

# Graves of Ash and Sand (Latest Draft)

## Chapter 1

### To Whom the Future Belongs

Takagi staggered through the burning sand, his blistering hand dry and red as he reached for his canteen. He swallowed his final few drops of water, bending over in a coughing fit as soon as the water touched his throat. The other three Japanese soldiers ahead of him wheezed, their breaths shallow and labored in the thick Gobi Desert heat. To them, he was just a short man slowed by his injured leg. But he pressed forward with all the strength he had left, his muscles sore, throat dry, and skin burning. And as they pushed deeper into enemy territory, he told himself he couldn't abandon these men. The only honorable choice was to hide his fear and die alongside them.

Just days ago, their comrades had been massacred in battle outside Caishen, the Chinese desert town ahead of them. He'd heard only whispers about the battle from the few survivors, enough to make him glad he wasn't a part of it. But now the four of them had been sent for reconnaissance, and death from heatstroke was probably the best he could hope for. For the proud sergeant ahead of him, this was the Greater East Asia War, and for the Americans, it was World War II. For Takagi, it was the war that had convinced him life was a punishment. But Sakata, the scrawny and overworked conscript at the front, would likely fall before he did.

Sakata halted as they came to a patch of rocky outcroppings and knelt down. Sergeant Mase, a tall, broad-shouldered man, followed Sakata's gaze and motioned for the other three to come forward. Takagi approached, and his eyes widened. A dozen lifeless bodies covered the ground, the foul odor of decomposing flesh hovering around them. Most wore Japanese Imperial uniforms, their stripes barely visible between the crusted streaks of dried blood, and he recognized two of the soldiers as Fuse and Gima from his old section. Takagi's stomach turned, and he looked away from them, his hands shaking.

Two townsmen in traditional Chinese tunics lay across the desert sand beside the Japanese, only a fraction of the Chinese mob of hundreds that had slaughtered their comrades in the Gobi Desert. They were sure to find many more bodies ahead if they continued through the sand. Over a hundred Japanese soldiers had fallen just days ago during their army's failure to take Caishen, and it was a miracle their comrades were even recognizable. The sergeant moved his hand to the pistol on his belt as his eyes darted around in search of enemies.

Takagi froze, waiting for Sergeant Mase's orders, the angry words that were sure to follow. Ogawa, the youngest of the four, glanced up from the map in his hand to the sergeant. But it was Sakata who finally spoke, taking a pistol from one of the soldiers on the ground and placing it in his shoulder pack. "Well, aren't we lucky to be here?"

Takagi's eyes moved back to Fuse and Gima as he remembered the few positive experiences he'd had with them in his old section. Back before any of them had been sent to kill or be killed, when their greatest worries had been how much they'd be allowed to eat. He'd argued over rations with Fuse and lost his cigarette lighter to Gima in a pointless wager over some card game, but he'd enjoyed their time together more than he would ever admit.

“Sergeant, we should cremate these soldiers when the rest of the army arrives,” Takagi said. “They fought with honor. The Chinese might not have the resources to honor all their dead, we can honor ours. We shouldn’t leave them to rot.”

But the men were young and low-ranking, and he knew deep down they were unlikely to be honored in any manner. Their casualties had only grown since the attack on Hawaii months ago, when the Americans declared war on them. Takagi suspected with a growing bitterness that they would be fighting for many years to come. The only concern Mase showed was for their dwindling food supply, and he seemed more concerned when soldiers didn’t die than when they did. Takagi had waited for his inevitable death, wondering just how miserable it would be, and the waiting gnawed at him. For the past week, he’d considered killing himself before anything else could.

As he looked out toward the blinding dunes, a soft groan interrupted his thoughts. One of the Chinese men moved his hand forward over the blood-soaked sand. His eyes fluttered open, then widened when he saw the soldiers. He was young, potentially in his late teens, though his bloodied face and the tattered blue changshan stretching from his shoulders to his ankles made it impossible to know for sure. The shape of his face, still somewhat visible, reminded Takagi of his younger self, before his skin grew rough and lines formed on his forehead. The young man remained frozen with fear, his wide eyes and trembling lips totally out of place on the battlefield.

He opened his mouth, blood trickling from his lips down his chin and onto his changshan. Before any of the others could react, Sergeant Mase raised his gun and shot the Chinese man in the forehead, splattering the sand with blood and brain matter. Takagi winced at the blast, but he forced himself to remain stone-faced, watching the blood seep into the sand as the ringing of the gunshot echoed off the dunes. Ogawa looked down at the dead man with a smirk. Pity had no

place here. Not this far into enemy territory. The young man's mouth still hung open, and a single eye remained visible.

The sergeant looked down at the young man with narrowed eyes, still clutching his Nambu pistol. "See if they have any water."

They searched the bodies, finding only empty canteens and empty blood-stained pockets. Sergeant Mase had been cautioned about the dangers of dehydration, but he'd paid little heed to these warnings. The four of them had more than enough bullets but little to drink, and now they would pay the price.

"We should have packed more." Takagi swallowed, his throat aching.

"That's not for you to say." Mase took a pistol from one of the dead men, confirmed it was loaded, and holstered it.

Sakata brushed sand from his uniform, glancing at the sergeant. "Takagi's leg needs time to heal. And we're about to send in our infantry anyway. What good will reconnaissance with only four men do?"

Takagi could guess at the answer, and suspected Sakata could as well. As inferior as they were to the full battalion, as doomed a reconnaissance mission was with so few men and so little to drink, it was procedure. Procedure to send out the lower-ranking men before risking the lives of the higher commanders. And the laws of honor dictated that tradition should be followed well after it outlived its usefulness.

Mase frowned, his narrow eyes boring into Sakata. But he continued ahead without a word. Takagi flinched as a bead of sweat trickled into his right eye, but he didn't have the energy to brush it away. He feared for Sakata more than himself now. Always the greatest outcasts, they'd shared rations while the men above them indulged in meat and alcohol. The two of them

had been punished more than any of the others. And unlike him, Sakata still seemed to enjoy living.

As they struggled forward toward Caishen, the large, well-built sergeant marched ahead with his head held high, boots kicking up sand. Though Mase was not known for his wisdom, few soldiers had as much confidence as he did. The sergeant had been in rough terrain before, and he endured the pain easier than the others. He reached for a flask on his belt and drank from it. Given Mase's overconfident reputation and the faint smell of alcohol, Takagi suspected it was sake, but he knew better than to comment.

Takagi wiped the sweat from his forehead. His skin burned as he touched it, and he wondered if the other three men felt as weak as he did. The bruises on his back from an unprovoked beating weeks ago still stung under the desert sun. Sakata had told Takagi if he didn't blame himself for the pain, surviving the war would be possible.

He'd never really discovered what drove Sakata's iron will. Sakata, the lowly conscript dragged from the streets of Tokyo and forced into uniform. Whose blood would never be fully Japanese if the rumors were true, and whose full heritage was known only to the commanders who hated him. Takagi could see in his eyes that he'd been fighting to survive since well before his conscription. Sakata should have run out of water first, but he'd somehow stretched out the supplies he'd been given, as if he was used to living on barely any water.

Months earlier, Sakata had made a note of the sergeant's drunkenness in front of Warrant Officer Kobayashi. The warrant officer beat Sakata with the butt end of a bayonet and stabbed him in the side, turning the conscript's insults and shouts of protest into cries of pain before leaving him to heal the wound himself. That was the trouble with Sakata. Once he got himself in

trouble, he always made it worse. Sakata should have been dead already, but he pushed himself harder than every other soldier, training with every kind of firearm.

Shortly after the warrant officer's beating, when Sakata was given nothing to eat by the bitter commanders, Takagi had handed over his last ration. The look in Sakata's eyes had never faded, and he seemed capable of wanting a future, of making his own path if he was ever allowed to. Takagi had known that feeling once, but it had faded along with his pride. When the additional fighting with the Americans had begun and rumors had spread of bloody confrontations in the Pacific, he'd felt his hope slipping away.

Takagi stumbled forward and caught himself on an outcropping, the jagged stone almost piercing his hand. He winced, his thoughts blurring, and he forced himself to focus. The sergeant glared at him before turning to Ogawa. "How far are we?"

"Ten kilometers to go." Ogawa looked from the map to the others, his face blistering and raw. "We should stop now and continue at night. If you approve, Sergeant."

"Keep marching," Mase said. "I'd like to get away from the stench of death."

"That scent is everywhere, Sergeant." Takagi wanted to tell Mase that he didn't smell much better than any of the dead men, but he knew this would only invite a punishment later. "I've heard stories of people dying out here because they walked for too long without rest."

Sakata nodded in agreement. "They should have given us more water."

"Before they decided to send us in for reconnaissance, I wrote to Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa." The sergeant stared directly into the conscript's pale face. "He taught me to ignore complaints from lowborn men with no love for Emperor Hirohito. Who had to be conscripted and forced to wear the colors of their own country."

Takagi responded before he realized what he was saying. "Aizawa also called Tojo brilliant for bombing the Americans."

Sakata smirked but said nothing. Mase turned back, his eyes flashing, and slapped Takagi hard across the face. Takagi's cheek burned, but he kept his balance. Then, as if nothing had happened, Mase turned from him and continued onward.

Takagi rubbed his cheek, relieved this was the sergeant's only response. Sakata had been beaten half to death for more innocuous comments, but by now the sergeant seemed desensitized to many of the conscript's complaints, and they'd singled Sakata out enough that contempt from him was expected. But Takagi knew better, and he scolded himself for being so foolish. The sergeant would stew on his comment about Aizawa, and alcohol would not help. It might be a relief to be executed and freed of toil, but to be stripped of his honor, to die before the others did, was the worst possible fate.

They walked for several more minutes before reaching an island of smooth sand in the sea of rocks. Mase turned back to the others. Takagi's skin had grown a shade redder, and the others were breathing heavily. Sakata was covered in burns, but he showed no discomfort.

The sergeant sighed. "We can stop now."

They sat on the ground, and Takagi winced as heat from the burning sand seared through his pants. His body ached, but he said nothing, gritting his teeth as the midday sun blazed straight down on him. The sergeant motioned for Ogawa to stand guard, and the skinny soldier leaned against a tall rocky outcropping, one hand on his pistol. Mase finished his canteen, coughing and taking a few seconds to catch his breath. Sakata did not reach for a canteen, but he watched the others with apparent interest, his hands resting on the sand.

“It won’t matter if we survive the desert,” Sakata said, watching the sergeant place his canteen on the ground. “They carry guns now in Caishen. Both the men and the women. And they have Li Bo with them.”

Mase shook his head. “Li Bo is just a legend. Follow orders, and worry about getting through this wasteland. If you ever loved your country, now is the time to show it.”

Sakata frowned and crossed his arms. “What about Takagi? You want to torture an injured soldier? Some endeavors are asking for death. My father was nothing more than a pickpocket, but he taught me that much. Taught me to keep myself alive. Walking through this desert is only the start. When we get to Caishen, we’ll be killing to survive, like we’re not already dead men.”

“Like I haven’t killed already,” Mase said.

“I have.” Sakata held his gaze on the sergeant.

The sergeant narrowed his eyes. “Enough nonsense from you. You don’t have the face of a killer. Not yet.”

Mase kept his gaze locked on Sakata but did not rise to strike him. Ogawa looked from one face to another, straightening the collar of his uniform and smirking at the standoff between the two men.

Takagi broke the silence. “Maybe Sakata is right. They say that in the battle for Caishen, Li Bo mutilated a soldier so badly he couldn’t be identified without the ID tag around his neck. The Chinese are out there, doing who knows what. They must have plans of their own.”

Ogawa laughed, looking out toward Caishen. “They’re fools. Not one of them could overpower Sergeant Mase or any of our warrant officers. I’ll enjoy seeing our commanders fill their streets with blood.”

“They’re not fools.” Sakata looked into the distance. “They’re just stubborn.”

The sergeant responded with a common smirk of contempt Takagi hated. Mase and Ogawa were more interested in army politics than in practical matters. Mase had once said that rank and military honor was more important than family, that one should value Emperor Hirohito over their own firstborn child. If Takagi died for Hirohito now, only Sakata would really appreciate what he’d done, carry on remembering him. Part of him wished the conscript would outlive him, do something with the life he seemed to value so much.

Ogawa broke the silence. “They’ve been more confident ever since the Americans started fighting us. But their allies from the West won’t save them. American soldiers are cowards with no sense of honor, more afraid than the Chinese. And still, they think they can win.”

“Of course they do,” Sakata shifted his position on the sand. “They want vengeance for Hawaii, so they just build more planes and tanks. All while we see our comrades slaughtered in the desert. If Li Bo really exists, do you want him to find you? To torture you until you beg for death?”

Tagaki winced instinctively, feeling the bruise on his face where the sergeant had struck him. It was as if Sakata wanted to be punished. If the sergeant hadn’t been desensitized to Sakata’s lack of discipline, if every man wasn’t needed on such a dangerous mission, the conscript would already be dead. Only Sakata’s dedication to training himself had kept him alive this long. But they had such little to lose now.

Ogawa smirked at Sakata, an air of superiority in his voice. “We were sent here to avenge our men. If you can’t do anything with your miserable life, then kill yourself. There’s more honor in suicide than there is in being useless. And Mase has no use for cowards. If you care nothing for honor, then you’re no different from the Chinese.”

Sakata sighed and shook his head. Mase turned to him with fire in his eyes, but a coughing fit interrupted his rebuke, and he hunched over, spilling the rest of his canteen. The sergeant paused, blinking a few times, and his hand shook, dropping the empty canteen. When he finally answered, his words were slurred.

“You want to know why they sent you and Takagi on this mission? When I volunteered, there were other soldiers I’d asked for. So I asked Warrant Officer Kobayashi, ‘Why send soldiers who haven’t killed anyone?’ He said that your lives could be sacrificed. That an injured soldier and an undedicated conscript weren’t needed for anything else. How many times must I discipline you, Sakata, before you learn your place?”

The others were quiet. Takagi studied Mase’s stern expression and felt his hands quiver, though he tried to repress his fear. Ogawa drank from his canteen, and Sakata narrowed his eyes at the sergeant.

“I tortured an American.” Mase said. “After some of Aizawa’s men captured him on Wake Island. He wasn’t big or muscular, and he didn’t try to act tough. But after I cut his throat, we found writing on the wall of his cell, a quote from his religion. ‘There is a time to be born and a time to die.’ A worthless American, but he was less of a coward than the conscript they gave me. Die with honor, if that’s what it takes to serve your country.”

Sakata leaned toward Mase, his breathing heavy. “You’re drunk. And you’re going to get us all killed.”

The sergeant scowled at him, but his anger slowly morphed into something else, his eyes studying the conscript with more uncertainty. Takagi had learned to recognize Mase’s instincts, the quick flash in his eyes that meant he sensed danger nearby. When the sergeant drank, these expressions were fleeting and sometimes unreliable, occurring at the smallest provocation.

Sakata stared at the sergeant with unsurprising contempt, the meter and a half between him and Mase seeming almost nonexistent. But he was nothing more than a conscript. All the same, seeing the sergeant uneasy for just a second made Takagi's heart pound. Before he could begin to guess what had startled the sergeant, the look in Mase's eyes turned back to anger, one of his eyelids slightly drooped.

Resting his hands on his lap, the sergeant glared at Sakata and spoke in a low hiss, his words even more slurred than the last time he'd spoken. "You will address me as Sergeant."

Sakata glared at Mase, eyes cold and focused. "Very well, Sergeant. Did you think dragging me along on this suicide mission would really help you accomplish anything? After all, you really don't believe I've killed anyone. You think I deserve to suffer like this, you and every commander I ever met. But as you said, there's a time for everything. So I waited for an opportunity to take action. You wouldn't believe how long I waited."

Sakata rose from the ground, and the others turned to him. He eyed Mase with a cold stare.

The sergeant scowled at him, pausing to process Sakata's look before he spoke. "You've said quite enough."

"Yes, I have." Sakata drew his pistol and shot Mase in the chest.

The sergeant coughed and looked from the conscript to the gun, his lips trembling as he tried to speak. He gasped for breath and reached a shaking hand toward his weapon as blood soaked through his uniform. Sakata paused for just a second before shooting the sergeant twice more, and Mase tumbled onto his side. Ogawa broke out of his initial shock and raised his weapon, but Sakata spun around, shooting him three times. The young man's body went limp as blood poured from his wounds, and he fell forward onto the sand.

Takagi's heart pounded, and his thoughts all blurred together. His hands quivered, and he fought the urge to throw up as he looked to the dead men, his fate seeming more uncertain by the second. But his body wouldn't move. He looked at Sakata, horrified, and it took what felt like an eternity before he could speak. "Are you insane?"

"Don't talk like one of those men." Sakata looked from him to the sergeant's body, still gripping the pistol. "I didn't choose to be a part of this war. I'd have left for the mountains ages ago if I had any sense. Any place is better than here."

"You're a traitor." Takagi felt sweat pouring down his face. If his life had any meaning now, he had no idea what it was. "What's left for you now? What's left for me? Without these men, I have no one."

Sakata sighed. "Come with me or go back to the base. Tell them what happened here if you want. The future belongs to those who are willing to reach out and grab it. There are military leaders I'll confront one day. Choose the future you want, and choose it now."

There was no insistence in Sakata's voice, no indication that he cared whether Takagi came with him or not. Perhaps the conscript had just lost the energy to care about anything besides his own escape. Takagi was still frozen, making no effort to reach for his weapon. "You think I have a future now? I can't just run away."

Sakata sighed again and holstered his pistol. He searched the others, taking half the rations and canteens and leaving the rest on the ground. Split between two men instead of four, the water left was enough to get Takagi back to the base. But he didn't feel relieved. There was no room for pity, but there was room for dread. Room to wish he was anywhere but here. As the conscript set off for the mountains, Takagi sat, unable to move as he stared at the dead men next to him.

## Chapter 2

### Colors of the Enemy

An armored vehicle from Caishen crawled through the Gobi Desert, scouting the wasteland for approaching Japanese soldiers. Though he was only an advisor to Mayor Guan, Li Bo had the most experience driving. Scouring the harsh terrain for signs of the Japanese invaders had become second nature to him. They had been lucky the first time, when the Japanese underestimated their fighting spirit and sent only a few hundred soldiers. They'd defeated those men easily enough with only a few escaping, but it was unlikely the Japanese would make the same mistake again. And Li Bo was sure they remembered him, the tall, broad-shouldered warrior with ripped sleeves and symbols of death tattooed on his arms.

Beside him, a round-faced young man named Zhang held a map, though Li had seen every dune and rock formation at least a dozen times and didn't need the help. Mayor Guan had cautioned against scouting for enemies alone, but Guan had always been fond of his lectures. Zhang's primary function, as far as Li could tell, was blocking his view through the side window.

Zhang drummed his fingers on the dashboard as the sky darkened above them. He pursed his cracked lips, turning to Li. "I think we went this way before."

"There's a patch up ahead we haven't been to," Li said. "Learn to be thorough with your work."

"If you insist." Zhang watched the bright sand rush past and sighed. "But we're going to be out here a while."

Li grunted, turning the wheel a hair to the left but keeping his eyes glued to the desert ahead. As a Civil Defense Coordinator preceding the battle for Caishen, he'd held at least the appearance of power, but with half their administration killed in the battle just days ago and faith in the mayor declining, he was now just another bureaucrat, carrying out whatever tasks the mayor was too busy to do. He wished he were back in the office, drinking something strong enough to make him forget the whole war. And if not that, then at least doing something that actually mattered. The future of their careers, whatever they'd be sent to do next, was up to Mayor Guan. Li wished he worked for someone who inspired more confidence.

Zhang, on the other hand, was naive enough to take pride in being the Chief of Logistics. But there was so little movement through the supply lines now that even Zhang must have known that title wouldn't last much longer.

"You don't seem to like me," Zhang said. "I knew that much even before our colleagues were killed, but now you brush me off at every opportunity. Not that it offends me. But if something happens to you, I might have to take over. Are you going to tell me if I'm ready?"

"The Japanese won't get me, if that's what you're implying. And you drone on enough for both of us."

Zhang shrugged. "You shouldn't be so overconfident. But there's a cautionary tale for every occasion. Did you ever hear of the warrior who challenged Hayakawa?"

Li turned the car as a cloud of sand blew against the window. "I assume I'm about to, as if Guan doesn't lecture me enough. Fighting the Slayer doesn't usually go well."

"In a way, he reminds me of you. Liked to drink. He lived in Da Chengzen or one of the other places the Japanese attacked. That part doesn't matter. The story goes, he was the kind of man who kept to himself. A regular thug who never let go of a grudge. Didn't you and your brother always hold grudges?"

Li sighed. "I suppose we did, some time ago. Does this warrior have a name? If he doesn't, the story's probably made up."

"Not that I heard. But that's not the point. He was a gangster or the son of a gangster, depending on who you ask. Had tattoos, like you. He was never satisfied working with anybody else, even to fight the Japanese. And when Lieutenant Colonel Hayakawa, the Slayer of Seven Thousand Men, attacked his town, he decided he would kill the infamous colonel once and for all. But he was too arrogant to ask for help. A bully who didn't get along with anyone."

Li scowled at him. "And this guy reminds you of me?"

Zhang shrugged. "He got the bright idea to attack the colonel with only a knife. He was a good fighter, but Hayakawa was better, more experienced. The warrior lost the upper hand quickly. He might have escaped with his life if he'd run when he realized the fight was lost. But he stayed, and in the end, Hayakawa managed to stab him to death with his own blade. He probably wasn't the first life Hayakawa took that day, or the last. But his death was the most avoidable of them all."

Li paused before responding, still showing the hint of a frown. “You think I’m going to get myself killed just because I’m confident? That’s what this is about?”

“There’s another version of the story,” Zhang said. “Some say the warrior survived the fight, managing to escape with only a few injuries. But running from Hayakawa and failing to avenge his town cost him his pride. So he killed himself.”

“And why tell me this? You think I’d do anything like that?”

Zhang sucked in a breath, looking out over the ocean of sand. “Maybe it’s not about you. But we did watch half of Town Hall die in this desert. We could save Caishen but not them. I wouldn’t go as far as that warrior did, but I understand now what it was like for him.”

Li shook his head. “Sounds to me like he never should have been a warrior. Killing himself just because he lost a fight. But I know the type. There are cowards, and there are people who win wars.”

They passed several dunes, some of which obscured their view. Li didn’t bother to slow the vehicle, and sand sprayed onto the windshield as he turned. As he drove around a rock formation, three figures appeared on the ground ahead of them, and Li spun the wheel to the right, sending the truck skidding. Zhang started to say something, but he stopped as Li finally regained control of the vehicle. Li gritted his teeth, doing the best he could to slow his breathing.

Zhang kept his eyes on the figures on the ground. “What happened here?”

They exited the vehicle, weapons raised. Zhang carried a bolt-action rifle, while Li carried a more lightweight Mauser pistol. Eyes darting around for enemies, Li reached toward his belt, feeling for the knife and backup pistol he always kept on hand.

As they stood in the middle of the sandy wasteland, the wind brushed against Li’s face. Sand particles flew into his eye, and he blinked, doing his best to brush them away. The breeze

was sharp and much colder than it had been an hour ago, before the sky had darkened. He walked forward, approaching bodies half-covered in sand. One man lay on his stomach, hand stretched out toward a pistol. He wore a Japanese military uniform. A second man was almost completely buried.

Another body lay several meters away from the others with the barrel of a gun in his hand, pointed at his face, and blood-colored sand beneath his head. Zhang's parable had come true sooner than expected. The man had a bruise on his cheek, as if he'd been slapped recently. Li brushed off the ID tag around the man's neck and read the name listed there. Takagi. He took Takagi's gun and removed the magazine, inspecting it before reloading the gun and placing it on his belt. Then he went to each man on the ground, inspecting their pockets and belts. Zhang watched quizzically, but he said nothing.

"You want to be more than my assistant?" Li asked. "You think you'll have my job one day? Go ahead. Tell me what you think happened, and I'll tell you if you're ready."

"The soldier with the gun must have killed the two others," Zhang said. "And then killed himself. But he didn't die facing them. He must have waited a while before taking his own life."

Li smirked. "Not quite. I checked the magazine. There was only one bullet missing. If Takagi there shot himself, he didn't shoot the others."

"So who shot the others?"

"You see those canteens on the ground? Not one of these men has any water on them. And the rations on the ground aren't enough to get all of these men across the desert. Whoever shot them took the rest of their rations. Probably another soldier, a deserter."

Zhang frowned, kneeling down and looking at Takagi's tag himself. "The deserter shot two soldiers. He must've left this man alive. If that's what happened, I understand why Takagi killed himself. But why would a deserter risk leaving a witness? Someone with a gun, no less."

"Who can say?" Li started back toward the vehicle. "He'd have gone west toward the mountains, away from the front lines. And seeing as we passed through this area yesterday, he's been on the run for a day or less. He can't have gotten far. We'll interrogate him and find out what he knows. Then we'll execute him."

\* \* \*

Sakata trudged through the desert, his forehead burning under the desert sun. A day had passed since his desertion, and though he longed to throw off his uncomfortable uniform, it was his only protection from the unforgiving sun. At first, he'd felt an overwhelming sense of relief for finally escaping the Imperial Japanese Army. Now, as he staggered forward, that sense of relief was beginning to dissipate. As the heat poured down on the back of his neck, he gritted his teeth, wishing he were anywhere else. The wind had begun to blow, but it did little more than move the hot air around, and he was struggling to keep his eyes open. Sand particles blew against his face, and the air tasted dull and chalky. Sakata estimated he'd made it about thirty kilometers since his defection the previous day, but he still had about eighty kilometers to go. Takagi hadn't been happy with the circumstances, but Sakata hoped he'd accepted things and started back toward the army base by now. Staying in the desert too long was asking for death.

He'd practiced the defection before attempting it, until drawing his pistol was down to muscle memory. But it had been years since he'd killed a man. Seeing the sergeant's expression had distracted him for a second, almost giving Ogawa a chance to kill him. But Takagi was free

now. Sakata owed the injured soldier that much for handing over his last ration. In time, Takagi would come to appreciate his freedom.

Saving the two of them had been the necessary choice, he felt certain of that much. When Warrant Officer Kobayashi had stabbed him in the side, he'd made it clear that lowborn soldiers were expendable. And Takagi never would have gotten out on his own. Pickpocketing and killing on the streets of Tokyo had never given Sakata the sense of relief he felt now. If he had to gamble his life sneaking into a Chinese town, better to do it on his own terms away from the front lines than to be a slave to the Japanese military.

As he staggered forward, an engine hummed in the distance. Sakata wondered if he was hallucinating from dehydration. He pulled out his canteen and drank the last few drops. The sound grew into a roar, and he turned. An armored car pulled around a large dune and sped toward him.

The driver had surely seen him by now. The vehicle had no markings, but it didn't matter in any case. Neither the Chinese nor the Japanese would be interested in keeping him alive. His instincts urged him to fight, though he would be slow in his weakened state. His Nambu pistol still had two bullets left after unloading on Mase and Ogawa, and there was also the gun in his shoulder pack with his other magazines. But this was a huge gamble. The two men he'd killed already had trusted him. The men in the vehicle would be prepared to kill him at any sign of resistance.

The car rolled to a stop a few meters away, and he saw two men in the vehicle. The driver stepped out onto the sand, training a pistol on Sakata. He was a tall man with broad shoulders and tattoos covering his arms. Li Bo of the infamous Li family, the man who'd existed only in

legend until now. A second gun, a knife, and a flask hung on his belt, which wrapped around a brown tunic. Sakata looked from the tall man to the one in the car, not daring to move.

The man barked something in Chinese. Sakata put his hands in the air, wishing he were wearing something other than his army uniform. The driver's eyes didn't leave him for a second. The second man emerged from the other side of the armored car, aiming his weapon at Sakata too.

Li Bo shouted an order at the second man as they approached, gesturing for him to pat Sakata down for weapons. The second man found Sakata's standard-issue pistol and the pistol in his shoulder pack, handing them over to Li before grabbing Sakata by the arm and pulling him toward the car.

Sakata hung limp, unable to keep up. Li walked up to him and struck him across the face with the butt of his pistol, knocking his head back. Sakata's vision blurred, and he tasted blood as the other man kept dragging him. His hands were forced behind him, and his captors handcuffed him. Then they shoved him into the back seat of the car. He recognized the distinct possibility that he was only alive because he hadn't resisted, and he decided keeping his mouth shut was the best way to maintain that arrangement.

The back of the car was cramped and dusty, and Sakata felt a tense dryness in his throat. He went into a coughing fit, but neither of the men looked his way. Li started the car, and Sakata glanced at the man in the passenger seat, making a mental note of his face. A few scrapes and cracked lips, but nothing that stood out. Sakata felt dizzy, and his vision was fading from exhaustion. He blinked, trying to keep himself awake. He knew what the Chinese were capable of, but he'd delayed his fate, at least. His body wouldn't be forgotten beneath the dunes.

## Chapter 3

### Waiting to Die

Sakata was jolted awake by a slap to the face. Pain flared through his skull, and he tasted blood once more. Li Bo loomed over him. Sakata instinctively jerked his hands, and the metal cuffs dug into his wrists. Pulling him out the car, Li dumped him onto the cobblestone ground. Brick walls extended a few meters high around them, with a single gate already wide open. They were in a courtyard somewhere in Caishen, Li Bo's town. Sakata's brain screamed at him to run, but he was too weak, and his captors knew it.

Li pulled him through the street, and the second man darted away. Sakata stumbled forward after Li, almost tumbling to the ground. Their destination had to be close, but every step was agony. They marched past a row of open-fronted shops and window displays. After the block of vibrant shops, the town faded into a run-down slum. A nearby building had an outside fenced area containing a few sickly-looking Chinese townspeople. Off in the distance, on the west side of the town, he saw several hills. Then on the far north side, what looked like a forest. If the Chinese had really turned this whole section of desert green, then Caishen hadn't always

been struggling financially. He'd been told the town was fifteen kilometers across each way, and a rough view of the town seemed to corroborate that.

His muscles finally gave out, and he collapsed, sharp gravel biting into his knees as he hit the ground. Li slapped him twice before finally resolving to drag him. They arrived at a windowless brick building just two blocks from where they'd parked. As Sakata was dragged in through a side door, he saw a dimly-lit corridor leading off somewhere and cells with rusted iron bars. The prison had a cracked stone floor, and the air was stale and humid.

Li stripped his uniform off and shoved Sakata into a cell before finally uncuffing him. The cell was only a few meters from the side door and about two meters across, with a large jug of water in one corner and a bucket in another. In front of his cell was a door and a hall leading off somewhere. He was the only prisoner in the building. Many soldiers had been captured in the battle for Caishen, and if they weren't here, he could only guess at how they'd disposed of. He was glad to have water at least.

Li stood against the door to the building, eyes darting toward the cell, running his fingers along both pistols on his belt. Sakata leaned against the brick wall at the back of his cell, forcing himself to stand. He wiped his brow and waited for the feeling in his limbs to return. Glaring at Sakata once more, Li reached for the weathered, steel flask on his side and twisted off the cap. As he drank, Sakata caught a faint whiff of alcohol.

Sakata gritted his teeth, watching Li Bo. He'd been put in a cell once before when he was ten after he was caught foolishly shoplifting on his own. He'd been alone a lot in those days, his father disappearing occasionally for days on end, and he'd taken some unnecessary risks. A week after his arrest, his father had arrived at the prison and managed to bribe one of the officers into

letting him out. A few days after that, his father disappeared for good. There was no note or money left behind, but by then, Sakata knew enough to survive on the streets.

The door outside his cell swung open, jolting him back to the present. The second man entered the building carrying tattered clothes, followed by a short woman with her pinky and ring finger missing from her left hand. Her changshan was stained with dirt and frayed at the hem just above her ankles. She looked Chinese, most likely a translator. They'd want to question him, given that they hadn't killed him yet. The second man threw the old clothing through the bars of the cell, and Sakata began putting it on. As the two men argued with each other, though most of the words were a meaningless haze, he thought he heard Li address the second man Zhang.

The woman glanced warily through the bars of his cell. Li spoke in Chinese to her and pushed her toward his cell. The woman turned to Sakata, brushing back her wavy hair. Her eyes were sunken, her cheeks pale and gaunt.

“What’s your name?” she asked in near-fluent Japanese.

“Sakata Ryuji.” He stepped forward. The more he cooperated now, the less of a threat he seemed, the more likely it was they might spare his life. “I’m a conscript. I defected from the army before you captured me.”

She repeated these words to the other men. Li nodded with a smirk, turning from her to the cell before she was finished. It was likely he’d guessed this much already. After a few moments, Li fed the translator the next question. She turned back to Sakata.

“The others with you. What did they want?”

Sakata paused. He’d already betrayed the Japanese army beyond the point of no return, and he had no reason to protect his superiors now. He had to convince the Chinese of that, or they were certain to torture or kill him.

He finally spoke, looking through the rusted iron bars at her weathered face. “They were coming here for reconnaissance, ahead of the army. There’s another invasion coming, a much bigger one. The army wants your iron mines, which you might have figured out already.”

Li gritted his teeth as he listened to the translation, swinging his fist at the wall. Angering him might have been a mistake, but he couldn’t count on sympathy from Li Bo no matter what he did. If he wanted to live, he’d need to find a way out himself. All he could do now was stall, hope they wouldn’t decide to kill him just yet.

As the woman with the missing fingers spoke to Li, Sakata caught a word repeated a few times that he suspected was her name. Qiao. All the other words were a garble.

Zhang interjected, saying something to Qiao, and she turned back to the cell. “Which commanders are coming? How many soldiers? When will they arrive?”

“I don’t know.” Sakata stepped forward, looking from her to the two men. “They never told me that much.”

As Qiao began translating, Li barked something at her. Sakata took another step forward. “If you learn who’s coming, I can tell you about them.”

Zhang cut in, and the two men began arguing. Qiao looked from one man to the other, opening her mouth to speak but stopping short as the argument continued. Finally, Li said something else to her, and she turned back to the cell.

Sakata looked from one face to another. He stared at Li Bo for a moment too long, and Li noticed his cold gaze, glaring back at him. The way Li hunched forward toward Sakata seemed to make even Zhang uneasy. Sakata softened his gaze, but he didn’t look away.

Qiao motioned for his attention. “If you try to escape, these men say that—”

Li interrupted her with another order, gesturing at the cell. Zhang cut in, and Li Bo glared at him. Qiao said something to Li in a hurried tone, which only made him angrier. Exhaling sharply, he stepped forward and slapped her across the face.

Qiao tumbled to the ground with a cry, a red mark forming on her cheek. Sakata flinched, his eyes flicking briefly to Qiao, then back to Li Bo, waiting to see if the man turned on him next. Qiao slowly pushed herself up from the ground with her three-fingered hand, casting a glance toward Li but remaining silent. As she rose back to her feet, Zhang stepped forward to calm Li, and Li Bo's voice grew a touch less aggressive. He turned back to the translator, issuing another order with resigned annoyance.

Qiao turned back to Sakata, though she averted his gaze. "That's enough for now."

As they left the building, he collapsed into a sitting position, letting out a breath. The way people acted was often more revealing than what they said, and he had a good understanding now of the two men who'd captured him. Zhang wouldn't do anything rash. It was Li Bo he needed to worry about, the angry captor who probably wanted to torture him and cut him into bits. For now, he needed to look for weaknesses in the prison. He would start with the rusted iron bars, see if they had any weak points. Then inspect the brick walls. For reasons he could only guess at, Li Bo had decided not to kill him just yet. And surviving this long was an accomplishment in its own right.

## Chapter 4

### Ambitions of a Dangerous Man

Li Bo respected the chain of command as much as anyone, but meeting with the mayor was still the most unpleasant part of his job. Mayor Guan's office was cramped with a half-finished coat of red paint over the old beige and a single window to the cracked street outside, where pedestrians walked past abandoned buildings. As Li stepped into the room with Zhang, he caught a whiff of tobacco and incense. The mayor's desk was covered in ink stains and crumpled papers, with an antique ashtray to one side.

As Zhang took a seat, the mayor looked up at Li with the same tired expression he'd had since the battle for Caishen. Mayor Guan was short and a bit overweight, neither of which were traits Li believed any authority figure should have. Guan ran civil affairs and controlled the town garrison, though in the recent battle with the Japanese, he'd relied on other administrators to rally the populace.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” Guan remarked. “Zhang tells me these meetings bore you. Is that true?”

“I’ve just been busy.” Li took a seat, shooting Zhang a scowl before turning back to Guan. “Zhang and I found a Japanese deserter named Sakata Ryuji. He’s being kept at the prison. I’d have killed him myself, but Zhang kept nagging me about getting your approval, seeing as the deserter didn’t want to fight for the Japanese army. I say it should be my call since I figured out there was a deserter in the first place.”

“I thought Sakata might be useful.” Zhang rested his arm on the side of his bamboo chair. “The Japanese don’t usually surrender. This one, he’s different. We had Qiao Lan translate for us, and he answered all our questions without a fight. Says there’s another invasion planned, much bigger than the first.”

Guan nodded, his lips tightening. He looked from Li to Zhang, letting out a sigh.

Li met his gaze. “You already knew.”

“I’d heard rumors,” Guan said. “Reports from some of our military scouts. Hayakawa will be leading the next invasion.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Hayakawa? The Slayer?” Li brushed a bead of sweat from his forehead, recalling the story Zhang had told him about the colonel. Nothing to look forward to. He looked at the stack of letters on Guan’s desk and wondered what other bad news the mayor had for them.

“Hayakawa leads a thousand soldiers, not to mention tanks and heavy artillery.” Guan put a finger against his lip and leaned back in his leather seat. “I keep thinking through all our possible moves. Our town garrison is only two hundred strong. In the last battle, only a few hundred townspeople joined them in the desert. Even if all thirty thousand men, women, and children in Caishen stood up to Hayakawa, we’d lose. Few civilians make good combatants. Against someone at Hayakawa’s level, untrained fighters will just be a liability. I’ve been

sending letters, trying to rally forces from the west. But our nation's army is spread thin, and Hayakwa will be here in two weeks if we're lucky. This town garrison, these two hundred untrained soldiers, they're all we're going to get."

