CHAPTER THREE

The Year 730

Principal characters
Otomo Tabito, Governor General of Dazaifu
Lady Otomo Sakanoue, his half-sister
Otomo Yakamochi, his son
The young woman Kojima
Yamanoue Okura, Governor of Chikuzen
Manzei, Buddhist priest charged with building the temple Kanzeonji

The morning light came softly through the paper windows. The young woman beside him moved to open them and sunlight danced on the polished floor. In this New Year's season there was warmth in the air. The sky was soft and the height where his residence stood was white with the bloom of plum trees. The day was perfect for the occasion and, acknowledging that, their eyes met and they smiled. He thought again how fortunate he was. She was young and he was not, but she seemed not to mind. No, more than that: she truly cared for him, and he knew that he was in love with her. At sixty-six his life was drawing to a close, but this late love burnished his days.

His wife had died so soon after they came here to Dazaifu. When he was appointed Governor General she had been firm in wanting to come with him, though most wives stayed in the capital when their husbands were posted to the provinces. They had come as a family, bringing their two young children and Yakamochi, his thirteen-year-old son by an earlier wife. Had the journey been too much for her? Young as she was, was she shattered at leaving home? She took to her bed, the physicians floundered, and she died.

He had been desolate. His half-sister had hurried from the capital. In her charge the household ran smoothly and the children were cared for and educated; he was grateful for her presence. Lady Otomo Sakanoue was a notable personality in her own right: a poet as distinguished as he, a witty and attractive woman who had been loved by an imperial prince and a powerful politician. She knew the ways of the aristocratic world he and she had been born to, and she shared a passionate devotion to their Otomo family. He was fond of her but she could not fill the aching emptiness that gripped him. He could not work, he could not sleep, he could only compose elegies in response to the poems of condolence his friends sent.

Hoping to distract him, some of his officers had given a small party and this girl was among those summoned from the teahouses in the pleasure quarter of the town outside the gate. He had thought no other woman could attract him, yet he was touched by her grace when she sang a sad song and the thought of her remained after she left. When later that night he was escorted to his residence on the hill he found her sitting quiet in the entryway. She would leave at once if he wished her to, she said, but he found himself asking her to stay.

And so she came into his life. Not just into his bed--into his life. She was bright and lively; she made him laugh. And she had a mind:

of course she could make a poem when she came to him--her teahouse training taught her that--but he had polished her gift, and she was so quick that she surprised him. She surprised him in many ways.

She fanned the charcoal in the brazier until the water in the kettle purred. She made tea and served the first cup of the day. They sipped, taking in the blossoms, the clouds of bloom that he and his guests would celebrate in poems later, inspiration spurred by wine. One of his own poems came back to him--

Great sages of the past
gave the name of "sage" to wine.
How well they spoke!

His mood darkened, for though that poem and the other twelve he had spun out at the time dwelled on the pleasures of drinking, they had been written out of resentment.

He knew why at his advanced age he was here at Dazaifu. He was here because they wanted him out of the capital. "They" were the joyless men who now controlled the court: the leaders of the Fujiwara family.

It had been done politely. The order assigning him as Governor General had been handed over with ceremony and a gush of words. He was reminded that his father had served in the same post, and he

was assured that the position demanded someone of his rank and of his polish as an aristocrat and a poet, for he would entertain embassies from China and Korea; the ability to produce a poem that was both eloquent and apt--and, of course, in Chinese--was the mark of a cultured man, and he, Tabito, excelled at it. More, the responsibilities at Dazaifu demanded a military man of eminence, and surely there

was none more eminent than he, the head of the Otomo, Yamato's chief military clan. In the event of attack from abroad he would be responsible for defending Kyushu, the most likely target, but of more immediate concern were the fractious Hayato in southern Kyushu. No other man was as qualified to deal with them. Eight years earlier, when they rose in rebellion, killing the governor appointed by the court to try to control them and collect their taxes,he had led an army to subdue them. It had been a hard campaign, a year and a half of battling those intrepid warriors in their rugged land where their magic was strong. Many had fought till they dropped: he heavily had counted a dreadful toll of their soldiers, and he had lost too. But he had mastered them and they had not rebelled since. For the first time the court could truly claim to govern all of Kyushu.

For centuries the Hayato had frustrated and frightened the Yamato court as it tried to extend its sway over their territory. There

had been intervals when they were quiet, when they sent delegations and gifts of their handiworks (their oiled silks and bamboo wares were especially prized). When they appeared the court tried to awe them with a display of power. It mustered upwards of five hundred cavalrymen from the provinces around the capital, but at the same time it showered gifts on the delegates and honored them with ceremonies and titles. The Hayato were probably amused by the waffling.

