

# Tamakaze

by

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for  
Master Instructor H.F. Ito  
and  
General Instructor Jim Sterling  
my two great Shintaido teachers

*Shikishima no Yamato-gokoro wo hito towaba, asahi ni niou yamazakura*

If someone asks about the spirit of old, true Japan, it is the flowers of the mountain cherry blossom that are fragrant in the rising sun.

From a poem by Motoori Norinaga, quoted in the  
last will of Lieutenant General of the Navy  
Takijiro Onishi

The sword of justice has no scabbard.

Antione De Riveral

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Chapter 1

**The Last Kamikaze**

One perfect plum blossom. Not cherry or chrysanthemum. Hanging over the clear, unruffled waters of an infinitely old lake, placid beneath even older, silent mountains.

On the shore, a meditation hut, built of precious woods in the ornate and curving Tokugawa style. Inside the hut, a Zen priest in *seiza*, wearing a robe not brocaded and resplendent but plain, clean and carefully arrayed. Before him, a single sheet of rice paper on which he has written his death poem. The black ink, carefully ground and mixed (with his own blood) in a lacquered bowl, is drying slowly, still glistening where he lifted the brush on the final downward stroke.

*So long ago.*

*I should have been one of them.*

*Instead, I have lived a life of ease and comfort.*

*My shame has sustained them.*

*I have become a vessel for them.*

*But that must end. I must end.*

He has already made the first, horizontal, left to right cut. The

hardest cut. Outside, the plum blossom stirs ever so gently, barely perceptible in the lake's mirror.

The second cut is easier, shorter, fatal. The priest hesitates, his mind's mirror momentarily clouded by pain. He sets down the *tanto*, the short sword dripping on the *tatami* mat, and takes up the brush again.

Abandoning the ink mixture, he dips the brush in his own gore. As he gasps his last breaths, below his death poem he draws the Japanese characters for *TAMAKAZE* (*Spirit Wind*)

魂  
風

He places the brush aside, picks up the *tanto*, and makes the second, vertical cut, grunting in a haze of agony. No *kaishakunin* second to lop off his head at the right moment. He is alone. He must remain upright as long as possible, his legs tied together by fine silk cord to help him. Now there is only the labored sound of his final breaths. Though in great pain, the monk could be seen, if there had been anyone to witness his demise, to relax in the shoulders and even the hint of a wan smile to flit across his face. He has waited so long for this moment. Death is welcome. Death is relief, release.

He falls over. The sky is as deep, blue, and clear as the water in the lake below, as empty as the Buddha's mind. But something stirs the plum blossom. It shivers, flutters, then falls as the branch shakes, gently

at first, then more violently. The rice paper walls of the hut rip open, flapping madly, exposing the priest's body to the chaos, but no one witnesses his passing. A covey of *uzura* quail explodes from the underbrush, startling through the once-solid walls. It is still a beautiful day by the lake, but the hut is in ruins as if a tornado had hit it. The monk's body lies amid the wreckage, staining the *tatami* mats with his last blood.

## Chapter 2

### **The Last American Fighter Pilot**

Iowa farm boy. It sounds like an insult somehow, but if you are one, there's nothing better. You have a dog. You have barefoot summers off, a swimming hole, a few score acres of corn to run in, Coke in the bottle, (still, even today, in the wondrous future,) milkshakes, real milkshakes not corn syrup and chemicals, and long hot summer nights full of stars. You are the quintessential American. You still get your hair cut at the local barber, and if you're younger than twelve, it's a buzz-cut. You have to get up early and do some dirty work, slopping hogs or milking cows, but after that you get to ride your bike, and odds are it's still a Sears Schwinn, down country lanes that stretch to nowhere. These places still exist. You may think they don't, but they do. And they're not Disneylands, either. Sure, okay, they have broadband, wi-fi, hi-dev, and everything else, but the fundamental things, they don't change. You can still buy a pair of Carhartt jeans from the Army-Navy downtown.

That was the world that Charles "Chuck" Branson, Iowa farm boy, grew up in. Gangs, rap, crack, none of that stuff reached him, touched him, though for all he knew it might have been all around him. Some of the kids at the high school might have wanted to be gangstas, and some of the girls dressed like ho's, but not among his friends. Heck, he still did a 4-H project in eleventh grade, and won a ribbon too.



Chuck was the grandson of WWII pilot Buck Branson. He'd just graduated from grad school and was leaving their Iowa farm in the morning to work at a marine biology facility in Japan. He hadn't filled out yet; he still looked like the seventeen-year old who took Reserve Champion Market Steer five years ago, tall, thin as a fence-post and blond as a fresh corn tassel. Today they were out walking the rows with his grandfather, looking for arrowheads like they used to do when he was eight, ten, twelve.

"Come on over here for a minute, son." Grandpa Buck called him son even though he was the boy's grandfather. Buck, like most WWII vets, had never talked of his war experiences to his grandson. Now he did.

"You all packed and everything?"

"Yes, sir."

"A thousand miles of prairie and you have to go study the ocean in Japan?"

"Yes, Grandpa." These were old furrows. They'd plowed them long ago. But there was something Buck wanted to tell his grandson.

"I know a thing or two about the Japanese, don't you know?"

"I know, Grandpa. You were a fighter pilot. You accompanied bombers over Japan during the last year of the war. You saw the fire-bombings of large Japanese cities up close."

"Yes, but it wasn't then that I—" Buck stopped, momentarily

unable to speak. He composed himself, cleared his throat, while Chuck stood, amazed, because he had never seen his grandfather even remotely flustered, not even the time he (Chuck) fell off the composter and tore up his leg. His grandfather had carried him to the truck and driven him to the hospital just like they were going downtown for an ice-cream soda.

"My brother, your great-uncle Joe Branson was in that group of guys from Ohio who all signed up together."

Chuck knew, but this was another of the many things about the war that Buck had never talked about before. The story was legendary in the family.

"One day he flew out on a sortie, and he didn't come back. And that was it. He was gone. I took a P-38, without asking, and went searching for him. It was a fool's errand. How the hell in all that ocean could you find one little plane, that was probably already sitting on the bottom or smashed to smithereens? But I looked. Flew around for eight hours, came back, refueled, went out again, five times, forty hours straight, and would have gone out a sixth time and more, except they threw me in the brig to keep me from going. You look a lot like him."

"I know, Grandpa." Joe Branson's picture sat on the mantel above the stone fireplace in the old house. A tow-head blond, thin and straight as a stalk of corn, smiling and confident he would live forever.

When Buck started speaking again, it sounded like he was a million miles away. Now he wasn't talking about his long-lost brother,

but about another day on that aircraft carrier those many years ago.

"It was a hot, sandy day; the paint was blistering on the flight deck, forchristsakes, and I was fuming up there because the Japs"--and right then a funny look came over Buck's face and he stopped himself in mid-story, wiped his brow as if he was back there sweating under the Pacific sun of 1944, and corrected his speech carefully for his audience-- "sorry, the Japanese, had caught us between sorties and the re-supply crew couldn't bring our planes out on deck loaded with bombs for fear one of 'em would get blown up and catch fire the others."

"If you pushed those Zeroes into a steep dive, they'd start to disintegrate; the stresses were too much for their flimsy design. We had more armament, at slower speeds they could outmaneuver the heavier American planes. So they'd try to engage us in dogfights, and toward the end, when that didn't work, they came straight at us..."

Buck paused. He stooped down and plucked at the dirt aimlessly, not even trying to pretend to weed. Anyway, these long rows of corn were all weeded by machine, the tractor pulling a special rig that tore out the ragweed and foxtail and lambsquarters, and left only the corn.

If Chuck had been a little more observant, he would have noticed the wetness around the edges of Buck's eyes. If he'd been more observant, he wouldn't have asked. But he was fascinated by a war story he'd never heard.

"What do you mean, Grandpa?"

Buck waved his hand weakly, and to Chuck it looked like as if he was trying to swat a bug or block out the sun, but in Buck's mind he was waving away the oil-black smoke from the choking fire on the forward deck, and peering into the distance to see if another flight of Zeroes was approaching. It was, and the lead one was not pulling up, he was hurtling straight at Buck. Kamikaze! The anti-aircraft guns were pouring rounds into the slowly disintegrating Zero, but on it came, its propeller spinning in slow-motion like Buck had only experienced twice before in the whole war, once on a landing in rough seas, and once in the middle of a dog-fight.

In the flash of slowed-down clarity, Buck could see the young Japanese pilot, now less than fifty yards away. The red dot of the rising sun glowed on his white banzai headband, and he'd lifted his goggles on top of his head to see better. His cockpit was already on fire from exploded shells, and in the second before the plane smashed into the bridge and burst into a searing ball of fire, Buck looked right into his eyes. There was fear, yes, and wonder, and, something else, something Buck could not quite place, a smile, pulling on the corners of his mouth, yes, that was it, he was smiling, but why? He was about to die, and take Buck with him. That smile stayed with Buck long after he dove at the last instant to avoid being immolated by the suicidal attack.

"Why was he smiling, Grandpa?" His grandson's voice came to him from far off. Buck hadn't even realized he'd been talking out loud.

"I thought a about that for a long time, Chuck. At first, and for many years, I thought it was insane cruelty. That he was happy to die, and kill as many Americans as possible doing it. But that didn't set right, somehow. It wasn't, it wasn't that kind of smile.

"What kind of smile was it?"

Buck didn't answer right away. When he did, his voice was low and shaky, like Chuck had never heard it before.

"It was a peaceful sort of smile, like he was relieved it was over. You know, those boys had it rough. Waiting to die, day after day, waiting for the weather, waiting for the enemy to be in range, waiting for orders from above. Sometimes flying out on missions but having to come back because of engine trouble. Sometimes coming back because they couldn't find us. Some of those boys went out five, six times before they..." Buck looked up into the sun again, which sun only he knew, the one on that August morning, or a different one from long ago. "And it wasn't a smile for nobody. It was for me, at me. He was smiling at me."

"We be of one blood, ye and I?"

"Huh? What?" Buck was startled back into the present by this odd phrase from his grandson.

"You know. That Kipling story you used to read to me when I was younger. The creatures in the jungle, they're all of one blood."

"You know, that just might be it," Grandpa Buck drawled, considering the idea. Coulda been like he was thinking he was my

brother, and he was smiling because he'd beaten his brother in a fight, though it cost him his life."

Buck fell silent. Chuck thought maybe he should go, but his grandfather made no move to dismiss him. They stood there, silent as the plains, for a couple of minutes. Then his grandfather spoke again.

"I didn't tell you everything..."

This time somehow Chuck knew enough to wait, again, while long Midwestern minutes passed. Then Buck started up again.

"You have to understand all this was happening at several thousand feet, at several hundred miles an hour, in the middle of a flak barrage, over the most heavily defended city in the world. We were freelancing after we'd dropped our main load, looking for secondary targets. I saw a military building and pointed to my wingman, Teddy."

Buck's left hand rose up like Ahab's, waving at the past. "But as we dove for a closer look—"

"I dunno, Teddy. Something's not right," I said. "They look pretty small."

The radio crackled back--

"All Japs are small, Buck. Come on, let's hit 'em."

"We circled one and came in low, from below; we were on the target and firing almost before we rose up and could see—"

"See what, Grandpa?"

"See the boys, in their school uniforms, no more than ten, most of

‘em. We tore through ‘em with the 50 cal’s, cut some of ‘em right in half. I yelled into the radio and called off the run, but it was too late. We’d—I’d made a terrible mistake. A war crime, killing innocent civilians.”

“But the whole war was like that, wasn’t it?” Chuck protested. “The fire-bombings, Tokyo, Dresden, London, then the nuclear bombs—“

“But this was different. I kinda knew, but I did it anyway. I tried to tell someone about it, but my commander ripped up my report and told me to get the hell out of his office. He didn’t want to know about it, didn’t want to deal with it. And I guess neither did I.”

“You’ve lived a good life, Grandpa Buck. You’ve got nothing to be ashamed about.”

Grandpa Buck took a deep breath. He meditated for a moment, and said slowly: “As long as you don’t live downwind from a hog farm, the air in Iowa is still corn-sweet and plains-fresh. Mostly gentle, not like that dust-filled Kansas ravager.” And he could have said, because it was on him now, but didn’t say: “*Not like the stifling wind of the Pacific in 1944, acrid with gun-smoke and burning metals, and the cloyingly repulsive aroma of roasted human flesh.*”

Buck was co-existing in two worlds, past and present.

“I flew a few more missions but nothing else ever happened, except back on the carrier. I saw the *kamikaze* attacks. Saw the pilots coming straight at me, looked into their eyes just before they crashed their airplanes into the deck of the carrier I was standing on.”

And he was there again, he was back there, gripping the rail, staring into the cockpit of a plummeting, smoking Zero, telling the story a second time as if he didn't remember having just told it.

“But here's the thing I want to tell you, the whole reason I told you this story: I saw their faces. I saw their eyes. And they were scared, just like me. I saw myself in their faces. Don't let anyone tell you we are different. We are no different. No matter how strange the Japanese may seem to you, they are just like you. Remember that.”

“I will, Grandpa.”

“Them boys never had a chance. Sure, we took some hits, more than the government ever let on, they downplayed the whole kamikaze thing, but even so probably less than three percent ever got through. Most of 'em ditched before they reached us, or got shot down, or missed their targets and crashed harmlessly into the sea. But even so, once in a while, one got through.”

And that was all Buck could tell. The rest was too horrible to utter, even at a distance of ten thousand miles and sixty years. They went inside to get ready for Grandma Branson's special last dinner for Chuck, all his favorite foods, beefsteak, baked potato, strawberry rhubarb pie, *like a death row prisoner*, Chuck thought.

The next morning, Buck scratched at the white stubble on his leathery neck. He still used a straight razor, a leather strop for sharpening it, and a round cake of Williams Mug Soap in a special cup



for lather. But the wrinkles in his face and throat were deeply etched, and he only bothered with it twice a week, the rest of the time letting the prickly whiskers alone. He looked hard at himself in the mirror and said out loud:

“Gonna miss that boy.” Then for the first time in twenty-seven years, Buck skipped breakfast and went directly to the barn.

A sunny August morning in Iowa. Chuck fed the cows in the yard for the last time, walked in the cornfields, where the second crop of the season was beginning to shoot up. His grandmother fixed him breakfast. Grandpa Buck was already on his tractor tilling more acres for planting. He'd said his goodbyes and didn't even bother to shut off the John Deere when the bus stopped at the foot of the driveway to pick up Chuck.

You could hear the bus coming from far away, almost feel it in the level ribbon of tar, pushing a gentle shock wave ahead of it. That wave was Chuck's future, but it was also the lingering reverberations of Buck's past.

It pulled up and waited like a panting dog, like TickTwo, the blue-tick hound that had followed Chuck around the farm faithfully for his whole youth-- stopping when he stopped, trotting ahead, stopping, trotting, and was so old and arthritic, and mad at him now for going away, that he didn't come to the bus either.

"Gotta go, son." The gruff voice of the driver intruded on his reverie.

"Yes, sir."

Still, Chuck lingered on the front step for just a second, gazing at the tractor cutting an even line down a long row, but he knew the old man would never turn around. *They just aren't like that*, Chuck thought.

Chuck waved uselessly one last time, as if from a great distance, and left the farm for his new life in Japan.

The bus Chuck entered was a shiny new German model, with TV screens mounted on the back of every seat, like an airplane, but from his tractor Buck saw only the old faded humpbacked blue diesel-spewer of his youth, come to take him away to war. He couldn't wave. *What, to myself? Preposterous!*

That night, Grandpa Buck sat alone. He took out a bottle of bourbon, drank quietly in solitude from a thick yellow mug meant for strong coffee. Upright, straight-backed, humbly dressed.

Like many old farmhouses, the walls of this one had bowed out and the floors partially buckled. You could roll a marble down the upstairs hallway to the back of the house, which creaked and stirred even when there was no wind. In a stiff breeze the creaking intensified and the house came alive with ghostly sighs and shivers. Buck had lived in the house for so many years that he no longer paid attention to these homely noises, so he didn't think anything of it when the clapboard homestead began to speak. But as the wind picked up he started to hear other sounds—voices, in Japanese, calling his name. *"This is what it*

*must be like to be crazy,”* Buck thought.

As the wind increased, Buck took up a flat carpenter’s pencil and jotted a note on a small slip of paper, folded it carefully into a small square. He was still holding the note when the windows in his study blew in, spattering him with shattered glass. He had his back to the windows, so he wasn’t badly cut, a few nicks around his neck and on his scalp. But now he was not alone. The room seemed smaller, crowded with young Japanese pilots in full combat flight gear. They were ghosts, of course, Buck knew that, yet somehow more substantial than ghosts. The leader stepped forward, staring at Buck with hard but not hateful eyes. There was almost a glint of pity in them.

“I remember you,” Buck said calmly. “What took you so long?” Inside, his heart thrummed like it hadn’t in years. “I’ve been expecting you for some time now.”

The pilot looked down, as if contemplating his answer, then spoke in a soft voice. “Where we are, no time. No days, no months, no years. Only Eternal Now. And suffering. Much suffering.” The other pilots grunted their agreement. They were weak, like zombies, Buck mused. Even at 82, he could probably wipe out the lot of them, though he had no intention of doing so.

“What do you want from me?”

The lead pilot smiled, a tight, thin-lipped grimace. “It is not what we want, it is what you want.”

“And what is that?”

“Death, and forgetting.”

At that moment Grandpa Branson, drawn by the crash of the window glass, knocked loudly at the door.

“Buck, honey, you all right in there? I heard a crash. What’s going on?” The ghostly pilots’ images wavered and began to fade, but Buck signaled them silently to stay.

“You go to bed now, mother. I’ll be along shortly.”

The doorknob rattled once and stopped.

“It’s not like you to lock a door on me, Buck Branson.”

Buck could imagine her on the other side of the door, in her plain-spun flannel nightgown, grey hair un-bunned. For sixty years they had taken care of each other, raised three kids and their grandson Chuck, almost lost the farm twice—*God he loved that woman*. But this was his own crucible. Where he was going, she could not go.

“You go back to bed now.”

“You are going to have some explaining to do, Mister.”

He heard her slow footsteps fading toward the bedroom. He turned back to his spectral visitors.

“I told the boy today. But it didn’t help. Me, I mean.”

The pilot smiled again, this time a little more savagely. “Oh, yes, it helped. It brought us here.”

“I see.” Buck made no move to get away from his captors, if that’s

what they were. The pilot was right. He sought what they offered, sweet release.

“Only, I just want to understand—“

“If understanding made any difference, would we be here?”

Buck said nothing. What was there to say? He longed to be with them. That’s all. The wind stirred and the barn creaked and the house shrieked and Grandma Branson pounded and screeched at the door that wouldn’t give way because Buck had dragged a stout old oak dresser in front of it.

They found Buck’s body in a poplar two hundred yards from the house. When the mortician prepared him for the open coffin viewing and gently unclenched his right fist, he found the tiny square of paper, and curious, unfolded it even though he probably should have given it unopened to Buck’s widow. Scrawled in Buck’s strong, crude cursive were these words: “*Chuck: Watch out! If they come for me, they may come for you too.*” When Grandma Branson read it she shook her head and said: “Just like him. Not a word to me and he’s dying in there. But at least he’s looking out for the boy. Better call him right away, though I don’t have a notion of what it means. To my knowledge he was all alone in there when the twister hit.”

The county sheriff questioned her as closely as was appropriate for an elderly grieving widow, but she couldn’t tell him much beyond what he already knew—that an extremely localized tornado had struck only

one side of the house, and carried off her husband of sixty years.

TickTwo was missing. As the wind had risen, the great beast, a loyal stiff old bluetick hound, set up a howling that would have woken the dead, if they weren't already awake and present on the other side of the door. He scratched and scabbled, forgetting his training, and wouldn't obey Grandma Branson's repeated schussing. When the tempest reached its crescendo, he bolted down the hallway, down the stairs, out the door, and disappeared.

## Chapter 3

**Two Tokyos**

The flight attendants were like goddesses, ravishing in their tight-fitting blue skirts and blouses, and uniformly speaking in high soft voices full of mystery and promise, extraordinarily attentive. Chuck had read about the *oshiburi*, hot moist towels presented before and after every meal (there were still frequent meals and snacks on the long international flight, long after domestic air travel had become like a bus ride,) but he had never experienced the pleasure of wiping his hands, face, and neck with one, until now.

He'd gone to college at I.S.U. in Ames, less than two hours by car from the farm. Tokyo existed in his mind like a giant *Pachinko* parlor. Chuck's education in things Japanese had been formed through 1) the films of Akira Kurisawa; 2) many dinners at a terrible Japanese restaurant in Ames called Mount Fuji, run by Koreans, that was a steakhouse in disguise; the sushi would have been inedible to a Japanese person; 3) the fantasy novels of Haruki Murakami; and 4) repeated readings of *The Tale of Genji*. Thus he had a typical Westerner's view of Japan as an exotic and quaint place with an industrial overlay, kind of like Disneyland if it was in Pittsburgh and there weren't any walls around it. He imagined all Japanese to be polite, subtle, and in some indefinable way, wiser than Americans. Even though he'd taken two

years of Japanese language, he spoke at the level of a five-year old Japanese child, and could read almost no *kanji*, *hiragana*, or *katakana*.

He landed not at Narita but in the newer Central Japan Airport in Nagoya. The first thing that struck him a literal body blow when he exited the terminal was the intense, oppressive heat of Japan in August, a suffocating, drenching, blanketing heat, nothing like the heat of Iowa. Modern Tokyo, with its gleaming towers, its neon, and its deafening noise, stupefied him. Already in a profound state of jet lag, he found his senses overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people, almost all of whose black heads he looked down upon as if from a great height.

Sweating profusely and struggling with his bags, he stumbled into a park, where the crush of people lessened at least slightly, for the Japanese carefully avoided walking on the grass—was it grass, it was unnaturally green, but maybe that was just the glaze on his eyeballs. A gaggle of teenagers careened toward him on roller-blades. Were they stoned, drunk, or just inept? He couldn't tell.

They looked, Chuck supposed, like typical urban teenagers, not like the fresh-faced country kids he had gone to high-school with. They were shouting to each other and pointing at Chuck, who certainly stood out in the crowd. Chuck wondered how they could hear each other—they all had audio devices strapped to their upper arms, and ear-buds in.

As they swooped by, their wheels clattering on the rough but hard gravel path, a big, tough-looking kid with mirror sunglasses, a Harley T-



Shirt, and a spiky do, shoved Chuck, hard, almost knocking him over, and the next skater by, a girl with orange hair, grabbed at his jeans and yanked his wallet from his back pocket, but as she sped off she couldn't hold onto it, and the wallet flew in the air, spilling its contents on the weirdly colored grass. She did a quick 360 and came to a stop, trying to gauge if she had enough time to go back and pick up everything before Chuck reacted. She decided she did.

She didn't.

"Hey! What the--?" Chuck shouted, the jet lag disappearing in a rush of adrenaline. He ran forward, and soon found himself in a tug of war with his tiny, orange-plumed, flaming-haired adversary. She kicked him hard in the shins and he grunted but wouldn't let go. The girl's companions had stopped about 50 yards down the lane and were laughing at the comical struggle, but they made no effort to come back and help her, even after she called out to them. When they saw that Chuck had her and his wallet firmly in his grasp, they skated off, hooting in derision.

The girl was furious. Still held by Chuck, she screamed an obvious obscenity at them, then turned her angry face toward Chuck.

"Stupid gaijin. Let me go!"

"All right," said Chuck. "I just want to—"

"Let me go or I call police."

"You? But, but I'm the one—"

“I say you try to wape me.”

“Wape you?” Chuck said stupidly. A second later he figured it out.

“Gwope me, idiot.”

“Gwope you? Uh, I would never—Anyway, I bet you’re only 16.”

“Am not. I’m nineteen. I’ll say you were trying to wape me, you horrible gaijin.”

“But, you little thief, I was not! I’m the victim here!”

“What they say in your country? ‘Tell it to judge.’ Arrgghhh! Help! Help!” The girl screamed in a painfully harsh voice, nothing like the lilting childish tones of those flight attendants.

“All right, all right!” Chuck, embarrassed. “Stop!” He loosened his grip but didn’t completely let her go. She opened her mouth to scream again. He let her go and turned to walk away, disgusted.

She pouted. Chased after him.

“Hey! Wait a minute, Mr. Gaijin.”

“Stop shouting,” said Chuck. He bent down to pick up the scattered money, cards, and papers from his wallet. Curiously, the girl suddenly became very quiet, and helped him, even scurrying around on her hands and knees to retrieve stray items. Chuck was mystified.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked.

“I figure it out. You not a bad guy.” She handed him a crumpled up wad of his IDs, credit cards, Japanese and American money, slips of paper with jotted notes and telephone numbers. “Can I be your friend?”

Chuck was still stunned by the turn-about in this girl's demeanor, but he was hungry for some human contact in this alien place.

"Sure. I'd like that." But at that instant he saw the green corner of paper under the sleeve above the other hand. He grabbed both her wrists, and with a little gentle pressure opened the other fist to reveal a few hundred yen.

"I should turn you in to the police!" he shouted.

"Wait, No! You want me. We go to your hotel, make love."

Chuck was so taken aback he actually took a step backward, like he was in a comedy movie, and that image, that thought flashed through his brain, followed by anger.

"What, are you a prostitute as well as a thief?"

That's when the girl started running. She didn't want him to grab her again. Chuck didn't follow. He had his wallet and most of his money back. Additionally, he was soaked with perspiration and the thought of running was almost impossible. He was due at the lab the next morning, and he hadn't booked a hotel for the night. His guide book suggested that the least expensive option short of a hostel was to stay in one of the so-called capsule hotels. He sat on a park bench and used his laptop with super wi-fi to find a good local capsule not far from the park.

The honeycomb structure provided stepping rungs to climb up into his capsule, a neatly appointed rectangular plastic box, #453. The whole experience amused Chuck, and the claustrophobic capsule gave him a

respite from the constant crowding he had felt all day, thought his neighbors resided mere millimeters from him, above, below and on both sides of him. And thank god, it was air-conditioned! He put on the pajamas supplied in his capsule, watched some Japanese television, and soon slept

It was here, in this strangest of settings, that Chuck learned of his grandfather's death. He was wakened by the beeping of his phone, notifying him of a message that must have come while he slept, with the mournful but stern voice of Grandma Branson, that ended with "and don't get any ideas of flying back here for a funeral. You're due at your new job tomorrow, and that's where Grandpa would want you to be." Chuck fought back tears. He knew that Grandpa Buck always took time to honor people who passed, and he knew also that he couldn't possibly afford to fly back and forth. Buck wouldn't have cried, but he wasn't Buck. He curled up inside the cocoon-like capsule and allowed himself to sob quietly.

Somewhere in the message she had told him about the note for him: *Watch out! If they come for me, they may come for you too.* "What do you suppose that means, Chuck dear?" she had wondered on in the phone message. No doubt that was why Grandma wanted him to stay. He'd be safe in Japan.

*"I'll find out what it all means, Grandma,"* Chuck thought, *"as soon as I'm settled at the lab."*

## Chapter 4

**Yoshida**

To reach the top of the Haguro redoubt, one had to climb two thousand four hundred and sixty-six stone steps, each one carved in a local quarry and dragged up the incline by monks, in what must have been a Herculean effort of manual labor, and carefully and arduously set in place many hundreds of years ago. Now they were swaybacked, their centers worn down by the feet of thousands of pilgrims making the spiritual ascent to the small shrine atop the mountain.

The path started in an odd, almost forgotten little park in the woods, dotted shrines, including a national treasure, the five-storied Gojuto pagoda. It was a peaceful, calm place, a vale, one descended into it. The two thousand and more upward steps and the soaring views came later. Beyond the shrine, up an even steeper set of stairs, at the very top of the mountain, above even the Sanzan Gosaiden temple, was the lair of Hiroyuki Yoshida, the leader of a right-wing Japanese militaristic cult called *Shourai Taiyou* (Future Sun.) At that moment, dawn on a late summer day, the last of the snow still lingering on the upper peaks, Yoshida stood in a meditation stance on a flat stone outcropping jutting out from the edge just beneath the summit, gazing over the mountainous vista, sword pointed straight ahead, out over the horizon, his two arms outstretched, holding it steady.

*Shoko.*

From here he could hear the monkeys chattering on the lower slopes. From here he claimed he could send his energy out the tip of his sword and around the world and feel it striking him in the back. Tall for a Japanese, he was clean-shaven and severe-looking, with fairly wide-set eyes, a square face, his hair in a topknot like the samurai of old, but modified to fall in a pony-tail down the back. He wore a white gi with white belt. He was barefoot on the cold rock. He was alone. And his thoughts were, as often, on the future of his beloved country, Japan.

Yoshida was not a fanatic, though his followers were. The leader of a group of true believers is rarely a true believer. He was a visionary, which is different—he saw the world as it could be, not in a true believer’s frantic dream, but coolly and concretely. He dreamed of returning Japan to military supremacy in Asia. He was a student of Zen in the samurai fashion. His retreat center in the mountains of Japan was a training facility for dedicated martial artists in both ancient and modern fighting techniques. Yoshida maintained a strict discipline, more rigorous for himself than for his followers. He fasted every seventh day. He took only cold showers, in pure, ice-cold water that had dripped down through two hundred feet of limestone from the mountain-top above the compound. He ate sparingly, mostly rice and *umaboshi*, the red pickled plum that for most Japanese was a condiment, but for Yoshida was his sacred victual.

He practiced *kenjutsu* for two hours daily, using a lead sword that was twice the weight of a steel katana, the way baseball players swing a lead pipe in the batting circle, that made his cuts fabulously fast. His footwork was impeccable, his *irimi* (stepping in) magnificent. He also practiced several other traditional Japanese arts—he was an accomplished potter and could coax remarkable sounds from the notoriously difficult *shakuhachi* flute.

Yoshida was training a new generation of right-wing Japanese extremists at this remote mountain camp in the north. His training combined old school and high-tech. His fighters wore gi's and carried steel swords but also Blackberries, GPS, and semi-automatics. But they needed something more. They needed to become as fearless as their predecessors, and in this soft, debauched world it was more difficult than ever to find men of that level of dedication to the cause. Japan must no longer be a pacifist nation. It was time for nationalist ideals to dominate again. For Yoshida, as for many people in Japan, the key to the future lay in the past. There was something unfinished, something left behind that must not be left behind, in the mewling pacifism of the past seventy years. Even the soft modern generation knew it, and longed for it, in their *anime* and their *manga*, always seeking but never quite reaching the *kokoro*, the heart. Yoshida would bring them the rest of the way there. He would jolt them into action. Yoshida stood, motionless,

sword pointed East toward the Rising Sun, waiting, for an impossibly long time.

He was holding a sword called the *Dojigiri Yatsusama*, a national treasure forged more than twelve hundred years ago by legendary sword-maker Hoki Yatsusama. This sword should have been resting on velvet in a glass case in the Tokyo Museum. Almost everyone thought it was. But Yoshida had stolen the original and replaced it with a fine copy. This sword had passed through many hands and would continue to do so. As sharp as the day the polishers finished their work on it, and not sharpened since that day, Dojigiri was not a blade to be inactive, a museum piece. "*It should be used!*" Yoshida had thought. A daring and pointless theft. Pointless, unless you considered the long-curving sword-edge of Dojigiri, ending in as fine a point as medieval Japanese technology was capable of producing. Dojigiri had not tasted human flesh in two hundred years. It was hungry. That was about to change.

Now he raised the sword up to heaven. A mystic reddish light surrounded him, like the light of a rising sun, bathing him in a thick, soft glow, almost the color of bright blood. With the sword pointed to the sky, his arms upraised, and his body in alignment, he was like an iron rod connecting heaven and earth.

*Tenso.*

After many minutes in this arrangement, he slowly lowered the sword to Shoko in front of him, he paused for a long moment, then



formally sheathed it, and bowed to the *Dai Shizen*, Great Nature before him. He was sure of it now, his destiny, to unite and uplift the Japanese people, to make them great again.

His breakfast was Spartan, *miso* soup and a piece of mackerel, one *umaboshi*, and *gohan*, rice, the sacred food of the Japanese. For years, the Americans had been forcing them to import inferior Californian rice. No one ate it. They fed it to the animals, or ground it up and used it for fertilizer. Almost all the *gohan* consumed in Japan was grown domestically. Rice was life! While he was eating, one of his advisors, Fujii, came in and sat down in *seiza*, several feet away and to Yoshida's right. The aide's excitement was palpable, but he said nothing, sitting silently until Yoshida had finished his spare meal and asked him: "You have something to report? What have you learned?"

"Commander," he addressed Yoshida with sparkling eyes, though neither of them were in the military. "There is something strange happening in our homeland. If the rumors are to be believed—" and stopped as Yoshida held up a hand.

"Rumors? Is that all you bring me?"

"Apologies, Commander. Here's what I know for sure. One in whom I have the greatest trust has verified that—"

"Yes?"

"—that the spirits of kamikaze appeared before his great uncle. And they killed him."

Fujii looked earnestly at Yoshida, whose furrowed brow showed his disappointment.

“If I base my actions on fantasies, Fujii, people will think that I am crazy.”

“But, Sensei, what if it were true?”

“You have brought me nothing.”

“I’m sorry, Commander.” Bowing repeatedly, Fujii tried to back out of the room in *hanmihan-dachi* (on his knees) but Yoshida stopped him with another impatient hand gesture.

“The spirits of kamikaze, you say?”

“Tamakaze.”

“What’s that?” Yoshida said sharply, because a brilliant idea was forming in his mind, but he didn’t know what it was, yet.

“My friend’s great uncle called them Tamakaze. Spirit wind.”

“I thought you said they killed him.”

“He left a death poem. He was a failed kamikaze.”

“Tamakaze. What does that make you think of, Fujii?”

“Kamikaze, of course,” Fujii answered with alacrity.

“Of course. Five thousand young men, dead in a few months, in the middle of a war that killed more than two million Japanese. Why were their deaths so special, then, Fujii?”

“I don’t know, Commander.”

Yoshida rose. “Because they chose, Fujii. Because they chose. They are the essence of Japanese spirit. They did not fall, they rose on the divine wind. Rose to heaven. Or tried to—” and a great light came over Yoshida’s face, “Ah, so so so, I see! And now they take revenge on those who stopped them from—but never mind.”

Yoshida thought for a minute, and then slapped a hand on the table. “I know how to find them. It’s easy. Offer them some bait.”

Fujii’s eyes widened, and he grinned. “Hai! I understand, Sensei.”

“Arrange it.”

“Hai!”

Fujii bowed once more and left. Yoshida watched the door for a minute, then turned to the picture window of the retreat, perched just beneath his sword meditation rock. The view from within this aerie was only slightly less spectacular than above, and presented the additional thrill of being indoors, protected from the elements, while looking out over the mountainous distance and the lush green valley below. It was Yoshida’s one indulgence. He loved a view.

“Tamakaze!” he said, savoring the fierce quality of the word.

## Chapter 5

**Yasukuni Shrine**

The next morning, Chuck took the train out to Yokohama, proud that he was able to navigate, even though in Tokyo the signs were in English as well as Japanese. The *Yoshimoto International Marine Biology Center Laboratory* was located in a warehouse in the port shipping area of Yokohama; not a beautiful natural setting, in fact, rather a disappointing dump. It reminded him of the area around the 80/35 interstate highway interchange in Des Moines, a dumping ground for railroad cars and tractor trailer rigs. The waters of Yokohama Bay were stagnant and oily.

A sign indicated the lab was closed for the weekend. Chuck thought the Japanese never took time off. But clearly there was no one here, even though Chuck had emailed ahead that he would arrive on Sunday morning. He thought they'd have at least one person to greet him. All his notions of Japanese etiquette and politeness were being challenged every moment, first with that crazy girl, and now this. After circling the building a couple of times and walking along the rank waters of the bay, noticing the lack of birds or seaweed, he gave up and boarded the train back to Tokyo. He'd have to stay in the capsule for a couple more nights.

When he came up out of the subway, he was only a few blocks

from the capsule place, but he couldn't quite remember which way to start, and was standing on the street corner, confused and bewildered, thumbing through his maps, when he heard an annoyingly familiar voice.

"Hey! You, tall, stupid gaijin."

"*Oh frack,*" Chuck thought. "*It's that punky Japanese girl from yesterday. How'd she find me?*" The thought boggled Chuck's mind, until he realized that out of the thirteen million people in Tokyo, probably only a few hundred looked like him.

"I found you. Pretty good, huh?"

"Yeah. How'd you do it? Steal one of my credit cards?"

The girl pouted. "No. I follow you to capsule yesterday. But I couldn't stay all night, and you gone when I get here today."

Chuck laughed at the girl's brazenness. She pouted again.

"Come on, American. Let's be friend. I won't steal from you, anymore."

"Okay. I'm Chuck Branson. What's your name?" he asked her in English, not daring to risk his Japanese.

"Chuck. Good name. I can say that." Then, in very formal English: "My name is Nao."

"What's your family name?"

"Just Nao for now," she said, laughing herself at the funny duplicate sounds. "Come on," Nao continued. "I show you something

amazing. Make you homesick.”

If Chuck closed his eyes and just listened to the music, he could imagine himself in his home town in Iowa, on a Saturday night with kids cruising Main Street in their classic cars, that they'd lovingly restored in their barns over the long winters. Yes, it was called Main Street in his town and many others, the main drag, straight and level, running east to west, lined with faded brick buildings that still housed a bank, a barber shop, a feed store, a pharmacy that still dispensed ice cream sodas in fluted glasses. Oh, the Americana of it!

But if he opened his eyes, this is what he saw: Fiberglas replicas of those classic autos; wildly exaggerated Elvises in orange wigs and late Elvis, Las Vegas-style white jumpsuits with sequins; middle-aged Japanese couples pointing and taking pictures while covering their mouths to hide giggles; a man selling *mochi* on a stick from a cart; cherry trees, no longer in blossom, their leaves drooping in the August heat; and, in the distance, the distinctly Japanese, swooping swallow lines of the Yasukuni Shrine; a weird mix of hollowly imitative and astonishingly real sounds and images that made Chuck slightly queasy. She had taken him back to the park, of course; that was where she hung out. For all Chuck knew, she lived there. Chuck made a mental note to keep his eyes out for roller-bladers.

Nao was singing *See You in September* in that high, disturbing, childish department store greeter voice, sexy and subservient, like a

porcelain doll with a wind-up string pull in the back of her neck. Chuck wanted to throttle her.

“Come on, *Chuckie-san!*” She shouted, trying to drag him up onto the flatbed truck where the performers were dancing and singing, and where, he knew, if he got up there he would also have to perform, *karaoke* style, *empty orchestra*, the same root as *karate*, *empty hand*, a factoid that fascinated him. But Chuck had no intention of making a fool of himself for the amusement of tourists from the hinterlands of Japan, come to gawk and gawp at the silly teenagers and the even sillier *gaijin*, whom they regarded as little short of monsters. He tugged his hand away and started walking down the long, tree-lined gravel path toward the Yasukuni shrine.

Nao ran after him. “Okay, I stop teasing you. But, why you want go to Yasukuni? That’s a place for old men.”

“It’s a long story. It has to do with my grandfather.”

“Okay, if you go for an old man, that’s good. I teach you *rei*, (bow) and how to make devotion with incense.”

“Okay, that sounds good,” Chuck said, though the girl seemed so modern he was surprised that she would know anything about formal Japanese customs. He wasn’t sure he wanted this girl tagging along with him, but there was no avoiding it. She chattered happily next to him, oblivious of the stares she received from passersby, and truly they made a striking couple, Chuck tall, gangly, and blond, Nao short, compact, and

orange.

Not many Westerners visited the *honden* (main shrine) of Yasukuni. It was off the tourist path in Chiyoda, and it was uniquely Japanese. Yet even most Japanese skipped the Yasukuni and went on to the Imperial Palace, or the flower gardens. Some stayed away because they wanted to forget the bloody and unhappy past. Others avoided Yasukuni because they remembered all too well.

Chuck was going because of his grandfather, and the stories he'd heard. Buck had never talked about modern Japan, only the past. Chuck had read about Yasukuni in a guide book. He wanted to see the statue of the kamikaze pilot, wanted to see how the man was portrayed, and whether there was anything of the look Buck described to him. After what Buck had told him, about his close encounter in 1944, Chuck wanted to see the statue, and he secretly hoped though he knew it was unlikely to the point of near impossibility, that some old pilot would be there, and that Chuck might talk to him.

But the museum was closed. Chuck couldn't figure out why and walked around in front of the little shack where they sold admission tickets a couple of times,

“Closed on Sunday, silly.” Nao said.

“But this—ahhh!” That's when it hit him. Yesterday wasn't Sunday, it was Saturday. He wasn't early, he was late. Today was Sunday. The head people at the lab probably had probably paid someone to come in



on their day off to meet him, and he hadn't gone out there.

"I have to go now, Nao," he said, stumbling over her name again.

"Oh—you no fun!"

"Look, I have to go get ready for—ah, I missed—uh, look I just gotta go."

"I see you tomorrow?"

Chuck didn't know what to say. He didn't know anyone else, so he said: "Tomorrow morning I'm busy. Why don't you meet me again in front of the capsule, tomorrow afternoon at five o'clock?"

Nao gave him a thumbs up that looked more like a gang sign, with a little wiggle, and ran off without saying goodbye.

Monday morning, Chuck was at the Yoshimoto Center early, but still the Center's director and several other people were already there waiting for him. He was ushered into an ordinary-looking conference room that could have been lifted right out of an American office complex. Nobody offered him tea, as he expected they would. He apologized profusely for the mistake in arrival time; they forgave him. It was the stupid gaijin syndrome Chuck had read about. As a foreigner, you weren't expected to know anything, so when you made a mistake, it was okay. People were polite but not overly friendly.

Chuck explained to the Center's director, a dour-looking fellow named Shiriashi who wore a dark gray suit, almost black in its austerity, that even though he had just arrived, he needed a little time off because

of his grandfather's death. Shiriashi grunted his disapproval, but reluctantly granted Chuck a bereavement week. Shiriashi assumed that Chuck would be flying back for the funeral, and Chuck decided not to let on otherwise; it would require too much explanation.

Secretly, Chuck suspected that the answers to his grandfather's death somehow might be found here in Japan, though he didn't have a clue how or why. It was just a hunch. "*Like when you're out hunting,*" Chuck mused as he left the lab, "*and you turn down this one path into a deeper wood, and you don't know why, it just feels right, and the game is there.*"

Chuck found himself always slightly disoriented. This wasn't the Japan he had studied, read about, and imagined, but it wasn't *not* that country either. The people were not calm, polite, and friendly, but rushed around distractedly. They shoved him aside at ticket counters when he was too slow or fumbled with the unfamiliar currency. He couldn't read any of the signpost *kanji*, and quickly got lost even though the signs were also in English. And when he asked for directions he felt like a five-year-old, being talked to slowly (in English) by impatient passersby, who managed to seem polite and in a hurry at the same time.

So he was relieved when this time the young woman Nao was waiting for him in front of his capsule hotel, in a miniskirt and tank-top, and sporting blue hair.

"Come on, we have dinner in Ueno. Very good noodles there."

Chuck reluctantly accepted her invitation. What else could he do? He didn't know what he was looking for, or where to find it.

On the walk to the subway Chuck gave Nao a little hint of what his search was about.

"Mystery. Exciting!" She suggested they look in her world. "Crazy stuff like that, my people hear about it. But first, the shrine." Chuck didn't know who *her people* were, but it made sense to him; he went along with her.

Over the next few days Chuck would discover that Nao's hair was sometimes bright orange, sometimes blue, sometimes blond. To her, Chuck was a typical gaijin, awkward and fumbling. But then she was surprised by his knowledge of older, traditional things Japanese. Chuck had studied classical Japanese culture. He knew more about *Cha-do* (tea ceremony) *Ikebana* (flower arranging,) and *Kabuki* theater than she did. But he was unprepared for the blur of modern Tokyo, the neon lights flashing, the blaring sounds, the chaos. The Japanese girl beside him was rad—one day she dressed like a 50's American girl, the next like a cowgirl, the next like a punk rocker. Chuck could hardly recognize her from day to day.

