

Prologue

May 21, 1626

Arima Domain, Hizen Province, Japan

Kwink-kwink-kwink.

Kwink ... Kwink-kwink-kwink.

Several in the flock of *Onaga* birds beckoned to one another as the morning fog lifted. The only other sounds in the serene forest were a few faint echoes of children calling out as they, along with their parents and all the other villagers, labored in the lowland rice paddies half a mile or so below and to the west.

Kwink-kwink-kwink.

Kwink-kwink—

The *Onagas* abruptly ceased their calls and hastily scattered to the skies before the rattle of hardened-leather-and-metal armor and the clomping of hundreds of horses' hooves approaching down a well-worn path at a steady, military-like pace.

The lead rider, adorned with a helmet that brandished menacing horn-like ornamentations, also wore the traditional formal battledress armor, painted in his official colors of black and red. His body armor consisted of a metal breastplate lacquered to give an almost perfectly smooth finish, coupled with multiple layers of protective gear consisting of metal plates.

Daimyo Matsukura Shigemasa was a large man with an intimidating, battle-scarred face. Like his frame, his predilections—large and profuse—were not easily satisfied, meaning his subjects must produce more, always more. So he and his samurai were on the march through Arima to demand that they do.

Arima was located in the old province of Hizen, situated on the island of Kyushu, Japan's southernmost island. Lord Shigemasa treated it and all its inhabitants as his property and slaves, to do with as he chose, subject only to the shogun's will.

All the villages in Arima feared Lord Shigemasa, but those in the village to which the daimyo and his samurai now rode had a special reason to fear him.

“Shigemasa is coming! Shigemasa is coming!”

The villagers had just minutes, so they mobilized quickly as they’d done numerous times before in real situations and many more times in practice drills. Several lifted floor planks to expose secret cellars, some just large enough to hide forbidden items such as Bibles and crucifixes. Other hiding places had to be large enough to conceal their bigger secrets—foreign Christians, including Catechist Miguel, Catechist Tonia, and Father Joaquim. But the Father was not quite ready to hide; he was putting the finishing touches on the concealment of the church building at the opposite end of the village. Such concealment became necessary when Japanese leaders’ hostility toward Christianity had resulted in an official ban of the faith from Japan more than a decade before.

Had the village’s early warning system—a child strategically situated on the forest’s far edge whose waving arms could be seen by another child at the near edge—given the villagers enough notice?

Having passed the rice paddies and arrived at the upper edge of the village, Daimyo Shigemasa shouted sternly, “Where is Yamaguchi-san?” addressing no one in particular but expecting an immediate answer.

“He is resting, Lord Shigemasa,” one of the peasants, out of breath from running to pay feigned homage, replied anxiously.

“Go get him.” Shigemasa glared at the peasant bowing before him as if he were an annoying, stray, hungry dog.

Instantly another peasant, no doubt grateful for the opportunity to escape the cruel lord’s anger-filled whims, ran down a narrow path to fetch Master Yamaguchi.

As the nearest peasant raised his head from a humble bow and ventured a glance in Shigemasa's direction, the daimyo roared, "I've heard more reports of Christians hiding in Arima. Are you hiding any of the vermin here?"

"No, Lord Shigemasa; there are none here," another peasant answered. "We are a Buddhist community, Lord."

"So you say." Shigemasa scanned the peasants kneeling before him. "The shogun has outlawed Christianity throughout Japan. I will have the pleasure of torturing and killing any Christians found on my lands ... including any who aid or hide them."

"Yes, Lord, we understand."

"Do you? We'll see." Shigemasa motioned for his samurai to search the village.

Quickly, several scowling, surly samurai dismounted from their horses, pushing villagers out of their way as they approached the dwellings.

In a sign of gross disrespect, as the samurai entered the peasants' homes, none of them bowed, as was the custom. Worse yet, they plundered the homes in their ruthless searches.