Yamato had tried everything. The often useful tactic of intermarriage had linked the court's ruling family and their chieftains; the Hayato showed no compunction about fighting relatives. The court had sought to mollify them by appointing officials from among their number, rather than sending in strangers; the Hayato cut down their own. Men of distinction were dispatched to lecture on the rule of law and obedience to the emperor, and Buddhist priests were sent from Dazaifu to propagate that gentling religion;. all to no effect. Two hundred families were moved from orderly northern Kyushu into the South as civilizing agents; there was no mellowing as a result.

Several times during the sixth and seventh centuries the court brought groups of Hayato to the capital district and settled them there. Partly this was in the hope that as hostages they would ensure the good behavior of their kin back home (another hope that proved forlorn) but, more important, Yamato wanted to make use of fighting men so formidable. They were placed at critical points in the capital's defense scheme and they bolstered the imperial guard. The danger was not of foreign invasion but of civil war, the ever-present danger of a coup mounted by an alliance of powerful families and a disaffected prince.

In those days the weapons of war included sword, bow, lances both short and long, and magic. In battle the Hayato were supported by a sorceress of high rank who worked to cast a spell over the enemy. The Hayato brought to the service of the court not only military prowess but the magic bound up in their rites.

A ritual dance that the court particularly enjoyed was one that displayed the contortions of a drowning man as the tide rose about him: to his hips, his chest, his throat. The court's pleasure in watching these spasms derived from a myth that they represented the triumph of the emperor's ancient ancestor over the ancestor of the Hayato. The myth was not ancient; myths can be contrived to fill a need and in no time at all become certifiably hoary. In this case, since Yamato had not yet succeeded in conquering the Hayato, it was comforted to have stories of long-ago triumphs (another told of a comely young Yamato prince who put on woman's clothes to arouse the Hayato chieftain, then skewered him while cuddling).

The Hayato had a singular ability to dispel evil spirits by barking and howling like dogs. Dog spirits were known to have mystical powers, and because the Hayato came from the uncivilized backwater of southern Kyushu (some said they were a different people entirely, whose ancestors had come from far south in the ocean) they were naturally gifted at imitating dogs. Whenever the emperor went forth they preceded him, barking and howling when his sedan chair came to a curve in the road, a provincial border, or when it arrived at a station. A special Hayato office was established in the Ministry of War to make certain that the Hayato who had been resettled in Yamato did not become so domesticated that their barking lost its potency.

The resident Hayato, sometimes arrayed alongside equally truculent "barbarians" from the other end of Japan, the far north, were prominent in major court ceremonies: at the coronation of a new emperor, at the Great Harvest Festival in the autumn, at the rituals of the New Year, and at receptions for foreign embassies (where they were put forth as evidence that they had been conquered).

Tabito himself, as the court's ranking general, had sometimes led their march from positions left and right of the main gate into the palace enclosure and to their stations for the ceremonies. Remembering, he found himself telling the girl now sipping tea beside him how the Hayato sang and danced before the emperor to the accompaniment of strings, flutes, drums, and clappers; how they wore their swords backwards, draped red scarves over their shoulders, and put red and white ornaments in their hair. He told her how they barked: those on the left loudly, those on the right answering with soft growls, soft and loud alternating in antiphonal response. The girl clapped in delight, and he was pleased at having given her another glimpse of the glamorous court so far away.

Tabito had maintained an interest in the Hayato in the years since he had fought against them. They had earned his respect as strong, skillful warriors. He believed that he knew how to handle them, but he would have been in a better position to promote his ideas at the capital than here at Dazaifu.

And so, though he professed to be honored by his appointment as Governor General, he knew the motives of those who had put him here, and he smarted that he was in a middle-level position when by lineage and seniority he was ready for the highest level. He was head

of the Otomo, and though the name no longer meant what it once had, it was a great name, still with the potential to play an important role--if he were there, at the capital.

But he was here, Governor General of Dazaifu, effectively sidelined from court politics, sitting out his last years as far from the scene of action as those conniving upstarts could put him. And here he watched as younger men--lesser men--were promoted over him.

He yearned for the old days, when rule was simpler, when the Yamato government was a confederacy of clans, each with its function. One conducted ritual to praise and supplicate the gods; another made armor and weapons; and from time immemorial his clan, the Otomo, had been warriors.

There was another lineage, who, tracing their ancestry to the Sun Goddess, held the position of priest-chieftain among them, but only as first among equals, and nothing without the armies of other clans in the confederacy, the Otomo in particular. Because the many consorts of that line always produced a plentitude of princely claimants, the real power rested with the clan that enthroned the candidate of its choice and then supplied the ministers to run his government. The process of selecting a king usually involved the demise of his rivals, and in this a military clan held an advantage. The Otomo had often been kingmakers.