He was surprised that she knew anything about her country's past. She wouldn't use chopsticks! She always used a fork, or her hands. She didn't like sushi. Her favorite foods were Mac 'n Cheese, and McDonalds, of which they (she) ate copious amounts, on Chuck's credit

card. Chuck didn't mind. She was giving him a look at another Tokyo, another Japan. She took him to underground clubs that had no fixed abode, appearing one night in a hotel bar, the next in a private mansion, the next outdoors in a park at midnight. They ate, when not at McDonalds, in greasy little yakitori's that were barely more than tin sheds under the tin roof of Omoide-yokocho next to the Shinjuku train station. She introduced Chuck to petty thieves and musicians, drug dealers and artists, homeless people and wealthy kids slumming it to spend their parent's money.

He in turn took her to a few places she'd never been, to a fancy Italian restaurant one night that couldn't have been more perfect in it's replication of a quaint place in Little Italy, the Styrofoam columns, plastic grape arbor, frescoed walls, heavy red leather booths; to some museums of antiquities that Nao didn't know existed.

But nobody knew anything. Chuck was enjoying himself but was also a little frustrated by lack of progress. Three days passed. Chuck insisted on speaking Japanese some of the time, and Nao took pleasure in being the boss of him, and corrected his grammar severely, with the result that his Japanese improved rapidly. He didn't know it, but he was learning to speak like a Japanese teenager, a fact that would come to haunt him later. But still, he was due back at the Lab in the following Monday, and it was already Wednesday evening. They were sitting in the Villa Roma sipping cappuccino's when Chuck told Nao:

“Look, I have to--haven’t you got anybody else I could talk to?”

Nao looked stricken. She was having a fantasy week, and didn’t want it to end. But she had a dilemma.

“Okay, but, you not think bad of me.”

“What?”

“I got arrested. Just one time.”

And so it was that Nao led Chuck to his first tenuous connection to the Tamakaze—a retired police detective named Kazuo Sakugawa.

## Chapter 6

**Detective Sakugawa**

Detective Sakugawa was late-middle-aged, short and balding. Forced into early retirement from the Tokyo Police Force, he kept a small office as a private detective in Roppongi, among the strip clubs, hostess bars, and nightclubs. It wasn't quite like noir New York or L.A., no name in gold on frosted glass. It was just an old car rental office that he'd taken because it was cheap. From here he did what private detectives do everywhere, mostly hiring out as surveillance for wives of cheating husbands and husbands of cheating wives.

Detective Sakugawa loathed everything about Nao, who represented the worst of modern Japan for him. But he owed her one-- his daughter had fallen in with the wrong people, and Nao had been able to get her out for him. They had an uneasy alliance. When she saw her standing stood in front of the old street-level office and waving at him through the cracked plate glass window that the detective had never bothered to replace, Sakugawa grimaced, but he let her in.

The detective was delighted to meet an American. He listened patiently, sucking on an unlit pipe, while Chuck told him what he knew, which wasn't much. Soon after arriving here in Japan he had received word of his Grandfather's death, in a manner that would have been entirely normal, a tornado fatality, except for the note that was found in

his hand. Because of the painful story Buck had told Chuck that very morning, of his long-ago brutality in war, Chuck suspected that Buck might have been murdered in revenge for this ancient wrong. Chuck thought the “they” in Grandpa Buck’s note could be someone, some people from Japan. Since he already in Japan, he’d decided to take a few days and look for them, before he had to start his new job.

Sakugawa spoke English in a queerly stilted and formal way, but very precisely.

“Let me summarize. It boils down, reduces itself, makes a reduction to one central idea. That somehow a surviving kamikaze pilot killed your grandfather. Even if this story was true, and that is a huge *if* which I don’t believe for a second, one could callously say—so what? These are old men, fighting a war long over. What would you say to that?”

“I would say, I wish it were true. But I’m afraid it’s not,” Chuck replied.

“I’ll make some inquiries. You (he pointed to Nao) will end up owing me, young monster.” Nao stuck out her tongue at him.

Two hours later, Detective Sakugawa called Nao’s cell phone. “I think I have something for you. Try the *Oni Matsuri* Festival at Yasukuni Shrine.”

“Yasukuni Shrine. That so funny. We went there a few days ago it was closed.

“Go again, my dear.”



## Chapter 7

**Yasukuni Shrine (Again)**

On the detective's advice, Chuck and Nao went back to the shrine. Workmen were setting up a temporary *dohyo* for the annual sumo exhibitions. Chuck purchased a ticket for himself and one for Nao, and they passed through the Daiichi Torii and wandered around until Chuck found the object he was looking for. The pilot in the bronze statue stood confidently, hands on hips, in his flight suit and helmet. Chuck could see nothing of the vulnerability, the humanity, the emotion his grandfather Buck had encountered in his brief moment of eye contact with the pilot of the incoming Mitsubishi Zero. Nao stood off to the side, looking bored.

An old man came shuffling up to the statue. Very old. Could have been—but before Chuck had a chance to try a question, the old man bowed and began to walk around the statue slowly. He supported himself with a cane that was nothing more than a thick stick of Japanese oak, stripped of its bark and polished. He moved very slowly. It didn't seem right to Chuck to follow the man, so he stood to one side and watched as the elderly worshipper circled the statue three times, then stood in front of it and bowed again. Chuck thought this was his moment. Making a stiff bow, he said: "Excuse me, sir. Are you, were you, *kamikaze*?"

The old man didn't acknowledge Chuck directly. Instead, gazing intently at the statue, he began to talk:

“We wanted to become *eirei*, guardian spirits of our country,” the old man mumbled in a rustic Japanese that even Nao had trouble understanding. “Instead we became *ronin*. We were the ones who survived. No one wanted us.”

Nao looked at Chuck doubtfully. She wondered if he could comprehend the depth of this old man’s shame, which frightened even her, a rebel who claimed to completely reject her nation’s past.

“But, it wasn’t your fault,” Chuck said, trying to comfort the man. Nao shook her head. He didn’t get it.

“I came back nine times. Others who came back fewer than that many times, they took out and shot. But somehow they believed me when I told them I couldn’t find the enemy in the fog, I got lost, my engine started acting up.”

“And then, when it was over, then I wanted to go. I went. Two days after the surrender, I flew out with sixteen others who refused to accept Japan’s defeat. They all died. I came back.”

“After?” Nao watched Chuck carefully. Maybe that would help him to see the horrible outcast fate the old man endured. He shouldn’t be there. His was a country in which the ultimate sacrifice wasn’t just an ideal, it was demanded, required. But no, the stupid American pressed on with his insulting questions.

“What about your family?”

“They were the first to reject me,” the old man said. “It’s so

different now. Then, with the Americans, so sorry, just offshore, waiting to attack, and word came of the two huge bombs—” as the old man talked Chuck could see that he went to the same place Buck went, he wasn’t there anymore, he was somewhere else, some time else.

“—and we all knew that the war was lost, but it didn’t matter, we still wanted to die for our country.”

The ancient pilot fell silent. Chuck waited for him to compose himself, then said: “My grandfather—“

But the pilot raised one withered arm and said: “I know.”

“You know?”

“This world is so small, after all, compared to the universe, compared to the vastness of the stars.”

“You come to pay your respects to the dead.”

“Yes, and I wait. Wait, for them.”

“Who are you waiting for?”

“The unreleased souls of my comrades, trapped in Buddhist purgatory, who wander the earth in search, and seek revenge.” He paused. “I’m sorry if this is not what you came to hear, but this is my story.”

With that he bowed, deeply, and entered the shrine; neither Chuck nor Nao tried to follow him, and the deep mood of old man’s reminiscences was broken.

Yoshida and his disciple Fujii were hidden behind a shoji screen

inside the Yasukuni Shrine, where the souls of those who have died for Japan in wars are honored. Crowds were gathering outside for the Oni Matsuri festival, wearing garish Buddhist masks, horrible grimacing faces done in violent red and black streaks, the faces of devils and ghosts. The festival was a parade, with music and dancing. Inside the shrine, an old man entered, bowed, prayed in a quiet corner.

“This is one of the cowards who refused to fly a kamikaze mission?” Yoshida whispered to his assistant.

“So it is said.”

“What makes you think the Tamakaze will appear tonight? We could wait many nights.”

“That is true, Sensei. But tonight is special. Tonight is the devil festival of Oni Matsuri. The old man has come to make an offering. And you are here.”

“Ah. So you think the Tamakaze know who I am?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“We shall see.” They waited.

Outside, the crowd was gathering for the Oni Matsuri Festival.

Just then a pale and fragile-looking young woman with deathly white make-up, holding a small bundle in her arms, appeared at the head of a crowd coming toward them. She had a particular interest in Chuck. She approached him. The crowd drew back. Even those wearing masks were afraid of this apparition.

“What is it?” Chuck asked Nao.

“Yuki Onna.”

“Huh?”

“The Snow Mother. Don’t touch her, and whatever you do, don’t take the baby.”

“That bundle’s a baby? What happens if I take it?”

“You’ll turn to ice!”

“I thought you didn’t know about any of this old stuff.”

“Everybody knows about Yuki Onna, silly. It’s a bedtime story to frighten little kids into being good.”

“Nice. Of course you don’t believe it.”

While they were having this short conversation the Yuki Onna had approached, closer and closer, and silently stood in front of Chuck and offered him the baby. He was about to reach out and take it when Nao grabbed him and pulled him back.

“Don’t touch her!”

The Yuki Onna reached out, chillingly, and Nao screamed. The image faded. In her place stood a man dressed in the leather jacket and cap of a WWII Japanese fighter pilot. He looked much like the statue! He too was ghostly, apparently so much so that the crowd didn’t see him at all. He was only visible to Chuck and Nao. He gestured for them to follow him inside the shrine.

Nao didn't want to, but Chuck insisted. They went inside. The fighter pilot looked at the praying old man, then turned to Chuck.

"We said to each other, before we climbed into our planes: *I will be waiting for you at Yasukuni Shrine.*"

Chuck didn't know what to say. After a moment the ghost pilot continued--

"Those Yuki Onna are the ghosts of the women we left behind. They never married, never had children. Their lives were over when ours ended, but they never found peace either, not even in death. Pity them. They didn't even have the moment of glory that we had. Not even a glass of sake before the flight."

"He's creeping me out," Nao whispered in surprisingly good American slang. Chuck stood between the ghost and Nao, and asked the pilot what he was doing here.

"Righting an ancient wrong. Just as we have done before. Watch!"

The pilot disappeared like a ghost, and the air around the old man praying at the shrine altar began to stir, and soon the place was swirling with destructive raging winds. Oni, angry horned demons in garish colors--blue, red, green--with large horns on their heads and three eyes, danced around the old man, who clutched at his heart and keeled over. The winds subsided immediately, the devilish images began to dematerialize, and the shrine was spared destruction. Soon only a few scattered prayer papers hinted at the wreckage that might have been.

From behind the screen Yoshida and his functionary gasped and grunted with amazement, the soft whirl of a video camera was the only unnatural noise. They had caught everything on digital video.

The Tamakaze had shown themselves to Yoshida while destroying the old man. Yoshida was ecstatic. He saw the vindication of his struggle and his radical views. "*Japan will rule the world!*" he hissed to Fujii. But before Yoshida's could make contact with the Tamakaze, the moment was disrupted. Chuck, heedless of the fading monsters, ran to the altar and took up the old man in his arms. The ghosts suddenly vanished!

"Grandpa!" Chuck said, almost not realizing what he was saying.

But he was too late. The ancient kamikaze pilot was dead. Chuck was the last person to have spoken to him. Nao stood by, crying, in shock, not comprehending what she had just seen, which appeared to her like a fantastic magic show, so dazzling she lost her mind.

"I go!" Nao said between sobs. "They catch me here, I go to jail."

"Go ahead. I understand." She ran out, passing within a few feet of the shoji screen where Yoshida and Fujii crouched.

Yoshida was furious. He stood up, and approached Chuck, who remained on his knees, cradling the old pilot.

"*Baka gaijin!* Stupid foreigner!" He shouted in Japanese. Chuck was confused by this verbal assault, but stayed where he was, and

protected the pilot's body from further harm. Fujii rushed forward and tugged at his leader's shirt.

"Sensei, we'd better go. We don't want to be here when the police arrive." Fujii could hear police sirens approaching the shrine.

Yoshida glared at Fujii, but assented. Once they were outside, Yoshida turned to Fujii:

"I want to know who is that foreigner who ruined my meeting with the Tamakaze. And also that repulsive girl. She represents everything that is wrong with modern Japan."

"Hai sensei! I will find out." They crept off. Later, in the privacy of the retreat at Hthey would watch the video over and over, show it on a giant screen for hundreds of followers, and it would turn up on the Internet as a short pirated video clip with the caption: *Special Effects at the Oni Matsuri Festival*.

Chuck stayed with the body until the police came. They took him downtown to a station and questioned him for hours. Chuck was smart enough not to tell what he'd seen. He said he saw the old man have a heart attack, and that's what came back from the coroner's office about five in the morning, and they let him go. It was just another one of the old-timers dying off. Nobody cared. But Chuck know knew it was so much more. Now he knew that there was a connection between his grandfather's death and this one. And to that strange Japanese man who



yelled at him. The lab job would have to wait. He would be too late for the service for Buck, but now he had to go back to Iowa.

Outside, amid drumming and torches, mere mortal men in the masks of those fearsome demons spread fear into the hearts of small children, and brought smiles to the lips of their parents.

Chapter 8

**Nightmare at 40,000 Feet**

When Chuck got back to his capsule hotel, Nao was waiting for him. When she heard of his plan, she begged Chuck to take her with him.

“I can pay. I translate for you, when you meet Tamakaze.”

“What makes you so sure I’m going to meet these Tamakaze?”

“Ghost pilot said.”

Chuck decided it would be a good idea to bring the girl along, though he didn’t know how his Iowan grandmother would take the sight of this crazy young woman. But Nao surprised him. She already had a passport, and she showed up at the airport the next afternoon in a prim business suit, with only a hint of purple in her hair. Her suitcases were the kind Gidget would carry, round things like pillbox hat boxes, lots of them. At customs, he finally learned her last name: Nao Hayashi.

At sunset they boarded a Chinese airline company’s sleek new passenger jet, the first generation of Asian-made planes. Scarcely an hour out, the plane encountered a horrific thunder and lightning storm. Major turbulence wracked the jet, bouncing the passengers around in their seats. Nao thought it was fun, but Chuck turned a greener shade of pale. Even the flight attendants were freaked out. They sat in their seats and put their seat belts on, just like the passengers. The pilot tried

changing altitudes but the storm followed them. Chuck puked up a couple of times into his vomit bag and then Nao's, and finally felt better, though the shaking and the stomach-churning drops and rise in altitude continued. Because it was new, the plane also made strange noises, a kind of high-pitched grinding and shearing sound that frightened the passengers, but that the pilots had been warned about in advance.

Nao had the window seat. Out the plastic view-port the blackness was occasionally lit up by flashes of lightning, some brief, some longer and more intense. In one of these flashes she saw him, standing on the wing, battered by the wind and pelted by rain, a Japanese man in flight gear. She screamed! But in the general pandemonium of the storm, her scream was barely audible above the din of the plane. In the next burst of light she saw two Japanese Zeroes, flying at an impossible altitude, diving from above, attacking and strafing the plane. Chuck was their target.

A lightning bolt struck the plane. Nao screamed again, and fainted. When she woke up, Chuck was holding her in his arms. She liked it, but then she remembered, and pushed him away in fear.

"Ghost Zeroes! Ghost Zeroes!" she shouted. But the turbulence was lessening now; the plane leveled off, and a semblance of normalcy returned to the aisles. The flight attendants got up and made their rounds, comforting people and bringing drinks and those nice *oshiburi*.

“What did you see?” Chuck asked Nao, but she huddled beneath the airline blanket, shivering, and wouldn’t say anything except that she wished she hadn’t come and could Chuck please ask the pilot to turn around.

“I’m afraid we’re too far out for that, Nao. You’ll just have to come along.”

They transferred planes in California and arrived in Des Moines in mid-morning. Nao wasn’t impressed with the airport--airports are airports--but as soon as they left the Interstate and drove out onto the plains of Iowa, which aren’t plains at all but gently rolling hills broken by short ridges, Nao was entranced.

“This Disneyland, right?”

“No, this is Iowa. This is where I live.”

“Are you cowboy?”

“No, but I did ride horses when I was growing up.”

“You a cowboy.”

“Farm-boy. It’s different.” They looked at each other across a vast cultural gulf, and yet, when their eyes met, they were, after all just two human beings, young and curious, both of them. They were opening worlds to each other. The next world they entered was a rural Iowa farm community, that had never seen anything like Nao before, nor she the likes of them. She had changed out of the business suit and into a tight-fitting pair of farmer’s overalls, dyed neon green, over a red plaid shirt,

and orange sneakers. The overalls were a perfect copy of a pair of Big John's from Agway, except for the disturbing color. They had pockets where you didn't expect pockets, and lots of little copper rivets everywhere. When they stopped at the coffee-shop/bakery on Main Street before going out to the farmhouse, Nao made quite an impression on the locals. Not that they would say anything or even look at her directly, but they did take notice.

"Grandma used to make these," Chuck said, picking up a bag of cinnamon rolls. "I think she'd like to have some."

"I brought her something too," Nao said, but Chuck was distracted with paying and saying hello to Mrs. Heaton and didn't catch it.

Every single thing that Chuck took for granted evoked "ooohs" and "ahhhs" from Nao—the F-16 mounted on the pole in front of the National Guard armory; the old Aermotor steel windmills with their tail-fins like flying fish; and the endlessly vast landscape, spreading out before her in a multi-hued carpet of soybeans, wheat, and corn. It was so different from the closed, small feeling of Japan.

They pulled into the long drive up to the white clapboard farmhouse circa 1851, that four days ago Chuck had not expected to see for the next two years. As they came onto the property, Chuck spied torn-off shingles and the caved-in room at the back.

"Fairy tale," Nao murmured.

"Nope. Just my grandparents' house."

Chuck could see the remnants of what must have been a large gathering. The grass was trampled down in the front yard and there were a few plastic glasses and paper plates strewn in the yard. *“The service for Grandpa must have been yesterday,”* he thought. *“I missed it by a day.”* He felt a lump in his throat and swallowed hard, making his Adam’s apple bob up and down, and ran his hand through his shock of blond hair.

He’d let Grandma know he was coming, and she hadn’t been any too happy about it, but she knew better than to try to tell a Branson man what to do. TickTwo (he had shown up two days after Buck’s death, covered in ticks and burrs) did a funny animal double-take when he saw Chuck and Nao. He started to growl but ended up wagging his tail furiously. Nao scratched him behind an ear and he was happy.

“That hound has been moping since Buck—“ Grandma said by way of *hello*. Then she and Chuck had a long, silent embrace, and when they finished Grandma dabbed at her eyes with a corner of her apron, touched her gray hair, gathered herself, and turned to Nao. She bowed. This was the first time Chuck had seen her bow, and a pretty bow it was, hands at the front of her thighs, head and neck modestly tilted forward, though the effect was somewhat lessened by the Mr. Green Jeans overalls, as Grandma Buck called them. The reference went right over Chuck’s head but Nao got it instantly.

“Captain Kangaroo. I am big fan.”

“So this is your Japanese friend? Welcome, young lady. I hope you brought your appetite.”

“Yes, Mrs. Branson.” Chuck had no idea from which pocket Nao had pulled that rabbit. The girl continued to amaze him.

“Oh, you can just call me Grandma. Everbody else does.” They all trooped inside, leaving TickTwo to sniff at the rental car and settle on the porch, content now that the young master was home again.

Nao wasn't prepared for the Jello, but she loved it. And Grandma Branson loved her, from the first moment, surprising Chuck, who thought the old girl was going to be stand-offish and formal. She clapped her hands in glee when Nao gave her the small, complexly wrapped package. Chuck held his breath, but it turned out to be an innocuous set of note cards with the Hiroshige's *Fifty-Three Stages of the Tokkaido Road*, of the kind you could get in any gift shop. But Grandma was delighted with them.

The meal was a roast chicken (one of theirs, naturally,) with Silver King corn and potatoes from the farm. The Jello came after, out of a mold in the shape of a pineapple, with tiny white mini-marshmallows and chunks of pineapple embedded in a translucent green that almost matched Nao's overalls.

“Your first time in Iowa, I dare say?” Grandma asked.

“First time in Americas,” Nao said with a grin. “I helping Chuck translate.”

Baffled, Grandma turned to Chuck. "Why would you need a Japanese translator in Iowa?" she asked, reasonably enough.

Chuck took a deep breath. "I think you know that wasn't any ordinary wind the other night, Grandma," he said softly.

Grandma paused before answering. "I suppose not," she said finally.

"It was all so long ago, and you were here, but I think you know something of what went on with Grandpa in the war."

"Yes. I know. We didn't have many secrets, me and Buck. What he didn't tell me in the day I heard at night in his nightmares. Waking up screaming, back in it still."

"It looks like it never ended until a few days ago, for Buck. And for others," Chuck hinted. Grandma dished Nao another helping of Jello, topping it with some real creamy whipped cream, not the chemical stuff from a can she was used to.

"It's over now," she said.

"For Buck, but perhaps not for those others. Did Grandpa Buck know any other pilots from around here?"

"Surely," Grandma said. "A bunch of those boys all enlisted together after Pearl Harbor, and the ones that wanted to fly went to flight school together, and a few of them ended up together in the Pacific, on the same carrier. Like Buck and his brother Joe. A lot of them became crop-dusters after the war, but not Grandpa. He was a farmer through



and through. Plus he said he never wanted to get in a plane again. We used to take the train to visit relatives in California.”

“I remember. But, about those pilots, are any of them still, you know, alive?”

“One or two. They used to have a reunion every year, just a barbecue, you know, nothing fancy, no speeches or anything, but at the end it was just talking about their illnesses and who’d died, and Grandpa stopped going.”

Chuck was a patient Midwesterner. He asked again. “Do you know any of them that are still around, that I could contact, Grandma?”

“I think I could come up with a couple of names for you, son. But why? Why would you want to talk with them. Isn’t it awful enough the way Buck went?” Chuck knew that Grandma Branson didn’t want him to investigate too deeply into Buck’s death. She knew something she didn’t want to share with Chuck, and she was afraid for him. His grandmother was no fool. She’d been nearly an equal partner with Buck for sixty years. There weren’t any secrets between them, and Grandma Branson knew better than anyone that it wasn’t any damn fool tornado that had killed Buck.

Chuck was going to say something or other when Nao, who had been sitting quietly, said to Grandma Branson: “I saw them on the wing of our airplane. They want to kill Chuck. He has to find out.”

“Oh my young dear, that must have been so frightening for you,”  
Grandma said comfortingly.

“It was. I nearly pee my pants!” Nao said in a confidential voice  
that made Chuck laugh but made Grandpa Branson offer her a rare hug.

“You poor thing. I’ll make you some tea.”

Chuck winced, knowing the Lipton wasn’t going to suit Nao’s taste,  
but the two women were practically ignoring Chuck now.

Eventually, Grandma gave him two names. The next morning, after  
a breakfast that included ham, bacon, *and* sausage from one of the prize  
hogs, Chuck and Nao set out for Bob Ridley’s farm. He was seventy miles  
away in the next county, but out here, that was nothing. With Nao  
playing country and western songs on the radio and admiring every cow,  
they were there in just over an hour.

These Midwestern farms have a certain rhythm to their day—up  
early milking, fire in the wood stove in cold weather, tettering and haying  
in the late afternoon. But something was off about Bob Ridley’s place, an  
unnatural quiet broken only by the lugubrious baying of his two matched  
hounds, who were tied up on leashes (*that’s odd*, Chuck thought) in the  
front yard. Chuck pulled up to the top end of the circular drive that  
surrounded a hundred-year-old shagbark hickory that overspread the  
lawn. He shut off the rental car but didn’t immediately get out.

“Might need your help Nao,” he said. Nao looked at him  
expectantly. But there was no one around, either human or spectral. The

house was untouched. They walked around it once, and were about to leave when Chuck caught the faint sound of a John Deere tractor, that unmistakable rumbling that is to tractors what the thumping basso Harley engine sound is to motorcycles.

It was off in the distance, on an upper field, and it was making long lazy circles, not up and down rows of furrows as it should. Chuck started out at a trot but as he got closer broke into a run, with Nao lagging well behind him. He could see the man he imagined to be Bob Ridley slumped in his seat, which had a dead man switch underneath it, but that only worked if the dead man fell off the tractor seat. The machine was only going a few miles an hour but it was still risky business to try to climb onto it while it was in motion. The egg beater blades of the tetterer were whirling dangerously behind it. Chuck timed his leap for a level stretch when the wheels weren't crossing any furrows or ditches, and heaved himself up onto the space behind the seat. He pulled dead Bo Ridley away from the wheel by both shoulders reached over and killed the ignition. The tractor lurched to a halt. The immediate silence was profound. Chuck found himself staring into the bruised face of Bob Ridley. His upper arms head, neck, and face were all covered with red welts.

“What happen to him?” Nao asked, afraid to come any closer.

“You know,” Chuck said. He pointed to a windbreak a couple of hundred yards off, where the brush and scrub and even some of the

larger black walnuts were uprooted and crazily knocked over. The path of the twister was obvious by the damage done along the break.

“Maybe he had a heart attack,” Nao said.

“Probably. Good bet. Or a stroke. But only after—those bruises—” and that’s when Chuck realized, it wasn’t a twister. It was hail, the kind that can be the size of golf balls or larger, and ruin a crop in minutes. He’d seen pick-up trucks pocked like those very golf balls by the force of a hailstorm, windscreens smashed, the works. “*That’s what had caused these bruises on Bob Ridley’s face,*” Chuck thought as he and Nao gently lowered Bob’s body onto the dirt of Iowa from which he’d sprung. But where, in this cloudless sky, was the hail storm, which must have happened just minutes ago?

“They were here. Maybe still are,” Chuck said. “Come on, we’ve got to call the police.”

“No police,” Nao said.

“But, Nao—“

“No police. They will deport me.”

“We can’t just leave Mr. Ridley here, Nao,” Chuck said sternly.

“They go to next one. Don’t you want get there first?”

Chuck imagined himself in the county morgue, and then inside the shabby construction trailer that served as the police station in Hawley. He saw himself answering questions for hours, and most troubling of all for an honest Iowa farm-boy, not being able to tell the truth, because no

one would believe it. Nao was right. They had to go, now, to try to save, he glanced at the slip of paper, Grover Connor, the last of the squadron, the other of the two names Grandma had given him.

Chuck laid out Bob Ridley's body, folded his arms across his chest, and closed his faded blue eyes. Nao cried. She'd never seen a dead body before. They walked slowly back to the car, the only sounds those of insects buzzing in the sustenance garden next to the farmhouse. Chuck wondered if Bob Ridley had family who would inherit the place. These old family farms had almost disappeared—his family's and this one were among the few that remained, most of the rest of Iowa's tillable acres had been swallowed up by the corporate mega-farms.

As a balm to Chuck's conscience, he phoned the cops from a pay phone. Yes, they still existed out here in the central plains. This one was right outside the convenience store in Hawley and had a folding glass door and everything. He left a vague message directing them to the scene of an accident, which wasn't strictly true, and anyway they'd never believe it once they saw the position of the body, but Chuck just couldn't have left Mr. Ridley slumped in his tractor.

As Chuck drove, Nao sat quietly in the passenger seat. Finally, after Chuck asked her what was wrong a couple of times, she said:

“You hate me.”

“I don't hate you. I *like* you,” Chuck said, more truthfully than he would have liked to admit.

“You must hate me. All Japanese. For these Tamakaze killings.”

Chuck pulled over by a rickety wooden roadside stand where you could buy corn by the dozen and leave money in an open small metal cash-box. “Listen, Nao. I don’t think that way, okay? Neither did my grandmother, and neither did Grandpa Buck. He told me so. And neither do these Tamakaze, apparently. They’re killing as many Japanese as Americans, as best as I can figure.”

“They hate me in my own country, because I different.”

Chuck looked over at this small, fierce, odd character, so far out of her element that “fish out of water” just wasn’t in it. She’d been through a lot today. He wanted to comfort her but he didn’t know how. “Come on, we’ve got a job to do. Let’s get going, okay?”

“Okay.” Nao was relieved, if not entirely mollified. The black ribbon of Route 142 stretched out over the gold and rose-tinted flatness. They had to travel ‘faster than the wind’ if they wanted to save Grover Connor.

## Chapter 9

**Yoshida Moves**

The training grounds at Haguro were a brutal place. Full contact karate with no padding was permitted. Naked blade (real steel sword) fighting was permitted, and fatalities were not uncommon. These were dedicated warriors. They trained as they fought, uncompromisingly. They followed Funakoshi's watchwords: "*If you are going to win, do so as quickly as possible. If you are going to lose, do so as slowly as possible.*"

Yoshida practiced *iaido*, the art of one cut. Some say it is only the art of drawing and putting back the sword. Not so. Done well, the unsheathing is itself a cut, deep, fast, and lethal. In a single movement, while stepping forward in *hanmihan-dachi* or while standing up, the swordsman draws and cuts. It can be ritualized and formal, or it can be fast, powerful, and dynamic. Yoshida practiced the latter style.

Yoshida was not a fanatic. That was true. He was not a true believer. That was true. But he *was* mad--gone insane in the way that a Go or chess player loses it, from excessive contemplation of too many possibilities. Instead of that one perfect cut, he had found a dizzying array of potential swings of the sword, all equally artful, and it overwhelmed him, drove him mad; but from within this madness came insane inspiration.

Yoshida believed in the existence of the Tamakaze now, because he had seen it with his own eyes. And this morning, while in deep mad meditation, drawing his sword over and over, slashing at imaginary opponents, he conceived of a plan so brilliantly demented that it would work.

The Japanese space agency was preparing to launch its first space plane, a sleek new orbiter powered by two nuclear reactors. *The peaceful use of space!* the media had trumpeted. Yoshida had read the press reports, and was excited by this expression of a resurgent Japan. But this morning, as he drew the sacred *Dojigiri Yatsusama* in *nuki tsuke*, several disparate ideas that had been floating around in his brain coalesced into the single fantastic thought: the space plane could be a magnificent weapon, a kamikaze of spectacular proportions! If only he could guide it—and then, as he sheathed the sword again, the last, most electric synapses connected and he had his answer—the Tamakaze could do this!

While a few querulous voices had speculated on the possible radiation side effects of a failed mission, no one had speculated on the wildly improbable possibility that the space plane could be hijacked by visitors from the spirit world. But that was Yoshida's fantastic plan, and, if no one stopped him, it would work. The Tamakaze would crash the space plane into San Francisco. It would be a terrorist act on a scale not even imagined by the worst of the Middle Eastern groups. Like a



Japanese science fiction film, it combined the deepest fears of his people, radiation and space invasion. Only this time they would be the invaders, the destroyers.

He would contact the Tamakaze. He would enlist them in his organization, he would elevate them to the status of gods, Thunder Gods, as they had been called. They would join him, he was sure. Their goal was his goal, to make Japan the ruler of Asia again. *The Empire of the Future Sun!*

Still in a state of extreme excitement at the idea, he called his students together on the dusty grounds of the outdoor practice field, the only level space in the summit retreat. The buildings of Shourai Taiyou were all built up against sheer rock walls. Yoshida stood above the fighters on a rock outcropping. They were a rough bunch, deep-voiced and boisterous. They called themselves the Forty-Seven Ronin after the famous band of samurai, but there were well over five hundred of them living and practicing in Haguro, and thousands more across the country who followed Yoshida's *Shourai Taiyou*.

“Ronin!” Yoshida cried. “You have studied well. You are Japan’s best hope. I stand here today to tell you that your exertions will not be in vain. A mystical force from the past is come to our assistance— Tamakaze! I have seen them. They are real! And they will align themselves with our Future Sun movement. They will become a new

Kamikaze, not born out of desperation, but divinely inspired. Victory is near!”

A cheer went up. They waved their swords, brandished their *bohs* and *jos* and *naginatas*, fired rounds from their semi-automatic weapons into the air and looked around for an enemy to challenge, but here they were all of the same mind. Only when they descended from the mountaintop would they find foes to do battle with—and they were ready. They sought death eagerly. They were ready to charge down the mountain path right now, and burn the world with their fiery passion, but Yoshida held up his hand.

“You, my closest followers, will be the vanguard of the new Japanese might. But not yet. Continue your practice, redouble your strenuous efforts, and be ready for our day, the day of *Shourai Taiyou* is coming soon!”

They roared again, and fell to fighting among themselves, and blood was spilled, and one or two died, but it didn’t matter, they were the new samurai of the world, death was nothing to them, and they would soon be conquerors. Yoshida watched with satisfaction from his spot above them. He didn’t care that they were undisciplined now, as long as they followed his orders when the time came. He drew his sword, the ancient and beautiful *Dojigiri Yatsusama*, and waved it dramatically above them. The late afternoon sun glinted off the steel blade, and a reddish mist spread over the retreat, enveloping everything in a dusky

glow. It was a magical, mystical moment that temporarily silenced the rowdy bunch on the field. They gazed in awe at the upraised sword, symbol of their highest aspirations, that almost seemed to be alive in the fading twilight.

## Chapter 10

**Saving the Truly Last**

Grover Connor's place was nineteenth-century brick farmhouse, square and stolid, reflecting the success of the gentleman farmer, no longer a pioneer, who had built his home to last, and fired the bricks himself in a backyard kiln. Like Bob Ridley, and almost every other farmer in Iowa, Grover Connor was out tettering, fluffing up the late hay to dry before baling it. Unlike Bob, Grover was still very much alive, and gave Chuck and Nao a hearty wave as he turned the tractor down the long row, the tetterers whirling away, tossing the hay up into the wind where it swirled for a second before settling again.

"Doesn't look like he's planning to stop for us, Chuck said. Nao didn't answer. Chuck turned to look at her and saw that she was staring at the western sky, where a black line of thunderheads was building up at unnatural speed, blotting the horizon, and racing toward them. "You stay here," Chuck shouted, as the wind had already, in just a few seconds, reached a screeching pitch. "Get back in the car!" Nao didn't have to be told twice. She leaped into the back seat and locked the doors. Chuck sprinted toward Grover Connor's tractor, which was chugging slowly down the line between tettered and untettered hay. Before he could get there, a great second tettering occurred, as the hay was blown into a wild confusion, destroying the neat rows that Grover had laid

down. As Chuck reached him, Grover half-turned to see where this strange wind was coming from, Chuck dragged him off the tractor, but gently, as Grover, like Bob Ridley, was a very old man to still be doing this kind of farm work. Once they were both on the ground, Chuck looked around for shelter. All he saw was a cattle trough constructed from an old porcelain bathtub. The sky had totally blackened in the space of a few seconds, with menacing clouds lowering over the hay field.

“Tamakaze!” he yelled to the dazed Grover, who nodded once, as if he understood. Chuck picked up the farmer, who couldn’t have weighed more than a hundred and thirty pounds, manhandled him to the trough, set him down, tipped up the trough and slid himself and Grover under it. The next instant the deluge struck. Under the cover of the upturned tub they could hear the pounding roar of a torrential hail and rain storm, deadly hailstones smashing against the tub’s exposed underside, thunderclaps, and something else—

“Who the hell are you?” Grover shouted over the din.

“Buck Branson’s grandson,”

“I’ve heard that sound before,” Grover yelled, and Chuck thought he meant the noise of the hail clattering off the tub, but then he realized, it was the other sound, like an angry mosquito multiplied many times over, the straining buzz of an airplane engine, diving and rising and diving again, every thirty seconds or so, accompanied, at the crescendo of the dive, by the staccato rat-tat-tat of a machine gun.

“That’s a Jap Zero with a seven point seven millimeter gun,” Grover said calmly, with a touch of wonder in his voice. “Never thought I’d hear that again.” Chuck nodded, “But what’s it doing over my hay field?” Chuck couldn’t tell him, at least not now. The storm was intensifying, and threatening to blow away the tub. Chuck tried to hold it down, but the heavy tub lifted up like a sail and cart-wheeled away like a ball of tumbleweed, leaving the two of them exposed. Chuck threw himself on the old man, covering him with his own body. Almost as soon as he did, the storm abated. In a matter of seconds, the clouds receded and the sun came out, matter-of-factly, as if nothing had happened. It was somewhat disorienting. Chuck stood up unsteadily and helped Grover Connor to his feet.

“Well, son, I thank ye. Woulda died on my John Deere if it weren’t for you. Come on inside. I need a beer.”

“Yes, well, okay, but—“ and Chuck remembered Nao and ran for the car. She was curled up in fetal position on the floor of the back seat. He led her, shaking and sobbing, over to where Grover Connor stood on the doorstep to the farmhouse. When he saw her, Grover couldn’t help himself and blurted out: “Jesus H. Christ, she’s a Jap! Did she have something to do with this? Was that you?”

Nao let out a wail. Chuck put his arm around her, the first time they’d had real physical contact since their first chaotic meeting in the

park in Tokyo. No, that wasn't right. He'd held her when she fainted on the plane.

"She's as much a victim here as we are, Mr. Connor."

"All right, all right. Come in. Nothing a beer won't fix."

They sat around a rickety wooden table with a scratched and torn plastic tablecloth. A scarred butcher block served as the sideboard.

Grover served them beer in small Mason jars.

"Sorry about the mess," he said. "Grace passed three years ago and I ain't much of one for the house chores. My niece come in every couple weeks, but she's on summer vacation this month."

"Don't matter none," Chuck said, falling easily into the country patter. Chuck told Grover what he knew of the Tamakaze. And he told him about Bob Ridley.

"Too bad about old Bob. He was one heckuva pilot. Still flew his own crop-duster, did you know that? I had to give it up about seven years ago when I cracked up mine. Hit a guy wire on our radio tower." Grover looked at Nao more closely. "You have any relatives in the war, honey?"

"All of them," Nao responded coolly, having regained some of her composure. "My grandparents own a tofu shop near Nagasaki."

"Tofu, huh?" Maybe I am selling them some of my soybeans. Wouldn't that be a coincidence?"

“Sorry, my English bad. Shop not there since August, nineteen forty-five. Grandparents not there either.”

Nao didn't have to say anything more. But Grover Connor wasn't nonplussed, or embarrassed, or angry.

“Well, little missy, it might surprise you to know that I was opposed to the Bomb when it was dropped, and ever since then. I saw too much—“ and here Grover stopped, and tried to clear his throat, and removed his glasses and wiped his eyes. “I'm an old man, miss, and I've seen a lot in my lifetime. You're just a kid. But from what Chuck just told me, you've gotten yourself into this mess with these, whatever they are, these ghosts, if I am to believe Buck Branson's grandson, these Tamakaze who killed Buck and tried to kill me.”

“And me,” said Nao.

“Yes. So, I'm not the enemy. And I won't tell you I was just doing my job, when I flew missions in double-you double-you two. I wanted to kill as many Japs, pardon, Japanese, as I could, so's we could all go home. But when I got home here to this old farm, I had a lot of time to think, and I did think, and I came to the conclusion that, and this might surprise you, that if I had it to do all over again I would have been a C.O.—“ he saw the perplexed look on Nao's face and explained—  
“Conscientious Objector. Back in the day, you either went to jail or became a medic. I would have gone in as a medic. That was no picnic either. Hell, back then I'd already fixed enough broken bones and birthed



enough calves that I was half a doctor, or at least half a vet. But that's second-guessing. I flew in the war. I killed people. It has haunted me ever since, and now apparently, it's coming back to haunt me for real..."

Grover trailed off. He didn't know what else to say. Nao softened.

"Okay. You have good *kokoro*, heart. I see that."

"Maybe you should be thinking about retirement, Mr. Connor," said Chuck, just to change the subject, because the conversation had become uncomfortably serious.

"Go to a rest home? Assisted living? I don't need any assistance, thank you. As long as I'm not being dive-bombed by Zeroes, I'm managing okay. Fred Huckabee comes over to help with the heavy stuff. I can't throw bales up on the wagon like I used to, and anyway we have automatic balers for that now. Nah, I ain't leaving. I ain't even leaving when I leave. You probably saw the little family cemetery down the way? We've got Connors buried there since they first came to Iowa as homesteaders in the 1830's."

Nao wasn't saying much. She was still shaking slightly from the storm and attack. She'd seen more than Chuck or Grover, who'd been under the trough almost the whole time. She'd seen the plane, seen the pilot's face contorted by the wind and the stress of the steep dive, the face of a *kami*.

Chuck ran his hand across the red and white checkerboard of the tablecloth. "I'm not sure what to do next," he said. "I don't want to leave you without protection."

"They not come back," Nao said, surprising the two men.

"How do you know?" Chuck asked.

"They, uh, I—" Nao didn't answer, and Chuck let it go. The poor girl was still quivering from the shock of events.

Chuck and Grover turned to more mundane things, talking of the crops and the harvest, of calves and chickens and goats, of the weather. Just two farmers, passing the time. Nao got up and wandered about, looking at the quaint museum-like assemblage of Grover and Grace Connor's life. Overstuffed armchairs with antimacassars in the living room. Mahogany end tables. A pack of Lucky Strikes and a silver lighter waiting to accompany Grover's ritual five o'clock Manhattan.

Grover invited them to stay while he cooked up some steaks--"the only thing I dare make myself, aside from a baked potato." Before dinner Nao, showed off her English skills. She read to them that day's *Des Moines Daily Register*. At first she just read the local news: whose barn had burned down, whose son or daughter had received a scholarship to a local college, who was buying or selling their property. But then, on page three of the international news, she discovered an article about the: "*Historic first Japanese space mission...New, nuclear-powered space plane...Peaceful use of nuclear energy...*"

As part of the story, the article also mentioned the resurgence of the right wing in Japan, and their fierce pride in the space undertaking. There was a picture of Hiroyuki Yoshida and a quote from him:

*“We are backed by the spirits of the samurai, and the spirits of the kamikaze. They are still with us, those brave ghosts, as Tamakaze. They ride with our first Japanese astronauts into space. Their strength is a wind that will blow away the Americans, the Chinese, the Russians, and leave only the glorious Rising Sun, the Future Sun, Shourai Taiyou!”*

“Let me see that,” said Chuck. He glanced at the picture of Yoshida and immediately exclaimed: “That’s the guy who yelled at me at the Yasukuni Shrine! He knows something. He knows it and he’s going to use it. We have to get back to Japan, as soon as possible.”

“I not fly,” Nao said flatly. “Three hundred people. Three hundred people would die!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I not take so many with me. You go. I stay here with Mr. Connor!” she said, giggling.

Grover looked at Nao thoughtfully. “I think I can help. It’s the least I could do, after Chuck here saved my life. But sit down, please, and enjoy these corn-fed Iowa beefsteaks.”

## Chapter 11

**Bad Mojo in the Dojo**

**Fugeki:** *A religious figure that receives the power of a divine spirit and communicates its will or summons the spirit of a deceased person who speaks through him or her. A fugeki is believed capable of summoning a divine spirit or the spirit of a deceased person to descend...*

from the *Encyclopedia of Shinto*  
Kokugakuin University

Yoshida entered the dojo at Haguro dressed not in a martial arts gi but in the saffron-colored silk vestments of a *yamabushi*, a Shugendo priest, decorated with mystical circles and arcane symbols so old their meanings were sometimes lost even to the priests themselves, and carrying a *horagai*, the conch-shell trumpet that was the ultimate symbol of the ascetic, nature spirit worshipping followers of Shugendo. Yoshida wasn't a real yamabushi, it was another of his affectations, but he had learned enough to perform a few simple rituals. And this wasn't a Shugendo shrine but a martial arts dojo. It had a traditional *tokonoma* altar in one corner, decorated with a simple set of artifacts—a vase with a spray of dried flowers, a bowl of fruit, a picture of the founder (Yoshida.) a huge picture window facing the mountains emphasized the dojo's spectacular setting. Yoshida clapped his hands three times, bowed, and began to pray while in a standing meditation pose, *Kongo-I*, the Diamond Mudra, palms together in a V at the height of his eyes, elbows facing outward to the sides, his whole body tilted slightly forward.

“Oh Tamakaze, come! The young men of Japan need you. They are taller and stronger than you, but they have become like Westerners. They have outgrown their school desks and their shoes, yet they are weaker too. For them the height of achievement now is to make money, to live in Western-style houses, to own many possessions. They know nothing of your sacrifice, your glory. They must be remade in your image, forged like blades of Japanese steel, hammered and folded again and again, plunged into cold water and tempered until their shimmering *hamon* appears, and they are polished to perfection. Come! Show them what it is to shine like the rising sun, to burn up completely in the flames of honored duty.”