Li considered this. "So what now?"

Guan sighed, and Li could see the tired acceptance on his face. "I've already sent for a diplomat from Hayakawa's battalion. I'll find some kind of compromise, some condition for saving the town. We offer them our iron mines, our cooperation, that has to be worth something to them. And we'll evacuate everyone we can, just to be safe."

So the fool had already given up. Mercy was a foreign concept to the Japanese, and Guan thought he could reason with the Slayer of Seven Thousand Men. He was as desperate and incompetent as ever. In the days since the battle in the desert, he and Zhang had been the ones to take defensive measures while Guan sat in his office, burning incense for his dead relatives and contemplating fate. At this rate, Li would be the decisive leader Caishen needed. And if there was any justice in the world, he would be rewarded for it.

"Negotiations? Evacuation?" Li crossed his arms. "The people will call you a coward."

Guan frowned at him. "What does it matter what they call me?"

Zhang held up his hands. "I think Li is trying to say—"

"What they think of you means everything." Li leaned forward, studying Guan's pale face. "Do you know what Enyu said to me before he and Guotai decided to stop working alongside us? It wasn't just because they saw half of Town Hall die in the desert. Enyu told me an untrained resistance would stand a better chance than any group under you."

Guan threw up his arms. "I risked my life in the desert, same as both of you. Back then, there were only two hundred Japanese soldiers. What do you want, Li?"

Li gritted his teeth. “I want you to pick up a gun fight for Caishen again. There are thirty thousand people in this town, all depending on you. Fight for them as long as you’re still breathing. But Hayakawa leads a thousand men, and that alone scares you? I’m the one who can strike fear into the Japanese soldiers. You know it and I know it. If Enyu and Guotai hadn’t left, then they would fight for you. But they’re not as patient as I am. So use me. Let me rally the garrison to meet the Japanese in the desert. You want to smoke? Burn incense for your dead relatives? You can stay here and do both. But I’ll fight.”

“Yes, yes, you’re very brave.” Guan said. “That was never in doubt. But you’ll lose to Hayakawa. And what then? It’s a death sentence for everyone in this town. The last time I listened to you, we executed every Japanese prisoner we took from the desert.”

Li shrugged. “They deserved it.”

“Yes, they did.” Guan leaned forward, pursing his lips. “But maybe we could have bargained with their lives.”

“The Japanese will never trade for prisoners of war,” Li said. “You know that.”

“I suppose now we’ll never know what their lives were worth. That’s what I get for following your advice. And now you want to kill Sakata? Without even asking him about Hayakawa?”

“Ask him what?” Li scoffed. “To guess what the Slayer will do? And what if Sakata lies to us?”

“What if he doesn’t? What if he knows something? Or has some perceived value to the Japanese? They don’t know he’s a traitor.” Guan sighed, falling back against his seat. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe we can’t trade him for anything. But making the offer, it might convince the Japanese we’re really interested in cooperating.”

Li glared at him, unable to believe what he was hearing. “If I called you a fool right now, would it impact my career?”

“You know I can’t afford to lose you, Li.” Guan looked down at his desk, letting out a sigh. “I wish I could. You tell Qiao what we discussed here. She’s part of Town Hall, even if she’s not here now. And she already knows there’s another invasion coming.”

Li rose from his seat, still glaring at the mayor. Zhang looked back and forth between them, opening his mouth to speak and then closing it. Guan met Li’s gaze, looking more helpless than he ever had. But there was no saving the man now, no changing Guan’s nature. Grimacing, Li turned away, walking back to the door.

## Chapter 5

### He Who Would Defy the Emperor

Sakata's cell smelled of sweat, blood, and his own waste. It was only a few days since his capture, but he was already growing used to the smell. He'd used the bucket once and promised himself he wouldn't use it again for at least another day. He was caged like an animal. His head still throbbed as he sat against the wall of his cell, staring through the iron bars. There was likely little he could do to delay his execution. No guard had been posted outside his cell, and he suspected the mayor didn't have the manpower to spare a guard on someone as insignificant as him. But the locked door was a good enough obstacle on its own. The cell was very old, but forcing apart the bars of the cell or finding another exit had proved impossible.

Footsteps echoed in the corridor, and a few moments later, the translator appeared outside of his cell. Her face had a fresh bruise, and she carried a paper bag. She walked slowly, the way Sakata often had after being beaten.

Sakata hadn't been fed since his capture the previous day, and the only thing he'd had to drink had been cloudy water from the jug in the corner. Once in the army when supplies were

low, he'd taken a canteen off of the sergeant's belt while the man was distracted, just as his father had taught him, finding with disappointment that it only contained alcohol.

The translator unlocked the food slot in the cell door and tossed the paper bag inside.

Sakata pulled the bag toward him.

"You're Qiao, right?" he asked, his eyes moving from her pale face to her missing fingers. "The others are called Li and Zhang?"

She nodded, gesturing to the paper bag. "Make it last. There won't be more food for a while."

Sakata paused, studying the bag for a moment before looking back up at her. "I almost thought you people had forgotten about me."

Qiao frowned. "Haven't the others come to speak with you?"

"Not since they captured me."

Qiao touched the side of her lip. "Li was supposed to question you about Lieutenant Colonel Hayakawa. That's the man leading the next invasion. You must know something."

"Yes, I served under him." Sakata rose from the ground. He remembered every beating from the army, every blow to his face. "Once I tell you everything I know, what then? I don't suppose you're planning to release me."

Qiao met his gaze before darting her eyes away. "That's not up to me."

Sakata shot her a sharp look. "Wouldn't want to disappoint Li Bo, would you?"

Qiao folded her hands, covering the space on her left hand where her missing pinky and ring fingers should have been. "You killed those three soldiers in the desert just so you could escape. You must hate Hayakawa even more than them."

“I killed two soldiers, not three.” Sakata stepped forward. “That was my decision. I don’t stand here and pretend like nothing is up to me.”

“That’s right.” Qiao nodded, slowly meeting his gaze. “Two soldiers. The third man killed himself.”

“Takagi.” Sakata stepped back, hands trembling. He should have anticipated something like this, but hadn’t allowed himself to imagine the worst. “I was hoping...I don’t know what I was hoping.”

“Yes, poor Takagi.” Qiao stepped forward, eyes boring into Sakata. “Coming here to slaughter Chinese families. I’ll make sure to cry over him.”

Sakata glared back at her. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“All right,” Qiao said. “Suppose Takagi was the greatest man who ever lived. Who are you going to blame for his death? Yourself or Hayakawa?”

“Well, aren’t you one to get right to the point? You think if you do Li Bo’s job for him, it’ll stop him from beating you?” Sakata’s voice was low and sharp. He couldn’t count on anyone else feeling sorry for him, not even the lowest of the Chinese. “You must think you’re so much better than me, keeping me locked here. I bet you heard stories about what the Japanese did at Nanking or Da Chengzen, and you think it justifies doing whatever you want to me. As if you Chinese have never bloodied your hands.”

“I was born in Da Chengzen. I wish I didn’t remember what I saw there. Sometimes I wish the Japanese had killed me.” Qiao’s eyes grew damp, and she wiped them with a trembling hand. “That’s...that’s all I’m going to say. I don’t have to tell you anything else.”

She glared at him, eyes red and watery, her lips pressed tightly together. Sakata’s eyes fell, and he let out a long sigh.

“I never saw Hayakawa,” he said. “But I saw the men under him. Major Ito, the man who broke Takagi’s leg. Warrant Officer Kobayashi, who stabbed me in the side. Hayakawa has always inspired a certain fondness for brutality. He was always careful. Too careful to put himself out in the open without a very good reason. I suppose I only know what he wants me to know.”

Qiao paused for a moment before she finally spoke. “You really don’t have any loyalty to them at all.”

Sakata looked back up at her. She wasn’t glaring at him anymore, but there was a lingering coldness in her eyes. If she’d really escaped from Da Chengzen, then she knew as much about the Japanese army’s brutality as he did.

“My father was part Ainu,” Sakata said. “That makes me part Ainu. Our people were the first Japanese natives, but we lost our power long ago. I told someone once. I don’t know why I did. But then it was common knowledge, and everyone hated me. When they drafted me, I was their servant, their tool to use. I was never a person to them. They had a hundred chances to kill me, but that would be letting me off too easy. Because my blood wasn’t as pure as theirs. Takagi was the only one who didn’t care.”

“I see.” Qiao nodded slowly, studying his expression once more before finally turning away from him.

Sakata stepped forward and grabbed the bars to his cell. “I told you what I know about Hayakawa. You have to talk to the others. Convince them to let me out of here. At least bring whoever’s in charge, whoever’s above Li Bo, and let me talk to him.”

Qiao turned back to him. “I can’t. I told you, it’s not up to me.”

“So I’m just someone you can use and then forget about? Because a minute ago, when you were pushing me for information, it sure seemed like that was up to you.” Sakata clenched his fists around the iron bars. “I bet you feel real proud, getting me to talk. Were you even born in Da Chengzen?”

Qiao’s eyes narrowed for a moment, but her expression quickly reverted to the meager ambivalence she’d shown before. “Goodbye, Sakata.”

She left him there, and he stepped away from the bars, slumping down against the cell’s back wall as the sound of Qiao’s footsteps faded into a hollow silence. His hands trembled, and blood trickled down his palms from where he’d gripped the bars. He needed an opportunity like he’d had in the desert, just one real opportunity. There was no depending on anyone else.

## Chapter 6

### An Unbalanced Game

A few days after his meeting with Li and the mayor, Zhang arrived at Xinnian Tea. The walls were bare, the old portraits that had once hung in the teahouse moved somewhere or sold. Probably the latter, given how the war had affected their economy.

In the back of the teahouse, Wang Shude, a pale old man in a wrinkled hemp shirt, hunched over his table, studying the round wooden tokens on the xiangqi board in front of him. Reliving an old game as usual, probably one with his daughter. Shude's eyes were focused, gliding over the lines on the old wooden board, and he looked like he'd barely moved since the last time Zhang had seen him.

Zhang walked past the other empty tables toward his old friend he hadn't seen for a week, glancing for a few seconds at the booth near the back, where the owner of the teahouse counted bills. The owner looked up and spotted him, gesturing toward a tea kettle. Zhang nodded, and the owner began brewing his usual order of green tea.

The old man looked up at Zhang and started resetting the pieces. “This war has taken a toll on all of us. I hope the mayor hasn’t been too hard on you.”

“He keeps me busy. Be glad you know someone who can keep you updated on the war.”

Zhang glanced at the board as the old man began arranging the pieces. “That game again, Shude? You know I can’t beat you.”

“I learned xiangqi when I was a boy.” Wang Shude adjusted his wrinkled shirt, resting his head on his palm as Zhang finished setting up the board. It was clear from the look in the old man’s eyes that he was still thinking of his daughter. “I tried teaching this game to dear Nuo. She never liked it, but I do. When she stopped speaking to me, I started studying xiangqi for hours a day. No one in my new family has bothered to ask me about it.”

Zhang slid one of the pieces forward. “I have news from Town Hall. Classified, technically. But I’d be a bad friend if I didn’t tell you. It’s nothing good.”

Shude looked him in the eye, and Zhang could see the old man’s face fall as he pieced together the most likely development. “Another invasion? How long until they arrive? A month?”

Zhang glanced back at the door as several people entered, lowering his voice. “Two weeks. Hayakawa will be leading a thousand soldiers, more or less. The toughest majors and captains the Japanese have. We’re negotiating, but that may only buy us some time. All we can do now is try to evacuate the town.”

Shude considered this. “Evacuate thirty thousand people? You mean after everything we’ve done, we’re just going to leave Caishen behind?”

“We’ll take the town back eventually,” Zhang said. “We just have to survive until then. Whether that happens depends on whether you and others are willing to cooperate. I want you to set a good example for your children.”

Shude shook his head. “We’ve been surviving for fifty years. Ever since the last war, it’s all we’ve ever done. When I was a boy, and soldiers came to our country, the men here made plans to fight them. The other fighters lamented that our nation lost the war, but I never cared about that. I cared about this town and its dedication to our country. That hasn’t changed.”

“I wish I shared your resolve,” Zhang said. “But the mayor can be very stubborn, and he’s not completely wrong. Most of us are too young, too old, or too scared to fight. We have far more liabilities in this town than combatants. You have your family to look after. If we go through with evacuation, you may not be given a choice.”

Shude nodded at him, folding his hands on the table. “I understand. You have responsibilities. And I’m just an old man. But I know people, people stronger than me. If it became necessary, I’m sure I could convince them to fight.”

Zhang looked back at the board. “I’d thought the great Wang Shude would be winning by now.”

“Move and see what happens.”

Zhang advanced his pawn, and Shude slid his chariot forward, blocking the pawn’s path. Zhang’s green tea arrived, and he sipped from the mug as Shude waited for his move. Another man entered the coffee shop and went to the other side of the room. Besides him, the teahouse was empty. Zhang looked back at the board, glad he still had time to spend with an old friend.

“And history repeats itself,” Zhang studied the pieces. “How many times must we find ourselves in this very position?”

“I’m a slave to routine,” Shude said, glancing around the teahouse he never seemed to leave. “Most men don’t live to fifty-three, and maybe they’re the lucky ones. They don’t grow to be stubborn. We’ve had wars for all of human history, but nothing deters me from my course.”

“And that’s all very admirable. But if you stay here, you’re asking to be killed. Who’s going to save us? Your friend with the gold bracelet? Ever going to tell me anything else about him?”

Shude smiled at this but did not take the bait. The old man stayed well-connected with all sorts of important people, and Zhang suspected that his good sense of discretion was part of what enabled this trust.

“I know you’re being reasonable,” Shude said after a pause. “But even still, I’d rather be here than anywhere else. Caishen is where I’d want to die. I’ll never forget the day pomegranate trees were put in the town square. I was only a boy.”

Zhang had his own memories, and it pained him to ask the old man to leave the town. There were so many traditions unique to Caishen, festivals and holidays that few other towns even knew about. Festivals that Shude had once loved but now avoided. They wouldn’t have many more chances to celebrate.

Zhang looked from the pieces on the board to the old man. “Even with an impending invasion, we keep to our traditions. Our unique traditions especially. Will you be coming to the Pomegranate Festival, stubborn as you are?”

“If my kids drag me there, I might. The trees are pretty enough without a dozen food stands and a roaring crowd cluttering up the street. I never liked these celebrations that last more than a day. Especially since we just got finished with the last one. You think our ancestors care

how much of our time we waste at festivals while the Japanese invade our homeland? We've got more dead than we can ever commemorate. And the Japanese will give us plenty more to honor."

"But they are our ancestors. And that's why we remember them."

"Nuo isn't going," Shude said finally.

"You've talked to her?"

Shude shook his head. "I used to go to the festivals, hoping she would be there. I guess I thought since we'd gone together in the past, she might still show up. Now, I know better."

"She'll come around sooner or later."

"I've had a lot of time to think," Shude said. "I'm sure she has as well. When I first married my second wife, Nuo was distant, but not like she is now."

Zhang pressed his fingertips together. "She won't be distant forever. You're a good man, and she'll see that."

Shude shook his head. "I've never been a good man. I don't know that Nuo will ever forgive me for leaving her mother. I'd go to her, but if she wanted to talk to me, she'd have made that clear by now."

"My grandfather always put things off. When he got older, he said he should've spent more time with his family."

"We all put things off," Shude eyed him with the hint of a smile. "You call it surviving."

Zhang glanced down at the board. "It's your move."

Shude slid his cannon forward, capturing the last of Zhang's pawns. "Look at your position carefully, friend."

Zhang looked back at the pieces and sighed, not bothering to counter. "You win again. And I'd almost thought the game was even this time."

Shude shrugged. "You don't know me well enough."

"I'll beat you one of these days." Zhang rose from the table, leaving a few coins by the board. "Here, this should cover both of us. I'll be sure to tell you if anything changes."

"Thank you," Shude said, still staring at the board.

Zhang left as the sun began to set, taking a final look back at the old man. Shude continued studying the pieces, a far-off look on his face.

\* \* \*

The Japanese diplomat that Guan had sent for arrived at Town Hall a week later. He was almost as short as the mayor, with slicked-back hair and narrow spectacles that hugged his round face. He wore a black wool frock coat and carried no weapons. In contrast, Guan and Zhang each carried pistols on their belts. The mayor had said to be ready for any dirty tricks the diplomat might try to pull.

They arrived at Guan's office, and Zhang stood as the other two men took their seats, keeping his eyes locked on the diplomat. It had not been long since the army had killed hundreds of their men, and just the sight of a Japanese superior officer made Zhang want to put a bullet through the man's head. He was glad Li Bo was out scouting the desert with members of the garrison, unsure whether Li would have been able to control his rage. He had called for blood at every opportunity, demanding executions over prisoner exchanges. The Japanese diplomat seemed more composed. He relaxed his arms, and he didn't offer Zhang so much as a glance.

"Captain...Amaki Fusao," Guan said. "You've seen our town square. What do you think?"

"Beautiful." Amaki leaned back in his seat. "You Chinese have outdone yourselves. Your pomegranate trees remind me of the trees in my hometown."

“A week ago, we found some of your men approaching our town,” Guan said. He hesitated for a moment, every bit of information he revealed a gamble. “We kept one of them alive. A conscript named Sakata Ryuji.”

Amaki’s eyes flashed. “He surrendered to you?”

Guan paused, taken aback by the bitterness in Amaki’s tone. Bargaining with the conscript’s life had always been a slim hope, but anyone less than a completely loyal soldier would be downright impossible to trade.

Zhang stepped forward, narrowing his eyes at the diplomat. “Sakata wasn’t given a choice. When he tried to resist, he was beaten until he passed out.”

Guan nodded, smiling at Amaki. “In the spirit of diplomacy, we see no reason that he should be harmed further. Presuming, of course, that our terms are followed.”

“What terms?”

Guan pressed his fingertips together. “You’ll send a few men at a time to use our iron mines. The rest of Hayakawa’s battalion stays outside of Caishen. Were they to enter, Hayakawa’s men might not know how to conduct themselves.”

“All that for the life of a coward.” Amaki smirked, shaking his head. “Hayakawa isn’t the kind of person who likes being told where his soldiers are allowed to go. Afraid a few of our men might spit on the graves of your ancestors?”

Guan’s eyes narrowed. “Do you know why we executed every prisoner we took the last time the Japanese tried to invade our town? Before our victory in the desert, your soldiers boasted that they would burn our ancestral shrine to the ground. There’s no need to speak that way about our culture.”

Amaki held out a hand. “Your terms do not matter, mayor. Here is what you will do. The streets will be cleared for Hayakawa’s arrival in four days’ time. You will shut down every arms factory in town and hand over all weapons you have. You will publicly hand authority to Hayakawa on the evening of his arrival at the town square. And you will give us full access to your iron mines. Or your resistance will be washed out with blood.”

“You’re in no position to make those demands.” Guan’s voice was steady, but his hands shook. “We still control the resources you need. And must I remind you what happened the last time you attacked Caishen?”

“An unfortunate accident.” Amaki crossed his arms. “But history will not repeat itself. If you thought your mob of commoners could defeat us, there would be no need to send for me. How have your desperate attempts at evacuation gone? Have the starving nearby towns suddenly offered to admit your people? Do you still think your army is coming to save you from Hayakawa? Shoot me now, mayor, and you will see what kind of mercy the Slayer has to offer.”

Zhang felt his chest tighten, but he kept his voice calm. “If you want to die, we can oblige you.”

Amaki laughed. “Mayor, I didn’t know your dog could speak. He has more bark than you.”

Guan rose from his seat, his eyes blazing. “I’ve heard enough. I’ll accept your terms. Go back to Hayakawa, and tell him I’ll give him his treats. Then see if he gives you yours.”

“Don’t be disappointed.” Amaki rose from the table, straightening his uniform. “There’s much more you could have lost.”

After the diplomat left, Zhang turned to the mayor. Guan's face was pale, beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. He had expected a much longer meeting and more explicit threats, but the mayor's swift concessions had made him more uneasy than ever.

"He's right about the evacuation," Guan said. "The nearby towns don't want any more mouths to feed. They've already said they won't admit refugees, even if that means leaving us to die. And he's right about reinforcements. The garrison we have is all the government can afford to give us."

"So that's it?" Zhang asked. "Hayakawa gets everything he wants?"

"Not everything." Guan walked to the window, watching the diplomat leave. "His men can occupy our town, but they won't destroy our traditions. The Pomegranate Festival and its festivities continue as planned. It's appearances that matter when making a first impression. Our town is valuable, and Hayakawa knows it. We're not going to cower in fear or give him the town square to use as his personal soapbox. He should be satisfied with complete control of the mines."

"You're going to hold festivities at a time like this?" Zhang asked.

"We'll clear streets for him. Just not the main road. We have plenty of spaces wide enough to allow a convoy through. How many men have we lost fighting the Japanese? How many boys? We promised to honor them for their sacrifices, and we will honor them. If we can't celebrate even one festival, it's all for nothing."

Zhang frowned. "You should be careful opposing someone like Hayakawa. We've fought soldiers, but not his soldiers."

Guan turned back to him, grinning and wiping the sweat from his face. "He asked for access to the iron mines. That's why they're here. If they're willing to send Hayakawa and a

thousand of his soldiers for the modest amount of iron we produce, it means they're running out of raw materials. The threat of chaos goes both ways. Hayakawa needs us to cooperate, to not sabotage the mines. He should be careful opposing us."

"Are you sure about that?"

"You've heard the propaganda about Hayakawa," Guan said. "The stories they tell to instill fear. I know the truth. When he visited the city of Xiao Hao, he spared many rebels living there to avoid a larger revolt. Hayakawa is ruthless when he needs to be, but he's not as careless as the other generals. If we show a firm but gentle hand now, we'll be respected at the bargaining table."

"What about the arms factory?" Zhang asked. "There's still that one on the east edge of town. We'll have to follow through with that agreement."

"I don't want to give Hayakawa anything he can use. When Li gets back from scouting, you should both send word to everyone you know who's worked in that factory. No more production of guns or explosives. I want all raw materials destroyed and every machine in that building dismantled. Any device simple enough for the Japanese to reconnect should be hacked into bits. I hate to admit it, but if we'd kept more prisoners alive, we might have a bit more leverage here."

"What of the conscript then?" Zhang asked. "He's no one important to them."

Guan sighed, staring at his desk. "I'd thought they might trade him for something small, something symbolic. Just in the spirit of diplomacy. If they really don't care about him, we can't use him as a bargaining chip. Maybe someone in that army cares about him, but I don't think we'll be that lucky. If the Japanese don't have a change of heart, we may as well give Li what he wants."

“That’s it for Sakata, then?”

“One less thing to worry about.” Guan turned back to him, but his eyes still avoided Zhang’s. “All we can do now is prepare for Hayakawa.”

## Chapter 7

### Losing Control

Qiao Lan walked down the main street, her mind wandering from the dark alleyways and abandoned buildings that she'd steered away from only days before. She had seen bodies carried through the street and captives tortured in the back alleys. She had seen boys as young as twelve beg for death, their limbs blown off. Dark alleyways didn't frighten her any longer.

In a day or so, the mayor would make the invasion public knowledge. For now, the truth was a burden on her. A burden on all of them, even if Zhang had certainly told his friend from the teahouse. And what kept her in line? Only honor, the stubborn part of her with a self-destructive fondness for loyalty. Whatever happened to Sakata, unlucky as the conscript may have been, her job was only to do what the others told her. Maybe running was the smartest thing.

The life she'd had before the battle days ago was gone, and this time of impending doom was as good a time as any to see the parts of the town she hadn't visited in her younger years. In the abandoned Lotus Tower stretched into the sky, by far the tallest building in the town. It might

have been one of their last sources of pride if the town had decided to maintain it. Now it was only a reminder of how far they had fallen. Most of the buildings on the main street were abandoned or closed, and there was no one else out walking. The silence was more eerie than it was calming.

She arrived at a tavern, the only place still open on the main street. The air smelled of liquor and tobacco, and the woman running the tavern had just begun putting away the bar supplies. Days before, Qiao would have shunned drinking, but she had little to lose with the occupation coming. She'd seen the tavern keeper only once before, the previous evening when the building hadn't been so empty. Dim light shone through the front windows, illuminating a table near the back. There was a half-filled glass beside a half-filled bottle of rice wine, and the tavern keeper smelled of alcohol. When she saw Qiao, she went to the table and began pouring the wine. Qiao pulled a few coins from her pocket.

The tavern keeper waved the money away, her eyes running over Qiao's tattered clothes, then to the stumps for two missing fingers on her left hand. "I'm sure you need that money more than I do. I've been doing better this year, with everyone drinking to forget the war. I might even be able to keep the tavern if the mayor doesn't try to shut it down again."

Qiao sat and took the rice wine, sipping the bitter drink. "If the Japanese came back, would you leave Caishen?"

The tavern keeper gave a faint smile, the dim sunlight shining off her dark eyes. "I wouldn't leave. There are children here. And people too old to leave. Someone would have to stay and fight. Besides, this tavern's been in my family for six generations."

Qiao nodded, and an image of the prison flashed in her mind. "What if there was only one person?"

The tavern keeper narrowed her eyes. “One person?”

Qiao paused, her fingers tapping on the counter. “One person you knew was going to be killed, but it wasn’t your place to interfere.”

“A life is a life.” The woman shrugged. “Why wouldn’t it be my place to do something about it?”

moved to the counter. “You’re very brave.”

“And you?”

“I can’t even fix my own problems.” Qiao looked up at her. “You think I have time to help everyone I come across?”

The tavern keeper sipped from her glass. “If your life was in danger, don’t you think someone would do something about it? When our leaders aren’t sending us to kill, most people want what’s best for each other.”

“No.” Qiao frowned. “No, that’s not right. Plenty of people could have done something in Da Chengzen.”

The woman paused, putting down her drink. “You were there when Hayakawa invaded Da Chengzen?”

Qiao leaned forward. “I know what people are really like. Even the neighbors you most expect to help you. You have to save yourself. Run while you still have the chance.”

“Run from what?”

“The Japanese.” Qiao sighed. “They’ll be here soon.”

The tavern keeper narrowed her eyes. “How could you know any more than the mayor? Are you trying to cause a panic?”

"I'm trying to save you!" Qiao shouted, the glass shaking in her hand. "You want to live, don't you? You thought the Japanese were just going to leave us alone because of one battle? The other towns don't want us. But you have to leave. Find somewhere far away."

"You run." The tavern keeper looked her straight in the eye. "Be a coward if that's what you want. But never think that of me."

Qiao rose from her seat, pushing in her chair. She pulled a few coins from her pocket and tossed them onto the table.

The tavern keeper looked down at the coins, then back up at her. "I told you, I don't want your money."

"Yes, you're such a hero."

Qiao turned away and started toward the door. The tavern keeper called after her, the woman's voice a light haze as Qiao left the building.

\* \* \*

Sakata stood, looking through the iron bars as Li Bo and Zhang emerged in front of his cell. Li Bo had two pistols on his belt, and Zhang carried a rifle. Sakata studied their faces. Zhang's expression was neutral, and Li glowered at him. Sakata glanced around, waiting for Qiao to emerge to translate. But the two men looked focused only on him.

Li pulled a key from his pocket and approached the cell, unlocking the door. He entered, and Sakata stepped back. Li's eyes were bloodshot, and he reeked of alcohol.

Sakata spoke instinctively in Japanese. "Are you here to release me?"

Li's fist was in the air before Sakata realized what was happening. The blow knocked him back, and he flew against the brick wall. He staggered forward, and Li punched him again, this time in the stomach. Sakata doubled over, looking up at his captor just before the next blow

struck his face. Sakata stumbled back and touched his face. It was wet with blood. By some miracle, his nose wasn't broken.

Sakata looked forward, fists clenched, eyes boring into Li. He had to be smart, now more than ever. Had to focus on keeping himself alive. But as he looked at his drunken captor, his heartbeat grew faster, breaths more ragged, pulled through clenched teeth. Even in his drunken stupor, Li seemed to notice his glare and stepped back a few paces. Looking him up and down slowly, Li turned and started back toward the cell door.

As soon as Li turned, Sakata rushed forward, ramming his captor into the iron bars. Li spun around and rammed his fist against Sakata's cheek. Sakata ignored the flaring pain and waited for the next blow, moving back and watching Li's fist. He'd been punched so many times in the army that he could see the full arc of the next swing as soon as it began. In the split second before Li's first made contact, Sakata turned and absorbed the blow with his shoulder.

The hit was harder than Sakata had anticipated, knocking him against the wall. A wave of stabbing pain shot through his shoulder, and he almost lost his balance. Sakata could tell from the sharp pain and sudden numbness that his shoulder was certainly dislocated. Sakata tumbled forward, away from the wall, blood trickling down his chin. He grabbed Li around the waist with his functioning arm, stopping his fall. His captor wouldn't like being touched, but nothing could be done to calm the man now. The scent of alcohol was strong on Li's clothing, and the fabric was stained with blood.

Sakata pushed himself to his feet and stumbled back, his vision blurred. Li swung at his head, then at his side. Sakata grimaced but managed to avoid crying out in pain, expecting his ribs to break at any moment. Unable to keep himself upright, Sakata collapsed, his shoulder

throbbing. Li walked back to the entrance of the cell, and for the first time, Sakata saw the hint of a smile on the man's face.

Sakata slowed his breathing, doing the best he could not to pass out from the pain. Li locked the cell door and left the corridor. As he disappeared, Sakata gritted his teeth, doing what he could to stop his body from quivering. He'd seen Sergeant Mase relocate a shoulder twice, and the second time he'd taken note of how it was done. From what he'd read on the subject, pinching an artery might mean losing his arm or his life. But there was no one else to fix his shoulder for him. Keeping his hand steady, he pulled his arm forward and outward to align the joint. Then he reached for his shoulder and slid the ball of his arm joint back into its socket, exhaling through his teeth as a surge of pain shot through his shoulder. After a second, the pain subsided. When he had finally calmed down, he pulled out the pistol he had taken from Li's belt and checked the magazine. It was fully loaded. Sakata crawled to the water jug in the corner and hid the pistol behind it.

If Li was as drunk as he'd looked, it was unlikely he would piece together where the missing pistol had gone. Especially when he still carried another on his belt. This was a gamble, of course, but Sakata knew he was past the point of relying on certainties. He'd rationed out the food Qiao had given him, and he'd felt his strength returning over the past week. In the military, he'd survived on less.

## Chapter 8

### A Perilous Choice

Wang Shude sat in his one-room house, watching his children fight over their favorite porcelain doll. Watching others bicker did not bother him as much as it once had, and he attributed this to the perspective that came with old age. His children never listened to his warnings against fighting, but at least they were spending time with each other. His wife, Xijuan, was at the sewing table with strips of linen from his old Tangzhuang, repairing the cotton cheongsam their daughter had torn for the second time.

They'd traded with their neighbors for better clothing with the few valuables they had, and with the impending invasion, this now seemed a bit foolish to him. Xijuan was younger than Shude's first wife, and she'd insisted their daughter begin wearing clothes with more class to fit in with the richer families. Shude had protested that Mei would find some way of ruining the dress like any rambunctious five-year-old, but these words had fallen on deaf ears. Finished, Xijuan called for Mei to put on the garment and make herself look presentable.

"Are you going to the festival?" Xijuan asked him, reaching for her purse.

“Afraid not.” Shude smiled, looking into her dark eyes. “I’m a man of old habits. Bao and Mei will enjoy the Pomegranate Festival more without an old man looking over their shoulder. They’re old enough to start making friends, you know.”

“What about your friend?” Xijuan asked. “Don’t you want to see if Zhang will be there?”

“He’ll be busy preparing for Hayakawa’s arrival. He’s a hard worker, that one. But it’s a shame the Japanese are coming. Thirty thousand of us in this town, and we’re all captives. Why celebrate at a time like this?”

Xijuan shook her head. “You heard the news from Town Hall. The mayor’s negotiated with them. I wish we could have evacuated. If we must stay here, we should stay together.”

Bao grabbed the doll from his older sister, but it fell from his hand, landing on the hardwood floor and shattering into a dozen pieces. Mei burst into tears, and Xijuan ran over to quiet her down. Shude gave Bao a stern look, but the boy ignored him. Xijuan handed Mei a rattle from the parlor table and directed her away from the shattered porcelain before running to get a broom and dustpan. Mei stopped crying, and the two children instantly began fighting over the new toy.

Shude felt his annoyance dissipating, and he laughed. “At least they know what they want. We don’t even know what the Japanese want.”

Xijuan shook her head. “They want to rule Caishen, not destroy it. Isn’t that what your friend made sure of? We’ve already shown the Japanese that fighting us to the death isn’t worth it. I still fear those men, but cowering in fear will not save us.”

“I’ve heard Hayakawa is an arrogant man.” Shude kept his voice low, glancing over to make sure his children couldn’t hear. Years ago, when he’d still been with Nuo and her mother, money had been less pressing, and the celebrations had seemed less frivolous. “It won’t matter if

the Japanese act polite at first. They'll take all the iron he can mine and leave us nothing. Even now, with an army at our gates, our mayor wastes his time organizing these pointless festivities. It feels like this whole town has given up. Some run, and others do whatever the mayor tells them. They think honoring the dead will return everything to normal. Our traditions won't keep the Japanese away or stop money from running out. Those are our real problems."

"Think of your children," Xijuan whispered back. "Bao and Mei have seen warplanes in the sky and heard stories about the massacres at Nanjing. If the Japanese are coming, let them feel like things are normal for one day. And stop worrying about money. My parents have some saved, and we can go to them if necessary."

Shude shook his head. "There's no more normal, Xijuan. With or without me. This country changed forever after we fought the Japanese half a century ago. It will change again. I promise I'll find work, even if it takes a while. You know we can't live on our savings forever."

Xijuan smiled at him as she led the children to the door. "We'll be at the market all day. They won't light the lanterns for another five hours. People will be praying to their ancestors. You want your children to pray to you after you're gone, don't you?"

Shude sighed, wondering if a single festival really deserved all of the complaints he'd made against it. "Maybe you're right. You have fun, and I'll think about it."

As his family left, Shude leaned back in his chair. There was still hope for Bao and Mei, even in the midst of war. Mei had always had a passion for learning about the world, and she deserved more, a chance for a full life, free from conflict. Shude hoped he'd convinced Xijuan that there was hope for the future. Convincing himself would be more difficult.

\* \* \*

Sakata awoke to the sound of footsteps in the hallway. It had been only a day since the beating, and his body still felt sore. Rising from the ground, he turned his back to the door and moved the water jug. He grabbed the pistol, fumbling it before managing to conceal it in his waistband. He shoved the brick back in the wall and turned to see Qiao arriving outside his cell. Alone.

“Hayakawa is arriving this evening with a thousand soldiers,” she said. Her Japanese was good, but her sharp Mandarin accent revealed itself when she said the colonel’s name. “If the rumors are correct, Major Ito will probably be with him.”

Sakata paused, wondering if he’d heard her correctly. If the goal of mentioning Ito had been to get his attention, it had succeeded. Ito was infamous for his savagery even among his own men. He’d only crossed paths with Sakata twice, but his policy of abuse had made every new recruit’s life harder.

Qiao met his gaze. “The mayor keeps telling himself he might be able to trade you for something. When Hayakawa arrives, that illusion will be shattered. You’ll be executed, most likely.”

“If Hayakawa’s coming, I’m not the only one who needs to be worried.” Sakata felt for the weapon at his waist, finding that his hands were trembling. “They call him the Slayer of Seven Thousand Men for a reason. People think they can negotiate with him, and sometimes he plays along. But if he doesn’t want to be contained, he won’t be.”

Qiao ignored these words. “I’m letting you out. The others don’t know.”

Sakata froze. “You’re releasing me? Why?”

“You don’t like the Japanese army, and there’s no way you’d go back to them now. You’ve killed two of their soldiers already. Even the mayor knows you don’t have any loyalty to them. He’d let you live, if he didn’t have some odd sense of duty telling him to kill you.”

“You’re not afraid of what he’ll do if he finds out you released me?”

“The mayor has bigger problems than a single conscript. He doesn’t care what happens to you. You can blend in with the Japanese army. You know their language. You know as well as I do that your interests aren’t aligned with theirs. You ran from them, but now they’re here, and you can cause trouble for them. So cause trouble and avenge us both. I can fight or convince someone else to fight. And we need everyone we can get.”

He stepped toward her, still shocked. “This can’t be real. You’d accept help from someone like me? Are you saying you trust me, Qiao?”

“I probably shouldn’t, you being Japanese. But I don’t trust the mayor either. Or anyone else who works at Town Hall. I have been beaten, as you have, and not by the Japanese. So I’m not asking their permission. Now here we are, both victims of our own countrymen. You must have realized the Japanese don’t care about you. You could help us. And if you don’t, we have nothing to lose anyway. The mayor has made sure of that. But would you dare go back to their side after everything that’s happened?”

“I couldn’t.” Sakata’s first thought was that Qiao had to be very stupid. But she stuck to her beliefs, to her optimistic hope that she could trust a Japanese deserter, and he had to admire that. “I should run to some town that’s not being invaded. That’s the best I can hope for now.”

“The invasion is keeping everyone busy. The next town over might leave you to starve in the desert outside their gates. Besides, are you going to let the Japanese write you off as a minor inconvenience?”

Sakata considered this. The men who’d sent him to Caishen were still alive. That was a bitter truth he’d accepted since his defection. But now his old battalion was here, full of men who’d caused him nothing but suffering. He had a better chance than he’d ever had to go after

them, and they'd done more to earn his hatred than any of the Chinese. He studied Qiao's expression, waiting for some sign that she was lying to him. But if she noticed his suspicion of her, she didn't bother to mention it.

She unlocked the cell door, and he pushed it open, stepping into the corridor. It was real, somehow, but it didn't feel that way. His clothes still carried the stench of sweat, blood, and human waste, and he staggered forward, grabbing the wall to steady himself. But he was out of the cell. One impossible task cleared. His limbs were numb, but for the first time since his capture, survival seemed like a possibility. He just had to ensure that the army wouldn't track him down.