Tabito's great-great-grandfather, Otomo Kanamura by name, controlled the government for more than forty years, through the reigns of five successive kings, all of whom he selected and, by judicious use of the Otomo army, put on the throne. It was Kanamura who was head of the government at the time of Iwai and who dispatched the army that destroyed him. Kanamura chose not to send Otomo warriors to battle Iwai, but a decade or so later he sent them to Korea, with two of his sons in command, in a doomed attempt to prevent Silla from taking over the merchant towns of Kaya.

Kanamura's grandsons--Tabito's grandfather and great-uncle-played major roles in fighting and winning a brisk civil war in 672. They and their allies fought to put their candidate on the throne because they opposed the direction the government was taking--the push to create a strong central government on the Chinese model, and so to strip the old clans of their power. Ironically, once their man became emperor he pushed centralization with even greater zeal than his predecessor.

Among the strategies pursued in the name of reform was the creation of a national army to replace clan troops like the Otomo's.

Most of the unhappy peasants' sons who were drafted got neither training nor equipment; most of them ended in labor gangs on construction projects; but deprived of their hereditary role the power of clans like the Otomo faded away.

One resolute and prolific family had seized control of the new bureaucracy. They bore the name Fujiwara. Though the Fujiwara were spun off from an ancient clan, that name was new. It dated only from the time of Tabito's father, and it still sounded unfamiliar to the ears--to Tabito both unfamiliar and unpleasant. The Fujiwara and a co-conspiring prince had come to power with a coldly perpetrated coup. At a palace reception for envoys from Korea, in front of the empress, they had murdered the current strongman. Assassinations were common enough, and Tabito thought that the victim deserved it, but this killing-- in the palace, before foreigners--was distasteful.

The Fujiwara brought the same grim seriousness to the business of founding their dynasty and running the government. To Tabito the imposing new capital at Nara was a symbol of their dominance: laughter and lightness were banned; the burdens of office were to be borne gravely. In a fit of spleen he dashed off his poems in praise of drinking.

How ugly!
those men who
with airs of wisdom
refuse to drink wine.
Take a aood look,
and they resemble apes.

There would be drinking and laughter where he was in charge. There would be wine and poetry at Dazaifu this afternoon and as long as Otomo Tabito was Governor General.

It was time for the girl to leave. He watched as she performed a morning ritual: separating the mats they slept on, as each night she pushed them together, and straightening the mussed bedding so the maids wouldn't see the state they left them in. This little prudery delighted him. She bowed half-teasingly, flashed one more smile, and was gone.

She would be back for the party along with other women from the teahouses, called to pour wine and jolly the guests. He would watch her fondly but they both knew it would be unseemly if she stayed close to him. When night fell she would be close.

The maids came and he went to his morning bath. With the window slid open he feasted on the plum blossoms as he soaked in the tub.

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When the sun was high they gathered. First to arrive was Tabito's closest friend at Dazaifu, crustily honest Yamanoue Okura, Governor of Chikuzen, the province in which Dazaifu lay. Tabito and Okura had developed warm bonds here. Sharing a love of Chinese poetry and learning, nostalgic for the capital yet exhilarated because they were at the gateway for the Chinese influences that were transforming their country, they drew together, supporting and stimulating each other.

These two men and Lady Otomo Sakanoue made Dazaifu the poetry capital of Japan: they were the three finest poets of their age. But Lady Sakanoue would not participate today. Being a woman she had not attended the university to be trained in the Chinese classics, and the festivities today would be decidedly Chinese. Not only was praise of plum blossoms a fashion newly imported from China, the plum tree was itself a quite recent immigrant. Numbers of them had been planted around Dazaifu, but had Lady Sakanoue been asked she might have said that her taste, Japanese taste, was for the fragile,
14 short-lived cherry blossom. And although Tabito and Okura believed that they were breaking new ground with their Sinified poems, Japanese taste proved to be for the kind of lyricism that Lady Sakanoue was gifted with.

My heart, thinking
"How beautiful he is"
Is like a swift river
Which though one dams it and dams it
Will still break through.

Close as they became at Dazaifu, it is doubtful that Tabito and Okura could have formed the same friendship at the capital, for they were of quite different status. Tabito's pedigree stretched back to mythology but Okura's background is obscure; some believe that he was a naturalized Korean or the son of Korean immigrants. Born in 660, he held minor government posts until in 701 his facility in Chinese gained him a position as a scribe with an embassy appointed to go to China; his name came last among the members of the mission.