They came. They materialized around the tokonoma as Yoshida prayed, a spectral cadre. He was ecstatic, but afraid. He had been in the presence of ghosts only once before in his life, hiding in the darkness at the Yasukuni Shrine. This time they had come at his summons. They gathered around him, a dozen and more of them, Japan’s finest warriors from another age, with valiant souls and swords that had tasted blood. They made him feel small and weak, yet they bowed to him. One handsome officer stepped forward.

“Yamabushi,” he said, not knowing that Yoshida was only a lay person, “Why have you called us here?”

Yoshida took a deep breath and hoped his voice wouldn’t tremble as he answered.

“Oh great Tamakaze, I honor you. I beg for your intercession. Your country is poised on the brink of a return to greatness. But we need your help. We could strike a blow that would surpass the brilliance of Pearl Harbor, and place the Rising Sun at the top of the firmament where it belongs.” He stopped, unsure of how his speech was being received, and waited, but the Tamakaze pilot said nothing. Yoshida continued--

“Our scientists have created a mighty rocket plane capable of reaching space. They plan to use it only for peaceful experiments. I have seen that it could be a weapon, a great weapon, that could destroy a whole city, and proclaim our new ferocity to the world.”

“And are you planning to tell the pilots of this machine of their mission?” the ghostly pilot asked, peering into Yoshida’s eyes with a dark foreboding. “Will you send them to their deaths unknowing?”

“Of course we will tell them,” Yoshida said, though this was not at all in his plans. “And like you, great Kamikaze turned Tamakaze, they will do this thing for Japan, for the Emperor.” He wondered briefly if they knew that the modern Emperor was a mere figurehead, still revered but powerless. But he pushed on. “When the world sees what glorious military feats we are capable of, they will fear us again, and bow to our will.”

“And what is your target?”

“America!” Yoshida shouted, forgetting himself. “San Fu-ran-cis-co!”

“Why does a yamabushi seek such destruction?” the pilot quizzed him.

“I am a warrior priest. I fight with my hands, my sword, with bullets and with my adepts, who train here in this dojo, for the future empire of Japan.”

The pilot stood silent for a moment, then said softly. “How can we help you?”

“Join with me. You, Tamakaze, could steer that rocket to its target, with your spirit wind. Is that not so?” Yoshida asked; he was uncertain of the extent of their powers.

“It is so.” Inwardly, Yoshida rejoiced. His plan would work! But he continued to control his emotions as he talked with the Tamakaze. He had said he would tell the astronauts. He had portrayed himself as a true yamabushi. It was very risky to lie and deceive those from the spirit world. He knew this, but his dedication to his dream, his desire to see Japan militarily supreme again, made him reckless.

“You are true to the code of *bushido*,” Yoshida said.

“We seek revenge. And release. Nothing more,” the pilot said, with a hint of sadness in his voice.

“And you shall have it,” Yoshida declared, “and so much more. Your names will live on, not in infamy but in glory, in Japanese history.”

“We care nothing for that. We wander, we wander...” the leader of the Tamakaze whispered, but Yoshida in his ecstasy was hardly paying

attention to the troubled apparition. “We go,” the pilot said. “Summon us, and we will come. Banzai!”

“Banzai!” Yoshida shouted, straightening up and saluting as the Tamakaze faded into the ether without a trace. Yoshida shook himself as if emerging from a trance. “*Amazing!*” he told himself. “*I am merely a conduit for the wishes of my people. And now, I have joined the past with the present, and can create a future of unimaginable greatness. Am I up to this task?*” he asked himself, and feeling weak again, he knelt in seiza and meditated. Yes, he could do it. He would not let his followers down. He would not dishonor the spirit of the Japanese people, even if it meant his own death. The words of one of his favorite poems came into his head, the last telegraphed message from General Tadamichi, commander of the Japanese forces at Iwo Jima, just before he led 800 men in a futile charge at the American lines:

*Ada utade nobe ni wa kuchiji  
ware wa mata natabi umarete hoko wo toramuzo*

Foe unvanquished, I won't perish in the field;  
I'll be born again, to take up the halberd seven more times.



## Chapter 12

### **Death Spiral**

Eighteen hours after the episode at Grover Connor's farm, Chuck and Nao were on a sleek corporate jet, just the two of them and a pilot and co-pilot, headed toward Japan, courtesy of Grover Connor's connections to a major soybean producer. The interior of the jet was like nothing either Chuck or Nao had ever seen, a comfortable space with deep padded seats not arranged in rows but around a plastic table. There was no flight attendant but there was a well-stocked bar and an array of drinks in a miniature refrigerator, and snacks, and hot food waiting for them in a caddy.

"It sure was nice of Grover to set us up," Chuck said. "Never thought I'd travel in style like this."

"I worry about pilots," Nao said. "If Tamakaze come—"

"Let's forget about the Tamakaze for a little while, and just enjoy this," Chuck said, but Nao was nervous and fretful, remembering the horrid image of the wing-walking pilot and the lightning storm and the attack on the commercial jetliner. The pilot thought Nao was just a jittery flier, and tried to reassure her. He showed them where the parachutes were stored, behind a panel in the bulkhead, but by his tone he indicated they would never need them.

After a stop in Hawaii to refuel they were on their way to Japan. Nao couldn't relax. She was claustrophobic in the small cabin. The pilot had left the small door open to the cockpit, and she could see him and the co-pilot, chatting, the plane on auto-pilot, cruising at a comfortable 26,000 feet. Chuck dozed, but Nao remained vigilant. The flight would be longer than a commercial one, fifteen hours and more. They would fly through the night. It was already early evening, somewhere over the western Pacific. Long streamers of wispy clouds stretched like the banners of a feudal Japanese army, glowing bloody red in the sunset.

Her first visit to America had been a whirlwind. The thrill of everything new was mixed up with moments of terror. She'd hoped they would stay longer, but Chuck was convinced that this Yoshida character held the key to the mystery of his grandfather's death. Nao wasn't so sure. Just a few days ago she'd been a cynical teenager, playing with her friends in the park and ripping off tourists like Chuck. Now she was involved in something she didn't understand, that went deep to the roots of her Japanese soul. She struggled to make sense of it all. Just then she heard a startled grunt from the cockpit, and the plane went into a sickeningly rapid left hand turn and dive. She knew immediately that it was happening again. Their plane was being attacked by Ghost Zeroes. A glance out the window confirmed her fear. The Zeroes dove and attacked repeatedly, half a dozen of them, splattering the jet with machine gun fire. The unarmed corporate jet took wild evasive action, but it was no

use, they were going down. A loud crash, and the pilot and co-pilot were sucked through the broken front windshield and the plane's cabin depressurized with a loud bang and a sucking sound, but they had already descended a few thousand feet and it was possible to breathe the frigid high-altitude air. But now no one was flying the plane. They started into a death spin that could have only one possible result. Chuck leaped forward unsteadily and ripped away the panel on the bulkhead.

“Put this on! Quick!” he shouted above the roaring din. Nao struggled to put on the unfamiliar parachute. Chuck helped her with hers, and placed her hand on the ripcord, then he cinched up his own.

“The pilots. I never even know their names!” Nao shrieked above the ferocious howling of the wind. She hugged Chuck in an ecstasy of death. “I never sleep with you. We could be lovers.”

“Yes,” said Chuck. “We will be. First we have to get out of this plane!”

But it was impossible. The increasing centrifugal force of the downward spiral now forced them against the side of the plane, and they couldn't move. It was like being on the scariest carnival ride in the world, only this one was going to end with a fatal crash into the vast Pacific.

The plane, passing through a zone of different barometric pressure, suddenly flipped, and ejected both of them out the shattered front windscreen, into the night.

Chuck tried to keep hold of Nao, she but she was torn from his grasp, and the last he saw of her she was dropping away into the darkness, parachute unopened. He screamed her name, but heard nothing but the banshee wind ripping at his clothes. He couldn't tell how far they'd already fallen, and he knew it was unlikely he'd survive a parachute descent from the height the plane had been traveling, so he waited a few seconds, then pulled the ripcord and was yanked into place beneath the canopy. But something wasn't right, his parachute wasn't fully deployed. Part of it was flapping madly above him. He rocked and wrenched at the cords, but nothing worked. Then, before he could reach the pin for the reserve chute, he hit the water, and everything went black.

Chuck woke up floating in the darkness. His first thought was "*Nao is dead,*" but then instinct took over and he tried to assess his own chances of survival. He was terribly cold, and sore, and his shoulders hurt from the shock of the parachute opening, but nothing was broken. He looked around. It was a moonlit night "*Hangetsu.*" *Half-moon,* Chuck thought, illogically remembering a bit of the Japanese he'd learned. He twisted around and around, but there was nothing to the horizon in any direction except the occasional white-cap gleaming dully in the moonlight and then disappearing. He thought briefly of sharks, but then decided it was unlikely any would find him so quickly, and he wasn't bleeding, as far as he could tell. He realized that the chute was dragging him down,

so he tried to wriggle out of the wet spaghetti tangle of chute cords, and finally succeeded in freeing himself from the device. He took off his shoes, which were pulling him down. But the struggle exhausted him, and shock was beginning to set in. He heard a strange clattering sound and realized it was his teeth chattering against each other.

*“Think. What would Buck have done? He would have fought it, till the end,”* he answered himself, and somehow that gave him the courage to re-assess his condition. He looked around again, and in the distance, on the crest of one of the little waves, he saw something, an object, and swam toward it. In a few minutes he had reached it. It was a seat cushion from the doomed plane. Not much, but enough to help him stay afloat. The words that attendants on commercial flights recited in their bored rote pre-flight announcements popped into his head verbatim: *“In the unlikely event of a water landing, the seat cushion acts as a flotation device.”* He was grateful for it, and clung to it with a fierce desperation.

Morning found him still afloat and still alive, groggy and thirsty. A vast undifferentiated ocean surrounded him. It was hopeless. As the morning wore on and the sun rose, the heat took its toll on his stamina. He was on the verge of giving up and slipping his arms out of the straps of the flotation cushion, when, riding up on one of the constant swells that rolled through this part of the ocean, he glimpsed a low line, nothing more than the sliver of a fingernail, and so far in the distance that it was quite unreachable, that could have been nothing but scud on the waves,

but might have been—land! With parched throat and sunburned face, neck, and back, he paddled wearily. After an hour of weak effort, he rose up on a roller and saw it again, a treeless atoll, a coral reef, a sandy beach still miles from where he was, but now faintly visible. To Chuck it meant life! He redoubled his attempt to swim, but had little strength left, and could only hope that the gentle current was pushing him in the right direction. He was pretty sure it was. Another tortuous hour passed, and Chuck saw that indeed the current favored him, but unless he could correct his drift, he would miss the island by about a half a mile.

Summoning all the strength within him, and that stubborn Midwestern determination that had been bred into him, he steered himself and his soggy, waterlogged cushion toward the spit of land that would mean the difference between dying here in the Pacific and some remote hope of survival. Soon he could hear the faint line of breakers crashing on the beach, and see signs of some long-ago human habitation, low ruined buildings, but now he faced another obstacle. He could see the white foam of the breakers on a dark outer bank of razor-sharp coral reef below. He had to time his entry to surf in on a breaker and hope he could tumble up on to the beach without lacerating himself and bleeding to death after his long struggle.

*“Too bad this Iowa farm boy never learned how to surf,”* he thought, almost delirious, but somehow he relaxed and let the combers push him

over the coral, and though painfully cut and scraped, he managed to claw his way onto dry land.

He lay resting for a while in the damp sand by the shore, then slowly and painfully raised himself unsteadily onto his feet. “*It’s an airstrip,*” he thought. It was an abandoned WWII site, probably used by the Americans for a few weeks or months at the end of the war, then left to rot. A few tin shacks, a roughly graded runway made of crushed coral, not even paved, and some old oil barrels lying in discarded heaps, rusting away for eternity. No water. No food, not even a coconut tree. At best he had put off his death for a few hours or days. He was terribly thirsty, and his skin was chapped and peeling where it wasn’t abraded red raw by the coral.

The highest point on the atoll was no more than a few feet above sea level. Every Pacific storm undoubtedly inundated it, and only the stubborn accretion of the coral kept it from disappearing beneath the waves forever. Chuck stumbled around the half-circle perimeter of the island, but found nothing of use to him. A large Quonset hut that must once have been an airplane hanger was rusted and riddled with holes, but at least offered him relief from the relentless sun. He crawled into it and lay in the darkness. It was hopeless. He would die here, of thirst or starvation, whichever came quicker. He was pretty sure that dehydration would kill him before lack of nourishment, even though he was a skinny guy without much body fat. He vowed not to give in to the craving and

drink salt water, which he knew would lead to raving and hallucinations. No, he'd lie here in this old hunk of corrugated tin and waste away.

His thoughts turned to Nao. He'd kept her at a distance, and then, as the plane spun toward the water, she'd clung to him, and he to her. Such an unlikely couple, he tall, blond, and laconic, she short, dark-haired (when it wasn't dyed) and a chatterbox. He'd always envisioned himself with one of the farm girls he grew up with, blonde or brunette, with freckles and blue eyes. But it didn't have to be that way. Now he'd never know. He only hoped the end had been quick for Nao. "*She probably passed out as she fell,*" he thought. "*Dammit!*" he couldn't just lie here musing on a future that would never come to pass. He struggled to his feet and wandered around the inside of the hut, idly wishing that he'd find an old P-38 and fly it off the island, an absurd fantasy, as he knew. He didn't know how to fly, and there were no planes, only a few empty oil drums, rotting pallets, the crap the military left behind as they advanced toward Japan and victory.

A faint buzzing sound caught his attention. He staggered outside and shielded his eyes against the ravaging sun. Exhausted and bleary-eyed, he squinted into the blazing sky's light and saw a half-dozen black dots. He couldn't be sure if it was just spots before his eyes, but no, there was something up there, the spots were growing larger, they resolved into airplanes! Chuck raced toward the open beach on tottery legs, waving his arms. Ahead of him he saw the sand kicking up in little



puffs. Out of the sun came a flight of Zeroes, swooping and firing their machine guns at him. Like his grandfather, he could see the faces of the pilots as they swooped in low and strafed him.

“Oh my god! They’re shooting at me!” he realized, and at the last he dove sideways to avoid the ragged line of bullets that tore through the sand. Chuck scrambled for cover. The planes strafed him repeatedly as he ran, dodging and tripping and falling and getting up again. The tin hut was reduced to a pile of rubble, and the oil barrels burst into smoky flames. He was tired, and his brain was working slowly. Soon he was unable to do more than roll on the ground when he heard them coming, and crawl away from the murderous fire. Three times Chuck narrowly avoided being shredded by machine-gun bullets. The attack lasted less than five minutes. Finally there was no place left for Chuck to hide. He lay exposed on the beach, in the extreme of fatigue and terror. As the Zeroes came in for their final assault, he simply passed out.

When he awoke, the young Japanese pilot from the Yasukuni Shrine was kneeling next to him. He was wearing a banzai headband and his leather flight cap and jacket, and carried a *katana*. Chuck was dizzy and disoriented, and unable to rise. As he lay there on his back, the pilot spoke to him:

“We will kill you now, American, just as we killed your grandfather and his wing-mates.”

A curious question popped into Chuck's head, and despite the desperately grim situation, he felt compelled to ask: "Why didn't you kill me back in that hay field in Iowa?"

The pilot gave Chuck a slight bow. "We honored your sacrifice. By covering the body of that old man with your own, you showed *samurai* spirit. So we spared him. But not you. That one act is not enough. We must kill you for the crimes of your people, for destroying the old Japan."

Chuck was terribly thirsty and tired, but he rose up, unconsciously sat in *seiza*, knees under him, and challenged the pilot's assertion. "No, no, that's not true. Japan had already changed, forever. You know that. It happened long ago, when the samurai were banned, not by the American but by your own leaders."

Behind the pilot Chuck saw a ghostly cadre of pilots. Some were wearing devil masks. Others were horribly disfigured, as if they had just crawled from their *kamikaze* death planes. Tamakaze! They began to practice *tameshigiri* (test-cutting) on each other. With brilliantly flashing samurai *katana*, they danced up and down the beach in a violent display of swordsmanship. It was gruesome and bloody, yet even though they maimed each other with wickedly deep cuts and slashes, they didn't die. They were already dead, ghosts from another age.

The handsome young Japanese pilot spoke to him again—

"Once, corpses, condemned prisoners, even innocent passersby could be used for *tameshigiri* by samurai. We were so proud, so strong,

and so fearless. Our nation once had a beautiful solitude. But your Admiral Perry came and spoiled all that. We were the Thunder Gods, we were the exploding cherry blossoms! We, the children of Izanagi and Izanami, were different, we were unique—“

“No!” Chuck was emphatic.

“No?” the pilot’s face twisted in a grotesque approximation of a grin. He was very angry.

“No. My grandfather told me, and I am telling you. He saw your pilots’ faces as they came in, watched them in the seconds just before their planes struck the deck of his ship, and he said they were no different from him. They were not monsters. They were scared. Calling for their mothers! Yes, you were scared! You were human!”

“Enough!” The circle of Tamakaze grew tighter, the bloody ghosts and devil masked spirits closing in on Chuck, swords raised. The sky had grown black; the wind was raging, the sand blowing every which way, the sea off the beach an angry froth.

“If you were so righteous, where are you now?” Chuck screamed. “Why aren’t you in heaven?”

This question surprised the pilot. He held up his hand to halt Chuck’s imminent slaughter. “What do you know of our Buddhist heaven?”

“I know enough to know that you aren’t in it, or you wouldn’t appear in this form. What has happened to you?”

The pilot smiled a sad smile. “We are souls trapped in purgatory for our sins. We are condemned to wander the earth in search of completion of our mission, and revenge.” With those words, the pilot raised his sword in the two-handed side stance called *hasso*, that reminded Chuck of a baseball batter, arms upraised, sword sideways, ready to bring it down on Chuck’s exposed neck. But instead of feeling fear, Chuck felt sorry for the once heroic pilot. Chuck saw that if he was to live, even a few more minutes, he had to reach out to this lost soul.

“My religion too has a purgatory. It’s the hell reserved for those who can find no peace. You want peace, don’t you? And is the way to peace more killing? Won’t this only weigh your souls down even more? Choose peace, and you will go where you long to be, to Heaven, to your heaven, Buddhist heaven.”

At Chuck’s last words the gathering wind and storm reached a crescendo of thunder and lightning and a huge bolt crashed right next to him, knocking him unconscious again.

When he awoke, an American Naval officer in a bright white, impeccably starched and ironed uniform was leaning over him.

“You’re lucky we came along, son. This island has been deserted for years. If we hadn’t seen the smoke from those burning oil drums we never would have stopped. Good thinking to light them on fire. Where did you come from, anyway? Were you shipwrecked, or what?”

“They—“ Chuck whispered, at the end of his strength.

“They’ who? There’s no one else on the island.”

“I—“ Chuck tried to say, but no words would come out, his throat was completely stuck shut from dryness. He lay back and let the Navy crew bundle him onto a makeshift stretcher and carry him to a waiting helicopter.

Chapter 13

**The Honored Dead**

“Fifty miles south-southeast of here we found the wreckage of a Hawker 850XE a mile down on the bottom. Know anything about that?”

Chuck sat in the cramped quarters of a utility room in the lower deck of a U.S. Navy destroyer, being grilled by two security officers. He knew that his interrogators knew he had been on that plane. He’d had to clear customs, after all, even though it had been a private flight.

“Never found any bodies. The manifest lists four people—the pilot, co-pilot, and two passengers. Apparently you’re the only survivor. Can you explain that?”

“No.”

They’d been questioning him for six hours before he finally told them the truth. They didn’t use any coercive techniques on him; he was treated with kindness and sympathy. But his questioners became increasingly suspicious of his vague and imprecise answers. At last, he broke down and told them the truth as he knew it. That the jet had been attacked by a half-squadron of Japanese Zeroes—

“—At 26,000 feet?”

“Yes.” And shot down, with the pilots first being sucked out of the plane by depressurization, and himself and Nao—

“—The Japanese woman—“

“Yes.” With him and Nao exiting the plane as it fell, and being immediately separated, and that Chuck assumed she was dead even though he had managed to put a parachute on her—

“—While the plane was falling and breaking up--?”

“Yes.” And the rest. That he’d spotted the island where they found him and swam to it. That the Zero pilots had strafed him and then landed and were going to kill him but for some reason decided not to, and that’s all he remembered until he woke up to the sight of his rescuers.

After that they put him on a psych watch and restricted his movements on the ship that was bringing him back to Pearl. They didn’t believe him. How could they? It was an impossible story, with no basis in fact, as far as they could tell. His interrogators simply decided he was unbalanced, suffering from his recent trauma, or before that, and discounted everything he said except for the plane crash. Weather radar had picked up a local anomaly in the area where the Hawker had gone down, a powerful local disturbance, and they chalked up the crash to that phenomenon.

At port Chuck was handed over to the American Consulate rep, but since he had committed no crime as far as anyone could tell, he was issued a temporary passport and a government-issue credit card, and released with a strong admonition to catch the next flight to the States.

Chuck took a room in an overpriced tourist hotel on Wakiki Beach, and spent more money in the hotel's overpriced clothing shop on a couple of beach-y outfits, underwear, and a small valise. It was all so different from his horrific experience in the barren atoll--the swim-up bars, the extravagant buffet table groaning with outlandish displays of tropical fruits, the gaudy foliage in the hotel lobby's air-conditioned lanai, and the insipid piped-in music. He suffered from a severe psychological dislocation. He was adrift as surely as he had been in the vast Pacific waters. He knew he should call Grandma Branson and tell her he was all right, and maybe even try to locate Nao's parents, but he did neither. He wandered the beach, which was crowded with both Japanese and American tourists, mingling but not interacting, he observed, as if inhabiting different but parallel universes, the Americans in outlandish floral print muu-muus and bathing suits, the Japanese in curiously dull clothing, all blues and grays and browns.

He decided to take a tour of the U.S.S. Arizona that was advertised in a brochure on the side table next to his hotel bed. He was searching for something, but he didn't know what. Lying on the plush comforter in his absurdly beautiful room, he thought back to the moments of despair he had suffered only two days before, floating alone in the ocean, clinging to a seat cushion, and later, a nearly naked and vulnerable, pitifully small and weak prey for the attacking Zeroes.



“*Unreal*,” he said aloud in the carpeted richness of his isolation, a mini-bar stocked with snacks and beverages, a television bringing him the world’s news at a click, the surf lapping on the golden sand of the fabled beach outside his window and ten flights below.

At the memorial he studied the faces of the other tourists. Why were the Japanese there? Were they secretly celebrating the surprise attack, their greatest military achievement in a war that led inexorably to Hiroshima and Nagasaki? It wouldn’t make sense. No, he decided, they were there for the same reason they went to Yasukuni shrine—to honor the dead. And what of the Americans? Were they there to remind themselves of the “day of infamy,” and how it launched America on a path to imperial power and greatness in subsequent generations--the so-called American century? No. They too came in the tour boats to stand silently on the covered bridge built over the visible hull of the mighty battleship, and remember the nearly twelve hundred men whose bodies rested in the waters beneath them. Both countries had long since moved past the conflict, and were interdependent partners in a global economy. So why were the Tamakaze still suffering? What about this Yoshida character? Why was he dredging up long-abandoned dreams of military glory? Would these modern Japanese, solemnly snapping pictures of everything, respond to his call to arms? And would the Americans, to whom Mitsubishi was a car company and not the manufacturers of the Zero, be able to summon the energy and hatred required to fight and

vanquish a determined opponent? Chuck realized that he had been given an important role to play. There was more at stake than the lives of a few old pilots. If Yoshida succeeded in stirring up Japanese nationalism, and whatever else he had in mind, the world could once again be wracked by global war. China, not Japan, was the dominant Asian power now. But the Chinese had no code of *bushido*. The Japanese, despite almost seventy years of enforced pacifism, might still have these war-like qualities, hidden beneath the surface, part of their character.

He watched them peering into the water at the murky outline of the sunken battleship. All the visitors to the memorial were quiet and pensive, no doubt thinking of the many men who lay entombed inside the ship only a few tens of feet beneath the surface.

He made up his mind. Despite the warning he had received from the consulate that he should go home, he would return to Japan. He would look up Nao's parents and tell them what happened, not sparing them the truth, though he imagined they would be just as skeptical as the naval intelligence officers had been. And then he would find Yoshida.

## Chapter 14

**Shame**

Nao's parents lived in a low, squat house, one of the last in their neighborhood built in the old style, with overhanging thatched eaves and heavy wooden corner posts, a door that Chuck had to stoop to pass through, and low ceilings that would have scraped his head if he didn't remain in a slight crouch. Chuck was surprised that the rebel Nao had come from such a traditional background. It made him understand and appreciate his wild-haired friend, and miss her, he thought with a pang of regret, even more than before.

Mr. Hayashi greeted Chuck at the door with a formal bow, and did not offer his hand, but gestured for him to come inside. The interior was dark, with mahogany panels on the walls and rustic furniture. It was as though he'd entered an old farmhouse in the middle of Tokyo, and indeed that's what it had been, until the city grew up around it. Inside, Mrs. Hayashi sat very straight, with her hands on her knees, and did not get up when Chuck entered the room. She would not look at him, though he did his best to imitate Mr. Hayashi's bow. He took the chair Mr. Hayashi offered him. Mr. Hayashi spoke English with an impeccable British accent. A younger daughter, who gave Chuck a start because she looked like a smaller version of Nao, served tea in primitive-looking, black, handle-less ceramic cups with rough, uneven edges, tea bowls that Chuck knew were antique family heirlooms of great value. He made a

show of admiring them as if he was in a *chado* tea ceremony. They had been hand-thrown and fired in a backyard kiln who knows how long ago, and had no designs other than those the firing process had created in them, and their glaze was thin, not thick and shiny like modern ware. They were ineffably beautiful-; they were the essence of *wabi sabi*, the poignant Japanese aesthetic of impermanence and imperfection. Chuck was in mortal fear of dropping his cup, and held onto it with grim determination as he told them the story of meeting Nao in the park (leaving out the attempted robbery) and of how he had she had become friends (as delicately as he could he made it clear that they had never been more than friends,) and how the two of them had gradually been drawn into the mystery of the Tamakaze.

"We know our daughter was a troublemaker, we know the policeman, Mr. Sakugawa," Mr. Hayashi said at one point in Chuck's narrative.

To Chuck's surprise, they did not question his story of seeing the Tamakaze at Yasukuni shrine, or of their two encounters in the United States and his last meeting with them on a deserted Pacific island. They only asked if he could be certain their daughter was dead.

"No, I can't be sure, but I never saw her parachute, and I was so lucky to drift onto that island..." he trailed off, not knowing what else to say, as Mr. Hayashi translated for his wife. Mrs. Hayashi sighed, the only sound she made during the whole interview. "She was a good girl, your

daughter," Chuck felt compelled to say. "She helped me, she treated me with kindness." They were satisfied with that. The second daughter served him little *mochi* cakes and re-filled his teacup, and Chuck thought his visit would be coming to an end soon, but then Mr. Hayashi invited him out back to the garden, a surprisingly lush enclave in the crowded city. A small Shinto shrine occupied one corner, with little ceramic *jizo* statues of various kami, some of them quaintly dressed in little clothes or decorated with hats and ribbons. A bowl of fresh oranges stood on the *tokonoma* altar. Off to one side on a little pedestal stood a somewhat battered-looking photograph in an ancient metal frame, of a young man in a military uniform, grasping a samurai sword, and looking grimly at the camera.

"Your father?" Chuck asked.

"Mrs. Hayashi's father," Mr. Hayashi replied.

"Nao never mentioned him."

"Of course not," Mr. Hayashi replied. "He exists only in this garden." Chuck couldn't be sure if that's what Mr. Hayashi meant to say, though his command of the English language was unrepachable.

Chuck hesitated, then asked—

"You mean, he's no longer alive?"

"He is no longer mentioned outside of this house. He too was a *kamikaze*. But he would never become *tamakaze*, if that is what you would wonder. He never completed his mission."

“What happened?”

“He –“ Mr. Hayashi paused, struggling to share this information with a stranger. “If you had not told me your story I would never tell you this. The shame is too great.” Mr Hayashi stopped again, then continued: “He ran away.”

“Ah,” was all Chuck could think to say. He waited for Mr. Hayashi to speak again.

“Would that he had used that sword you see in the picture. But he did not. He deserted, came back to Japan and lived under an assumed name. We only learned about it because he was killed in an American bombing raid and the government notified us to collect his remains. He is family. He deserves a place here. But nowhere else.”

“It must have been very hard to—“ Chuck started to say, but Mr. Hayashi cut him off peremptorily.

“He dishonored the family. He is a non-person, beyond the walls of this garden. I show you this only so that you will know, as you continue your quest, how strongly this is felt by the Japanese people. The Tamakaze draw their strength from our character. They will not be stopped easily. And this Yoshida you spoke of, he will have the support of many in this country, more than you might think.”

“Thank you for telling me,” said Chuck.

“Our daughter—“ Mr. Hayashi began, but then stopped. It was as close to a public display of emotion as Chuck had seen in any Japanese

person other than Nao. He wanted to hug the old man, but knew how inappropriate that would be, so he merely stood and waited while Mr. Hayashi collected himself.

“I was wrong. I should have...no, no regrets. There is nothing I can do now, except wish that I would have been kinder to my daughter. She spoke of you with fondness. It is our duty to help you.” He bowed. Chuck attempted a clumsy bow in return. Something passed between them, an understanding, an unspoken acknowledgment. They stood in the sheltered garden, with the city’s busy hum faintly audible beyond the walls, and contemplated the shrine and the photo from their vastly differing perspectives. The urban noise died away, leaving only a meditative silence.

## Chapter 15

**Nao and Her Grandfather Take a Trip**

Nao knew about the Tamakaze—more than she had told Chuck in their brief time together. Nao hadn't always been a rebellious punk with artificially colored hair. Once upon a time she'd been a normal Japanese teen, into Hello Kitty, *keitai shousetsu* (mobile phone novels,) Shonen Knife, and whatever else was popular with young people of the time. When she was fourteen, she accidentally found out that her grandfather was not dead, as she had been told, but only banished from the family by her hard-hearted (to her way of thinking) father.

The picture of her grandfather had always been in the garden, but she had been told he died in the war. It was only by accident that she learned that not only had he not died in the war, but that he was still alive, and living in Tokyo under another name. One day a letter came, and Nao, who routinely picked up the mail on her way home from school, glanced at it, and thinking it was for her, opened it. The letter was from her grandfather to her mother, a plaintive note wishing that he could see his grandchildren before he dies, but at the same time acknowledging the impossibility of it.

This news was so upsetting to Nao that she ran away from home, and on her own, at age fourteen, took the train into downtown Tokyo to find her grandfather.



When she came back, three days later, her mother was frantic with worry, and the police had spent millions of yen in a fruitless search; she wouldn't tell them where she'd been or what she'd done. "You didn't tell me, why should I tell you?" she said.

On the second day of her visit, Nao and her grandfather had boarded the Oedo subway for Hikarigaoka Park in Nerima. The elderly man walked very slowly, with a cane, and the park was some distance from the train station, but he insisted on walking there.

"It is all changed," he said as they shuffled along.

The base had been used by the U.S. Army after the war, but as Tokyo kept expanding the land became more and more valuable, and eventually the base was closed and the land sold off, all except the park. Nao and her grandfather shuffled on, a young girl and an old man, moving slowly amid the bustle of Nerima's crowded streets. Nao had imagined a deserted facility near the edge of Tokyo Bay, windswept, with ocean views, a chain-link fence, grass growing up through the tarmac. This was just another part of Tokyo.

"Wait," he said, looking around vaguely and squinting into the sun. "It was right here." He pointed toward the south, where more stores and high-rise apartment buildings blocked the horizon.

"What?"

"The runway. This street was the runway. My barracks were over there.

“How can you be sure?”

“The sun. We flew by the sun. If I look down this street, I can feel myself taking off, I can see what I would have seen when I was airborne. Though so much of the city had been destroyed by the American B-29s, it was hard to navigate. But the Tokyo Bay was the same. They couldn’t bomb the bay into rubble.”

He paused, like Chuck’s grandfather, like Grover Connor, like the old man at the Yasukuni Shrine, lost in his memories.

“We rammed them you know. The Superfortresses. We were famous for that, another form of Kamikaze. They were slow, but heavily armed. If you could avoid their machine guns...Yuki did it. Not as impressive as crashing into a ship, but a remarkable exhibition of flying process nonetheless. Many brave men. All of them forgotten now.”

But the Tamakaze had not forgotten about Nao’s grandfather. Here, where so many of them had taken off from Narimasu air base to their deaths, their spirit was strong, even in the midst of the modern chaos of this bustling Tokyo district. *So bright and noisy*, Nao thought, gazing at the neon signage and busy streets jammed with cars and hurrying shoppers. The Tamakaze were there, and they followed Nao and her grandfather unseen by her but felt by the grandfather. Only when the two visitors were relatively alone, picnicking on the grass in Hikarigaoka Park, eating *onigiri* rice balls with *umaboshi*, *daikon* pickles, and drinking lukewarm tea from a thermos Nao had packed, did they make their

presence known. Their leader, the handsome Sasaki, appeared alone, not in his flight jacket and leather helmet, but in anachronistic, tan off-duty khakis. Anyone giving him more than a passing glance would have wondered about his clothes. To young Nao, he was just a person in uniform, but her grandfather struggled to his feet and saluted. Sasaki did not salute back.

“Desecrator!” he said. “Why have you stained this holy ground with the bottom of your soles?”

Before Grandfather Hayashi could answer back, the impetuous Nao leaped up and defended him.

“Who are you to criticize my grandfather? He served his country well in the big war. What have you ever done?”

“I did my duty,” Sasaki answered. And his image suddenly wavered, became transparent, and Nao understood that she was in the presence of a ghost, and gave a little scream, but no one heard it.

Then Grandfather Hayashi did something completely shocking and unexpected. From within his shirt he withdrew a long blade in a wooden scabbard, He fell to his knees and despite his advanced age composed himself in seiza and prepared to commit seppuku. Nao shrieked. The Tamakaze pilot watched impassively.

“Grandfather, No!”

“It must end,” he said calmly, and would have disemboweled himself right then and there in front of Nao if her terrified screams hadn’t

drawn the attention of a park policeman, who rushed over and with a polite but firm voice, addressed the elderly man sternly:

”Stop! It is forbidden to commit seppuku in Hikarigaoka Park!” as if this was a common occurrence like littering and there was a local ordinance against it. His utterance was so formal and measured, and so comically unexpected in the tense situation, that Nao in a huge release of tension, actually laughed. The Tamakaze disappeared. Grandfather Hayashi bowed and placed his wakizashi in front of him. The policemen knelt also in seiza, bowed to Grandfather Hayashi, and requested permission to pick up the short sword. Grandfather Hayashi nodded. Nao rushed forward and embraced him.

“You are innocent. Innocent, Grandfather! You did your best. No one blames you anymore!” and she cried and cried, until their roles were reversed and he was comforting her.

“We were supposed to defend the city,” Grandfather Hayashi said. “But look, it is destroyed, we couldn’t stop them. The fire-bombings. They were too many, and we were too few.”

“No, Grandfather! You look. The city is rebuilt, bigger and more beautiful than ever. Japan is a great country again, and a peaceful one.”

“Peace? Amid the rubble? The corpses?”

“Grandfather! There is no rubble. No corpses. Come.”

Nao, in desperation, tugged her elderly grandfather to his feet and walked him down the Interaction Path toward the Arch of Light. The centerpiece of Hikarigaoka Park. The policeman followed discreetly behind, still carrying Grandfather Hayashi's wakizashi.

“Hikari!” she cried. “Playing with light.’ This is the new Japan. Thanks to you and the others, we survived. We moved forward, into the light.”

Grandfather Hayashi said nothing. The fan-shaped leaves of the ginkgo trees fluttered their welcome. Up ahead, the Arch of Light glowed. Grandfather Hayashi had a small *satori* that brought a single sudden tear to his eyes. His granddaughter was right. He no longer needed to feel guilty. He turned to the young policeman and, pointing to the sword, said: “Give it to the museum. I shall need it no more.” The younger man bowed again, and still holding the wakizashi before him like a ceremonial dagger in his white-gloved hands, backed away for twenty steps before he turned and walked away.

## Chapter 16

**Mr. Sakugawa Attends A Meeting of Shourai Taiyou, By Mistake**

Detective Sakugawa sat sweating in his unsightly (by Japanese standards--unwashed, aging, and slightly battered) automobile, waiting for trouble on a side street of a Tokyo suburb. He was staking out the last house on the left at the end of a block of flimsy Japanese row houses. This one was built in the old style, with low overhanging eaves and upturned corner cornices. Once it had even had a thatched roof, but sometime in the last hundred years the thatching had been replaced with heavy rough-hewn planking that gave the place a slightly demolished look.

A man came out, got into a car parked in front of the house, and drove off. Sakugawa followed him, expecting to be led to a tryst. After all, the call had come from the wife. Why else would she hire a detective, other than to obtain pictures of the guilty husband for use in a divorce case? These things almost never came to trial in Japan; they almost never went to litigation, were almost always settled by *kyogi rikon*—mutual agreement, and the farthest they usually went was something called Family Court. Sakugawa kept a careful distance behind as his quarry threaded his way through the jammed streets toward the open country to the north, eventually taking one of the on-ramps onto a limited access highway. The suburbs gave way to rice fields. This

prefecture had once been all rice fields, but now was intermittently broken by strip malls and housing developments. Sakugawa was annoyed. *"This is a long way to go for a bit of sex,"* he thought. But soon his patience was rewarded. About thirty miles north of Tokyo the car he was following left the highway. At the end of the exit ramp the car turned away from the level rice fields and toward steep foothills to the west. Soon his prey was driving too fast up curving roads that caused Sakugawa to lose sight of him repeatedly. This annoyed Sakugawa no end, and the driver's excessive speed also made him wonder if he had been spotted. There was nothing worse than being discovered as a tail. It was humiliating, and could be dangerous.

But Sakugawa's fears were unfounded. Rounding a corner, he saw the sleek Accord turning onto a smaller road, something it was unlikely to have done if the driver thought he was being followed. Sakugawa drove past the turnoff in case the driver was decoying his movements, then quickly doubled back. He could only hope that there weren't too many residences along this road. The odds were in his favor—these mountain turnoffs often petered out in steep ravines after only a short distance. He was in luck! Up ahead he saw the gleaming rear of the Accord pull into a driveway. Once again he used the tail's trick of overshooting his turnoff. In the narrow lane it was more difficult to turn around, and it took him a minute to find a suitable spot for this maneuver. When Sakugawa passed by the driveway on his way back, he grunted in surprise and displeasure.

At least a dozen cars crowded the home's parking area, spilling over onto the narrow strip of grass next to the asphalt. Not a likely scenario for a cheating husband. There must be something else afoot. This had happened to him a few times before. A lonely housewife, feeling abandoned, hires a detective to check on a suspected philandering husband, but it turns out the man is into drugs, or gambling, or any one of a number of humanity's sinful predilections. Or sometimes it was something completely innocent, a group of men devoted to *pachinko*, or watching *sumo* together on television, or drinking fine wines without their wives.

Still he must do his due diligence; snap a few pictures to reassure the client, then call it a day. Where to put his car, without having to make a long, tiresome hike? He settled on a small turnout a few hundred yards back toward the main road. As he was walking back toward the house, planning to scramble up the hillside to look for a suitable spot for surveillance and picture taking, a car slowed down as it passed him, and the passenger side door opened. Leaning across the seat, the driver, a middle-aged man not much younger than himself, asked him:

“Going to the meeting?”

Sakugawa went with it. “Yes, please.” He mumbled something about the driveway being full and not wanting to block the road.

“Yes. Our movement is growing in popularity. Soon it will sweep the nation.”



Sakugawa was no bounty hunter. He didn't own a gun, wasn't in it for the money, or the publicity, or even for the thrill of the chase. He simply liked to see justice done, and only took cases that would satisfy that urge.

Sakugawa wondered what sort of movement it was, perhaps a revival of Go players, or some other gathering of retro hobbyists. But he said nothing as he hunched down and clambered ungracefully into the passenger seat. The man introduced himself as a Mr. Otsu. And then he said something that intrigued and mystified the usually unmystifiable Sakugawa:

“We approach the day when everything changes? Where will you be?”

“Uh, at home, I suppose,” Naturally enough Sakugawa had no idea what the man was talking about.

“I’m going to be there,” the man replied. Even though I don’t have an official role, I want to be present.” Sakugawa nodded as if he understood. By then they had arrived at the driveway and Mr. Otsu squeezed his smallish car into a parking space Sakugawa had passed up. They got out of the car and approached the house, and were greeted at the door by a stern-looking man who didn’t seem in the least fazed that he didn’t recognize Sakugawa. After all, who would possibly arrive at a meeting in such a remote location if he hadn’t been informed of it?

Zafus and zabutons had been arranged in a circle in a sunken living room of the house, an architecturally anachronistic nightmare from the 1970s. Almost all the cushions were taken. Sakugawa noted the object of his pursuit, seated almost directly opposite him, and quietly engaged in reading the same handout Sakugawa found on his seat, a one-page double-sided photocopied flyer entitled *News from the Mountain*. Sakugawa sat down cross-legged and began to read, but could hardly make any sense of the densely worded text. It was written in formal, archaic kanji, almost like a religious scroll. He had just deciphered the first sentence, which was greeting and exhortation, when the meeting was called to order by the grim-visaged host. “Greetings. As is our custom, let’s go around the room and introduce ourselves and state our profession.”

There were a few ex-military men, some business professionals, a couple of accountants. When it was his turn, Sakugawa answered truthfully, giving his name and “retired policeman.”

“Ah, so so so,” the host responded. We have many policemen in our ranks.” Sakugawa gave a quick glance around the room to make sure there was no one there who recognized him from his years on the force, and sighed inwardly with relief when he saw no familiar faces.

Once the circumnavigation of the room for introductions was complete, the host, a Mr. Nakatami, launched into the main topic of the meeting.

“You all should have read the Yamabushi’s letter by now. The purpose of this meeting, like others being held around the country today, is to ensure that we are ready when the time comes.

Nakatami paused dramatically. And let his eyes wander around the room. Sakugawa met his gaze with the neutral, non-committal look he had cultivated over many years as a detective, private and otherwise. *‘Never let the other fellow know what you are thinking’* had saved him on more than one occasion.

“Are we ready?” And then, without warning, Nakatami flashed a wicked-looking short sword and leaped at the person next to him, plunging the *wakizashi* into the space between the fifth and sixth ribs. Sakugawa was armed, of course, but used all his inner discipline to remain seated. No one else moved. The victim of this sudden attack slumped over on his side in a slowly spreading pool of blood.

“Traitor! Dog!” Nakatami shouted, and he kicked the dying man, a gratuitous gesture that struck Sakugawa as almost as brutal as the knifing itself. It was all so unexpected, Sakugawa half-believed the man would soon get up and give a laugh of delight at the bizarre joke. But no such thing happened. Instead, two men rose and dragged his body off while a third man produced a mop and bucket and cleaned up the shocking stain. More unbelievably, Nakatami continued the meeting.

“Are we ready?” the group rose as one, Sakugawa taking his cue from the man next to him, and shouted their readiness, for what he did

not know. Sakugawa was experiencing violent inner turmoil. He had just witnessed a murder, He wasn't even supposed to be here. He had no idea what was going to happen next, and what he was going to do after he left the meeting, presuming he got out of it alive. Sakugawa braced himself for further catastrophe, but the meeting proceeded as if nothing untoward had happened. Incredibly, Nakatami's wife brought in rice cracker snacks and tea. Sakugawa felt his gorge rise and thought for a moment that he was going to vomit, but he managed to control the reflux, and smiled weakly as he accepted the bitter green beverage from the proffered tray. He noted that the cups were the kind one would find in a third-rate sushi bar, plastic not porcelain, and faux-embossed with a rising sun, and the words Shourai Taiyou—Future Sun. Ah, so it was connected to that madman Yoshida who trained a group of fanatic right-wing mercenaries up on Mount Haguro. That made sense. Still incredibly tense, Sakugawa relaxed ever so slightly, now that he knew who he was dealing with. Nakatami began to lecture the group in an oddly fervent tone:

“Many of us, most of us in this room were born after the humiliating defeat of 1945. We missed the honor of dying for our country, for the Emperor. We can thank Yoshida-san that he may provide us with the opportunity once again.”

