

“But Uncle Sumiatsu gave me permission to bring you out. I guess my uncle himself would like someone to forgive you. If so, I will forgive your sin. Only I can do that. I know Uncle Sumiatsu supports Master Seia, not me. Still, Uncle Sumiatsu is officially a servant of me, the master of the Ohmuras. Therefore, if I forgive you, then it is equivalent to Uncle Sumiatsu forgiving you.”

“Am I forgiven ...? Will my sin ... be finally forgiven?”

Sumitada nodded, and the huge shadowy figure started sobbing while quivering his girth.

Sumitada and Sumichika got out of the house with Sumitane and Hidemasa. Sumiatsu and the villagers were waiting outside, and looking at them at a distance. While pointing at Sumitada and his servants, they were whispering something. Some of them were holding weapons. With a serious look, Sumiatsu was approaching the four.

“Sumitada, are you serious about freeing my son and that Kohno’s kid? Do you dare to shoulder the disgraces of the two of them?”

“I don’t think their deeds are disgraces. The two of them are worthy of trusting from the heart.”

“You are an outrageous man ... Do as you like!”

“I understand Uncle Sumiatsu is happy about that. By the way, I have a favor to ask you, Uncle Sumiatsu. May we borrow a bathroom? The stench of this man is a little too much.”

Sumitada’s remark made Sumichika and Hidemasa laugh. Sumitane scratched his head while blushing.

Sumitane Ohmura had once brought fears to people in the Ohmura area as the Black Devil of Miyamura Village, and Hidemasa Kohno had caused Sumitane to kill others. The two of them just joined the Sumitada’s vassals. The fact negatively stimulated the old-time vassals, especially those in the Seia faction.

“How could Sumitada bring the notorious ‘Black Devil’ to his side ...? Is Sumitada insane, or what?”

“Isn’t the one named Hidemasa suspected of murdering his own father?”

“How pitiful. I guess Sumitada can count on no one except for those notorious goons.”

They called Sumitada names, and reviled abusively. However, only Sumiatsu Ohmura, who was one of those who had been badmouthing Sumitada, just stopped speaking ill of his nephew Sumitada, who just assigned his son Sumitane under his command. Since then, Sumiatsu had been staying neutral.

Sumitada gathered leading figures of the vassals at the Ohmura Mansion. He made an official announcement that he would appoint; Sumitoshi “Isenokami” Tomonaga as the head of general affairs of the Ohmuras, and Sumichika Imamichi as the prime vassal, the representative of all the vassals. Also, he chose twelve senior vassals, including Sumichika, Isenokami, Sumiyasu “Shinsuke” Tomonaga, Sumitane Ohmura, and Hidemasa Kohno. The word “senior” did not indicate their ages. Instead, it implied the significance of their posts. The senior vassals Sumitada appointed were far younger than those who had served for the former master, and it signified the impression of generation change of the Ohmuras.

Sumitada slighted important figures from prestigious families of the Ohmuras and the Tomonagas. Instead, he attached greater importance to even questionably notorious goons such as Sumitane Ohmura and Hidemasa Kohno. The self-righteous judgment of the young master naturally made the Seia faction critical

of the issue. But, when Sumitada announced the final name of the twelve senior vassals, the opponents could do nothing but be rendered silent.

“The twelfth senior vassal is going to be ... Agon-hoin.”

Right after Sumitada called the name, Agon-hoin appeared from an adjacent room briskly and prostrated himself before the master. There was a stir in the Seia faction, whose faces were contorted with uneasiness.

Agon-hoin was the chief priest of the Kinsen-ji Temple, the prestigious temple located near the summit of Mount Taradake. Since he possessed the great abilities in both literary and military arts in addition to the position as a religious leader, Agon-hoin was being worshipped by everyone not only in the Ohmura area but also in the neighboring regions. Even Sumiaki, the former master of the Ohmura, and Seia, Sumiaki's elder brother, could not speak to the priest on even terms. That Agon-hoin had just joined the senior vassals of Sumitada's, and its significance was immeasurable.

“Why would Agon-hoin support that Arima's brat ...?”

Those who spoke ill like that were so shocked that they were almost at a loss.

The one who started the controversial personnel affair was Sumitoshi “Isenokami” Tomonaga, who was newly appointed the head of general affairs. This honest man had been seriously contemplating the issue pertaining to the reorganization of the vassals under Sumitada for days and nights. Then, after that, he decided to give Sumitada his opinion.

“Personally, I have no objection to the eleven vassals, whom Master Ohmura has chosen, including Sumitane Ohmura and Hidemasa Kohno. However, this list will definitely provoke the Seia faction to the greater degree. I think we need at least one vassal who has great influence over the Seia faction and keep them in check.”

“There is some truth in what you, Isenokami, speak of. But, can we find such a convenient candidate? Because I expelled Hohkinokami and Shinzaemonnojo, no one among the Seia faction will support me.”

“I have only one candidate in my mind.”

“What? ... Who is it?”

“The chief priest of the Kinsen-ji Temple. I mean ... Agon-hoin.”