The delegation tried to sail in 701 but were driven back by storms; they finally got away at the end of July 702. It is difficult to know how many years Okura spent in China. The ambassador returned two years later. (He proudly reported that when he was received in China, one official told him that he had heard of Japan, that it was said to be a country of gentlemen whose people enjoy prosperity and happiness and are extremely polite, adding that the ambassador's "most favorable appearance" confirmed all that he had heard. Being a bearer of good news, the ambassador was promoted two ranks and rewarded with rice fields and other lands.)

However, the vice-ambassador and his suite did not return until the spring of 707; if Okura was one of this group he would have had nearly five years in China.

At any rate, his years in China and his excellence as a Chinese scholar raised his prestige so that in 714 he finally received court rank, though low, making him a member of the lower aristocracy. In 721 he was appointed tutor to the crown prince, the young man who now was emperor, and in 726 he reached the high point of his government career when he was made Governor of Chikuzen.

He was the only one of the coterie around Tabito who had been to China, and his poetry is the most Chinese. His famed poem on poverty surged from his open- hearted response to conditions around him, but he could not have written it had he not known the Chinese tradition of social protest (just as Tabito's poems in praise of wine show that he knew the Chinese sages' raffish delight in drinking). Here, in part, is Okura's destitute peasant:

Like other men I work my fields
But only rags hang from my shoulders....
Under a sagging roof, in leaning walls,
With straw scattered over a dirt floor,
My parents at my pillow,
Wife and children at my feet,
Surround me with quiet sobbing.

In the hearth no embers glow,
In the pot a spider spins its web,
We forgot long ago how to cook rice....

And yet the village headman comes growling at the door to collect taxes. “Is this,” his peasant cries, “Is this the way of the world?”

Okura did not exaggerate this picture of grinding poverty. AChinese poet would have blamed the emperor’s rule. Okura could not bring himself to do this. He offers no remedy.

It was probably Okura’s eloquent poems of condolence when Tabito’s wife died that made the two men close. Okura was no stranger to grief. He had lost a young son. Heartsick, he had addressed these lines to the deity of the underworld:

He is young,
and does not know the way.
0 Angel of Hades,
I shall send you an offering.
Carry him there on your back.

Next to arrive was Tabito’s neighbor, the Buddhist priest Manzei. In civilian life Manzei had been a government official named Kasa Maro. He had entered the priesthood and taken the name Manzei late in life, on the death in 722 of an empress he had admired, but his priestly robes did not prevent the government from using his services. In 723 he was sent to build the major Buddhist temple planned as part of the Dazaifu complex.

He came with an impressive record as an administrator and builder, having been especially rewarded for constructing the Kiso Road through the mountains to link the capital district and the regions in the northeast. In later centuries the road he engineered would become the Kiso Highway, the mountain route linking Tokyo and Kyoto, parallel to the Tokaido coastal route. Building a road of any kind through those mountains was a notable achievement but, like Japan’s other roads at that time, his Kiso Road was little more than a footpath and still rough, as recorded in a folk song from one of the provinces it traversed:

The highway through Shinano
Is a new-cut road.
You may trip on the stubs:
Put on your sandals, dearest!

The temple being built was called Kanzeonji because it was to be dedicated to Kannon, the Buddhist deity of mercy and compassion. Building Kanzeonji was an assignment suited to Manzei's abilities but it was not an easy task. He had already worked on it for seven years and it was far from finished.

Its construction had been ordered more than half a century earlier. When Dazaifu was being built in the 660s the emperor of that time decreed that Kanzeonji be erected beside it as a place for prayer in memory of his mother, the Empress Saimei. She had been empress when it was decided to rescue Paekche from the assault by Silla and China. No doubt the decision was made by powers behind the throne, but she was a spirited lady who enjoyed her role as commander-in-chief, and she came to Kyushu in 661 with her son the crown prince so that she could personally oversee the assembly and dispatch of the troops. She died here, in a temporary palace not far distant, and it was the necessary period of mourning that delayed the expedition for two years before it sailed to disaster in 663.

It is understandable that her son wished to commemorate her. Consort of a ruler, she took over when he died, something not unheard of but not usual either. After three years she resigned in favor of her younger brother, and when he died she became empress again. Twice empress, she was also the mother of two emperors: the son who was crown prince when she died, and his younger brother, who launched the civil war of 672 to take over by eliminating his brother's son and heir. (That was the war in which the Otomo played a decisive role, and were subsequently mortified to find that their reward was aggressive action to strip power from clans like theirs.)

The temple that Manzei was charged with building had to be an impressive one of many buildings, and construction had gone slowly. Back in 709 Dazaifu had received an order from the clearly impatient court: the temple had been established by imperial decree but "years have passed and it is not yet completed"; therefore Dazaifu should see to it that fifty priests were assigned to act as foremen for the gangs of laborers that were to be drafted during the peasants' slack months in the winter, so that "with expert supervision" the temple would be constructed quickly.

