

Island Dawn

By

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Rivers edge

Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan

Mid May 1872

The spring rains had swollen the river to a raging torrent, cascading through the boulders and rocks near the village deep in the mountain valley. Kaito stared at the roiling waters. A wide smile brightened his face and his black eyes sparkled as the sun danced wildly on the coursing waterway.

His impoverished village was so small it didn't even have a name. It was simply called *Mura*, which meant village, but also unevenness or even erratic, like the river below. His home, however, was strategically located. Only a few hundred yards upriver, fording was possible. It was several miles of rough terrain in either direction to find another such spot. So important was this tiny place that to forestall attack by rivals, the Shogun had forbidden construction of any bridges on the river, or even the use of a ferry. The only way across the river was by foot or the back of a horse. On days like today it was simply impossible.

None of this mattered to Sakai Kaito. He was a simple peasant farmer, naive in the ways of politics and wars. He was deeply tanned. His hands were heavily calloused from labors stretching back to his childhood; even beyond his own lifetime, to generations preceding him for two thousand years. Now, succeeding

generations would carry the Sakai name forward to the god *Jimmu*. His dutiful and respectful wife had delivered a firstborn son whom he had named Toshio. With his pride as swollen as the river below him, Kaito turned and headed back to his meager home; there would be work to be done preparing for another day in the fields.

Even as his wife was delivering his first son, Sakai could not know that halfway around the world a recently ended civil war in a distant land of strangers would shape his nation's destiny, and that dark events beyond his lifetime would cast a shadow over all his progeny.

Imperial Palace

Tokyo, Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan

One day in the summer of 1877

“Your tea is most delicious, your Highness. A truly good cup of tea is difficult to find at home.” Ulysses Simpson Grant, former Army General and recently retired eighteenth President of the United States, was not noted for his tea drinking at home or abroad. He was, however, polite, and he waited patiently for the translator to complete his simple comment.

“In Nippon we have found that tea tastes better when brewed with fresh water from a brook or well,” The Enlightened One observed. “The water of Tokyo Harbor seems to lack a certain subtlety, wouldn’t you agree?”

Grant chuckled at the oblique reference to the Boston Tea Party, then replied, “Indeed! Clearly it is not in the getting of the tea, but in the brewing. We had good tea leaves but failed from lack of experience in the steeping.”

“Alas, so it is with governments,” the Emperor said. “Many good ideas are tried, but few survive the trial of political intrigue and popular sentiment.”

“Still though, there is no sight quite so grand as the home harbor at the end of a long voyage.”

Grant stroked his beard and regarded the Emperor thoughtfully. The former President was a man of some genius, mostly unappreciated back home. Grant was capable and well informed. He was certain of his facts and appraised

the royal sitting opposite him. It seemed to Grant that the man who had named his reign Meiji was not uncomfortable with silence when it was appropriate and had a good sense of what his country needed. All things considered, the General believed Mutsuhito was the right man, at the right time, for Japan.

After a moment of reflection, Grant continued, “Popular sentiment, in my view, is no substitute for strong leadership. Once the ill-informed wishes of the masses supplant enlightened executive authority, it is most difficult to control. Like this tea, when diffused into the water it is impossible to put the essence back into the leaf.”

Mutsuhito, for his part, chafed internally at the silly formality of the occasion. Unlike Grant, he was a captive of birthright and not particularly fond of governance or Imperial trappings for that matter. What he really wanted at this moment was a drink, but for some time, and with great fervor, his advisors had burnished his royal image for western consumption. Therefore, it would be unseemly to suggest it himself. The Emperor looked around his court, his eyes finally resting on his old friend in drinking and debauchery, Ito Hirobumi. Looking at his liege, ever attenuated to serene distress, Ito picked up his cue for action.

Ito motioned to the attendant Hirone Akagi whose family had spied upon, manipulated and served the Imperial Court for generations at the behest of powerful *zaibatsu* families-the real power behind the throne. Ito whispered in his ear, then spoke to the visiting dignitary “Pardon, Mr. President. Would you care for a drink of fine American whiskey?”

Grant didn’t miss a beat. “I would be honored to indulge,” he replied.

Several glasses, a small flask of water and a round glass bottle with *Jack Daniel's Old No. 7* embossed boldly on its side, were produced by Akagi on a lacquered tray. Observing proper international protocol, the visiting statesman was served first, the Emperor second, and then everyone else according to rank.

While Grant waited for everyone to be served, he surveyed his surroundings in the palace. The craftsmanship of the joinery of the wooden walls was exquisite. Each interior wall was covered with a rice paper of subtle translucence, lending a charming air of softness to the decor. Non-paniel scroll paintings of countryside scenes and animals adorned the walls, while finely crafted tatami mats served as rugs throughout. Tables and chairs, reflecting the new western style and attitude of the Imperial household, were brilliantly executed in the spare manner of the Japanese and covered with a mirror-like black lacquer finish. The wooden floors were polished until they fairly glowed. Everything had an aura of newness, yet Grant supposed that emperors and their concubines, wearing impeccably embroidered silk kimonos, had been gliding down these corridors for centuries before Columbus had encountered the New World. He was not aware that the palace had been rebuilt only recently, following a great Tokyo fire. The retired President wondered how a culture that could produce this magnificent art and style for long could be so backward in science and politics.