Isenokami's remark gave Sumitada a startle. Although he had met Agon-hoin several times, it was not more than the priest-and-visitor relationship. It might have been a desperate measure to scout the chief priest whose name was respected not only in the Ohmura area but also among the neighboring regions. Still, on the other hand, Sumitada thought it was a good idea.

“Of course, if the priest accepts the offer, that is ...”

Isenokami added, but Sumitada was not hearing that statement anymore. He commanded, “Sumichika, come with me,” stood up, and immediately started riding the horse for Mount Taradake.

The vast stretches of the lower land, along with the Ohmura area, could be observed from the peak of Mount Taradake, which was one of the majestic mountains in the northern part of Kyushu Island, the

third-largest island in Japan. The mountain stretched over several regions, including the Ohmura area. People could climb by horse up to the middle of the mountain, whose altitude was a little higher than that of the Kiritsume Castle where Sumitada had once been confined. Beyond that, they had to climb by foot and needed one day and one night to reach the summit. It was towering in the high sky, from which even the Kiritsume Castle could be overlooked far below it.

The following morning Sumitada and Sumichika finally arrived at the Kinsen-ji Temple located near the summit. In the briskly clear morning air, Agon-hoin in the full-dressed priest robe was sitting on a wooden veranda of the main building and welcomed the visitors. He was looking as if he had been waiting for them.

“The Young Master of the Ohmuras. And you are ... Sumichika Imamichi, I presume. Thank you for visiting my temple.”

“Your Grace, have you been expecting us to come?”

“Yes. You know, I always keep my eye on the world in and around the mountain.”

Prompted by Agon, Sumitada and Sumichika entered the main building and found tea being prepared for them.

“Honestly, I have a favor to ask you, Your Grace.”

As always, Sumitada started straightforwardly. To their surprise, Agon reacted, “I will accept it.” The remark made even Sumitada be at a loss.

“Your Grace ...? I have yet to say anything.”

“You would like me to join your vassals. Am I not correct?”

“... How do you know that? Your Grace, can you read people’s mind? Or, is it a sacred power of some sort?”

As if his curiosity was being aroused, Sumitada leaned forward with bright eyes.

“I think there could possibly be no other reason, if the Young Master of the Ohmuras has come here with his loyal servant.”

Agon’s remark made Sumitada and Sumichika look at each other and laugh together. While seeing the two amusingly, Agon softened what had been his usual stern look in his face.

“Young Master. To tell you the truth, I have been watching you ...”

“You mean, our coming to this place in the mountain?”

“Yes, that too, but not only that, but also your days in the Kiritsume Castle. You know, from here, you can see the castle very well. Even under such unfavorable circumstances, you were not in despair at all, and continued your physical training. Then, once you gained the good opportunity, you made the move immediately and very fast, and finally carved the way leading to the future. Despite your still young age, you are surely endowed with the talent for being the master. Even though this Agon had never been interested in serving just another master, I would do so, just for this master.”

“Your Grace, you had been watching me back in those days? Wow ... How embarrassing.”

Sumitada smirked awkwardly. Sumichika, sitting next to his master, nodded several times as if he was convinced and was agreeing with Agon’s remarks.

“Your Grace, did you happen to sneak behind and hide near me?”

Sumitada asked, while recalling the “tengu’s presence” that he had once felt in the mountain.

“Well ... I do not remember well. I do not think I understand what it is.”

The priest answered ambiguously, and it meant that he was making an indirect affirmation. The presence that Sumitada sometimes felt during the days in the Kiritsume Castle had to be that of Agon-hoin’s. Sumitada sincerely appreciated the fact that the renowned priest was having such great consideration for him.

In this way, Agon-hoin had just joined the Sumitada’s senior vassals and became the linchpin of the group. Under the new master Sumitada, the reorganized Ohmura vassals started in earnest. Although there still were threatening moves among the Seia faction, the existence of Agon-hoin at least made the resistance inconspicuous. For the time being, the domestic troubles in the Ohmuras had settled down.

(To be Continued to Vol. 2)

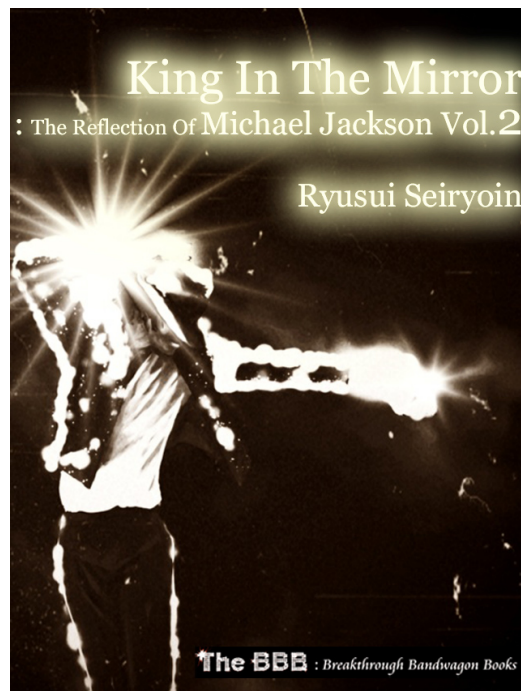
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