Sakugawa felt a little sick and dizzy. Had he really witnessed a murder? How was it possible that this fellow Nakatami could stand up in

front of the group and drone on about “loyalty and sacrifice”? Was this “the banality of evil”? Or was it some gigantic prank staged for his benefit? No. A man had died. Sakugawa had been too close to the crime to be fooled by fake blood or a collapsing dagger. He would have to report this to the police, if he managed to get back to Tokyo alive. Now what was happening? Nakatami had finished speaking and the whole group was trooping out back, where a martial arts training field had been bulldozed out of the hillside and planted with grass. Sakugawa saw that many of the attendees had brought bohs, jos, naginatas, wooden swords. He had none. As a former policeman, of course he had been trained in judo, jujitsu, and karate, but he was a middle-aged man with flat feet and bad knees. As he looked around him at some of the others, he saw an assortment of types, some younger men obviously eager for a fight, their blood lust aroused by the senseless killing inside; and some older men, not as old as him but past their fighting years, who nonetheless were changing into gi’s and preparing to spar or fence. Mindful of what he had witnessed, Sakugawa didn’t dare refuse to participate, and saw no chance of slipping away. Nakatami seemed to be keeping a special lookout for him, perhaps because he had no gi or weapon, so Sakugawa made a show of removing his shoes, taking off his shirt, and limbering up, and when the opportunity presented itself, casually mentioned that he had forgotten his practice stuff but would take on any comers in a

freehand match. A muscular young man immediately challenged him with a cruel sneer seemingly fixed on his curled lips.

“You’re an ex-cop, huh? Let’s see what you’ve got.” The format was mixed martial arts, in other words, anything went, punching, kicking, grappling. Sakugawa noticed at once that his opponent was muscle-bound and slow. Sakugawa’s best tactic would be to avoid a wrestling match and stay on his feet if possible, and outwit the beefier but clumsy younger man. Several others were sparring nearby, but as Sakugawa and the other man engaged, the focus of the group seemed to shift to the two of them, perhaps because Sakugawa was a stranger and they were curious to see how he did.

The younger man charged like a bull and Sakugawa stepped aside gracefully, with an economy of movement learned in hundreds of classes over many years. His opponent barreled past him and almost fell over from his momentum. This comedy was repeated three times, until the other learned his all out assault was not going to work. He switched tactics and tried to approach Sakugawa slowly, still seeking to engage him at close quarters and throw him to the ground, where his strength and youthful energy would serve him best. Sakugawa countered by also changing his defense, circling to the left like a boxer and only counter-punching when his opponent lunged at him, hoping to grasp him, It was a masterful demonstration of Funakoshi’s dictum: “There is no offense in karate.” After a while the younger man grew frustrated and though he

was able to grab Sakugawa, he ended up being sent flying by a variety of *nagewaza* throws, until he was exhausted and lay on the ground.

Sakugawa had hardly even broken a sweat. He bowed deeply to acknowledge a polite round of applause.

Another youngster stepped forward to challenge Sakugawa, but Nakatami moved between them.

“Enough,” he said. “The old lion has proved he is still leader of the pride. Now, all of you, please study his excellent technique. It is not necessary to be the strongest or fastest, only to have the best timing.”

Sakugawa, his honor defended, sat on the sidelines and watched the sparring. It was rougher than he remembered from the police academy where some of the trainers were brutal sadists who would beat recruits with batons for no reason. It was the senseless license of fanaticism that knew no boundaries. Men seemed eager to prove themselves to Nakatami, and, as on the battlefields of war, until recently an all-male realm, the absence of women gave them a certain unfettered freedom to be cruel. A little blood flowed, and two or three had to stop to treat cuts and bruises but the recent memory of the sudden knifing overwhelmed any shock Sakugawa felt from seeing men beating on each other. And then it was over. Nakatami called them together to exhort them one last time.

"Our leader, our sensei, does not ask too much of us, only that we be completely Japanese. What does this mean? Let me explain by offering

you a story. When the great Matsukaze left the Yomiuri Giants to play for Philadelphia in the American baseball league--notice I did not call it the major leagues as the Americans do, nor would I refer to their provincial playoffs as the 'World Series'--"

--there was knowing laughter from Nakatami's audience; obviously some of them were familiar with the story or at least its themes--

--he was asked to follow the regimen of his new team. Of course, he did. But this meant pitching less often, throwing fewer pitches in each game, giving way to the relief pitcher earlier than he was accustomed. Matsukaze had once thrown 270 pitches in a seventeen-inning game. And one night, in a long extra-innings game, when this team had run out of other pitchers, Matsukaze, who had pitched the night before, volunteered to go back out, and threw 200 pitches in ten innings, to win the game for his team. It was unprecedented in America. But not in Japan. Going beyond! That's what makes this little island nation great! You must go beyond. Do more than you think you can do, push yourself to the limit, and beyond. Now, go, and be ready."

The weekend warriors slid their weapons back into their elegantly brocaded covers, changed back into their everyday clothes, folded up their gis, and the gathering began to dissipate. Sakugawa was almost ready to breathe a sigh of relief when he saw Nakatami approaching him, shadowed by two formidable bodyguards.



“Our little gathering was by invitation only, and you were not on the list. How did you happen to arrive here today?” Nakatami stared at him intently. If Sakugawa had flinched, blinked, or hesitated, his life would have been in danger. But years of detective work had prepared him for moments like this. Without wavering he met Nakatami’s gaze with his own hardened look and said:

“Police business.” This frank answer surprised Nakatami, who was put on the defensive.

“Ah, so, you are investigating us?” It had worked. He had thrown Nakatami off the scent.

“No, no, not at all, Sakugawa said off-handedly. Nothing to do with Shourai Taiyou,” he was able to assure his dour host truthfully, though he wasn’t about to tell him that he had come accidentally, on the trail of a philandering husband. Nakatami seemed satisfied, dismissed the bodyguards, and merely complimented Sakugawa on his martial arts expertise.

“Not bad for an old man, eh?”

“We will need many like you when the time comes,” Nakatami affirmed.

“I am loyal to the Emperor, Sakugawa answered. Stating a truth is one of the most effective means of concealing a lie.

At that moment Nakatami was distracted by several people who needed his attention before they left, and Sakugawa took advantage of

the interruption to slip away. He noticed that his body was sore despite the ease with which he had fended off his attacker on the keiko field. He dreaded the long walk back to his car, but was at the same time relieved that Nakatami would not be able to record his license plate number or even the make and model of his car.

But before he could even leave the driveway, Mr. Otsu, the man he had talked to briefly inside, accosted him.

“Would you like a ride back to your car?” Mr. Otsu asked mildly.

“Certainly, thank you.” He climbed in. Mr. Otsu was driving a late model Japanese sedan. After an uncomfortable silence, Sakugawa asked: “Does that happen often?”

“What?”

“What?! The, the—“ Sakugawa was momentarily speechless.

“Oh, that. He wasn’t ready. If he’d been ready, he’d be alive now.”

“What about the police?” Sakugawa asked.

“We all signed a nondisclosure, don’t you remember?” Mr. Otsu asked with a hint of suspicion in his voice. Sakugawa recovered quickly.

“Of yes. Of course. I see, What was I thinking?”

“Are you ready?” Mr. Otsu asked. Sakugawa threw up his arms and assumed a fighting stance as best he could within the confines of the passenger seat of the Accord. “That’s better,” Mr. Otsu said with satisfaction. “Banzai!”

“Banzai!” Sakugawa repeated with as much false enthusiasm as he could muster.

More shaken than he ought to have been, Detective Sakugawa climbed wearily into his car, but didn’t start it right away. He noticed that his hands were shaking slightly. “I’m getting old,” he thought.

As a man who was used to following others surreptitiously, Sakugawa was exaggeratedly cautious when it came to being trailed himself. In Tokyo he would often take two or three random turns if he had an intuition he was drawing unwanted attention. But here in the narrow confines of the valley he had no recourse to evasion. He would have to drive directly down the hillside, followed by several cars, and could only hope that none of them was assigned to track him. He longed for the anonymity of the crowded superhighway, where every man was alone, encased in shells of repetitive sameness. It was easy enough to lose a tail on the highway. Once he reached the plains he felt better, and his haunting sense of being surveilled was lessened. With a few quick highway divergences, feinting onto off ramps or taking last-second merges, he put the fear of being followed behind him, and arrived at his home in the early evening fairly confident that he had not been traced.

He had thought that he would immediately report the killing. Now, in the comfort of his apartment, with his pipe in hand and a glass of warm sake on the low table beside him, he was not so sure. Sakugawa wasn’t afraid of Shourai Taiyou or Yoshida. He was too old, too wise, too

hardened by his years of police work for that. But he was concerned for his country. In the years since the Second World War, Japan had shed its image as a nation of fanatics, kamikaze pilots, harakiri suiciders, and al that. Those bloody brandings had been replaced by one of feverishly working *sararimen* (salarymen), spending crazy hours to make Japan an industrial superpower. This was still a stereotyped exaggeration of the real Japanese, but at least it was relatively benign. If Yoshida succeeded in stirring the populace to dreams of empire again, Sakugawa feared that his country would become pariah in the global community. He tamped some fragrant tobacco into his pipe and took a sip of sake. What do to? He decided to do nothing. He would report to the fearful housewife that her husband was not cheating on her, and leave it at that. But he would watch, and wait, and see what developed. It was a cautious strategy, a Go player's strategy, temporizing, waiting for the appropriate moment to be aggressive.

Chapter 17

**The Coolest Thing since Headbands**

Chuck also had met the Tamakaze once before, though he didn't know or remember it. One fall, when he was nine years old, and his primary interests were collecting arrowheads, riding his bicycle, and following the hapless exploits of his beloved Chicago Cubs, his grandfather had taken him on a hunting trip to the woods of northern Minnesota, a thick evergreen forest unlike anything in Iowa, and full of mystery, at least to a small boy from the plains of the Midwest. They camped on a lake shore, not mud like the ponds of Iowa but rocks, perfect for skipping and filling his pockets, and clear straight to the bottom. When you went fishing you could actually see the fish and know exactly where to drop your line. They were hunting, not just the famous Minnesota northern white-tailed deer, but moose. Buck Branson had some idea he wanted a big rack of moose antlers mounted over the sideboard in the dining room. Grandma Branson feared that it would make the farmhouse look like a hunting lodge, but she knew that once Buck got an idea in his head, you might as well try to make the harvester combine run backwards as stop him. He only knew one direction, and he was not to be deterred.

The woods of Minnesota in the time of Chuck's boyhood may seem a far distance in time and space from the air over the South Pacific in 1945, but not for Tamakaze. They were present. Buck Branson stalked his moose; they stalked him. But for whatever reasons, the time was not right. Perhaps they felt he had to suffer more life, living with those memories, before the events that unfolded on the day Chuck left for Japan, twelve years later. But they were there, in the woods, spooking the deer that could feel them, and frustrating the hell out of Buck Branson.

"We might have to go on up into Canada if this keeps up," he fumed. "Maybe that old Mr. Moose will honor my license up there." Buck was joking. He didn't have a license to hunt moose in Minnesota—those permits were for state residents only. Buck was used to hunting and fishing freely on his own and friends' properties in Iowa, and never bothered with a license there either. He never took more than the limit, whether it was fish or waterfowl or anything else, so what did it matter to his way of thinking, whether or not he enriched the coffers of the state by buying a piece of paper.

The Tamakaze were also oblivious to the legalities of border or propriety. They observed what Buck taught Chuck about the natural world; and they noticed that the boy had a softer, more Shinto-like relationship with *dai shizen* (Big Nature). He was hardly at all interested in the main purpose of this trip, to kill a moose, but loved to walk silently

in the woods. He picked up quickly everything Buck taught him about signs, tracking, wind shifts, sun glare. What paths and trails did which animals make. This time, the Tamakaze left Buck alone and came for Chuck, lying under the stars in his Sears and Roebuck sleeping bag decorated with brown crossed tomahawks on a field gules. A slight breeze (the mark of the Tamakaze) was enough to wake him, and a pleasant, not frightening glow in the woods was enough to induce him to pull on his Carhartts, a Cubs sweatshirt, and his Red Wings and follow the feeble orb flickering mysteriously just beyond the brush surrounding the camp. The light led Chuck to clearing where the Tamakaze were gathered in a circle, heads bowed. Chuck should have found this exceedingly strange, to encounter a group of Asian men in uniforms in the middle of the woods in the middle of the night, but part of the magic was that he didn't. He only asked:

“Are you guys lost?” with the earnestness of a nine-year-old, which brought a faint smile to Lieutenant Sasaki's ghastly gray face.

“Not so much. We came to see you.”

“Me?”

Yes.”

“I'm just here with my grandfather. He wants to kill a moose.”

Sasaki couldn't help himself. He smiled again.

“How do you feel about that, Chuck-san?”

“How do you know my name? And what's a 'san'?”

We know all about you, Chuck. And the 'san' is a term of affection, like 'Chuck-boy'. Our futures are, um, ah, linked."

Chuck didn't know what to say to that, so he answered the first question.

"I don't want to kill a moose."

"Have you told your grandfather this?"

"Nope. Can we sit down? I'm sleepy." The circle of Tamakaze immediately lowered themselves into *seiza*, and Chuck, thinking these were maybe some kind of Indians, copied them, even though when they did pow pow night in Cub Scouts they always sat cross-legged.

"The people who lived here before your kind were Shinto-ists too, though they didn't call themselves that."

"What's a Shinto?" Chuck asked. The nine-year-old boy was drowsy, but he knew something special was happening to him.

"You. You are Shinto, You believe that all things have spirit, even the animals, even the rocks and the sky and the water. That is what the Sioux and Chippewa believed,

"I suppose I do," said Chuck sleepily. He was happy just to stand near this glowing orb, that talked to him, Though he didn't know or remember it this is why Chuck later took an interest in things Japanese, despite his grandfather's silent disapproval.

They touched him, in the way that spirit can touch flesh, *everslightly*, with grace and compassion. Their quarrel was not with this young boy. This young devotee of Shintoism, this animist. They floated



him back to the campsite, a pleasant journey that Chuck would remember as a dream, the only memory that would stay with him from this encounter, and laid him down next to his grandfather, whose whisky-soaked and war-ravaged dreams were fitful and tortured.

The next morning, as they ate their instant oatmeal and drank their hot chocolate, Chuck asked Buck: “Couldn’t we just take a picture of it, Grandpa?”

“What?”

“The moose.”

“Ya want me to hang a picture of a moose over the sideboard instead of a moose head?”

“Grandma would like it better.”

“Listen, son, before there was a Super IGA, with everything wrapped in cellophane, your ancestors were out in Iowa, and up in Massachusetts before that, hunting bear and deer and yes, goddamn moose, for food. Now I admit, I could drive down to the IGA and get everything I need, except maybe the game meat, but hell son, being out here is half the fun of it, ain’t it?”

“It sure is, Grandpa. Only—“

“What, son?”

“Only I don’t want to hurt the moose. The Indians—“

“Now look ere, son,” Grandpa Buck took his grandson to task—  
“them Indians, when they left those arrowhead all over our corn fields,

which weren't cornfields then but forests like this one, do you think they were just leaving them for Chuck Branson to pick up and put in a glass case? They were shooting deer, and eating them."

"I know, Grandpa."

"It's part of the cycle of life, son."

"I know. But, do you need its head? You don't eat it."

"That's a fact. Moose head wouldn't be much of a meal. Those Indians o' yours probably ate moose brains and moose tongue and what all else I don't know, but not us." Grandpa Buck eyed his grandson across the smoky campfire. He was a good boy. He had a good heart. He just didn't know much about the world, yet, how hard and cruel life could be. He'd never sat in the cockpit of a P-38 with other human beings shooting at him.

"You know what?" he said finally. "You still got your little Brownie I gave ya?"

"I do."

"All right then. Today we'll leave the rifles in camp and go a huntin' with the Brownie. Maybe we'll actually see him this time. Sure can't get no worse."

"Can I lead today, Grandpa?"

"You're the hunter. You've got the weapon of choice. Go on."

Chuck instinctively led Buck to the clearing where he'd talked with the Tamakaze. It was empty, with no human signs or tracks, which

puzzled Chuck a little bit. But he didn't dwell on it, because there, in the center of the clearing, as big as life, and heading off to the west, were a fresh set of moose tracks, the large hoofed prints clearly discernible, much larger and spread farther apart than deer tracks.

"You're as good as Tick Two," Buck said. The hound was back in Iowa, disconsolate at not being brought along, but Buck had decided he was more trouble than he was worth, for at the time he was just a puppy with feet too big for his body, and no hunting sense.

The moose's trail took them on a long wide swing around nearby Lake Wahnena, stomping through the marshy parts and occasionally detouring around inlets where the moose had forded by swimming but they never lost its track, and the prints grew fresher until Buck raised his hand for silence and said: "He's just on the other side of this hillock. You go on ahead now. This is your hunt."

Not many grandfathers would send their grandsons ahead toward a dangerous 1,500 pound animal, but Buck understood there was something else going on in these Minnesota woods that day, even if he couldn't have said what it was. Armed with his grandfather's boxy little Brownie, an anachronism even in the late nineties, Chuck crept forward, glancing occasionally back toward his grandfather until he lost sight of him through the leafy brush.

Chuck could hear the bull moose (for that's surely what it was) grunting and sloshing in the shallows, where it calmly stood munching

on the soft weeds growing close to shore. When he crept up over the small rise and gazed down on it, he laughed out loud. The moose was wearing, most improbably, a *banzai* headband a white strip of cloth with the bright red rising sun on its massive head. The tailpiece of the headband was draped festively on one huge antler. He looked like a crazy cross between Rocky and Bullwinkle. An adult would have assumed the animal had somehow gotten entangled in the cloth, but Chuck knew this was connected to his hazy memories of the night before.

“Hello, Mr. Moose.”

“Hello, Chuck,” the moose answered, to the surprise of neither party. “Thank you for saving my life.” An observer would have heard only the oddly grating sound of a moose call, like someone playing the harmonica badly, blowing on numerous notes at once.

“You gotta forgive my Grandpa. He’s just old-fashioned.”

There was a pause before the moose answered. “I can forgive him for hunting me. There are other things it is not in my power to forgive.”

And Chuck knew, however dimly, that the souls of the Tamakaze had entered the moose, and that the moose was one with them.

“I like being an ungulate,” the moose said. “Now that the wolves are gone, I only have to worry about men and their rifles, and only for a few weeks a year, except for the poachers.”

“Why are you wearing that thing on you head?” Chuck asked with the innocent directness of a child.

“To honor these spirits who have come. They remind me of those who used to live here, who, when they killed me, would use every portion of me, right down to the tip of my nose.

“And you liked that?”

“Better than cutting off my head and rack for a trophy.”

Where’s Mrs. Moose?” Chuck asked.

“Taking care of Baby Moose, over in that thicket yonder.”

They talked for a while, about what it was like to be a moose, and a boy, and the woods, and did the moose hibernate (no), and was he cold in the winter (not much. Big fur coat!) Finally it was time for Chuck to go. Chuck said: “I’d like to take your picture now. It won’t hurt.”

“I know, Chuck.”

“Only, could I ask you to take off the head thing. I *know* Grandpa Buck wouldn’t like that.”

“You take it off.”

The great animal lowered its head, and Chuck, standing in his tippy-toes in the frigid northern lake water, slipped the headband off the shaggy beast.

“You keep it, Chuck, but don’t show your grandfather.”

“Okay, thanks!”

When Chuck returned, Buck didn’t ask him any questions, but simply turned around and headed back to camp. It wasn’t until a week later, after Chuck had his film developed down at the old Rexall in town,

and handed his grandfather the 4 x 6 wallet-sized snapshot one night after dinner, that Buck saw the moose. He whistled softly.

“A real giant. Coulda fed thirty.”

“He was a daddy,” Chuck said. “There was a Mrs. Moose and a Baby Moose.”

“No doubt, no doubt, a big bull like that,” Buck answered, holding the photo between wrinkled thumb and index finger thoughtfully.

And that is how Chuck met the Tamakaze, and how Buck Branson ended up with a grainy blowup photograph of a moose instead of a real moose head over the sideboard his ancestors had trundled all the way from Massachusetts a hundred and seventy years ago.

## Chapter 18

**Dinner for 10 or 10,000**

Yoshida's Chinese mistress Linda Wu was freaking out. Yoshida had invited his closest advisors to this dinner, and intended to reveal his grand plan to them. Linda had prepared the dishes Yoshida liked—the horse *sashimi*, the live crayfish that sometimes crawled off the table before they could be eaten, the sushi wrapped in real gold leaf. For himself, Yoshida was a Spartan, but when he entertained guests, he was an Epicure. He liked everything just so, and Linda had been unable to find one or two of the items he had demanded. She picked at her long nails and fretted her shiny black hair. Yoshida, who in an earlier phase of his life had been a caterer, and had once served a sit-down dinner for 10,000 Communist Party cadre in the Outer Court of the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Imperial Palace in Beijing, was not sympathetic.

Linda Wu was slimmer and more fine-boned than most Japanese women. She wore tight-fitting *cheongsam* dresses of the finest silk, guaranteed to stir the sexual desire of Japanese men, for whom Chinese women were an exotic attraction. Yoshida was not a beast like those soldiers at Nanking in 1937, but like many leaders he was a man of large appetites despite his stoic demeanor. He had found Linda Wu in a brothel in Hong Kong, and had saved her, liberated her from the sex

trade by buying her contract from a Taiwanese pimp. She owed him her life and her freedom, and remained forever grateful to him. That didn't stop her from using her sharp tongue when necessary, but when it came to food she bowed to Yoshida's experience, and wished to please him in this above all things except sex. And right now she was terrified that the dinner would not measure up to his exacting specifications. She had learned to cook the sacred *gohan* rice to perfection—not too sticky, not too wet, with just the right sheen and firmness of texture. That part she was not worried about. It was other items that concerned her now, the whole sea-bass that must be crispy on the outside but soft and chewy within, the squid, the octopus, the battered *Okonomiyaki* dishes. She thought to herself that she was like a Tamakaze in the kitchen, a whirlwind of activity, and she laughed inwardly, knowing that Yoshida would hate the comparison.

Guests arrived and she welcomed them and sat them at the low table, where they could warm their feet under the heated *kotatsu*. Besides Linda and Yoshida there was his faithful *deshi* Fujii, and several of Yoshida's lieutenants—bearded Takahashi the weapons expert, Ogawa the accountant who kept the books for *Shourai Taiyou*, the diminutive but fierce-looking Kosai, whose specialty was explosives, and three others, big fighting men who were also strategic planners and members of his inner coterie.



When Yoshida had asked Linda earlier to set a place for Elijah, she had missed the reference but added one more place for the mystery guest. When the time came and the other guests were assembled, Yoshida bowed his head and recited a Shugendo invocation while in one hand he waved the *gohei* wand in supplication. Suddenly Yoshida clapped his other hand over Linda's mouth to stifle the scream that would have pierced the room, as the pilot drifted through the wall of the dining room and stood before them.

“Welcome, great Tamakaze! You have come alone this time,” Yoshida observed. The pilot said nothing, “What is your name, that we may honor you properly?”

“I am—I was *Shōsa*, Leader Ishii Sasaki, Kikusui-Tenzan unit, 131<sup>st</sup> Airgroup, 256<sup>th</sup> Attacker Squadron, *shinpū tokubetsu kōgeki tai*.” He bowed.

Yoshida looked around the room with satisfaction. His guests were slack-jawed, stupefied. A coldness had crept into the space, chilling Linda's delicate bones, and stealing the steam from the birds-nest appetizers she had just brought out. It was the aura of death. Yoshida was not immune to the horror, but he steeled himself and went on—

“These are my most trusted associates. I wanted them to see you, to inspire them. *REI!*” he shouted, and the table bowed as one.

Yoshida outlined his plan while Squadron Leader Sasaki stood silently facing the group. In one week's time the Japanese space agency

would launch the nuclear-powered space plane *Dai Shizen* (Great Nature) on Japan's first independent space mission. The Tamakaze would help the astronauts divert the space plane into a flying bomb that would destroy the American city of San Francisco. This attack would launch a new age of Japanese hegemony—Yoshida stopped suddenly. A mournful sob had escaped from the mouth of his accountant, Ogawa.

“What is it, Ogawa?” Yoshida asked with more than a hint of annoyance.

“—My nephew and his family live in San Francisco,” Ogawa objected, but quietly, meekly. It was very difficult, almost impossible, for any of Yoshida's followers to challenge him.

“Then they will be martyrs to our cause,” Yoshida answered severely. “This glorious action must not be revealed to anyone prematurely. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Good. *Itadakemas* (let's eat.)” Yoshida dug into his food, but his guests were too agitated to enjoy the elaborate meal Linda Wu had prepared. They were thinking of the second, more formal meaning of *Itadakemas*—“thanks for all we have.” Or was it the presence of the phantasmal guest, standing silently behind them? In a few days, if Yoshida's plan succeeded, nuclear destruction would be visited on the world for the first time since World War II, and for the first time, on a country other than Japan. It was thrilling and terrifying, and they were

part of it! No wonder they had no appetite. Yoshida noticed their lack of enthusiasm with displeasure, and ordered Linda to bring out more sake. When the cups had been filled and drained several times, and the faces of his guests were flushed with the specially brewed, extra strong rice wine, he stood, and proposed a toast:

“To the Emperor! May he return to his palace as a divine being.  
*Banzai!*”

Stirred by those ancient longings, his guests rose as one and echoed Yoshida’s cry, three times: “*Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!*” Just afterwards, almost unnoticed, the ghost pilot faded from view

After the dinner Yoshida called the young accountant Ogawa into his study, a *tatami* room lined with bookshelves crammed with Japanese military history texts, biographies of famous samurai, and the like. On one wall was a hanging scroll with bold calligraphy that read: *Budo Soku Kō Hyaku Ran Ji Toku* (“through the study of Budo (martial arts) you character will be developed” (literally, “kneaded” like bread dough.)

The two men sat each on a *zafu* set on a *zabuton*, facing each other. Ogawa’s face was still tinged with pink from the sake, but Yoshida was perfectly composed.

“Ogawa!” Yoshida said in a pitiless tone. “You trouble me.”

“Don’t be troubled, Commander.”

“Can you be trusted to keep this news of tonight to yourself?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Because if you can’t, there is another way open to you.” Yoshida didn’t have to spell it out. Ogawa knew he was talking about *seppuku*, ritual suicide. It was tempting in a frightening way, to avoid thinking about his poor nephew, a successful orthodontist, his petite American wife, and those cute kids, incinerated.

“I can keep silent, sir.” He bowed, very low, exposing his neck to Yoshida’s blade (had he chosen to draw it) the way retainers of old bowed to show that their lives were in their *daimyo*’s hands.

“They will be remembered as heroes of our country in the world to come, Ogawa.”

“Yes, sir.” Ogawa bowed again and withdrew. Alone now, his belly full of food and sake, Yoshida prayed. Sasaki appeared again before him, pale, almost transparent. Yoshida was startled. In his excitement he had almost forgotten about the Tamakaze pilot.

“Yes?” he said, in a tone he might have used to one of his followers.

Sasaki said nothing. A chill went through Yoshida’s body. Was he losing him? Yoshida’s mind raced. What could he say to this disembodied spirit? Admiral Onishi’s death poem leaped into his mind. He recited it:

*Today in bloom, tomorrow as scattered petals  
Like a delicate flower, life is  
How we could aspire this fragrance,  
So transitory  
To last forever?*

Sasaki looked at him with a weary expression, lost between the two worlds of the living and the dead.

“May I remind you,” Sasaki said softly, “that Admiral Onishi committed *seppuku* as the war ended, and apologized to us, the men he sent to their deaths, and urged all Japanese to work for peace in the future. He refused a *kaishakunin* second, and took fifteen hours to die.”

Yoshida was frightened. He tried to calm himself, and adopted a falsely imperious tone.

”Yes, I know. I have seen his sword he used at the Yushukan Museum by Yasukuni. I have visited his grave at Zen Soji-ji.”

Sasaki answered with a sharpness that Yoshida had not heard in his voice before.

“There was another grave. Half his ashes are interred at a cemetery in his home village, Ashida, in Hyogo prefecture. It is there that his soul rests. Where does your soul rest, Yoshida-san, priest-warrior?”

Yoshida drew himself up and answered with all the conviction he could muster: “My soul will not rest until Japan is once again the glory of Asia!”

“Onishi found peace in an honorable death. We, the eternal wanderers, envy him. What will your death be like, Yoshida-san? Have you contemplated it? We had weeks and months before to think about ours, and many years after.”

“I told you, I can help you to your release. Do this thing for Japan, and you will be freed from your purgatory.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I have consulted the *Omikuji*,” Yoshida lied again, risking all by telling one spirit he had consulted another. “They tell me that this is your way to release.”

“Ah, omikuji, very good.” Sasaki was satisfied with Yoshida’s answer.

*“They must not know each other, these kami,”* thought Yoshida wildly.

“I am sorry to threaten you, but I have my squadron mates to think of. If you lie to us, we will hunt you down. You have seen that we are good hunters,” Sasaki said, and the budo scroll stirred on the wall, though the windows were shut.

“You can trust me, Sasaki-san. You and all your men,” Yoshida said in a tremulous voice. Sasaki bowed and vanished again, slowly, his fading image burning itself into Yoshida’s mind.

How does one become the leader of a fanatic cult? There’s no career path for it. You can’t get an advanced degree in it. How do you even start? It wasn’t radiation that created, like Godzilla. It wasn’t a mutation, or feminine space aliens (see *Destroy All Monsters*, (1968)) It was a basic flaw—check that, it might be a virtue (that bug might be a feature!) in the Japanese national character, that caused men like Yoshida to arise. Or is it global, a human characteristic? After all, Germany had given rise to Hitler, Russia to Stalin, Uganda to Idi Amin, Iraq to Saddam, North Korea to, well pick one, the list goes on and on.

America had spawned a whole host of murderous crazies from Charlie Manson to Jim Jones , though it's political history was strangely devoid of insane demagogues, like these—democracy at work!

Who is the first person you convince that your radical viewpoint is the *real* way of the world? In Yoshida's case, his first convert was Linda Wu. Yoshida had been a rather ordinary person growing up in a dismal Tokyo suburb, attending a mediocre university, beginning a drab and uneventful career in catering, working the club circuit and gathering a clientele. In college he had fallen under the spell of the right-wing writer Yukio Mishima, who had already capped his writing career with a highly publicized act of *seppuku* after a comically futile attempt at a *coup d'etat* aimed at restoring the Emperor to power. Nonetheless, a mystique quickly arose around Mishima, and by the time Yoshida entered college a few years later, Mishima's legacy as an ardent advocate of Japanese nationalism was flourishing. Most of Yoshida's classmates were liberals, or apolitical creatures looking only to profit from Japan's booming economy. That was the beginning of Yoshida's fanaticism. It's always easier to become radicalized when you are a persecuted minority. The young Yoshida led counter-protests, conducted dirty tricks campaigns, wrote speeches for more well-known campus activists.

But even young counter-revolutionaries need to eat. Yoshida fell into the food business more or less by accident. He was a good organizer, and catering is nothing but project management of food. He started at

the bottom, working for a big company, lugging steam tables to events, but soon found himself responsible for dinners, parties, functions of all kinds. He quickly learned what was easy (rubber chicken and a bottle of Scotch whiskey at every table) and what was more difficult (ice swans, live sushi, parties on boats) and soon left his employer to start his own company. His work brought him in touch with Japan's debauched elite, the pampered politicians, actors, pop music stars, and athletes who expected and received royal treatment. They were the most finicky clients, and the worst tippers. Yoshida, who already saw the world through a political lens, found his views reinforced by the behavior of his self-indulgent and indulged clientele. Their decadence confirmed his suspicion that Japan was slipping rapidly away from its disciplined roots.

One weekend he was asked to supply a feast for a group of visiting Chinese businessmen. They all wanted Filipino prostitutes, whereas their Japanese counterparts asked for Chinese hookers. This job had all of the worst elements, and looked like trouble from the start—it was held on a hundred-foot-long yacht, a misnomer, really, this was a small ship, docked at a yacht club in Yokohama where it rocked unsteadily making the servers' job all the more difficult. The vessel's owner, a wealthy businessman named Saburo Murofushi, was trying to secure additional business in China, which was just beginning to emerge from the excesses



of the cultural revolution. He had ordered a lavish spread, with a champagne fountain among other devious delights.

Murofushi had also contracted with Yoshida to supply prostitutes for his guests' pleasure. The invitees were a troublesome mix of sleazy Japanese business types with *yakuza* connections, and greedy Chinese government bureaucrats looking for bribes. A real den of thieves, all of them. The job started badly—Yoshida's van was delayed by horrendous Tokyo traffic and he didn't arrive at the mooring until forty-five minutes before the guests were due to arrive. Usually he liked to have two hours to set up. The sun was grinding down over Tokyo Bay, its last gleams filtering through a choking industrial haze, like a poisonous fog, soupy and hard to breathe, when Yoshida finally freed himself from the endless line of cars fleeing downtown for Yokohama and the suburbs beyond, and maneuvered his van past pallets and abandoned forklifts and stacked containers to the end of the dock. Murofushi, a barrel-chested former bar bouncer with deep-set suspicious eyes and heavy jowls, greeted him with a scowl.

"I was beginning to think I was going to have to order take-out food. Where are the girls?"

To his credit, instead of being obsequious, Yoshida made no apologies, didn't even mention the traffic, and put up a little resistance in the face of his client's displeasure.

“Don’t worry, Murofushi-san, I will have everything set up by the time your guests arrive. The young ladies are coming in a stretch limousine with a hot tub and a full bar, that you can use for private assignations.”

Murofushi grunted his grudging approval. Yoshida clapped his hands and his two male helpers (always males, to avoid mixing his two lines of business, although that wasn’t a certainty in these perverse times), neatly dressed in black and white, scrambled to unload the van. First out was a whole roast suckling pig, an impressive offering with a shiny Fuji apple stuck in its dessicated jaw.

Prop wash from a larger tanker docked down the slip was causing the smaller yacht to pitch and rub against the bumpers that kept its bright-work immaculate, and coincidentally, made Yoshida’s catering job even tougher. Murofushi send a henchman down to take care of it. A few shouted words came floating across the water, and two minutes later the trawler’s engines suddenly ceased.

“If this boat is rocking, it should be for another reason,” Murofushi joked, and disappeared up the gangway and into his private quarters to await his guests.

A whole haggis came out of the van, wrapped in cellophane. Yoshida didn’t even know what it was, but he’d found a specialty shop in Tokyo that could supply it, part of a seemingly endless stream of these Western delicacies, all for the jaded tastes of the Chinese guests, who

arrived in a group, cadre-style. They had already been priming themselves for the evening, drinking cheap plum wine in their hotel rooms, and one of them promptly fell into the bay, to the great hilarity of his comrades, and had to be fished out of the scummy harbor water by one of Murofushi's deckhands. The Chinese man seemed none the worse for wear, though sobered up, but that wouldn't last long. He was issued some dry clothes and the party got underway in the spacious stateroom of the yacht. It began with rounds of toasting and predictably boring speeches from both sides--Japanese-Chinese solidarity, the glorious future of the Pacific Rim, old feuds forgotten--all lies, of course except the part about the glorious future. Japan was already an economic powerhouse and China was about to become one. But beneath the alcohol-fueled camaraderie was an ancient hatred, born of hundreds of years of persecution and domination by the Japanese of their larger but less developed neighbor, and a clash of cultures, as exemplified by the Japanese aesthetic of purity and simplicity arrayed against the rococo gold and red excess of Chinese art. Yoshida watched the sorry spectacle with dispassionate distaste, and his servers kept the liquor flowing. This was just the necessary preamble to the orgiastic evening to follow.

The prostitutes arrived in a limousine garishly painted with retro psychedelic flowers, a vehicle that looked completely out of place on the dock, and in Japan. It was as if Yoshida wanted to call attention to the illicitness of his operation, taunting the police, whom he knew to be in

the pocket of Murofushi. Loud disco music could be heard through the tinted windows even before the doors opened and the girls emerged—a sickly looking collection of too skinny Filipino women, most of them cocaine or meth addicts, heavily made up and to conceal aging or acne, and to create the tawdry allure that would appeal to this clientele. One or two were of questionable gender.

The guests weren't college kids at a frat party. These were grown men, some of them powerful figures in their little worlds, but the introduction of alcohol and the sight of beautiful nearly naked women striped these men of their greatness. They became foolish and diffident, or they turned aggressive and lacked all charm.

Yoshida moved among the drinking, awkward drunken dancing and manner-less eating, a maitre d' of the highest order, ensuring that all of Murofushi's guests were served appropriately, their desires met, their needs addressed, within the considerable powers of his ability to meet them. Once or twice he sent out for additional items—a special wine, a special whore for a client's unusual tastes. If not for the language barrier he would have been a much sought after commodity in Las Vegas, the kind of character who could handle difficult clients, a fixer. In Japan, he was considered a necessary accouterment, often treated as Murofushi dealt with him, as a flunky. But Yoshida didn't care, his ego wasn't invested in this small-time operation. Though he might not have been able to articulate yet, he was already dreaming of the day when he

was leader of some as yet unspecified, grander, more powerful organization. But at the moment he still had to deal with his current reality.

A boat, even a luxury yacht like Murofushi's, is a small, confined space. People were literally having to step over each other to pass forward and aft. The gregarious Chinese didn't mind it, but the more fastidious Japanese were sometimes offended by a foot in the face, or worse. The limousine was getting quite a bit of use. Behind the driver's compartment were two separate areas, one with the bar and one with the hot tub, an ostentatious and slightly absurd luxury for a motor vehicle.

The chauffeur, a blank-faced man in his late forties, stood impassively outside the car, smoking cigarette after cigarette, and taking no notice of the continual movement in and out of his automobile. He was used to it.

The ethnic tensions that had been simmering under the surface all evening, boiled up and over. Angry drunken words were exchanged, words that, in the Chinese homily, "can never be recalled".

Sometime during the evening, a scuffle broke out among several men competing for the attention of a beautiful young prostitute who called herself Linda Wu, though with these girls that was unlikely to be anything like her real name. One of the Chinese businessmen had noticed a rising sun tattooed on the back of Linda Wu's neck. If you

mounted her doggy-style, it would be in your face as you took her, and the Chinese man was outraged that his pleasure might be spoiled.

“Why do you have the enemy’s flag inked on your body? That’s disgusting, you whore!”

“But I am a whore, you idiot!” Linda Wu shrieked at him. “You can’t insult me by calling me what I am!” Linda Wu laughed in the man’s face. He slapped her, hard. Yoshida, just coming in with another course on a tray, put down his load and shot across the room, low and fast. He grabbed the man’s arm as he raised it to strike Linda Wu again, and broke the man’s wrist with a jiu-jitsu hold that left him cringing and howling in pain.

The thin veneer of civility was shattered, and pushing and shoving threatened between Japanese and Chinese cliques threatened to explode into a full-out brawl. Murofushi might have screened his guests for weapons had this not been such a delicate political dance—two of the combatants produced wicked-looking dirks, the kind of weapon a sailor might carry, and began slashing at each other ineffectually. The cabin lights went out briefly, and one of the porthole windows was smashed, before Murofushi’s bodyguards separated the fighting groups and restored order. Murofushi confronted Yoshida.

“How dare you strike my guest?”

“How dare he strike one of my girls?”

“She’s just an ordinary Hong Kong slut,” the pale, grimacing Chinese man protested, still holding his fractured wrist pathetically.

“You will never work in catering again!” Murofushi declared.

“That’s true,” Yoshida said coolly. In the chaos he had given orders to his helpers to start removing whatever they could, and something more. “But not because you and your *yakuza* thugs will blackball me. I am finished with this, this tawdry charade. The next time you hear of me, it will be in a different role all together.”

“What do I care of that?” Murofushi sneered. “Get off my yacht!”

“With pleasure,” Yoshida answered

But as he left, he managed to smuggle Linda Wu out of the party and whisk her off into the night, Yoshida crouching in the back of the van while one of his helpers drove crazily, zig-zagging through the mess on the dock until they hit open highway.

Linda Wu’s head popped up, smelling strongly of sheep’s intestines and oatmeal.

“You are my hero,” Linda said. “Would you like a --?”

“No,” Yoshida said quickly. “At least, not now. You are never again to sell yourself to a man. I’ll take care of you. I’m getting out of that business, as of this evening. Many things are changing tonight, and you are part of those changes.”

And long into the night Yoshida described his vision of a new Japan to this young Chinese prostitute who spoke only rough street Japanese and understood little of what he said. But she understood enough to know that she would be with Yoshida for the rest of their lives.



Chapter 19

**Out of Sun, Into Wind**

*“The obstacle that checked and tripped the body...”*

*From A Soldier*

Robert Frost

March 15, 1945. Finally the long, frustrating, excruciating waiting was over. Days and weeks had gone by as they trained, using precious gasoline on laughably short flights, barely taking off and circling once or twice before landing again. The men had grown restless and confused. Why were they here? Why weren't they out there, in the Pacific, fighting the Americans? It had been difficult for the officers to maintain discipline. Worse, though, were those rare days when a small group of them left on a mission. Some were so weak-legged they had to be helped to their planes. Others went under threat of being beaten or killed right there on the tarmac. Some flew out and came back so many times, claiming engine trouble or an inability to find a target, that they were taken out and shot as cowards. But most walked stoically to their planes, never turning around. Those were the heroes, the ones you knew wouldn't come back. They drank their ceremonial glass of sake, tied their *banzai* headbands to their flight helmets, and went off to die.

Sasaki had a sword, a family heirloom, that he wanted to bring with him into the cockpit. But he was of two minds about it. If he took the sword with him, it would perish with him, and go out of the family. Finally he decided to give the sword to his older brother, on his last day of leave before the mission.

Of his family, only his brother Taro was still alive. The firebombing of Tokyo in March of 1945 had killed his parents and his sister. But Sasaki had searched his soul and found a surprising lack of bitterness toward the American pilots who had leveled most of his home city with incendiary bombs. If Japanese bombers were capable of reaching America, he knew that his country's leaders would have done the same. He had more disdain for the German rockets that randomly fell on English cities, killing citizens and setting fires. These seemed cowardly, impersonal, inhuman. He had met a few Germans during the course of the war, and found them haughty, cold, and less interesting than the few open, friendly Americans he had met before the war. War was the real enemy. He harbored no hatred for the Americans, In the sky, he had seen their bravery, and had sensed an unspoken camaraderie between them as pilots, despite the fact that they were trying to kill each other. He had heard similar stories about sailors who shared the dangers of the sea, and who wept when they were unable to save survivors of a ship they had just blown up and sunk. But perhaps he was naïve. As a pilot,

he had been spared the horrors of the firebombs, that night after night turned Tokyo into an inferno, creating a hellish orange glow that was visible from the airbase across the bay.

The weather in Tokyo in March of 1945 was mild and dry, delightful spring weather and surprising—some years it would already be hot and humid by early spring. In other years people would have been out walking, enjoying the flowers, though it was still a bit early for cherry blossoms. But in wartime nobody walked for pleasure. It was dangerous and non-productive. The collective will of the populace was focused on survival, not enjoyment.

He met Taro at a tea shop in the small town outside the airbase. There was little food to speak of, and the tea was all *bancha* now, twig tea, the terraced tea fields could no longer be tended and all resources went to the military. As a pilot, Sasaki was still relatively well-fed—he was shocked at his brother's emaciated look. His bones nearly protruded through his skin, which was sallow from jaundice. They shook hands instead of embracing, as if this was a formal meeting instead of a family reunion. Sasaki thought it was because his brother didn't want him to feel his frailness. They sat down around a rickety rattan table in two frayed rattan chairs. The tea shop was little more than a tin hut with a tattered awning, under which a few of these tables and chairs were arrayed.

“Here,” Sasaki said immediately. Take this money,” and he shoved an envelope with some yen into his brother’s hand

Uncharacteristically, his brother did not try to refuse it. His pride of being the number one son was gone, along with much else.

“I wish my medical condition had allowed me to join the army,” Taro said. “Then I wouldn’t have seen, what I saw.” Sasaki knew he was talking about the firebombing, and that he had perhaps even witnessed his parents burning alive, but he didn’t press the point. Taro had lost a kidney in a childhood accident, and was never able to do strenuous physical activity. He had become an accountant, and had held a reasonably good job before the war, but like most men his age who hadn’t gone into the service, he was impressed into a civilian factory job despite his expertise in accountancy. He made the nosecones for artillery shells.

