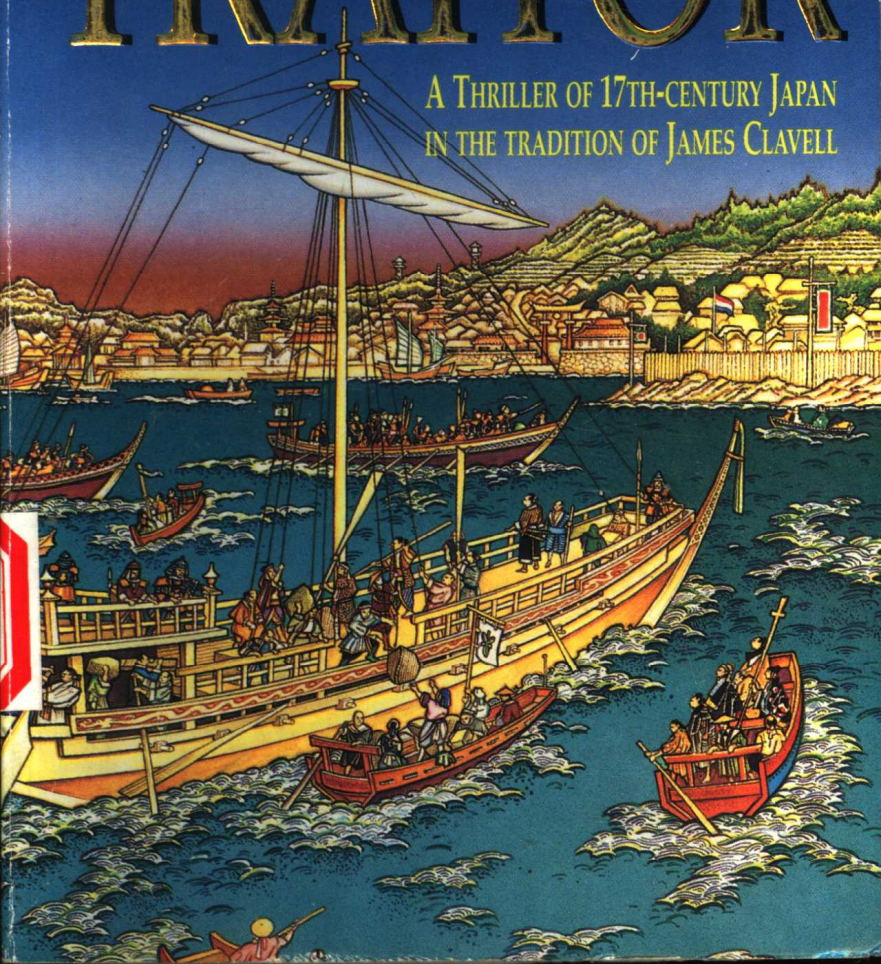


LAURA JOH ROWLAND

THE WAY OF THE
TRAITOR

A THRILLER OF 17TH-CENTURY JAPAN
IN THE TRADITION OF JAMES CLAVELL



The Way of the Traitor

Laura Joh Rowland



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Prologue

Like a pale moon, the sun's white globe rose in a mesh of drifting clouds above the eastern hills beyond Nagasaki, the international port city on Kyūshū, the westernmost of Japan's four major islands. Mist clung to the forested slopes and shrouded the city clustered around the harbor. Bells echoed from hillside temples, over the governor's stately mansion, the townspeople's thatched houses, and the foreign settlements. In the harbor, a salt-laden summer breeze stirred the sails of Japanese fishing boats, Chinese junks, and a myriad vessels from the exotic, faraway lands of Arabia, Korea, Tonkin. A patrol barge glided down the corridor formed by the harbor's high, wooded cliffs, past the watch-towers, toward a calm sea. On the western horizon, the silhouettes of distant ships appeared as dawn gradually pushed back night's curtain.

On a steep road leading away from town, a low, anguished moaning heralded a solemn procession. First came Nagasaki's highest officials – mounted samurai dressed in black ceremonial robes and caps – then four hundred lesser dignitaries, attendants, servants, and merchants, all on foot. Last marched a small army of soldiers armed with swords and spears, guarding the terrified prisoner in their midst.

'No,' whispered the samurai between his moans, which

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grew louder as the procession climbed higher into the hills. He had been stripped of his swords, and all clothing except a loincloth. He tried to break free, but heavy shackles hobbled his ankles; ropes bound his wrists behind his back. Spears prodded him up the path. 'This can't be happening!'