"You really want me to stay here and fight for you?" he asked Qiao.

"You owe me your life, Sakata Ryuji." Her voice did not waver. "Hayakawa will not bring peace, and the Japanese army is no friend of yours. Go, before anyone sees you, and everyone at Town Hall will have one less thing to worry about."

He pushed himself toward the door. As he opened it to leave, he heard footsteps from around the corner near the end of the hall. Li entered the corridor, shouting something at Qiao and glancing only briefly at the cell. Then he saw Sakata by the door, and his eyes widened.

Sakata froze. Li reached for the gun on his belt, his eyes fixed on Sakata as his fingers brushed the holster. He stared at Sakata, his eyes bloodshot, his mouth agape. Sakata snapped out of his daze first and grabbed the pistol from his waistband. Li grabbed his weapon, but Sakata was faster, his hands moving before he realized what he was doing. He raised the weapon and fired twice. Li gasped as the bullets struck him and fired off a shot, striking the brick wall as Qiao screamed and pressed herself against the bars of the cell. Sakata fired at Li again, and the

large man dropped his weapon as blood soaked through his clothing. Li had been drinking again, and it had cost him precious seconds.

The blasts rang in Sakata's ears as he stumbled away from his captor. Li's body went limp, and he tumbled to the ground, his limbs contorted. Qiao screamed again and jumped away from Sakata, her arms shaking. Even after the ringing of the gunshots faded, it took several moments before she calmed down enough to look at him. Sakata wanted to run, but he found himself frozen to the ground. He blinked, smelling sulfur in the air.

Qiao's hands shook, her face pale. She looked at Sakata and opened her mouth, but no words came out. She must have considered the risks when she'd let him out, but now she'd have to remember Li's dead body whenever she thought of the choice she'd made. Sakata knew the feeling. There was no time to doubt himself, to worry about anything but moving forward. Li had threatened his life, and he'd made the necessary choice.

"Listen to me carefully." Sakata looked her in the eye. "Drag his body into the cell, and mop up the blood with his clothing. Leave the cell door open, and pray no one else is coming here in the next ten minutes. Tell them he entered my cell to beat me, and I got his gun and escaped. If you hadn't released me, I'd have had to kill him anyway."

"What about you? What are you going to do?"

Sakata sighed. "I'll be fine. So will you, but only if I leave now."

He tucked the first gun back into his waistband and grabbed a second gun from Li's belt. Then he darted out through the open door.

## Chapter 9

### Faces in the Crowd

As he stepped along the main road, Wang Shude thought back once again to what Xijuan had said about staying together. Whether she was right or wrong, it was no use living in the past, and his children did need someone to look over their shoulder, at least for now. As he'd considered all of this, Wang Shude had finally convinced himself to go to the Pomegranate Festival. If they hid at home instead of keeping to their way of life, they might never be allowed to hold festivals again. Pride was what gave them a reason to hold to their national identity in the first place.

It was early in the evening, and when he arrived at the town square, the street market was in full swing. As one of the later arrivals, he was trapped behind the roaring crowd. Rows of paper lanterns hung above the street, just as he remembered them from years past. The air smelled of fried food and burning wax, and he was glad he had returned. At the stands to his left, children ate tangyuan filled with black sesame and sugar and played riddle games. The stands to his right served hand-pulled chang shou mian and a variety of other noodles alongside dumplings, spring rolls, oranges, and pomegranates. He could taste the citrus in the air.

If he remembered correctly, the dragon dance would start in about half an hour. He looked for his family and caught a glimpse of someone who looked like his son, though pushing through the large crowd proved to be almost impossible. Several boys ran past him, almost knocking over one of the stands. Shude leaned against a food stand at the edge of the town square, glad that he had decided to come all this way.

Engines roared behind him, and Shude turned to see a convoy of military vehicles driving down the main road toward the crowd. Several boys who'd been playing in the street a few meters from the crowd darted out of the way. The truck at the front held about a dozen soldiers, and it was followed by three tanks. Shude hurried aside just as the vehicles reached the festival and came to a halt. The main road was wide enough to allow tanks and large trucks through, but the huge crowd of townspeople stretched from one side to the other. Shude's mind raced as he looked over the military vehicles. Tanks and trucks that had been used to lay waste to countless Chinese towns.

Hayakawa looked older than the descriptions in all the stories he'd heard, but he was sure the colonel himself was the red-faced man barking commands to the other soldiers from a truck at the front of the convoy, the vein on his head twitching as he spoke. He was guarded by several other soldiers and looked tall and powerful, his muscles still visible through his well-pressed uniform. Hayakawa looked over the crowd, letting out an exasperated insult in near fluent Chinese. He glanced at Shude for a moment with no sign of malice, and for a moment, the old man hoped he might be more reasonable than all the rumors he'd heard. It didn't help that the colonel had been called the Slayer of Seven Thousand Men.

Hayakawa shouted in Japanese to the other soldiers, and they exited their vehicles. The colonel sent some of the men to nearby buildings and several others to stand guard at the edge of

the convoy. Several of the men glared at the ongoing festivities, and others approached the festival, weapons on their belts. Shude moved instinctively toward the front of the convoy, hoping to get between it and the crowd. He approached the truck at the front, he bumped into one of the soldiers descending from the vehicle. The soldier grabbed his arm, pinning it behind his back. As Shude looked at the soldiers armed with guns, his heart pounded, fear overpowering all his other emotions.

Hayakawa argued with the soldiers next to him. Finally noticing Shude, he stepped off of the truck. He nodded at the soldier holding Shude, and the man shoved the old man onto his knees.

Hayakawa grabbed Shude's shoulder with a rough, scarred hand and spoke in Chinese through a heavy accent. "You are the only one not directly blocking my convoy, so I will question you. Do not make me regret that decision. Tell me, old man, where is the mayor? And what are these people doing here?"

"It's the Pomegranate Festival." Shude did his best to keep his voice from shaking. "I can't tell you where the mayor is. Are you Lieutenant Colonel Hayakawa?"

The colonel pushed Shude back, releasing the old man's shoulder. "Your mayor was ordered to clear the streets for our arrival. This blatant disrespect to me and my men will be taken as a sign of resistance."

The colonel turned away, looking offended by the mayor's disobedience more than anything else. Shude rose to his feet, looking uneasily at the growing number of soldiers approaching the mass of townspeople. Several people had left the crowd, but some had stopped to see what was going on. His eyes darted around the mass of people, searching for Xijuan and their children. The mayor had promised a peaceful transfer of power, but now he was nowhere to

be seen. Shude felt a part of himself telling him to leave before anything happened, but he thought of his family in the crowd, and he didn't feel comfortable leaving them to Hayakawa without trying to explain things better. Most of the people in the crowd had quieted, noticing the soldiers.

Shude turned back to Hayakawa. "There's no need to escalate things. I'm sure someone from Town Hall can explain this. They wouldn't try to disrespect you."

Hayakawa grunted at this and turned to a tall soldier with burns covering his face. They exchanged a few words, and the colonel nodded, his eyes narrowing.

Shude pushed toward the colonel, and Hayakawa turned back to him. "Leave. I'm not going to wait an hour for the mayor to arrive." He nodded to the other soldiers, who reached for their weapons. "I'm sure this is a game to him, this whole town and all your fates."

"It's not," Shude said. "I promise you. Any bloodshed will only make your job more difficult. Send these people away and wait for the mayor if you must. I'm sure he'll be here soon."

"How soon?" Hayakawa frowned at him.

"A few minutes at most." Shude prayed he was right. Lying seemed like a necessary risk at this point. "I know the man who organizes his schedule. I swear it on my life. The mayor will not dishonor his agreement."

The colonel was silent for a few moments. Shude spotted Xijuan holding their daughter's hand and smiled at them, trying his best not to panic. He saw his son standing frozen at the edge of the crowd. As he turned back to the convoy, Hayakawa shouted in Japanese at the other soldiers, making Shude wish he'd learned more than a few words of the foreign language. They raised their weapons toward the crowd, and Shude saw a soldier pull a long black machine gun

from one of the trucks. Another man pulled out a bayonet. Somewhere in the crowd, a woman screamed. Shude shouted for Xijuan and the others to run, but the crowd was dense, and townspeople shoved aside carts, trampling over each other as they tried to run.

“The mayor will come!” Shude screamed, though he knew the colonel was no longer listening. The soldier holding Shude’s arm yanked the old man back, and Shude staggered away from the convoy.

“What are you doing?” Shude demanded. “What is this?”

The soldier turned and slapped him across the face. Shude fell to the ground, his cheek stinging from the blow. The soldier reached for his weapon, glaring at Shude, but Hayakawa shouted once more in Japanese, and the soldier turned back to the panicking crowd.

“Don’t do this!” Shude shouted, but no one was paying attention to him anymore.

He thought of Bao and Mei, praying that Xijuan had found them and pulled them away from the crowd. He pushed himself to move, to rise from the ground, but his body refused to move.

Hayakawa flicked his hand in the air, and the soldiers opened fire. There was screaming from the crowd, but it was quickly drowned out by the sound of gunfire. Frantically looking through the crowd, Shude spotted his wife and son. As Xijuan looked back at him, she was hit with half a dozen bullets. She fell backward, crying out for their daughter in a shrill voice, her white dress instantly stained with streaks of blood. Lanterns fell onto the bloodstained ground, blocking Shude’s view of her and sending sparks flying. As Bao struggled to climb over a fallen food cart, a hail of bullets struck him in the back, and he lost his grip on the edge of the cart, tumbling to the ground beside Xijuan.

Shude felt his heart stop, his breath catching in his throat as sweat formed on his palms and the smell of gunpowder overpowered all other scents. He crawled forward, looking for Xijuan and Bao but terrified of what he would find. Unable to imagine the worst, he prayed that they had somehow survived. Instead, he saw his lifeless wife and son sprawled across the ground alongside a dozen others. A blood-covered woman hung limp from a tangyuan stand, screaming in a shrill voice and holding the hand of a dead boy. Beside her, an injured man sat against the stand, coughing out blood. Shude looked desperately for his daughter, channeling all the strength he could to move forward. But he was too slow, too weak to do anything.

Some who had only been injured by the first hail of bullets tried to crawl away from the massacre. Bodies covered the ground, and one woman lay beside a wrecked spring roll stand, her head opened and covered in blood. A tall man shouted in pain as he staggered away, his arm hanging awkwardly at his side. Mei stepped into view and clutched at the tall man's shirt as several others in the crowd pushed past her. Hayakawa raised his hand once more, and another round of gunfire brought them all to the ground.

Shude's head throbbed, and his body shook as the soldiers continued firing. One of the soldiers stepped forward and kicked the old man aside, still shooting at the crowd. Shude felt a burning pain in his chest, and he forgot how to breathe. The screams from the crowd replayed in his head, the faces of his dead family flashing in front of him. His vision blurred, and he felt a painful ringing in his ears as he collapsed to the ground. He wondered if he was having a heart attack. But the pain subsided, and he was left feeling only a bitter emptiness. Hundreds of townspeople were dead. His family was dead, gone in an instant.

He looked up at the colonel, who was looking out at the bodies covering the road ahead. Shude wondered if he would be killed next, finding the thought more of a relief than anything.

But Hayakawa seemed to have forgotten him entirely, focusing only on the road ahead. The colonel gave several more orders, and the soldiers moved the bodies out of the way. A few of them pushed over a stand that was blocking the road, and the rest reentered their vehicles. Hayakawa stepped back into the truck at the front, and the convoy continued. Shude crawled forward, his heart pounding, and reached out toward the crowd. His hand found only a pool of blood.

## Chapter 10

### The Ones in Charge

Mayor Guan sat in his office, paralyzed as the sound of the gunshots echoed in his mind. Regret ate at him, and he had the sinking feeling that he had done something terribly wrong. Part of him hoped that Li or Zhang would return and tell him what had happened, but the other part knew that it was his responsibility to find out on his own. For the past hour, he'd considered going to the town square to wait for Hayakawa, but his pride had stalled him. He didn't like the idea of showing up before the other party, of giving the colonel that last shred of power over him. Just as he'd talked himself into going, the shooting had begun. His first instinct had been to run to the scene of the shooting, but he had no weapon, and he'd never been as scared of the Japanese as he was now. He'd been gentle but firm, insisting only on keeping his culture. But the Japanese were inhuman creatures straight from the underworld, just as Li had warned him. *Slayer of Seven Thousand Men* had been an understatement. He should have known, should have been more careful, but he had clung to tradition, knowing nothing else to cling to.

One part of him wanted to flee, but another part told him he needed to find some way of ending the conflict. So he sat in his office, frozen. But he would have to face Hayakawa sooner or later, take the blame and end the massacre. A cold sweat ran down his forehead. He tried his best not to assume the worst. He hadn't mustered the strength to run or the bravery to confront the colonel, his body frozen to his chair. Reaching into his pocket, he fumbled for a cigarette to calm himself. He held it in his hand for a moment before changing his mind and tossing it onto his ashtray. He slumped forward, his mind wandering from the gunshots outside to the ink stains on his desk. He shook his head, forcing himself to focus.

Someone knocked at the door of his office.

He looked up. "Come in."

Qiao pushed open the door, her expression frantic. Guan's heart sank.

"What is it?" He rose from his desk.

"Li Bo is dead." Her voice trembled. "Sakata killed him."

Guan's eyes widened. "Sakata killed Li? How?"

Qiao was shaking. She breathed several times before responding, and her voice trembled as she spoke. "I don't know how. When I ran to his cell, Li's body was on the ground. He'd been shot more than once."

Guan grimaced, staring at the mess of papers scattered across his desk, praying this explained everything but unable to convince himself. "I've heard nothing but gunshots. It can't all be from Sakata, can it?"

"I don't think so," Qiao said, her hands still shaking. "Something else must have happened. Something far worse."

Guan met her gaze. His words were slow and measured, but he finally found the strength to rise from his seat. “Hayakawa. It has to be him. I’ll talk to the colonel. We don’t have time to worry about Sakata now.”

The sound of footsteps came from the hall, and Zhang ran into the office, his face pale. His clothes were disheveled, and he gripped a pistol in his hand. “Hayakawa is here.”

“What happened?” Guan asked.

“It was a massacre. He killed almost everyone in the town square. I heard so many gunshots. And when I reached the town square, the only survivor still there was Wang Shude. He said his whole family was killed.”

“Your friend from the teahouse?” The color drained from Qiao’s face, and her lips trembled as she spoke. “There were hundreds of people in the town square. How many survived?”

Zhang closed his eyes and lowered his head. His hands shook. “I saw only a few. The Japanese have only grown more furious. I saw them slaughtering people they found on the street. Slashing pregnant women and children. Wang Shude made it a block from the town square, but he was a mess, crying and begging me to save his daughter, Nuo. But there was nothing I could do. It’s a miracle he’s even alive. Now they have soldiers searching the nearby buildings. If Major Ito is with them, it can’t be good. They’ll come for you here, Guan. It’s just a matter of time.”

Qiao looked from him to the mayor. “We did everything he told us to.”

Guan collapsed into his chair, covering his face with his hands. “It’s my fault. I didn’t expect him to go this far, but I should have.”

“But why?” Qiao asked. “You said you negotiated with him. Now all those people are gone.”

Guan looked up at her. “Qiao, I—”

“The Japanese ordered us to clear the streets for Hayakawa’s arrival,” Zhang said, unable to meet her gaze. “We thought it would be better not to appease all of their demands.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Qiao stepped away from Zhang, her body shaking. “Was I supposed to know about this?”

“It was my decision alone.” Guan rose from his seat and went to the door. “Hayakawa will want to talk to me. He might kill me, but it’s a risk I have to take to appease him. One of his other demands was that I publicly hand over authority to him. There will be no negotiating with him now. This massacre won’t stop until I go to him to surrender.”

Zhang closed his eyes and exhaled, his hands balled into fists. “I suppose you’ll have to. Where’s Li?”

Guan sighed. “He’s dead. The prisoner got a weapon and escaped. I should have told Li to be more careful. Shouldn’t have backed Sakata into a corner without a better plan for what to do with him. But we have bigger problems now.”

“Li Bo is dead?” Zhang stepped back, his whole body shaking, and grabbed the wall to balance himself. “Not now. Not with Hayakawa here. Why would he go to torture the prisoner at a time like this?”

Qiao put a hand on his shoulder. “Panicking now won’t change what happened.”

“So many have died already.” Guan wanted to scream, to run, or to drop dead, but it was on him to stop the colonel. “If Enyu and his brother hadn’t left, they would know what to do. But we don’t have time to waste. I will talk to Hayakawa alone. The two of you should run while you

still have the chance. Leave through the side door. If the colonel wants to speak with anyone, it's me. Seeing you will just make him angrier."

"You're sure about this?" Zhang asked.

Guan nodded. Qiao stared at him, her eyes widening as if he was insane, which did not help to calm him. The color had returned to Zhang's face, but he stood frozen by the door.

Guan narrowed his eyes. "Go!"

Zhang nodded and pulled Qiao out of the room. Guan stared out the window with a resigned sigh before leaving the office and locking the door behind him. He heard yelling outside in Japanese, and he increased his pace. When he reached the front door of Town Hall, the yelling was replaced by an unsettling silence.

Guan straightened his suit. Gathering all of his courage, he took a deep breath and opened the door.

\* \* \*

Shude stumbled through the blood-filled street, gasping for breath as he turned a corner. Soldiers continued shouting behind him, and he saw one of them open fire on two boys outside the teahouse where he'd spoken to Zhang a week ago. It was a cruel joke that they'd spared him of all people, he who had lived most of his life already.

Pictures of the gunfire in the town square flashed through his mind, and he bent over, vomiting onto the road. He deserved all the pain he felt. There had to be something, something he could have said or done, that would have stopped Hayakawa. He had failed, and he barely pushed forward the gaping emptiness in his gut. But he had to push forward, had to find a way to fight back. He owed his family that much.

As he continued forward, two men came rushing toward him with weapons raised. But they were not Japanese soldiers. Shude's first thought was that they must have been muggers taking advantage of all the chaos. There was a good chance they would kill him even if he did everything they said, and he found that the thought of his own death came as a relief.

One of the men grabbed him. He was skinny with a thick beard. Shude felt his chest pounding, and he waited for the bullet that would end his life.

“Are you all right?” the man asked. “Did they hurt you?”

“My family.” Shude forced the words out, though he found himself sputtering. “The Japanese killed them all. And my daughter, Nuo—”

“Come with us.” The other man stepped forward, motioning for him to follow. “We can help you avoid the soldiers. We can kill them if we have to, with how arrogant and careless they are. There's one tall soldier with burns on his face...he's more careful than the others. Just be cautious. Stay alive for your daughter.”

Shude followed them down the street, darting ahead to catch up with them. “Why? Who are you?”

The man with the thick beard answered, not bothering to turn back. “My name is Enyu, and this is my brother, Guotai.”

“Enyu? Guotai?” Shude glanced around as he spoke, his hands still shaking, as he poured over the names and events he remembered. “You worked with the mayor, didn't you? Planning our defense during the battle for Caishen?”

Enyu put a finger to his lips and motioned for Shude to press himself against the side of a shop as several soldiers crossed the street ahead. Though Shude still felt no excitement at the prospect of living, there was a part of him urging his body forward, after these men. He thought

of Nuo, trapped in her apartment as the Japanese massacred everyone in sight, and his heart sank. He thought of Zhang, probably dead or captured by now. Death might be the better fate.

As they came to the end of the block, he saw a Chinese man with scrapes and scars on his face on the other side of the street wearing a gold bracelet and holding a pistol. Shude slowed down, and Enyu turned back to him, motioning for him to continue forward. Guotai turned back to Shude as well, and the old man could see a bead of sweat moving down his face.

Shude looked at them, pausing a few moments to catch his breath before speaking. "My daughter must be hiding from the Japanese right now. I'm sure of it. She's in an apartment on the other side of town."

"We can't cross the town right now," Enyu said. "We're lucky the soldiers haven't killed us already. There's a place where we'll be safe. We have to hope your daughter survives long enough for things to calm down."

Shude held out a hand, his heart pounding as he forced himself to speak. "There's a man I know who's a lot like you. He'd know how to get to my daughter without getting caught."

"You want to find this man?" Enyu asked. "Do you even know where he is?"

Shude gestured ahead at the man with the gold bracelet, the man who still seemed mysterious after knowing him for so long. "He's right there. I think he spotted me."

Enyu and his brother turned back as the man with the gold bracelet started toward them. The man's hands were covered in blood, and Shude saw several scratches on his face.

A Japanese soldier came running down the road with a gun in hand. Enyu pushed himself against the side of a building, and Guotai pulled Shude back. It took all of Shude's willpower to keep himself from crying out. The soldier spotted the Chinese gunman, pausing in a moment of surprise, and in that second, Shude was sure they were all dead men.

Without turning to look, the man with the gold bracelet raised his pistol and fired three times. The soldier tumbled to the ground, clutching at his chest, and the Chinese gunman approached them.

“Hello again, old man,” he said before turning to the others. “You may call me Youxia.”

“We shouldn’t stay here,” Enyu said. “Follow my brother and I.”

As they darted down the road, Enyu glanced back at the man with the gold bracelet. “Are you the Youxia who fought in the battle for Caishen?”

“Of course.” Youxia matched Enyu’s pace easily, but he slowed down when he saw Shude trailing behind them. “But we don’t have time to discuss my reputation.”

With gunshots echoing around them, it seemed impossible to think ahead, to plan past the present moment. But they would have to work together, trust each other if they wanted to survive. Sooner or later, they would have to fight back.

Shude panted as he caught up with them, finally finding his resolve. “We need numbers on our side to avenge those who have been killed.”

Youxia nodded, glancing around to see if any soldiers were near. “The old man is right. He may not be a warrior, but he knows people from Town Hall, and he knows how we defeated the Japanese in the past. And he’s our elder. I’ll want his help and wisdom.”

Shude lumbered toward Youxia as the younger man pushed forward. “Can you get to my daughter? Keep her away from the soldiers?”

“I will, or I’ll die trying.” There was no hesitation in Youxia’s voice. “I fought alongside several of her friends in the battle for Caishen, and I heard stories about your daughter. I know she brought us the closest to making peace with the Japanese. We’ll need her now more than ever.”

As he pushed forward, Shude allowed himself a sliver of hope. He would give his mind and body to fight the Japanese, but Nuo had a chance to survive now. Youxia would protect her.

## Chapter 11

### Down the Bloodstained Path

With screams and gunshots still audible in the distance, Sakata approached a warehouse near the town square, pistol in hand. If Hayakawa had resorted to violence already, there would be a lot of blood left over. Sakata had seen death many times before, learned to stay away from the shooting and put it out of his mind as best he could until he had a good understanding of his surroundings. He could only hide in alleyways, peek around corners, or he would stand out.

He'd waited, watched Major Ito break off from the other Japanese soldiers with his signature long stride and enter the warehouse with two other men. If the major thought he could fend off a planned attack with just two other soldiers, he was as arrogant as Sakata remembered. But he had no reason to expect that anyone was coming for him, and Sakata vowed not to waste this lucky break.

Sakata was free for the time being, but a life spent hiding and watching the Japanese army continue its rampage was hardly appealing. He was convinced, deep down, that such a cowardly freedom would be short-lived. It was not just the sergeant who'd imprisoned him, but a

group of authority figures who spent their days deciding who to kill, a group of which Ito was a part. Sitting silently and watching the system continue to exist was as bad a punishment as being beaten.

With time, he'd learned how the army worked and where it was weak. This undertaking wasn't necessary to survive, but it still felt necessary. Maybe killing the worst authorities would motivate their successors to be more reasonable, or maybe that was too much to hope for. But he was a killer too, as much as any other soldier with a gun. He would just have to hope that his killing was less pointless than theirs.

He pushed open a back door and entered the warehouse, ignoring the shouts and screams coming from somewhere blocks away. There were a few carts in the center of the warehouse and piles of boxes near the side of the room. Sakata heard voices growing louder and ducked to the side of a doorway on a dividing wall. Major Ito's voice rose above the rest, shouting orders.

A series of gunshots echoed in the distance, but Sakata didn't flinch. He tightened his grip on the pistol and listened, straining to identify each voice. Ito and the two other men sounded close together, unaware of his presence. But even if he made the first move, he'd only have a few seconds before they reacted.

Sakata ran through the doorway, instantly locking his gaze on the three soldiers. One of the men beside the major raised his weapon. Sakata fired at him, sending him to the ground. Ito and the other man each turned their weapons on him. Sakata darted to the side. He fired twice at the man beside Ito before diving behind a stack of boxes as the major opened fire. He heard the second man collapse as he crawled forward, pressing himself to the ground. Bullets tore through cardboard and boxes fell to the ground behind him. Ito had only seen him for a moment, and it was unlikely he recognized him, especially out of uniform.

“Chinese scum!” Ito shouted.

Sakata listened for the location of his voice. Pushing forward, he steadied his hands.

Bullets collided against the brick dividing wall behind him. He held his breath, hearing footsteps as the major stepped toward him. A bullet grazed his back. The boxes wouldn’t provide cover much longer.

Sakata emerged from behind the boxes with his weapon raised. Ito turned to him, and Sakata fired at his hand, running forward and closing the distance. His third bullet struck the major’s arm, the fleshy part of his bicep just above the elbow. Ito dropped his weapon and grabbed his arm, wincing in pain as blood rushed from the wound.

Sakata walked forward with his pistol raised. There was a flash of recognition in the major’s face. Then fear. Ito took a few steps back. Sakata clutched his pistol, eyes locked on the major. He reached Ito and grabbed his head. Slammed it hard against the brick wall. Ito slumped to the ground and stopped moving, blood trickling from the back of his head. Sakata put a hand to the major’s neck and felt for a pulse. Still alive.

One of the other soldiers was alive too, moaning in pain. Sakata turned to him and silenced him with a shot to the head before his pistol clicked empty. Blood trickled down his back where the bullet had grazed him. But he could handle being grazed. He’d felt much greater pain before.

Turning back to the major, he took the gun from Ito’s belt. Then he dragged the unconscious major, grunting under the weight, and placed him in a chair at a wooden table. Sakata bound the major’s hands with rags from a supply closet, making sure the knot was snug. He turned back to the other soldiers and stripped off the uniform from the man with the least visible blood. The man wore an ID tag around his neck, but his uniform itself was nameless, just

like all the others. Glancing back at the unconscious major, Sakata took off his prison rags and put on the army uniform, leaving the tag and wiping off what blood he could. He'd look like a nameless low-ranking soldier without the tag, but there were plenty of those around. The uniform was a bit large for him, but it was usable once he rolled in the sleeves and tucked the shirt into the pants. The pistol on the soldier's belt was still fully loaded.

Finally satisfied, Sakata sat across from Ito and spat in his face. Seeing the man's eyes flutter, he readied the pistol he'd taken from the major.

Ito's eyes shot open, and he jerked his arms, struggling against the rags Sakata had tied around his wrists. Finally, he gave up, glaring at Sakata and breathing through clenched teeth. The major had seemed invincible before, instilling harsh disciplinary measures, preparing the invasion to Caishen that would cause nothing but death. But he was only flesh and blood.

Sakata leaned forward, his gun pointed squarely at the major's chest. "Do you remember who I am?"

"A worthless conscript, not even good enough to die with honor."

"I am Sakata Ryuji." He studied the major's wrinkled face as a series of gunshots rang out somewhere nearby. "And you sent me to die. I know you asked Warrant Officer Kobayashi to make a list of the most problematic soldiers under his command and send them on the most dangerous yet unimportant missions. The ones carried out for tradition's sake, to remind us of the slaves we are. I despised the army too much for Kobayashi's taste."

"Plenty of people got sent to this town for the iron it holds," Ito said. "Majors, Warrant Officers. If we can quell the rebellion here, we have nothing to fear. Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa even sent his son. That boy's here, making the most of it. You're not special, Sakata."

Sakata frowned. In passing, he had heard about Junji, Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa's son. But he had a hard time believing the lieutenant colonel would send his own offspring to the front lines. If it was true, Aizawa was teaching the boy a harsh lesson.

Ito leaned forward, smirking. "You're just one more man in this town. What do you think you'll accomplish?"

"Nothing you'll be happy about. You came all this way for blood, and that's what you'll get."

Ito narrowed his eyes. "Is that why you risked your life to capture me? Revenge?"

"This army is rotten," Sakata said. "It brings nothing but meaningless death, and the corrupt elements must be destroyed. If I got to you, I can get to Kobayashi. But I want to know who else planned the invasion of Caishen."

"We both know you can't leave me alive. I've got no reason to help you. You don't look healthy, Sakata. What will you do to me?"

"I can break your arm. That's what your army trained me for. To push forward even when I hadn't eaten in days."

"I've been threatened with worse," Ito said.

Sakata studied his face. "You are a practical man. If you don't answer me, I'll go after others. And who knows what will happen to them?"

Ito leaned forward. "You already know the answer. This whole mission is Hayakawa's doing. But you're not prepared to kill him. And you're not prepared for Nakamura."

Sakata narrowed his eyes. "Who's Nakamura?"

“So you don’t know.” Ito smirked. “You should never go to war against an enemy you don’t understand. And if you understand Hayakawa, then you’ll run from here before challenging him.”

“I don’t need to risk my life going after Hayakawa just yet,” Sakata said. “And we both know you haven’t told me everything. Have you nothing else to say?”

“You won’t get anything out of me.” Ito gave him a cold glare. “Kill me. Or don’t. It makes no difference.”

The major leaned back in his chair, unbothered by the weapon aimed at him. Sakata tightened his grip on the pistol. As several more gunshots rang out in the distance, he looked deep into the major’s eyes and fired. Ito gasped as the bullet struck his chest, blood seeping from the wound. Sakata shot him again, this time in the cheek, and the major’s head snapped back, hanging like a discarded rag doll.

Sakata moved as fast as he could, despite his hands shaking. He tied his prison rags together and wrapped them around the body of the man whose uniform he’d taken. Dragging the body, he pushed open the side door to the warehouse with his shoulder. He stumbled toward the wide steel garbage bin resting against the side of the warehouse several meters away. It was more difficult than he had anticipated. He heard more shooting and prayed that no one would enter the alley. The uniform he wore would buy him time, but when the soldier’s body was found, the Japanese would realize there was an enemy wearing their colors.

He opened the waste receptacle and lifted the soldier’s body with all of his strength. Grunting, he pushed the body over the side of the container. The corpse landed on a thin layer of trash with a thud. Sakata let out a breath and closed the lid as quietly as he could. Gasping for breath, he staggered backward and collapsed against the wall. His hands were stained with blood,

and he wiped what little he could onto the ground. Ito was far from the only Japanese officer whose existence was a danger to the world. He would find Kobayashi next.

He sat for a few seconds, catching his breath and trying to ignore the screaming coming from every direction. When his body stopped shaking, he rose to his feet and pushed himself forward through the alley. As he got closer to the town square, the gunshots became louder. He heard a distinctive woman's voice from the street ahead shouting in Chinese and a blend of Japanese voices that could have been coming from anywhere.

He made it to the edge of the alley and peeked around the corner. Seeing only a few Japanese soldiers, he stepped out onto the main street. Bodies lay everywhere, all civilians. There were children covered in blood and a man whose skull had been bashed in. He passed a boy whose stomach was slashed open and whose arm was bent at an unnatural angle. Beside the boy was a woman holding his hand, her face mutilated and covered in blood.

Sakata looked away, keeping his breath steady. He'd seen his share of dead bodies, and he'd heard descriptions of civilians tortured in Nanking years ago. He hadn't been to an occupied village before, but what he saw now confirmed every rumor he'd ever heard. He tightened his grip on the pistol, doing everything he could to keep his hand from shaking. There would be no closing his eyes and hoping it would all disappear. And if he was found now, he could expect to receive as much mercy as the Chinese.

Soldiers walked through the street, their weapons raised. One of them passed Sakata and kicked the body of the dead boy whose stomach had been slashed. They were no longer shooting, and the woman had stopped screaming. She would never scream again, and Sakata could only guess which of the bodies was hers.

He hurried down the street, stepping around glass from shattered windows, holding his breath and waiting for someone dangerous to appear. Soldiers were filtering out, leaving the main road. A few more gunshots rang out in the distance. If he was forced to shoot his way out, the soldiers would probably assume it was one of their own firing at the Chinese.

A soldier stepped out of a small red-brick building holding a knife, his uniform splattered with blood. The soldier was tall with burns on his face and a thin cut on his hand. He gave Sakata a passing glance and continued down the street.

When he was gone, another soldier stepped through the shattered glass wall of a shop, carrying a rifle and dragging a teenage girl by the arm. Her face was pale, and tears trickled over the bruises on her cheeks. She reached out with her free arm, and Sakata could see it was covered in blood. It was almost as much blood as when Kobayashi had stabbed him in the side.

The soldier paused for just a moment, and the girl wriggled free from his grasp and started running, making it a few meters before stumbling forward as her bloodied right leg dragged behind her. Grunting in exasperation, the soldier raised the rifle and fired three times, and the girl tumbled onto the ground.

Sakata glanced around. The rest of the street was deserted. He walked toward the soldier, stepping through blood-soaked dirt. His hands shook as he pulled the pistol from his belt. The soldier turned to him, not noticing the weapon until it was too late. Sakata shot him twice in the chest. The soldier clutched at his wounds, blood spilling onto his hand. His body went stiff, and he fell backward onto the broken glass.

Sakata looked in all directions, but no one came. He stepped away from the body, glancing around once more before bolting down an alley.

## Chapter 12

### To Stay or Run

Though he'd been in the Japanese army for two years, Private Junji Aizawa had made few friends. And though his father, Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa, was respected by many, this did not always transfer to him. He was short and scrawny, a bit small for his uniform, and his father had kept him away from any seat of power. Junji had always been at the army bases, staying away from the massacres as much as he could. Sending him to watch townspeople be slaughtered had to be a test of some kind, a rite of passage. Knowing the stubborn man his father had always been, this was the most likely explanation.

Though his feelings rarely mattered in the grand scheme of things, Junji pitied First Lieutenant Nakamura Hideki, the tall soldier with burns on his face from some battle in the past. The first lieutenant seemed so unenthusiastic, going through his work only as a matter of course. When Nakamura had requested that Junji work directly under him, Junji knew it only because of Nakamura's loyalty to Hayakawa, and Hayakawa's respect for General Aizawa.

He followed Nakamura through the main street, just hours after Hayakawa's massacre in the town square. The lieutenant carried a half-full can of gasoline, and the liquid sloshed against the side of the container as he walked. First Lieutenant Nakamura stopped at a tavern and motioned for Junji to follow him inside. A woman stood frozen behind the counter, gun held in a trembling hand, seemingly unable to move. There was no one else in sight. She had to be the owner, or at least the person in charge of running the place.

The lieutenant raised his pistol, motioning for the woman to lower her weapon and come toward them. She ignored the command, almost frozen. Others at Nakamura's rank would have fired and asked questions later, but Nakamura had always possessed a unique curiosity. If there was something he wanted to know about the tavern, he would make the woman tell him, even if it seemed like a waste of time to everyone else.

“Tell her to put the gun down,” Nakamura ordered.

Before Junji could translate, the woman turned, as if in a trance, and pointed the weapon at them. Nakamura reacted instantly, firing three times, and she tumbled out of sight behind the counter. Junji heard a groan, and he knew she probably wouldn't last much longer. It had been a waste coming here, unlikely to end in anything but bloodshed. But Nakamura never just stood around when other soldiers were taking care of business.

“Why did we come here?” Junji asked, though he knew the question was pointless now.

“I wanted to learn about this place.” Nakamura studied the walls. “And what did we learn? That there's an enemy around every corner. We could have learned that much from history. This building might serve our purposes. But other buildings will do better.”

Nakamura walked forward and poured the gasoline on the ground. He pulled a matchbook from his pocket, motioning for Junji to move away.

“What are you doing?” Junji asked.

Nakamura drew in a breath, as he often did before saying something that only made sense to him. “I came here to make the owner give us this place. She never did. It’s nobody’s now.”

The lieutenant lit a match, and Junji watched it fall toward the puddle of gasoline. Flames erupted, and the lieutenant stepped away from the fire.

Nakamura turned back to Junji. “Let’s go.”

As they left, the fire roared and black smoke curled through the door behind them. The windows on the front of the tavern shattered, and fire began blazing on the outside of the building. The nearby soldiers distanced themselves from the fire, and Junji stumbled away from the growing blaze.

As a boy, he had lived through the Great Kanto earthquake. He had seen towering structures brought to the ground and his neighbors crushed beneath falling rubble. He had run instead of aiding the others, and since then he had been cursed. Cursed that honor should demand he join an invading army. Cursed to be followed by destruction his whole life while surviving to witness it.

There was little time to contemplate this beyond the fleeting images that flashed in his mind. Feeling Nakamura’s gaze on him, Junji turned back to the lieutenant and followed him away from the tavern.

\* \* \*

Wang Nuo sat in her apartment listening to the Japanese man on the radio for the first time in the few days since the convoy had arrived. As soon as news had arrived about the shooting in the town square, she ran to her room and locked the door. Her apartment was the only place she knew to hide. And at this point, it would be difficult for anyone to get in or out of the building

until the soldiers moved. The waiting gnawed at her. The first two days, she was terrified to make noise, but she hated being in the dark. So she'd turned the radio on, as quiet as possible while still being able to hear it. It hadn't taken Hayakawa's men long to take control of the airwaves.

The man had a heavy accent, but from what she could understand, a lot of people had been killed even after the town square massacre. The rest seemed like lies. Something about Chinese rebels launching an ambush and several treaties being broken. Then a minimally accurate recounting of Chinese history and the previous global conflict that the broadcaster called the First World War, a term she'd begun to hear more often. The broadcast blamed most of their current problems on the Nationalist government.

As the man continued, there was a term that caught her attention, a reference to comfort women likely being taken to service the soldiers in the next few days. The broadcast brushed over it, hiding most of the bitter details of what that entailed, but Nuo had heard the rest from stories about the conquests in Korea. The attempt at peace had failed, just as profoundly as their attempts at evacuation. A miserable death would await some who were captured, and brutal torture would await the rest. She had already been lucky to get by without resorting to prostitution, lucky that Caishen was a place where some were willing to hire single women.