“I also have this sword,” Sasaki said, drawing the weapon out from beneath his coat where he’d kept it from sight, why he wasn’t sure. “It’s supposed to go with me,” he said, leaving out where; there was no describing where he was going. “I want you to have it instead. Perhaps, someday, you’ll have a son to pass it along to, so that it can stay in the family.

“We don’t have a family anymore,” Taro said bitterly. “All gone, and now, you, this insane order, how can you stand it?”

At that moment the waitress came around and took their orders, staring at Sasaki in a horrified way, as if she was looking at a ghost. And perhaps she was. Sasaki broke the uncomfortable silence

“I am doing what is right for my country,” Sasaki answered Taro’s question that had hung in the air like a bad smell.

“No family, and soon no country. Please kill as many Americans as possible. When they arrive on the mainland I will fight them even it it’s with my bare hands,” Taro declared.

“This is a magic sword,” Sasaki said spontaneously, surprising himself. He had no idea where that thought had come from, other than his desperate wish to do what he could not do, protect and preserve his family. “Whoever owns it will be shielded from danger—“

“Then you must take it with you, Taro shouted, drawing disapproving looks from people at nearby tables.”

“No, said Sasaki. “When I go down, the sword would be lost. But if you keep it, you will survive the war, I am sure.”

But his brother wouldn’t take the sword. He was deeply despondent, and refused to consider a life after the war, with no family. His last scrap of honor was that he could insist that Sasaki take the family sword (now supposedly endowed with magic qualities) with him on his last flight.

They sat together for a few more minutes, but there was really nothing more to say. One of the two was headed for certain death within 24 hours, the other was resigned to an uncertain fate of hunger and constant fear of death from above. They had never been close as children. The age gap between them had been too large to make them natural playmates, but now each of them longed for a closeness they would never have. And their life experiences had reversed their roles—Sasaki, more robust and confident, seemed more like the older brother than his frail and beaten down sibling. Finally, Sasaki reached over and took his brother's hands in his own. Taro's hands were like claws, bony fingers almost without flesh.

“Do you believe in Amida Buddha? That we all are born again in the Pure Land?”

“No.” Taro's lifeless eyes displayed no emotion.

Sasaki, desperate to give his brother some hope, hit upon a memory.

“Do you remember when we were young, and Father took us to the ocean at Miyajima, the Torii gate in Hiroshima Bay?”

“I remember.”

“And Father said: ‘All creatures pass through this gate.’ And I didn’t know what he meant, and said so, but you said: “I know. The ocean is life.”

“Yes. So?”

“You know then. You know now. I may fall short of that American ship, but I cannot fall short of the ocean. I will always be with you.” He paused, trying to think of what else he could say. “This war will not go on forever.” For him, certainly, that was true. It would end tomorrow.

There were terrible rumors, that the Americans were planning to enslave the entire nation when they took the main island, that the American men were beasts, rapists and worse. That—but Sasaki believed none of it. He had encountered them in the air, many times, and he knew that they fought hard, and were as valiant as any Japanese pilots. He heard them joking on their radio frequencies, and he liked the sound of their banter: easy, casual, warm.

“Someday,” he continued, “the people of Japan will stroll in parks again, view the cherry blossoms, have picnics.” He would just not be among them. But he desperately wanted his brother to have that hope, that possible future. “Promise me you will visit Yasukuni when this is all over.

Taro looked at his brother with infinitely sad eyes. "If there is a Yasukuni, if there is a Japan, I will go there. And you will be enshrined there." His brother started crying, and Sasaki averted his eyes, not out of embarrassment or politeness, but because if he didn't he would weep too. As if on a signal, the two brothers stood and embraced. Then they separated. Sasaki walked slowly back to his base. He was glad he had visited his brother. Now there was nothing binding him to this world. He was free.

The next morning, half an hour before they were to be called to duty for the last time, Sasaki and his pilot friends sat in the dormitory they had called home for the last four months. Nervous banter alternated with distressing silences, as each man thought of the hours ahead. Sasaki decided to clean his sword one last time. He sat on his bunk and took out the carefully wrapped scabbard, bound twice over in cloths, the outer a square of silk with a flying cranes design, the inner a plain blue sleeve of cotton-wool. He paused and raised the sword in its scabbard over his head, the weapon resting on both palms turned upward. Lowering it, he slowly and precisely withdrew the blade, not in a cut but in the manner for cleaning. And he paused again, this time in a small start of surprise, followed by a satori--he had taken care of this sword for the last three years, through air battle, war travel, jungles and deserts, and he had never noticed the inscription near the haft. He brought the



sword close to his face and squinted to read the kanji etched into the mystical steel. It read:

*Promised Protection  
Comes when white cranes fly over  
Sooner or later*

How was it possible he had never seen these words? It was not possible. He had handled the sword too many times. Though weathered and worn, though they looked like they had been in the blade forever, these were new kanji. This was a new haiku. It could only mean one thing; the sword was speaking to him. But what was that one thing? How to read the haiku? In Sasaki's mind, the idea formed naturally that it was a message from the future.

He was not a religious man, but he could think of no other plausible reason why these words had suddenly appeared, other than to tell him that it was all right, his family would be protected, that the future for the Sasaki's was assured. Now he felt he could go to his death in peace. He cleaned the sword lovingly and replaced it in its scabbard.

The call came, to assemble on the tarmac. Now it was his turn to drink the sake, make the final walk. With a steady gaze and a straight-backed walk he took his place in line and accepted his sake.

And oh, what sake! Sasaki had never tasted such a delicious drink, though he knew it was not expensive stuff, only ordinary Ozeki, or maybe not even that good. But every sip seemed amazingly delicious. He would

have savored it longer, but his honor wouldn't allow it. Carelessly he spilled the last few drops on the ground, shouted "Banzai!" and turned and walked to his plane to the cheers of his comrades. As he clambered in the cockpit he placed the sword next to him on the left side, the drawing side.

The confines of the cockpit were too small to allow Sasaki to draw his sword from its scabbard as he flew toward his death, but he reached down and gripped it tightly in his left hand, steering the stick with his right hand.

"This plane is my sword. I am a sword. I strike!"

He was not a fancy flier, but today was different. As he raced through the sky, he tried all the maneuvers the flight instructors had taught him, the ones that had enabled him to defeat the Americans five times in one-on-one combat: the Immelman, the barrel roll, the side roll, the inside loop. He flew as if in a dream, heedless of enemy fighters and even his own fellow kamikaze. The clouds were huge, puffy, ethereal castles he wandered through or floated above, shafts of sunlight streaking through them and lighting them up as if from within, creating a magical sea and skyscape. He flew carelessly, handling the stick with unaccustomed looseness, so that he careened around the sky instead of staying in formation. He fluttered and danced on the rudder pedals and the plane flew unpredictably diving and rising and turning at random.

As he approached the American fleet, he held back. There was no point in conserving fuel; he had been given only enough for a one-way trip anyway. He watched as several of his comrades flew toward the enemy's naval squadron and were cut to shreds by anti-aircraft fire. None of them reached their targets.

“What a waste!” Sasaki cried out. Secretly he had been against the kamikaze idea from the start, especially when it involved veteran fliers like himself, who he felt would be better used in combat against the Americans. For the past few months the enemy had ruled the skies with newer planes, more planes, more armaments, more firepower, and more senior pilots. But he also understood that it wasn't fair to send unskilled junior pilots to their deaths without leadership from men like himself who had been tested in battle. One by one they hurled themselves and their flimsy Zeroes and slower-moving dive-bombers at the American ships, and came up short, crashing harmlessly into the water, blown out of the sky by deadly American defensive fire, or picked off by the fighters that circled remorselessly above them. And his loyalty to his country, and the Emperor rose up within him and he plotted how to get through. So far he had managed to avoid the enemy's planes. That was vital, because he had no weaponry. The Zero had been stripped of guns and even protective armor, and was nothing but a flying bomb. He looked for an opening, but the American ships held to a tight formation brilliantly. He decided that his only chance would be to approach from an

unconventional angle and force the carrier (for he had selected the aircraft carrier as the most glorious target) into a turn. While the great ship was maneuvering, she would be vulnerable, perhaps only for a few seconds.

Sasaki rose and ducked back into the cloud cover, banking and calculating as he did so. He would come in, not from the starboard side, where they expected him, but from the port side, using the sun behind him to shield and distract the gunners. It wasn't all that unconventional—in a dogfight it was a standard tactic, but his youthful and inexperienced compatriots had all flown straight in, and the Americans might be momentarily caught off guard by his circling, and they might also think the attack was over.

Stretching around to check the skies, Sasaki saw that a lone P-38 was following him! He was utterly defenseless, and in no mood to die up here by smashing his Zero into the enemy fighter. He had a bigger target in mind. He must lose this wolfish adversary if he was to achieve the honorable end he had set for himself. But how to do it? He was already dangerously low on fuel. All his fellow kamikaze on this mission had already futilely sacrificed themselves. It was up to him to salvage the honor of his group. Having been stationed on a carrier himself, he could imagine what was going on down below in the flight deck. The "All Clear" signal would have been given, the damage, if any, was being assessed,

spent shells collected and planes that had been hastily moved below decks during the attack would be being brought back up, and at the same time the carrier would be turning to windward to retrieve her cover fighters. That would put the carrier into the perfect position for Sasaki to come out of the sun and strike, if only he could shake his dogged pursuer. The faster, more powerful P-38 was making up the distance and the gap between them was closing fast. Sasaki could play hide and seek among the clouds. But he'd soon run out of fuel and crash. There was only one thing to do!

Sasaki fainted as if he was going to use the cloud cover as a hiding place. He briefly slipped into the thick grey stuff, then, still hidden, turned as quickly as possible. He calculated that the American pilot would do what he would have done, stay outside the clouds and wait for him to re-emerge. The American wouldn't anticipate that he would immediately come out, flying straight at him. Or so Sasaki hoped, and his ruse worked exactly as he planned it. Streaking out of the fog, he found himself just a half-mile from the American, and headed directly for him. For a few seconds he had the element of surprise, and again fainted, this time as if he was going to ram the P-38 with his Zero. Such actions were not unknown, and the American had probably heard rumors. By the time his adversary got over his astonishment and trained his machine guns, Sasaki was upon him. But he had no machine guns of his own. At the last second he dove, but not before he saw the grim,

determined enemy staring at him with a look of resignation and wonder, but ready to give his life to protect his ship.

Sasaki's windshield exploded, showering him with shards of glass, and suddenly air came rushing into his cockpit and the noise of his plane's engine was much louder than before. It was delightful! The sky was bluer, and the clouds seemed closer, and the fresh air was rejuvenating after hours in the tightly enclosed space. But his head was throbbing—he'd been hit! Strangely he felt no pain, only a terrific pulsing sensation in his temples. There was no time for anything now, except to dive toward his target. Already, he knew, the American pilot was swooping into a turning dive to come up behind him. Where was that carrier? He peered through the wisps of clouds, looking for the telltale wake that he would see before he saw the ship itself. There it was!

Bleeding and half-dead from his wounds, Sasaki struggled to keep his fighter airborne.

The carrier has spotted him, and was leaning into a slow turn to port that would bring its antiaircraft guns to bear on him. But they were too late. He had won. If none of the machine gunners got off a lucky shot, and if he could stay ahead of the angry pilot behind him, he would slip through their last defenses and strike the ship. A red mist filled his goggles, his own blood blinding him. He tore off the headgear and wiped his eyes with one gloved hand. The Zero rocked, buffeted by low altitude

turbulence, but Sasaki was completely focused on bringing his Zero in. He could feel but not see the American shooting at him from behind. All his concentration was on the several hundred yards ahead of him. He flew through a terrifying storm of smoke, flashing orange arcs of tracers, and violent explosions all around him that rocked and battered his plane. Instead of taking any evasive action, Sasaki flew straight in. That allowed the gunners to train their sights on him, but cut the distance he would have to travel, and the few seconds he had bought by forcing the carrier into a turn had given him the minute edge that was the difference. A 50-cal round tore through one wing and momentarily threw him off course, but miraculously the wing held and he realigned toward his target.

In the last three seconds of his life, Sasaki made eye contact with one of the men on the deck, who was just standing and watching, not firing a gun, without any outward signs of fear, but a quizzical look on his otherwise almost impassive face. Sasaki could see by the man's uniform that he too was a pilot. Sasaki wagged his wings slightly, and smiled.

"Goodbye, my brother!" he cried. The man dove sideways as the Zero smashed into the deck plates, merging metal into metal. And *"the obstacle that checked and tripped"* Sasaki's body, a 50,000 ton aircraft

carrier, *"shot the spirit on, further than target ever showed or shone."* He came out of the rising sun, and into the wind. He was Tamakaze!



## Chapter 20

**Mission Uncontrolled**

Yoshida had recruited a bunch of young geeks straight out of Chuo University to man the monitors at the mock mission control center in his mountain hideaway. It didn't take much--he wasn't trying to guide the vehicle himself, the Tamakaze would do that, just to follow its trajectory and speed. Still, within the control center, a cave dug out of the granite mountain face and accessed through a hidden door at the far end of the dojo, a dozen technicians scurried around, monitoring double-wide screens displaying projected orbital loops, fuel/thrust ratios, and other critical data.

Yoshida had managed to hide from Squadron Leader Sasaki and everyone else that he hadn't ever talked to the astronauts, much less gotten them to agree to the insane suicidal plunge. The mission had taken on a life of its own. Many in the room felt that they were embarking on the next phase of Japanese history. Some wore swords at their computer stations. It was a heady time, full of promise. They were like *kagemusha*, shadow warriors, mimicking the actions of the real technicians at the launch site, Tanegashima Space Center a few hundred miles to the south. In five days the space plane would rise off Tanegashima Island in a thunderous roar, and descend like a fiery wind on America, finally settling old scores, and birthing in flames the new

Japan. And they, these nerdy, wimpy techies, would be the new electronic samurai, guiding the weapon to its target, with the aid of the amazing Tamakaze! The thrill of it all blinded them to any moral dilemmas. As a precaution, Yoshida had closed the heavy main gate to the compound, a holdover from its days as a stronghold for rebellious Buddhist monks. It would take a tank to crash through those old wooden doors, fastened with bars of iron forged by the monks themselves. No one could enter or leave without Yoshida's permission. In addition to the technicians, several hundred armed followers were barricaded within. The camp was in a state of high readiness and excitement. Training continued in both the indoor dojo and the outdoor field. Up in the mountains the weather was already turning, the leaves changing colors, the Japanese maples coming out in blazing red and the fan-like leaves of the ginkgo trees turning bright yellow, falling and carpeting the stone steps of the Haguro climb. Down below in the Sanzan Gosaiden monastery, the monks were putting up food for the winter and stocking their root cellars with *yama imo*, the mountain potato. It should have been a time when the Shourai Taoyou group would practice *Tensho*, the great, slow, grounding karate kata of renewal and consolidation. Instead, swords were being polished (though never sharpened once made) and ammunition stockpiled. The creeping madness of isolation was setting in, like at Jonestown in Guyana in the 1970s to the followers of Jim Jones. But there would be no mass suicide here, only mass slaughter should

the government discover Yoshida's plot and try to stop him. And that wasn't going to happen. He had well-placed followers within the Diet and even in the Prime Minister's office. As Sakugawa and Mr. Hayashi had both warned Chuck, there were many who still longed for a Japanese empire.

He moved among the technicians, admiring their work, though he understood very little of it. He was a leader, not a hands-on participant. When the vital moment came, he would be at the tokonoma altar of Shugendo, summoning the Tamakaze, not here in among the computers and monitors.

*"Gambatte!"* he shouted to no one in particular, the old exhortation to do one's best, keep trying, don't give up. The techies looked up from their monitors, and then resumed their work. Yoshida was like a god to them, but they were not his boisterous, samurai-throwback warriors. They were cool, focused on their jobs, they were ready to die, yes, but not right at this moment—there was still programming to be done, and testing, and roll-out of a Beta version of the software that would let them break into the government's own tracking capabilities. To them this exercise was like a big video game, with a hacking component. They were excited in their own way. They were going to beat the system, and follow Yoshida into the future.

## Chapter 21

**In Omoide-yokocho**

Detective Sakugawa dined alone at Fukuhachi's (Happy Eight's) yaki-tori in Omoide-yokocho, the maze-like warren of shops and restaurants located under a banged-up corrugated tin roof that covered the alleyways next to Shinjuku Station. The detective liked to eat here not only for the food, but because sooner or later almost everyone passed through Shinjuku Station. Omoide-yokocho was an area where small-time drug dealers, thieves, pimps, and other assorted denizens of the Japanese underworld hung out. If he loitered at Fukuhachi's, drinking Asahi beer and eating the small skewered chicken snacks, sooner or later anyone he was looking for would amble by, sneak by furtively, or halloo him loudly and drunkenly.

But today was a slow day. He was Fukuhashi's only customer, and no one of interest came down the alley. After a couple of beers Detective Sakugawa was getting sleepy and was just about to go back to his office in Roppongi for a nice nap, when he noticed a tall, oddly-dressed gaijin, shuffling confusedly through the marketplace, bumping into people, and looking distinctly out of place. He appeared to be looking for someone, or something. Why was he wearing those clothes that were only suitable for the beach? And why did Sakugawa think he had seen this person before? Those gaijin all look alike! But this one--*Ah, so so so*, it was that crazy American the little thief Nao Hayashi had brought to him with an

unbelievable story about ghosts and murder. Just for fun, Sakugawa decided to follow him. It was easy—how could he lose sight of this gangly blond foreigner who stood a head taller than most of the black-haired Japanese around him? But there was no fun in it. The American was lost, wandering in circles, covering the same alleys three and four times, and looking in the August heat like a bedraggled pup. Finally Sakugawa stood in his path and waited to see if the American would recognize him, but no go. Chuck walked right by him. Sakugawa frowned but determined to stop this gaijin's fruitless meanderings; they bothered him.

“*Sumimasen* excuse me, may I help you?”

Chuck turned, and a confused look crossed his face—where had he seen this man before?

“Detective Sakugawa, at your service.” Sakugawa bowed. Chuck attempted a bow in return; not so bad, this time.

“Detective. Sorry, I didn't recognize you.” The dour detective wanted to say “*Obviously*” but restrained himself.

“Have you just come from swimming?” Sakugawa asked. Which, given the demoralizing heat, was not an implausible question.

“Oh, this outfit? Yeah, no, well, it's a long story?”

“What is the expression? I have all your ears?”

“*No, I'm all ears.*’ Look, could we sit down somewhere? I'm exhausted.”

“Yes, no doubt all that walking in circles is very tiring,” Sakugawa said. He led Chuck to Fukuhachi’s and bought him a beer and some *edamame*. Sakugawa noted that Chuck knew enough to eat only the beans and not the pods, as he had seen some other foreigners do, so he spared him the classic gaijin challenge of ordering him the slimy *nato* tofu.

“Where is your friend, the young truant?”

“I think she’s dead.” Once again, as with the Hayashis, Chuck told his story: the two incidents in Iowa, the ill-fated plane ride home, his visitation by the Tamakaze on the deserted island, and his rescue.

Sakugawa had heard some wild tales before, in his line of work, but mostly they had to do with cheating husbands and improbable alibis. The detective listening patiently, without interrupting. When Chuck was finished, Sakugawa drained his Asahi and took out his pipe, but didn't light it. Toying with the musty-smelling bowl in one hand, he tapped its stem on the knuckles of his other hand.

"Pardon me for sounding like the policeman that I am, but do you have any evidence of these incidents, that is, any physical evidence? A spent shell from the Zeros' guns, for example, or, well, I don't know what."

"No," Chuck replied. "They weren't real. But they were there. And they killed Bob Ridley, I saw his body covered with welts from hail, and they crashed a corporate jet and killed two pilots and Nao."

"Mr. Branson, I am going to tell you a truth now. When a Japanese person says to you *Totemo muzukashii desu* 'It would be difficult' to do something, they are being polite. It is part of our national character. We don't like to say 'No,' so we say 'It would be difficult...' But what we mean, in Western language, is 'no way, absolutely not. So, when I tell you that it would be difficult to convince a police officer of your claims, do you understand me?"

"Yes, detective. You don't believe me."

"That is not what I said." Chuck looked heartened, but still confused. "The most interesting part of your story is the involvement of Hiroyuki Yoshida. He at least is a real person, and a dangerous one. There are those in Japan who believe he could be Prime Minister if he ran in next year's election. But conventional politics doesn't interest Yoshida-san. He acts outside of the political system. He acts outside of the norms of modern democratic society. He is a dreamer, and his dream is the dream of many in Japan, because of our economic woes and our loss of place in the world. If what you say about him is true, he is a lunatic and a threat to Japan and the world."

"And the person responsible for Nao's death," Chuck said grimly. The detective registered a small expression of surprise.

"Why do you say that? I thought it was these mystical Tamakaze."

"I looked into the pilot's eyes. He, uh, my grandfather told me, uh, I don't know how to say this."

“Please try.”

“He was like me. Just a young man. Devoted to his country but not a fanatic. We, uh, understood each other. I think this Yoshida is using the Tamakaze, maybe goading them, maybe tempting them with dreams of glory. But I don’t blame the Tamakaze. If my theory is true, I blame Yoshida. And I owe him one, for Nao.” The savage determination in Chuck’s voice was unmistakable.

Detective Sakugawa folded his arms across his chest. “I have underestimated you, my young friend.” He sat silently for a few seconds, then unfolded his arms and slapped both hands on the table emphatically. “It is not difficult to find this man. Everyone knows the whereabouts of his hideaway. But to get close to him, to confront him, to prevent him from further mischief, that is—*difficult!*”

“Detective Sakugawa. Our U.S. Marines have a saying, do you know it?”

“Please enlighten me.”

“They say: “*The difficult we do now. The impossible will take a little longer.*” I have never been a Marine, never been in the military. But my grandfather, and an old Japanese man, and another Iowa farmer, and two innocent commercial pilots, and a young girl I was growing to like very much, are dead because of me, and I plan to do something about it.

“Now, tell me, where is this Yoshida’s headquarters?”



Sakugawa shifted in his seat. He studied the young American for a long moment. Then, slowly, he began to speak.

“As a hobby, I raise koi. Do you know what they are?”

“A fish, right?”

“The grandest of fish: regal, elegant, long-lived, and beautiful. Their coloration is a thing to behold. I could lie and tell you that one spoke to me, like in the story *The Fisherman's Wife*. Do you know it?”

“Sure. That tale is popular even in the U.S. A fisherman catches a fish that speaks to him and grants him a wish, but the fisherman's wife wants more and more.”

“Exactly. I am pleased you know it. Perhaps this will not be so difficult after all. I could tell you that one of my lovely babies spoke to me and told me to help the gaijin. But that would be a lie. Instead I will tell you another story. I tell you this story so that you will understand why I am going to help you, and you will understand us, the Japanese, a little better. Are you willing to listen?”

“I’m all ears,” Chuck said.

“Excellent. This story is called *The Master of Birdbaths*.” Sakugawa paused theatrically, pulled a battered leather pouch of cherry-scented tobacco and a box of stick matches from his pocket, lit his pipe, puffed contentedly, and settled in to tell his story:

*Once, in a village high in the mountains of Yamagata Prefecture, there was an artist who made nothing but birdbaths. In truth, he did not even make them. We moderns*

would call his work "found art," for it consisted solely of finding two pieces of volcanic stone and putting them together, without carving or shaping them in any way. One was a pedestal stone, vaguely cylindrical, with a thick end forming a large base when set upright. This pedestal stone tapered to a thinner end with a top surface flat enough to support a second stone: the bowl stone. The bowl stones had natural depressions where water gathered for birds to bathe. The birds loved his birdbaths, and the people who bought them always commented how many birds of different varieties were attracted to his creations. It was said there was even a bit of magic in his birdbaths--in the winter, even when other birdbaths were wreathed in garlands of snow and ice, his works remained unfrozen, filled with pools of inviting warm water.

As the mountainous land where the Master (for he truly was one) lived was quite rocky, it was relatively easy in the early days for him to locate two suitable stones. The Master's art lay in his ability to find stones that worked well together, that formed an aesthetic pair. As he grew older, however, the stones became scarcer, and the Master began to struggle with the effort of bringing the stones to his workshop from ever more remote locations higher up on the mountainside.

At last he took on an apprentice, an eager young boy, strong as a rock himself. The Master, (now known as the Old Master) taught the boy the best places on the mountainside to hunt for pedestal stones and bowl stones. And he tried, with less success, to show the boy how to pair them up in pleasing combinations.

"If you have a smooth pedestal, then a rough bowl is better. If the pedestal is of light colored rock, then use a dark

*bowl. If an angular pedestal, then a round bowl."*

*"Why, Master?"*

*"Opposites attract the eye, my son."*

*The apprentice shrugged. To his way of thinking, the goal was to find and put together as many pairs as possible and sell them. But perfect stones grew more and more difficult to find, and the two wandered farther and farther from the workshop every day, climbing higher and higher on the mountain. Sometimes they came back empty-handed. Sometimes the apprentice would find stones that looked suitable to him, but the Old Master would point out an imperfection. He would show the apprentice that this pedestal stone was not level enough to hold a bowl stone, or that bowl stone would not give the birds a deep enough trough to splash and play in. But it was difficult for the apprentice to see the difference between the stones the Old Master used and those he rejected.*

*One day the apprentice insisted on lugging back a pedestal stone and bowl stone that the Old Master had spurned. After the Old Master went to sleep, the apprentice took a hammer and chisel and deepened the trough of the bowl stone, and leveled the top of the pedestal stone.*

*After some effort he succeeded in balancing the bowl stone on the pedestal stone, and created a birdbath. The next morning he showed it to the Old Master with great pride, but the Old Master only shrugged and said:*

*"Some would do it that way, but that is not my way. That one I will not sell in my workshop."*

*Stung, the apprentice put his birdbath aside and accompanied the Old Master on the daily wearying search, but his heart was heavy. Why all this senseless walking,*

*when one could form and finish a piece that looked identical, with much less effort, using perfectly good stones that lay close by?*

*Secretly, the apprentice took his artificially created birdbath to a local market and sold it as one of the Master's. He brought home a handsome profit. The Old Master said nothing, but continued his arduous ways, leaving their workshop every day to wander on the mountainside, quietly and thoughtfully selecting pedestal stones and bowl stones.*

*The apprentice, emboldened by his success, soon left the Old Master, and went into business on his own, shaping birdbaths from less than perfect stones and selling them. At first he tried to say they were the Old Master's work, but people noticed the differences, so he dropped the pretence, lowered the price, and called them New, Improved Birdbaths.*

*As no one was now willing to pay for his more expensive rare creations, the Old Master retired to a hut on the mountainside, and was never heard from again.*

*The apprentice now billed himself as the New Master. Business boomed. He could make birdbaths at ten times the speed of his predecessor. Eventually he stopped using stones altogether and formed the birdbaths from a paste of sand, clay, and water that he shaped in a mold and baked in a kiln. Each one was identical to the previous one. To individualize them, he painted some, and studded others with small colored stones around the edges. They were inexpensive, functional, and gaudy. He sold them in droves. Soon almost everyone in the land where he lived owned a birdbath, where few had owned one before. The New Master expanded his market, shipping birdbaths to other lands, and the countryside where he lived became known as the Birdbath Capital of the World.*

*In truth, most people now bought one merely as a garden decoration, or even put them in places where there were no gardens, and cared little if birds came to use them, or even if there were birds in the area.*

*But a funny thing happened. Discriminating people noticed that the birds preferred the master's natural, warm birdbaths to the apprentice's artificial and augmented ones. Worse yet, competitors arose, and came out with even cheaper and showier versions of birdbaths, with mirrors and lights, and at half the price. The commercial birdbath market crumbled. The New Master lost his business and at last died penniless and forlorn.*

*Eventually, the Old Master's rare bowls became highly sought after. If one came on the market, it fetched a price ten thousand times that of one of the New Master's products. Societies were formed whose sole purpose was to study the Old Master's technique. Books were written about him, and his best pieces found their way into museums and were worshipped as art. In the end, no one remembered that there had ever been a New Master—they only remembered that once there had been an Old Master who made exquisite birdbaths.*

Sakugawa opened his eyes and gazed Chuck meaningfully. “Why do you suppose I told you that story?”

“You told me why. You wanted me to understand why you were helping me, and something about the Japanese character.”

“And what did you learn?”

"That Japanese people value patience and steady practice, studying slowly. Repetition."

"What else?"

"That they worship the beauty of the natural world. But I knew that."

"Yes, and what else?"

Chuck thought for a moment, then answered slowly.

"That all things, uh, come 'round in the end."

"Ah. So so so. Well put, in your American colloquial. We call it karma."

"Sure, karma. I know what karma is. Now let me tell you a very short story in return. My Grandfather Buck was a whittler. Do you know what that is?"

Sakugawa was surprised, but went along. "Yes, one who sits on the front porch and aimlessly carves wood."

"No," said Chuck. "Well, yes, some whittlers are like that. They make wooden chains and pointed sticks, or just whittle sticks away to nothing. But my Grandfather was a *master* whittler. He could spend a year on one creation. Here, look, I have one right here." And out of his pocket Chuck pulled a key chain. Attached to the keys was a small, intricately carved wooden globe, now gray with age and further discolored from being in Chuck's pocket, but still a miniature masterwork, with the land masses of the Earth clearly visible, etched in fine detail. There was

Honshu, the main island of Japan, and even the smaller islands were visible if one looked carefully.

“May I?” Sakugawa asked. Chuck removed the keys and handed him the carved object. Sakugawa held it, turned it, admired it as if it was an ancient teacup in a *chado* ceremony. Finally he tried to hand it back to Chuck as if returning a magnificent treasure.

“No, you keep it,” said Chuck.

“I will take you to Yoshida,” said Sakugawa.

## Chapter 22

**Commander Noguchi Has a Visitor**

Hideo Noguchi, commander of the Dai Shizen space plane mission to space, was a modern, secular Japanese man. He knew almost nothing of Shinto or Zen. He had a degree in physics from a prestigious overseas university, and had served in Japanese defense forces for a dozen years, flying fighter jets and training daily for this most important first space flight. Noguchi lived in a small but well-appointed apartment, all gleaming steel appliances and granite countertops in a complex just off the grounds of Tanegashima Space Center on Tanegashima Island.

This morning he was dressed as usual in a one-piece blue jumpsuit, drinking his morning coffee and reading the *Asahi Shimbun*. His first thought when Squadron Leader Sasaki appeared unbidden, wafting in to his quarters through a solid wall, was that someone must have spiked his coffee with hallucinogens. His second thought was "*I can never tell anyone of this or I will lose my ride on the space plane.*"

Without any preliminaries, Sasaki directed a question to him. "You fly next week?"

"Yes." Noguchi was not afraid. As a physicist, he was intensely curious as to how this strange creature existed, and why it had come to visit him. Was it a sort of holograph, an experiment he wasn't aware of, being conducted by another branch of the military? But he couldn't think



of anything to ask, so he studied its quavering image and waited patiently while it asked him questions.

"And you support priest Yoshida's mission?"

"Oh, yes. Yoshida-san is a great leader," Noguchi answered, wondering why the apparition would bring up the right-wing nut-job Yoshida who had tried to make the space plane his personal campaign.

"Are you afraid?"

Noguchi sensed that the spirit, or whatever it was, was testing him, he answered honestly. "I'm always a little afraid when I fly. But this is a wonderful opportunity for Japan."

Noguchi tried to imagine how he might capture his elusive, insubstantial visitor. But it was impossible. In the back of his mind he still had half a thought that this was a gigantic prank being played on him by his fellow astronauts, Omura and Sato. If so, they had gone to great lengths to create the joke. He reached out tentatively and tried to touch Sasaki, who did not draw back. There was nothing there. It was either a superb hologram, being projected from a device hidden in the room, or he was drugged or ill and hallucinating, or he was being visited by a creature from the other world. This last idea was so foreign to his scientific mind that he could almost not conceive it. But he knew that he must.

"Who are you?" Noguchi asked.

The ghostly pilot smiled. "I am your predecessor." At that, Noguchi looked more closely and noticed the antique clothing: the leather jacket and flying cap, the sword! No doubt about it, his visitor was dressed in the mode of a Second World War flyer. A fantastic idea began to creep into Noguchi's mind. But there was no time, his guest was speaking to him—

"I wish you success in your mission. Banzai!"

"Banzai!" Noguchi responded automatically, briefly thinking that the last time he had shouted that word was way back at the end of flight training school.

"If you succeed, I may see you in my world," Sasaki said with a touch of ruefulness.

"What world is that? I hope not!" Noguchi gave two answers in quick succession, but he was speaking to empty air now, Sasaki had vanished as mysteriously as he had appeared. Noguchi stared down into his half-empty coffee cup and poured it into the stainless steel drain. He walked briskly to his bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror, noting with satisfaction that his hands weren't trembling.

*"You are Captain Hideo Noguchi, commander of the first manned Japanese space mission, and you do not believe in ghosts,"* he told himself in a loud voice. But he couldn't confide in anyone, couldn't raise the subject, even if he had been victim of an elaborate hoax. *"Not now. Not four days before the flight. They'd take me off the mission for sure."*

*"What was that all about?"* Noguchi asked himself. His mind was still troubled by the crazy interview, and the troubling questions the ghost had asked him. But he couldn't give himself a satisfactory answer. He scrubbed his face vigorously with cold water and prepared to leave for the base.

## Chapter 23

**Haguro Pilgrimage**

The girls who brought around the food carts on the Niigata Shinkansen bullet train weren't as beautiful as the airline flight attendants, but they were pretty nice looking, in an ordinary way, like the young women who bowed in front of department stores as you entered. They all had the same look--delicate, petite, and highly conformist. "*Not at all like Nao,*" Chuck thought, though he suspected some of the girls might have more personality when they weren't wheeling *bento* boxes down the aisle of the train.

Detective Sakugawa had tried to convince Chuck that he should *walk* to Haguro from Tokyo, a distance of several hundred miles, to get to know the Japanese people and talk with them, but Chuck thought there was some urgency to the trip. The space plane was launching in five days. He didn't know what Yoshida had planned, but he believed there was some connection. Sakugawa had agreed to come along as far as the town of Tsuruoka, where he had a relative he could visit, and then Chuck would be on his own, by bus to Haguro.

"You think you stand out in Tokyo, wait until you get to the provinces. They will either run away from you as if you were a horrible monster, or come up to you and pet your blonde hair like you were some exotic zoo attraction," Sakugawa warned. Some of these people may never have seen a Westerner in person, though they will certainly have

seen your type on television." But it wasn't that bad. Aside from feeling even taller and more clumsy than in Toyko, Chuck didn't feel so out of place, in fact it was easier to walk the streets of Tsuruoka, which had several million fewer people than those of Tokyo.

Sakugawa left Chuck at the Tsuruoka bus station, with explicit directions on which bus would bring him to Haguro. He was on his own after that. "Your best chance would be to disguise yourself as a new recruit, come to join Shourai Taiyou, and infiltrate. But in your case, that is impossible."

"*Ichi-go Ichi-e*," said Chuck, which caught Sakugawa by surprise.

"Indeed. '*One life, one chance.*' Where did you learn that? Not from the little troublemaker, I suspect."

"No, not from Nao. From a teacher in the U.S."

"Remember it well. Sometimes there is only one chance, and you must take it."

"I will."

"If I was twenty years younger, I would accompany you. But these days I would only hold you back. The best I can be is your outside man. You have my cell number. Call me if you need help."

"I will."

Chuck couldn't walk to Haguro, but he decided to lengthen his trip slightly by stopping along the way. His ticket allowed him to get off and pick up the next passing bus. Each town he stopped in specialized in a

particular craft. One might make *daruma* dolls, another *oni* masks, a third fancy embroidered cloth. All the shops in each town carried that one item, almost to the exclusion of anything else. He shopped a bit in each place, picking up a collection of assorted Japanese *tschochkes*, but by the end of the day he was ready to end his trip, and took the last bus into Haguro, arriving just after sunset.

Sakugawa had recommended a small *shukubo* pilgrimage lodging to him. He couldn't find an English speaker and struggled with his limited Japanese and with the provincial accent of these mountain people, but eventually, by showing someone a picture of the place on an Internet page Sakugawa had printed for him, he was able to find his way. A massive knotted rope hung on a gable above the entryway. Chuck made a mental note to ask someone its significance, since it seemed symbolic not functional, and ducked his head to pass through the door. An elderly Japanese lady almost jumped out of her shoes when she saw the tall gaijin enter.

"No English, no English!" she cried, almost like sounding an alarm. Her husband rushed out from somewhere in the back, sized up Chuck, decided he was harmless, and asked him what he wanted.

Chuck asked for a room, in broken but intelligible Japanese, but the old man looked at him blankly. It was apparent that they were both so unused to the idea of a gaijin speaking Japanese that the sounds he made did not correlate into speech for them. He put his hands together,

placed them next to one ear, and tilted his head, to signify that he wanted a place to sleep. The old man brightened and said the only word of English he knew:

“Okay. Okay!”

In short order Chuck was installed in a small but comfortable room on the second floor, with a private bath. Chuck got the definite impression that he was given the best room in the house, and the only one with a private bath, not so much because he was a guest of honor, or even that they were trying to take him for the most money, but to avoid discomforting their Japanese guests by asking them to share the bath with a gaijin. This was only partly true, but Chuck was just as happy to be able to sink into the small, square, but deep tub, drawing his knees up to his chest to be able to fit in, and luxuriate in the hot water. Even though it was early September and still fiercely hot in Tokyo, up here in the mountains it had begun to cool, and the evenings were chilly.

The next morning he walked the streets of the town. He'd taken an inventory of his possessions, still meager after having lost all his luggage over the Pacific, and put together a little shopping list of supplies for a hike into the mountains. He had no weapons, nor did he even think of needing any. He had no plan. But his grandfather had once told him about hunting that “Sometimes the best plan is to have no plan,” and he was going to go with that. He purchased a few packages of noodles that he could eat raw, a trick he had learned from Nao, a couple of

ridiculously expensive pieces of fruit wrapped in paper, some *mochi-on-a-stick*, the pounded rice snack for which the town was justifiably famous, and a water bottle with the logo of a Japanese bank on it. Before he left town, he stopped a teenager on the street who spoke reasonable English and asked about the knotted ropes on the houses.

“Ah. Those are *shimenawa*. They purify sacred shrines, and keep evil spirits from houses.” Though not much more than a boy, the teen had answered Chuck with a gravity that surprised him. He took another look—an ordinary kid in school uniform, blue pants and a white shirt, nothing special about him—short hair, close-set eyes, a book bag over one shoulder.

Chuck smiled at him. “Are there evil spirits around here?”

The teenager answered him with a grave look. “Oh, yes. Everywhere. And you are here, because, why?”

Then it was Chuck’s turn to put on a serious expression. “I am here to do battle with those evil spirits.” The boy nodded, not at all surprised.

“I thought so. You may win, but it will be dangerous.”

“Okay, thanks.” Chuck didn’t know what else to say. It was one of the strangest short conversations he’d ever had with anyone, especially one so young.



“So sorry. Must go. Late for school.” The teen ran off, leaving Chuck to contemplate the shimenawa as he headed for the entrance to the park.

On the way up the mountain he saw a sign for “Basho’s pond,” with a trailhead that veered off to the right and down a slope. Though he was already exhausted from climbing the seemingly endless steps, and there was an urgency to his hike, he had become a fan of Basho’s poetry back in America, when he was first learning about Japan, and couldn’t resist the side trip. To see the pond where Basho’s frog jumped in, from his famous haiku, was worth the detour and the extra hiking. Except for an occasional monk in brown robes and *geta* clattering up or down the many steps, there were few visitors this August day.

After a half-mile or so he came to the pond, an algae-covered and stagnant pool in a glade tucked into the side of the mountain. A greening bronze statue of a frog five feet high was set on one bank, with a couple of meditation benches nearby for weary hikers. As he sat contemplating the famous place, he recited Basho’s poem, first in Japanese, which he had memorized:

Furu ike ya  
kawazu tobikomu  
mizu no oto

And then in his favorite of the many translations, the one by Hass:

The old pond —  
a frog jumps in,  
sound of water.

It was magical to be here, at the very site of the origination of probably the most famous Japanese haiku. But just how magical, Chuck didn't comprehend until a frog leaped out of the water and landed on the bench beside him. This was a man who had been strafed by Zeroes and seen the sky go suddenly black with the power of Tamakaze, but when the frog plopped down next to him, he leaped up, spilling his noodles all over everywhere, and almost ran away. The frog eyed him curiously, then made the most ordinary frog noise and hopped off the bench. Chuck relaxed for an instant, distracted by a noise in the bushes behind him, but that was a mistake, and only increased his shock when he turned around, and instead of a frog there stood, not a prince or a World War Two Tamakaze, but a medieval samurai, in full horned and plumed helmet, mesh armor, and brandishing a vicious-looking *naginata*. He was even more surprised when the warrior dropped to his knees, carefully placing the *naginata* at his side, and bowed to Chuck from *seiza*. He said something to Chuck in guttural Japanese, but Chuck didn't get any of it.

"I'm sorry," said Chuck. "I don't understand you." The samurai tried again, but the language barrier was solid. His Japanese was so growl-y and accented that Chuck couldn't make out a single word. Chuck was trying to decide if he should run away, when another figure emerged from the bushes where he'd heard the rustling before. It was the teenage boy from the street in Haguro.

"No frog haiku here," he said.

“What?”

“Sign says Basho’s pond, and Basho did come here, but the real pond from the poem is at Motobansho in Fukagawa.”

“Oh.” Chuck was disappointed, but he was still having trouble with the sudden and unaccountable presence of the samurai. He turned, but there was no samurai.

“Was he with you?”

“Who?”

“The samurai.”

“What samurai?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I followed you. I am, what is the English—playing a hooky.”

“You skipped school to follow me up Haguro?”

“Yes!”

“You remind me of someone I knew,” Chuck said, and he felt himself choking up at the thought of Nao. “Won’t you get in trouble?”

“You already in trouble. I help you.”

Chuck was in no position to turn down an offer of help. “Okay,” he said, “but you have to turn around once we get to—“ and he stopped, because he didn’t exactly know how to explain where he was going.”

“”You go to pray at Sanzan Gosaiden temple?”

“No.”

“Oh. Then you in big trouble. You go to Yoshida-sensei’s Shourai Taiyou?” Chuck nodded but didn’t say anything. “He is a crazy man!” the boy said, giggling at the thought speaking so rudely about an elder.

“Tell me what you know about him. But let’s walk, it’s already getting late and I don’t want you to be going down the mountain by yourself in the dark.”

“It’s okay. I come up here a lot. I like the views,” the boy said solemnly, and Chuck knew that despite the drab school uniform, this was no ordinary boy. He tried to put the samurai out of his mind. They climbed out of the vale and back onto the main steps up the mountain.

According to the boy, whose name was Soji Hanaki, Yoshida was regarded with fear and wariness by the people of the town of Haguro. He had invested great sums to fix up the old abandoned summit temple and build new buildings. His followers spent a lot of money in the town, mostly on sake and food. But they also got into fights at the local bars, and when they got drunk some of them tried to ride their motorcycles up the steps of Haguro, disturbing the monks and damaging that national treasure. No one knew why they were there or how long they would stay. The sleepy little mountain town was disrupted by their presence, but there was nothing anyone could do. The local police force was tiny and ineffectual.

“So we wait,” said Soji, “and we think maybe they leave soon.”

“Why do you say that?” Chuck asked.

“Lots of action in the last weeks,” the boy answered. “More people coming and going. Something is happening, but we don’t know what.”

Neither did Chuck, but he felt certain it has something to do with the upcoming space plane launch.

“What do your parents do?” Chuck asked Soji.

“Mom is a regular housewife. My dad was yamabushi, but he gave it up when Yoshida came.”

That explained some of the boy’s knowledge of things of which a teenager would normally be ignorant. “Why did he stop being a yamabushi?”

The boy didn’t answer right away. Perhaps it was a source of shame. Chuck was always putting himself into these embarrassing situations.

“My dad thought Yoshida was dishonoring the title.”

“*Ah, it’s personal,*” Chuck thought, but to the boy he only said, “Your father is an honorable man.”

“My father believes these mountains that we walk on are spirits. There are three of them, and the temple at top is dedicated to them.”

The boy in his halting way was trying to tell Chuck something important.