As the attendant poured the deep-amber liquid into the glasses, an advisor took the opportunity to ask of the visiting politico, “Mr. President, what is your view of an elected governing legislature?”

“Perhaps his highness would care to show me his garden,” Grant said,

pretending not to hear the question. “I have heard rumors regarding its beauty.”

The Emperor bowed and led the President for a stroll down a corridor, shoji panels sliding silently open unbidden before them, whispering closed behind the trailing entourage. In the garden more serene perfection greeted the group. Enclosed behind white stone walls capped with dramatic black ceramic tiles, the carefully manicured pine and black-cherry trees were paired with tiny, centuries-old bonsai versions. Ceramic, stone and terra cotta statues of varying sizes, hues and subjects dotted the compound, each surrounded by stylized artistic expressions paring nature to its most elemental and elegant. A profusion of precisely placed flowers accented the conifers, again in large and small examples. A bamboo garden guarded a red-lacquered foot bridge spanning a crystalline pond filled with aquatic plants and brightly colored koi. Even as small birds flitted about, the President could not detect so much as a single errant leaf upon the ground. The paths they walked were of pebbles, each selected by hand for dimensions and color, then carefully raked in an intricate design. He had little doubt that the instant the group was out of sight, gardeners in hidden spaces would swarm out to restore even the slightest perturbation. He idly wondered whether they stood out in the rain and wind to maintain perfection even in the face of disquieted nature and wasn't certain his speculation was as entirely absurd as it seemed.

The Emperor's advisor, having allowed sufficient time to elapse, boldly repeated his question regarding an elected legislature. The visitor would not likely view this as an insult, even if other Nippon advisors were shocked. To ask a third time however, was out of the question, so the petitioner kept his own

counsel and waited hopefully for a reply.

Grant mulled this over for some time. He was quite aware of the widespread lack of literacy in Japan. Japan was only just beginning to emerge from twenty centuries of political and cultural isolation. Her citizens, while most industrious, were not sophisticated politically and were certainly not prepared to take the reins of self-government in hand. Too many complex issues in international finance, military, government and emerging colonial crises were now facing the Japanese to suggest any chance of ceding control of the government to a plebiscite legislature.

Akagi refreshed the visitor's whiskey unobtrusively and the President sipped thoughtfully. "Very dangerous," was his blunt reply. "They are useful in their own way in the handling of routine local affairs. But in times of trouble the political naiveté spoken of becomes a hindrance to the exercise of national administration." He continued, "Only fifteen years ago, President Lincoln ignored our constitution when it didn't suit his needs. A good thing, too; if he had waited for Congress to approve, the secessionists would have prevailed and the country would be in complete disarray."

"Then you would not have a legislature at all?" the Emperor asked.

"Oh yes, I would have one," Grant replied, thinking of Japan's current plight, "without fangs or claws and eating soft food."

Grant and Mutsuhito laughed heartily together and continued to converse at length, as the former Defender of the Constitution and the direct descendant of God meandered among paths in the garden. The Emperor, not particularly fond of the trivia of government, paid little attention, but his friend and councilor took

the President's comments to heart and was already planning accordingly. Akagi watched unobtrusively, taking mental notes. He would report to his masters later.

For his part, Grant was enjoying the gardens immensely, and for a moment, his unconscious military manner of visually inspecting every possible location for an enemy sharpshooter yielded a glimpse at a pair of childish eyes peeping out from behind a stone figurine. The aging General made eye contact, then winked and smiled at the young boy and was rewarded with a silent giggle as the small face disappeared. It was the highlight of Grant's day and he never once mentioned it to a soul.

United States Trade Dock, Shimoda Harbor

Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan

May 12, 1890

The spring breeze carried white cherry blossom petals from trees nearby and deposited them on the bamboo sandal-clad feet of Toshio Sakai, as he stood with perhaps two-dozen other young Japanese men on the loading dock. Slightly built but sinewy and strong, he regarded the petals absently as a representative from the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association droned endlessly through an interpreter.

“When you arrive in Lahaina,” the interpreter said, pausing for the American to speak before continuing, “you will be met by the plantation overseer. He will transport you to your new home and help you with any special needs you may have.”

Toshio adjusted his simple work clothes and pulled his woven bamboo hat, which looked vaguely like an inverted funnel, onto his head as a shield against the sun. His wide-set brown eyes peered into the rigging of the old converted whaler, then to deckhands unloading a cargo of cheap machine-made cloth and a few cases of small tools. His perusal wandered to the bow of the ship and lingered over the foreign letters spelling out the name of the vessel, *Hawaiian Sunrise*.

The old wooden ship was past her prime, too small and too slow to

compete with the smoke belching coal steamers that plied the Pacific trade these days. The master was an old man on his forty-first, and last, sailing and could be seen treading the deck in a sort of sentimental haze, perhaps recalling his youth harpooning humpbacks and wrestling lustily with the naked island girls that used to swim to meet the boats in Lahaina harbor. The bawling of protesting livestock held in pens on deck added to the cacophony around the port. Stevedores and crewmen could be seen brandishing all manner of convenient weapons and heard swearing at each other in half a dozen languages as cargoes were loaded or discharged. Japanese *okinakashi* guided nets with crates marked “Porcelain-ware--Destination Boston” aboard and disappeared down the hatch, reappearing moments later heading down the gang planks for another burden. He did not know that the cargo coming off this and dozens of other foreign ships was what was driving him on board.