Whether fifty priests were ever assembled and, if they were, whether their supervision was expert, is doubtful. In any case it would have been difficult to muster the gangs of laborers.

As Okura wrote, conditions among the peasants were often desperate. Northern Kyushu was first to receive new methods from the continent, and its farming was the most advanced in Japan--iron tools were used here centuries

before they appeared in the Yamato area. Nevertheless, agriculture then was primitive. Irrigation, where it existed, was crude. Seed was a remote ancestor of today's varieties. Little was understood about fertilizing; when land was no longer productive it was abandoned. The peasants were burdened with taxation in kind and in labor, including a system that forced them to get their seed from a government granary, where it was issued as a loan at high interest.

The chronicles of those years are peppered with reports of drought, flooding, violent storms, plagues of insects, blight, epidemic disease, and consequent famine all over Japan. Dazaifu reported that calamities had repeatedly prevented the growing of crops. Prayers to both Shinto and Buddhist deities seemed unavailing. The emperor lamented that, because of his shortcomings, "Our conduct is not approved by Heaven," and "for this reason the seasonal changes are out of order, rain and drought do not come when due, the crops do not ripen, the people are suffering." Many peasants became wandering vagrants. Those drafted to work on Kanzeonji were likely too emaciated or dull in spirit to be of much use. Or they melted away into the night.

And so Manzei had been sent to build what his predecessors could not. He worked valiantly and with some success. His being a poet was a help, for in seeking labor and materials he had often to joust, in an urbane yet determined way, with both Tabito and Okura. He usually got some of what he needed. Buildings were rising.

Few of Manzei's poems have come down to us but one of the most quoted and best loved poems of the period is his. We do not know whether he composed it at Dazaifu or somewhere else, before or after he became a priest, but it expresses the Buddhist idea of evanescence.

To what shall I compare
this life?
the way a boat
rowed out from the morning harbor
leaves no traces on the sea.

The other guests assembled quickly: the governors of the provinces of Bungo (southeast of Dazaifu) and Chikugo (Imai's old stronghold, south of Dazaifu); the deputy governors of Satsuma and Osumi (the two provinces at the southern tip of Kyushu, the homes of the Hayato people Tabito had campaigned against); the governor and his deputy from the island of Iki (in the strait, about a third of the way to Korea); the deputy governor of Tsushima (the much larger islands about two-thirds of the way to Korea); two of Okura's staff in Chikuzen;

and from the officials at Dazaifu, Tabito's three vicegovernors, the captain and the lieutenant of the military, the secretary and his assistant, the physician and the pharmacist, the magistrate and two judicial secretaries, the Shinto priest and the Yin-Yang master, and the chief accountant. With four others whose posts we do not know, there were altogether thirty-two men, and thirty-two verses resulted, all in the characteristic short form of thirty-one syllables.

Since the Japanese then regulated their lives by the lunar calendar, the thirteenth day of the New Year fell on our February 4. At Dazaifu on that day it was warm, however capricious spring might be later. Mats covered with red cloth were spread under the blossoming trees, wine flowed, the delicacies of the season were served. When enough cups had been drained, rank was forgotten and the merry guests broke slender branches from the trees to garland each other with bloom.

Tabito had been selective in issuing invitations. No one was invited who would have been embarrassed to commit verse in such company. Everyone present was capable of producing a poem on the spot, but, though there was pretense that it was all extemporaneous, each man had worked and worried over his thirty-one syllables ever since he received his invitation: inspiration could fail, wine could help or hinder. Here is a sampling of their efforts:

When spring comes
And the first plums bloom
In your garden,
Could you spend the long spring days
Looking on them by yourself?
-- Okura

In my garden
The plum blossoms fall-
Or does snow flow
From the distant heavens?
-- Tabito

Spring comes, and the nightingale
cries hidden in the treetops
as it swoops
to the lower sprays of plum.

-- Yamaguchi Wakamaro, deputy secretary

Tabito thought highly enough of the day's harvest to copy them all and send them to a friend at Nara: "On the thirteenth of the first month [of 7301 we gathered for a banquet at the house of the old man, the Governor General. It was the splendid season of early spring. The weather was pleasant; the wind was mild. Plum blossoms scattered like powder before the mirror; orchids emitted fragrance like a sachet tucked in the sash.... In the garden young butterflies danced; in the sky last year's geese returned north. Here, with heaven for our canopy and the earth for our seat, we drew knee to knee and passed the cup.... The poetry of old includes verses on the falling plum blossoms--and how does our day differ from the past? We composed a few slight songs on the plums in the garden."