“You can take bus to the summit, you know. You don’t have to walk.”

“I know,” said Chuck. “But 2,446 is my lucky number.”

“You make a joke.”

“Yes, I make a joke. I kid. There was, is, this detective, see, and he said to slow down, meet the people, see the country, so I am walking, and I am meeting you. Only, I’m in a hurry. Because I think Yoshida—“

“Yes?”

Chuck realized he had to tell the whole story, so he did, as they walked up the many steps, past smaller shrines that lined the ancient way. Some were Buddhist, some were Shinto, some were Shugendo. All were green with mossy age, and holy. Candles had already been placed in some of the smaller *tourou*, and glowed softly in the late afternoon gloom. Chuck told Soji about the first death, his grandfather, and what his grandfather had told him about the kamikaze before he left. He told the boy everything, about the incident at Yasukuni and his encounter with Yoshida, and the two old flyers now farmers who were attacked in Iowa, and about losing Nao. Soji listened intently but never interrupted him, and they had come within a few hundred steps of the Sanzan Gosaiden temple at the summit by the time Chuck finished the telling. Soji waited to make sure that Chuck had completed his tale, then spoke slowly.

“You think Yoshida is going to bring down the space plane? Why would he do that? He loves the space plane. It is Japan’s first triumph in space.”

“It is also a flying bomb, if one wants to use it that way. Remember Nine Eleven.”

“You are serious?”

“Yes.”

Soji whistled, low and breathy, a schoolboy’s whistle, full of import.

“I not go home tonight. I stay with you.”

“No, Soji. You can help me more by going home and coming back tomorrow. We’ll make a rendezvous, you know this word?”

“A meeting place?”

“Yes. We’ll arrange to meet, and if I don’t come, then you can call the police.”

“Police won’t help you,” Soji said. “They like Yoshida. He pays them.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know. But I will come, and if you don’t come out, I will help you.”

Chuck was a little worried that Soji viewed this like a movie, and didn’t understand the seriousness of it, but he was wrong.

“If you die, where should we send ashes?” Soji asked.

Chapter 24

**The Prisoner of Zendo**

Soji and Chuck passed by the Sanzan Gosaiden temple at around six in the evening. It had taken them most of the afternoon to climb the steps, and it was already nearly pitch-dark in the mountains, but Soji assured Chuck he could find his way down, and Chuck knew that if the boy just stayed on the path he would be fine. But the massive closed gate was a formidable barrier to entry into Shourai Taiyou. Chuck stood before it and wondered what to do next. Soji told him.

“Can you climb trees?”

“Sure I can climb trees, I grew up in the country, like you.”

“Come. In the back. I show you. Matsuyama.”

“Huh? Matsuyama? What do you mean?”

“Matsuyama. Mountain pine. Great climbing trees.”

“Oh.”

Along the rear wall of the compound they found a Japanese black pine with one long limb growing over it. By standing on Soji’s shoulders Chuck was able to reach the bottom-most branch and hoist himself up into the tree.

“Okay, Soji,” he whispered. “You’ve helped me a lot, thanks! You go home now.”

“I go home now. Come back tomorrow.”

“Yes. Gambatte!”



“What?”

“Try your best.”

“I will.”

Chuck watched as Soji backed away and disappeared into the darkness. In a few short hours he had grown to like the boy, and hoped that nothing would happen to him on the way down the mountain. Now he steadied himself and scooted out on the limb until his weight threatened to snap it off.

“*A ninja I am not,*” Chuck thought. He couldn’t quite tell how far down it was to the ground, and he didn’t know if there were guards. Or dogs, or electronic monitoring devices. He would just have to take his chances. He lowered himself until he was hanging by his arms, then took a deep breath and let go. He fell about fifteen feet and hit the ground hard in a heap, but didn’t break anything. A bed of pine needles cushioned his fall.

“*A ninja I am most definitely not,*” he said again, silently, while catching his breath. He hadn’t a clue what to do next. *The plan of no plan.* Gradually his vision adjusted to the darkness and he could make out four large buildings in a quadrangle surrounding an open expanse in the center. Hugging the wall, he inched his way around the inside perimeter. The first building he came to was a large dormitory or residence hall. Hundreds of pairs of shoes were neatly lined up on the porch. He skirted this building and approached the second one. A light

shone inside through a pair of plate-glass windows. A dozen or so pairs of shoes waited for their owners outside the entrance to this structure, set between the two windows. Emboldened by his success thus far in avoiding detection, Chuck maneuvered until he could look through one of the windows. It was the dojo, and there was a night practice going on. Takahashi, the black-bearded (rare for a Japanese) weapons man, was putting some of his senior students through a rigorous set of kata. Ten of them moved as one, kicking, blocking, punching, turning in unison. It was an impressive display, but Takahashi wasn't satisfied. As Chuck watched, they did the kata over several times without pause. while Takahashi screamed at them:

“Higher! Faster! Harder!”

Chuck retreated into the darkness between buildings. “*What am I doing here?*” he asked himself. He certainly wasn't going to defeat these highly-skilled warriors in hand to hand combat. He wasn't even a fighter. The last time he'd been in a fight was in tenth grade when Billy Ransom punched him in the eye for dancing with his girlfriend at the Friday night Grange social. He didn't want to fight. But it was a little late in the game to be thinking like this—he should have asked himself these questions before he dropped into the compound. Now he would have to make the best of it. The most he could hope for was to learn what Yoshida was up to and bring back some evidence to the Japanese police, if he could find any who would listen to him.

He crept toward the next building, which looked like an old temple, with a curving tiled roof and a pair of stone lions guarding its entrance. Chuck guessed this was the original Shugendo site that predated the newer construction within the compound. He could hear the sound of low chanting coming from inside, but there was no window; if he wanted to see what was going on, he'd have to enter the place. A fragment of Sunday school song flitted through his brain, something about Daniel entering the lion's den, and then it was gone. Chuck took a deep breath, another, a third, removed his shoes, and stepped into the temple.

A little old man appeared out of nowhere, scurried over to where Chuck had just left his shoes, turned them around so that they were facing in the correct direction for him to slip them on when he left, and disappeared.

The chanting stopped. Then it started again. Slowly Chuck moved toward the sound of the human voice, singing in low tones the same few phrases. It could have been Gregorian, or Hasidic, or Greek, that soulful expression of humanity's deepest longing, for unification with nature, spirit, God. Finally the altar came into Chuck's view. A lone figure in a brocaded robe and wearing a tiny round cap, faced the altar, his back to Chuck. It was Yoshida, Chuck was sure. Without turning around, the chanter stopped his ministrations and issued a stern command.

"Come forward!"

The hair stood up on the back of Chuck's neck. He was discovered! He wanted to run but it was futile. He was trapped within the walled compound of Shourai Taiyou.

"Come forward!" the voice commanded him again. Chuck thought of his grandfather, repeatedly flying out into the darkness and storm in search of his brother. *"This is it, Grandpa Buck. No plan. Just keep going forward."* And he stepped out of the shadows into the dim candlelight of the Shugendo altar.

Yoshida turned around and glared at Chuck. Despite the gravity of his situation, Chuck couldn't help but think that the little pillbox hat reminded him of the kind an organ-grinder's monkey would wear. It was strapped tightly under Yoshida's chin, just like a monkey's would be. The slightest hint of a grin crossed Chuck's face.

"You find this amusing?" Yoshida asked.

"No, no," Chuck said, but he had a flash of insight that he had put Yoshida slightly off balance by not being completely terrified, and he made note of it.

"You cause me a lot of trouble, ever since Yasukuni Shrine. You think you are clever, American, but now you find yourself my prisoner."

"Am I a prisoner? Where are the guards?"

"Close by." said Yoshida. "Waiting to take you to your cell. But first, we talk. Why are you here? Are you U.S. government spy?"

Making it up as he went along, Chuck decided to tell Yoshida the truth, on the principle that he wouldn't be believed anyway.

"I'm here to find out what you're doing, and stop you if necessary."

"Ah, Americans. Always arrogant, always naïve. You cannot stop me."

"Okay, I cannot stop you. Then you can tell me what you're doing."

Yoshida was enjoying himself. He knew Chuck wanted him to reveal his plans, and he could see no reason why he shouldn't. So he did.

"I am going to make Japan great again. In four days a rocket ship will crash into San Francisco. I will do that."

Chuck froze, for the first time afraid, not for himself but for his country, for the world. It was what he had feared.

"You'd better be careful, Yoshida. I'm not that easy to kill. The Tamakaze tried—they shot down a plane I was on, but I lived."

Yoshida roared like one of the stone lions out front. "Those weren't Tamakaze! Those were my men; a few of them, expert flyers, in specially equipped high-altitude Zeroes."

"What?!"

"Oh, yes. I don't know what happened to you on that island, but the commercial jet shoot down--I ordered that sortie."

"Two men died!" Chuck was furious. He finally had confirmation of Yoshida's involvement, but it wasn't what he expected

“THIS IS WAR!” Yoshida shouted. “You are an intruder. I would not let you disrupt my plans.”

“Nao. You killed Nao.”

“Oh no. She is here.”

“What? Why?” Chuck asked, but in his mind he was shouting:

*“Nao is still alive!”*

“She is here because I knew that would bring you here.”

“But I didn’t even know—“ Chuck said.

“Better still. I am spider, you are fly. You wandered into my trap without bait. Ha ha!”

“Now you will join her, and you two can have romantic death together.” Yoshida laughed again, cruelly. “You think I am monster, but in my country, I am hero, not you. I am loved, not you. I am—“

Chuck interrupted Yoshida—“I thought Japanese didn’t use the word “I” so much. You’re an ego-maniac, Yoshida. And if I don’t stop you someone else will. And if no one stops you, the worse for you, your name will be a synonym for evil for generations to come.” Chuck saw that he had gotten to Yoshida with this last, and again filed the information away for future use. Yoshida, like many despots, was sensitive of his legacy.

Yoshida frowned. He had thought of this possibility, but had kept it in the back of his mind until this rude foreigner reminded him. “You join your little playmate. That is punishment. That girl’s chatter give me headache. It probably worse for you, gaijin. Anyway, it useful to have you

here. Now!” From the shadows sprang two burly warriors who must have been there the whole time, even as Chuck had been creeping toward Yoshida. The leader of Shourai Taiyou spoke to them rapidly in Japanese, and Chuck couldn’t catch any of it, but he saw the two smile as if pleased. They took him, one by each arm, and dragged him roughly out of the temple. Chuck could smell sake on their breath, and some kind of fish. It was obvious they wanted to beat on him, but apparently Yoshida had told them to go easy, because they only cuffed him around and knocked the breath out of him, but left his face unmarked. They led him to the basement of the residence hall, shouted a warning, opened a locked door, flung him unceremoniously into the darkness, and slammed the door behind him. It took Chuck a minute to catch his breath, and another to adjust to the to the near total darkness. A patch of color in the corner caught his eyes. An orange thatch of hair—

“Nao!”

“Chuckie! You are dead! Are you a ghost?” She backed away, fearing that the Chuck she saw wasn’t real.

“I’m not dead. I thought you were dead. The last time I saw you—you were falling out of the sky and your parachute wasn’t open!”

“”Damn thing! I struggle and struggle. I thought I would hit water before it pop!”

They approached each other tentatively, then rushed together in a clumsy embrace.

“Nao! I was so sad when I thought you were—“

“”But then you came to rescue me! Just like the movies!”

“No, actually, I thought you were dead. I came to find out what Yoshida was doing.”

“Oh. That not very nice.” Nao tried to pull away and pout, but Chuck wouldn’t let her.

“But Nao, you mean so much to me! Why aren’t you dead? I mean, even if you got your parachute open, well, it was only a miracle I washed up on a beach on the only land around. How the heck did you survive?”

“They came for me. Yoshida’s men.”

“Oh. So they had more than Zeroes?”

“What you mean? Tamakaze—“

“No, it wasn’t the Tamakaze. Well, not then. Later, on the island—“

And slowly, painfully, they pieced together their separate stories. Yoshida’s men came in a helicopter and searched the crash site. They found Nao entangled in her parachute shrouds, nearly drowned. Yoshida had ordered his men to bring her to Haguro as a hostage, on the off-chance that Chuck might have survived.

“He’s going to blow up America!” Nao cried.

“Not America. Only San Francisco. But that’s bad enough,” Chuck said grimly.

“They kill us first,” Nao said.



“We’re not dead yet,” Chuck said. “We still have our one life, our one chance.”

“You my hero,” Nao said, and looked up at Chuck dreamily. They had remained in a close embrace as they talked, and now they kissed, first time ever, and both of them knew that it would never get any better than this, the two of them locked away in a cell in the basement of Yoshida’s lair, and they might even have thought about making love, but they heard a suppressed laugh from somewhere outside the room, and realized they were being observed.

“Go away, creep!” Nao shouted, but the response was only more lecherous laughter.

“Never mind, Nao. There’ll be time for everything, after we get out of here.”

“How we do that?”

“I don’t know. Yet.”

They settled down on the floor of the cell, and talked quietly, holding hands.

“You’ve got to save us, Chuck.”

“Look, I’m a marine biologist, not a super-hero,” he objected. “I don’t have any skills. I can’t fight, I don’t have a gun. The last time I shot one was my old deer-hunting rifle on the farm seven or eight years ago. I’m not even a good marine biologist yet. I’m just starting out. If we ever get out of here I’m going to work in a warehouse on the docks of

Yokohama, where it looks like all the marine life is probably dead from bunker oil spills or raw sewage.”

“Whales,” Nao blurted out.

“What?”

“Whales. They’re like Tamakaze. From another age. We hunt them in Japan, they say for science but everybody know we eat them. Soon they be gone, unless the world makes us stop. How can the world do that?”

“And?”

“That’s all.”

But Chuck had picked up something from Nao’s comparison of the whales with Tamakaze. “I’ll tell you something else about whales, something I learned from working with them. They’re intelligent, more intelligent than we are, probably. They don’t need technology—“

“Like the Tamakaze—“

Chuck was getting excited—“Exactly. Like the Tamakaze. They don’t need weapons—and something else—they’re very loyal. Once I saw a whole pod of them stay for three days, swimming around a mother whose calf had died, to keep the sharks away from the carcass, the corpse. The whole pod was mourning—That’s it!”

“What?”

Chuck dropped his voice to a whisper. “That’s how we can stop Yoshida!”

“I don’t get it,” Nao protested.

“Never mind. We have to get out of here.

“How?”

“I don’t know. Make a ruckus.”

“What is ruckus?”

“Do what you do best. Make a lot of noise. Cause some trouble!”

Chuck said with a grin. Nao was angry, but she did what she was asked. She jumped up and began to pound the door.”

“Help! Help! This crazy gaijin going to rape me.”

“Oh, not that again,” Chuck said, but Nao ignored him.

Unfortunately, so did their guards. After a few minutes, Nao gave up and sat down again. A small sob escaped from her.

“Sorry, Chuck. I not good ruckus-er.”

Chuck held her, and eventually they slept, lying together fully-clothed on the cold dirt floor of the dormitory basement. In the morning their captors threw in a couple of poorly made *onigiri* rice balls and a bottled water. That was breakfast. Nao used the tiniest bit of the water to freshen up. Chuck scratched at his blond beard whiskers. There was nothing to do in the cell, and time was slipping away. Around midday they were led out of the cell and taken to the outdoor training field. Twenty or thirty of Yoshida’s best were engaged in kumite partner practice, some with weapons, some fighting barehanded. It was the usual punishing, no-holds-barred action, and the dusty field was stained here

and there with their blood. Yoshida watched from a makeshift wooden platform above the field.

“You like to try?” Takahashi asked Chuck. The weapons man was secretly furious that he had not been able to detect Chuck’s presence last night, and that Yoshida’s personal guards had captured him instead.

“Me? No. I’m no fighter,” Chuck demurred. Takahashi stared at him with contempt.

“Your girlfriend fight for you then. How humiliating!” He grabbed Nao’s thin wrist and was going to drag her out to face one of the fighters when Chuck stepped forward and blocked his way.

“Get your hands off her, asshole!”

“Oh, so the gaijin does fight. What is weapon of choice? Sword, Boh? Knife?”

Chuck knew no techniques with any weapons. He thought his best chance was in a fistfight, so he settled for that. Takahashi matched him up against a thick-set, barreled-chested man with a fresh scar on one cheek, no doubt from a previous bout. Chuck was half a foot taller but much weaker, and inexperienced. He knew enough, though, to not initiate the action, so for a few seconds they circled each other, then his opponent grew impatient and charged Chuck, knocking him to the ground. After that it was pretty much a one-sided affair, with Chuck doing his best to absorb as little punishment as possible, covering his head while the fighter pounded on his shoulders and arms. Apparently

Takahashi didn't like the man's efforts. After a minute or so he hauled the man off Chuck and called out another, while Chuck stood up, reeling from the attack. His next opponent didn't go to the ground. He was a taller, thinner, Japanese version of Chuck, and for a brief instant Chuck thought he might hold his own, but then the kicks started coming, and Chuck had no defense for them. He took a *mae geri* straight on kick to the face, and a *yoko geri* side kick to his gut that doubled him over in pain. The aggressor then switched to *tsuki*, and pummeled Chuck with punches. Chuck stumbled backwards and fell down, and Takahashi stepped in again and called out:

“Next!”

Chuck was forced to fight three more of Yoshida's warriors. Each one attacked him in a different way, some with judo throws or jiu jitsu holds, others with simple straight ahead karate kicks and punches. Once or twice Chuck found an opportunity to punch back, and even gave one of his tormentors a bloody lip, but it was small stuff compared to the abuse he was receiving.

He had already taken a pretty severe beating and was going to be in for more when he was knocked down by the concussive force of a nearby explosion. In the dust and confusion that followed, he saw (but didn't hear--the blast had temporarily deafened him) Nao running toward the front gate, which had been shattered by the bomb, or whatever it was, and there was Soji, waving at him! Chuck struggled to his feet and

limped toward the opening. Fighters were all around him, but they were as stunned as he was, and reacted more slowly. Looking back, Chuck noted with satisfaction that Yoshida's wooden viewing platform had been knocked over by the blast. Most of the warriors had run to their leader and were gathered around Yoshida, who lay on the ground, but he was moving and was probably okay, from what Chuck could tell at a distance. At that moment Yoshida raised himself up and pointed at Chuck.

"Run, Nao!" Chuck screamed. Defiantly she started back toward him, but Chuck turned the other way, into the arms of the approaching fighters, and at that moment Soji appeared and pulled her over the rubble of the smashed gate.

"Hooray for chemistry class!" Soji yelled, but Nao could barely hear him. She started back toward the crumbled wall of Yoshida's fortress, but Soji wouldn't let her go.

"Best way you can help Chuck is to get more help!" he shouted in her face. She then turned for the top of the Haguro steps, but Soji pulled her in another direction.

"Can't take the steps, they'll catch us. Can't take the road either. Come on, I know another way down." Nao followed Soji at a run. He plunged into the woods, angling off away from the main trail and the stone steps. A much smaller trail, barely more than an animal path, meandered down the mountainside. Nao, disoriented from the explosion,

had trouble keeping his balance, and fell a few times, but Soji urged her on, and her hearing was gradually returning, thank god, with only a minor lingering buzz that soon wore off.

The forest was beautiful and quiet, but there was no time to enjoy it. They came upon a spring that Soji said was okay to drink from. Then they pushed on, down and down, through groves of massive old growth trees that hadn't been logged in a thousand years, if ever. Soji and Nao talked in Japanese:

“Your boyfriend is brave, but he’s not much of a fighter, neh?”

“He tried his best.”

“Yes. You must leave Haguro,” Soji cautioned her.

“Oh, yes! Gotta get the frack outta here and get some help!” Nao said in slangy Japanese that the country boy Soji had trouble understanding.

“This trail will bring us out a mile up the road from town. There’s a bus at 3:10 p.m. to Tsuruoka. If we hurry you can jump right on it and you won’t have to spend any time in town. They might have sent a truck down from Shourai Taiyou, but they won’t have time to find you.”

“Gotcha! Thanks!” said Nao, and even while tumbling down the hill as fast as her short legs could carry her, she managed a bow in Soji’s direction.

When they came out of the mountain forest onto a small road, Nao told Soji to leave her. The teenager was reluctant, but Nao was insistent.

“Please go home, or to school, and don’t say anything to anyone. You’re a hero, but you’ll have to be an anonymous one.”

“I didn’t do it to be a hero,” Soji said. “I did it because you needed help. Sorry we couldn’t rescue your boyfriend.”

“He’s not my—well, maybe—“ Nao said falteringly. “Get outta here,” she said.

Soji disappeared back into the forest. Nao walked alone toward town. Every time she heard a car she ducked into the bushes, but fortunately this was a small back road and there was little traffic. As she neared Haguro there were a few mountain houses. She needed a change of clothes. In town, Nao bought herself a simple skirt and blouse outfit so that she could travel without calling too much attention to herself. It was over. They had failed to alter Yoshida’s plans in any way, Chuck was still a captive, and Nao had barely escaped with her life. With a heavy heart, Nao walked toward the bus station and her final escape from the threat of the Shourai Taiyou. From somewhere in the back of her mind popped up a quote from Yagyu Jubei Mitsuyoshi that she had learned somewhere:

*“Under the sword is hell...with a simple step forward there is heaven.”*

She had been under the sword, but she had stepped backward, not forward. She wondered what that meant. *Nothing good*, she thought. *Nothing good.*





## Chapter 25

**Missing the 3:10 to Tsuruoka**

Nao was standing outside the Haguro Center bus station just down the street from the *torii* gate in to the park, waiting for the bus that would take her to the train station, and safety, when the same samurai who had appeared before Chuck at Basho's Pond paid Nao a visit. She started to scream and then covered her own mouth and looked around. None of the other people waiting for the bus seemed to notice the samurai. He was not like the Tamakaze. He didn't engage Nao, or threaten or attack her. Instead, he simply appeared before her, raised his naginata, and pointed the murderous weapon toward the peak of Haguro. There was no mistaking his intent. He wanted Nao to go back. Nao was pale with fear, but still shook her head defiantly at his ghostly image.

"I can't," Nao said, remembering the prison up there, and her narrow escape from death. The samurai was unmoved, or else, more likely, he didn't understand.

Apparently the samurai wasn't visible to any of the other travelers waiting for the 3:10 to Tsuruoka. They couldn't hear him, either, though to Nao the samurai's shouted command: "*Hajime!*" (begin!) was as audible as the rumbling approach of the bus.

"I have to go back," she said to herself.

The samurai gestured one more time with the seven-foot long, oval-handled weapon with the curved blade, again not menacing Nao, merely pointing out her duty, and then disappeared, fading like the Tamakaze into insubstantiality. For one insane instant as the image vanished, she thought she saw her grandfather's face within the helmeted visage.

"I'm going back," she told herself. "Now we together forever, life or death!"

She disappeared into the station and came out a few minutes later. The bus up to the summit arrived in soon after that, and she mingled with the pilgrims and tourists, trying to look as inconspicuous as a punky orange-headed Japanese girl could. The bus crept around the back side of the mountain, switching back and providing the riders with spectacular panoramas of *Dewa Sanzan*, the three sacred mountains of Haguro. Nao chatted with other passengers. She thought she finally had an advantage. Yoshida would not expect her to return after escaping from Shourai Taiyou. The question was, how to use this advantage? If only she could disguise himself somehow; she had to cover that fiery carrot-top!

On the way up she passed police and fire trucks heading down the mountain. Soji's explosion had been so big that the authorities couldn't ignore it. When the bus stopped at the summit, Nao veered away from the main path and headed down a long promenade of ancient cedars to the temple lodging to the Saikan, monastery, where she took a room. She

would wait and see what happened. At least she was near him, though she feared for what might be happening to him after Soji's partially failed rescue attempt. Her fears were well-founded.

Chapter 26

**Climbing Mount Fuji (The Hard Way)**

“He must not be found here, on Haguro,” Yoshida said, as the ringleader and his inner coterie regrouped in the central hall after Soji’s incursion. Chuck was bound and blindfolded, and had been roughed up in the aftermath, but was still conscious.

“We could throw him to the fishes, at Tsuruga,” said Takahashi, who particularly did not like Chuck and all he stood for.

“No. His body must be found. It will serve as a warning, Wait. I know.” Yoshida turned and addressed Chuck directly:

“You think me a fanatic. You think me a lunatic dreamer commanding a dangerous following. You are not mistaken. But you fall short in your estimation of me. We have a saying: ‘You are wise to climb Mount Fuji once and a fool to climb it twice.’ I shall make you a wise man, for you shall climb it only once.”

And so, in the middle of the night, Chuck was force-marched down the long trail from Haguro, bundled in to a blanket and tossed into the trunk of a car. For hours he endured the jostling and bumping of being human cargo. For a while the ride was fairly smooth and he knew they were on one of Japan’s sleek superhighways. But then the rough ride and swaying side to side began again, and he imagined (rightly) that they were now somewhere on the lower flank of Fuji.

And then, still in the darkness of night, he was let out of the trunk. He begged for water and was given just a sip. The same group of Yoshida's inner circle was still attending him. This weird ritual they were putting him through was something that only a dedicated coterie would have undertaken. They could just as easily have dumped his body anywhere, but Yoshida had spoken and they obeyed.

With a rough rope around his neck, Chuck was dragged and prodded up the sacred mountain. All through the rest of the night they climbed. He was given no food or water, and his throat was soon parched in the high dry air. His flimsy sneakers provided little support and were soon shredded from the sharp glassy volcanic rocks, because Yoshida's groups didn't take any of the five traditional tourist paths of wide steps, with their way stations and mountain huts where one could purchase absurdly expensive food and lodging. Instead they climbed a brushed-choked trail, poorly maintained, that only joined one of the main trails for the last steep climb over bare rocks to the summit. Here Chuck's captors removed the rope from his neck but warned him not to talk to anyone or try to escape but he was so exhausted, dehydrated, and footsore that it wasn't even a possibility. Why had Yoshida brought him here? It was madness. A throng of people crowded the long low ledge that faced east, waiting for the rising sun. Yoshida appeared, looking refreshed. He had, it transpired, slept in a mountain hut the night before

and has only hiked the last stretch of the trail, unlike Chuck and his handlers, who had walked all night.

It was disorienting, after his confinement and the arduous climb, to find himself mingling with the Japanese tourists and foreigners in the pre-dawn light. Chuck could feel the life slipping out of him. The high altitude made him nauseous. The torturous climb, and his already weakened physical condition, left his body unable to heal itself. He was going to die, here in this barren cinder-strewn volcanic crater of Mount Fuji, thousands of miles from the rich loam of the Iowa farm where he was born and raised.

Heralded by shouts of “Banzai”, the first sliver of sun peaked over the distant horizon. Chuck stared not east but into Yoshida’s face, illuminated by the rising sun and animated by a curious mixture of arrogance, awe, and hope. Even in his physical and mental distress Chuck was reminded of a story he had once read about how on Easter morning the Greek priests would run from village to village in the mountains, trying to outpace the sun, and how the Greek peasants would be waiting in anticipation and exultation at each place.

This scene on Fuji would be repeated on every sunny morning during the climbing season, from May to October. Today was clear; a few thin clouds on the horizon. Like all sunrises, this one lasted on a few minutes. The predawn play of light on clouds transformed in a gradual

tingeing from gray to light purple to faint orange and finally to a blazing red.

An American couple walked by, spiffy in their L.L. Bean getups, Scotch plaid shirts and cargo shorts, with matching walking sticks they must have purchased at fantastically exorbitant prices, with the words “I Climbed Mount Fuji” burned into the handles. Chuck raised his eyes plaintively, but his captors quickly stepped between and yanked him away. The Americans noticed nothing. Like everyone, they were focused on the sun making its fabled appearance on the eastern horizon.

Chuck felt like one of those Everest climbers, left for dead after reaching the summit. He was very cold, and bruised and bleeding, but oddly at peace. He would never stop Yoshida now, but it didn't matter, Nothing mattered. He was dying, and even that didn't matter. Yoshida appeared at his side.

“This is not the true summit. Come. I will show you the actual summit. And the group moved away from the gaggle of tourists and headed even farther up the trail, until the summit ledge disappeared behind them and they were scrambling out on the scree of volcanic cinders that made up the final crown of Fuji.

Yoshida raised a hand and the group halted.

“Let them find him up here. They'll believe he was just another stupid gaijin who thought climbing Mount Fuji was easy, and didn't bring enough water, and got lost.”



“He should thank us. He has done what many Japanese would love to do, see sunrise from atop Fuji-san. Only in his case it was a one-way trip. Only up.”

For some reason Takahashi found this particularly amusing.

“Only up. Ha ha ha!” and he gave Chuck another kick in the ribs.

“Leave him. He’s as good as dead. If he survives somehow, then he’s a worthy adversary, and I’ll kill him again.”

It was outrageous hubris not to destroy your enemy when you had the chance, but that was Yoshida, and his followers knew it was useless to argue with him. They were all facing a long climb down from Fuji, and eager to get started. They dragged Chuck, now nearly unconscious and incoherent, behind a large boulder and left him to die.

Groaning lowly Chuck opened his eyes and looking up at the orange-tinged clouds of dawn. Clouds drifted slowly by. In the distance he could hear the low murmur of the summiters, several hundred of them, gathered along the east-facing ledge or mingling in the summit shops, but they might as well have been a million miles away.

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind was a dim memory from a book he had read about mountaineering, with grim stories of climbers who died on the slopes of Everest or K-2, their bodies forever frozen in high snowy wastes, mummified in place by the dry air. It was an image that had fascinated him as a boy, and filled him with a delicious thrill of horror. But, as deaths go, it wasn’t a bad one. You just slipped away.

And this wasn't remote Everest. His body would soon be found and presumably brought down the mountain and shipped home to mingle with the soil of his native Iowa, though it pained him to think of Grandma Branson, losing her grandson so soon after losing Buck. *At least Nao is safe*, he thought.

Unable to move or cry out, he lay for a long time, slipping in and out of consciousness, dreaming of moose and cornfields. Then, a hand gently sliding under and cupping his head, a voice, speaking to him softly, urging him to open his eyes, offering a sip of precious water. Chuck could scarcely see anything, and his rescuer was in silhouette against the rising sun. He had only the sense that the man was wearing a costume much like the one he had seen Yoshida wear, the *yamabushi's* cap and robes, but this one was somehow different. Then, a feeling of tremendous lightness, and the wind on his face, as if he was being lifted off the summit of Fuji and was soaring toward heaven. Then, nothing.

Chapter 27

**The She-Demon's Sword**

Chuck woke up in darkness, and alone, but not alone. All around him he sensed the presence of spirits. But they were different from Tamakaze. Those were wounded, tortured souls, trapped and lost in Buddhist purgatory. These were spirits of peace, at peace. They lived here. This was their realm, they inhabited it comfortably. They were the rich, moist humus of the ground cover, they were the rocks and trees, the birds and insects, they were the world, alive with possibility. They weren't scary at all. It felt right to be with them. Once again as after his encounter with the Tamakaze, Chuck was sore in body and spent in spirit.

Next to his rude bed Chuck found a tray with bowls of food, and what food! Chuck had eaten Japanese food many times now, first at college in that awful plastic fake Mount Fuji, then later, in his travels with Nao, at many different kinds of eateries: yakitoris, robata-yakis, sushi bars, even a little restaurant that specialized in tofu prepared an infinite number of ways. But he had never tasted anything like this—earthy, subtle, not heavily spiced but pungent, like eating the soil of Japan itself.

The food was there in the morning, and removed and replaced with another tray in the evening. In between times Chuck slept. For the first two days he never saw who brought and removed it. Nor could he really tell where he was, except that he was outside, lying on a rough bed of pine needles with a simple quilt covering him, beneath a rock overhang, something like a cave. For some reason he guessed he was back on Mount Haguro, but didn't know for sure until the morning of the third day, when he awoke to find a man kneeling beside him, and dressed as a yamabushi, like he had once seen Yoshida attired. This man's outfit was simpler and somehow more authentic. The man silently urged Chuck to sip the tea, and when Chuck commented on its mysterious and delicious taste, he said:

“It's called *hyakunen-cha*. Hundred year tea. We say if you drink you will live to be one hundred.

“I don't want to live to be one hundred. Tomorrow would do.”

Chuck looked around him. “Where am I?”

“Mount Haguro.”

“How did I get here? I was dying.”

“We flew.”

“Flew?”

“Yes. On a cloud of five colors.”

“Okay. Sure. Whatever you say.”

“You have seen Tamakaze. Why would you doubt that you could fly?”

“You have a point there.”

The miso soup was nothing more than a clear broth mingled with a blond swirl of *miso-shiru*, and flecked with bits of mushroom, but it was redolent of the soil, smoky, slightly salty, and delicious. The rice was boiled, not steamed, and plain, without the even the soy condiment, yet it seemed to Chuck he was imbibing a nation, not just a grain.

A few creamy curds of tofu hardly cooked with just a hint of ginger, constituted the main dish. All this he ate, one dish at a time, out of a bowl the yamabushi had carved from a single piece of Japanese oak, with chopsticks from the same source tree.

The yamabushi taught him the Zen Buddhist ritual of *oriyo-ke*, mindful eating. He learned to pour water into the remains of his food in the bowl, wash his dish with his fingers and drink the accumulated dregs, so as not to waste a morsel. His practice was even simpler than the monk's, who usually stack three bowls of various sizes inside their *furoshiki*, then carefully folded the cloth around the bowls. But this man wasn't your typical wizened oriental sage. The strenuous exertions of being a mountain yamabushi did not allow for it.

“Who are you?” Chuck asked on the second morning of his recuperation.

“My name is Hanaki. I live in Haguro. My son Soji told me about you—“

“You are Soji’s father?!--” Chuck uttered with a gasp, but the yamabushi went on—

“--when Yoshida tried to kill you, I followed, and brought you here.”

It sounded so simple, but Chuck knew there must be much more to the story than this, but he was so tired he could only ask:

“What is this place?”

“These are the ruins of the *Mine no Yakushi* Temple. Shall I tell you the story of it?”

“Please,” said Chuck, and as if he was a little boy again, he snuggled deeper under the quilt and let the yamabushi’s words wash over him.

“The story is called *The She-Demon’s Sword*. Long before Haguro was a famous tourist destination,” Hanaki began, “before even the ancient five-story pagoda at the foot of the mountain was built, this temple was a thriving community of dedicated monks. There was no shogunate at this time, no central Japanese government. The area was ruled by a powerful warlord named Furukawa, with a fair but iron hand. The monks in their remote religious isolation had little contact with Furukawa other than paying taxes. He tolerated their presence but paid them little attention. His focus was on defending his fiefdom from attack

by more powerful daimyos to the south in Yamagata. This peaceful and happy arrangement lasted for many years, and as their practice deepened, many monks achieved enlightenment, and even the dullest among them seemed possessed by the spirit of the place. Then, in the course of one terrible day, everything changed.

A ronin stumbled into their midst, wounded and bleeding.

The ronin had just come from the battle of Sekigahara. His mind was drenched in a red mist, the blood of a thousand corpses. He was gone slightly mad. Wandering on the battlefield in the aftermath of the fight, among the wild pigs and feral dogs eating the flesh of the dead, he had found his two brothers, gutted and scalped for their topknots. Like them, the ronin was on the losing side. He had no allies, no daimyo to offer him protection. He was a walking dead man, perhaps only looking for a place to die. His wounds were numerous—three arrows embedded several inches up the shafts, a gash on his shoulder from a *jodan* cut, and another on his right hip from a *chudan* cut, that left him hobbled and unable to lift his own sword above his waist.

Driven by a foolish, senseless nostalgic desire to see the ocean before he died, he had forced himself to climb Haguro, one limping step at a time, not knowing that he was on an impossible quest, that there was no vista either east to the Pacific or west to the Sea of Japan from the sacred mountain's summit.

Gradually he cast off his mesh armor, his plumed and horned helmet, everything except the two swords that symbolized the soul of a samurai. These he clung to only out of form—his fighting days were over. Toward the end of his climb, the ronin, now stripped down to a mere yukata and straw sandals, bleeding heavily and gasping for breath, stumbled up an ancient ravine and found himself facing the entrance to a cave.

“This is as good a place to die as any,” he said aloud, “maybe even better than some. No one will disturb my bones here.” He dragged himself inside, only to discover that his wouldn’t be the first bones to come to rest here. The cave floor was littered with them! And some of them looked gruesomely fresh. He recognized a human femur, with bits of gristle still clinging to it, “I don’t like the looks of this,” he muttered, but too weary to retreat, he ventured farther into the dark space. On one wall was a weapons rack, with a collection of magnificent swords on display. In the dim light of the cave their blades gleamed with a frightful inner light. One sword in particular stood out from the rest; it’s *tsuba* (hand guard) was inlaid with precious gems and its handle was bound in a splendid scarlet cord the equal of which the ronin had never seen. And the blade itself was perfection. Suddenly, against all reason, the ronin felt a pang of envy and covetousness. He wanted that sword. He must have it, though he could not even wield it and would never use it. Dropping his own katana, (one that had been gifted to him by his Sensei



on his graduation from sword school more than twenty years before and had been his constant companion ever since, and had never been more than a few feet from his person even while he slept, even while he enjoyed amorous relations), he seized the weapon from its place on the rack. Even as he first grabbed it, the ronin knew he had made a terrible mistake. His first indication was when the weapon spoke to him, in a harsh whisper:

“She’ll be back soon.”

The ronin almost dropped the possessed blade, but something, perhaps the sword itself, prevented him.

“Who?” he croaked, fearful of the answer.

“My owner, the *Jikininki*. She who eats samurai.”

Now the ronin was shaking his teeth clattering, and not from the cold mountain air. He made a weak gesture as if to replace the sword on its holding pegs, but the sword resisted, and spoke again, a warning and a command:

“She comes! Run!”

The ronin bolted for the cave entrance, and just missed running into a large ominous shape looming in his way. He could smell her as he barged past, with only the merest flash of a head start, and tumbled down the mountainside, incomprehensibly clutching the katana.

“Oh, she won’t like this. Don’t let me suffer even a scratch, I warn you,” the blade taunted the crazed samurai as he fled, heedless of the

thorny brambles that tore at his remaining clothing and exposed skin. The villagers found him the next morning, near death. The sword was gone, and the ronin's hair had turned white.

He soon died, but not before he asked the local abbot for a favor.

"Return the sword to the demon," he begged. "Perhaps in another lifetime I will have expiated enough of my sins to make amends."

The abbot did as the samurai asked, leaving the sword on a mountain ledge, afraid to approach any closer to the demon's lair. When he checked the next morning, the sword was gone. The she-demon had taken it back.

"Oh, and what a demon she was! If you angered her, she ripped open her own belly and threw her steaming entrails at you. And her sword work was impeccable. When she cut you, you felt your world sliced open, and your heart's deepest secrets revealed for all to see. It was painful beyond measure. The villagers rumored that the she-demon's steel sword was formed from iron mined in the caves and forged in the fires of Hell. Certainly it possessed unusual tensile strength. Some attributed its soul-destroying qualities to the she-demon's purported mixing of the infernal metal with the bones and blood of her victims during the firing and tempering of the blade. This is what gave the sword its taste for human flesh. Yes, swords were made and meant to kill, but this one was as bloodthirsty as its owner was.

Because of the demon, for many years the villagers of Haguro had been reluctant to ascend the mountain. They came up to the monastery only infrequently, which did not bother the monks, deep as they were in meditation like the deep snows of winter that settled on the mountain, enveloping everything in muffled silence. It was said that the demon's sword could cut a person's soul, not just their body, and that once inflicted these wounds never healed. Two or three of the villagers were permanently disabled by the demon's sword, which did not kill but psychically maimed them, leaving them useless and sad.

The she-demon had four arms. Consequently, though she often fought in the two-handed samurai style, it was at two different levels, lower and higher, and she was frighteningly adept at switching between them. If you jumped to avoid a low cut, you found yourself in the locus of her upper cut. Few survived an encounter with the Jikininki, and those who did were permanently changed. Many lost the power of speech. Others became prone to strange fits of crying, and many survivors found solace in *seppuku*.

Hanai paused.

"The end?" Chuck asked.

"Not quite," said Hanaki with a peculiar twinkle in his eyes. He was enjoying himself.

"You said the ronin asked the abbot for a favor."

“Yes. To return the sword to its owner.” Hanaki didn’t elaborate.  
Chuck pressed him.

“But that wasn’t all, was it?”

Hanaki hesitated before answering. “No. Remember, he asked to be allowed to remember all his past lives, so that when the time came, when he had paid for all his sins, he could help the person who was destined to slay the jikininki. That time has come,” Hanaki said mysteriously.

“You told me this story because the she-demon still exists,” Chuck said slowly. Trying to reason it all out.

“Indeed,” said Hanaki. “As does the sword. The Buddha said: 'Many lives have I lived, and I remember them all,'" said Hanaki, as if that was supposed to make everything clear. When Chuck failed to make the connection, Hanaki spelled it out for him. "You are the one who must fight the she-demon," Hanaki said, searching his new friend's face for signs of fear.

“Me?”

“Yes. And you’ll have to fight the she-demon’s sword twice.”

"I don't understand," Chuck said. Hanaki waited patiently and said nothing. Then, as if the sun was rising once again on Mount Fuji, realization dawned in Chuck's mind.

"You were the ronin," he said haltingly. "This whole story is about you."

"Yes."

"And the demon, was, is Yoshida?"

"Yes."

"But he doesn't know it."

"No. He does not. He is like an animal, following his instincts without knowing why."

"Many lives has he lived, but he doesn't remember them," said Chuck.

"How you say in American slang? 'Bingo!'"

"Yes. Bingo." And Chuck's mind flashed briefly back to Iowa, lazy Friday evenings at the Grange, his grandmother smoking Pall Malls and playing five cards at a time while the kids ran around in the field next to the hall. Then Hanaki surprised him again.

"She is here."

"Here? You mean, here on Mount Haguro?"

"Yes. She has always been here."

As befitting a she-devil, the Jikininki lived in a cave not far from where Chuck lay. She was a cold old thing, heavy in heart and body, with leathery skin and a demon's horrific face. She was slow-moving except when it came to sword fighting. Like most cave-dwelling monsters, she littered the dirt floor of her hovel with the bones of her victims, mostly unwary villagers scavenging for firewood who strayed too close to the

entrance and fell prey to her greedy blade. Truth be told, being a demon she didn't need to eat at all, nor did her sword. They enjoyed their bloody work, the way a butcher or an executioner enjoys theirs; the satisfaction of a job well done and all that.

*Where did the she-demon come from? What horrible things must have happened to her to turn her into this blood-drinking, bone-gnawing apparition?* Chuck wondered. Hanaki's voice called him out of his reverie.

"I must go now."

"What?"

"This business is between you and her now. Once you challenged Yoshida-san, I was no longer the enemy. The way to victory now for you is by slaying the she-demon."

"But, I must be too late. How long have I been here? A month? The rocket must have taken off already. Did he succeed? Is everyone in San Francisco dead?"

"My friend, time is not an iron band. It is a rubber band! Ha! What they say in Buddhism? When you understand this, you will be able to drink the whole Western Ocean in a single gulp. You have only been here two days. I must go. And you, have another mountain to climb. Again."

A mountain like Haguro wasn't really the backcountry. You couldn't hike here for days without seeing anyone like in, say, Alaska or the Brazilian rain forest. Haguro was too near to towns, and Japan is too

small, for it to be real wild and remote. But there were steep ravines near the summit, overgrown with thorn bushes and vines, and blocked by tumbled boulders, where hardly anyone ventured. And it was in the upper reaches of one of these treacherous declivities, high and forlorn, that the cave of the she-demon was hidden. And so that morning Chuck left one cave to seek another, equipped only with a thermos bottle of water and a few snacks Hanaki had left him. But when he had awoken that day, he had found next to his head the banzai headband that seemed strangely familiar, that he wore now. He was under a spell, a benevolent enchantment to be sure, but magic nonetheless, that enabled him to see and participate in the animistic world of the yamabushi Hanaki, where demons came alive.

The cave entrance was hidden, but the smell of it made Chuck's stomach churn it before he reached it, a musty, foul smell—the slightly sweet and sour smell of decaying human flesh. He climbed up onto a ledge and paused briefly to enjoy the view, a panorama of the remote back slope of Haguro, waves of lesser hills in cascading rows of blue-grey ridges stretching far away to the north. He took a deep breath, trying to quiet his stomach's complaints against the pervading stench emanating from the dank hole he was about to enter.