Shouting came from the hall, followed by the sound of gunshots. She was safer here than out in the open, but it still wouldn't be hard for them to kill her. After the battle for Caishen, one of her neighbors had advised her to carry a weapon. If the soldiers arrived at her apartment, fighting them off would be a fool's errand. But if they made it here, she could guarantee a quick death for herself at the very least. She rose to her feet. With trembling hands, she opened a drawer and pulled out a pistol.

Something thudded against the door to her apartment. It swung open, breaking the lock, and a Chinese man with scrapes on his face and a gold bracelet on his left wrist entered carrying a pistol. His boots were stained with blood.

Nuo raised the pistol, her hands shaking. “Who are you?”

The man moved to the side of the doorway, glancing into the hall and revealing several scars on his cheek. “Call me Youxia. Wang Shude sent me to get you. I’d have come here faster, but I couldn’t move until the Japanese did.”

“You know my father?”

Youxia nodded. “His wife and young children were killed in the town square three days ago. That was the worst of the killing, but the Japanese are still slaughtering townspeople. Your father is in a warehouse across town, and he wants to make sure you’re safe.”

“There will be soldiers everywhere.” Nuo’s heart pounded. “This room is no fortress, but it’s the only place I can hide.”

“You heard the soldiers outside your door. They were slaughtering everyone in this building. I killed them. If I had arrived a minute later, you would be dead. If you come with me, your father will do everything in his power to ensure your protection. We don’t have time to argue, Nuo.”

Nuo grimaced. Ever since Shude had left her and mother for another woman, she’d tried not to think of him. But that conflict was the least of her worries now.

She sighed. “You’d have better odds depending on anyone other than my father. But I’ll go with you. Someone must fight the Japanese. If that means I meet with Shude, then so be it.”

Youxia moved into the hall, motioning for her to follow. Nuo stepped around the growing pool of blood from the two dead Japanese soldiers on the ground. Her heart pounded, and sweat

formed on her palms. She could hardly believe she was still alive. Youxia moved down the hall faster than her, never lowering his gun and putting his back against the wall every time they reached a turn. Nuo ran after him. He was fast, and her legs ached as she forced herself to keep up.

When they were outside the apartment building, Youxia glanced in every direction, motioning for Nuo to press herself against the side of the building. After a few moments, he nodded to one side, and she darted after him. They turned corners, moving through alleyways she could have sworn she'd never seen before. She caught a glimpse of several soldiers less than a block away, and she was certain they would come after her, but Youxia showed no such concern. She ducked around a corner after him and heard no sounds that indicated approaching soldiers.

When she was sure she wouldn't be able to run any longer, they finally emerged from the maze of alleyways near the middle of the town. Youxia slowed his pace and turned back to her, waiting as she caught her breath.

He nodded toward a warehouse on the other side of the street. "I used to work there. That's where we're staying. Our resistance is small right now, very small. But Shude and another woman have the connections to help us recruit more people. Your father's been talking to whoever he can get in contact with."

Nuo wanted to know what kind of weapons they had, how prepared their members were to fight against trained soldiers. But she didn't know much about combat, and she wasn't even sure what kind of answer she was expecting.

Instead, she asked the question that seemed the simplest. "What happens if the Japanese decide to inspect the warehouse?"

“They’re less likely to come to a place that looks run-down and abandoned. If they do, we’ll kill them. Then find another place to hide.”

He pulled a key from his belt and unlocked the door. They entered a large room with only a few windows to the outside. Her father sat with two other men at a small table on the far side of the room. In a corner across from them, a tall man stood with a young woman.

Shude rose from his chair and studied her face. “Nuo.”

Her father was much older than the last time she’d seen him. His voice was quieter, and he seemed to have much less energy. She wanted to be angry with him, but he looked so frail and hopeless. Seeing the massacre would change anyone, and she didn’t have the heart to fight with him.

With a sigh, she walked toward the table. “Who are these people?”

Shude gestured at a skinny man with a thick beard. “This is Enyu Kang. And that’s his brother, Guotai Kang. They helped the mayor during the battle for Caishen. When the Japanese were massacring everyone in sight, they and Youxia helped me survive.”

Nuo frowned. “It’s like you planned this out already. If we did, why surrender? Why isn’t Town Hall involved in these resistance efforts?”

“There are quite a few in this town who anticipated bloodshed and some who made preparations to resist. But the mayor’s overconfidence left them less than ideally prepared. Some townspeople saw the mayor get himself captured, and now we don’t even know if he’s alive. Or where the others from Town Hall have gone. They could all be dead or off being tortured, but we’ll have to fight without their help. No politician is going to save us.”

Enyu gave a slight nod, stroking his beard, but he didn't avert his gaze from the pistol he held on the table. He didn't look like he'd smiled in a long time. Guotai looked at her with a slightly warmer expression, hands folded together neatly on the table.

"My name is Dequan Luo," the tall man said from across the room. "This is my sister, Mingzhu. Our parents were killed in Da Chengzen, and we ran here. We were only a block away from the town square, and we barely escaped. When we crossed paths with the others near this warehouse, I'd already accepted death. I hated the Japanese, but I was sure they'd already won. Shude convinced us to join. Seeing the resolve of an old man and Youxia's confidence gave us the courage to fight."

"That's all it took?" Nuo asked. She turned from him to the others. "You're all prepared to fight on your own? Without even waiting for our military to arrive?"

Enyu shook his head. "Our nation's military is spread too thin to offer us assistance, and the mayor has failed us. It's on us to rescue ourselves, and I won't turn away from an elder so devoted to our cause. Soon, we will gather everyone else willing to fight for Caishen."

Shude nodded. "As soon as we were safe, I sent Youxia to get you. You should give him your respect. Remember the name of the one who saved you."

Nuo considered this. "That word, Youxia. It's a nickname, no? As in a wandering knight? Adventurer?"

Youxia turned to her. "Youxia is the name your father gave me when we met many years ago and I told him of my achievements. Back then, I didn't know it was a reference to ancient folk heroes. But I prefer it to my family name."

"Fair enough." Nuo took a seat, eyeing her father. "Aren't you too old to be a part of this resistance?"

“Fifty years ago, we went to war with the Japanese,” Shude said. “I was too young to fight, but I won’t give in now. I know Zhang, a man from Town Hall, as well as several other important people. If anyone can get in contact with the mayor or anyone close to him, find out if they’re still alive, it will be Mingzhu or I. Four days ago, the mayor ordered that the arms factory on the east side of town shut down production of weapons. I have it on good authority that the factory director did not comply.”

Nuo crossed her arms. “Did you confirm that yourself?”

“I know only what I heard,” Shude said. “But I know Ji, the factory director, and some of his associates. We’re going to depend on him.”

Nuo frowned at him. But she couldn’t yet find words of objection that seemed to fit. Her father wasn’t the slow old man she remembered.

Shude continued. “Once we’ve gathered the necessary weapons, we can make our first strike. Enyu and I have discussed several possible courses of action that we’re prepared to share with the rest of you. The Japanese will continue their slaughter, and not just against those who resist them. We can’t sit back and wait to die.”

Before the battle for Caishen, Nuo had been convinced that they were guaranteed to lose on the battlefield, that diplomacy was the only way they stood a chance of surviving. But then her efforts at negotiation had failed, and they had beaten the Japanese army in combat. All the same, neither approach had brought permanent peace.

“If you continue with this, it’s likely you’ll die for nothing,” she said. “You and that undying bitter stubbornness of yours. Seven people don’t stand much of a chance against a thousand soldiers.”

“Revolutions have started with smaller numbers,” Enyu said. “I never shot a gun until last year, never fired at another person until it was life or death. I was shot in the leg during the battle for Caishen, but I’d do it all again. That’s what it means to live in Caishen. Once the townspeople learn of our existence, more will join us. No one here wants the Japanese ruling over them. We are simply the catalyst for an uprising against them. Perhaps other resistance groups are being formed as we speak. We’ll sabotage the Japanese forces until they are no longer capable of occupying our town.”

The others nodded in agreement, and Nuo studied each of their expressions. Shude smiled at Enyu, and she got the feeling that her father actually had hope behind his words. She walked to the opposite side of the warehouse, taking a seat at a table far from the others. Youxia followed her, chuckling as he studied her face. She glared at him.

Youxia sat across from her. “You’re still not sure about this, are you?”

“I’m not sure about him.” Nuo nodded at Shude, keeping her voice low enough that her father couldn’t hear. “I thought being here for him might keep him out of danger. But now I wonder if backing him up will just get him killed. He shouldn’t be fighting at his age.”

“You don’t trust him?”

Nuo shook her head. “When my mother was sick, he left her for another woman. He wasn’t even there for her funeral. But still, I’m afraid he’ll get himself killed, and us with him.”

Youxia sighed, stroking his chin and looking down at the table. “For years, I resented my brother for drinking too often. We rarely met, and whenever we met, we argued. Then we met again in the battle for Caishen. He saved my life. But he wasn’t so lucky. A few days ago, he was shot by a Japanese soldier. That’s what the rumors say, anyway. I wasn’t there to protect him

when it happened, but I'll be there for your father. He's going to be in danger no matter what. What matters is whether you're together."

"You want me to learn from your mistakes?" Nuo chuckled, shaking her head. "I have enough of my own to learn from."

"It's not just for your father," Youxia said. "I know of the role you played when the Japanese attacked our town, how you drafted a truce offering before the battle began. And now we have Hayakawa to deal with. I don't know who he talks to, how he plans the way he does, but he's a master at his craft. Wherever he goes, destruction follows. I don't believe you'd walk away from us now."

He rose from the table, walking back to the others. Nuo sighed, telling herself that if she regretted joining Shude, she could always blame Youxia's lecture. Then she rose from the table and walked back to her father.

## Chapter 13

### Madness with a Purpose

Lieutenant Colonel Hayakawa entered Nakamura's living quarters as the sky outside darkened. Living quarters had been ripe for the picking, but practicality and forming a secure base came before luxury. The shack was one of several dozen beside the forest at the north edge of the town, and the Chinese inhabitants of all the shacks had been removed days ago, shortly after the incident in the town square. Most had cooperated, but some had been killed for resisting. Others had been killed for saying the wrong thing or being in the wrong place. Though Nakamura had advised him to take women to service the soldiers, he had decided that it was too early for his men to relax. Once the Chinese learned to accept their place, more aggressive measures could be taken.

"Have you spoken with the mayor?" Nakamura asked as the colonel approached.

"I have." Hayakawa took a seat across from the lieutenant. "He's cooperated so far. The moment we met, I saw the fear in his eyes. After what's happened, he'll do whatever we tell him. There are others from Town Hall who slipped through our fingers, but we control this man now."

“You kept him alive? An interesting choice. Especially with the moniker you worked so hard to earn.”

“Slayer of Seven Thousand Men.” Hayakawa sighed. “A useful title to have, but one must be careful when living up to it. Such is the burden of propaganda. Many other leaders sought to earn a similar title, and many lost control of the towns they occupied. If we kill too few, the Chinese will feel emboldened. If we kill too many, they’ll have nothing to lose by fighting us. Their population is around thirty thousand. Controlling that number requires a balance.”

“But this mayor, he’s the only semblance of Chinese authority left. There’s an enemy around every corner in this town. The Chinese want their town back, and they think there will be someone of their own to lead them. That’s what that mayor represents. You know as well as I do what rebellion brings. It will destroy the Chinese, and it will destroy us.”

“We’ve already sent a message,” Hayakawa said. “And right now, our claim to authority rests on the deal we made with that man. It’s a tenuous claim, and few will forgive us for what happened in the town square, but better to have the law on our side for now. To have a Chinese figurehead under our thumb if he’s ever needed. I consider you a friend, Lieutenant. You and all those I have ever fought with. Few colonels would trust their advisors as much as I trust you. But on this matter, I am simply better informed.”

Nakamura leaned back in his chair. “The Chinese won’t care what the mayor has to say. They just see bodies in the street. No matter what you do, they’ll say you’re a madman. That’s what they say about all great leaders. Genghis Khan. Napoleon Bonaparte. Don’t you read any history?”

“I’m not a madman, Nakamura. The Chinese were ordered not to interrupt the procession. If the mayor didn’t prepare them, the massacre is his fault. I’ll enforce order if he’s incapable of

it. Look at the mess these people have gotten themselves into on their own. Their houses are run-down, their clothes tattered and covered in dust. All while they espouse the virtues of cleanliness and purity. They've rejected discipline for too long."

"They don't think that way." Nakamura leaned forward. "I told you in the town square that these people were dangerous, that there were some among them who'd killed our soldiers. I gave you that warning. So you sent them a message. I can't make your decisions for you. I can only say what I know."

Hayakawa clasped his hands together. "Perhaps I'm a madman for listening to you."

Nakamura shrugged. "It's the Chinese who are mad. We showed ourselves to be superior, and they resisted us."

"It's the battle for Caishen that gives me pause," Hayakawa said. "It was the first time that a town I had my eye on inflicted hundreds of casualties on our forces. We can't afford to force their hand here. I may be playing it safe, but the beginning of an occupation is when the threat of rebellion is the greatest. Sometimes a single massacre is a greater show of control than ten massacres like it. It took me a long time to learn that lesson. We'll find the mine workers, drag them back to their posts and make them start mining iron for us. See if this war can actually produce something."

Nakamura studied his face. "Has war ever been simple?"

"This war is an odd case." Hayakawa leaned forward. "Do you remember when we held a siege on Tsingtao in the First World War with Warrant Officer Makihara? He was still a private. And you taught us both how to play Oicho-Kabu. We fought against the Germans then, and I was only a lieutenant. War had rules back then. Now they leave it all up to me."

“Who else should they leave it to? You’re a war hero. No one can compare to that. I had my accomplishments a few years ago, but now I follow you. You got your promotion from Da Chengzen, and ever since then, people have known you have to lead us.”

Hayakawa sighed. The lieutenant had never been one to reminisce about the battles of the past, and he had changed in the past few years. Nakamura had once lived for promotions and honors, but he no longer seemed to care for either. He didn’t seem any more enthusiastic on days with battles than on any other days. Hayakawa knew his men were all betting on him, waiting for the Slayer of Seven Thousand Men to decide the next move.

He hadn’t always faced such pressure. He wished he had kept a journal during the battles of the past, but he remembered parts of them well. It was a shame that Japan and Britain were on opposite sides after they’d fought together so valiantly in the First World War. But Emperor Hirohito demanded loyalty, and what this required was always unpredictable.

He looked past the lieutenant, studying the wooden wall behind him. “I wasn’t sure if we would work together again, lieutenant. But I appreciate seeing the face of an old friend. I wonder how many of these other men understand honor as I do. To die for Emperor Hirohito is the highest honor, yes. But camaraderie, standing beside the others even after the battle, that’s a part of bushido as well.”

“Be grateful that these soldiers are willing to die for the cause. The hard part is still ahead of us. In time, the Chinese will realize they cannot defeat us, but in the meantime they will resent us and may try to rebel. It’s likely that you’ll have to send the Chinese another message, then as many more as it takes before their spirit breaks completely.”

Hayakawa shook his head. “It’s only been a few days, and we’ve already spilled enough blood to get their attention. We’ll send a few soldiers to ensure the Chinese cooperate. If the

Chinese were going to resist us, they would have holed up in the Lotus Tower. But they've shown no interest in the tower, and now it's under our control. A high vantage point will be important if it comes to an all-out battle."

"You mean that tall building by the town square?" Nakamura laughed softly. "I suspect they abandoned the Lotus Tower a long time ago. It looks old, and there's little sign of whatever business used to operate there. Who knows if it's even structurally sound?"

"It's good enough for our purposes. We occupy this town now, and we can rule with stability. But the soldiers need to feel that. I'll teach Junji and Toyama the rules of Oicho-Kabu. Things will settle down. It's been too long since we spoke with our old friends."

Nakamura pressed his fingertips together. "Everything you do here, from playing cards to ordering mass killings, all of it affects your reputation. You must decide who you want to be. Someone new, or the same person you've been until now? Some here call you the Destroyer of Villages. Then there's your other nickname."

Hayakawa sighed. It wasn't bad to be called the Destroyer of Villages, and he had done more than enough to earn the title. He had been to other, smaller towns with little battle experience or fighting spirit. Most had surrendered instantly, and he had crushed all those that hadn't. But keeping larger, more powerful towns in check had always been the real challenge, what set him apart from the other bloodthirsty commanders. Not all towns could be destroyed without massive losses, but all could be contained.

Hayakawa rose from his seat. "I do appreciate you, Lieutenant."

He felt Nakamura's eyes on him as he went to the door. The lieutenant had changed over the years, and he now had a strange habit of staring at people when he thought they weren't

looking. The colonel turned back to Nakamura once more and feigned a smile before leaving the shack.

\* \* \*

Sakata crept through a side street near Town Hall, one part of his brain thinking through his mental map of the town. The Lotus Tower and prison were in the center, alongside a hospital and many no longer prosperous Chinese businesses and apartments. There was Town Hall on one side of the town, not far from the arms factory, and an abandoned library on the opposite side. Not far from the abandoned library, there was a residential area on a hilltop bordering the desert and overlooking the rest of the town. The Japanese hadn't put many troops there yet, likely to avoid resistance from residents who had the high ground, but they had made their base to one side of it, the other side of their base bordering the forest. Some soldiers had gone into the town, and he'd seen groups enter the tall tower in the center, but it would be difficult to form a supply chain between there and the army base. The main advantage of a tall building was the line of sight and high ground it offered, which more than made up for its distance from the encampment.

He could get food from the army's stockpile without arousing too much suspicion, and sleeping in unused rooms in abandoned buildings came with a small enough risk that he was willing to tolerate it. But the movements of the Chinese would be of great consequence if he wanted to stay alive. If they were going to cause trouble, they would need to congregate somewhere in the middle of town, where they could move from building to building and conceal themselves. And they would be staying away from the Japanese encampment. He needed to avoid running into either party by mistake, avoid being needlessly caught in the crossfire.

As he moved forward through the street, he saw two figures emerge from around a corner ahead of him. They also moved as if trying not to be spotted. He darted forward, making as little

sound as he could, until he got a better look at them. Zhang and Qiao. Compared to him, they didn't pay much attention to their surroundings, and they were very conspicuous when they did glance around. They spoke in Chinese, a bit louder than was necessary, and he was able to get closer until he could pick out some words he recognized.

First, the name of the mayor. That much was to be expected. Then *qiú*, which he believed was the Chinese word for prisoner. But not *sǐ*, which he thought meant dead based on the other conversations he'd heard. So Guan had been captured but might still be alive. It was unlikely they knew much for certain, but anyone working at Town Hall probably knew more than the average citizen. Much could be learned from rumors alone if one knew the right people.

He waited for more, for something about the army, but they disappeared around another corner before saying anything else informative. He fought the urge to follow them. He was likely to be discovered if he continued his pursuit, and he didn't feel the need to reveal himself to the Chinese just yet.

The information he'd gathered was useful in its own right. Hayakawa, the Slayer of Seven Thousand Men, hadn't executed the mayor, or had done so very discreetly. He was careful, balancing the threat of violence in the hope of minimizing rebellion. It was likely that his reputation as an indiscriminate slaughterer had also been carefully crafted for similar purposes.

Sakata remembered other rumors about Caishen's consistent will to fight back against oppressors, both during the previous Japanese invasion and multiple times when the Red Army had attempted to take the town. After this, rebels from other towns had begun fleeing to Caishen, or so the stories went. Hayakawa was more than anything they'd faced before, but now Sakata knew exactly the type of man he was.

## Chapter 14

Nuo sat at a table at the edge of the encampment, gritting her teeth as her father approached. He was uneasy, apparent enough in his pale face. But not uneasy enough. He regretted leaving her, she could see that plainly enough. But it had been too long to act like nothing had happened. He passed Dequan and Guotai and stood beside her table, not meeting her gaze. She caught Enyu watching them from across the room, but Youxia was gone, off on some scouting mission at Enyu's request. Nuo was glad that at least Youxia wasn't around to lecture her again.

"It's been a long time," Shude said to her as he met her gaze. "You're twenty-four already. For a while, I was hoping we'd meet at one of the festivals. I wish we could have met under better circumstances."

"How about this?" Nuo studied his frail figure, unwilling to let herself feel any more pity. "I'll keep you from doing anything stupid that gets yourself killed. And you can pretend like I'm just a person fighting beside you, and not someone who's avoided you for the last eight years. We live or we die, and then we go our separate ways."

He sighed. "I was hoping we wouldn't abandon each other again."

“You abandoned me first,” she said, glaring at him. “You left my mother to die.”

Shude finally looked her in the eye. “I was wrong for leaving you. I’ll do whatever I can to make it up to you. But I’m not that man anymore.”

“You got your second chance with Bao and Mei. But you don’t get it with me. Not now, not this late. If you wanted to see me again, you should have come and groveled at my feet. Before the rest of your family was dead, not after.”

“You’re right.” He looked down again. “We can fight together then go our separate ways. Help Dequan and his sister learn to protect themselves, at least, before we depart. You don’t need to think of me as your father.”

He didn’t mean it as an insult, but the words still hurt. Nuo forced herself to say nothing, to not lecture him more. She had said as much as she needed to. As he strode away from the table, she wiped a tear from her eye and promised to stop pitying herself.

Dequan looked at her from the side of the room, saying something to Youxia and turning from him to come to her table. Mingzhu had gone off to search for people from Town Hall in the supposed hiding places only she and a few others knew of, and Nuo had expected that Dequan might join his sister. But instead he was here, probably to talk about her problems.

Nuo sighed. She would probably get another lecture on the importance of family, or on how much her father meant to the resistance. She was tired of being told how to feel, but she didn’t have the will to argue either.

“Is it all right if I sit here?” he asked.

She nodded, bracing herself for the lecture. “If this is about Shude, I already made up my mind.”

“About time,” Dequan folded his hands. “My father walked away when I was only a boy in Da Chengzen. He was a scoundrel and an abuser, and I was glad he was gone. But my mother kept taking him back. She told me it was harder living as a single woman, even if the man she married hated her and her children. I was angry with her for so long. Then Hayakawa arrived at Da Chengzen, offering to negotiate with the leader there. And as he spoke to our leaders of peace, convinced them that blood need not be spilled, his men set fire to the town around them. I never saw what happened to my father, never cared one way or the other. But I was with my mother when the soldiers came...well, you know what happened in Da Chengzen. Hayakawa earned his promotion, and we ran here.”

“Do you miss your mother?”

Dequan nodded. “Mingzhu misses her, so I miss her too. Our mother had her good points. When we first heard that Hayakawa was running, she was too weak to leave Da Chengzen, and our father had made himself scarce. She begged us to run. But Mingzhu wouldn’t leave her, and I wouldn’t leave Mingzhu. When they finally did arrive, our mother gave herself up to the soldiers. If we hadn’t seen her die, I don’t know if I could have dragged Mingzhu out of there. In Da Chengzen, half the newborns didn’t make it past infancy. My mother always repeated that fact, said she was lucky that both of her children were still alive. She did care about us.”

Nuo looked at the table. “She sounds nice.”

Dequan leaned forward, meeting her gaze. “What about Shude? Did he beat you? I thought he was inspiring when I first met him, but if he—”

“Never.” Nuo looked him in the eye. “He just loved Xijuan more than my mother.”

“I see.” Dequan sighed. “I look up to Shude as a fighter. Enyu and Guotai worked alongside the mayor, and even they look up to him. You probably see him differently.”

Nuo frowned. “Can we not talk about him?”

“Of course.”

Dequan fell silent after those words. Nuo wondered if he might bring up Mingzhu, speculate on whether there were even people from Town Hall alive to find. Instead, he rose and left the table. Nuo supposed that he too might resent discussing his family for too long.

For the first time since she arrived, Nuo realized she feared for all of them, not just Shude and herself. But some of them would die if they stood up to the Japanese. That was the burden of knowing people, of making friends at a time like this. But it was one she would have to accept if she wanted to trust the others, to put her life in their hands.

## Chapter 15

### Instinct and Preparation

Sakata crouched outside Warrant Officer Kobayashi's shack near the edge of the army encampment. It was only four days since the massacre in the town square, but the soldiers had settled in already. The shack was small, about two meters each way if his estimate was correct, but practical enough for army purposes. The area where most of the Japanese had camped out was about ten blocks across, and he only occasionally saw soldiers moving between buildings. No soldiers had been tasked with standing guard, as even the most rebellious Chinese would be fools to run straight into the Japanese base. Most of the Japanese were inside the buildings or at other parts of the town, keeping the populace at bay.

Two soldiers, an exception to the rule, were laughing about something nearby. Sakata breathed as quietly as he could, waiting for them to leave. He'd been keeping track of the warrant officer's daily routine, finding Kobayashi to be a very predictable man. With the uniform, Sakata would look like he belonged at first glance, but the more he interacted with the soldiers, the more likely they'd realize he wasn't one of them. So he watched and waited. In the

last two days, Kobayashi had returned to his shack at around the same time. He'd been accompanied before, but he wasn't as high ranking as Major Ito, and Sakata held out hope that he might be alone this time. Some officers were very careful, even around other soldiers, but Kobayashi had always been arrogant, just like the major.

After a few moments, the two soldiers were gone, and Sakata darted to the back door of the shack. He forced it open, hard enough to break the wood surrounding the lock, and pushed it closed behind him, though the door wouldn't shut completely. He ducked behind a tall cabinet by one of the walls, where he stood and waited.

The first time he'd tried to assassinate someone was a month after his conscription. Sergeant Mase, who was now rotting to death in the desert, had set sights on Sakata immediately. Becoming a target for punishment told Sakata everything he needed to know about what to expect in the military. He watched the sergeant, kept track of all his weapons until he knew the merits of each and if they were loaded at all times. Skills his father had taught him on the streets of Tokyo. He waited outside the barracks for everyone to go to sleep, prepared to enter and shoot the sergeant in the head, no matter the consequences. When all were asleep and the time had come to enter, he'd lost his nerve. Until Mase, he'd killed men on the streets, but never a Japanese commander in the view of other soldiers. As he waited behind the tall cabinet, he promised himself he wouldn't back down this time. In the desert, Li and Zhang had caught him by surprise, but now he was prepared to face his enemy.

After a few minutes, he heard the turn of a key at the front door and the footsteps of someone entering. He waited a few moments before darting around the side of the cabinet and raising his pistol. The warrant officer's eyes widened, and he stumbled back. Even if he hadn't

been stalking the warrant officer for two days, Sakata would have recognized him. Kobayashi was overweight and stunk of alcohol, and he moved with all the grace of a dancing elephant.

Sakata stepped forward, his pistol raised. “Don’t scream. I only want to talk to you. Sit down.”

The warrant officer nodded, sitting on a wooden bench, though his hands shook. Sakata glared at him, his grip tightening on the weapon. He pulled a chair from a table on the other side of the room and sat across from Kobayashi, keeping his pistol trained on the warrant officer’s large belly.

“Do you remember me?” Sakata asked.

“A conscript.” Kobayashi’s face was pale. Sakata felt an urge to shoot him and be done with it, but he’d risked his life coming this far, and he wouldn’t let the man off that easily. Not just yet.

“I’m Sakata Ryuji, and I’ve killed my share of men getting here. You should remember my name, since you always hated me and the blood I was born with. Then you signed my death warrant, sending me here with no chance of coming back alive. You stabbed me in the side and broke my rib, threatened to kill me if I stepped out of line again. I wonder if you even remember.”

As he watched the words sink in, Sakata didn’t feel as satisfied as he’d expected. Killing the men who’d tortured him had seemed a distant fantasy, then a precious opportunity, but now he wondered what he even had to look forward to after this. He could run, but the army would still exist. He could look for other ways to harm the army, but it was beginning to feel like an unwinnable fight. He would find a purpose, wouldn’t allow himself to remain aimless.

Kobayashi leaned back against the bench, looking at the weapon and then at him. "You don't know what I have to deal with. I take orders. It's Hayakawa who makes the important decisions."

"You know what war is. You chose your place in it and sent men to die. Because that's what Hayakawa wanted. When you were sent to Caishen, you must have realized it could end the same way for you. You've been waiting for that ending ever since you arrived. But you were always so arrogant, I'm sure you thought your death wouldn't come for a long time. Two words you said to me that I never forgot. Red Dragon. You remember the story behind those words, don't you?"

"All right." Kobayashi leaned back in his seat, narrowing his eyes. "I sent you to die. That makes us both murderers. But I did have reasons for hating you."

Sakata leaned forward. "Did you?"

"The other men under my command addressed me as Warrant Officer Kobayashi." The warrant officer narrowed his eyes. "I worked hard for that title. I liked it. And you understood the traditions, but were offended that I had cursed your worthless blood and slapped some discipline into you. Offended the story I'd told about the Red Dragon. So you just called me Kobayashi. As if you were equal to me. And when I gave you an order, you would pretend you didn't hear me the first time. You must have realized I wouldn't just accept that."

"That's it?" Sakata sighed. "I can't say I'm surprised. You never tried to hide your ambitions, and you were petty. But I have ambitions too, dog of Hayakawa. I must tear down what you and the other self-serving commanders have built."

He studied Kobayashi's face, trying to read the warrant officer's subtle expression. Sakata hadn't worked hard for the army, but he had worked hard for himself. Living on the

streets and being beaten made a better fighter than any army regimen. And men like Kobayashi paid no attention to the soldiers they abused or the townspeople they slaughtered. They would only learn through punishment.

“You never wanted to admit that anyone was better than you,” Kobayashi said. “Well, this is war. Why don’t you join the Chinese if you think everyone is equal?”

“Maybe I will.”

“You’re petty, Sakata.” Kobayashi balled his fists at his sides. “Pettier than me. But there’s nothing you can take from me that I haven’t already signed away.”

Sakata clenched his jaw and tightened his grip on the pistol, raising it toward the warrant officer’s face. There was little more he could get out of Kobayashi. A gunshot might attract more soldiers, but he had no hope of overpowering the major without giving him time to yell. He had to commit now. Then he could run out the back door just the way he’d come, before anyone realized he was there. As he tightened his grip on the pistol, there was a knock at the front door. Then a Japanese voice outside.

Before Kobayashi could speak, Sakata shot him in the head. Then he turned and fired twice through the wooden door. The voice outside was replaced with agonized moaning. Sakata ran out of the shack and silenced the soldier on the ground with a bullet to the head. There were no other soldiers in sight, but he heard voices getting louder, approaching fast. He’d complicated things now, but that was the gamble he’d made coming here.

Sakata was frozen for a moment, his hands quivering, but then he pushed himself to focus. He hurried away from the shack, glancing back for approaching soldiers. The uniform he’d stolen had noticeable bloodstains now, and his days of living on the street had not been kind

to it. But he'd seen spare uniforms loaded into a truck on the edge of the encampment, and he could get a new one.

He would hide, for now, and he would look for any signs of rebellion among the Chinese. Besides that, there were others in the army who needed to be observed, perhaps even killed. He'd caught glimpses of Hayakawa occasionally, though the colonel wasn't as careless as Kobayashi. Only so much could be learned about a man from rumors alone, without direct observation. And the burn-faced man who advised him needed to be watched as well. Sakata had a hand to play against the Japanese army, and he'd stayed a step ahead of Hayakawa's men so far.

\* \* \*

Nuo crouched beside her father, Youxia, Enyu, and Dequan behind a row of shrubs outside the arms factory. Hoping that the factory director would finish his work and get out of the building before the soldiers came to inspect the factory a second time. They'd spread rumors, made the Japanese aware the factory wasn't as broken down as it had first appeared. It was the greatest risk they had taken so far. There were four of them prepared to shoot if necessary, but Youxia and Enyu were the only ones with training. She'd never fired her gun before, but this ambush might be the safest opportunity for combat training she would ever get.

As she sat, fighting the urge to run, a Japanese army truck came down the road and rolled to a stop outside the factory a dozen meters from the row of shrubs. Nuo held her breath, pressing herself against the ground and peeking through the leaves. Three soldiers emerged from the truck, pistols at the ready, and walked toward the building. Nuo tried to ignore the pounding in her chest, telling herself to trust the factory director. Shude had insisted Ji knew what he was doing.

“It can’t take that long to wire explosives.” Enyu shook his long hair out of his face. “The factory director should have left the building. I feel guilty just staying here when Ji might be in danger.”

“It figures.” Nuo felt a pang of annoyance. Partly with Ji, and partly with her father for recruiting someone so unreliable. All the same, she feared for him more than for the others. He was old, and she knew better than any of them how foolish he could be. Foolish enough to get himself killed if she wasn’t there to keep him sane.

Shude shook his head. “Give Ji time. He said issues might come up. Nuo, Youxia, get ready to run as soon as he gets back.”

“I’m ready,” Youxia said. “Dequan, ready your weapon. And pay attention.”

“I’m ready to fight whenever the Japanese are,” Dequan said. “We should have brought my sister. Mingzhu needs combat experience just as much as I do.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Youxia said. “For now, we wait and watch.”

Before any of the others could respond, the arms factory burst apart in an ear-splitting explosion, sending clouds of smoke in all directions. Bricks fell from the side of the factory, and smoke billowed out toward the row of shrubs. Nuo covered her face with her arms as the roof came crashing down, sending debris flying across the dirt. Ji was nowhere to be seen, and Nuo’s heart sank. The explosion had taken him too.

She felt her hands shaking, and her father grabbed her arm as he stumbled back. She expected him to collapse, but he kept his composure, turning from the factory to the army vehicle outside. Two Japanese soldiers emerged from the truck, shouting. Heart pounding, she watched the soldiers draw their weapons.

Shude turned to Nuo and the others. “Move. Now.”

Dequan darted out from behind the shrubs. One of the Japanese soldiers spotted him and began shooting. Dequan fumbled for his gun as he ran, and the weapon fell to the ground. Several bullets whizzed past him. As the other soldier turned to fire on Dequan as well, Enyu rose to his feet and fired at both soldiers. One of the soldiers began shouting, but a bullet struck him in the head, cutting him off. The other soldier was hit in the chest, and both men tumbled to the ground. One of them began crawling forward.

Youxia ran out from behind the shrubs and opened fire on the moving soldier. The soldier continued flailing as a wave of bullets struck him. A moment later, his arms slumped to his sides, and he stopped moving. Youxia lowered his weapon and turned back to the others.

“I told you to be careful, Dequan,” Youxia muttered.

Enyu crouched down and glanced around, finally standing after a few moments and frowning at Youxia.

“We could have taken him alive,” Enyu said. “Learned something. Kept hostages.”

Youxia stepped past him. “Ji blew up the building while he was still inside. I didn’t know he’d lost the will to live, but maybe we should have suspected this when he took too long to return. This fight is what we live for now. Life or death. We don’t need hostages.”

Nuo looked at the huge pile of wood and ash covering the field. Planks of wood and pieces of brick covered the dirt, and clouds of smoke rose from the debris. Her father followed her gaze for a few moments before turning back to the group, as pale as she had ever seen him.

## Chapter 16

### No Easy Path to Peace

Youxia led them through the maze of alleyways again, though by this time, Nuo felt she understood how he avoided the soldiers. There was a bit of instinct to it, as well as glancing through windows, slowing down just enough when approaching a corner to make sure the soldiers wouldn't notice them. They were making good time, but she still got the feeling they were slowing Youxia down. Though Enyu was agile and seemed able to predict the movements of the soldiers, even he struggled to keep up with Youxia. Dequan might have matched Enyu's pace, but he stayed back, making sure that she and Shude were able to keep up.

The soldiers had no reason yet to suspect them of killing soldiers, but any interaction with the Japanese was a great risk. When they finally arrived at the warehouse, she'd broken out in a sweat, and she exhaled as she pushed open the door. Images from the exploding building still flashed in her mind as she walked forward in a daze, certain she would collapse at any moment.

Guotai nodded at her from the table, weapon in hand. Mingzhu had returned. She sat beside Guotai, and she gestured at the empty seats. Nuo walked over to them and sat, placing her

own weapon on the table as the others crowded around them. So many had died, and she was now placing her life in the hands of people she'd just met. Youxia, her father's mysterious friend. Enyu and his brother. Dequan and his sister. If they died now, she and her father would be the only ones left to remember them.

“Ji blew up his own factory.” Dequan spoke slowly, looking near Mingzhu but not meeting his sister’s gaze. “While he was still inside. He didn’t bring the weapons out like he was supposed to, and now they’re gone. And so is he. I didn’t know him, but I hate that I wasn’t able to stop him.”

“We lost Ji already?” Mingzhu’s face turned pale. “He put so much on the line for us. And the Japanese have already come out ahead.”

Dequan finally met his sister’s gaze, and Nuo could see he was trying to look hopeful. “We took out five Japanese soldiers.”

Mingzhu narrowed her eyes. “Was there nothing you could do for Ji?”

Enyu sighed, stepping forward. “He took all of us by surprise. But you’d be right to lecture me. Our stockpile isn’t going to double like we expected. Perhaps I should have done something when he took too long to return. Maybe then we could have saved him.”

Shude put a hand on his shoulder. “What’s done is done. I was the one who knew him. When we talked to him before setting up the ambush, I sensed something was off. If anyone deserves the blame, it’s me. Ji was a good man, and I failed him.”

Dequan looked from his sister to Enyu. “We can grieve after we’ve won. The factory director gave his life to weaken the Japanese, and weakening them is all we can do until more people join us. Hayakawa’s battalion still outnumbers us a thousand to seven. We can’t wait too

long to decide on our next move, and that's going to depend on how many people we have.

Mingzhu, you said you were going to recruit people. How is that going?"

Mingzhu rose from her seat. "I made contact with two individuals from Town Hall. Zhang and Qiao are still alive, but they're wanted by the Japanese. Zhang's word carries some weight, and he's known Shude for a while. If we can convince him we stand a chance against the Japanese, he might be able to help with recruitment. It will take a while for them to reach more people while hiding from the Japanese, but it's doable. Many resisted the Japanese before, and they might be willing to do it again."

"Just one concern." Nuo stepped forward, finally finding her composure. "How much ammunition do we have left?"