Amid the lower ranks of officials, one witness fought back fear and nausea. He hated watching executions, but his attendance at this one was mandatory, along with that of everyone else who had dealings with Nagasaki's foreign community. The *bakufu* – the military dictatorship that ruled Japan – wanted to remind them all of what would happen to anyone who violated the nation's harsh antitreason laws, to warn them against any allegiance with the foreigners, no matter how innocent, or any act of disloyalty toward the government. Here, in the only place where foreigners were allowed in Japan, an ambitious man might gather powerful allies and launch a rebellion against the Tokugawa regime. To prevent this, the *bakufu* enforced the laws more rigorously than anywhere else in the country, devoting immense effort to identifying and punishing traitors. Even a minor infraction would inevitably lead to death.

'Why are you doing this?' the prisoner pleaded. 'I beg you, have mercy!'

No one answered. The march continued relentlessly, until at last the members of the procession gathered on a plateau overlooking the city and harbor. None spoke, but the witness sensed their emotions, hovering in the moist air like a malignant cloud: fear; excitement; disgust. He watched, terrified and appalled, as the army bore the captive into the center of the plateau.

There waited four grim, muscular men with cropped hair, wearing ragged kimonos. One, hammer in hand, stood beside a newly erected frame composed of two wooden

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pillars joined by a crossbeam. Two others seized the prisoner's arms and forced him to his knees beside the man holding a sword; the sharp blade gleamed in the dawn light. These were *eta*, outcasts who served as executioners, and they were ready to cut off the prisoner's head and mount it on the frame as a warning to would-be criminals.

'No!' the prisoner screamed. 'Please!' Straining away from his captors, he entreated the audience. 'I've committed no crimes, I haven't done anything to deserve this!'

The witness longed to clap his hands over his ears and shut out the screams, to close his eyes against the sight of the panic-stricken samurai whose courage had fled before this ultimate disgrace, to deny his terrible sense of identification with the condemned prisoner.

Hoofbeats clattered as the governor of Nagasaki urged his horse forward. 'The prisoner, Yoshidō Ganzamon, is guilty of treason,' he announced in grave, ceremonial tones.

'Treason?' The samurai ceased struggling, his face blank with shock. 'I'm not a traitor. I've served the shogun well all my life.' His voice rose in disbelief. 'I'm the hardest-working officer in the harbor patrol. I always volunteer for extra duty. I risk my life in rough weather. I practice the martial arts so that I can some day bring my lord glory on the battlefield. I've never acted against the shogun or his regime. Whoever says so is lying!'

But the governor's voice drowned out his plea. 'Yoshidō Ganzamon has cravenly denounced the lord to whom he owes his ultimate duty and loyalty. He has called His Excellency the Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi a weak, stupid fool.'

The witness knew that Yoshidō had insulted the shogun during a party in the pleasure quarter, where the courtesans flattered and the sake flowed freely, removing men's inhibitions and loosening their tongues. Nagasaki boasted more

spies than anywhere else in Japan, all alert to the slightest transgression. They'd overheard Yoshidō's careless words and brought him to this sorry fate as they had many others.

'I didn't mean it,' Yoshidō protested. 'I was drunk; I didn't know what I was saying. A thousand apologies!' He tried to bow, but the two *eta* held him firm. 'Please, you can't kill me for one little mistake!'

No one spoke in his defense, not even the witness, who knew of the man's exemplary record and character. To take a traitor's side would mean sharing his guilt, and punishment.

'For his dishonor, Yoshidō Ganzaemon is hereby sentenced to death.' The governor nodded to the executioners.

Now the prisoner's fear turned to rage. 'So you condemn me as a traitor?' he shouted at the silent, watchful assembly. 'When there are much, much worse criminals in Nagasaki than I?' Harsh, bitter laughter exploded from him. 'Just take a look around Deshima, and you'll see!'

The crowd stirred; murmurs swept the plateau like a troubled wind. The witness gasped at the accusation, for Yoshidō spoke the truth. By unfortunate accident, the witness had discovered shocking activity on Deshima, the Dutch trade colony. He'd observed clandestine comings and goings, illegal transactions, forbidden collusion between foreigners and Japanese. Even worse, he believed he knew who bore the primary responsibility for the crimes. Now his bowels loosened; he swayed dizzily. If an underling like Yoshidō knew about the crimes, then who else did, or would eventually find out?

The governor held up a hand, arresting all sound and motion. 'Proceed!' he ordered.

The *eta* seized the looped knot of hair at Yoshidō's nape and yanked, forcing his head high, holding it immobile. The witness's heart thudded; his limbs went numb and cold in

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horrible empathy. He saw himself in Yoshidō's place, ready to die not in glorious battle, or honorably by his own hand in ritual suicide as befitting a samurai, but in disgrace, a convicted traitor.

Then he pictured the person he suspected of the Deshima crime, kneeling beside the executioner whose sword now rose in a high, deadly arc. A person to whose fate his own was inextricably bound. Would they die together like this, some day? The penalty for a crime of such magnitude was death not just for the criminal, but also for his whole family and all close associates. *Please*, the witness prayed in mute terror, *let it not happen!*

'Oh, yes, there are bigger villains than I, who are probably committing their evil, treasonous deeds even now. Punish them instead!'