As he entered, he realized that the cave wasn't a cave at all, more like a gigantic cleft in the mountainside, narrower at the top than the

bottom; the vegetation had managed to grow across the opening, creating a thatched roof to the cavern, that let in occasional shafts of weak sunlight where it wasn't completely overgrown. The effect was like being in a natural cathedral, dim and dark and grand, the matting also dampened the sound.

He heard her before he saw her, and smelled her before he heard her. She was a great, fat, waddling thing, but light on her feet, the way an elephant can be when it runs, enormous yet surprisingly graceful. And of course she had a demon's face, bloated cheeks, fiery eyes, painted like a warrior in a permanent scowl, with tusks for teeth, and bristly whiskers. It was a face that frightened Chuck.

The she-demon advanced toward Chuck, two blades (not one!) whirring and weaving in her four arms. Chuck was careful not to look directly at her. He circled to the left like a boxer, trying to keep his distance.

"Why should I even speak to you? You are not even Nihon (Japanese)!" The she-demon's voice was a haunted rasp like the bellows of Hell.

"Since when is the she-demon fussy about what kinds of humans she eats?" Chuck answered with a boldness that surprised him.

"You might give me a stomach ache."



"I hope I do, if it comes to that."

"Why do you, a gaijin, wear the headband of a Japanese?"

Chuck had forgotten entirely about it. He reached up, touched the talisman, and blurted out an answer that surprised even himself: "A moose gave it to me".

Chuck had no weapons and no strategy other than what Hanaki had told him, that the she-demon became careless when she grew angry. But how would that help him, trapped here in her cave, he did not know. Most of all Chuck was tired of being beat up, crashed, thrashed, shot at. He was tired of losing. Buried somewhere in the recesses of this cheerful Iowa farm boy's mind, the mild-mannered marine scientist, was a basic American trait—competitiveness—he wanted to win one, not for the Gipper or America, for himself.

The she-demon was obviously well schooled in *Hyoho Niten Ichi-ryu*, the art of fighting with two swords, as created by master swordsman Miyamoto Musashi. Instead of a katana (long sword) and *wakizashi* (short sword) she employed two katanas, gripping each in two hands in classic Japanese sword style. A ridiculous question popped into Chuck's mind, and before he could suppress it, he found himself asking—

"You have four arms. Why don't you use four swords?"

"You are not worth my anger," she told Chuck. She was laughing at him, at his puniness, his weakness. Why he wasn't even as much of a challenge as when a horde of villagers with torches and pitchforks came calling, as had happened a couple of times. She had sent them packing, and she would deal with this pale human.

Instead of goading the she-demon to an outburst, Chuck found himself growing angry. That wasn't going to help him. He couldn't think of any names to call this monster, who had undoubtedly heard them all. And the cave seemed to be getting smaller, or the she-demon larger, he couldn't tell which, and she was backing him into a corner, relentlessly. Soon there would be nowhere to hide from the slashing blades.

*"You are just like him,"* Chuck realized. *"You are so arrogant and vain. That's your weakness."* And he knew at once how to defeat the she-demon. If he could only bring himself to do it. He must move closer to her!

"You stink," Chuck said to her. "You, your cave, your life, it all smells really bad."

But instead of being offended, the she-demon seemed to revel in the accusations.

"Yes. The smell of death. Sweet, no? Yes? You'll find out soon enough." The she-demon whirled in a 360° kick that left Chuck gasping as he leaped out of the way.

He tried again.

“You barren hag. Last of your kind, I bet. Who would copulate with a hideous creature like you?”

But this sally too was met with derisive, cackling laughter. “Demons don’t procreate, you idiot human! They don’t create at all. They destroy!” And she jumped at him again, the two blades bisecting the spot he had stood an instant before. But even in his panic, Chuck noticed that the she-demon was careless. She had no fear. She was at the top of the food chain, and she knew it.

*“Two swords. One sword. No sword Yes, that was it!”* thought Chuck. *The school of no sword.* Bokuden’s comical victory over the bully, one of the stories that had charmed Chuck when he first began to study Japanese culture. But this was no time for amusing recollections. How could he apply “No Sword” to his current perilous state? Thinking quickly, Chuck dropped to his hands and knees among the filthy bones and scraps of his predecessors, and crawled *toward* the she-demon. She was so monstrously fat that she couldn’t see down to the floor over her magnificently flabby belly.

“Where did you go, miserable human? Don’t try to hide from me. There’s no escaping.”

And to prove her point, like the Cyclops, she rolled an enormous boulder into place in front of the cave opening, blocking the entrance.

But now Chuck ignored her, scurrying to stay close behind her as she turned this way and that, seeking him out. Finally she tired of that game and sat down heavily in the center of her abode.

“I have all the time in the world. I have eternity,” she told him. “How long do you have?” It was true. Chuck couldn’t wait too long., It was like he was under siege from within, he would be driven mad by thirst and hunger if he was kept in the cave for more than a couple of days. On the other hand, his goal wasn’t to kill the she-demon, simply to defeat her, Hanaki hadn’t said anything about bringing back the skin of the she-demon, or even her sword, though that seemed the likely trophy. His task was to keep the she-demon from eating any more villagers.

“I’ve often wondered,” Chuck said aloud, noting with satisfaction that he had startled the she-demon, who had lapsed into a heavy somnambulance, “why more Japanese aren’t vegetarians. They’re Buddhists, many of them, but they eat meat. Seems like a contradiction.”

“Are you suggesting,” the she-demon answered, slyly feeling around behind her with one of her four hands, and forcing Chuck to move nimbly to avoid being snatched up—“that I should become a vegetarian?” This made her laugh, a fat-shaking belly laugh that almost squashed Chuck when she suddenly shifted her weight to laugh more freely.

Unlike the great Odysseus, Chuck had no shipmates to help him, He was on his own. Since his encounter with the Tamakaze he had come

to accept that the world wasn't confined to the narrow limits of his five senses. He knew this. But to be confronted by this monstrosity, her four arms, her immense belly, her labored breathing, here in this high remote place, was, well, it was all a little surreal. He needed to keep his focus, or the unreality would crush and consume him, literally!

"I" make you a wager," he said to the she-demon. If I win, you'll stop eating the people from Haguro. If I lose, well, then you'll eat me and things will go on as before."

"Not eat humans? What would I eat, then? Chuck was encouraged that she hadn't rejected his proposal outright.

"They'll bring you offerings. They do that already, don't they?"

"Hmmpffhh! Little rice balls. Stale cookies. Crackers made from shrimp. I hate shrimp. I don't want to live on that."

"But you could, couldn't you? If you had to?"

"I suppose so. But I don't have to!" Chuck noticed with a mild panic that the she-demon was edging backward toward the nearest wall of the enclosure, trying to force Chuck out into view again. He had to do something soon, or it was only a matter of time before her flashing blades found him and flayed him.

Those swords. They weren't the same. One was a beautiful weapon, the handle wrapped with thick gold braid, the tsuba inlaid with ivory and mahogany parquet. The other was a masterpiece. A simple blade, an iron grip, redolent of *wabi sabi*. As if to prove the point, the she-demon tossed

away the lesser sword, and wrapped all four hands around the handle of the sublime blade. With all four hands plying the one weapon, she could attack in any of the four directions, on all three levels, *geidan* (lower) *chudan* (middle) and *jodan* (upper) at will, with ease. Her dexterity was nonpareil! She danced, her rolls of fat jiggling in audible thumps against her body. Chuck wasn't fooled by her obesity—he knew that she was an agile, lethal warrior, capable of slicing him open with one savage swing of that magical sword.

Chuck attempted one more distraction. “How do I know I could trust you not to eat any more villagers if I win?”

The jikininki roared: “Now you *are* making me angry! A demon's word is sacred. And you, you not-even-Nihon, dare to challenge my honor? I will enjoy gnawing on your bones!”

None of his strategies had worked; he had only succeeded in enraging the she-demon, who now careened around the inside of her cave randomly, crazed, hoping to crush Chuck with her bulk. Time was running out for him. He'd been lucky so far, but his energy was flagging under the unrelenting assault. In desperation he did the one right thing—he leaped onto the she-demon's back and scrambled up, clinging to her mangy coat. When she rose up to her full height to shake or scrape him off against the nearest wall, he leaped again, and caught onto one of the trailing vines hanging down from the roof. Pulling with all his remaining strength, he hauled himself up hand over hand until he was

beyond the reach of the she-demon on her sword. Chuck was exultant!  
He had won!

“From here,” he said, panting, “I can climb up through the roof and out. Then I’m going to burn your roof.”

“I’ll find another cave “

“And I’ll destroy that one. Without the protection of your cave, you’ll be hunted down. When the villagers come, they’ll pelt you with rocks or pour boiling liquid on you. They might just be so angry *they’ll eat you!*”

The she-demon sat down heavily and began to weep, sobbing and sniffing pathetically.

“This has been my home for hundreds of years. Where would I go?” she wailed. Chuck felt pity for the old thing.

“You don’t have to leave; you just have to stop eating the people of Haguro.”

“And become a vegetarian? Me?”

“If you want to stay in your cave,” said Chuck firmly. “So, I have your word? I don’t have to burn down this roof?”

“All right,” the jikininki said ruefully. But then the sword itself spoke, in a voice like a snake, all hiss and venom:

"I was made for only one purpose. Allow me to fulfill my destiny." It wasn't clear if it was speaking to the she-demon or to Chuck, but he knew its purpose--the sword of perfection was made for killing.

“Lay your weapon down, monster, or the villagers come with their terrible vengeance.”

The she-demon complied, and as soon as it left her hands the sword vanished, simply disappeared. One instant it was on the ground, the next it was gone. Chuck, who had supposed that his quest was about bringing back the demon’s sword, Arthur-like, was momentarily crushed and overwhelmed by a sense that he had failed.

“Where did it go?” he demanded of the she-demon, but she was so distraught that he couldn’t make anything of her blubbing. “I’ll make sure they come and feed you,” Chuck said to her.

“Watch out for my sword, it may still bite you!” she said, and Chuck remembered Hanaki’s warning, that he would have to fight the she-demon’s sword twice, and he had a slight inkling of what that meant, but it slipped quickly from his mind.

When Chuck returned to Hanaki’s solitary confines, he was struck by the similarity to the she-demon’s lair--two remote and desolate dwellings atop the fastness of the mountain. Hanaki greeted him warmly.

“So, you have succeeded! Well done. The spirits of the mountain are with you.”

“Yes, the she-demon will eat no more humans. But now I must stop Yoshida, or all this will have been just a diversion.”



“And now you are ready.” Hanaki gave Chuck another deliciously impish smile. “Your girlfriend is waiting for you up there.”

“Huh? My—you mean Nao? She went back? That crazy—she’s not, uh, well, maybe—“ Chuck fumbled for words.

“Come. It’s time for you two to find each other, for real. Then you can dispense with the she-demon that is Yoshida.”

## Chapter 28

**Autobiography of The Katana**

I was born in the moment of creation. Yes, I am that old, as old as anything. Like everything, I remember nothing before the Great Explosion that created me. Anything, everything, nothing. Perhaps I was Sword in one or all of the myriad universes that preceded this one. We'll never know. There are many legends of incredibly hardened swords made from meteorites, not just in Japanese mythology, but all around the world, from Joan of Arc's sword to the Indonesian Devil Sword. My blade is even older than those sacred (or profane) weapons. I was forged in the first microsecond of the universe, before the creation of the kneiss, the Vishnu schist, before the swirling gases coalesced to form your sun. I am the *ur* sword. I can slice galaxies in a single stroke. I am the mother of all swords. Captured within the forged steel of my being is Light itself, which is the dwelling place of Life. I am the Essence of the Thing.

Swords by many names, in many languages. In ancient Syriac I was *sapseyra*. Today I shall go by *Katana*, though it could just as easily be *daito* or *tachi*. How is it possible that I was born with my Swordness? This is not an elegant and charming history. To do myself justice, I would have to tell you thousands of stories, of encampments and dis-

encampments, dismemberments, self-dismemberments, battles and wars, wars and battles, bloody, gory epics, yet some of great tenderness too. I could tell you of the time a crazed Rom blacksmith got it into his mind to create a sword invested with the soul of a gypsy. He used meteorite, yes, for certain sure, with nickel-bearing iron for hardness, but he also added his own sweat, a gallon of rum-charge, a batch of stinging nettles, 100 cloves of garlic, and the bodies of some small animals that might have been bats or salamanders, to the molten metal from which the sword was shaped. This version of me was excellent for random slashing and mayhem, accompanied by dancing and music!

Or I could regale you with chronicles of the courts of the powerful, always seeking to improve upon my innate perfection. Swords in stones, swords in caves and lakes and on spaceships, swords of every conceivable length, heft, metal, and origin. But the two incarnations of me that you are most interested in are *Doji-Giri* (the “Monster-Cutter”), and the Sasaki family heirloom. I shall tell you about each one in turn.

How did the Monster-Cutter, one of the most famous swords in Japanese history, end up in the hands of a monster? Why did I let this happen, you might ask, as if I was a benevolent spirit seeking only harmony for my worshippers? You misunderstand me. I am Sword. If there were no tension between yin and yang, the universe would be in stasis, an impossible state, and would quickly devolve into entropy.

The she-demon, in the form of Yoshida, stole it—that's how it came into her possession. Imagine how committed one must be to a cause, to steal a national treasure! Especially when one's cause is the nation, and one's nationalistic politics are so far to the right that one frightens people. But what do I know of politics? I am only a sword. The Sword.

It was an inside job. Every five years, each sword is taken out of its glass case and given a careful cleaning. Because this is Japan, this cleaning cannot be done by janitors, not even by museum staff. It was a ritual that required an authentic sword cleaner. Yoshida's armorer, Takahashi, was the Museum's main contract sword cleaner. I must admire Yoshida's, the best word for this is a Spanish one, *cajones*. He not only stole *Doji-Giri* from the Tokyo National Museum; he did it in a way that no one knew it was gone. The replica itself was a magnificent creation albeit by a modern sword-maker, who was tasked to reproduce even the markings left by the forging process. This was of course an impossibility—each sword is unique. But he came close, close enough that complacent Museum staff never questioned the substitution.

Yasutsuna, the maker of *Doji-Giri*, was a master. Yasutsuna purified himself under an icy mountain waterfall, and abstained from sexual relations for days before he forged a blade. I could tell you of the lost art of a Persian metallurgist who—but no.

The actual switch occurred at Takahashi's armory, in private, with Yoshida in attendance. The armory was little more than a shed in the

tiny back yard behind Takahashi's residence, but still qualified as a holy place in the bizarre world of Yoshida. It was crammed with swords in various states of repair, naginatas, shields, helmets, and armor, the trappings of a medieval samurai's costume and weaponry.

Yoshida and his inner circle gathered closely around the armorer's work table. The velvet pads on which the pieces of Doji-Giri rested had been carefully vacuumed the original removed and replaced by the replica. They stood around for a few minutes, admiring the strong yet delicate and beautiful work of the replica, and gazing furtively at the original historic blade, now in pieces on the work bench. Yoshida had no intention of leaving Doji-Giri in a display case. At Yoshida's command, the black-bearded Takahashi reassembled Doji-Giri for the first time in a hundred years and more. He mounted its blade in its handle, and carefully reattached the *tsuba* guard. Aside from new cord wrappings on the handle, it was as Yasutsuna had made it more than a thousand years previous. A new scabbard was brought forward, crafted by a separate national treasure who specialized in such wooden items. With his followers standing behind him, Yoshida knelt on the tatami floor of the shed and bowed deeply to this object of his desire, holding the weapon, now inside its scabbard, on the level above his head above his head with both hands.

Only Takahashi was allowed to touch Doji-Giri. The others were happy just to be in the presence of this icon of feudal Japan, Only the

Emperor's sword, *Kusanagi-no-tsurugi*, the "Grass-Mower", one of the three sacred treasures of Japan along with the Mirror and the Jewel, was more venerated.

Later, in an even more private ceremony on Mount Haguro that was captured on videotape by Linda Wu, and eventually found its way onto the Internet, Yoshida tested Doji-Giri in a bamboo forest, hacking two and three of the hollow-stemmed trees at a time in multiple cuts, and in the final shot of this curious and amusing video, smiling bashfully with an armload of bamboo tubes in his arms. But I (in the form of Doji-Giri) was not satisfied. Green bamboo would not satisfy my appetite. I desired blood!

There are two kinds of people in this world, those who have handled a sword (touched me, and whom I have touched) and those who have not. I, Sword, am always amused when humans handle me. Such poor technique. Do not use your arms, people! "What?" you say. How can we swing the sword without using our arms? Try using your whole body. The best of you, the true warriors, know what I mean. The sword is not a baseball bat. If anything it's more like a golf club. Ha!

In my Sword mind, I live in a magical world where anything is possible, world peace, human perfection.

Yes, I let Yoshida steal me. That is my role. I foment! Let there be blood, buckets of it, *Jets of Blood*<sup>1</sup>. Let the slashing begin! Let there be

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<sup>1</sup> Title of a play by Antonin Artaud.

severed limbs, severed heads, nasty open suppurating wounds, maggots crawling in the interstices. I am the Sword that Kills!

But I am also the Sword that Gives Life. How is that possible? Because the world is a round thing, a whole, holistically speaking. “*You can’t have one without the other.*” Right now the microscopically small corner of the galaxy known as Planet Earth is terribly out of balance. My killing side is dominant, to a degree that is unnatural, though everything is natural, and nothing is really off. Everything. Nothing. When the world learns to use me as a tool for peace, my other side will not shrivel up and die.

The last time we saw the Sasaki family sword, it was becoming One with the deck plates of the U.S.S. Franklin on March 19, 1945. How did it survive this impact? Some things I cannot share with you, they are the secrets of the Sword. But I can tell you this: there is true alchemy in the world. Not the paltry trick of turning base metal into gold. Real, true transformation infinitely more difficult to accomplish, and infinitely more valuable. As the yamabushi has hinted, this world, this universe, is less solid and fixed than it appears. All is change: solid to liquid to gas, energy to matter, love to hate, soul to dust and back again. Why then, would it surprise you that a sword in the cockpit of a Japanese Zero plunged into an aircraft carrier in March 1945 should emerge unscathed I confess. I intervened, I brought this sword to me, that I might admire it a while, and return it when it was needed. *Sapseyra ex machina.*

Though not a famous sword, the Sasaki family heirloom is unique. It is the Sword that Gives Life! Though it had been in many battles, it had never been used to kill a human being. Before there was a Sasaki family, even before there was a Japan, the elements of this blade were consecrated in a ceremony of the gods. But how can a sword give life? We, the One, are the gods. We can do anything; we can even transmute a killing device into a tool for peace, for love. Here is the essential truth, as spelled out by the great swordsman Munemori Yagyu: The Death-Dealing Sword and the Life-Giving Sword are but opposite and inclusive aspects of the No Sword. And when you wield the Sword of No Sword, you are enlightened, all conflicts resolved, all questions answered, the universe roundly whole and complete. Wouldn't that be a fine state of affairs? Peace is not boring. Peace is the flourishing of the ordinary. *"Peace is present when man can see the face that is composed of things that have meaning and are in their place."*<sup>2</sup>

And so it goes for the Mad Sword of No Sword. Crazy Wisdom throughout eternity, shape-shifting, transmogrifying, but always I, Sword. Everything, Anything, Nothing. Mostly Nothing. It is better that way.

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<sup>2</sup> From *Flight to Arras*, by Antoine St. Exupery



Chapter 29

**“Re-United, and It’s Understood”**

Coincidence, not fate, brought them together again. Nao was keeping watch, to be sure, and Chuck looking for her, after Hanaki led him along a transverse trail to the side of the summit where the Saikan monastery and Yoshida’s hide-out lay, but Chuck was just as likely to wander past her, and Nao was no Sakugawa when it came to surveillance techniques. But fortunately, Chuck stumbled out of the forest just as Nao was coming back from a morning walk, and they met on the trail. Nao wanted to hug him, but he looked so frail and black-and-blue that she just took his hand and squeezed it.

“Hi, Chuckie-san,” she said.

“Nao!” was all he could say. Hanaki had tended to him, but between his beatings at the hands of Yoshida’s men, and his fight with the she-demon, Chuck was pretty spent. Nao sized him up and took the situation in hand.

“Come on,” she said. I’ have room for you. You rest.”

“But, Yoshida—“

“Can wait,” Nao said. “First, you rest.” An she led him by the hand to Saikan.

Most of the accommodations were large, dormitory style tatami rooms for pilgrims, but there were a few private suites. Nao had arranged

for one of those. Soon they were wearing the provided simple cotton *yukatas* and laying on thin futons in a sparsely furnished room. Nao surprised Chuck again by showing some talent in massage. She gently kneaded his bruised and aching body. Then she took him down the hall to the public *onsen* hot springs bath that was part of the amenities at Saikan. When he walked in, the dozen or so Japanese men and women (because they were in a rural area, this was still a communal *onsen*) tried politely to ignore him while at the same time displaying an intense curiosity. For his part, Chuck hadn't been skinny-dipping (as he thought of it) since he was a boy.

“Stay in front of me, and stay with me” he ordered Nao, holding the ridiculously small towel he had been provided in front of his privates. . . But the pain in his body was such that he soon slipped into the water, ignoring the discreet side-long stares of the other pilgrims. He was the only westerner, but Nao had coached him through the ritual of rinsing off first and then not dunking his head under the water, and he didn't embarrass himself.

In the early evening they dined with a group of pilgrims in the temple restaurant, on the specialty of the house, a *Gohonbo Bassho-zen* meal made from herbs and plants harvested on the mountain. “This what you need, heal you up quick,” Nao told him. Chuck was worried that the Shourai Taiyou would have spies out looking for him, but Nao reminded him that they wouldn't be expecting him here, and anyway, the priests at

the monastery didn't like Yoshida and his rough bunch. That gave Chuck an idea.

"Tomorrow I want to talk to the head guy, what is he called?"

"The abbot?"

"Yes. You think you can arrange that?"

"I try," Nao said. But now we go back to room, you sleep. You need it."

## Chapter 30

**Sakugawa's Kanreki Choice**

Detective Sakugawa was enjoying a peaceful breakfast at his host's home in Tsuruoka--a fried egg, a piece of mackerel, and rice, with tea--when Nao called him from the Haguro bus station.

"Why you leave him? Why you not here?" she screeched. It took Sakugawa a minute to place the voice, then he responded with a mixture of surprise, annoyance, and anticipation.

"Young monster. You live."

"I live. Maybe not long. I escape, but I go back. You come too. Right away. Bring help. But no police. They too much on Yoshida's side."

Then she hung up. Sakugawa closed the phone, took another bite of egg, tore a bit of flesh from the bony fish, sipped his tea, and sighed. *All this trouble because of my worthless daughter.* Well, not really. He could blame her for much, but not for the actions of Yoshida. Sakugawa shook his head slowly. He was too old to be chasing villains around on a mountaintop. He'd never done this. But he still felt a sense of responsibility, of *on* and *giri* for the clumsy, ignorant, but sincere gaijin who had given him—Sakugawa withdrew the little wooden sphere Chuck had given him from his pocket and examined it. Such a small world, and such a big threat to it. Not that he, Detective Kazuo Sakugawa, was going to solve the problem. But he must try. He sighed. The girl was right, the Japanese police were, if not corrupt, at least in sympathy with Yoshida

and his nationalist aims. Sakugawa had seen too much of this in his tenure as a detective—it was one of the reasons he had finally resigned and left the force. Whatever he did, it would have to be on his own. But he also had personal reasons—the memory of the murder he had witnessed at the meeting of Shourai Taiyou was still fresh in his mind. The time had come. Time to cash in a few favors owed, from the loathsome, distasteful characters who populated the world he lived and moved in. He sighed again. He was a small-time private detective, semi-retired, with no ambitions other than to enjoy his final years in peace. He had even thought of selling the business and retreating to a monastery as did many men of his age. He was sixty years old. He had just enjoyed his *kanreki*, symbolically born again as a baby after completing five cycles of the Asian zodiac. He had worn a red vest like an *aka-chan* to prove it. He would much rather stay home and tend to his beloved koi. Ah, well. There would be time enough for that, if he was successful and if he didn't get killed in the process. The first thing he must do, he decided, was rent a bus.

## Chapter 31

**Preflight Jitters (Big-time)**

On the Saturday before the Monday maiden flight of *Dai Shizen*, Commander Noguchi and his crew of two were scheduled to accompany the orbiter as it was rolled out from its hanger to the launch site. The convoy was to proceed at a creeping pace of three miles an hour, the space plane already hoisted vertical on the mobile launch pad, and the when in place, there would be a walk-through of the crew entering the command module. For this part of the day, he and his two fellow astronauts would be dressed in their space gear, as if they were going to fly that day, and would board the launch vehicle several hours before the simulated countdown reached zero.

His two compatriots, a man and a woman, were already waiting for him in the hangar when he arrived. Noguchi frowned. As commander, he should have been here first. Was he slipping?

“Ohio-gozaimasu!” he almost shouted. Lieutenants Keiko Omura and Mitsuru Sato snapped to attention. Omura was a stunningly beautiful woman, tall, lithe, clear-eyed and well-proportioned, who had dazzled her peers with both her looks and her ability to learn the complicated algorithms of space navigation. It would be she and not Noguchi who guided the ship back to Earth. Sato was a blocky, thickly built man, with bushy eyebrows, a bottlebrush mustache, and a wide,

stern face. Sometimes people looked at him and thought he lacked intelligence, but that was a mistake. Despite his rugby player physique, he had a keen intellect and had been chosen for this mission because he was the most adept at manipulating the various experiments that they were going to perform on this first mission. The three of them had been training together for more than a year, and knew each other well, their personal habits and foibles. Sato followed the sumo season, and had several favorites whose fortunes he tracked during the Grand Tournaments. Noguchi was a devotee of the art of Japanese pottery, and had even studied at Omoto. Omura, on the other hand, was thoroughly modern. She owned an extensive and expensive collection of Gucci bags, high-fashion shoes, and women's wristwatches. Keiko liked to comb out her long black hair, which she had resisted cutting despite space program regulations, and pin it up in elaborate coiffures, none of which resembled the demure arrangement of a geisha's hair. They all had their little strengths and their personal faults, but had come together as a team during the course of the grueling training regimen, and could move about in the space plane's cabin without bumping into each other, and pick up tasks from one another smoothly, as needed.

“Ready to go?” he asked them. They responded quickly and without hesitation:

“Hai!” said Omura, with a shake of her glossy hair. She managed to look ravishing even in the bulky flight suit.

“Hai! Let’s go today. The hell with the walk-though!” said Lieutenant Sato.

Noguchi felt fortunate to have such talented and dedicated flyers with him. As a result, it was a strain to hide from them the secret of the strange visitor to his quarters. In fact he couldn’t do it. As they climbed into their space suits for the trip to the launch site, he looked for an opportunity to raise the subject when no one else from the space agency staff was around. It reminded him of the scene in the old American space movie *2001*, when the two astronauts tried to hide their conversation from the computer HAL 9000 by turning off the sound inside the pod. As Noguchi remembered it, the machine read their lips. But there was something off today about his partners too, some undercurrent of tension that couldn’t be attributed to the closeness of the launch. Perhaps...

He was careful to wait until they were alone in back of the van bringing them to the launch site, rolling slowly behind the space plane, as tall as a twenty-story building, as it inched its way down the long tarmac toward the final earth location, before offhandedly mentioning—

“—I had a visitor yesterday.” His statement was met with a troubling silence. They waited for him to go on, but he refused, and neither of them asked who the visitor was, or what the hell he was talking about. But sensing an opening, he tried again—



“—I love those old ghost stories, where people walk through walls and all that—“

More silence. Finally, he came right out with it—

“Look, you guys are going to think I’m crazy, but to honor the team, I have to tell you, I saw, that is, a kamikaze came to me—“

He stopped. A look of relief was flooding over the faces of his two companions—

“I thought maybe you guys were playing a joke on me,” Keiko Omura said, with a long sigh following her admission.

“That’s what I thought, too” agreed Sato.

The three of them stared ahead at the towering space ship, trundling slowly down the asphalt drive. Its sleek design had solved the fuel to weight ratio that had previously required booster rockets for a vertical takeoff. The nuclear-powered engines could attain orbit without them, but was it still fundamentally a shuttle craft, not meant to travel to the moon or other planets. It landed on a runway like the old American shuttles that had been retired, but under its own power. The primary mission of Dai Shizen would be to make trips to the ever-expanding international space station with supplies and crew member exchanges. But for this first flight they would merely circle the Earth for a couple of days and run a few routine experiments.

“That’s what we all thought, then. But it was real, wasn’t it? As real as—” and he lowered his voice in case the driver was listening—“We can’t tell Mission Control. They’d boot us off and cancel the shot.”

“Agreed,” said Omura.

“Definitely not, ” said Sato.

“What does it mean? Could it be some foreign agent or agency, playing with our minds?”

“We’ll have to be vigilant, every second.” Sato stressed the point.

They put their heads together and talked in low tones.

“What did it say to you?” Noguchi asked each of them.

“He wasn’t clear. He wanted to know why we were doing this, as if there was some other reason, something else going to happen,” Sato said.

“I got the same feeling,” Omura concurred. “And he was hung up on that right-wing kook Yoshida, who seems to want to be a part of it but has nothing to do with our mission.”

“Yeah, that was strange. Either of you know anything about him, other than what has been in the papers?” Noguchi asked. They both shook their heads in the negative. “I wonder,” he said, “if we shouldn’t make some discreet inquiries.”

“Too risky,” Sato protested. “Let’s just go. Once we’re in space, no one can interfere, and security here at Tanegashima is tight.”

“Yeah, if only they could keep the ghosts out, we’d be all set,” Omura said with a giggle that broke the tension. They all sat back and

adjusted their suits, so awkward here in Earth's atmosphere. Once in space, of course, they'd change into more comfortable one-piece jumpsuits, but for this walk-through they were required to don the launch suits that protected them against the tremendous G-forces of liftoff and smashing through Earth's atmosphere. This high-tech outfit provided each of them with an automatically opening parachute in case of bailout, a radio, tools, and oxygen and and water. Right now they were carrying their helmet and gloves, but otherwise encased in almost 90 pounds of suit.

“Okay, let's chalk it up to mass hysteria, or some weird confluence of illusions. I don't know what else to do. We've worked too hard and too long to lose this chance.”

“Agreed,” the other two said in chorus. They were still a team. Noguchi was relieved.

The rest of the day went smoothly. They rode the gantry elevator up to the crew chamber, resting high atop the vehicle, entered it, sealed it, and went through a simulated countdown without any hitches. Human nature being what it is, they were all too willing to ignore the invisible threat that the Tamakaze's visit represented, especially since they didn't know what it was. That evening, their next to last before the mission, they gathered at Noguchi's apartment for a celebratory dinner. He prepared a simple meal, *udon* noodles and *wakame* salad, and served cold sake in moderation.

“Nobody can get drunk tonight, but I promise that when we return we’ll have many more bottles than this one!” Noguchi declared. He was feeling expansive, as if he had passed some test that he hadn’t even known he was taking, but his mood changed in the middle of the dinner, when they were joined by the guest that none of them ever wanted to see again. This time when Sasaki appeared suddenly to all three of them at once, there could be no mistaking him for anything other than what he was, a *kami!* He didn’t come through the wall as before, but simply materialized across the room from the table where they ate, standing in *fudodachi* immovable stance with one hand gripping the *tsuka* handle of his sword and the other on its scabbard, as if ready to draw and slash them to bits.

They all rose, and stood as a team, Omura and Sato flanking Noguchi on his left and right.

“What do you want, spirit?”

“You say, ‘when we return’ but I thought you were not coming back,” Sasaki answered in a diction that immediately identified him as from another age. No one talked like that any more. There was also a hint of disapproval in his voice.

“What are you talking about? Of course we’re coming back. If we don’t come back it means the mission had been a catastrophic failure!” Sato said with a grimace. He was trying not to let his fear show, but his hands trembled and his voice was hollow.

Omura, to her great shame, was whimpering slightly. She had always been afraid of ghosts, and though she hadn't told Sato or Noguchi, Sasaki's previous visitation had almost caused her to request to be excused from the mission. Sasaki's next words did nothing to comfort her—

“Not failure—success! Was it failure when we sank the American aircraft carrier, *St. Lo*? Or the *Columbia*, or the many other ships damaged and destroyed by our actions?”

“Your achievements were glorious,” Noguchi replied. “But they didn't result in victory for Japan.”

“Does not matter,” Sasaki answered succinctly. “We carried out our orders at the command of the Emperor. As you shall.”

“But, but—“ Sato spluttered, “The Americans are our allies now. They are the one world superpower. Surely you don't think we're going to attack them in some way?”

“The Shugendo priest Yoshida told me he had talked with you.”

“Hiroyuki Yoshida? The Shourai Taiyou guy? What has he got to do with us?”

Sasaki didn't answer immediately. He sized them up, and found them wanting. Then, in a flash, from a distance of ten feet he drew the sword and struck, a single fast, wide horizontal cut as if to say, “*I could kill all three of you right now,*” made an imaginary show of shaking

invisible blood from the *kisaki* point of the wickedly sharp blade, thrust it back into its protective sheath, and vanished.

Omura let out a stifled scream. Sato rushed toward the place where the Tamakaze pilot had stood, but it was empty air. Noguchi stumbled backwards and almost knocked over the sake bottle. He picked it up and looked at it as if wondering whether they might have been drugged, but there was no getting around it, they had seen him together this time. “What do we do now?” he wondered aloud.

“Nothing,” said Sato.

“Yoshida—“ Noguchi began, but Sato cut him off—

“Yoshida is powerful in his world. He must have somehow made contact with the spirits of kamikaze. But he supports our mission. And anyway, he can’t touch us. If we raise this, if we tell anyone, the space agency will delay, and the honor will go to another flight crew.

“Keiko? Lieutenant Omura? What is your opinion?”

Omura had not fully recovered from her fright. She gathered herself and showed the courage that had led her to be an astronaut.

“I want to fly,” she said. “But I am afraid. If he appears in the cabin of the space plane while we are in orbit, where could we go?” Her question hung in the air for a minute.

“I got the sense that his quarrel is more with Yoshida now than with us.” Noguchi answered. “He didn’t think much of us moderns, that’s

for sure, though why I don't know, except that none of us uses a *katana*. But we were straightforward with him. Apparently Yoshida was not."

"But, that other world, I never believed it even existed," Omura said. "I thought it was only my grandmother telling tales."

"Me too," said Sato. "I'm a scientist. This is outside my realm."

"And mine," Noguchi echoed. "Look at it this way. We've been given a great gift. We've seen behind the veil. Not many have that opportunity. When we return from our mission, and we will return," he emphasized, "There'll be time to study this phenomenon." He looked at his two fellow astronauts, Omura pale, Sato flushing and sweating slightly. He picked up the sake bottle.

"I propose a toast," he said, and filled their cups. Omura took the bottle from him and filled Noguchi's cup. He raised it. "To the eternal spirit of the kamikaze, who loved their country as we do, and were willing to give their lives, as we are." He paused. "And to the mission."

"To the mission," Sato responded.

"To the mission," Omura seconded. They drank, their minds filled with dread, foreboding, and anticipation.

Chapter 32

**Chuck Becomes a Monk**

Almost as soon as they returned to their room, Chuck passed out, and didn't wake up until the next morning. He was stiff and sore, but the fighters hadn't broken any of his bones, and Nao's massage and the steamy waters of the onsen had done wonders. He woke up alone, Nao was off somewhere, and by the time she came back, Chuck had dressed himself and was ready for the day. Nao told him that the abbot had agreed to see him that morning.

"You're taking good care of me, Nao-chan," Chuck said.

"I try keep you alive, that's all."

"I didn't do such a good job of that for you, did I. I mean, you fell out of the plane and I lost you."

"You got parachute on me. No parachute, no Nao." She was matter of fact about the whole thing. Chuck realized that he had underestimated this tough, resourceful girl from an old family by way of the streets of Tokyo. She was like Soji, wise beyond her years.

"When you go before abbot, you bow, very low. In seiza if you can. He a very big guy around here. Very powerful. He hate Yoshida. He help us, I bet."

"Okay, I will."



There was nothing in the morning paper, which somehow had gotten delivered to the small gift shop up here at the summit, about the blasting open of the Shourai Taoyou gate. Yoshida must have been busy suppressing coverage of the event.

After another simple breakfast of rice and vegetables topped with an *umaboshi* pickled plum (Chuck was getting used to eating rice at every meal now) they wandered the grounds, admiring the immaculately manicured gardens, until they were summoned to the abbot.

Two junior monks led Chuck into a small room where the abbot received visitors. Nao stayed outside. Chuck knelt and bowed. The abbot was an imposing character named Seiki. With his shaved head, broad shoulders, and fixed scowl, he looked like he could have made short work of any of Yoshida's men. He began to speak to him in Japanese, but Chuck couldn't follow him. Unperturbed, the abbot called Nao into the room. She too bowed, formally, touching her forehead to the tatami mat.

"Is he okay?" Abbot Seiki asked Nao in Japanese.

"He needs more rest. Thank you for our lodgings. The Haguro food is reviving him," Nao answered, while Chuck looked on silently, not able to follow the quick exchange.

"You were in Shourai Taiyou yesterday?"

"Yes. We escaped. Yoshida is going to blow up the space plane on America, day after tomorrow." Nao was blunt. She didn't want to waste the abbot's time. He showed no surprise whatsoever. At the mention of

Yoshida, a dark, un-Buddhist look passed across Abbot Seiki's face, as if he was having to control himself from rushing up there himself and crushing the interloper with his bare hands. Monks had been on this mountain for hundreds of years before the arrival of Shourai Taiyou. They would be here long after Yoshida and his kind were gone.

“Why don't you go to the authorities?”

“Which ones? Did they do anything yesterday when they found the gate knocked down?”

“I see your point,” Seiki said. He was a disciple of non-discrimination. Nao's strange appearance, and Chuck's purpled face did not keep him from grasping the inherent truth of the situation. “How may I help you?” Nao turned to Chuck.

“He wants to know how he can help us.”

“I want to become a monk for the next couple of days.” Nao rolled her eyes, but translated for the abbot, who nodded his assent. “You too,” Chuck added to Nao.

“Forget it,” said Nao, but the abbot caught Chuck's meaning and indicated that Nao too would be welcome. Before he dismissed them, the abbot said:

“As a Buddhist, I cannot help you do violence, but if you stop Yoshida, it would be a blessing on the whole world, so I will do this much.”

Within an hour, Chuck and Nao were outfitted in the robes, straw hats, and straw sandals of mountain monks, and were put to work tending the gardens at the Sanzan Gosaiden temple, just below and to the right of Saikan. If he kept his hat pulled down over his hair and face, Chuck could almost pass for a monk, and Nao too. The drab robes disguised them well. Later in the afternoon, under the pretext of lighting some of the tourou candles along the Haguro steps, they were able to approach within a hundred yards of Shourai Taiyou without being discovered. The front gate had already been repaired. Except for a little construction debris one would never have known that yesterday Soji had blown it wide open.

“That worked once, but it wouldn’t work again,” Chuck commented.

“This time you need something tricky,” said Nao.

“Trouble is, Nao, I’m just not a tricky guy. I’m kind of like a plowed furrow, straight and long. I’ve never been good at subterfuge—“

“Sub-what?” Nao furrowed *her* brow.

“I’m just not devious or subtle.”

“That okay. I like you the way you are. We beat Yoshida, somehow. But not today.”

They turned back in the twilight, both watching the tourou candles quavering in the early evening wind. That night Nao gave Chuck another long massage, followed by another round in the onsen. He was losing his

inhibitions about appearing naked in front of Japanese people, including Nao, and the other pilgrims also were losing interest in him. Chuck also realized that more of the stares were directed toward Nao, her colorful hair and the fact that she was the consort of the gaijin.

“They jealous because I have such a tall, handsome boyfriend,” Nao said with satisfaction. And Chuck couldn’t help but notice (they stayed close together as he had asked) that Nao had a nice young body, with round breasts, fuller than he had imagined, if he had ever imagined them, a lovely flat stomach, and stubby but shapely legs.

After another of the inn’s healthy Haguro dinners that left Chuck longing slightly for an Iowa beefsteak, they returned to their room. Nao produced from somewhere a rather large ceramic bottle of Japanese sake and two small cups whose exteriors depicted smiling geishas. He also noticed she’d changed her cotton yukata for a sexy silk robe decorated with images of swooping swallows. He may not have been a complex man, but Chuck was a man, and he grew excited at the sight of her.

“How you feeling?” Nao asked as she poured them each a brimming cup of the deliciously warm sake.

“Better and better,” Chuck said. “Kanpai!”

“Hey, pretty good! Kanpai!” They clinked the sake cups together and drank. Chuck immediately held out his for more.

“You pour for me and I pour for you. That how it done,” Nao informed him. Chuck took the bottle and gave Nao some more, and then

she filled his cup. They toasted again. The sake was doing its work. The massage and bath and the sake were relaxing him, but the sight of Nao, sitting demurely in seiza as she poured again, prevented drowsiness.

“Ah so,” said Chuck. Nao laughed.

“I waiting for you.”

“Huh? What?”

“Didn’t Abbot Seiki tell you? This the honeymoon suite!”

“But we’re not—oh never mind,” said Chuck, and he took Nao in his arms and kissed her. Each of them was remembering that morning in Iowa, driving out to Chuck’s grandparents’ place, when they had looked into each others’ eyes and seen this moment coming. So much had happened since then. They’d been literally ripped apart from each other in a tumbling, breaking apart airplane, and found each other again on a mountaintop.

“We are so different, yet same,” Nao said softly.

“Same?” Chuck asked.

“Young. *Gen-ki*.”

“Genky?”

“Gen. Ki. Healthy. Energy.”

”Yes, only I don’t have orange hair,” Chuck teased her lightly.

“It yellow, that just as weird, to a Japanese.”

“Let’s put the light out. Let’s have only a candle.”

“Oooh, how romantic,” said Nao. And in reaching for the light switch, her silk robe fell away, and his “one size don’t hardly fit all” yukata fell away, and they fell away, far away. They made love and fell asleep, woke and made love again, throughout the night. When they finally awoke in the morning, it was to the bright and shining world of new lovers. Yoshida was still planning to blow up an American city, in less than a day, but now they had each other. Was it selfish? Yes, but it was also human. They lounged in their room, imagining themselves the only two people who had ever been in love before in the world. They were an odd couple, and they knew it, but it didn’t matter. Nao had convinced Chuck that there was nothing they could do until tomorrow, the actual day. Then, if they dared, they would try again to thwart Yoshida. Until then, they might as well enjoy themselves. Nao also secretly hoped that Sakugawa would show up, but she dared not call again, and anyway her cell phone didn’t work up here. They spent the entire day before the launch of Dai Shizen in each others’ arms.

## Chapter 33

**Eagle Scout Soji Camps Out**

A little higher up on the mountain, in Yoshida's domain, the intensity of the impending event was increasing rapidly. Chuck and Nao's escape had only magnified the cult's dual paranoid sense of persecution and righteous manifest destiny. As Chuck had seen, they had quickly rebuilt the fortification, and doubled the guards. No one was allowed in or out now—they would all remain together until the action was completed, in triumph or defeat, no one knew. Yoshida gathered his closest advisors together. Linda Wu served them lunch in a corner of the dojo, rather than in his private quarters, as if to emphasize the immediacy of it all. It was not a splendid feast, but a warrior's repast, a simple meal of miso soup, rice, and a few grilled meats to give them strength.

"How will our technicians perform?" Yoshida asked Takahashi.

"They are not soldiers. Will they stand up to the strain?"

"If they knew pressure, they would not bear it, but they are ignorant," was Takahashi's analysis. "They'll be fine, the young pups, because they don't understand what they do."

"I suppose that's for the better," Yoshida commented, leaning back on his zafu. "And what about afterwards? Are the people ready to rise up and fight for the motherland?" For a long minute, no one replied.

“There will be an investigation,” Okada the accountant spoke up diffidently. “We will be interrogated.”

“That was not my question,” Yoshida snapped with some irritation. “There will be no questions if the country is mobilizing for a great battle. Will that happen?” No one spoke.

Finally, Fujii, his loyal deshi, broke the uncomfortable silence. “Yes, sensei, the people will rally around the emperor, as you have planned. There will be chaos, but in the end the people will all become members of Shourai Taiyou!”