"A few hundred clips," Guotai said. "Ji also gave us several dozen grenades. Your father is very good with persuasion."

Enyu nodded. "My brother's right. It's impossible to dislike him."

Nuo narrowed her eyes at Shude before turning to the others. "I'm sure it is. Dequan certainly seems to admire him. Is he that inspiring?"

Dequan took a seat at the table across from Guotai, lowering his head. "When our parents were killed in Da Chengzen, I was sure we would be next. I didn't think about saving the town or resisting the Japanese. All I cared about was keeping Mingzhu alive for as long as I could. But Shude talked sense into us. Shude, what must it have taken for you to see your wife and children killed and keep wanting to fight?"

Shude took a seat beside him, putting a hand on Dequan's shoulder. He opened his mouth to speak and then closed it. Nuo had never seen her father at a loss for words before, and he had never been uncertain in talking about family. He'd changed, somehow, in all those years they'd

spent apart. He was suffering as she'd wanted him to suffer, but she found herself feeling a pang of sadness all the same.

"I'm not as brave as you are." Dequan looked up at the old man. "You must have always been brave like this. At least some part of you. That's why you pushed us to fight."

Shude shook his head. "Not always. My wife fell ill, and I abandoned her. I didn't think I owed anything to anyone. Then Nuo stopped speaking to me, and I realized I deserved it. I swore that I would be better in raising Bao and Mei, that I would not repeat the mistakes of my past. I should have died in the town square, but instead, they were slaughtered."

Nuo studied her father's face, looking for some sign that this humility was all a show. But she saw only how tired he was, how ready he seemed to die. Being alive was a punishment enough for him. She wished she'd seen this strength from him years ago, before he'd abandoned her mother.

Enyu nodded. "It's going to take all of us to give this resistance a fighting chance."

Youxia turned to Enyu. "You asked me to watch the Japanese, to find out whatever I could. It will be hard to kill any high-ranking soldiers without finding a way into the Japanese encampment. I see them enter the camp, usually with others, but I haven't gotten much further than that. Maybe eventually we can take the encampment back, but that's beyond our capabilities now."

"Who are these high-ranking officers?" Enyu asked.

Nuo studied both men's faces as Youxia took a seat at the table, noting that both of them tried, unsuccessfully, to hide their concern. She had seen the soldiers walking through the streets, and she remembered Dequan's words about Da Chengzen. Whether or not Hayakawa alone was responsible for the tragedy in that town, there had always been a delicate power balance among

the army. It was clear in how each soldier tried to make their name dreaded among the Chinese. And the men influencing the colonel were a source of danger she couldn't afford to ignore.

"You all know of Lieutenant Colonel Hayakawa," Youxia said. "Major Ito was second only to him, but from what I can piece together, he's been killed. There are some majors left, but I couldn't learn much about them."

Enyu stroked his chin. "Is that it?"

"Not quite," Youxia said. "There's Warrant Officer Toyama. I thought he was a nobody at first, but he's had quite a bit of input on the occupation, and he spends most of his time around higher-ranked officers. I wouldn't be surprised if Toyama is promoted a few ranks here in Caishen."

Enyu nodded. "So this Toyama will know things before other low-ranking soldiers. And he may be easier to get close to."

Dequan held out a hand. "I get the picture, but I'm not sure how useful reconnaissance will be, even with access to this Toyama fellow. You risked your life, and all we have now is speculation about army politics?"

"That's not all he found," Enyu said. "Those are only the facts I was unaware of, and I consider his investigations so far to be sufficient. What matters now is weakening the Japanese before they find and eliminate us."

Nuo turned to him. "And how would we do that?"

Enyu took a seat and folded his hands. "We have two options for how we proceed. The first is more straightforward. We can continue picking off soldiers who stray too far from the military encampment and continue luring them into traps. Low risk, low reward. I don't find the first option very appealing."

“What’s the second option?” Nuo asked.

“We raid the Japanese and take their weapons. They’re not expecting us to go after it.

Shude and I have a plan, and all we need now is agreement from the rest of you.”

“Where are these supplies?” Dequan asked.

Enyu leaned forward. “The Japanese have occupied the Lotus Tower near the town square. A local man told Shude he saw them carrying weapons into the tower. Dozens of automatic weapons. Lots of explosives, too. Some showed signs of damage, but the sheer quantity makes this a golden opportunity. We take everything we can find and do as much damage to the building as we can. That would be easier with dynamite than with grenades, but we can only use what we have. The Japanese see themselves as the only authority left in Caishen. They don’t fear us as they should. Based on military rumors, we believe they’ll only have a few people standing guard. Most of their men are busy slaughtering civilians and trying to instill fear.”

Nuo frowned. “How did you learn all this?”

“Soldiers love to talk,” Enyu said. “They rarely think the little snippets of information they share are important. Youxia knows Japanese, and he gets close enough to listen. He takes too many risks for his own good.”

“How many people would we need?” Nuo asked.

“Five,” Enyu said. “You, me, Youxia, Guotai, and Dequan. That’s everyone except Shude and Mingzhu. Shude is too old to fight. Mingzhu will need to guard this warehouse. And continue the resistance should all of us be killed.”

Mingzhu folded her arms. “That’s exactly what would happen. We’ve discussed this.”

Youxia stepped forward and gestured at Shude. “I discussed this with the old man. And with all the wisdom of his fifty-three years, he approves of the plan. Our weapons and ammunition will run out if we don’t find a way to resupply them. We may as well get weapons from the Japanese. I say we follow Shude’s plan.”

Mingzhu shook her head. “Even he knows it’s a gamble, one we can’t afford. Not with such a small number of people.”

Enyu held out a hand to silence her. “Once we recruit more members, the Japanese will see us as a serious threat. They’ll put more guards around the Lotus Tower. Or move their weapons somewhere more secure. We have to attack soon, before they realize they have a weak point. We could be killed, yes. But if we succeed, we’ll save ourselves a lot of trouble in the long run. And we’ll send a message to everyone in this town. That the resistance isn’t dead.”

“It’s been less than a week.” Mingzhu sighed. “But there’s no talking you out of this, is there? You can go, as long as Shude thinks it’s the right thing to do.”

Shude stepped forward. “Nuo stays with you. I don’t want her going anywhere near that tower. I’ve put her through enough.”

“I’m going with them,” Nuo said. “Worry about pitying me later. Our odds are better with five than with four.”

“Then I’m going too.” Shude looked at her with a determination in his eyes he’d never shown before. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Enyu shook his head. “You’re too old to fight. It’s your knowledge we need, and we lose it if you’re killed at the tower. If our campaign inspires others, we need a planner and as many people with connections still alive as possible. So stay here.”

“You think I can’t fire a gun?” Shude stepped toward him. “I’m fifty-three years old, but that doesn’t make me a corpse. It’s up to me to decide how much I risk. You may be young, but a bullet will kill us both just the same. I won’t abandon Nuo again.”

“Enyu is right,” Nuo said. “You can’t fight at your age. And after all the people you lost, you can’t let them kill you too. That would be letting them win.”

Enyu nodded. “All of us here have lost people. It was sickness that killed our father when Guotai and I were only boys. The doctors couldn’t tell us what it was. But for months, we knew he was on the edge of death. Near the end, even when he could speak, he hardly made sense. We should have been prepared for his death. But it haunted us, and after that, my greatest fear was losing someone else. I can’t pick sides here. I can’t force either of you to come or not come. But I feel dread like I did that day. If we lose, there won’t be a place in this town safe for either of you. The Japanese won’t show any mercy.”

## Chapter 17

## Lessons from Boudicca

Junji Aizawa sat across from Hayakawa, watching the way the colonel studied his cards. Hayakawa had spoken only briefly about Kobayashi's death and about the incident at the arms factory that had occurred the previous day, but he had stewed quietly, and irritation was written on his face. Hayakawa had tried to keep them optimistic, inviting them to play Oicho-Kabu, a card game Junji had never played before. Warrant Officer Toyama brought a bottle of Mijiu from the old mayor's house, and Hayakawa had finished a glass already.

Junji suspected from Hayakawa's expression that the colonel had better cards this round than he did. Warrant Officer Toyama sat to Hayakawa's right, smoking a cigar as he studied his cards. To the colonel's left was Lieutenant Nakamura, a burned cheek resting against his hand. They sat around an oak table in what had only recently been the mayor's house. Toyama was dealing. Junji had never gambled on a card game before, and given how well the last hand had gone, he had a feeling Oicho-Kabu wasn't going to be very profitable for him.

“Nakamura taught me this game during the Great War,” Hayakawa said. “World War I, they call it now. We served in the 18th Infantry Division under Mitsuomi Kamio. There was nothing to do but play cards and wait to be fired at. A lot of men died in that division. But not us. We did what we were told, and we respected our superiors. It kept us alive.”

“That war was a huge pain compared to this one,” Nakamura said. “It wasn’t just the risk of death. Kamio thought too highly of himself. And there were rats in our tent. Far too many of them. When there are too many, you start to see even the simplest beings as a threat. A threat you can never fully understand.”

“They were good men,” Hayakawa said. “The ones we lost. But that wasn’t enough to keep us all alive. Junji, Toyama, you should meet Warrant Officer Makihara. I’d have died if he hadn’t saved my life at least three times. Now his son fights for us too.”

The colonel sighed, and Junji saw the far-off look in his eyes that came with recalling everything it had taken to come to this point. Hayakwa had changed after the destruction of Da Chengzen, had become more reserved. Junji considered that high expectations might be a burden of their own.

Each of the men placed their bets, and Toyama turned to the lieutenant colonel, his eyes narrowed. “I’m sure you’ve heard about what happened at the arms factory. And to Kobayashi.”

“Yes, I’ve heard.”

“And?” Toyama finished his cigar and set it aside. “Do you think the Chinese are going to be a problem?”

Hayakawa frowned. “Deal the cards.”

Both men stared at each other for a few seconds. Then Toyama smirked and shook his head, dealing out four cards face-down. Junji forced a smile.

Toyama turned to Nakamura. "How about you, Lieutenant? What do you think about these uncivilized people?"

Nakamura looked up at the warrant officer. "There are too many of them."

Toyama turned to Junji. "What about you, Private?"

Junji felt Hayakawa's eyes on him, and he shifted forward in his seat. "I'm not sure what the Chinese have done to frighten you, except blow up their own factory."

Hayakawa laughed. Nakamura shook his head and gestured for Toyama to add another card to his hand. Toyama looked from Junji to the colonel, his hands clasped.

Hayakawa drew another card and placed his hand face-up on the table. "Let's see what you have."

Nakamura revealed his hand, sliding his chips forward. "You still play to win, colonel. You must think of this game often."

Junji had lost both of his bets, but he kept his mouth shut. Hayakawa came out even and took back the chips he had wagered. There were bags under his eyes, and the colonel leaned back in his seat, putting a hand on his cheek. He opened his mouth, as if to say something, and then closed it. If there was something he wasn't saying, Junji suspected it was related to the incident at the warehouse.

Nakamura folded his hands on the table. "There's nothing happening in this town that hasn't happened many times before."

Hayakawa narrowed his eyes at the lieutenant. "Is that so?"

Nakamura smiled, looking from the colonel to the others. "When Boudicca led the Celtic Britons to rebel against the Roman empire, many feared that the region would collapse into anarchy. And so the Roman governor brought in more forces. Overwhelming numbers and

supplies. He understood that something like this, the allure of freedom, can grow into something uncontrollable. Caishen has yet to find its charismatic leader, but even those in the neighboring towns know the reputation it has. Fighting all who try to take the town. Until now, of course. But will this agreement last?"

Hayakawa narrowed his eyes. "We have enough men. There's no need to signal desperation just yet. Not as long as we keep stable control of the iron mines."

Nakamura frowned. "Is my proposal any worse than the measures we've already taken?"

Toyama crossed his arms. "What are you doing in the meantime about the Chinese? What measures is Nakamura talking about?"

Hayakawa took a breath before answering. "After hearing Nakamura's account of our situation, I put a few soldiers in charge of repairing our older artillery at the tall building by the town square. The Chinese call it the Lotus Tower. But they have no idea how many more of our weapons will soon be operational. That will discourage any more revolt, and if it continues, we can wipe out the few holdouts while losing very few men. I don't ignore all the lieutenant's advice. Enough of this bickering."

Toyama turned to the colonel. "That's three hands. Your turn to deal."

Hayakawa took the deck and began dealing, showing the hint of a frown. Junji wondered how much of the truth the colonel had really shared with them.

\* \* \*

Enyu and the others approached the side of the Lotus Tower, weapons in hand. To his right, Dequan carried a grenade satchel in one hand and gripped his pistol with the other. A soldier patrolled the street several blocks away, but he didn't look in their direction. Enyu ducked around

the side of the building, holding his breath as he gripped his pistol. A soldier stood in the alley beside the tower, a meter away with his back turned.

As Youxia approached him, the soldier turned and spotted Enyu. Enyu lunged forward and knocked the gun from the soldier's hand. The soldier swung at him, but Youxia leapt forward and stopped the man's fist, then struck the soldier's windpipe hard before he could cry out. Enyu stumbled backward, motioning for Nuo to be quiet as she and the others approached.

Youxia put a hand over the soldier's mouth and shoved him to the ground, pinning the soldier's neck down with his knee. He pulled a knife from his belt, grunting as the soldier thrashed beneath him, but Enyu held out a hand to stop him. Enyu glanced through the side window of the tower, spotting a few soldiers talking with each other. The walls were thick, and it didn't look like the soldiers had heard the commotion.

"How many?" Youxia mouthed, glancing both ways down the narrow alleyway.

Enyu raised three fingers, looking down at the captured soldier and speaking in a low whisper. "Ask him if there are any others and where they are."

Youxia spoke to the soldier in Japanese, and the man gave a frantic response, spit flying from his lips. Youxia turned back with a shrug. Enyu sighed and exhaled through his teeth. He should have expected this much. He'd heard that a Japanese soldier would bite off his own tongue before selling out his country. Urging himself to focus, he made a cutting motion over his neck and turned back to the building as Youxia slashed the soldier's throat. Whether or not they found weapons, Enyu promised himself they would send a message.

"Stay behind me, and guard Shude," Enyu whispered.

He pushed open the side door and entered the workroom, pistol raised. The soldiers turned to him, raising their weapons, but Enyu darted to the side before they could lock their aim

on him. He opened fire, and bullets whizzed through the air, striking two of the men. One of them screamed and dropped his weapon before falling. The second man clutched at his neck where the bullet had struck him and fell to the ground, blood seeping from the wound.

The last man fired, but Enyu was a fast-moving target, and his bullet struck the wall. Nuo entered and fired three times. One of her shots struck the soldier before he could take aim again. He stumbled toward her and dropped his gun before tumbling to the ground.

Shude entered the workroom, followed by Youxia, Guotai, and Dequan. Youxia stepped forward and grabbed the submachine gun from the work table. Enyu glanced through the doorway leading out of the workroom, toward a staircase and the main entrance to the tower. Not much else was on the first floor. He'd expected to find more soldiers guarding the building, but if the Japanese were overconfident, it was a good sign.

Youxia turned to Enyu, brandishing the submachine gun. "Nice of them to leave this behind."

Enyu stepped forward and glanced around the corner, grabbing a Japanese Nambu pistol from the table. "Weapons first. Talk later."

## Chapter 18

### Point of No Return

Enyu opened a cabinet and threw aside a stack of papers, finding only a combat knife. Guotai pulled a long-range wooden Arisaka rifle off a lower shelf and turned back to Enyu, gesturing at the other empty shelves. Enyu knocked a screwdriver off the work table and kicked a stool over, breathing through his teeth.

“I was certain far more weapons would all be here,” Shude said. “The Japanese were seen carrying machine guns into this building, I’m sure of it. We can try another room.”

“No, we don’t have time,” Enyu turned, spotting an open window on the far side of the building. “I know this building. There’s no other obvious place to repair weapons. They must be hidden somewhere. But I have a new plan. A better plan than a simple raid.”

Youxia shook his head. “I don’t like changing our objective on a dime.”

Enyu held up a hand to silence him. He gritted his teeth, looking around the empty workroom. Thinking of the risk they’d already taken to get here, and there were plenty of spots

for them to take cover. Everything in him resisted the idea of starting over, of risking another ambush.

“I’ve thought about this possibility,” he said. “Soldiers will arrive and realize what happened. Maybe they’ve already heard gunshots. Eventually, reinforcements will get here, and they can only enter from a few places. So we’ll pick off all the soldiers that arrive. They’ll be disoriented as these men were, unsure of the threat. Start by securing the building and cataloging all the exits.”

“How long is that going to take?” Nuo asked.

Before Enyu could answer, there was shouting from outside, and he reached for his weapon. Three soldiers burst through the main door on the other side of the building. They spotted the group and opened fire. Enyu and the others ducked for cover behind steel cabinets and walls and fired back. One of the soldiers screamed as a bullet ripped through his arm. Enyu fired at the soldiers, and his third shot hit another man in the head. The soldiers were exposed with bad visibility to the shielded Chinese and no room for cover, and there was little the Japanese could do to protect themselves from the torrent of bullets.

Enyu felt his heart pounding. Bullets flew past him in both directions as the soldiers shouted in Japanese. The soldier with the wounded arm cried out once more as two bullets tore through his side. Enyu turned to see Nuo run out of bullets. Her hands shaking, she began reaching for a pistol from a dead soldier beside her.

Enyu pressed himself against the wall to avoid the oncoming gunfire. “Nuo, get back!”

She turned just as he ran out of bullets himself. Before she could respond, a bullet whizzed past them and struck Shude in the side. Nuo screamed in terror. Enyu forgot their

surroundings for a few seconds. Youxia pushed past them and opened fire at the last soldier, who fell to the ground in a mess of blood.

Shude groaned. His face was pale, and blood poured from the wound.

“Nuo!” Enyu ordered. “Get Shude out of here.”

“I won’t abandon all of you,” Nuo said, fighting back tears. “He wouldn’t want me to.”

“Don’t question me. I won’t let him die.”

Nuo knelt down to check the wound, and Enyu looked back around the corner. The last soldier lay unmoving in a pool of blood. There would be more than just three soldiers coming.

They still had the better position, but it wouldn’t be long before the Japanese covered the exits.

Enyu turned back to the others. “Nuo, medical supplies will be somewhere on this floor. Youxia, take Shude out through a side door to avoid any more soldiers. The rest of you, with me.”

Youxia nodded and knelt down to move Shude as Nuo ran to look for a medical kit. There would be no time for cataloging the exits now, no escape unless they got the upper hand and shot their way out. And for that, they needed the high ground, risky as it was. Enyu and the others raced up the staircase, toward a landing on the second floor where the stairs changed direction, leading up through the upper floors of the tower. When he was halfway to the landing, Enyu heard shouting behind him as more soldiers entered the building through the main entrance. He heard Youxia shouting as he fired back with the submachine gun. Then a scream as one of the soldiers was hit.

Enyu turned back as he reached the second floor landing and blasted at the soldiers. He saw Nuo sprinting back with a kit of medical supplies, ducking away from the line of fire and covering her head with her free hand. Youxia had tossed the submachine gun aside, and he

ducked with Nuo behind a table as Enyu provided covering fire. One soldier was caught in the hail of bullets, his body flailing as blood soaked through his uniform. Another soldier was hit in the stomach, and he doubled over in pain. Enyu's next bullet tore through his neck. As he reloaded, Enyu saw Youxia and Nuo dragging Shude out through the side door. As he fired down at the soldiers, he prayed that Nuo would be able to get her father away in all the chaos. More soldiers would be gathering, and they had at best a few minutes to get far away before every escape route was blocked.

When the last soldier in sight had fallen, Enyu turned back and continued up the staircase. A thousand thoughts ran through his head, and he pushed himself to focus on what was most immediate. Having the high ground had kept them alive so far, but resisting an unending swarm of Japanese soldiers would be impossible. They needed to secure one of the landings, force the Japanese to fall back or kill enough of them that their bodies became an obstacle for their comrades. Having a line of sight to the first floor would be ideal, keeping the Japanese from securing a foothold inside. But he wasn't confident the universe would allow them that much.

Voices grew louder behind him. More soldiers. As he reached the third floor landing, Enyu raised his weapon and looked back. He saw one man coming up the stairs and fired twice in the man's direction before his magazine clicked empty. Both shots missed, and the soldier ducked back around a corner. Two more men approached. Guotai opened fire with the long-range rifle and sent both of them to the ground. Then he darted up the staircase, past Enyu, and ran to a window on the fourth floor.

As Enyu reloaded his pistol, Dequan came up the stairs with the satchel of explosives, almost out of breath.

Dequan looked at him, panting. "I have the grenades."

Enyu nodded. "Keep one, and give me the rest. We can still fight."

As Dequan followed these orders, more shouting came from below. Several more soldiers charged up the staircase, and Enyu fired down at them. He ducked back as a bullet whizzed past him before firing back at the oncoming wave of soldiers. One of the soldiers fell before Enyu could take aim at him, and he turned back to see Dequan blasting furiously. Then there was a click as Dequan's clip emptied.

A stocky soldier came up the staircase, showing no sign of effort as he pushed forward. Dequan ducked behind a corner, and Enyu hurried up the stairs away from him just as the man reached the third floor landing, gun in hand. He was only a meter away, close enough that Enyu could see the red in his cheeks. As Dequan reloaded, Enyu raised his weapon, stepping past the satchel of grenades. The stocky man turned his weapon toward Enyu, and they opened fire at the same moment. Enyu ducked back as a bullet grazed his arm, but his aim was better, and the stocky soldier tumbled to the ground as a shot landed just above his hip. His face went pale, and blood trickled through his uniform.

Enyu caught his breath, glancing down to see how many soldiers were approaching. The Japanese had fallen back somewhat, and he saw only a few soldiers peeking around a corner on the second floor. When their numbers increased, the Japanese could rush the staircase, but they would take heavy casualties. Getting past the soldiers would require all three of them, maybe even finding the weapons that were stored in the tower. Enyu looked from Dequan to Guotai, who was reloading the Arisaka rifle on the floor above.

Before he could decide on a plan, several soldiers came around the corner, raising their weapons. Enyu turned toward them and fired back. His pistol clicked, empty, and he ducked down to reload. He rose a few seconds later, pistol loaded and heart still pounding.

“Come on!” Enyu shouted from the staircase, grabbing the grenade satchel. Guotai turned from the window and started toward the fourth floor landing, ducking toward the wall as several bullets flew past him.

Dequan turned back around the corner on the third floor landing, with a gun in one hand and the glint of a spark in the other. He fired several times at the uniformed men, his face red. The soldiers fired back, and Dequan was cut down by half a dozen bullets. His face went pale as blood seeped through his clothing. He tumbled forward, the gun falling from his hand, and landed on the stairs. The grenade he was holding flew from his hand, down the staircase.

One of the soldiers jumped back, but he was too late, and the blast that followed ripped him apart, mangling his body. The two others closest to the blast were thrown against the wall, and the landing was blown apart. Dequan’s body tumbled out of sight along with the other debris, leaving only a trail of blood.

Enyu froze, looking down at the hole in the staircase where Dequan had been a moment earlier. His heart pounded, and his hands trembled. A bullet from below struck the wall behind him, and he snapped back into focus, hurrying up the stairs toward Guotai.

He darted into a room after his brother, slamming the door shut behind him. His brother stared out the fourth-story window at a growing company of soldiers with several military vehicles. He’d expected reinforcements to come, but they had coordinated much faster than he’d anticipated. Hayakawa lived up to his reputation so far. If the Japanese came at them with full force, it wouldn’t be long before he and his brother joined Dequan in death. Their best hope, realistically speaking, was to confront as many soldiers as possible, to take as many Japanese with them as they could. That meant surviving as long as they could. The strongest card they had

against the Japanese was the building itself, the hope that the soldiers would direct focus toward reclaiming their stockpile of weapons.

Enyu stepped toward Guotai, breathing heavily. “There’s no way down. Even if we found a rope or a cable, they’ll be covering all the exits. But they can’t shoot their way to the fourth floor without the stairs. I hope the others got away from the tower, but at the same time, part of me wishes Youxia was here. He might’ve helped us secure one of the lower floors.”

Guotai turned back to him. “Do you hear something? Behind that door?”

Enyu turned to the thin wooden door and listened. He heard a call for a medic from below, and then what sounded like radio static. Enyu tried to remember if there was a soldier he’d missed, but the memories from the gunfight all blurred together. The man sounded wounded, but it was hard to tell for certain. As Enyu reached for his weapon, Guotai stepped past him, gun in hand.

The soldier on the other side of the door shouted in Japanese and pushed the door open, rushing through. The stocky man from the floor below. Guotai fired twice, and the soldier fell, his gun clattering to the ground beside him. Enyu looked through the doorway and saw a radio about the size of a shoebox. He crawled forward and dragged the radio inside. A Japanese model. They’d found at least one thing put in the tower by Hayakawa.

Enyu shrugged. “I remember him now, the soldier who just came in. I shot him just above the hip. Guess I should have gone for his head once he was down. Must have been very difficult for him to get as far as he did.”

“Did they hit you?” Guotai asked. “They didn’t get me.”

“They grazed my arm.” Enyu rolled up his sleeve, revealing a smear of blood. “But that’s it. If we can find the weapons they stored here, we might be able to drag this out.”

Guotai shook his head. "No, there's something that's been bugging me up to this point, and I think I realized what it is. You said that some of the weapons carried into the tower showed signs of damage, didn't you?"

Enyu nodded. "That's right. But it's very likely that most of them will be operational."

"Why bring them all to this building?" Guotai eyed him closely. "And why didn't any soldier make use of them when they had us pinned down in that firefight? Are we to believe they're all this high up? No, I think after that fight I can justify a new theory. The weapons were all damaged, visibly or not. The Japanese brought them here to repair them. At least, that seems like the most likely scenario. Even if we find some weapons, there's no guarantee that any of the ones we find will be repaired."

Enyu paused as these words sunk in. Even if Guotai was wrong about the weapons being brought for repairs, they were unlikely to find them now if they hadn't already. If by some miracle any more soldiers managed to get close to them, they could at least fight back. But they were greatly outnumbered now, and in all likelihood they were just waiting to die.

Enyu crawled toward the window. "Do you remember the look on our father's face the day the sickness took him? How pale he was? I got a good look at him that day, and I couldn't bear to look at him again. Even after he died. I used to resent him for being so strict, so focused on his job and not on those around him. But I've become so much like him now."

He turned back to his brother. Guotai didn't answer the question, but the look in his eyes showed that he remembered. Enyu sat back against the wall, feeling a trickle of blood from the place his arm had been grazed.

Finally, Guotai wiped the sweat from his forehead, showing a small smile and gesturing at the soldier they'd killed. "You think that man was the last one?"

Enyu sighed, unrolling his sleeve. “Where are the grenades?”

## Chapter 19

### Message to the Enemy

Outside the Lotus Tower, a crowd had gathered. Hayakawa stood among them, watching as clouds of black smoke wafted through the now-shattered windows on the second floor of the building. He wondered how many soldiers had been killed by the blast. If the Chinese found the weapons inside, the battle might be drawn out for quite a while, but if all went as he hoped, the resources they had would be enough to take back the building.

Most of the people watching were soldiers, though a number of townspeople were outside as well. With their homes destroyed, an increasing number of Chinese had risked using the main roads, and now most of them searched frantically for a place to avoid the line of fire. A few were bold enough to stay nearby and watch. Hayakawa pushed through the crowd, shouting orders into his transceiver and looking for Nakamura. A truck with half a dozen soldiers approached the building, and Hayakawa shouted for them to watch the exits. The men ran toward the building, weapons raised. There were others inside the building, others approaching from the opposite side. So many had swarmed here, and they'd arrived before he had.

He turned to see Nakamura approaching from the side of the building with a crowd of soldiers, as Captain Amaki approached from another direction. The lieutenant was disheveled, but his eyes were cold and focused. He nodded at Hayakawa.

“You got here before me,” Hayakawa said. “I haven’t even seen any majors here yet.”

Nakamura nodded. “I’ve been hard at work rallying forces. The good news is, the Chinese took the bait. Of course, this was just one possibility I anticipated. I wasn’t going to rely on it going exactly as I hoped.”

Captain Amaki stepped toward him. “What bait?”

Nakamura smirked. “Putting all those old weapons in the tower and allowing the Chinese to see us. Leaving the tower mostly unguarded but positioning soldiers so we could quickly swarm the building. Now we have the resistance surrounded. Even better, one of the blasts took out part of the stairs. And even if the Chinese make it to the first story alive, there are very few exits for them. The weapons aren’t stored on the first floor, but most of them haven’t been repaired yet anyway. We have explosives tied to every support on that building. Warrant Officer Makihara is evacuating the building as we speak. I strongly suggest we set them off.”

Hayakawa narrowed his eyes at Nakamura. “I’m your superior. You should have told me this was your plan.”

Nakamura sighed. “I didn’t know if it was even likely to work. But you’re right.”

“We have supplies in there,” Amaki said. “All those weapons that could potentially be repaired and used for our purposes. You can’t be serious about blowing the place up.”

Nakamura narrowed his eyes. “The Chinese are massacring our forces as we speak. And right now, they’re closer to the stockpile than we are. No doubt some of those weapons have

already been repaired, and that makes our stockpile a liability. Please tell me keeping that building up isn't your biggest concern."

Amaki turned to Hayakawa. "Right now, you are frightened of what you do not know. But in a few days, this battle will be a rumor. Who knows how many Chinese fighters are in that building? It might be a dozen, or it might be only two. Destroying an important asset to get rid of two people is a very bad look."

A sergeant approached them, carrying a radio. "A soldier made contact through a radio inside the building. And one of our men heard the Chinese speaking on the other end."

Hayakawa took the radio and placed it on the ground, turning back to Amaki. "Very well. There's no need for extreme measures with other options still available."

He switched the radio back on and issued a standard greeting in Chinese. He heard faint voices on the other side, and he continued.

"This is a message to the Chinese inside the Lotus Tower, who are now surrounded by the better half of our forces. I will not repeat this message a second time. In a few minutes, my men are going to set off every explosive we've placed on the first floor and level the building. Your only recourse is to lay down your weapons and turn yourselves in. You have sixty seconds to indicate your surrender."

He looked at the others. Nakamura watched him with the hint of a smile. Amaki wiped sweat from his face, looking from the shattered windows on the tower to the men guarding the exits. Hayakawa saw a few townspeople watching them and allowed himself a small smile, hoping they would remember his decisive ultimatum.

A window somewhere shattered, and four indiscernible objects fell from the far side of the building toward the crowd of soldiers and vehicles. There were shouts from the soldiers nearby.

Hayakawa turned to Amaki. "What was that?"

If Amaki gave an answer, it was rendered inaudible by the deafening blast that followed. All four grenades went off in rapid succession, and soldiers instantly cried out in agony. One man was thrown against a tank, and his body crumpled to the ground. Another man let out an inhuman howl and writhed on the ground, his legs completely severed from the blast. A cloud of black smoke obscured the rest, but their cries were unmistakable.

Hayakawa turned to Nakamura, the small smile gone from his face. "Blow up the building."

\* \* \*

Three blocks from the tower, Nuo and Youxia knelt over Shude, doing their best to stop the flow of blood. They'd been lucky to get away from the building before a swarm of soldiers gathered, or maybe just blessed that Youxia had been skilled at surviving for a long time. Dragging the old man out of the line of fire had taken all of their combined strength, and he was still bleeding out. Nuo desperately wrapped bandages around the wound, limiting the flow of blood as best she could. He might live, but it was a gamble, and she didn't like the uncertainty.

Youxia looked back at the tower and motioned for her to look. Soldiers were leaving the building from multiple exits. One of the men motioned to the others, and several of the soldiers broke into a sprint.

"They're about to level the building," he said.

Nuo turned to him, panting. "Are you sure? What about Enyu and the others? Are they still in the tower?"

"I can't be certain of anything from this far away. But there's nothing we can do for the others right now. We've got time to get out of range, but we still have to hurry."

She looked frantically from him to Shude. "My father—"

"He'll be a dead man if we don't get him away from the flying rubble. Quickly."

She saw the intensity in his eyes and relented, promising herself she wouldn't let Shude bleed to death. As she scrambled to assemble the medical supplies, Youxia lifted Shude onto his shoulders. The voices of the soldiers grew louder.

\* \* \*

On the other side of the tower, Hayakawa watched the soldiers evacuate. The man without legs screamed in agony as the other soldiers pulled him away from the tower. Once they appeared to be a safe distance away, Hayakawa turned to the soldier with the detonator and nodded. The soldier pressed the button, to no avail. Nakamura shouted at him, and one of the other men approached as the soldier tried several more times before passing the device to the other man. The second man shook his head, barking something about not holding the button down long enough. If that was really the only issue, it wouldn't set them back very long.

The man now holding the device stepped forward, nodding at the others. Nakamura shouted once more, and the soldier held the button down. Hayakawa felt his heart stop as he waited for several seconds. Then there was an ear-splitting blast and a billow of smoke from the lowest floor of the building. The soldiers covered their ears as the next blast sent bits of rubble into the crowd. There was a grating twist of metal, and Hayakawa felt his breath stop. Then the building plummeted toward the earth.

## Chapter 20

## Story of Angels and Devils

Nuo dove behind a wooden shed and crouched down, her heart racing. A bead of sweat trickled down her forehead, and she wiped it away with a trembling hand. A window somewhere shattered, and she fought the urge to turn back around the side of the shed to see how far away Youxia was. There was another blast in the distance, followed by several soldiers shouting.

She heard Youxia's heavy breathing, and he made it out of the alley a few seconds after the second blast. A piece of debris flew past them a moment later. Nuo turned back to see if her father had been hurt by the flying rubble.

"Are you all right?" Youxia asked.

Nuo nodded. "What about him?"

Youxia knelt down and placed Shude on the ground. The old man gasped for breath, and Nuo helped him sit upright. He was no longer bleeding, but his face was pale.

"What happened?" Shude coughed as he spoke. "Did we destroy the building?"

There was a pause, and then Youxia spoke. “I think the Japanese did. Enyu and the others must have been inside. They couldn’t have survived.”

“There were only three of them. If I hadn’t been shot, you wouldn’t have left the building to help me. Together, you could’ve—”

Nuo shook her head. “We would have been killed as well. There were hundreds of Japanese soldiers. I’m glad you’re alive, father.”

Youxia paused. “We’ll have to tell Mingzhu what happened here. She was right, after all. We have no more weapons than we had this morning. And Dequan...she won’t be happy to hear how we left him to die.”

“Enyu trusted me.” Shude leaned against the wall of the shed, his face pale. “They’re dead. All three of them. I’d have been killed or killed myself if Enyu and Guotai hadn’t been there to help me. They pushed me to live. And Dequan was like a younger me. Losing his mother in the same massacre where I lost Xijuan, Bao, and Mei. I don’t know what I was thinking, dragging them all into this.”

Youxia nodded. “They were good people. Neither of us knew them for very long, but we’d have died for them, and they for us, if given the opportunity. That’s why Enyu insisted that you had to live. He was willing to trust you, to trust us to carry on without him. Resistances have come back from worse than this, but only when their members were committed.”

Shude sighed, turning to Nuo. “I can’t take any more of this. I can’t lose you too. I won’t keep trying to fight.”

“This isn’t over.” Youxia stared past him at the wreckage from the tower. “Not as long as the Japanese and I are still breathing. We might be able to recruit more members now that everyone knows we exist. I’m going to drag you out of here, and you’re going to tell Mingzhu

we can still beat the Japanese. If nothing else, I can abandon my honor and ask an old acquaintance for help. You remember Hou, don't you?"

Shude nodded slowly. "You told me about him. If you believe we can get him on our side, I won't abandon you."

Nuo eyed them both. "You're sure about this?"

"Get up," Youxia said. "Help me carry the old man. I'm not done with him."

\* \* \*

Junji approached the house that had once been the mayor's. It had been a day since the collapse of the Lotus Tower, since they'd scoured the streets for any signs of remaining rebels. Somehow, whatever rebels remained had evaded capture. There was a rumor that more townspeople had considered resisting, but the commanders he knew didn't put much stock in rumors.

Junji pictured the events of the previous day all too clearly. It had been like watching the Great Kanto earthquake all over again. The Japanese would not forgive the rebels, and the slaughter that followed would be much greater than before. It was his duty to die for Emperor Hirohito, to trust that there were reasons for the war that surpassed his own understanding.

To be summoned by Hayakawa had been his only relief since the battle at the tower. He hoped the colonel had some work for him that would help to restabilize the town so the Japanese could make use of it.

He pushed open the front door to the house, entering a living room where Hayakawa and a young soldier with a wiry frame sat talking. He recognized the boy as Akito Makihara, Warrant Officer Makihara's son. Junji bowed as the colonel rose from his chair and turned to him. Akito quickly rose as well and brushed dust off his uniform, turning to Junji and showing what may have been a genuine smile.

“You called for me,” Junji said. “Should I sit?”

“No,” Hayakawa said. “I’ll be quick. You speak Chinese. The soldier in charge of our radio broadcasts was killed yesterday at the Lotus Tower. We’re putting you in charge of our broadcasts from now on. Makihara’s boy will take you to the station.”

Akito stepped forward. “I heard you were near the tower with my father when it collapsed. A lot of our men were injured. Are you all right?”

Junji nodded. “I’m fine. What do you want me to say?”

Hayakawa paused, thinking for a moment before he answered. “You’ll tell them what happened. After slaughtering Chinese and Japanese alike, the rebels blew up the Lotus Tower. They were killed before they could further endanger civilians.”

Junji frowned. “Is that what happened?”

The colonel stepped toward him. Junji stepped back, and Hayakawa put a hand on his shoulder. He had never questioned the colonel before, and this question had seemed so trivial. But from the glare in Hayakawa’s eyes, he could tell that it had not been his place to discuss what should be broadcasted. Not even as the son of Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa.

He felt the colonel’s breath on his face. They stared at each other for a few seconds, and Junji’s hands quivered. If the colonel regretted decimating the tower and destroying the weapons inside just to kill two rebels, he didn’t show it.