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The many festivities of the New Year behind him, Tabito turned to routine duties: overseeing the Dazaifu staff of several hundred, reviewing the reports that flowed in from Kyushu's eight provinces and the two islands under his jurisdiction; monitoring the receipt of taxes.

The tax system was modeled on China's. Agriculture was really the country's only industry. Since the most valuable resource was the land that could grow rice, the government undertook to parcel out that paddy land equitably so that every peasant household could pay its taxes and, necessarily, have enough left to live on.

A census conducted every six years identified who could be taxed and who was entitled to an allotment of land. A household received a quarter of an acre for each male over the age of six, and two-thirds of that for a female. (Originally a new-born baby received an allotment, but infant mortality was so high that the constant granting and retrieving of allotments was vexing.)

With the central government reaching down to manipulate the income of each family, and a trail of bureaucratic paper that stretched back to the Bureau of Accounts in the Population Ministry, it was an involved, burdensome system. To Tabito it was offensive, as offensive as those humorless men who had perpetrated it as part of their design to centralize all power in themselves.

He admitted, however, that in much of the country it was working. It was working around Dazaifu, in the northern provinces of Kyushu, where the peasants tilled their allotted fields with no more than their customary grumbling. It was not working in the southern provinces, Osumi and Satsuma, where the Hayato stoutly resisted the scheme and had killed a governor or two to emphasize their views.

While the vice-governors of those two provinces were at Dazaifu for the plum blossom party, Tabito had talked quietly with each of them. He was concerned about maintaining peace in that area, and shortly he sent off to the capital a strongly worded dispatch. It had never been possible to enforce the allotment system in those two provinces, he stated; more strife and bloodshed would surely flow from further attempts to force it on them. He recommended that the farmers of those provinces be permitted to hold land as they chose. (After pondering, the court agreed.)

The most basic tax extracted from the peasants was labor, corvee (as in building Kanzeonji) or military service (which often degenerated into mere labor).

The commodity taxes were collected by the governors, who kept what was authorized to run their provinces (Dazaifu audited them to curb extravagance) and forwarded the rest. The rice went into

Dazaifu's warehouses to cover operating expenses, but rice was just one of the items.

There were goods that the court demanded all of. Silk was one; only courtiers could wear silk. Another was the dried plants that yielded a rich purple dye, a hue forbidden to all but the nobility (sometimes Dazaifu dyed fabrics and sent them to the capital).

Beyond such preempted items the government demanded a share of just about everything the peasants produced in their struggle to eke out a living: the cloth the women wove from plant fibers, the fish dried in the sun, the furs of animals trapped, the salt extracted from the sea; taxes were a crushing burden. In answer to Okura's destitute peasant, yes, that was the way of the world.

Kyushu was now operating in the black. Until recently it had not been producing enough to support all of Dazaifu's operations and the government had to support its distant capital with iron and bundles of bamboo to make arrows and with silk and cloth to present to foreign envoys in return for their "tribute."

Handling and keeping track of tax goods occupied a large part of Dazaifu's staff. Once in a while Tabito would stroll through the accounting section just to let the horde of clerks know that he was aware of them. These young men came from the solid old local gentry of Kyushu. They had received their education--reading, writing, figuring--at Dazaifu's academy, set up for that purpose. They had been drafted to serve here, but most of them counted the months until they could go

home to work in a district or provincial office, where their family connections would give them more importance and their prospects would be brighter.

Every bundle of tax goods that came in carried a tag, a thin strip of wood, usually from one to three feet long, two to three inches wide; it listed in black ink the item, quantity, and source. The clerks recorded the information and totted up the amounts, providing the basis for the reports that flowed to Tabito and on to the capital.

When they caught up with their work, some of the clerks would shave boards that had been tallied and on the clean surface they would practice their writing or copy maxims from a popular Chinese book on how to pass examinations for advancement. If Tabito approached, such boards were hastily hidden, but the Governor General had been known to spot someone's effort, ask to see it, and utter a word of praise or encouragement to ease the victim's embarrassment.

(In the many excavations of Dazaifu's site, hundreds of those boards have been found, most of them at least partly legible despite more than a millennium in the earth.)

For relief from paperwork Tabito rode out on inspections, some of several days to one of the provinces beyond the mountains, some of a few hours, as when he checked on the progress at Kanzeonji, which was separated from the Dazaifu headquarters only by the buildings of the academy where the young clerks had been trained.

At Kanzeonji Manzei's busiest season was drawing to a close, for with the third month the time for planting neared and his drafted peasants grew restive. Both he and Tabito were relieved that the winter had brought noticeable progress on some buildings, and Manzei pointed out augmented stocks of roughed-out timbers, piled on blocks away from the damp earth, with wedges between them so that air could circulate as they dried. His skilled carpenters would have enough to work with through the warm months.