Yoshidō's hysterical voice echoed through the hills, in vain. Panic sharpened the witness's senses. He heard the crowd's simultaneous intake of breath, smelled anticipation mingling with the salt sea breeze. Under the sun's blind, merciless eye, and over the hammering of his own heart, he heard Yoshidō scream: 'No, please, no no no NO!'

The executioner's sword slashed downward. In a great red fountain of blood, the blade severed Yoshidō's head, forever ending his protests and accusations.

But the witness's terror lived on. If matters continued along their present course, the danger would escalate. There would be more violent death, more mortal disgrace... unless he stopped the crimes before someone else did.

1

Through the desolate streets of night-time Edo marched Sano Ichirō, the shogun's *sōsakan-sama* – Most Honorable Investigator of Events, Situations, and People. A storm had cleared the Nihonbashi merchant district of pedestrians. Rain pelted tile roofs, streamed from eaves and balconies, dripped off the brim of Sano's wicker hat, and drenched his cloak and trousers. The moist air saturated his lungs with the odors of wet earth and wood. Beside him walked his chief retainer, Hirata, and behind them ten other samurai detectives from the élite corps Sano led. Their sandaled feet splashed along the narrow, muddy road. Spurning shelter and comfort for the sake of their mission, they forged ahead through the downpour.

'This is the place,' Sano said, halting outside a mansion surrounded by a high stone wall. Black mourning drapery hung over the gate; lanterns inside sent a shimmering glow up into the rainy night. Under the balcony of a shop across the street, Sano and his men gathered to review their strategy for the climax of a long investigation.

Since early spring, a rash of bizarre crimes had plagued Edo. Thieves had been stealing corpses from the homes of the deceased and the sites of accidents, or intercepting coffins on the way to funerals. Ignoring class distinctions,

they'd seized dead peasants, merchants, and samurai – nine in all. In addition, eight religious pilgrims had been murdered on highways outside town, with abandoned baggage and fresh blood found at the death scenes, but the victims gone. None of the corpses had been recovered. The crimes had terrified travelers and deprived families of the right to honor their dead with proper funerary rituals.

Sano, ordered by the shogun to capture the body thieves, had placed agents around town. Disguised as itinerant peddlers, they'd loitered in teahouses, entertainment districts, gambling dens, and other places frequented by the criminal element. This morning an agent had overheard a servant boast that the thieves had paid him to help steal the body of his dead master, during the funeral vigil tonight. The agent had followed the servant to the home of a rich oil merchant and reported the location to Sano.

'If the thieves come, we follow them,' Sano reminded Hirata and his men now. 'We have to catch their leader and find out what happens to the corpses.'

The detectives surrounded the merchant's house, while Sano and Hirata hid in a recessed doorway across an alley from the back gate. They waited for a miserable, wet hour, breathing the weather's humid warmth. Still the streets remained silent and deserted. Sano's urgency grew.

The son of a *rōnin*, he'd once earned his living as an instructor in his father's martial arts academy and by tutoring young boys, studying history in his spare time. Family connections had secured him a position as a senior police commander. He'd solved a murder case, saved the shogun's life, and been promoted a year and a half ago to the exalted position of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi's *sōsakan-sama*. By capturing the Bundori Killer, who had terrorized Edo with a series of grisly murders, he'd won the shogun's

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greater favor. Since then, he'd solved many other cases, seen his income and personal staff grow, and achieved a satisfying sense of professional accomplishment. His socially and financially advantageous marriage to Reiko, daughter of the rich, powerful Magistrate Ueda, would take place in the autumn. Yet a dark cloud shadowed Sano's existence.

He'd grown increasingly disillusioned with the *bakufu*, a corrupt, oppressive dictatorship. Under its orders, Sano had to spy on citizens who'd criticized government policy or otherwise offended the Tokugawa. Distorted and embellished, his findings were used to discredit honest men, who were then exiled or demoted. And the shogun was no better than the regime he commanded. Tokugawa Tsunayoshi indulged a weakness for religion, the arts, and young boys, while neglecting affairs of state. He also sent Sano on fruitless searches for ghosts, magic potions, and buried treasure. Yet Sano had no choice but to pursue such immoral or ridiculous activities. The shogun commanded his complete loyalty, and his future. And his personal life offered no consolation.

While time and self-discipline had exorcized the worst of his heartbreak over losing Aoi, the woman he loved, he couldn't relinquish her memory. He'd delayed his marriage for more than a year, but not just because it would finalize their separation. He didn't want to become close to anyone again, to risk the pain of hurting – or losing – someone else who mattered to him. Hence, he rejoiced at every assignment that was worthy of his effort and allowed him to postpone the wedding yet again, and to maintain his emotional isolation.