Akito stepped forward, looking warily from Junji to the colonel. “I’m sure the private is just tired, Colonel.”

Hayakawa lowered his hand, still glaring at Junji. “You have a broadcast to make.”

## Chapter 21

## The Offer

Sakata stepped through a mess of ash and rubble where a building had once been. Only part of a wall was left, advertising a *jiǔguǎn*. Stringing his memory, he vaguely recalled learning that the word meant tavern in Chinese. There was a charred body on the ground that he suspected belonged to the tavern's unlucky owner. It had been only two days since the collapse of the Lotus Tower, but in the faces of many townspeople, a look of impending doom had already set in. Whatever role Ito and Kobayashi had played in slaughtering the populace, getting rid of them hadn't stopped the Japanese army. Hayakawa was the biggest threat, but going after him would be a gamble, even with the new, clean uniform he'd taken. And that gamble was one Sakata hadn't yet resolved to make.

The resistance was well-hidden, and if Sakata hadn't been on the outskirts of town, away from the other soldiers, he probably wouldn't have spotted any of their members. Living like this was a big risk, but it was his only option. The Chinese man wearing a gold bracelet that he'd been following walked through the street, and Sakata could still see the outline of a gun in his

waistband. The Chinese man was good at not drawing attention, at minimizing the amount that soldiers saw him. But Sakata knew another person trying to avoid detection when he saw one. The rest of the street was empty. He couldn't blame the townspeople for avoiding the place where so many had been slaughtered.

Besides the tavern, a lot of buildings had been burned to the ground. If he'd only heard stories about the Lotus Tower, he might have assumed the official broadcast was true. But he had been watching the army from the shadows for a week now, watching the movements of the colonel and those closest to him. Seeing Hayakawa's ultimatum for himself and seeing the rebels refuse to surrender had given him some respect for them. So had seeing townspeople leave their homes in the dead of night to go wherever it was the resistors met. Little about the war surprised him now, but the resistors here had been more bold than he'd expected.

As Sakata walked forward, a piece of wood snapped under his foot, and the Chinese man spun around, raising his gun. Sakata ducked behind the broken wall and pulled out his pistol. He heard the Chinese man stepping toward him.

The man spoke in Japanese through a thick accent. "Who are you?"

Sakata tightened his grip on the pistol. Caishen's iron exports had always been the biggest part of its economy, and it made sense that many people here knew more than just Chinese. Still, hearing the Chinese man speak Japanese so suddenly caught him off guard.

"My name is Sakata Ryuji," he said. "I'm a deserter from the Japanese army. What's your name?"

"You may call me Youxia," the man said. "You should not stay here, foreigner."

"I've seen you before," Sakata said. "I've been watching this part of town. Are you a member of the resistance?"

“There’s no resistance,” Youxia said. “No one here to threaten you except me.”

“I know what happened at the Lotus Tower.”

Youxia laughed. “You can’t trust everything you hear from the army.”

“I saw what happened,” Sakata said. “You occupied the building. When your people refused to surrender, the Japanese destroyed it. They’re not going to stop until someone makes them. But there’s hope for you yet. You were outnumbered, but the Japanese still suffered many casualties before the building collapsed.”

“A lot of buildings have been destroyed,” Youxia said. “Who’s going to remember that one?”

“Maybe not the history books.” Sakata inched forward. “But for now, rumors must be spreading about the resistors who weren’t afraid to challenge the Japanese army. Whatever your numbers are now, they’ll grow. If they grow enough, you’ll have a chance.”

Youxia came around the side of the building, his gun lowered. “You’re very optimistic.”

Sakata lowered his pistol. “You want to know what happened? The Chinese rebels dropped grenades on the Japanese forces outside the building. Dozens were killed. I saw a soldier’s legs blown off. When I was in the army, I heard rumors about Caishen and its persistence against invaders. When the Japanese massacre entire towns, many of the survivors run to the mountains. But the rest come here. Some travelers take it upon themselves to visit less powerful towns, advertise the bravery of your resistance. Everyone knows this is the place where a thousand Chinese townspeople entered the battlefield to fight a few hundred Japanese soldiers in the battle for Caishen. You must know of the reputation this place has, Youxia.”

Youxia shook his head. “Maybe rumors are just rumors.”

Sakata nodded, studying Youxia's expression. "I owe my life to a Chinese woman. And I know the army better than anyone on your side. If you want my help, you must take me to this resistance. I got my revenge, killed some of those bent on bringing destruction. But the truth is, I don't know what results my actions have had or who really needs to die. I need to see things from your side."

"I did hear of Ito's death," Youxia said. "And we didn't kill him. That helps your story a bit. But it still doesn't prove anything."

"There are others who can confirm I killed Japanese soldiers," Sakata said. "Doesn't your resistance have anyone from Town Hall?"

If they spoke about him, there was always the risk they would reveal what had happened to Li Bo. But the army was their bigger enemy now, and he hoped they wouldn't choose to reignite old fires when he wasn't the biggest threat to deal with.

"We'll have people from Town Hall soon enough." Youxia sighed. "Give me your weapon. I'll search you, and you can be under our surveillance until we need you."

\* \* \*

Nuo entered the warehouse to find about a dozen new faces. Chairs had been dragged to the center of the room, and most of them were filled. Shude smiled at her from his seat at the side of the cluster. At the front, Mingzhu stood with a man Nuo didn't recognize.

Nuo gestured to the man. "Who's that?"

"My name is Zhang." The man gestured to a woman at the side of the room. "Qiao and I were able to recruit these people per Mingzhu's request. Many lost family members in the town square. Some came from other towns to aid the fight here. The latter often form their own groups with people they know, but we've made an effort to recruit them to the resistance movement, and

we can expect more to arrive as more rumors of this fight spread. After the sacrifice your friends made at the Lotus Tower, many of us felt this resistance had the spirit to drive out the Japanese.”

Nuo turned to the back of the room, where Youxia sat beside a Japanese soldier who wasn’t bound in any way. Youxia said something in Japanese, and the soldier nodded.

“What’s he doing here?” Nuo asked Youxia.

“This is Sakata,” Youxia said. “He’s a Japanese deserter who claims to be on our side. I’m going to translate for him. I trust that someone from Town Hall can confirm he left the Japanese army.”

Zhang nodded at him, eyeing Sakata closely, and the look was not a friendly one. But it vanished after a few moments.

“Sakata definitely left the army,” Zhang said. “He even killed some of his own men. It’s a story I’m sure he’ll tell you someday. But I didn’t think he would be coming here to join us. In any case, it’s the soldiers still loyal to the army that pose the biggest threat to us now.”

If Zhang’s look had meant anything more than general distrust of the Japanese, he wasn’t about to explain why. Nuo opened her mouth to respond, and Youxia turned to Sakata, repeating what he and Zhang had said in Japanese. Qiao’s eyes darted from Youxia to Sakata. Her face was pale. Zhang grimaced as he looked at the soldier, but he said nothing.

Nuo stepped toward Youxia. “We’re just accepting this? He’s Japanese. Why would he care about us or anyone in this town? After he chose to join their army?”

“He didn’t choose to join,” Qiao said. “He was drafted. And the Japanese burned down his house when he was a boy. I can assure you he doesn’t want this war any more than we do. And he won’t do anything that benefits the army.”

Nuo narrowed her eyes, looking from one face to another. The others knew this man somehow, and doubting their judgment would cause problems. Even if he wasn't on their side, he couldn't exactly run back to the army after killing Japanese soldiers. They would have to watch him closely, look for signs that he was a spy, but they could still tolerate him for now. It wasn't the biggest gamble they had made so far.

Mingzhu cleared her throat. "Now that Nuo is here, we can discuss our next course of action. The Japanese killed my brother. They massacred countless citizens. The Pomegranate Festival was only the start. The Japanese won't rest until they've destroyed every remnant of our culture. But our resistance has more members now than it did before the Lotus Tower fell. And many more have expressed an interest in joining us. We're still outnumbered, but that's no reason to sit back and let them massacre us. Tolerating this occupation is no way to honor those who have died. We should increase our guerilla operations. When our numbers have grown sufficiently, we can draw them away from their army encampment and take it back. They may outnumber us, but we know this town. The Japanese dream of dying for their emperor, so let's oblige them."

A man near the front shook his head. "You can't possibly want us to attack them head-on. You know what Hayakawa did in Da Chengzen."

Mingzhu stared him down. "I thought we were all prepared to fight. My brother is dead. The only family I had. I want justice. Have I been unreasonable? Have I sacrificed less than any of you?"

Zhang stepped forward. "Hayakawa is the problem. He shows no mercy. He massacred hundreds in the town square. He destroyed the Lotus Tower almost as soon as we occupied it. Hayakawa is more dangerous than any of the others."

“Maybe he is the problem,” Mingzhu said. “But how will we get to him? We killed some of his men, but he still hides behind hundreds of soldiers armed with every kind of gun.”

“We could draw him out,” Shude offered. “We saw him come to the front lines when we occupied the Lotus Tower. In the War of Jiawu, some of our fighters drew a Navy commander into an ambush.”

Nuo shook her head. “Hayakawa will be more careful than that after what happened at the tower.”

“Yes, he will,” Mingzhu said. “We don’t yet have the power to kill Hayakawa. Strength can only be defeated with strength. So we will hunt down every Japanese soldier in this town, one by one, and we will slaughter them.”

Sakata sprang to his feet, and his chair clattered to the ground. The others turned to him, and Zhang pulled his gun from his belt. Sakata looked at Mingzhu and said something in Japanese. Qiao froze, her eyes widening. Youxia nodded for a moment and then started laughing.

“What did he say to me?” Mingzhu asked him. “Why are you laughing?”

“You’ll get your justice.” Youxia nodded at Sakata. “The defector has offered to kill Hayakawa.”

## Chapter 22

### A Name from the Past

Sakata looked from one face to another. Some glared at him, and others looked at him with what appeared to be curiosity. Mingzhu stepped toward him, her eyes not leaving his face. He was used to being watched closely, and it felt refreshing to finally be taken seriously. Mingzhu said something to Youxia, and Youxia turned to him.

“Why do you want to kill Hayakawa?” Youxia asked him.

Sakata looked from him to Mingzhu. “Because someone has to. Who else thinks they can kill Hayakawa? I’ve been fighting for my life since I was a boy, and I understand the inner workings of the army better than any of you. No one man can shoot his way to the Slayer except for me. Until now, I wasn’t sure going after Hayakawa was worth the risk. I thought he might be easily replaceable. But you’ve made it clear the power he holds.”

Youxia repeated this. Mingzhu nodded slowly at his answer before saying something else.

“When can you do this?” Youxia asked him.

“I can do it now.” Sakata dangled his pistol in front of them. “The longer I wait, the more people will die. I’ve gotten into their encampment before, and I’ll do it again. This is a pistol I found the last time I raided the Japanese camp. Send Youxia to watch me kill a few of them if you wish.”

Youxia repeated this for Mingzhu, and she nodded at him again. Nuo said something in Chinese, and several of the others butted in. Mingzhu held out a hand for silence and turned to Youxia, waiting a moment before uttering a few sentences.

Youxia turned to Sakata. “You’re not Chinese. You don’t speak Chinese. The only thing I know about you is that you betrayed and killed members of your own country. You might not be a friend of theirs, but you’ll forgive us if we’re not enthusiastic about trusting you. Why go this far for us?”

Sakata studied his face. “When my commanders dragged me into this conflict and beat me, I prayed for their death. When the fighting didn’t kill them, I prayed for my own death. But now I can stand against them. I’ve thought about how I would go in, get to him before he realizes what’s happening. I don’t need your help. Make plans for how to handle the rest of the soldiers.”

Youxia repeated these words as he said them, and Mingzhu nodded slowly, responding after Youxia had finished.

“We’ll give you this chance,” Youxia said. “If you betray us, we’ll be prepared. And you can expect our vengeance.”

Sakata studied his expression, finding no sign of levity. “I’d know a bit about that.”

Sakata left the warehouse with Youxia and started through the town toward the military encampment. He’d watched the soldiers take over the homes and buildings at the edge of town,

and he'd gotten a good idea of where the high-ranking officials spent most of their time. He kept to the side of the road, making sure they weren't being spotted by any soldiers.

Youxia hurried after him. "You're really going through with this?"

Sakata nodded. "It's not automatically a suicide mission. I trained a lot. And I fought for my life before I ever put on a uniform. I've gotten in and out before and killed people without getting shot myself. They've been fighting for medals and honor, but I've been fighting to survive."

"You're going in with that pistol?" Youxia asked. "If you can get in, why not steal an automatic weapon?"

Sakata glanced at him. "I tried to find one, but those are rare with the army's poor supply lines, even among Hayakawa's men. Most just have Nambu pistols. So I'm going in with one of those myself. You know as well as I do that someone needs to stand up to them. Now tell me, Youxia, what happened when Hayakawa came to your town?"

Youxia sighed and nodded. "It was a bloodbath. And not just in the town square. They slaughtered people for just walking down the street. They set fire to most of our businesses and killed anyone important they could find. Even Li Bo is dead."

Sakata stopped and turned to him. "You knew Li Bo?"

"Not by choice. Li Bo was a distant stranger to wisdom. He was smart when he tried to be, but he made a lot of mistakes. No matter how he died, he must not have learned from them. It's a shame."

Sakata nodded ahead, toward the forest that stood beside the army encampment. "If I kill Hayakawa for you, you believe you'll have a chance against the Japanese?"

“You confuse me, Sakata. You went through so much trouble to escape the war. And now, here you are. Volunteering to fight in the same war you left just a few weeks ago. I think it would have been easier for you to just stay in the army. Why didn’t you?”

“Do I strike you as a common soldier? One of them? I thought you decided to trust me.”

“I didn’t say we trusted you. Just that we’d give you this one chance.”

This was about what Sakata had expected. There was no changing his Japanese blood, no undoing his time in the army.

“Are you my commanding officer, Youxia?” he asked. “Do you issue orders to me? Do you plan on sending me to die?”

Youxia shrugged. “I suppose not.”

Sakata continued ahead. “Then you have nothing to worry about.”

“You besmirched your name just to fight on your own terms?” Youxia laughed. “You have guts. Not many people do, not even the Japanese soldiers obsessed with bushido. Sometimes fighting for honor and approval is another form of cowardice. But you have a strange way of choosing your allies. Just a few weeks ago, we were enemies. Yet you don’t seem the least bit curious about me.”

Sakata turned back. “Is Youxia your real name?”

Youxia paused for a moment. “My name is Li Tao. Li Bo was my brother. Killed by a Japanese soldier, or so the rumor goes. So I’ll find the soldier who killed my brother and avenge him. We didn’t always get along, but I owe him that much.”

Sakata froze and studied Youxia’s somber expression. But he regained his composure and nodded at Youxia before turning back to the encampment. They continued in silence for another

minute. When they reached a row of trees a few meters from the edge of the encampment, Sakata turned back to Youxia.

“Hayakawa will be around here,” Sakata said. “I’ve watched him. And I’ve seen him entering and leaving that large house right there. That’s where I’ll start.”

“That’s the mayor’s old house. Are you sure Hayakawa will be there?”

“He might be. I could stake out the area, but if I’m noticed and suspicion arises, I might not get a chance at all. If I run in now, storm through the camp, I can get to him before he knows I’m coming. I have to take the few chances I can get. It won’t be easy to kill Hayakawa. He’s not proud, and he’ll be much more careful than Ito. It would help if he stuck to a set routine, but he doesn’t. And most of these buildings are restricted to people he works with. I’m going to stand out.”

“But you have a plan?”

“This uniform, combined with my knowledge of army procedure. That’s what lets me get in and out. They’re not about to shoot someone who looks like another Japanese soldier. That means I’ll be the one to shoot first. I’ll move quickly. Shoot my way in and kill Hayakawa before anyone realizes what’s happening.”

Youxia looked at him, reading his face. “If you fail, there’s another man I know who I’ll give a chance to assassinate the colonel. Have you heard rumors of Hou the Unkillable?”

Sakata shook his head. “Not until now. I doubt he’ll stand a chance against Hayakawa if I don’t.”

Youxia smirked. “For what it’s worth, I hope you come out of this alive. But I’m watching you, Sakata.”

Youxia crouched back, nodding a silent farewell as Sakata moved away from him. He felt a calmness come over him, honing his instincts as he gripped his pistol. His whole life, he'd been one misstep away from death. If he was throwing his life away to fight the Japanese, at least the danger would be a familiar feeling.

He approached the house, trying to make his movements look as natural as possible. Congregating the army in one place made them hard to attack, and they would be more on edge with news of the resistance. But in a case like this, the illusion of security would work to his advantage. No soldiers had been solely delegated to guard duty. As he went to the building, several soldiers walked past the house without giving him a second glance. He reached a door on the side of the house by a window. He glanced around. None of the soldiers outside paid him any attention.

Through the window, he saw two soldiers sitting around a wooden table, an older man and a young soldier with a wiry frame. Both had drinks in hand. Sakata took several deep breaths. Then he burst through the door.

The soldiers looked up at him with surprise. He raised his gun and shot the older man twice in the chest. He gurgled and dropped his porcelain cup, and it rolled off the table, shattering on the ground. As the young soldier reached for his weapon, Sakata turned to him and fired two shots. The second man coughed out blood and collapsed forward, his face hitting the wooden table as his cup fell to the floor and shattered into a dozen pieces. Sakata darted around the table and entered a hall with a door to the right and another passage to the left.

A soldier came around the corner and ran up to him, rifle in hand. "I heard gunshots."

Sakata stopped in his tracks to avoid colliding with the soldier. Then he raised his pistol and shot the man through the head. As the man collapsed to the ground, Sakata kicked open the

door to his right. He heard a snap, and the door creaked open, revealing a soldier on a chamber pot.

Sakata raised his pistol. "Where's Hayakawa?"

The soldier sputtered for a few moments, and Sakata fired next to the man's head. "Where is he?"

"Help!" the soldier shouted.

Sakata shot the soldier in the chest. As the man grabbed the wound and opened his mouth to cry out again, Sakata shot him once more with his last round and hurried down the hall.

Without slowing his pace, he pulled out one of two spare magazines and reloaded his pistol. He reached a side door and shouldered it open, glancing around as he stepped out onto the grass.

Several soldiers ran past him, apparently too focused on getting to the sound of the shots to ask him what had happened. He saw one of them glance at him for a brief moment before turning back away. Just ahead of him was a broadcast station that looked about four meters long. In the distance, uniformed men walked past rows of occupied shacks. Gritting his teeth, Sakata hurried to the door of the broadcast station and pushed it open. A soldier sat at a broadcast booth, and his eyes widened when he saw Sakata.

Sakata trained his pistol on the soldier, approaching the booth. "Where's Hayakawa?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me. I'll do whatever you want. Just don't shoot me."

Sakata narrowed his eyes. "What's your name?"

"Junji," the soldier said. "I'm no one. Just a private."

"All right, boy. Put your gun on the floor where I can see it. Then turn on that transmitter and make Hayakawa come here."

Junji nodded, keeping his eyes on the pistol for a few moments before setting his gun on the floor and turning to the broadcast equipment. He flipped a switch and turned several dials, leaning into the transmitter. Sakata watched him, keeping his gun trained on Junji's face. With all the shooting, the camp would likely suspect an invader. His hope was that this would make them more urgent to cooperate, perhaps assume Hayakawa's presence might be needed to resolve the issue. But if the private sent a coded message, or the Japanese figured out what was going on, then there was little hope. But he had struck hard and unexpectedly, and all had gone well so far. The private seemed almost docile, unlikely to disobey a man with a gun, even if it meant putting Hayakawa in danger. Perhaps not as rare a sight as he'd once thought, even with all the military propaganda.

"This is an urgent request for assistance." Junji's voice shook as he spoke. "Lieutenant Colonel Hayakawa's presence is requested at the broadcast station. I repeat, Lieutenant Colonel Hayakawa's presence is requested at the broadcast station."

Sakata nodded and backed toward the wall, leaning against a steel electrical cabinet bolted to the wall. Like most of the room, it remained in good condition, likely built for durability during the war. He looked toward the door he had entered through as he tightened his grip on the pistol. He glanced at the door on the opposite wall for a moment, then at Junji.

Junji frowned. "Hayakawa won't be happy about being called like this."

Sakata turned back to Junji, eyes cold. "I wouldn't worry about him."

Junji studied his expression. "What did Hayakawa do to you?"

Sakata turned away from him and listened for the sound of footsteps. Junji watched him, seeming uncertain of what to do. After about a minute, he heard someone approaching. Then several others. And finally the sound of voices.

Instinct took over, and he dove to the floor. A barrage of bullets tore through the wall. One of the shots grazed his shoulder, and he winced, knocking his pistol away. One shot ricocheted off the electrical cabinet. Another bullet shattered a light on the ceiling, spraying glass onto the ground. Sakata's hands shook, and he gasped for breath.

## Chapter 23

### The Face of a Killer

The air smelled of gunpowder and blood. Smoke billowed from the broadcasting equipment, and some of it began to catch fire. Sakata saw Junji on the ground, clutching his side as his blood spilled onto the hardwood floor. He crawled forward, grabbing his pistol and rolling onto his side.

He gritted his teeth and glanced back. The wall of the station was riddled with holes, and he heard the men outside began reloading their rifles. On the other side of the station, most of the bullets had made it through, but some had caught in the wall. The soldiers on that side had to be using handguns instead of rifles.

Sakata rose to his feet, hunching as low as he could. He ran to the electrical cabinet still hanging from the damaged wooden wall and ripped it off. It had stopped a bullet already, and if the soldiers were using pistols, it stood a chance of stopping the others. He sprinted to the door opposite the barrage of bullets.

He pushed the door halfway open with the cabinet, ducking down behind it and looking out through the half-opened door. A soldier saw him and raised his weapon. Sakata pressed himself against the metal cabinet and shot the soldier in the head before he could fire. Several bullets tore through the wooden door and dented the metal. One of the bullets missed the cabinet and grazed his leg. He heard one of the men on the other side of the door shout in anger as his gun ran out of bullets.

Sakata glanced around the side of the door. There were two more men on this side of the broadcast station, but others would be coming around too. One had his pistol raised, and the other was reloading. The man with his pistol raised cried out, seeing Sakata's weapon, and fired several more times. Sakata ducked back against the electrical cabinet and fired back at both men until he heard one of them cry out. After catching his breath, he sprinted out from behind the door. One of the two men was on the ground, clutching at his chest. The other man raised his weapon, but Sakata had already taken aim, and he fired his last few shots, sending the man to the ground. The second soldier landed beside his comrade, moving his arm and moaning in pain. His torso was covered in blood.

Sakata darted away from the broadcast station, running further into the makeshift encampment. The sound of gunfire had been replaced with shouting, and he glanced back to see soldiers storming the broadcast station. Looking ahead, he saw a row of wooden shacks alongside a row of what had once been Chinese businesses, now repurposed for army use. He reached for his last magazine and reloaded his pistol.

Voices grew louder behind him, and he sprinted for cover. He reached the row of shacks and ducked around the side of one of them. Two soldiers ran past with their weapons raised, but neither of them looked in his direction. Sakata stood frozen a few moments before running

alongside the row of run-down living quarters, glancing into the windows of each shack he passed. Soldiers exited a few of them and ran to the sound of the gunfire. Most were empty, but a few had soldiers he didn't recognize. Not everyone had realized the gunshots occurred inside the camp.

He turned a corner and ran into two soldiers hurrying the opposite way. Sakata saw red blisters on one of the men's hands, then red splotches on the other man's face. He couldn't begin to guess why, and he pushed himself to focus. Fortunately, the Japanese didn't seem to suspect yet that the shooter could be one of their own. The men gave him a passing glance and continued past.

To his right, he saw military vehicles and a sheet concealing part of the encampment. He turned the other way to look at the nearby buildings. About a dozen shacks, one of which was Hayakawa's. Several old shops that had been turned into army meeting rooms. The colonel would be in one of the buildings, but soldiers would be scouring the area. Sakata ran forward, his hands clammy with sweat. He was a few blocks away from the broadcast station, but news would travel fast.

A door swung open on the old flower shop, and Lieutenant Colonel Hayakawa stepped out with two other soldiers. Sakata began to raise his pistol but stopped himself as three more soldiers ran up to the colonel. Others approached from the direction of the gunshots. The element of surprise was gone now. One of the men pushed Sakata out of the way, and he stumbled backward. With no escape route, shooting Hayakawa would be a suicide mission. Sakata fought the urge to take aim at the colonel.

Hayakawa went to the front of the crowd. The soldiers moved out of his way, and several men bowed to him as he passed. Hayakawa raised a hand, and the crowd silenced.

Hayakawa cleared his throat and looked out at the soldiers gathered. "We have reports of an intruder in our camp. All of you, move with caution. We have faced difficulties reaching this point, but all of them are being dealt with. You may be glad to hear that our scouts have made significant progress toward finding the location of the Chinese resistance. We'll destroy them soon enough."

There was a roar of approval from the soldiers in the crowd. Sakata stared at Hayakawa, and his grip tightened on the pistol. He'd seen faces like Hayakawa's before. Full of pride and authority. The colonel could give his speeches, but eventually, he would make a mistake. And then he would die.

\* \* \*

Hayakawa returned to his shack after the crowd dispersed, several soldiers following him there with watchful glances in all directions. It had only been two hours since the intruder had arrived, and allocating soldiers to investigate the threat had taken up most of his focus. The soldiers departed as he entered his shack, and he sat on a bench beside a wooden table and began to unbutton his uniform. The door opened, and Nakamura entered holding a small card, followed by Toyama. The men bowed to him as they entered, and he gestured for them to sit.

"Did anyone tell you what happened at the broadcast station?" Nakamura asked.

Hayakawa eyed him. "I heard there was an intruder. Did you learn anything else?"

Nakamura sat across from him. "There's a Japanese soldier trying to kill you. Killed a good number of our soldiers already. I traced him to the broadcast station and had our men ventilate it with bullets. The soldier escaped, but Junji was shot. He's in a lot of pain right now, but they say he'll be able to move in about a week. We managed to dig up this old photograph of

Sakata, and Junji says it could be him. Though his memory of the minutes before he was shot is a bit blurred.”

Hayakawa leaned forward. “What else do you know?”

“Captain Amaki told me a very interesting story.” Nakamura slid the photo forward and gestured for Toyama to sit. “This is the man Junji saw. Sakata Ryuji, if Amaki’s theory is correct. Sakata was a conscript sent over on a reconnaissance mission to Caishen with three others. The rest of his squad was killed. I’m sure you can guess by whom. According to an earlier report from Amaki, Sakata was being held prisoner here. Until he escaped, according to the mayor. At the moment, he’s suspect number one.”

Hayakawa took the photograph. “How many soldiers has he killed besides the three in the desert?”

“At least ten. He was wearing a soldier’s uniform. We’ve lost a good deal of men, Colonel. Who knows how many of their deaths he’s behind? We’ll find him. But until we do, you’re not safe.”

“I can protect myself.” Hayakawa studied the photograph, trying to remember whether he had heard the conscript’s name before. “If Sakata is determined to find me, he’ll find me. Or I’ll find him.”

Nakamura frowned. “I wouldn’t trust fate.”

Hayakawa nodded. “That’s why I need you here. Only a few know the breadth of your accomplishments, only those you or I have told. Around the time he saved my life, Makihara told me that there is much one can do from behind the scenes. So tell me what you’ve done to counter the rebels so far.”

Toyama sighed. "Nakamura's been helping me. One of the majors sent me to gather as much information as I could. Townspeople can often be threatened into telling us what they hear. But it can take time to confirm information. That's why we must deal with this man directly. Has anyone ever tried to assassinate you before? You specifically?"

Hayakawa reclined in his seat. "Rebel groups have targeted me in the past. But never another Japanese soldier. I've never met Sakata. But to him, I'm sure I symbolize authority. I've often found conscripts to be a liability. But you don't need to worry about me."

"What, are you going to kill him yourself?" Nakamura asked.

"If I have to. I'm not much older than I was the last time I killed a man with my bare hands. We have so many enemies in this town, Lieutenant. It could all collapse into nothing in one day. What's the point of sitting here, discussing this one man?"

Nakamura stroked his chin. "Something's been bothering you, Colonel. And it's not Sakata. Are you going to tell me what it is?"

Hayakawa sighed. "A messenger brought me a letter this morning from Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa. Aizawa's health is failing. But his brain never stops working. He probably could have gone to our superior and taken over this mission for himself. It was his idea, after all. But he trusts me. Trusts that I'll come around to his way of seeing things with enough convincing."

"And what is his way of seeing things?" Toyama asked.

Hayakawa shifted forward in his seat. "This morning, Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa told me I should stop sitting around and talking with you. 'Do what needs to be done,' he said. So I will do what needs to be done. I will find the rebels who orchestrated the attack on the Lotus Tower,

and I will destroy them. They hide in the shadows, crawling through the dirt and hiding their faces. They can't sustain a rebellion as unclean savages."

The others nodded at this. Hayakawa thought back to the other words in the letter from Aizawa, promising himself that he would not disappoint the colonel or anyone else who had trusted in him. It had been so long since he had first met Aizawa, since the older colonel had sparred with him and told him he had the fighting spirit of ten men. Hayakawa had sparred with others, too, but not in a long time. His life was too important to risk now, which was a curse as much as a blessing.

Nakamura rose from his seat. "Before I go, I should make you aware that Warrant Officer Makihara's son was killed. I assume you'll want to deliver the news personally, seeing as he saved your life more than once."

Hayakawa nodded. Toyama rose from his chair and followed Nakamura out the door. After they left, Hayakawa took the drawing from the table and studied it again. It was only a rough sketch, but the conscript's hollow cheeks and deep-set eyes were still distinctive. With a soft sigh, Hayakawa released the drawing and let it flutter to the floor, promising himself he would be ready the next time he saw Sakata's face.

## Chapter 24

### A Place for Dwelling Souls

Sakata returned to the warehouse, his whole body aching. The door had been left unlocked, and he made a mental note to berate Youxia for his carelessness. Qiao stood alone at the wooden table, staring at the place where the others had sat. A tall man he didn't recognize stood at the other side of the room, and he gave Sakata a dubious glance as he entered.

Sakata approached her. "Who's that? Where's everyone else?"

"Hou the Unkillable. One of Youxia's old friends, apparently. Don't worry, I told him about you. The rest didn't say where they were going. Just said they had heard a rumor that the Japanese may search this place tomorrow. We shouldn't return until the day after that. What about the assassination? What happened?"

"I didn't do it." Sakata sat across from her. "I should've. I would've been shot too, but I should've killed him anyway. Deep down, after I killed Ito, I thought I was invincible. But as I stood in that crowd of soldiers and looked at Hayakawa, I realized that I would die if I shot the colonel."

“So you couldn’t kill him.” Qiao placed her left hand on the table, glancing down at the stumps where her pinky and ring finger should have been. “Did you think it would be easy, going after a murderer like that?”

Sakata frowned. “I could have killed him. He was right there. All I had to do was pull the trigger, and they would lose their great hero. That would send a message.”

Qiao shook her head. “You think this is all on you?”

“Maybe not. But I said I would kill this man. I can’t just let him live. Maybe there will come a day when our conflicts can be solved without killing. But this is all I know how to do.”

“You think you’re the only one invested in this?” Qiao lowered her voice to make sure Hou didn’t overhear. “We’re in this until death now. Even Zhang understands that. The army is our enemy, and that’s if that means putting aside our past grudges, then so be it. I knew the woman who ran the tavern on the main road. She told me she would fight when the Japanese army arrived. The day after they arrived, they burned her alive. Whoever killed her is still out there. He probably doesn’t even remember what he did. This isn’t over for me until the army is gone.”

“You don’t want my life,” Sakata said. “Living to settle a score almost got me killed half a dozen times. It’s too late for me, but I hope that you can live a normal life when this is over.”

Hou moved toward them, his footsteps silent, and answered in Japanese through a thick accent. “It’s too late for all of us.”

“Hou the Unkillable.” Sakata studied the tall man’s scratched face. “You seem like someone who would know. Are you really more powerful than Youxia?”

“I saved his life, if that’s any indication.” Hou smiled, but the smile quickly faded. “When I fought in the battle for Caishen, I wasn’t concerned with honor or even saving this

town. I just wanted to protect my friend. But when the army returned, I couldn't protect his brother. With Li Bo and so many others dead, I can't turn back."

Sakata folded his hands. "Are you worried you might become numb to killing people?"

"This war is my life now," Hou said. "I don't have time to worry about the effect it has on me. I worry about the few lives I care about. Learn to do that much, and you might become one of us."

He walked away from their table, and Sakata looked from him to Qiao, no response springing to his mind. It was only a matter of time before he proved himself to the Chinese or became an outsider forever.

\* \* \*

Hayakawa stood in the old Chinese flower shop, clutching the letter one of the soldiers had just delivered. He read the words a second time, and his hands trembled. Nakamura stood beside a wooden table in the center of the room, watching him.

"What is it?" Nakamura asked.

Hayakawa folded the paper and tucked it into his uniform. "Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa is dead. The sickness took him three days ago. His aide-de-camp sent me the last message he wrote before he died. And we'll have to tell Junji. Did you know Aizawa was never really afraid of death?"

Nakamura shook his head. "What was he afraid of?"

"Failure." Hayakawa took a seat at the table and motioned for the lieutenant to sit. "He always had such high expectations. It was he who first proposed we invade Caishen. We had our disagreements, but he trusted me to lead the occupation. Later on, I think he wished that he could be here as well. I think he feared that without his leadership, this operation might be a failure."

Nakamura sat, narrowing his eyes at the colonel. “Just because Aizawa mentored you doesn’t mean you can’t do this without him. You’re the Slayer of Seven Thousand Men. The Destroyer of Villages. If reputation counts for anything, you’ve won this fight already.”

Hayakawa sighed. “I don’t understand the Chinese, though I’ve tried. Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa understood them or at least thought he did. He had all sorts of ideas, but they sent me instead of him. I’ve been good at containing the Chinese militarily, and that’s been enough in the past. But I’ll never understand what causes them to run headfirst into death. They’re not dying for an emperor, not since the Qing dynasty. They have no concept of honor. They’ve lost, and they should understand that. I can’t say why they don’t.”

Nakamura shrugged. “We lost thirty-four men at the Lotus Tower. Who can say if they consider that a loss? I’m closer to you than the others, yet you never tell me everything inside your head. Maybe no one can truly understand another person’s motivations. At least Toyama’s been more useful than the others in learning about the enemy. Leave it to the son of a fisherman to want to prove his valor. He’s been finding townspeople on the street, and I’ve been torturing hearsay out of them. The rebels have an old man with connections helping them. Wang Shude, he’s called. And they’ve been growing. The rebels we killed in that tower aren’t even a tenth of the resistance now.”

Hayakawa shook his head. “I wouldn’t put much stock in rumors.”

The door swung open. Captain Amaki and Captain Kimura entered the old shop, their uniforms covered in dust. They bowed to the colonel as they entered, and Nakamura rose from the table to return the gesture. He gave each of them a full bow.

Hayakawa rose from his seat. “I see you’ve been in the mines. Why are you here?”

Amaki stepped forward. "The Chinese mine workers have failed to meet their quota almost every day. Supply lines being what they are, they still use gunpowder instead of dynamite. And they use primitive forms of lighting, nothing safety-proofed. That slows them down. They also say there's not as much iron as we were promised. This town was supposed to have more iron deposits than any town in China. So we beat them. We even killed one of them. Still, they failed us. Even if the iron deposits were exaggerated, they could have worked harder. We'd like to get rid of them and conscript new workers from the populace."

"Do what you must," Hayakawa said. "There's another matter I must attend to."

"Warrant Officer Makihara?" Nakamura asked.

Hayakawa shook his head. "Someone else."

He left the old flower shop and started toward a large truck at the edge of the military encampment. Many of the other vehicles had been moved, but he'd ordered that the truck be somewhere he could access it at any time. He unlocked the front door and climbed inside. The truck bed had been welded shut, and the back of the truck had been repurposed into a small holding cell, where Guan, the now-retired mayor, sat hunched over against the back wall. A few crates covered the ground, and old building tools had been left on the steel benches. They'd opened the windows near the front of the truck, enough to prevent the vehicle from overheating. Hayakawa considered that they might end up executing Guan anyway if they couldn't find any use for him.

Guan saw Hayakawa and rose to his feet, brushing the dust off his prison clothing.

"Hello," Hayakawa said. "I imagine you're getting tired of that cell."

Guan stepped forward. "What do you want, Colonel?"

"I want to have an honest conversation." Hayakawa dragged a crate to the space in front of the cell and sat on it. "Go on. You can sit. I'm not here to kill you. You didn't kill Sakata just because he was your prisoner."

Guan lowered himself to the ground, keeping his eyes on Hayakawa. "Is Sakata the reason you're here? I don't know where he is. He killed one of my men and disappeared."

Hayakawa furrowed his brow, waiting to see if Guan broke eye contact. "You had him last. Now he's trying to kill me. And seeing as we're at war, it would only be natural to conclude that your people may be behind this."

"I was a coward before, but not anymore." Guan rose to his feet, glaring straight at the colonel through the bars of his cell. "This prison is my punishment for failing to stop you. So if you're going to kill me, kill me. You wouldn't be talking to me if you had any idea what to do about Sakata. Or about the resistance. I know about them too, Colonel. You're not the only one here who talks to me."

Hayakawa stood. "We'll know more about the resistance soon enough. When our hand is forced, we can either find use for you as a figurehead or execute you publicly."

Hayakawa pushed the crate aside and left the truck, slamming the door shut behind him. He clenched his fists and kicked the ground. Then he started back toward the center of the encampment.

\* \* \*

Shude sat across from Nuo in a small wooden cabin on the edge of town shrouded by the forest, two kilometers away from the army encampment. The others had left a few minutes ago to scout the Japanese camp, and the two of them sat at a small table, waiting.

Nuo tapped her hand on the table. "Are you sure no one else knows about this place?"

“Maybe they do.” Shude glanced around before looking her in the eye. “But it’s not the first place they would search. We haven’t been ambushing them anywhere near the forest.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Nuo said.