Unable to find anything to validate the daimyo's suspicions after several minutes of searching and ransacking, the samurai next converged on the village's Buddhist temple, where they scrutinized various Buddhist items of worship but again found no evidence. The lead samurai bowed toward Daimyo Shigemasa and shook his head, signaling their failure to find anything to substantiate their suspicions, although it appeared to the villagers that he and his men had desperately hoped to do so.

"As I mentioned, Lord Shigemasa," the nearest peasant said, venturing to speak again but not daring to look the daimyo in the eyes, "there are no Christians in this valley."

Aggravated, Daimyo Shigemasa glared menacingly at the villagers who stood before him. His evil gaze was interrupted by Master Yamaguchi's arrival on the scene.

"Lord Shigemasa, we are pleased to have you join us. Welcome," Master Yamaguchi said.

“You can dispense with the pleasantries, Yamaguchi-san,” Daimyo Shigemasa sneered coldly. “I’m here for your taxes.”

“But Lord Shigemasa, we paid our taxes two weeks ago ... *and* on time,” Master Yamaguchi responded confidently. “We are now fully paid. I believe our small community is the most reliable in all your lands.”

“Your community *is* reliable, Yamaguchi-san—perhaps too reliable,” the daimyo replied. “If you can pay your taxes that easily, I must not be charging you enough.” He turned to look at the rice paddies, empty of workers because of their rush to hide their secrets. “If the lot of you can be in your huts when you should be out working in the fields, then I have been too lenient with you. Beginning today, I am doubling your taxes.”

“But Lord Shigemasa, our community already pays more taxes than most! We cannot support it,” one of the peasants cried out in anguish.

“The next villager—man, woman, or child—who questions me will lose his tongue.” Shigemasa slowly turned his head, assuring himself that his edict had been heard and understood.

“In one month I will return to collect your outstanding amount.” Daimyo Shigemasa turned his gaze onto the surrounding rice fields with a grin on his face then continued. “Rice or a cash payment of five-hundred silver coins. You may choose how to pay.”

“May I speak, Lord?” Master Yamaguchi looked pleadingly at Shigemasa.

“What?”

“What if we need more time?”

Shigemasa scanned the villagers and placed his gaze, for a brief moment, in turn on each woman and child in the settlement before replying with volume sufficient to be heard by all. “If you fail to pay within one month, we will take all your women and children as hostages.”

Master Yamaguchi noted many furrowed brows as parents throughout the village held or moved closer to their children.

Gesturing with his hand, the daimyo then motioned for his samurai to prepare to depart.

“Before I take leave,” the daimyo added, first looking at Master Yamaguchi and then turning to focus on the weakest-appearing villagers, “there is one other way for you to pay your taxes.”

“What, Lord?” a villager cried out. “What other way?”

“Find Christians and inform me of their whereabouts.”

“But we are Buddhists, Lord. We do not know any Christians.”

“Then let me motivate you,” the daimyo replied. “Rewards for information leading to the capture of Christians are 300 silver coins for priests, 200 coins for brothers, and 100 coins for any other vile Christian!”

Daimyo Shigemasa turned his horse to face the mountains as his band of samurai remounted their horses. “You would all be wise to help us root out any hidden Christians in Arima—and not *just* for the money.”

“What do you mean, Lord” Master Yamaguchi asked.

“There are developments in the regime.”

“What developments, Lord?”

“The shogun has confirmed his appointment of Mizuno Kawachi as the new governor of Nagasaki. His first task will be to exterminate all Christian dogs from these lands. He arrives in June.”

“We will cooperate in any way we can, Lord.”

“See that you do,” the daimyo answered sternly, casting his punishing gaze on those who looked weakest and most likely to break. “I can assure you that both the new governor and I will hunt down every last hidden Christian and annihilate them—all of them!”

No one dared reply.

As he turned his back on the village and signaled his flag-bearers up the mountain, the daimyo called out, “Have your taxes ready for me in one month.”