On one of his visits Tabito took occasion to teasingly congratulate Manzei on having successfully overcome the impediment of age and priestly vocation by fathering the baby born to one of his servants, in status a slave but nonetheless attractive. Manzei accepted the compliment gracefully. (Five generations and more than a century later, the descendants of that child, citing its aristocratic father, successfully petitioned to change their rank from slave to freeman.)

Quite regularly Tabito did what he did early one balmy day in late spring: he summoned his son Yakamochi to join him in inspecting Dazaifu's defenses. With the captain of the military (who was also an Otomo) and the personnel officer, trailed by junior officers, they rode out toward Onojo, the fortifications on one of the two mountains that flanked the valley headquarters. Tabito was in his element, a military man guiding his son to follow their clan's tradition.

After the stiff climb to the top and a tea break to rest the horses, they rode the five-mile path inside the breastworks, checking emplacements and the disposition of troops. When they reached one of the several clusters of storehouses Tabito dismounted to inspect the rice and weapons they held. He took time to satisfy himself that the required quantities were actually there and in good condition, for, as he reminded his officers, in case of attack the entire headquarters would take refuge on the two garrisoned mountains; they would have to be fed and armed to fight.

The troops were Frontier Guards. About three thousand were under Tabito's command, stationed on the two mountains, on the islands of Tsushima and Iki, and at lookout posts where they stood ready to light the signal fires that constituted an advance warning system stretching from Tsushima to Dazaifu.

On this day the Frontier Guards were Tabito's first concern. He frequently dismounted, his party necessarily following suit, so that he could talk with the men face to face. They had been conscripted from provinces hundreds of miles to the northeast, close to the limits of the court's control; not far beyond was the northern frontier and hostile "barbarians." In every province men were drafted into the national army that was supposed to replace the private armies of clans like the Otomo, but only the reputedly dauntless men of the northeastern provinces were sent to Dazaifu. It was said that though an arrow might hit one of them in the forehead, he would never be hit in the back, and the soft men of the capital district regarded them with uneasy awe.

Reputation notwithstanding, Tabito was quite certain that morale was low among his Frontier Guards. They had been chosen arbitrarily, torn from their young wives and old parents, marched for dusty days until they reached the port of Naniwa--Osaka today--where they had been herded onto boats for days of uncomfortable sailing to distant Kyushu. Their tours of duty were supposed to be three years but they knew that recruitment often lagged and that if no replacements arrived they would be held over. They found themselves in an unfamiliar landscape among people whose speech they could scarcely understand. Their soldiering seemed to consist mostly of growing the vegetables they ate; it made them homesick for their own fields. They were told that they were there to defend

their emperor's land but emperor and country were uncomprehensible: the only loyalty they felt was to their families and homes, and they worried that they might never see them again.

Yamamochi, at his father's side that day, never forgot the Frontier Guards at Dazaifu. Twenty-five years later he had to supervise the departure at Naniwa of a new levy of men bound for Kyushu. A brilliant poet himself, greater than his father, and different (his aunt, Lady Sakanoue, had been a greater influence than his father), it occurred to him there at the port to ask the unhappy conscripts for poems. Most he discarded but some he included in an immense anthology he was compiling (perhaps he touched them up a bit). Many are straightforward laments-

My wife must be longing for me deeply--
Even in the water I drink
Her face appears.
For the world I can't forget her.

but some are forthright in their anger-

Truly he is an evil man
To take me as a soldier
When I am so ill!

From today on
With never a look back
I go to be the emperor's damn shield.

Faced with bored and unhappy men, Tabito was inspired to call for an archery contest. The officers stationed on the mountain were upset--they hated to be surprised-- but targets were set up along the earthworks and the men in the vicinity were mustered. Training had been almost totally neglected until Tabito came as Governor General. He had ordered it stepped up but he suspected that the officers were less than zealous in following through. Still, most of the men had hunted for game with bows back home, and after they limbered up and got used to the bows from the storehouse they shot well.

Competition banished lethargy, they began to enjoy themselves, and bulls-eyes brought cries of "You got a rabbit!" or "A pheasant! You downed him!" In a quiet aside, Tabito told Yakamochi that they did far better than the courtier guards at the capital, who were given at least a small prize if they managed to hit the wall on which the target was placed. The young man took the hint and from that day on began to train harder.

Tabito personally commended those who scored highest and ordered saké for all, further upsetting his officers, who had counted on drinking it themselves. He left orders that such contests were to be held regularly for all the men, and he rode down the mountain pleased that he had left at least one contingent of Frontier Guards livelier than he found them. Tonight he would tell that lovely girl all about it.