Now Sano raised his head, straining to hear. 'Listen!' he said to Hirata.

From up the alley came the sound of brisk footsteps splashing through puddles.

'A palanquin,' Hirata said as the sedan chair, carried by four hooded and cloaked bearers, emerged from the dripping darkness. The bearers laid down their burden at the merchant's gate. They were all samurai, with swords at their waists. The gate opened, and two of the men hurried inside. Soon they reappeared, stowed a long bundle in the palanquin, lifted the sedan chair, and trotted away.

Imitating a dog's bark, Sano signaled his men. He and Hirata followed the palanquin, darting in and out of alleys and doorways, through the rain's relentless clamor. Shadows moved through the night as the detective corps joined the pursuit. The palanquin led them deeper into Nihonbashi's twisting maze of streets, past closed shops and over canals. Finally it stopped outside one of a row of thatched buildings on the edge of the swordmakers' district. A sign over the door bore a circular crest and the name MIOCHIN. And Sano guessed the fate of the stolen corpses.

The bearers vanished inside the building with their bundle. Behind the paper windowpanes, lights burned and shadows moved. Sano gathered the detectives beside the abandoned palanquin and said, 'Surround the house, and arrest anyone who comes out. I'm going inside.'

He drew his sword, but Hirata whispered urgently, 'The thieves are dangerous killers. Please stay here, where you'll be safe.' Beneath his hat, his wide, boyish face was tense with concern; his earnest gaze beseeched Sano. 'Let us handle this.'

A rueful smile touched Sano's lips as he started toward the door. Twenty-one years old, Hirata took very seriously his role as chief retainer and primary protector, opposing Sano's determination to fight battles alone and reserve the

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worst risks for himself. He didn't know that his master's unspoken fear of loss and guilt outweighed the fear of death. And he didn't understand that Sano needed danger, and confrontation with evil. Bushido – the Way of the Warrior – taught that a samurai's sole purpose was to give his life to his lord's service. Duty, loyalty, and courage were its highest virtues, and together formed the foundation of a samurai's honor. But Sano's personal concept of Bushido encompassed a fourth cornerstone, as important to his honor as the others: the pursuit of truth and justice. The exhilarating quest for knowledge, the satisfaction of seeing a criminal caught and punished, infused his existence with a deeper purpose than serving a gravely flawed regime.

'Come on, let's go,' Sano said.

With Hirata beside him, he stole up to the building, quietly slid open the door, and looked into a large room lit by hanging lanterns. Mounted on wall brackets were many sheathed swords, and gleaming steel blades with the hilts removed. Characters etched on the tangs certified that these blades had cut human bodies during *tameshigiri*, the official method of testing swords. In the back of the room, near sliding doors that opened on to a wet courtyard, stood seven men: the four thieves in dripping cloaks, the hoods thrown back from their coarse faces; two peasants in cotton headbands, loincloths, and short kimonos; and an older man dressed in a formal black surcoat and trousers stamped with the Miochin crest. In his pale, aquiline face, deepset eyes burned.

The thieves unwrapped the bundle on the floor, baring the corpse of a stout man shrouded in white silk funeral garments. Gazing down at it, Miochin said, 'A perfect specimen. Many thanks.'

According to Tokugawa law, the bodies of executed

criminals could be used to test swords, but murderers, priests, tattooed individuals, and *eta* were taboo. A recent shortage of suitable traitors, thieves, and arsonists had reduced the supply of raw material for sword testers. When the *bakufu* sold the few available corpses to the highest bidders among the hereditary testing officials, the wealthy Yamada, Chokushi, and Nakagawa families bought up the precious commodity, forcing minor clans such as the Miochin to use straw dummies. However, the cutting of human flesh and bone was the only true test of a blade's quality. Since swords tested otherwise fetched lower prices and commanded less respect, Edo's swordsmiths and samurai avoided testers who couldn't certify their weapons at the highest level of strength. Miochin, unwilling to accept the loss of income, had hired *rōnin* to procure corpses by theft and murder.

'We'll test the blades from swordsmith Ibe,' Miochin told the peasants, who had to be his sons. 'I shall perform *ryōkuruma* and *o kessa*.' The most difficult cuts of all: across the corpse's hips, and through the shoulder girdle. 'You will use the arms and legs for lesser blades.'

The thieves stirred nervously. 'I think someone followed us,' one said. 'Hurry up and pay us, so we can get out of here.'

Miochin gave a string of coins to the thieves. Outside, Sano and Hirata drew their swords, then burst into the room.

'Tokugawa Special Police Force. You're all under arrest!' Sano cried.

Amid exclamations of dismayed surprise, the thieves unsheathed their swords; Miochin and sons grabbed weapons off the wall. Aware that the penalty for theft and murder was death, the criminals advanced on Sano and Hirata, blades drawn, faces taut with desperation.