“This place is sacred,” Shude said. “Hundreds of years ago, this place was an oasis in the desert. Then the iron deposits were found and the town was formed, a bastion of wealth. We planted trees, turned the valleys green, when other towns had only enough wealth to cling to what they had. They planted this forest years before I was born to honor our ancestors. Zhang once told me that the souls of the dead dwell here. He understands the teachings of Laozi much better than I ever will. I didn’t believe him at the time, but now I understand what he felt, thinking of the ones he lost. To go from full of life to an unmoving corpse. When the soul is lost, where does it go? Can so much energy really vanish into nothingness? It’s not possible. The Buddhists and the Taoists agree on that much. The body may perish, but the soul remains.”

Shude looked back at the windows, which had been painted over. The door on the side of the cabin was closed, but the lock was broken, and rays of light peeked through holes in the wood.

“I shouldn’t have sent Youxia to get you.” Shude rested his hands on the small table. “This conflict could get you killed. I told Youxia I wanted to guarantee your safety, but the truth is, I wanted to see you again. That was selfish of me. You deserve someone better than me.”

“I’m glad you recruited me.” Nuo looked into his eyes. “You could have gotten killed if I wasn’t at the tower. You could have died in the town square too, and I wasn’t there.”

“You don’t owe me anything. You know that. This resistance is my atonement for letting Xijuan, Bao, and Mei die in the town square. I’ll fight the Japanese to my dying breath until they

suffer how those in the town square suffered. I'll fight them until the others in this town no longer live in occupation. This risk is one that only I deserve."

"When we first reunited, I told you I didn't want you to die." Nuo looked down at the table. "I said it out of obligation. But now, I'm being selfish. I don't want to lose you again. You should be making plans from somewhere safe, not risking your life like this. Even after what you did, you're not at an age to be taking these risks. But staying here, putting myself on the front lines, I forced you to put your life in danger."

"No, child." Shude leaned forward and grabbed her hand. "You never forced me to do anything."

Nuo looked up at him, squeezing his hand. "I'm glad you asked me to come."

Several gunshots rang out in the distance. Shude froze, and Nuo's face went pale. Shude rose from the table.

"I'll see about the others," he said. "If you see any trouble, run. Stay out of the warehouse until the Japanese have searched it and found nothing."

Nuo nodded, placing her pistol on the table. Shude gave her a final glance, noticing for the first time how much older she looked than she had years ago. Her eyes looked the same, but she didn't smile the way she once had. And in just the past few days, she'd gotten noticeably thinner. Pushing these thoughts aside, he turned away and left the cabin.

The other rebels were nowhere in sight. Shude walked forward, following their trail until it disappeared. He heard a voice and reached for his pistol, moving toward the sound. A branch snapped under his foot, and he froze, waiting for someone to appear.

As he stepped forward, he saw one of the rebels on the ground, covered in blood. His hand tightened around the pistol. Before he could react, half a dozen soldiers emerged from the

forest around him. He saw other rebels on the ground, some dead and others restrained. One of the soldiers grabbed him and threw him onto the dirt. All of the soldiers were focused on him now, their weapons pointed at his head. He couldn't fight them now, but it looked like most of the rebels had avoided capture. It was up to them now.

A soldier with burns on his face stepped forward. Shude recognized him as the man who'd spoken to the colonel before the massacre in the town square. The man knelt down and pulled Shude up by his hair. He shouted an order in Japanese to the other soldiers, and they lowered their weapons.

Shude felt himself being dragged along the ground and then lifted, followed by several blows to the head by one of the men. His hands were restrained. They could kill him or leave him alive, but the battle that gave him purpose had been stolen from him. His vision blurred, and his body went numb.

## Chapter 25

Nuo would never forget how close she came to being captured in the evening after Shude was taken. She fled from the cabin in the woods just as the Japanese approached, and had they seen her, she was certain she would have been captured as well. Following Youxia, even just a few times, had taught her some of the necessary instincts for avoiding detection, and she spent that evening and the following day waiting outside the warehouse to see if the Japanese came.

They did come, the day after Shude was captured, and conducted what appeared to be a full search, before moving on to other buildings. It was then that she noticed most of the other rebels also watching the warehouse from the concealed locations they'd agreed to use for hiding, all of them too tense to try and contact each other with the Japanese nearby.

The day after that, she and the other rebels returned to find Sakata and Qiao at the wooden table. Nuo began dragging several chairs to the center of the room, and Youxia motioned for Sakata to come to him. They exchanged a few words in Japanese, and Sakata nodded, his expression hardening.

“Where’s your father?” Qiao asked.

“Captured.” Nuo walked to the front of the room. “Along with nineteen others. We have to get my father back before the Japanese decide he’s no longer valuable alive.”

Zhang approached her. “They want us to rush in after him. We should consider our next move carefully.”

“It’s not your father being held captive.” Nuo’s voice quivered, and she glared at him, breathing heavily. “This should be my call.”

“He was my friend.” Zhang lowered his gaze. “He was my friend, and I couldn’t protect him. I know he cared about you more than his own life. He wouldn’t want you to get killed. I owe him that much at least.”

At the back of the room, Sakata said something to Youxia in Japanese. Youxia laughed and said something back. Nuo turned to them.

“Does the Japanese deserter have something to say?” she asked, keeping her voice as calm as she could. “I recall him promising to kill Hayakawa. Perhaps he can explain why the colonel is still alive.”

As Youxia began translating, Mingzhu turned to Nuo. “Enough of this. You’re acting like I was when my brother was killed. Your father’s not the only one who’s been captured. Nor are the rebels they captured the only ones whose lives are in danger. We have a town to defend from the Japanese invaders.”

Nuo turned to her. “And how would you have us defend it?”

“We should attack their infrastructure and ambush them, but make sure we know more about the locations we go after. I hear that some townspeople have independently ambushed soldiers in the streets. And the last time we tried a direct attack, it didn’t go well.”

Nuo shook her head. “The ambush strategy isn’t feasible with forty of us and counting, especially if we aren’t willing to sacrifice the lives of everyone who participates. The Japanese are onto it. My father and Enyu planned our raids on the factory and tower, and they’ve not available to us anymore. We can’t afford to depend on Sakata either.”

Youxia held out a hand. “We should make them come to us.”

The others turned to him, and Hou gave a smirk. Nuo stepped toward Youxia. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“We need to find a place we can defend. Probably not this warehouse. Then we send a few of our people there and make sure the Japanese follow us. When they send over their attacking forces, we can ambush them mid-route. Any other town would fold to the Japanese army, and that makes them overconfident. But here, in Caishen, we can pay them back for all the blood they have spilled.”

Nuo shook her head, laughing softly. “Is that any better than my idea? Any less idealistic?”

Hou turned to her. “An ambush will be easiest. We did plenty of them during the battle for Caishen.”

Youxia held out a hand to silence them. “If we admit everyone who’s expressed an interest in joining our cause, we’ll have over a hundred fighters on our side. Many fought in the battle for Caishen. Of course, the army will want a decisive victory, so they’re likely to send more soldiers than they believe necessary. If they send half their soldiers, which I suspect is a good estimate, they’ll outnumber us four to one. With that ratio, we can set up several ambushes along a controlled path, but we can’t attack them directly.”

Nuo walked forward and nodded at Sakata. “Is this his idea?”

“It’s mine,” Youxia said. “Mine and Hou’s. In the battle for Caishen, Hou planned more ambushes than anyone else. But we’ll need someone on the inside to track the movements of the army and make sure we’re being followed. I think Sakata is the best candidate for that.”

Nuo crossed her arms. “He hasn’t killed Hayakawa for us yet.”

Youxia rose from his seat. “Sakata risked his life trying to kill the colonel. They’ll be after him now, but that’s not going to stop him. Not after he killed their major.”

Nuo kept her gaze locked on Sakata, but he did not flinch. Instead, he crossed his arms and looked from her to Zhang.

“What will it be, Nuo?” Zhang asked. “Your father always struck me as wise. What would he do?”

“We’ll do as Youxia says.” Nuo nodded at Sakata. “We’ll give him another chance to show his utility. But he still owes us Hayakawa.”

\* \* \*

Junji lay on his cot, his body aching a bit less than it had before. He was in a hospital in the center of town, which was uncomfortably far from the army encampment. The Chinese doctors had been replaced with Japanese army medics, and the Chinese patients had been killed to maximize space.

A fenced area outside, which had once been used for quarantining, had been converted into a prison for the captured rebels. Junji had been allowed to move with a wheelchair for an hour a day, and once when the rebels had been brought inside for a round of violent interrogation, he’d managed to talk to Wang Shude himself. There was something almost traitorous about speaking to a Chinese rebel without torturing or killing them, but he’d had to know why they still resisted against much larger numbers. Shude had seemed almost confused

by the question, and it wasn't until he pressed further that the old man revealed his family had been killed in the town square. The other soldiers had ended the conversation then.

There was often a logic to the killings, especially when Hayakawa was involved, but there was no logic to the way the Chinese prisoners had been beaten and tortured. There had to be a reason that Hayakawa had allowed all of this, but the more killing Junji had seen, the less reason he could find for the military campaign. It was blasphemous to say these things aloud, so instead he told himself to trust Hayakawa. He would have to accept his father's death, accept that he would never know for certain whether the great Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa had appreciated his efforts. His memories of the man were all he had now.

The door to his room opened, and Hayakawa entered with Warrant Officer Toyama.

"Feeling better?" Hayakawa asked, taking a seat.

Junji scooted onto his side with a grunt. "The doctor says I'll live."

He looked from Hayakawa to Toyama. Neither of them looked particularly excited to see him. Asking about his condition had been strictly a formality, something to ensure he still harbored no resentment toward the soldiers who'd shot him. If they were here, it was probably for a more important reason.

Hayakawa sighed. "I hope you'll be ready to help us again soon. You have our full support in your recovery."

Junji looked at him. "Your men shot me without a second thought. It's my father you respected, and I'm all that's left of him. The last time I saw my father, he told me that one must be willing to spill as much blood as necessary to serve Emperor Hirohito. I'll never measure up to him. I can't harden my heart to unleash suffering as he did."

Hayakawa frowned. "I'm not here to talk about him. You were shot because Sakata Ryuji tried to kill me. That makes it partly my responsibility. We have a vicious fight ahead of us. I want to make sure you'll be on your feet, ready to fight by the end of the week. When we find out where the rebels are located, we'll crush them."

Junji nodded. "I'll be ready if you need me. That's what you wanted to know?"

Toyama turned to the colonel. "Nakamura told me about the oversupplied battalions sent to nearby towns. What we're dealing with here is more important than whatever they're doing. If someone like you, someone they respect, asked for reinforcements, we'd get them."

Hayakawa shook his head. "We have enough already. Aizawa saw to that. I've been in other towns before, seen other rebellions that needed to be kept under control. This place...it stood out to Aizawa. Their history resisting the Red Army, their history with us. But we'll keep them under control."

"That's my father," Junji said. "He never told me what he told you. But he sent me here all the same, knowing I'd never see him again before he died. I'll never hear him say he's proud of me. But I'll fight for you, Colonel. You never forgot about me."

Hayakwa looked at him silently, his face impossible to read. But Junji knew the colonel, knew that no matter what was written on the man's face, Hayakawa had made time to visit him for a reason. Hayakawa was not so arrogant as the other lieutenant colonels, and even though he seemed prepared to fight the rebels, he had to know that everything was on the line. That his life might be lost if things went badly.

Junji went into a coughing fit, his body shaking. When it finally passed, he spoke. "Whatever your plan is, I hope it works."

Hayakawa put his hand on the wall, standing in silence for a moment before answering.

“So do I.”

## Chapter 26

### The Buddhist Virtue of Combat

Nuo stood with Mingzhu at the edge of the warehouse, watching Youxia speak with Sakata at the small table. They talked a lot, in a language she couldn't understand, and Nuo had found herself growing more suspicious of the two of them. Yet in the days since Youxia had first proposed luring the Japanese into an ambush, more resistors had joined them, just as he had predicted. Even Dr. Yin, a man she'd known since she was a child. They were up to almost a hundred members now. She owed it to him and Mingzhu to rally these people and fight alongside them, to resist fear even in the wake of her father's capture.

Youxia walked over to them with a sheet of paper. "I've just told Sakata everything I'm about to tell you."

Nuo nodded at the paper. "What's that?"

"A map of the town." Youxia placed the map on the table, revealing a hand-drawn diagram. "It's about fifteen kilometers across each way, which gives us a lot of room, but I'd prefer a place closer to the military encampment. The iron mines are occupied by the Japanese,

so I propose we use the abandoned library as a false base. There are a dozen hills between there and the army encampment, which will slow down the army. We'll have fighters prepared to surround them. It's the best fight we can hope for."

Nuo studied the map. "Whoever's going to shoot at them should practice, at least. Especially now that Enyu and Guotai are dead."

Youxia shook his head. "Shooting rifles will draw the Japanese. We'll have to do our best when the time comes and hope the soldiers are crowded together. Of utmost importance are our explosive weapons. We have three grenade launchers, each with an effective range of 250 meters. With no training, one can only expect an accurate shot within a fifth of that distance. Three of us will use grenade launchers. I'll be one of those three."

Mingzhu studied the markings on the map. "I'll take one of the grenade launchers as well. I had some practice with weapons before I came here."

Hou walked over to them, glancing from her to Youxia. "So do I. I should take the third grenade launcher."

"Are you sure about this?" Youxia asked. "I'd rather have you focus on allocating other forces."

"I can do two things at once," Hou said. "You'll need me out there, backing you up with explosives. You've always needed me. I trust myself with a grenade launcher more than I trust anyone else."

"True, true," Youxia said. "If only my brother was here. He could do a lot with one of these. Maybe even more than you."

"He wasn't quite as talented as me." Hou smiled. "While you were bickering, refusing to talk to him before the battle for Caishen, I got to know him quite well. I'm sure I've heard more

of the recent rumors about him than you have. He was famous, and even news of his death spread fast. I wasn't going to bother with all that I heard now, but I could if you wish. I won't let him go on having a better reputation than me."

"Not right now." Youxia sighed. "You can have one of the grenade launchers. I'll go with Sakata to draw Japanese scouts to the abandoned library. They'll make plans to attack us there, and within a few days, we can expect them to arrive. And when Sakata is there, he can have another shot at killing the colonel. We can help him this time, send in fighters to draw away the soldiers between him and Sakata. The best time for that is when they come to attack us, as their forces will already be divided."

Nuo nodded. She wished she knew more about Hou and Sakata now that she was forced to put the fate of the town in their hands. But their odds were slim no matter what they did.

\* \* \*

Sakata watched Youxia speak to the others from across the room. The resistance had grown fast, but the growth wouldn't last forever. If he failed to kill the colonel, their odds would plummet. And then there was the rest of the plan, much of which he would need to trust entirely to the others.

Youxia approached him and nodded for them to leave. Sakata rose from the table and followed Youxia out of the warehouse through the town, toward the army encampment. Youxia hurried forward, and Sakata darted after him, glancing around to make sure they weren't yet being watched. The military had pictures of Sakata from early after his conscription, but he had changed since then. Become less malnourished, gotten bruises and scars. But if someone really looked for the similarities, they would recognize him. He turned his face to the side and maintained a distance from Youxia of about a few dozen meters to avoid the suspicion of a

soldier associating with a Chinese townsperson. There were more soldiers on the streets now, but most didn't give them any more than a passing glance.

About a hundred meters ahead was the sacred forest, and to the left of the forest was the Japanese army camp. Sakata gestured to the brick building on the far side of the encampment the colonel had emerged from. "The last time I saw Hayakawa, he was coming out of the old flower shop."

Youxia followed his gaze. "So he might be there now, right? I don't see many soldiers around, and most of them are probably patrolling the streets. You might consider moving up your schedule and going in while you can. If he's not there, someone else important will be."

"Maybe." Sakata ducked behind a shrub, gesturing for Youxia to follow. "I should make sure before I go in. There's no reason to cause another massacre for nothing."

"What's wrong?" Youxia narrowed his eyes. "I thought you liked killing people. Isn't that all you've done since you got here?"

"You're right." Sakata sighed. "I've killed a lot of people. When I was in the army, they told us about a warrior known as the Red Dragon. He was dangerous and unafraid and invented a dozen new kinds of torture. It wasn't just that they wanted us to be like him. No, they told us that the Red Dragon would punish insubordination personally if they ever began to doubt our loyalty. I'd always known that I was out for myself, but the story of that man drove the point home. I knew I would have to kill to survive. To fight back. Half the people I killed could have been conscripted, for all I know. But I figured, Hayakawa needs to die."

Youxia nodded, studying Sakata's face for a moment before he spoke. "When the Red Army first came to our town, I couldn't bring myself to fight them. They were Chinese too, even if they were communists and I was nothing of the sort. Nuo convinced me we could negotiate

with them, end the fight by proving we wanted peace. Then others braver than me died keeping them out of Caishen, and I realized I'd been a fool. I never refused to fight again."

He started to look down, but Sakata met his gaze. "How do you know when you've done enough?"

Youxia didn't answer, and Sakata could see in his eyes that he hadn't thought about the question before. It wasn't really fair to ask, not when the future of the war was this uncertain and so much work was left.

"Hayakawa still needs to die," Youxia said finally, gesturing to the old flower shop in the distance. "There's an old Buddhist principle called karma that I happen to believe in. In this case, it means the Japanese getting what they deserve."

"Buddhism?" Sakata frowned. "You never struck me as a pacifist."

Youxia smirked. "I can believe in the parts I like. Everyone in that building chose to stay in the military. The one that's currently occupying Caishen and massacring people in the streets. You chose to leave. You need to go in there and fight."

"Patience, Youxia." Sakata held out a hand. "First, you have to draw the scouts to our ambush. Then I'll hide in this camp while I wait for Hayakawa to show himself. Once I know where he is for certain, I'll go after him."

Youxia nodded and darted off to the side toward the military encampment. Several meters past the forest, a few shrubs bordered the encampment, and Youxia ducked down behind them. Sakata hurried straight ahead to the forest and crouched behind a tree.

As Youxia began darting away from the camp, several soldiers approached the area where he'd been, and Sakata saw one of them reach for their weapon. The soldier with burns on his face, who appeared to be in charge, stopped the first man and gestured for him to be quiet.

Youxia glanced back at Sakata, and Sakata nodded in approval. Youxia darted away toward the abandoned library, and Sakata saw the other two soldiers follow him, keeping a distance of a few dozen meters.

## Chapter 27

### To Fight for Peace

Guan sat against the back of the truck, waiting for one of the soldiers to return. The few who attended to him spoke Mandarin, but they never had anything nice to say. They were high-ranking soldiers, men who should have been doing something more important, but they seemed to take some pleasure in seeing him humiliated like this.

He hadn't eaten in a day, and he'd begun to fear that the soldiers would just forget about him. He'd lost some weight in the week since the Japanese invasion, and he'd done as many exercises as he could each day to keep his strength. It was agonizing, but he deserved the pain for enabling the massacre in the town square. He owed it to those who had died to not give up, to fight the Japanese occupation in any way he could until his dying breath. He'd become more aware of his surroundings, his reflexes more sensitive to the actions of the soldiers.

He'd tried fruitlessly to find some way of escaping his cell, and he'd studied the contents of the truck over and over for something he could use. If Sakata could get out with his health in poor condition, Guan reasoned that he could do the same. There was a toolbox on one of the

benches, but it was well out of reach. And though his cell was makeshift, there was no getting out without a key. All he could do now was hope the Japanese took pity on him.

As he pondered his fate, the door of the truck swung open. A portly soldier who'd brought him food before stepped inside, this time carrying a pair of handcuffs. He'd never struck Guan as a man of reason, and there would be no talking him out of his dull-witted obsession with slaughtering the Chinese.

“Do you have any food?” Guan groaned as he spoke, trying to sound as weak as possible.

The soldier shook his head. “I’m just here to transfer you. Hayakawa’s orders. Put your hands through the bars.”

Guan stood and moaned as he stumbled forward. Hoping the act of weakness looked genuine, he stretched his hands out in front of him, putting them through the bars of the cell. So the Japanese had decided to get rid of him. If anything, it was a miracle they’d waited this long. He had it coming for letting so many people die. As the cuffs tightened around his wrists, he wondered how they planned to kill him. A public execution would send a message, but it might also spur the already growing resistance against the occupation. He could only hope the resistors would succeed where he had failed.

The soldier pulled a key from his pocket and began unlocking the cell. “We’ll be restoring order soon. You shouldn’t put any hope in the rebels fighting for your town.”

Guan glared at him. “Do you know something they don’t?”

The soldier laughed and swung the door open. “Many things.”

Guan snorted at this, shaking his head and hoping the soldier noticed. Getting the soldiers to overshare information wasn’t always difficult, and he could usually press them to keep him updated on the resistance by insulting their country or honor. This particular soldier had shown a

penchant for violence, and the last bit of information he'd learned had almost come at the price of a beating. This time, with no cell door between them, he could probably expect a punch to the face if he pushed too hard. Maybe learning the truth would be worth it.

"You think you can beat us in our own town?" Guan asked. "You're a fool, and so is Hayakawa. You know nothing. Nothing about the size or location of the resistance. Kill me or torture me, but I'm satisfied. We resisted invaders before, and we'll do it again."

The soldier grimaced at him, clearly unhappy with this response, but his expression slowly morphed into a smirk. "I do think that. Tomorrow, we'll crush the rebellion. We tailed one of their men to the abandoned library."

Guan stumbled forward, his leg hitting the bench, and tumbled forward, doing his best to make the fall as convincing as possible. The soldier stepped toward him and kicked him in the head. He winced in pain and slowed his breathing as he rose back to his feet, glaring up at the soldier.

"They'll kill you," Guan hissed. "They'll kill you all."

"Really?" The soldier grabbed his arm and yanked him back up to his feet. "Perhaps you'd like to see the mustard gas we brought to help finish off the rebels."

Guan's heart sank. There was no reason for the Japanese to lie to him if they were going to kill him. The soldier's satisfied smirk was enough to confirm the threat, along with the fact that he felt no need to supplement his words with a beating. And the resistance would have no idea what they were up against. That information would die with him if he didn't find a way to escape.

Guan stared past the soldier, squinting out the front window of the truck at two soldiers arguing by one of the shacks about fifty meters from them. As the soldier turned to follow his

gaze, Guan turned to the toolbox on the side bench and reached inside. His hand found a screwdriver, and he leapt toward the soldier as the man turned back and raised his gun. Guan was faster, and he drove the steel into the soldier's chest before he could fire. The man staggered backward, clutching his chest in pain. The pistol shook in his hand.

Guan sprang forward. He had a single moment to press his advantage, or the soldier would recover and execute him on the spot. The soldier steadied his hands, grabbing the screwdriver to prevent Guan from using it again. Instead of fighting for it, Guan swung his arms and slammed his metal cuffs against the soldier's eye.

The soldier dropped his gun and clutched at his eye, blood seeping through his fingers. It only cost the man a second, but it was a second he would never get back. Guan rushed forward and rammed into the man, pushing forward with all his strength. The soldier reached for the screwdriver in his chest. Guan forced him back. The inside of the vehicle was only about two meters wide, and the soldier raised the tool just as they reached the wall. The screwdriver trembled in his hand, and his head collided with the wood before he could strike.

Guan allowed himself to breathe as the soldier slumped back against the wall, dropping the screwdriver and moaning in pain. Killing him quickly would be a mercy. And though the walls of the truck were thick, he couldn't allow the man to make too much noise. Guan pulled him back and darted around him, looping his cuffs around the man's neck from behind.

The soldier thrashed against him, and Guan was yanked forward. He tightened the cuffs against the soldier's throat, stopping any sound from escaping the man's lips, and pushed him toward the center of the truck where he couldn't kick the metal bench and draw attention. Blood dripped from the soldier's uniform to the floor, and the man moved slower now. Guan pulled back, tightening.

The thrashing didn't stop, but Guan was fueled with determination, and his eyes darted around the truck for something he could use. The edge of the bench caught his eye first, but it would produce too much noise. He kept looking and spotted a softwood plank on the bench. Better. Straining, he dragged the soldier over to the side of the truck, using all of his strength to keep the man from escaping. Putting his palms tight against the soldier's head, he thrust it down against the wooden plank. The thrashing stopped, and he brought the soldier's head down again and again until his hands were covered in blood.

He found a keychain on the soldier's belt and tried each one until he got the cuffs off. His hand shaking, he reached for the soldier's gun and made sure it was loaded. Then he ran to the door and peeked outside to see if any soldiers were standing guard. The two men were still arguing, both too engrossed in the quarrel to look at the truck.

He glanced in the other direction. He stood near the edge of the encampment bordering the sacred forest, and the temptation to run there and lay low was strong. But it wasn't just desperation to survive that had fueled his will to fight. The resistance might hate him for failing to prevent the incident in the Town Square, but he needed to warn them of the coming threat.

He sprinted to the edge of the encampment bordering the desert, ducking behind a building that looked abandoned. He glanced around corners and darted from one building to the next, certain that he would be spotted at any moment. But most soldiers in the encampment had congregated near the desert, and he made his way to the other side in just a few minutes.

Once he had made it a dozen meters away, he broke into a sprint toward the abandoned library. He knew the layout of the town well, and the path there crossed through a large field, then a wide valley with hills bordering the sides. At the end would be the worn-down building. Clouds covered the sky, and it looked as if it might rain soon. As he crossed through the valley,

he saw the edge of a figure crouched behind a tree on his left. He turned right and saw another figure with a glint of metal in their hand. He stopped in his tracks, breathing and wiping dust from his prison clothing. People emerged from the hills on either side of the valley, weapons in hand. Some were men he'd known for years. Zhang was among them, his face unkempt and covered in sweat. Zhang said something inaudible to another man and a woman, and they climbed down the hill to meet him.

Guan nodded at Zhang. "I thought I'd never see you again. Is Qiao here as well?"

The man beside Zhang stepped forward. "My name is Youxia. If you have any concerns, you should tell them to me. But it would be wiser to leave, Guan, important as you may have once been. Your incompetence has gotten a lot of people killed."

Guan looked at the resistors gathered on the hilltops. "How many of you are there now?"

Youxia gave him a distrusting look. "State your business now, Guan."

Guan looked from him to Zhang. "The Japanese know you're here. They brought mustard gas."

Nuo's face turned pale. "If they had mustard gas, they would have used it by now."

"Not necessarily." Youxia sighed. "There are significant international consequences to the wide-scale use of chemical weapons. Caishen is only a Chinese town, but news might spread as it did from Da Chengzen, and it will be difficult to contain. Rape and mass murder will invite words of disapproval, but using chemical weapons as an official policy invites the Allies to use similar tactics in the Pacific."

Mingzhu turned to Youxia. "How is it possible we never heard of this?"

Youxia clasped his hands together. "Sakata told me that when he visited the encampment, part of it was concealed even from the other soldiers. That makes Guan's warning credible to me."

"I'm not lying to you," Guan said. "A soldier bragged about it to my face before I killed him. The gas is real."

"If it is, there's little we can do." Youxia gestured for him to follow them back toward the abandoned library. "We don't have respirators. We'll tell our men to be prepared to get out of range, but we'll be shooting at the Japanese from a distance anyway. If that doesn't work, the mustard gas will doom us no matter what."

\* \* \*

Shude sat in the fenced area outside the hospital, his limbs numb. He had been beaten and tortured and interrogated, then beaten and tortured for no reason at all. Part of him wished for death. But the greater part of him wanted to push through the pain, to see Nuo again.

One of the soldiers walked up to him. Instead of a beating, he just glared at Shude. "Hayakawa wants to see you."

Shude was dragged into the building, cuffed and covered in bruises, his hair still wet from the rain. Hayakawa led him to a back room and pulled out two chairs across from each other.

"It's been a while," Hayakawa said. "Of course, I wish we could have met under better circumstances. And though your mayor forced my hand, it is a pity what happened to your family."

"You shouldn't have left me alive," Shude said. "I'll be dead soon enough and sent to the maze of punishment. I'll drag you there with me."

“We found your accomplices,” Hayakawa said, ignoring the idle threat. “One of your men was seen spying on us, and we followed him back to the abandoned library. No matter what it takes, they’ll soon be defeated. What should matter to you now is how you and our other prisoners are dealt with. And that will depend on what information you’re willing to provide us. Tell me about this base of yours.”

“You won’t win,” Shude said. “You wouldn’t be talking to an insignificant old man if you were certain you could.”

Hayakawa leaned forward, his eyes cold. “I know the secret to torture. About looking into a man’s eyes and knowing what he’s most afraid to lose.”

The colonel pulled a combat knife from a sheath on his belt and spun the blade between his fingers, his eyes boring into Shude’s. Trying to intimidate him, or maybe just trying to clear his mind by spinning the blade. Shude couldn’t tell, and he didn’t care. Hayakawa’s men had beaten all the fear out of him.

Shude sighed. “Ever since I got here, your soldiers have done nothing but try to coax information out of me by whatever means necessary. But I saw what you did in the town square after offering us peace. You’re nothing but liars. Torture me, threaten to kill me. It doesn’t matter. You’ll kill me anyway.”

“I have other things to threaten you with.” Hayakawa slapped the flat of his blade on his thigh. “Perhaps the life of your daughter.”

Shude’s eyes flashed, but his gaze did not divert from the colonel’s face. “I trust my daughter to look after her own life more than I trust you. You’ll never understand. Our lives are just an inconvenience to you.”

Hayakawa paused, studying Shude's face before continuing. "There's a story I recently remembered, something I haven't even told my own men. When I fought in the First World War, there were rats in our tent. Rats in a lot of tents, eating through our food. We were being fired at every day, so I didn't even care about the rats. I'd seen so much death that just seeing another living creature made me smile. But the other men couldn't stand the rats, so we decided to get rid of them. Poison gas was in short supply, so we decided to poison food instead and leave it out for them. Somehow I was tasked with this job. So I did as I was told, poisoned the food and lured the rats to one location, tempted them with something they had grown to love. And when they died, I felt a bleak emptiness, because I had grown to fear death and to love my own life. For a long time, I blocked that event from my memory. But I think that all this time, I've been fighting to make every death a necessary one. So many soldiers have died, but they died for our cause."

He was lying. He had to be. Shude wanted to scream at him, but he was speechless after hearing the colonel's story. After everything they had fought for, he'd come to offer a self-righteous justification for the slaughter.

Finally, Shude managed to glower at the colonel. "Is this some kind of joke? Can you even count the number of people you've killed? What's necessary about their deaths?"

Hayakawa stared at the old man's face, gesturing outward with the blade. "When I killed those in violation of my orders, there was no longer any question of authority. And authority is the antidote to anarchy, to chaos that kills without reason. When we control this town, everyone who has died will have died for something. We'll have stability. Then there will be meaning to this war, and not just emptiness. How many people do you have at this library, Shude? The more information you give me, the quicker and easier this fight will end. And the fewer people who will have to die."

The way he said it, the colonel might have even believed his own words. Perhaps he'd fooled himself after so long, after growing accustomed to his line of work.

"I hope you all die." Shude rose to his feet. "You and all your bloodthirsty dogs should bleed to death on the battlefield. You'd probably enjoy it anyway. Dying for your emperor."

"I'm not afraid of fate." Hayakawa rose from his chair and put the knife back in his uniform. "I make plans for my death and for everything else, and my men know what to do if I fall in battle. But your stubbornness suits you. I understand what drove you to throw your life away to rebel against us."

Shude glared at him. "Why do you think you can empathize with me?"

Hayakawa studied the old man's face for a moment. "Because I too have been called a stubborn man. And I'm still stubborn. If you're not ready to talk, maybe a few more hours of torture will change your mind."

Hayakawa called over the other soldiers, and they dragged Shude back toward the interrogation room. He would be punished for defying the colonel, but punishment was nothing he wasn't used to by now. He would wait and pray for Nuo's safety with all the faith he could muster.

## Chapter 28

### Attrition Warfare

Qiao knelt with Youxia and several others behind a row of trees as a convoy of Japanese vehicles entered the valley. A hundred and eight of them had come to ambush as the soldiers made their way to the library, and everything was on the line now. She leaned forward, but Youxia pulled her back, gesturing for her to stay low to the ground. The rain had stopped, but the ground was still wet, and she moved carefully to avoid slipping on the mud.

“Explosives ready?” Youxia whispered at one of the rebels beside them.

The man nodded, handing him a grenade launcher. Youxia took the weapon and trained his gaze on the tank leading the procession. There were about a dozen vehicles in total, some appearing to hold supplies.

Qiao looked from the procession to Youxia, her heart pounding. “Where are the rest of them?”

“I don’t know.” Youxia wiped the sweat from his face as he studied the convoy, his breathing heavy. “Ready your weapons.”

He fired the grenade launcher at the front tank and reached for another anti-tank grenade, reloading the weapon and aiming it at the next vehicle in the procession. The first explosive went off just as he fired the second grenade, tearing off the armor plating on the side of the tank. The second grenade knocked over a truck, sending several soldiers to the ground.

As Youxia reached for a third grenade, shouting came from behind them. Qiao turned toward the sound, pistol shaking in her hand. Several men beside her raised their weapons toward the commotion. It came from lower on the hill, not in the direction of the valley, but in the direction they'd come, flanking the path of the convoy.

“They’re sending soldiers up here on foot,” Youxia said. “Get ready to open fire. Hou and I planned for a lot of contingencies, and much of our strategy remains the same. But we’ll have to move fast. If we pull through, we’ll owe Hou a great debt.”

Qiao turned to him, her heart pounding. “How did they know this was our vantage point? If they do know, why send the procession below?”

“Maybe they’re just paranoid. It doesn’t matter now.”

Several figures appeared coming up the hill. Qiao saw the flash of a soldier with a spray tank wearing a respirator, and in the next moment mustard gas billowed toward them. Several rebels near the soldiers fell to the ground coughing, and bullets whizzed through the cloud of gas, knocking others to the ground. Youxia let out an inhuman roar and fired back toward the soldiers through the mustard gas. Qiao heard one man cry out and hoped it was a Japanese soldier.

“Toward the convoy!” Youxia ordered. “Their numbers there should be depleted.”

Qiao and several others followed him down the steep slope toward the convoy, weapons raised. She saw Hou and several others coming down the slope on the opposite side of the valley as Japanese soldiers fired at them. A whole swarm of soldiers near Hou’s camp, some driving

trucks with Howitzers mounted on top. One Japanese soldier charged down the slope after Hou squad with a machine gun, and others stood by the Howitzers at the top of the hill. Her heart dropped. They'd already found the rebel location on the opposite hill and fortified a position there, even brought heavy artillery. Youxia raised his weapon toward the pursuing Japanese soldiers, but Hou was faster, spinning around and unloading his weapon at the soldier with the machine gun.

Both men tumbled to the bottom of the hill near the wreckage at the head of the convoy, and Qiao and Youxia hurried forward toward them. Several soldiers had exited vehicles near the back of the convoy, but the rebels in Youxia's squad were prepared for them. Mingzhu clung to a rock further up on Qiao's hill and fired an explosive down toward the rear of the convoy. One soldier dove out of the way, but three other soldiers were caught in the blast.

Several more soldiers fired automatic weapons down from the trucks on the opposite hill, and Qiao dove to the side, watching several other rebels do the same. One of the shots grazed a man beside her, and Youxia ducked back just in time to avoid a wave of bullets. She slowed her breathing, trying her best to calm herself. If these were her final moments, she wouldn't die a coward.

"They can't get us easily from up there," Youxia said. "Not with mounted Howitzers. Not when we're spread out and about to be mingled with Japanese soldiers."

A dozen soldiers hurried down the opposite hill where the shots had come from, weapons raised. Some carried rifles, and others raised pistols toward the rebels at the bottom of the valley. They'd been forced to leave the mounted weaponry, but they had numbers on their side, and it was now their fight to win.

Youxia fired at several soldiers exiting from their vehicles, and Qiao got to Hou before him. He'd been hit under the left shoulder, and a growing splotch of blood soaked through his shirt. He tried to sit upright, but Youxia reached them and motioned for Hou to rest. Qiao saw Youxia's eyes dart around as he studied Hou's injury. It wouldn't do for him to worry over an injured man, not while they were still being fired at. Nuo hurried over to them, breathing hard.

Hou coughed, losing blood fast. "They swarmed us. They're putting a lot into this battle. They brought more high-ranking commanders here than they needed. But I got a few soldiers. They don't call me unkillable for nothing."

Qiao turned toward soldiers approaching from the convoy and opened fire, moving toward them to get a closer shot as Youxia and Nuo covered her. Hou held out a hand for her attention, but she continued firing until the soldiers fell to the ground.

"Listen!" Hou called, causing them to turn back. "There's only one way to stop them. I should have seen it earlier, but there were too many soldiers then. You have to get to the top of my hill and reach the heavy artillery. They've diverted most of their men away from guarding the Howitzers. Once you capture them, you'll have the high ground, and you can attack their forces from behind."

"You saw them use the mounted weaponry." Youxia turned from him, toward the soldiers coming down the hill they'd descended, and readied the grenade launcher once more. "They couldn't hit us from that range."

"That's because you were spread out," Hou said. "Someone will have to act as bait and get their forces to clump together. But you must take their heavy artillery and fire down on them. It's our best shot."

“In a minute.” Youxia stepped past him and fired an explosive at a crowd of soldiers approaching from the wreckage at the front of the convoy.

Several of them cried out, and one of them tumbled back as his arm was blown off. But some still continued toward them. Rebels and soldiers continued firing everywhere around them, and one Chinese man was hit in the stomach. He rushed forward, crying out in pain and firing at the soldier who’d shot him. His aim was off, and several more shots landed in his torso, sending him to the ground.

Qiao reached for his gun and fired at the approaching soldiers, but they outnumbered the rebels. A young rebel was shot in the back of the head and tumbled to the ground next to her. She turned back to the hill she’d come down from, seeing more soldiers descending with a spray tank. They spotted her, but she took aim first and fired, hitting one soldier in the side and the other in the stomach. They dropped the spray tank, and it tumbled down the hill, splitting open on the ground and releasing a cloud of gas just a dozen meters away.