*

The rainy season arrived, ran its sultry course, and gave way to summer's heat. At its most enervating, one of Tabito's legs began to pain him. He limped for a couple of days while the leg swelled and turned an ugly red. Then he took to his bed. His temperature rose alarmingly, and the pain was worse than any he had suffered as a soldier. The Dazaifu physician and the pharmacist concocted herbal medicines to reduce his fever, others to purge his blood, and still more to combat the infection; none seemed to help. The Yin-Yang master searched the astrological signs and tried all manner of divination to determine the source of the evil.

The household was shaken. With Lady Sakanoue's blessing, the young woman from the town moved in to share around-the-clock nursing with a devoted maid who had come with Tabito from Nara. They kept cool cloths on his forehead, debated whether hot or cold should be applied to his leg, and second-guessed the doctor.

Okura sent anxious inquiries. Manzei sent a team of priests who established themselves in an anteroom and prayed without cessation. As word spread, prayers went up from Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines all over Kyushu.

Tabito, feverish and dazed with pain, convinced that death was near, agonized that the head of the Otomo was dying in such a remote place, lamented that his half- brother and nephew were not at hand to hear his last wishes. At once an urgent message was dispatched to the capital. The bearer, riding hard on a fast horse, carried one of the eight copper bells then allotted to Dazaifu to speed vital journeys; its shrill jangle cleared the narrow way ahead of him and alerted post stations to ready a fresh horse.

Immediately the word reached Nara, the two Otomo men were summoned and ordered to ride in haste. By the time they reached Dazaifu the crisis had passed. The infection had gathered, opened, and suppurated, and now was beginning to heal. Tabito apologized to his kinsmen for their unnecessary trip. Before long he was up and about, and the two made ready to return. Tabito was not yet able to ride

but Captain Otomo Momoyo and Yakamochi led a group that accompanied them to the post station on Hakata Bay, then as now a busy port. After sharing a farewell drink and exchanging poems, the two travelers boarded a boat for a return journey more leisurely than their headlong dash to reach Dazaifu.

*

The rest of the year moved by without drama. Tabito especially enjoyed sitting with Okura before an open window at the residence, gazing at the mountains in the distance, noting their changing colors as autumn advanced, and looking down at the Chinese red and gold of the headquarters, while they discussed Chinese poets and philosophers. Tabito never tired of hearing Okura reminisce about his years in China.

At the end of the year Tabito received the orders he had often longed for. He was promoted to be one of the Great Counselors, the topmost three or four officials in the government. His term as Governor General of Dazaifu was over. He was to return to the capital to take up his new duties.

He was under no illusion. He knew that the appointment, coming so late in his life, was largely ceremonial: he would have no real influence, exercise no great power. But it was an honor. He prepared to travel during the coldest time of the year.

Now that he must leave Dazaifu he had the inevitable regrets. He would miss Okura and Manzei. He would not again see the plum blossoms outside the window of the Governor General's residence. He would miss the girl.

He told her when she came on the evening of the day that he received his orders, but he knew that she had already heard. She buried her head against his chest and made no sound, but when he lifted her face to his it was wet with tears.

He had already done what he could. He had given her a teahouse of her own and enough money so that she would be independent. She need never entertain a man unless she chose to.

He included her in the party that would see him off. One or two of the others were miffed by this (but not Okura or Manzei or Lady Sakanoue), which bothered him not at all; he was old enough and held enough rank to do as he pleased. And so she was one of those who rode with him as far as the post station at Ashiki, close by Mizuki, the massive defensive dam across the river.

Tears were shed at Ashiki, and not only by the girl. Of course poems were exchanged, this by the governor of Chikugo:

Dismal from now on,
the road over Ki Mountain--
and I had always wanted to take it!

The girl--her name was Kojima--tried hard not to embarrass him by being emotional:

Don't let your heart
race with thoughts of home.
Watch the winds
with care before you go
for the sea road is a savage one.

Tabito's reply was less restrained:

That 1, who thought myself a strong man,
Should now, on Mizuki's embankment,
Shed tears on bidding you farewell!

And then he was gone. He boarded a ship at Hakata Bay and sailed into the Inland Sea. As he passed coastal views that he had shared with his wife on the way down to Dazaifu the old sorrow deepened and it did not lighten when he reached home, where everything reminded him of her: Yet in dreams his contrary heart flew to Dazaifu.

This empty house,
with no one here,
is more painful to be in
than to be on a lonely sojourn,
with grass for a pillow.

His friends rallied to welcome him home and after the festivities of the New Year he took up his new duties. He did not long enjoy his lofty position at the court. He died on the twenty-fifth day of the seventh month.

Okura ended his tour as governor of Chikuzen that year, but returned to Nara too late to see his old friend. Manzei was still building Kanzeonji.