“Exactly!” Yoshida thundered. Whether he himself even believed it, did not matter. They were all swept up in the moment, and jumped to their feet, shouting “Banzai!” and even drawing their weapons, which most of them carried with them at all times now.

“For almost 70 years we have suffered the shame of defeat. We were been made impotent, defenseless, relying on others for protection of our borders. We were prohibited from developing the nuclear capabilities that were used against us. All this will change. In one glorious moment we will liberate Japan from the stigma of pacifism. It is the end of Article 9 of our constitution, that flimsy piece of paper that has prevented Japan from attaining its true place! Destroy those who stand in our way. Seek out and kill those who oppose us. That reminds me. The severed heads of that westerner and his foolish companion should be mounted on the walls of our compound. Where are they?”



There was another discomfoting pause. Takahashi stuck his sword in its scabbard forcefully and replied: "We will find them. Our informants are everywhere, in Haguro, in nearby Tsuruoka, even in Tokyo. They will be found. We do know who helped them escape, and he is being dealt with, even now."

"Very good, but not good enough."

"Yes, Commander."

Takahashi's weapons expertise had enabled him to discover Soji's identity. He traced the chemicals used in the explosion back to the high school in Haguro, and from there had identified Soji as the likely culprit. Two of his best men had been sent to bring the boy to Shourai Taiyou, and he expected them at any moment. After that it should be an easy matter to extract from the youth the information he needed to find Chuck and Nao.

But Takahashi hadn't counted on the inventiveness and resourcefulness of his young adversary. Soji knew they would come for him, and had vanished, leaving his worried parents a note saying he had gone on an "expedition," whatever that meant. Takahashi's men showed up at their house, tore apart his room and threatened to beat his father, but only half-heartedly, because he had greeted them dressed in his ancient costume of a yamabushi, and they were afraid of his arcane powers. It was soon obvious to the invaders that the old couple had no idea where their son had gone. After a while they left, threatening to

return but knowing that little would be gained by further harassment of these old people. They would have to look elsewhere. They would not return to Shourai Taiyou to face Takahashi's wrath, until they had discovered Soji's whereabouts.

Soji, meanwhile, was camping on the side of the mountain, not far from Basho's pond. He thought that Chuck and Nao were safely away, and was just waiting for the furor over the blown-up gate to subside so that he could go home. Soji was an Eagle Scout in the Haguro troop, and had lived off the land before. Just in case, he'd lugged another batch of potential explosives up the trail with him. As long as the late-summer weather held, he could stay up here for days, and never be found. But his natural curiosity led him to make a reconnaissance foray to the summit. He saw the rebuilt gate and, from a tree perch, the buzz of activity inside the Shourai Taiyou compound. Something big was about to happen. *"Looks like I oughta make up some more chem lab stuff,"* Soji thought with an inward smile. He'd been thrilled by the success of his first concoction, a bigger explosion than he'd intended that had done more damage than he'd imagined was possible. He'd have to tell his chemistry teacher, someday. But he was on his own now, and didn't know where Chuck had gone. He daydreamed of Nao and secretly imagined himself with her instead of Chuck, a teenage fantasy, she was way too sophisticated for a country boy from Haguro. His best plan was to wait and see who showed up, and what happened next. He decided to

come up to the compound during the day and keep watch from his perch in one of the giant cedars that overlooked Shourai Taiyou.

## Chapter 34

**The Samurai Is Identified**

In the world of the Yamabushi, the barriers between the physical and the spiritual are removed. Time and space are constantly in flux. The appearance of the Tamakaze was not an extraordinary manifestation. Soji's father, who went by the single surname Hanaki, had watched, if that word can be used for the visions that came to him in prayer, as his son had become involved with the strange American and his even stranger Japanese girlfriend, the far-reaching rampage of the Tamakaze, and Yoshida's machinations. Hanaki had trained his son well. The boy was fearless, as a Shugendo monk should be. Soji had already begun to learn the prayers, chants, and rituals, and also at an early age had undertaken the ascetic training that would make him a yamabushi too--running in the mountains while chanting sutras, living for days or weeks in isolated caves, developing his physical and mental prowess. But Soji was still a teenager. His father Hanaki was a fully accomplished yamabushi. While he led an ordinary life as a tofu maker in a small shop in Haguro, everyone in town knew that he spent many nights in the high wilderness, communing with the Shinto gods, and he was revered, even more than the priests in the temple at Sanzan Gosaiden.

As Soji had told Chuck, when Yoshida came, dressing in fancy robes and claiming to be a yamabushi, Hanaki had quietly given up his

Shugendo practice, and “hidden his light under a basket,” as is said. But his son, after a seemingly accidental (though in the karmic world of Shugendo nothing is accidental) meeting with Chuck on the streets of Haguro, had taken up the cause. When the threat became strong, Hanaki had once again resumed his yamabushi role. That’s why Takahashi’s guards had found it impossible to attack him. But this was a test of his son, and Hanaki knew he had to let Soji succeed or fail on his own. Only when Chuck was leaving the field of battle did Hanaki intervene, and only with the smallest gestures, bowing at Basho’s pond, pointing at Mount Haguro with his naginata to Nao at the bus station. Hanaki spoke no English. He could not communicate directly with Chuck. His son, a bright boy who had studied English (and chemistry!) at school, would carry the day or lose it. *Up to him*. Hanaki would watch from the small devotional space at the back of their tiny house in Haguro, as events unfolded that could have a dramatic impact on the history of Japan, and the world.

In the darkened corner of the root cellar where he had made his altar, Hanaki lit a stick of incense and sat in seiza. Now he would see if his son had learned his lessons well. This was his *shugyo*, his test. Hanaki began to chant the *Sutra on the Unlimited Life of the Three-Fold Body*:

*“There is nothing that teaches or receives above and beyond the original Buddha of no mind and no thought. Moreover, this is a single*

*Buddha, and there are not two Buddhas. Shut your eyes and contemplate the original Buddha that is without beginning and without end...”*

And his body shone like an autumn rainbow.

Chapter 35

**Japanese Bozos On This Bus**

It wasn't hard for Detective Sakugawa to find Nao's friends—that's what he did for a living. He started with the bail bondsman and the juvenile court system, gleaned a few names and mug shots, and then headed out to Yoyogi Park, where before long he was surrounded by a half-dozen aggressive characters, some sitting on their scooters, who were only mildly interested in helping their long-since lost friend.

"So the little shit is still alive, huh?" the putative ringleader said with a sneer. He was a kid himself, barely older than Nao, doing his best James Dean, or was it Marlon Brando imitation, with slick backed greasy hair, a white T-shirt, a pack of cigarettes rolled in his right sleeve, black jeans, and a pathetically under-powered and exhaust-spewing Vespa in replacement of the real motorcycle that he couldn't afford.

"Yes," Matsyuama said patiently. "And she is in big trouble."

"What's that to us?"

"Your name?"

"I don't have to tell you my fracking name."

"This is true. You do not." Sakugawa would have to entice them. It was against his principles to offer bribes. Blackmail would have to do. Sakugawa pulled out his collection of head shots and matched him up. "You are...Ryuo Shibao—" Sakugawa turned over the photo and read the rap sheet pasted on the back—"high-school dropout. Three convictions

for shop-lifting, two for grab-and-run robberies, currently out on bail for a third, facing, oh dear, a year in prison if convicted of your next offence.”

Ryuo stared at Sakugawa in anger and disbelief. “What’s it to you, old man? You got the hots for Nao, huh? You a sugar-daddy, is that it? A *Lolicon*?”

“Hardly. But I am a retired Tokyo detective. Now a private investigator. And I do have friends in the justice system.”

Ryuo’s eyes widened. *Hey, maybe there was something in this for him.* Like a good poker player, Sakugawa waited.

“Whaddaya want from us?”

“Thirty of your friends and two days of your life. In return I offer you a vacation in the mountains. Have you ever been up north?”

By late that afternoon, Sakugawa had assembled a busload of minor criminals and juvenile delinquents, and was on the main highway heading north out of Tokyo. He drove the bus himself, a legacy of his days in the police force when he’d had a commercial license. It was not a pleasant trip—his passengers were an unruly bunch, either sullenly listening to their Ipods or blasting music from retro boom-boxes, fighting with each other, throwing around the cheap fast food that Sakugawa had provided them for dinner, and racing up and down the narrow aisles in violation of all bus rules. He didn’t dare make stops along the way, but fortunately the bus was equipped with a toilet. Using a classic police



technique, he enlisted Ryuo as his enforcer and turned over discipline of the group to him. Ryuo instantly turned into a bully and minor dictator, and a semblance of order was restored.

*“Never in my life did I think I would make a trip like this one,”* Sakugawa mused as he steered the bus up Highway 4, the main route to Yamagata in the north, and beyond. He’d told his ersatz little private army almost nothing about what they were doing—for most of them it was just a lark, a chance to escape their dreary urban existence for a day or two, and maybe bust some heads. And that was enough. And as he looked in the rear view mirror at the collection of pickpockets, shakedown artists, and smalltime drug runners, he realized that they weren’t criminals, not hardened *yakuza* gangster types who would kill for sport. They were more like his daughter than he cared to dwell on, mostly teenagers whose lives had gone wrong, and who could probably still be steered into ordinary, productive existences as salarymen if someone took the time to do it. But that wouldn’t be him. Instead, he was going to hand out a cache of small arms and fling them into a battle of unknown proportions against a fanatical enemy that trained year-round in the fighting arts. It was madness, and probably suicidal! But he was duty bound, and that was that.

They slept like English gypsies in a roadside rest stop, and arrived in Haguro the next morning, foul-mouthed, unwashed, and ready for a fight. Sakugawa quickly determined that there was nothing to do in the

town, so after a breakfast for thirty of bad coffee and croissants from a local coffee shop, they headed up the mountain, before any of the tour buses. It was Monday morning. The launch of Dai Shizen was six hours away.

Chapter 36

**Old Pond, Big Splash**

It was just good timing, Soji later decided, that he had come up to his observation tree early on the morning of the launch. He'd breakfasted early at his camp by the pond, and was bored, so he decided to hike up and take his place while the dew was still hanging cold in the mountain air, before the chilly morning fog had even lifted. If he hadn't been there, he would never have seen the ragtag bunch of Tokyo teenagers, led by an elderly man in a shabby business suit who appeared to be breathing with difficulty in the thin mountain air. They were marching toward the front gate of Shourai Taiyou. He scrambled down and intercepted them before they reached the turn to the gate, where they certainly would have been seen and routed by Yoshida's vigilant guards.

He leaped out in front of them, startling the older gentleman, who threw up his hands in surprise. Before him stood a boy in the tan shorts and shirt of a Boy Scout, wearing red retro Chuck Taylor Converse All Star high-tops.

"Hey!" Soji said in a sharp but low voice. "You'd better come with me."

Ryuo elbowed his way past Sakugawa and towered over the smaller Soji.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Friend of Chuck. I can help you."

“Who says we need your help?” said Ryuo, but Sakugawa had caught his breath and reassumed his position of leadership.

“What can you tell us? Where are the American and the girl?”

“Gone.”

“No. She called me. They are still here somewhere.”

“Huh?” It was Soji’s turn to be surprised. “Well, anyway, I can tell you that a front attack on the compound is a big mistake. I did that once already. It worked then, but it won’t work a second time.”

Ryuo jumped back in. “You attacked the compound? All by your self?”

“Yes. I helped them escape. I took them to the bus station and I thought they left Haguro.”

“They must have changed their minds.”

By bits Soji and Sakugawa pieced together the story. Like Chuck, Sakugawa quickly realized that Soji was an extraordinary young man. When Soji suggested they go down to Basho’s pond and make a plan, he quickly agreed. Soji took them by another of the small trails that avoided the Haguro steps. The Tokyo teens, whose idea of a wilderness was Yoyogi Park, thrashed around and stumbled their way down the steep path. But they dug the big green frog statue, and they splashed into the pond water thoughtlessly, washing up in the algae-covered soup, to Soji’s amazement and horror.

“Friends of yours, Detective Sakugawa?” he asked wryly in a quiet moment with the elderly former policeman, who was sitting on the bench next to the frog statue, smoking his rustic tobacco pipe and recovering from the exertion of descending from the summit.

“Hardly. I have arrested two or three of them at one time or another.”

“Why did you bring them?”

“I am asking myself that question as I lie here. This is a beautiful spot. If these rabble-rousers weren’t here, I might be able to enjoy it.”

“We need news of what is happening with the launch of Dai Shizen. Is the weather good? Is the countdown proceeding on schedule? That would help us determine our plan of attack. But cell phones and other electronic devices don’t work up here. Haguro and the other two of Dewa Sanzen are holy mountains, and no towers can be built on them.

One of Ryuo’s buddies was happened to be wandering by, and overheard this snippet of conversation. “You need news? Here, use this,” he said, casually tossing a little red plastic box to Sakugawa.

“What is it?” asked Soji, who had never seen anything quite like it.

Sakugawa stared at the box in amazement. “It is the device that rescued Japan once before. It is a transistor radio.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said the teen who’d thrown it, running his fingers through his slick-backed hair. “We’re into that retro stuff. Pull

out the antenna, you'll get some reception for sure, man! We don't need no stinkin' cell towers!"

Sure enough, when Sakugawa extended the flimsy antenna and turned the dial, static gave way to the voice of an excited news announcer describing the scene at Tanegashima Island. The countdown was well underway. The astronauts were in their places. In three hours the space plane would thunder off its pad, announcing a new day in Japanese history. Just what kind of day, whether triumph and pride or tragedy and monumental shame, was still to be determined. Sakugawa gathered Ryuo and Soji with him for a conference. Inwardly he smiled at how different, and yet how much the same these two teenagers were. For them this was a big adventure, for him an uncomfortable trial. For them, the world would continue to excite and amaze, regardless of what happened in the next few hours, unless they died, but both of them assumed they would live forever, so that wasn't even in their thinking. But Sakugawa felt the weight of responsibility in a way that had never been placed on him before. He wasn't an important government minister, or a military man, but through a quirk of fate, he had suddenly been entrusted with the future of Japan. He wished that he had taken a risk and contacted the authorities. But it was too late for that. It was up to him, and these wild teens, to defeat a plot that would truly "live in infamy" if it was allowed to proceed.

“I’ve got the guys making some serious Molotov cocktails over there,” said Soji. “Not gasoline. A special mixture from chem lab.”

“Wish you’d let us bring our weapons, Detective,” Ryuo whined. Sakugawa had personally inspected and disarmed everyone who had gotten onto the bus. He didn’t want guns and knives, though he suspected a few had gotten past him. But Soji’s explosives could serve as a deterrent or distraction while they attempted to enter the compound.

“I wish I knew where those two were,” he said of Chuck and Nao. “But it’s too late. We have to go. Get those—” Sakugawa didn’t have a word for the group, they weren’t men yet, they weren’t soldiers, what were they? “—Get your friends together. We’re going back up the mountain.” Ryuo gave him a mock salute, and ran off to round up his buddies, who had grown bored with the pond and had wandered into the woods. Turning to Soji, Sakugawa said: “You are several years younger than that boy. Why do you seem older?”

“Ah, he’s okay,” said Soji. “We sure need him and his friends. Those fighters up there, they don’t mess around. They have semi-automatics, not just samurai swords.”

“That’s why we’re not going to fight them,” said Sakugawa. “Ours is a guerilla war, a battle of subterfuge and subtlety. But we must stop Yoshida before the space plane leaves the launch pad. After that, events may be out of our control.”

“They may be already,” said Soji.

“True,” said Sakugawa.

“*So serious for a teenager,*” Sakugawa thought, as he watched Soji gathering his home-made bombs in a large Boy Scout knapsack.

Sakugawa took a private moment to say his prayers. He thought briefly of his koi, swimming placidly in the water he never allowed to become cloudy or stagnant, in the large tank in his apartment. They knew nothing of his troubles, Japan’s. Or did they, he wondered. The neighbor boy would feed the fish while he was away. But what if he didn’t return? No, he must go back. His fish depended on him.

“*I will do it for them,*” he decided. He put away his pipe, lifted his weary middle-aged body off the bench, and rubbed the well-worn nose of the bronze frog for good luck.

“*Spirit of Basho, be with me,*” he whispered to the iconic metal amphibian.



## Chapter 37

**Chuck Wakes Up**

On Monday morning, Yoshida figured out where Chuck and Nao were. After contemplating the problem for some time, he thought: "*The safest place is under the sword,*" a weird variant of the same idea Chuck had expressed. His retainers had been unable to locate the two. They should have stood out in any setting, especially in a mountain town like Haguro. "*They must be close by.*" Rather than sending Takahashi's men again, he determined to search on his own. He disguised himself as a workman, borrowed a ladder and a bucket of paint from a storeroom, and took precious time on this most important day to maneuver his way to the edge of the Sanzan Gosaiden temple. And there he saw them, in the garden outside the temple grounds, just starting up toward his retreat.

"*I will deal with that treacherous abbot later,*" he thought. "*For now—*" He dropped the paint bucket and ladder and all pretence, and stepped forward and surprised them with a hidden revolver. He gestured for them to keep silent and walk in front of him, the rest of the short distance from the temple to the Shourai Taiyou gate. There he gave a special signal, and was admitted with his captives through a small door to the side of the main gate. Once inside, he tore off their straw hats and revealed their true identities. Takahashi immediately pleaded to be allowed to execute them on the spot.

“No, Takahashi. You have shamed yourself. They were here all along, and you failed to find them.”

Chuck was angry with himself. He'd almost forgotten the reason he'd come so far, had almost dishonored his grandfather's memory. Now, just as he had finally begun to take action, here he was, helpless, captured again, in the grasp of the enemy. He had no one to blame but himself. He only hoped it wasn't too late.

“Am I too late?” he asked.

“Not at all, not at all,” Yoshida replied with mock sincerity. “You have returned just in time to witness my triumph. He glanced at an expensive watch on his wrist. “In one hour and thirty-nine minutes, all will change. Come!”

With guards on either side of them, Chuck and Nao were roughly escorted behind Yoshida, across the open practice field, into and through the dojo to the hidden cave at the back, where the space opened up to a bright room filled with activity. Three different technicians ran up to Yoshida with updates. He waved them off.

“Only tell me if there is a problem. Otherwise, I assume you are doing your jobs and that all is well.” All three nodded and bowed and withdrew.

“Sit!” Yoshida commanded, and Chuck and Nao were pushed down into chairs, but they weren't tied down or restrained. Yoshida was supremely confident. Why shouldn't he be? All his plans were coming to

fruition. Nothing could stop him now. All that remained was to bring the Tamakaze into play at the right moment. He could afford to be magnanimous. “*Kukicha* tea?” he asked Nao, who had been uncharacteristically quiet ever since they were seized in the garden.

“You stay away from me. I have one chance at happiness, and you ruin it!” Nao shouted, oblivious to the surprised stares of the techies.

“Typical teenager,” Yoshida commented to the room, “Thinking only of herself. What about your boyfriend? What about *Nihongi* Japan?!”

Nao sulked. Chuck didn’t try to comfort her. He was feverishly scanning the room, seeking any way he could ruin Yoshida’s plan. It didn’t look promising. A dozen guards were stationed around the room, with two next to him and Nao at all times. The minutes dragged by. On the largest screen, mounted where everyone on the room could see it, the space plane stood in all its glory, on a dazzlingly sunny morning on Tanegashima Island. A light plume of gas vented from its full tanks. It resembled a magnificent solitary perched bird about to take flight. All the support vehicles had been moved away. Noguchi, Sato, and Omura, three people Chuck had never met but whose lives were inextricably entwined with his own, lay on their backs in the crew cabin, awaiting ignition and the shattering blast that would propel them into space.

Chuck had one hope—he knew that to summon the Tamakaze, Yoshida would have to leave the cave and cross to the main temple to

pray at the tokonoma altar. If there was ever going to be a moment when Yohida was vulnerable, that would be it.

At last the moment was upon them all. Only ten minutes remained before lift-off. Yoshida had disappeared momentarily; he returned gaudily attired in his phony yamabushi robes, this one in purple silk. He was also wearing the *Dojigiri Yatsusama* sword. Then, in his arrogance, Yoshida turned to Chuck and said:

“You, American, come with me.” His order was to Chuck only, but Nao made such a scene at the prospect of being separated from him that Yoshida reluctantly agreed to her presence. He ordered one guard to accompany them. Having watched Chuck’s fighting skills on the outdoor field, he had no fear of an attack. He wanted Chuck to see his power, and to be a representative for all Americans as Yoshida destroyed one of their jewel cities. It was *hubris* of the most dangerous kind, and Chuck hoped to make Yoshida pay for it. As the remaining minutes slipped away, they left the control room and passed through the dojo and outside. Yoshida’s warriors had gathered on the central field to wait for news. They cheered when their leader emerged, but he didn’t stop to address them. They understood. This was a sacred moment. Yoshida, the guard, and Chuck and Nao passed between the stone lions, removed their shoes, and entered the temple. Candles and incense had been lit in preparation. In the gloomy light, Chuck could see that a cabinet behind the altar had been opened, almost like the ark where torah scrolls are kept in a

synagogue, and within the cabinet a scroll much like a torah was laid out.

Yoshida mounted the altar steps and removed the scroll carefully. It crackled with age and significance.

“This is the *Kojiki*,” he told Chuck, as if lecturing a beginning student. “The oldest book in the Shinto liturgy. It relates the origins of the kami in the Plain of High Heaven. By reciting certain passages of this book, I have discovered that I can call the Tamakaze to me.”

He turned his back to them and began to read from the *Record of Ancient Matters*. Nao translated as he went:

*“The names of the Deities that were born in the Plain of High Heaven when the Heaven and Earth began were the Deity Master-of-the-August-Centre-of-Heaven, next the High-August-Producing-Wondrous Deity, next the Divine-Producing-Wondrous-Deity...*

*...next they gave birth to the Deity Great-Door-Sun-Youth; next they gave birth to the Deity Heavenly-Blowing-Male; next they gave birth to the Deity Great-House-Prince; next they gave birth to the Deity Youth-of-the-Wind-Breath-the-Great-Male...”*

“These are the wind kami,” Nao whispered in a pause.

*“...Suddenly riding in the Imperial Palanquin, he forced his way across mountains and rivers: the Six Divisions rolled like thunder, the Three Hosts sped like lightning. The erect spears lifted up their might, and*

*the bold warriors arose like smoke: the crimson flags glistened among the weapons, and the ill-omened crew were shattered like tiles...*

“Yes, *the ill-omened crew*,” Chuck thought of the Japanese astronauts when he heard the translation. And at that moment the Tamakaze appeared, a host of them, more than Chuck had ever seen, filling the temple with their presence.

Yoshida turned around and even he was surprised by the multitude before him. He bowed, deeply, and said:

“The time has come. Let us usher Japan into a new age, the age of Shourai Taiyou, the Future Sun!”

“It has started,” Sasaki responded. “Our target is in sight.”

Nao jabbed Chuck with an elbow and hissed: “Tell him about whales?”

“Huh? What? Whales?”

“Tell him. Whales. When I was to ruckus.”

“Oh. Yeah. Right. Wait!” he shouted, disturbing Yoshida’s *wa*, again. “I want to tell you all something. About the whales.”

“Whales,” Yoshida scoffed. “What do they have to do with anything? We Japanese hunt them and eat them regardless of what the world says. Don’t waste my time, we have only minutes.” He signaled the guard to seize Chuck, but Sasaki stepped forward and silently made clear that he wished to hear what Chuck had to say.

Speaking more to Sasaki than to Yoshida, Chuck continued in a rush of words: "I have seen a mother stay for days around a dead calf. I have seen a whole pod stay for weeks around a dead mother. They stick together, they take care of their own. Brave Tamakaze," Chuck continued, "aren't these brave flyers in this space ship your own? Aren't they just like you? Like my grandfather? Aren't the people of San Francisco just like you? Aren't we all of one blood, that should be shed only in honor and not indiscriminately?"

Yoshida took up the challenge. "Why should we remain unwilling pacifists under the thumb of your American government, while you continue to stockpile thousands of nuclear weapons and threaten to use them at every turn? Where is the justice in that?"

"You would send these astronauts, national heroes, to their deaths, for your glory?"

"No, for the glory of Japan."

"What about the millions in San Francisco? Don't they include *issei, nissei*?"

"What about Hiroshima? What about Nagasaki?" Yoshida countered. "This would be our revenge, finally, for those horrors."

The ghost pilot looked at Chuck steadily, waiting. In response, Chuck instinctively sat down in *seiza*, bowed his head to the floor, and then said. This is what my Zen teacher taught me: "*We learn little from victory, much from defeat.*"

“A Japanese Zen teacher?” Sasaki asked softly. “What is his name?”

“Her name was Ruth Epstein. She was a Jew, a Holocaust survivor. She knew everything about horror, death, and defeat. And yet she studied the Japanese way of peace. She lived in a farm in Iowa, USA. She has passed now. She taught me one most important lesson, a Buddhist proverb: *“The body is tortured only by the demon of the heart.”*”

The Japanese pilot grunted. This one had struck home. Both Chuck and Yoshida turned to him. He stood stiffly at attention, then bowed—to Chuck!

Yoshida smiled viciously, but a look of uncertainty had crept into his expression. “Enough talk. The time has come! Tamakaze, the space plane nearing its target. We strike now, for the everlasting glory of Nihongi.”

The image of the Japanese pilot wavered, slowly vanished, along with the rest of his squadron and all the others who had joined him. The ceremony at the temple was over. In an agony of doubt, Yoshida rushed back to the control room, with his entourage and Chuck and Nao behind him.



## Chapter 38

**Glide Path to Infinity**

The countdown and launch went smoothly. At precisely 12:39:21 in the afternoon, the space plane lifted off and headed toward orbit. Because it ascended without booster rockets, the vehicle didn't try to punch its way through Earth's atmosphere with jet-propelled muscle. Instead, after an initial firing of the main rocket, the space plane settled into a gradual shallow upward glide, skimming the edge of space. It would take several orbits to achieve full escape from Earth. There was something distinctly Japanese about its approach to space—subtle, gentle, indirect, yet sharp and powerful.

After they passed through the stratosphere, where commercial jets fly, the space plane entered the mesosphere, from where it would gradually lift into the thermosphere where previous space shuttles orbited. They were not yet in space, but at the edge of space. They removed their helmets and gloves and changed out of their launch suits, and settled in for the long ascent. The craft was heading east over the Pacific, toward the West Coast of America. The three astronauts expected to find themselves alone in this ethereal realm. But they weren't alone. They had company, in the form of, no, it was not possible—

“It's not possible!” Sato shouted, causing a momentary panic in mission control at Tanegashima Island, and a cry of joy in the kagemusha control room at Shourai Taiyou. From the frosty window of

the space plane Sato had seen, not a flight of Zeroes, but men, human beings, or their heavenly bodies, Tamakaze, dressed impossibly not in space suits but in their antiquated leather jackets, kahki pants, and caps, gliding alongside, floating weightless in the ether!

Omura was the first to act. She didn't scream or panic, as Noguchi had feared she might, but instead grabbed a camera and began to take pictures.

"What is the trouble, Dai Shizen?" the voice of the communicator at Tanegashima crackled.

"No trouble," Noguchi replied. We are experiencing slight upper atmosphere turbulence, that's all."

"Affirmative, Dai Shizen. Carry on."

"Those will never come out," Sato said to Omura after shutting off his onboard microphone, referring to the photos she was snapping furiously. "Look, even now they are—oh my God!"

A brilliant burst of light flooded the cabin.

Noguchi breathed in sharply, making a sound that registered in mission control and on his biometrics that were also being monitored.

"Asking again, Dai Shizen, is there a problem? Are you declaring an emergency?"

"Negative, ground control. We are fine up here. Just gasping at the beauty of Earth seen from space. Sorry if we startled you."

But then the space plane plunged sharply, throwing them back into their seats. They were going down!

“Dai Shizen! Dai Shizen!” the ground control operator yelled into his headset, and everyone in the control room at Tanegashima scrambled to find out why the space plane had suddenly started a steep descent. Alarm bells and buzzer warnings sounded both in the space plane and on the ground. All was cacophony and chaos. “What’s happening? What is your status? Why have you changed course?”

None of them had touched any controls. The space plane was still on a computer generated course and speed settings, but unmistakably they were descending.

“Switching to manual flight control!” Nogushi ordered, and he tried to level out, attempting to maneuver though the machine was never intended to be flown at this great altitude. But nothing he did made a difference. The wings of the plane began to glow with the heat of reentry. Unless they put the plane into a proper attitude it would soon overheat and turn into a glowing cinder. Worse—

“We’re headed for San Francisco. It’s as if it’s programmed into our flight plan!” the navigator, Omura informed Noguchi. The plane was beginning to buck and shudder from the stress of the unnatural angle of flight.

“It’s them!” Omura shrieked. “They’re doing this!” And she was right. But she continued to work on the navigation inputs, trying to find

a way to compensate for the invisible strain that was forcing them down,  
down, toward a terrible meeting with Earth.

## Chapter 39

**Taifun and More**

By the time Yoshida reached the control room, wearing his *Dojigiri Yatsusama* sword, the countdown clock to the destruction of San Francisco was already under five minutes. A tracking screen displayed the trajectory of the Japanese space plane—it had nearly reached his target!

Chuck struggled but was held fast by two guards. The seconds ticked away, to under half a minute—29...28...27...

Triumphantly, Yoshida shouted the name of Tamakaze and the ancient cry of Banzai!, but nothing happened. He yelled at his assistants, but they shrugged their shoulders. Something had gone wrong. His plan was not working. The screens showed that the space plane had stabilized, and even begun to ascend again. Just then, in this sealed cave room deep within the mountain a slight breeze began to play at the papers strewn on the control stations. The wind rose up quickly, and the familiar chaos of the Tamakaze ensued.

From somewhere unseen, the disembodied voice of Sasaki came to all of their ears: “*We reject the idea of senseless suicide and the death of innocents. This is not the real budo.*”

“You are abandoning me? You are giving up the dream of Japanese empire?” Yoshida cried out. In answer, the voice replied:

“*You dishonor that ancient sword.*”

Then, in a moment of real magic, the second sword, the sacred protector sword of the Sasaki family appeared in Chuck's hands.

As Chuck turned to Sasaki, Yoshida rushed toward Chuck. Even Chuck with his limited knowledge could see that the sword Yoshida held was the same sword the she-demon had wielded so ferociously in the cave, just a mile or so from where they now stood. Chuck stared at Yoshida, looking for some telltale sign that this was the jikininki in human form, but saw only a proud, determined warrior whose world was collapsing around him, literally. One thing was the same--the hatred he felt emanating from his opponent. It was a clash of two magic swords, demon versus Tamakaze, not quite your classic battle of good and evil, but close enough. Both were killing weapons of extreme sharpness, tensile strength, balance, and beauty. One was a hungry killer, the other a guardian, a protector. "*The sword that kills, the sword that gives life.*" And the sword that gives life must win, else all would be perpetual darkness and gloom. It must win. But will it win? In a fight with *katana*, would you put your money on, an experienced Japanese martial artist with a fanatic's determination, or a mild-mannered marine biologist from Iowa? Ha!

Yoshida rose up for a *daijodan* straight overhead cut that would have cleaved Chuck's skull in two. Sensing danger, Chuck turned and with absolute Beginner's Mind stepped in (*irimi*) and swung the Sasaki sword in an upward cut from *gaidan*. This one perfect cut would have

decapitated Yoshida, except that in a feat possibly more astonishing than the cut itself, Chuck managed to restrain the eager blade, and stopped it just under Yoshida's neck, where it sliced only the drawstring from his yamabushi cap, which fell to the floor harmlessly.

Yoshida stared at Chuck with a strange look of fear and admiration. "One cut." he murmured. "One cut." He backed away from Chuck. The *sageo* cord strings of the sword's scabbard came undone and *Dojigiri Yatsusama* dropped to floor. In one motion Chuck picked it up. Now he was like the she-demon, a two-sword wielder. But only for an instant. The Sasaki sword disappeared as magically as it had appeared.

By now the whole interior of the room was enveloped in the whirlwind. Chuck was the first one to understand what was going on...he dashed for the door, still carrying the sword and dragging Nao with him.

The panicked staff followed on Chuck's heels, leaving Yoshida, Fujii, Takahashi, and a few of his most loyal followers in the rapidly disintegrating control center. Yoshida was no longer in control. He was staring vacantly at the place where Chuck had bested him with one cut. The very last glimpse Chuck caught of Yoshida, he morphed briefly into the she-demon! Chuck's heart went out to her, but it was her choice—she looked at him ruefully, changed back into Yoshida, and turned away.

Chuck and Nao ran out the tunnel leading from the underground chamber to the dojo, and rushed for the door, where they were blown out the last few feet and knocked to the ground onto the open field by a

violent gust. A *taifun* of monstrous proportions was swirling all about them. The sky was black. Uprooted trees were flying in the air.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” Chuck yelled into the raging wind. Then his legs wobbled, and he fell to the ground. What was happening? The earth was shaking violently.

“Earthquake!” Chuck yelled, somewhat unnecessarily. Everyone else had been knocked off their feet too, and they all lay sprawled in the wreckage of the compound as the wind continued to blow debris all around them. It was as if the world was coming to an end. Then a noise even louder than the booming wind captured their dazed attention.

They turned to see the whole mountaintop rocking and quivering, the compound walls crumbling. The mountain began to slide down upon itself, sweeping aside everything in its path. Yoshida (the she-demon) and everyone inside the cave was buried under millions of tons of rock.



## Chapter 40

**Storming the Citadel**

Soji led Sakugawa and the rest around to the left side, farthest away from the monastery and the head of the steps back to town. There was no entry from the rear, fourth edge of the compound that backed up to the last couple of hundred feet at the top of the old mountain. On the left, though, the forest grew quite close to the compound walls—this is where Soji had boosted Chuck into the tree that allowed him to drop into the inner yard. That wouldn't work for thirty of them. Soji wanted to blast a hole again, but Sakugawa had another idea.

“There are hundreds of them and only thirty of us. We must even the odds. I suggest a diversion.” He called Ryuo to him and outlined his plan. Ryuo would draw off the main body of the Shourai Taiyou fighters on a chase, while Soji and Sakugawa entered the compound to look for Yoshida, and Chuck and Nao if they were there. Instead of blowing a hole in the wall, Soji set off a spectacular explosion just outside the main gate. Sure enough, the gate creaked open and a few of Yoshida's men came out to see what had happened. Ryuo's bunch had lined up fifty yards in front of the passageway, and mooned the fighters. As soon as they saw this, the enraged fighters called back for their comrades and burst out of the gate and gave chase. Ryuo's group pulled up their pants and scampered down the hillside, with most of the Shourai Taiyou in

pursuit. From afar, Chuck could hear the occasional explosion as Ryuo's crowd set off Soji's chemical bombs in their wake. The rest of Yoshida's men came out a minute after, fleeing for their lives from the trifecta of taifun, earthquake, and landslide. Later on, the police, finally shamed or startled into action by the enormity of events on Mount Haguro, combed the mountainside with dogs and helicopters and rounded up all the fighters from both sides. They had an extremely difficult time distinguishing good guys from bad, until Sakugawa showed up to sort things out. But that was later.

Soji and Sakugawa ventured inside. The wind had risen by then, and as they entered, they saw Chuck and Nao racing out of the dojo building. At that moment, the earthquake hit and they were thrown to the ground along with everyone else. And then the mountain started to come down on them.

Out of the dust came Linda Wu, holding a large but light Tai Chi sword, like the kind one would see in a Hong Kong chop-socky movie. She raced toward Nao, holding the unwieldy weapon above her head, intent on beheading her Japanese counterpart. Before Chuck could intervene, Nao cold-cocked her with a right hand. Linda Wu fell backwards like a *daruma* doll but didn't bounce back up.

"Where the hell did you learn to do that?" Chuck wondered aloud, as he dragged Yoshida's unconscious mistress toward the hole in the wall and safety.

“I watch MMA on TV,” Nao answered. Except for a bruised hand, she was fine.

“Soji!” Chuck exclaimed, seeing his young friend advancing toward them unsteadily in the first wild aftershock of the temblor.

“Sakugawa-san!” Nao screamed. The detective was unhurt but having trouble gaining his feet. Nao helped him up.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” Chuck repeated.

“Come on, go, go go!” They all yelled to each other, as huge boulders rained down onto the compound, crushing anything they landed on. The dojo building was buried under the rockslide that showed no signs of abating, as the four of them plus Linda Wu lurched toward safety.

Outside the devastated ruins of the compound, as they turned to watch the mountain toppling, something even more amazing happened. The disembodied spirits of many Tamakaze floated up out of the shattered mountain, took the shape of cranes, and disappeared into the sky. By choosing life, The Tamakaze were freed. Their long purgatory was over.

High above the compound, a Mitsubishi A6M Zero appeared and dove toward them, pulling up and slowing. The pilot, Sasaki, waggled his plane’s wings and waved to them, then threw his plane into a steep climb toward the sun, where he vanished from sight.

“You have won a great victory, my friend,” Detective Sakugawa said to Chuck, as they all lay gasping for breath outside the blown-open mountaintop.

“Couldn’t have done it without you,” Chuck answered.

“I must go find my little army.”

“What?” Chuck knew nothing of this part of the story.

“Little monster, some of your friends are presently wandering around in the jungle below us, no doubt shooting monkeys and causing other trouble. I must go rescue them.

“Wait!” said Chuck. “What do I do with this?” he asked, holding up *Dojigiri Yatsusama*. Despite his age and fatigue, Sakugawa fell to his knees when he saw the sacred weapon, which he recognized instantly.

“Yoshida had this in his possession?”

“Yes.. I think the Tamakaze want me to return to someone.”

“Indeed. It is a national treasure, a part of our history. I had not heard it was stolen. Perhaps, yes, he must have left a fake.” Sakugawa took out a pen and paper and scribbled an address for Chuck. “I, and the Japanese people, would be deeply grateful if you returned *Dojigiri Yatsusama* to this museum in Tokyo. They will want to have it back.” Sakugawa bowed, was it to Chuck or the sword? “Goodbye.”

“I have to go too,” Soji piped up. “My folks will see the explosion and feel the earthquake and landslide, and they’ll be worried about me.”

The slim, serious boy stood up. Chuck shook his hand solemnly, and they bowed to each other.

“You’re a real hero, Soji.”

“Nah. Just a high school kid with big dreams. I come to visit you in America maybe.”

“Definitely! Only—” Chuck glanced at Nao “—I might be living in Japan soon.”

Soji nodded and ran off. Sakugawa limped away, leading a still dazed and silent, weeping Linda Wu by the hand. Chuck and Nao were momentarily alone. And then the samurai made his third and final appearance. Nao saw him too, for the second time, and this time Chuck had Nao translate for him, once she got over her shock. Again the samurai uttered a low guttural passage to Chuck, through slits in the helmet vizor pulled down over his face.

“What’s he saying?”

“It’s one of Basho’s haiku.”

“Well, Basho, sure, that makes sense. I was visiting his frog pond on the way up here, the first time I saw this guy.”

Nao shook her head. “Not that one.”

“Huh?”

“Not the froggie haiku. Another one. And she recited it:

natsukusa ya  
tsuwamono domo ga  
yume no ato

The samurai grunted his approval: Chuck looked at Nao when she did not translate immediately. After a moment, Nao spoke softly:

Summer grasses  
All that remains  
Of warriors dreams

Chuck thought he understood. He shifted to seiza and bowed to the samurai and said to Nao—“Tell him, uh, tell him that the Tamakaze are free, and that, that, jeez, the only thing I can think of is American slang. You figure out the translation. Tell him: ‘*We’ve buried the hatchet, forever.*’”

The samurai was well pleased. He stamped the handle end of his naginata on the ground, and gestured for Chuck to come closer. When Chuck’s ear neared his face, the samurai said in a whisper: “Don’t forget to eat your food *oriyo-ke* style,” and Chuck understood all--that Hanaki the yamabushi was the original samurai from the story of the she-demon, come to make his presence felt in the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hanaki had unified himself with the spirit of a samurai from the Tokugawa era, a fierce warrior named Shima Sakon who had been killed in the battle of Sekigahara. It was in this disembodied form that he had appeared twice to Chuck (and Nao). The samurai bowed stiffly in his armor, turned on his heels and marched off, and Chuck and Nao never saw him again.

Chapter 41

**The Mission Continues**

In the space plane, the light was fading, the Tamakaze were gone, and Omura's navigation program had leveled out the vehicle. Noguchi took over and guided them back up toward space, and when they reached a certain altitude, the computer requested permission to resume the normal automated trajectory. Noguchi called his crew mates together.

"I think it's over. I think we'll be all right now."

"What do we tell them down on the ground?"

"It was an unknown anomaly," Noguchi declared emphatically.

Sato looked at him in surprise.

"Anomaly? Unknown? But we all saw--"

"What? We saw what? What would you tell them? That we saw Japanese ghosts in space, and that they tried to take down our vehicle? Does that make any sense?"

Omura put an end to the discussion. "Let's get on with the mission," she said simply. And so they did, and as intended became heroes of the peaceful exploration of space.

## Epilogue

*This world of dew  
Is only a world of dew  
And yet, and yet...*

Issa

Chuck and Nao married and settled in Japan. They had two of the most beautiful children you'll ever see, a girl and a boy, Tama and Kaze, with bronze-colored skin and bronze-colored eyes. Nao let her blue orange red yellow hair grow out, and guess what, it was black! Nothing like the Tamakaze incident ever happened to them again. Chuck became fluent in Japanese and rose to a position of prominence in the world of marine biology. He discovered a new species of mussel that he named *naodonta japonicensis* in honor of Nao. He also took up the study of *iaido*, and practiced it for the rest of his life, but never again achieved the sublime timing and utter purity of his first cut.

Besides being a wife and mother, Nao became a writer and achieved a modicum of fame for her very scary ghost stories, based on the cosmology of Japanese *oni* and *kami*, updated for modern audiences. Her most famous novel was entitled *Tamakaze*. It became the basis of an urban legend about what really happened the day that *Dai Shizen* took off.



Yoshida's *Shourai Taiyou* movement fell into disarray and dwindled after his death. In those circles that knew what had happened, it was considered a matter of shame that Yoshida had not given the astronauts an opportunity to decide their own fate. Instead of becoming, a martyr, Yoshida was reviled and his cult was discredited. The dojo and center (what was left of it) in Haguro was sold to Abbot Seiki of Saikan and turned into a pilgrims' hotel.

Detective Sakugawa returned to Tokyo to tend to his beloved koi. He continued to dabble in street cases, though nothing as fascinating as the one involving the Tamakaze. Every once in a while, Sakugawa would take out old Buck Branson's carved globe and meditate on it. After three years, he sold his koi and closed his office, gave half the money to his daughter, donated the other half to a home for troubled youths, and entered the Sojiji Soto Zen monastery in Osaka.

Soji Hanaki grew up to become, not a chemist, but the world's first yamabushi astronaut. But that's another story.

Lieutenant Sasaki's brother Taro did not die in the war. He became one of the founders of a group that provided aid and treatment to the *hibakusha*, the "explosion-affected people". He married and fathered two boys, enabling the family name to survive. The first son was named after Lieutenant Sasaki. And one day, at an antique shop in Ikebukuro, he stumbled across a sword that he immediately recognized as the family heirloom, buried under a pile of inferior aluminum imitations. Why had

no other collector seen its immense value? He couldn't believe his good luck. He identified the piece for certain by looking for and finding the old family inscription, just under the tsuba. But it wasn't quite how he remembered it. Some of the words seemed out of order:

*Sooner or later  
After cranes flew over, came  
Promised Protection*

The three astronauts, Noguchi, Omura, and Sato, were rewarded ten years after their first flight by being named to the first Japanese mission to Mars.

I swear on the Buddha that when I wrote this story, I had no idea that the last name of the girl in the story *Sadako and the Thousand Cranes* was Sasaki.

Grandma Branson lived for several more years, enjoying time with her great-grandchildren and even hosting a gathering with the Hayashis. The kids came to the Branson farm in Iowa frequently and enjoyed the same timeless Iowan summers that Chuck had known. When in the fullness of years Grandma Branson passed on, she was buried in the family cemetery surrounded by a white picket fence and overspread by shady elm, alongside her husband Buck. Nao planted a cherry tree that soon was strewing delicate pink petals over their graves each spring. And every so often, on the most still and windless days, the leaves and

blossoms of the tree quivered ever so gently, and the air was briefly filled with the tangy salt breeze of the Pacific.

THE END