Qiao covered her nose and mouth with her shirt. She looked from Hou to Youxia, then toward the growing number of soldiers closing in on the rebel position. “I’ll help you get to the top of that hill. But we’ll have to move fast.”

“Wait.” Hou held out a hand. “One of the commanders will be coming here in a rage. He wouldn’t stop shouting. Someone needs to rally rebels here. I’m out of bullets, but I’ll help you find the artillery at the top of the hill.”

Qiao nodded, firing several shots at an injured soldier as he rose from the ground. Several more soldiers fired at them from behind an overturned truck, and Qiao ducked back as she returned fire. Several more Chinese rebels approached, and one of their shots struck one of the soldiers behind the truck. The other soldiers ducked back down for cover.

Youxia turned back to Hou. "You're too injured. There's a medical kit on the ground from one of the trucks."

"I can fight." Hou pushed himself up, reaching for a knife on his belt. "They only got me in the side."

"Get help," Youxia said. "The others can save you."

Nuo grabbed Youxia's shirtsleeve. "Youxia, he's—"

"Enough!" Youxia said. "We don't have time to waste."

As he and Nuo sprinted off toward the hill with the mounted weaponry, Qiao ran toward the mass of rebels near the front of the convoy. About forty stood nearby, and she saw many others further away and coming down from the hills on her side of the valley. If all else failed, they would at least die together. One man stumbled forward, his arm bleeding. Several other rebels stood frozen beside a dead body, their faces pale. Qiao turned back to Hou, who had risen to his feet, and he disappeared behind the mess of military vehicles before she could say anything. If he returned, she hoped there would be someone left to help him.

Qiao raised her voice toward the crowd, ducking against the hill as the rebels continued firing. "Youxia has ordered us to draw the Japanese here to divert their attention and cluster them in one location. He'll get to the mounted weaponry and gun down however many soldiers he can. Fight aggressively, and only take cover when they redirect their forces here."

A rebel in a tattered outfit stepped forward, wiping sweat from his face. "With that mustard gas, we're as good as dead!"

Several of the others nodded in agreement, and she grimaced, resisting the urge to grab him and shake him. She spotted Guan's face in the crowd, and he looked at her as uneasily as the rest.

“Then some of us will die.” Qiao did her best to keep her voice from shaking. “If you run, we’ll lose this fight. But the Japanese won’t be satisfied. They’ll hunt you down and slaughter your families alongside you.”

“She’s right,” Dr. Yin said. “Youxia has left us no choice but to trust him.”

Several soldiers emerged from a vehicle near the rear of the convoy, and a dozen rebels charged toward them, opening fire. They outnumbered the few Japanese soldiers in this small part of the valley, but they only had a few moments before a much larger crowd of soldiers arrived. The soldiers cried out but fired back, and Japanese reinforcements hurried toward them.

A soldier emerged from behind one of the vehicles and charged toward them with a knife covered in blood. Several rebels darted out of the way, while others reached for their weapons.

“I am Makihara!” he shouted in Chinese. “And you will all know suffering before you die!”

Qiao raised her pistol, but he was less than a meter away before she could fire, and he knocked the gun from her hand. He brought the knife down toward her chest, and she stumbled backward to avoid the blade. Her heart pounded, and she looked around frantically to see where her gun had fallen. The rebels who’d been nearby had darted away, and the other Japanese soldiers had drawn their attention with a new cloud of mustard gas. One of the rebels finally turned to assist her, but a hail of bullets from a Japanese soldier brought him to the ground.

Makihara slashed at her again, and the blade tore through her right eye. She clutched at it in pain and fell to the ground as blood streamed down her face. She pushed herself back as he swung at her again, this time slashing through her thigh. As Makihara lunged forward, a gunshot rang out, and he tumbled to the ground. He dropped the knife and fell to the ground a meter away

from her. Qiao turned back just in time to see the rebel who'd been injured by the earlier hail of bullets. He was alive after all, but he was losing blood fast.

The injured rebel lowered his pistol and looked her in the eye, forcing out each word as he spoke. "The mustard gas. We have to take it from them. Survive as long as it takes to..." His body went still.

Several more soldiers arrived from the far hill and opened fire on the rebels. Some tumbled to the ground, and others darted out of the way, reaching for their weapons to return fire. Qiao lay on the ground, blood soaking through her fingers as she clutched at her eye. Ahead, a tall and muscular soldier exited a military vehicle. She spotted a high-ranking insignia on his uniform as he called over a few other men. One of them pulled a spray tank from the back of a truck, and they marched forward, toward the rebels. The other Chinese fighters were too busy with the other soldiers to turn their weapons on these men.

Qiao's vision was beginning to blur, and she did her best to control her breathing as gunshots rang out through the valley. On the ground ahead of her, a grenade lay with the safety pin still intact. She crawled forward, trying not to draw the attention of the men with the spray tank. She only had a few moments before they made their move.

Forcing herself to ignore the pain in her eye and thigh, she pulled herself forward, finally reaching the explosive. As she removed the pin, one of the men spotted her and reached for the pistol on his belt. Qiao felt her hand shaking as she raised the grenade in the air, but she forced herself to focus. As the soldier raised his weapon, she mustered all her strength and hurled the grenade forward.

## Chapter 29

### Those Who Would Climb Toward Death

Sakata approached the old flower shop he'd seen the colonel enter several minutes earlier, stepping through mud and glancing to the side to make sure no one lay in wait inside the wooden shed in front of the building. Half of the soldiers had left to assist the attack on the Chinese, and many of the others had gone to monitor the populace and watch the prisoners at the hospital. The few that remained had been drawn away when gunshots rang out at the edge of the encampment, likely the rebels Youxia had promised to lure the soldiers away. The colonel himself had not emerged from the building. He might even be alone. It was a perfect opportunity, and those didn't come often.

Sakata approached the building as the gunshots continued nearby, glancing through the window on the flower shop. Two soldiers sat at a table, facing the door, one with a gun visible in his lap and the other with a pistol in hand. A staircase near the back of the room led upward, but there was no sign of Hayakawa. Sakata took a deep breath, turned and fired at them through the window.

He hit one man in the chest, and the soldier clutched at the wound. He hit the other man in the shoulder, and that soldier tumbled back. Sakata burst through the door, weapon raised. The man who'd been shot in the shoulder rose to his feet, and the man who'd been hit in the stomach got up, staggering forward. Sakata took aim at the soldier with the stomach wound and shot him twice more before turning his weapon on the other man. The second man sprang to his feet and raised his weapon, and Sakata hurried to the side as the soldier fired at him. Sakata winced as a bullet grazed his arm, diving behind the table and returning fire.

The soldier ran around the table. Sakata ducked away, scrambling for his spare clip and reloading his pistol. He fired four times, but only one of his bullets grazed the soldier. Rising from the ground, Sakata grabbed the edge of the table, heaving it forward. The soldier leapt back to avoid it, and Sakata raised his weapon, firing three shots with a shaking hand. There was a spurt of blood, and the soldier tumbled to the ground, clutching his stomach. His hand moved, and Sakata shot him in the head.

Sakata ran to the staircase, reloading his pistol. As he hurried upward, he reached a landing with a wooden door on one side. He pulled the door open and ducked down as bullets tore through the wood. Entering the connected room, he grabbed a table and flipped it on its side, dragging it over to the landing and shoving it against the door to prop it open. He saw a new soldier hurrying up the steps through the holes in the door, and he fired down at him until he saw the man fall backward. Several more soldiers approached and opened fire, and a bullet tore a chunk of flesh off his side. Sakata winced, firing at them until his clip was empty. He only saw one soldier still moving on the ground, and the man was losing blood fast.

Sakata ran into the connected room, searching frantically for another weapon or magazine. If commanders had occupied the building, there was a good chance they had

designated part of it as an armory. And there weren't many places to put them, with the flower shop's only rooms being the large area below and the small room connected to the staircase. But the connected room had barely been stocked, and there were no weapons to be found among the army rations and half-empty medical kits. He heard more gunshots and soldiers shouting nearby as the fight on the edge of the encampment continued. He could only hope that the rebels could continue buying time, that the shots he'd taken wouldn't arouse too much suspicion over all the shooting nearby. Collecting his thoughts, he ran back to the staircase. It led up to a wooden door, and he could see sunlight peeking through the edges. He heard voices from above, the sound of someone issuing orders and responses through a radio. So Hayakawa had chosen to conceal himself on the roof and give orders to the army from there. As Sakata stopped to catch his breath, a bullet struck him just below his left shoulder, and he tumbled to the ground. He looked back. The injured soldier was still alive after all. And his last shot might have cost Sakata everything.

Sakata grimaced and crawled to the side, the wound throbbing, and pulled himself back into the connected room as more bullets tore through the wood. He couldn't waste a second, and he could only hope that things were going better for the rebels carrying out the ambush.

\* \* \*

Youxia climbed the hill, slowing to allow Nuo to follow him. The gun remained steady in his hand, but he felt his heart pounding in his chest. They'd heard a loud blast from below, followed by a flurry of gunshots in quick succession. They could only hope things had turned in their favor. Several soldiers hurried down the hill only a dozen meters away, and he pressed himself against the side of the hill, motioning for Nuo to do the same. He expected the soldiers to spot them and open fire, but they seemed much more concerned with the growing commotion by the military vehicles.

“I hope Sakata is doing well right now,” Youxia said as he climbed. “If we defeat the Japanese here, it will put them in disarray. Then I’d like to push our forces into the encampment and ensure the colonel dies myself.”

Nuo frowned at him. “One thing at a time, Youxia.”

Youxia nodded with a soft sigh. “Of course. Things would have to go very well here.”

As they reached the top of the hill, Youxia saw three soldiers standing by the Howitzers. He signaled their position to Nuo and motioned for her to approach from a separate direction. As she got in position, he crawled around to the opposite side and grabbed a tree root, hoisting himself to the top of the hill.

Ducking behind a tree, Youxia glanced around at the soldiers and aimed for the closest one. As the man glanced in his direction, Youxia opened fire, sending the soldier to the ground. He cried out in pain, and the other two soldiers looked around frantically for the assailant. As they turned in the direction of the gunshots, Youxia sprinted for cover behind another tree, firing back and drawing their gaze. They fired back at him, and he winced as a bullet tore a piece of skin off his leg.

As the soldiers continued firing, Nuo sprang up behind them and shot one of the men three times from behind. As he tumbled to the ground, the other man turned back, weapon at the ready. Youxia emerged from behind the tree and shot him twice. The soldier dropped his weapon and moaned in pain as he fell to the ground beside his comrades.

Ahead of them were several Howitzers mounted on trucks that the soldiers had been guarding. The weapons were theirs now, and if they didn’t make any major tactical errors, they had a chance of turning the fight around. He would have to trust Hou’s judgment, trust that the

rebels below would manage to lure the Japanese into grouping out in the open. It was at least worth seeing how good a job they'd done.

Youxia approached the heavy artillery, lowering his pistol. "With these, we can win."

Nuo nodded and lowered her weapon. Youxia glanced back to see if the rebels on the ground had made any progress, and he saw a fourth soldier approaching, gun in hand. Youxia turned to the soldier and began to raise his weapon, but the soldier was faster, pointing his pistol directly at Youxia's head.

A figure emerged from behind a tree and tackled the soldier to the ground. As the soldier cried out, the man raised a knife. Hou's knife. Hou knocked the gun from the soldier's hand and jammed the blade into his chest, raising the knife to stab the soldier again and again. When the soldier had stopped moving, Hou dropped the weapon and tumbled onto the ground beside him.

Youxia ran over to Hou, kneeling down in the puddle of blood and studying his injuries.

Hou coughed, forcing out words. "Qiao killed one of the majors with a grenade. But they're pushing back. Get to the artillery, quickly."

Youxia grabbed him by the shoulders. "You followed us. Why?"

Hou coughed out blood and looked up at Youxia with the hint of a smile. "I knew you would need me. You always have. I told you I could fight."

Youxia shook his head. "You idiot. Did you really think you were unkillable? Have you never learned to value your own life?"

Hou stared into his face for a moment before grabbing his shoulder. "You must avenge Li Bo."

Youxia's eyes widened. "You know how my brother died? Tell me, and I'll kill whoever caused his death. I swear it."

Hou coughed again. “He died at the prison. That’s what I heard. Ask someone from Town Hall.”

His hand fell away from Youxia’s shoulder, and his body went limp.

“Youxia.” Nuo touched his shoulder. “The Japanese won’t be far behind us.”

“No, they won’t.” Youxia turned to her and rose to his feet. “We’ll just have to kill them all.”

## Chapter 30

## Pain Tolerance

Sakata tore through the medical supplies in the connected room as the injured soldier below moaned in agony. Finding a half-used roll of gauze, Sakata unfastened the top two buttons of his uniform and wrapped the remainder of the cotton fabric around the bleeding bullet hole below his shoulder. Beside the fabric, he found a quarter of a roll of medical tape. He used it to secure the cloth, finding that the tape ran out quicker than expected. The injury still stung, and his left arm felt stiff when he tried to move it, but the bleeding was slowed. He rebuttoned his uniform, hurried back to the landing and up the staircase, clutching the wound in pain.

He pushed open the door to the roof of the flower shop and stepped out to see Hayakawa standing by himself with a gun on his belt, a radio on a bench beside him. Sakata had discarded his empty gun, and his only hope now was somehow maintaining the element of surprise, even with how suspicious his appearance here would be. If Hayakwa had seen pictures of him, he hoped the colonel wouldn't study his face too closely now. He remembered a story of another warrior who'd challenged Hayakawa, a great fool, and this thought did not calm him. If he

defeated the colonel, it would not be because he had been trained by the best warriors. It would be because he had learned better than anyone else to withstand pain.

The colonel turned to him as he began to close the distance between them. Hayakawa was a tall man who appeared to be in better health than most of the common soldiers that served under him. His muscles were well-defined, a feat that owed more to a colonel's rich diet than to unique personal discipline. He studied Sakata's sweat-covered face, his brow furrowing.

"Who are you?" Hayakawa asked, his hand moving to his belt. "Have you driven the rebels from the encampment? I've been hearing gunshots all around."

Sakata shook his head. "The rebels are in this building. They killed all the others."

The colonel froze in surprise, and Sakata charged forward in that short window of opportunity. As he was a few meters away, Hayakawa came to his senses and raised his pistol. Sakata darted to the side just before the colonel fired, and the bullet missed him. As he closed the distance, the colonel fired again, and this time his aim was better. The bullet tore through Sakata's side. Ignoring the pain, he pushed forward, grabbing the colonel.

Sakata held onto the colonel with all his might, leaning forward and pressing Hayakawa back. They reached the edge of the roof and tumbled over the side of the building together. The colonel's gun flew from his hand, and he cried out in shock.

They landed on the shed at the front of the shop, and their combined weight collapsed the wooden roof, sending glass from the shed's side window spraying onto the mud. Hayakawa had taken the brunt of the fall, scratches covering his face, but no blood soaked through his uniform. He rose to his feet, sweat covering his face, and shoved Sakata onto the mud.

Sakata crawled away from the colonel and staggered to his feet, blood dripping down his side. The colonel lumbered toward him, a glare of death in his eyes.

"I know who you are," Hayakawa said. "I met scum like you all the time in the First World War. When we were being shelled and one of our own men tried to sell us out to the Germans, I broke his arm. You like your arm how it is, Sakata?"

Sakata grabbed his side, panting. Forced himself to ignore the pain. He'd had a shot at freedom, but his ambitions had caught up to him and he was back to fighting. If he brought the colonel's war machine to its knees, at least there would be something to show for it.

Sakata lunged forward, and Hayakawa knocked him aside, against the wall of the flower shop. Sakata struggled to stay upright, clenching his teeth as his head throbbed. Hayakawa's gun was a few meters away. Fighting the temptation to go for it in his condition, he grabbed a shard of glass from the ground instead, ignoring the pain in his hand as the glass cut his skin. He jabbed it at Hayakawa, slicing a thin cut along the colonel's arm. Hayakawa swung at him and struck Sakata in the jaw. Sakata dropped the shard and stumbled back, slipping on the mud and grabbing the wall of the shop to steady himself. If the colonel got another punch in, a direct punch, it would all be over.

Hayakawa rushed at him and swung a fist. He was fast, but Sakata had seen fists swung before a dozen times, and he stepped aside, dodging the blow. The colonel struck hard brick, but he wasted no time pulling his fist back and swinging at Sakata again. The conscript jumped back, and this time Hayakawa's fist only missed him by a hair. Sakata grabbed the colonel's arm and tried to throw it against the wall, but his strength was waning, and the best he could do was bat the arm away.

Hayakawa wiped the sweat from his forehead. "You don't want to kill me, boy. I'm the only one bringing order to this town."

The colonel reached into a sheath on his belt and pulled out a combat knife. He stepped through the mud, looking from Sakata's face to his bleeding torso. He swung the blade forward, and Sakata jumped back. The knife was faster, and it tore a gash through his side just above his ribs. Sakata stumbled back, clenching his fists. Hayakawa stared him in the eye and closed in.

Sakata raised his fists, glaring into the colonel's face. He stepped toward Hayakawa, and the colonel thrust the knife at him, slicing a cut in his arm. Sakata flinched at the pain and hissed in frustration, backing away from the colonel.

Hayakawa had been expending energy too, and his last jab hadn't been as precise. There was another thing Sakata had learned from fighting for his life so recently and so often. The will to fight as if the world was at stake. Summoning all his strength, he rushed at Hayakawa, fists raised higher this time, poised to punch down at the colonel. Hayakawa jabbed the knife at his arm again, but Sakata was ready. He struck the colonel's extended arm with his other hand, sending the knife to the ground.

Sakata leaned down to grab the weapon, but Hayakawa adjusted instantly and lunged at him. Weakened from his injuries, Sakata only managed a single step back before the colonel shoved him to the side. He tumbled back and landed face first into the mud. The colonel still had fight in him, too.

Hayakawa walked toward him. "You like the taste of mud? You like hiding behind bushes and crawling through the dirt? If you were still one of us, you'd have dignity left."

Sakata rose from the ground and ducked back as Hayakawa swung a fist at him. Then he lunged at the colonel, leading with his elbow.

Hayakawa caught his arm, stopping his approach. Sakata leaned toward the colonel, glaring into Hayakawa's eyes and the colonel began bending his arm, straining his joint. Staring

the colonel in the eye, Sakata raised his other hand and released a fistful of mud into Hayakawa's face.

The colonel released his arm and stumbled back, spitting out dirt. Sakata grabbed the knife from the ground. Sprinting forward, he drove the weapon into the colonel's chest.

Hayakawa collapsed to the ground as blood flowed from the wound, and Sakata hurried past him to the pile of rubble, his side burning. He fell forward and landed face-first on the grass. Behind him, he heard Hayakawa moaning. The pistol Hayakawa had dropped lay a few meters away on a piece of the collapsed shed. Sakata crawled toward the gun, pushing his torso upward to avoid the shattered glass.

“Wait!” Hayakawa called.

Sakata grabbed the weapon, turning back to the colonel. Hayakawa was propped on his side, his face still covered in mud.

The colonel pulled himself forward. “You don’t know what you’re doing. This is bigger than both of us now. At Da Chengzen...”

The colonel trailed off, and his face went pale. He was losing blood fast, faster than Sakata now, and even a man with Hayakawa’s strength couldn’t maintain focus for long while bleeding out. Either of them could lose consciousness in a second.

Sakata leveled the weapon at the colonel’s head. “What are you trying to tell me?”

Hayakawa looked directly at Sakata as if remembering something important, gasping for breath between his words. “The pocket of my uniform. There’s a letter. Take it. Take it and...”

The colonel's breathing quieted. Sakata tried to make sense of these words as blood poured down his uniform. The sound of shouting and gunshots in the distance had faded. Other soldiers would arrive soon, and there would be no fighting them off. Maybe he would even die

before then. They could kill or capture him, but he still had a job to finish. He leaned forward and fired at Hayakawa until the gun clicked empty.

Finally allowing himself to exhale, he dropped the gun and rolled onto his back, feeling blood flow down his side. He had no strength left to run, no energy left to flee the soldiers or even reach for the letter. But he had done what he'd come to do, and he was too injured to even reach for the letter. He stared up at the sky, admiring the clouds, before closing his eyes and allowing himself to relax.

After what felt like a long time, he was awoken by voices from behind him. He recognized Youxia's deep tone, followed by a mess of other voices in Chinese. Then Qiao's voice, calling his name. Sakata groaned and strained to look at them. Qiao's face was covered in blood, and there was a bandage over her eye. Youxia's shirt was soaked in blood, some of it probably his own, but he didn't look too badly injured. Sakata turned and saw a Chinese man holding a spray tank several meters away.

"Did you win?" Sakata asked.

"The Japanese fell into disarray. We saw the burn-faced man order them to pull back. But we don't have much time. We have minutes until they reorganize and drive us out of here. And we couldn't take the hospital. I'll call Dr. Yin." Youxia turned toward the other voices and shouted in Chinese.

Sakata grabbed Qiao's shirtsleeve as she knelt beside him. "The colonel's uniform. Check the pockets."

He felt his voice grow weak as he tried to speak again, and the pain in his side returned with a renewed intensity. Several others knelt beside him, and Sakata felt himself being dragged

away from the building. He caught a final glimpse of the colonel's body before his vision faded completely.

## Chapter 31

## What Else Was Lost

Sakata awoke on a cot inside a dimly-lit room. His side felt numb, and he reached down, his fingers brushing strips of cotton. Fresh bandages covered the wound below his shoulder, and his arm still hurt when he moved it. The uniform he'd stolen was on a hanger beside him, though some of the blood had been cleaned off. Several injured Chinese men lay unconscious on mats on the ground, one missing an arm. Desks and chairs had been shoved to the side of the room.

The door opened, and Qiao entered. She looked at Sakata. "You're awake. It's been two days. Dr. Yin saved your life."

Sakata groaned, shifting himself backward. "What happened to your eye?"

Qiao looked from his face to his bandages. "I'll be fine. How about you?"

"I thought I was going to die." Sakata ran a hand along his bandages. "How bad were the injuries?"

"They removed the bullet below your shoulder, but the other one went clean through your side, barely missing your vital organs. The bleeding has stopped for now, but the doctor said to

rest for at least two weeks. You won't die, but we used up all the pain medication we have. Everything is running out, and you're lucky we had enough supplies to treat you."

"Thank you." Sakata sat back and allowed himself to relax. "What is this place?"

"You're near the warehouse where we met before. We turned this old office building into a makeshift base and pulled this cot out of a supply closet. If the Japanese mount a counterattack, they won't come for this place first."

"We're not done fighting, are we?"

"Not yet." Qiao reached into her pocket and pulled out the blade he'd stabbed the colonel with. "We found this embedded in Hayakawa's chest. We cleaned the blood off."

Sakata took the knife and placed it on the side of his cot by the wall. There was no window in the room, and he looked from the hardwood wall to the small lamp on the other side of the room.

Qiao pulled a sheet of paper from her pocket. "We searched Hayakawa and found this. It's formatted like a letter, but it has some kind of military code. Can you tell us what it is?"

Sakata glanced over the letter. The paper was coated with wax and mostly undamaged. But the message was written entirely in numbers.

"Hayakawa mentioned this letter," he said. "And to his dying breath, he insisted I was making a mistake. Now that I think back, his words kept trailing off. He must have thought some piece of information inside had a chance of turning me from the resistance. But I'm not going back to his side. And he made another mistake. High-ranking officials would know this code. I don't. I can't even tell you who wrote it."

"Keep it, in case you can figure something out later." Qiao said. "If we're lucky, the information in that letter might help us enough to make a difference."

“And the mustard gas? Do we still have any?”

Qiao sighed, shaking her head. “We had a single sprayer for dispersing mustard gas, but it was destroyed as we retreated from the Japanese base. We couldn’t carry the heavy artillery with us either or bring a Japanese vehicle without being found. Don’t worry yourself too much. You did your part. You saved us from Hayakawa.”

“I don’t know how much I really saved you,” Sakata said. “The army is still out there. You lost an eye. You saved my life, and I don’t want you to die. But what can I do in this condition? Even when I recover, all it will take to kill me is bad luck. I get unlucky once, and I’ll be gone forever.”

“I don’t want you to die either.” Qiao studied his face. “You should listen to whatever the doctor tells you. I’ll let you rest.”

She left the room, and Sakata stuffed the letter into the pocket on his uniform. He slept for what felt like another hour until the door burst open again. He expected to see the doctor, but instead, Youxia entered the room.

“Feeling better, Sakata?” Youxia stepped toward his cot, giving him a half-smile.

Sakata nodded. “I’ll live.”

Youxia pulled over a wooden chair and sat. “When I mentioned Li Bo earlier, you acted like you knew him. How were you acquainted?”

“I saw him at Town Hall,” Sakata said. “Same place I met Zhang and Qiao.”

Youxia tapped his foot, the half-smile gone from his face. “What was he like before he died? Was he angry? Did he drink?”

Sakata shrugged as well as he could with his injuries. “How well do you think I knew your brother?”

Youxia narrowed his eyes, glancing at the unconscious men on the ground and lowering his voice all the same. “Well enough to kill him.”

Sakata sighed. “Did Qiao tell you?”

Youxia’s face fell, and he paused a few moments before responding. “She dodged the subject every time I brought it up. So I went to Guan. The truth was written on his face after only a few questions. It shouldn’t surprise me. You killed anyone who got in your way, and why would it matter to you whether one of them was my brother?”

Sakata sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“As if that brings him back.” Youxia scoffed. “That’s all you have to say to me?”

Sakata glared back at him, his sympathy suddenly replaced with anger. “Your brother was a psychopath who enjoyed locking people in cages and beating them. What’s that Buddhist principle you said you believe in? Karma? It was him or me.”

Youxia crossed his arms. “You think that detail matters to me? My brother had his faults. But he cared about his family. When my savings ran dry, he gave me more than enough to keep me from falling into poverty, even gave me this gold bracelet. I should have appreciated him more.”

“Are you here to kill me, then?” Sakata reached slowly for the knife at the side of his bed, keeping his eyes trained on Youxia.

“Kill you? Here?” Youxia shook his head, his expression a mix between a demented smile and a glower. “I had every intention of avenging my brother’s death, but you? And after you killed Hayakawa? Qiao thinks you saved us all, and she’s not the only one with affinity toward you. You’re a hero to these people, and I need their trust. I could kill you in secret, but I’d always be a suspect. And then the infighting would start.”

Sakata released the weapon. "I see."

"I risked my life pushing our fighters into the encampment, and I called a doctor for you," Youxia spat. "I saved your life. The life of my brother's killer. You think I want to owe him more than I already do? I could burn incense every day, and it wouldn't atone for the honor I've lost. If only I had known the truth, then I could have left you to die."

He rose from his chair without a word and went to the door, slamming it shut behind him.

## Chapter 32

Toyama entered an abandoned building near the center of town. Judging by the kitchen in the back, it had likely been a restaurant. Nakamura sat just to the right of the entrance, across a wooden table from Captain Amaki and Captain Kimura. Toyama bowed to them as he entered. Toyama stepped over to the far side of the table, feeling the eyes of the other men on him.

Toyama sat and glanced over to Nakamura. “I hope you didn’t wait too long for me.”

Nakamura shook his head. “You’re just in time. Better to have more witnesses for the decisions we make today.”

Amaki tapped his hand on the table. “I received word that Warrant Officer Makihara went missing. The Chinese don’t claim to have him, and we’ve received no intelligence indicating he was captured. How do we proceed?”

Toyama cleared his throat. “We still hold about a dozen prisoners, including Wang Shude. Even if he’s been captured, there’s no need to do anything about Makihara yet.”

“You’re right,” Amaki said. “It’s not the most pressing issue. When Hayakawa cobbled together this battalion, Nakamura and I strongly advised him to set out a clear chain of

command. But beyond Ito and the majors, his other organizational duties kept him from setting out a clear line of successors. An acting leader must succeed him until a formal successor can be chosen, and this choice can't be made haphazardly. One of the majors would have been the obvious choice, but the remaining two were killed in battle. That leaves us with myself and Kimura, both of equal rank. Throw that in with Nakamura's unique experience, and we'll have to make the choice sooner or later as a group.

Nakamura nodded, his eyes cold. "They'll tell stories about Hayakawa's end, just as they did of his many battles. We must control these stories, keep the message simple. Dozens of great Chinese warriors thought they were invincible, and Hayakawa slew them with ease. The one soldier he couldn't defeat, the man who killed him, was a Japanese traitor. Only a man trained in Emperor Hirohito's army could hope to rival Hayakawa. Now a new legend must arise to kill Sakata."

Amaki lowered his head. "In light of the colonel's death, there is something I must share with you. While he was still alive, Hayakawa ordered that upon his death, we make a truce with the Chinese. Not a surrender, but simply a compromise. He said to preserve our numbers, control the rebellion without inciting more of it. And that he wouldn't ask us to gamble more losses if he couldn't even protect his own life."

"It's true," Kimura said. "You know I hate to agree with Amaki, but Hayakawa told me the same thing."

Toyama frowned. "Why would the colonel give such an order? And even if he did, why should it matter to us? He's not in charge anymore."

Kimura turned to him. "If our attempt to control this town only descends into chaos, stops our iron collection, then we'll be failing Emperor Hirohito."

Toyama stared into Kimura's eyes, resisting the urge to glare at the captain. "We've taken greater risks before. You'd throw away your honor because of fear?"

Kimura folded his hands on his lap, narrowing his gaze. "The slaughter has always been a means to an end, and that end is in the iron mines. What is the more dishonorable choice, Warrant Officer? We've made temporary truces before, but we've never gone against Hayakawa. When he gave orders, there was always a good reason for them. So we obeyed him, just as you should obey me."

"He's right," Amaki said. "Our victory is far from assured at the present. And who are we to challenge someone with Hayakawa's reputation? If we had beaten the rebels on the field, this would be an entirely different conversation. It's their rate of progress that makes them a threat, not just our total losses so far. They ambushed us and slaughtered over a hundred of our men while severely outnumbered. If we continue to fight and our efforts fail, we will be dishonored forever. Hayakawa might have had the influence to get more reinforcements, but asking for them now means going against him. Our superiors wouldn't like that. We'll negotiate with the Chinese and come to terms that are still favorable to us. They'll no doubt be wary of being ambushed at the negotiating table and only send a few representatives, but this may allow us a better opportunity to outmaneuver them and conquer the town later, after they've let their guard down."

Toyama fought the urge to argue. He had come a long way from the poor, insignificant boy he'd once been, but these men still outranked him. All he could do was serve them, advise them until they saw fit to promote him. That had always been the cruel fact of rank and reputation.

“Are you sure it’s wise to follow a dead man?” Nakamura asked. “I know I’m outranked here, but my advice never failed Hayakawa. I never spoke against him before, but this decision is one I would have strongly opposed. We can’t show weakness now.”

Kimura frowned. “Better than losing two hundred more men and showing more weakness. If we continue, there’s a good chance our numbers will only fall and theirs will only grow.”

Amaki nodded. “It’s a rare case where our reputation makes our hand appear bigger than it is. We can benefit from a temporary truce, and Hayakawa’s wisdom is nothing to scoff at.”

Nakamura sighed. There was no happiness in his expression, but both men outranked him, and they’d made up their minds. “If we wish to meet with the rebels, we’ll need a neutral location. And terms we can agree to. We’ve done nothing but fight the Chinese since we got here. I can find a neutral location, and I can help with organizing terms. But there’s no guarantee the Chinese will agree to any of it.”

Amaki held up a hand. “That’s not the only issue we must attend to. I have no strong preference for whom we choose as our leader, but with no clear leader to appeal to, I ask that this group grant me authority to negotiate terms with the Chinese. Hayakawa did not fail to trust me even once, and it’s clear to me that we have the stronger hand to play. Kimura? Nakamura?”

Nakamura sighed. “But very well. If the three of you want to negotiate, then do it. But I always expect the worst, and someone must prepare the troops in case the Chinese make any sudden moves.”

Kimura folded his hands. “It’s decided then. We’ll meet with the Chinese, and Amaki will handle negotiations. Nakamura can stay with our troops and plan for the worst.”

\* \* \*

Toyama sat in his shack slumped against a wooden bench with a bottle of sake on the table in front of him. He'd gotten used to the smell of alcohol. Drinking was preferable to thinking about the upcoming negotiations, or about Hayakawa's death. Hayakawa had always been an honorable man for as long as Toyama had known him, and negotiating with the enemy was the least honorable thing one could do.

The door swung open, and Nakamura entered with a stack of papers. He went over to Toyama, glowering at him.

"Get up," Nakamura said. "You have no time for that. Amaki and Kimura are busy scouting the rebels, doubling down on interrogations. They want to make our hand as strong as possible before they make peace with the Chinese later this week."

Toyama narrowed his eyes at the first lieutenant. "You're going along with this? When Hayakawa was alive, it didn't bother me that you seemed to be going through the motions. But even now? You used to care so much about improving your rank. About victory at any cost. Who have you become, Nakamura?"

"You think I'm weak?" Nakamura's eyes were cold. "Hayakawa was weak. That's why he died. But not me. Not anymore. I must return to being the man I was years ago. That's the only way we'll win now."

"You have a plan?"

Nakura nodded. "Cooperate now, and you can make decisions once you advance in rank. A boy from a poor village like you, I bet you always did whatever it took to improve your class. Once we've been promoted, we can reverse this mistake and crush the Chinese."

"What was Hayakawa thinking, asking us to make peace?" Toyama slowly shook his head. "And why would Aizawa send us here without ensuring every variable was accounted for?"

Aizawa was a brilliant tactician obsessed with victory. I can't put this on him, but he must have known how Hayakawa felt. He should've talked sense into the man. This will only embolden the rebels in other Chinese towns."

"Yes, it will." Nakamura walked over to the table and took a seat across from Toyama. "If I ran these negotiations, we'd bring the prisoners in chains and execute one of them each time the rebels dared to disrespect us. But you heard what Kimura and Amaki thought. They'd rather have Hayakawa's peace than maintain power by all means necessary. Sometimes it is wise to let men above you fail, to wait for your turn to rise through the ranks. Hayakawa, I was willing to give the benefit of the doubt. When he was alive, that is."

Toyama tried to meet the lieutenant's gaze. "You're right. I don't like that those men outrank us. But I'm still proud of my rank. All the common soldiers who looked down on me before would never dare to cross me now. If I walked up to one of them and slapped them across the face, there would be nothing they could do. Nothing but grovel and hope to earn my favor. If I got promoted now, I'd have even more power than that."

Nakamura placed the stack of papers on the table in front of them. "Do you know why they call Hayakawa the Slayer of Seven Thousand Men? Many commanders are responsible for more deaths than that, and they were never graced with such a nickname. And many before him destroyed villages, but they were not called the Destroyer of Villages. But Hayakawa was a charismatic leader, a man who displayed his honor and faith in Emperor Hirohito more sincerely than anyone else. That impressed people even more than the results he got. Plenty of others have gotten results."

“We all work for our titles,” Toyama said. “I know you must be proud of yours. Even if few here know the extent of your accomplishments, what purpose does it serve to envy a dead man? Better to be forgotten than to be a traitor like Sakata.”

Nakamura frowned. “Did you read his file?”

Toyama shook his head.

“I did. Someone will have to fight him eventually. Might as well be me. He grew up poor, never impressed his commanders, and yet he slaughtered our men without dying himself. All that anger, all that thirst for blood, and he never directed it at the Chinese. He must have thought the Japanese army would never make him a hero. In a twisted way, I understand that. The army rewards those like Amaki and Kimura. Men who will speak the hard truths, men like us, must wait our turn. Maybe if someone more inspirational had been in charge of Sakata, he’d still be on our side.”

Toyama met his gaze. “Someone like the Slayer?”

“The only reason Hayakawa was given that name is that he was the hero that those with influence wanted. I suppose they could have made me a hero, but I don’t have the face for it. Hayakawa battled with a great warrior, gave speeches that roused a hundred men. That’s what’s really important. They praised the battles I fought in, the sacrifices that earned me these burns, but it was Hayakawa they promoted. I fought, and he got the credit. When that happened, I thought I should just follow him. But he wasn’t determined to win at any cost. Learn these lessons from history, Toyama. Learn from Hayakawa’s virtues and from his mistakes.”

Toyama finally met the lieutenant’s eyes. “It was Hayakawa’s opinion that mattered, but he always asked for your advice.”

“Not always. Not on making peace with the Chinese, or on the use of mustard gas. He kept too many secrets, more than even a man like him deserved to have. Hayakwa appreciated my friendship, but he believed in rank above all. So I allowed him to take the spotlight. I was stepped over, but I didn’t take the route Sakata did. I listened to my superiors, stayed in the army, helped them get closer to victory. This is the slow path, but it’s the one I’ve taken. Even if I have nothing yet to show for all my faith.”

“So what now?” Toyama asked.

“I’ll do what was requested of me.” Nakamura spread out the papers, revealing maps and diagrams with the locations of mining equipment.

“What’s this?” Toyama asked.

“I requested blueprints of the mine shaft building,” Nakamura said. “This is everything the soldiers kept record of since we arrived, alongside several diagrams Amaki made per my request.”

“Are you going there?” Toyama said. “I thought mining didn’t interest you.”

“I’m not.” Nakamura glanced over the papers once more before looking up at Toyama. “These are simply for me to study. We can’t have the Chinese ambushing us from a room we don’t know about.”

Toyama stroked his chin, looking from Nakamura to the papers on the table. After a short pause, Nakamura brushed the papers aside and held out an index finger as if just remembering something.

“You knew Warrant Officer Makihara’s son, didn’t you?” the lieutenant asked. “I saw you speaking with him on more than one occasion.”

Toyama shifted forward in his seat. "We were on good terms. He wanted to be a politician when the war was over. A shame he had to die."

"A shame, indeed."

Nakamura looked down at the table, and Toyama watched him study the papers. If the lieutenant was willing to wait, to go along with the negotiations, then so would he. And when they had earned enough trust to be promoted, they would crush the Chinese.

## Chapter 33

### A Future Once Hoped For

When Nuo arrived at the warehouse, about ten other rebels were crowded together around a table. The number of resistors in fighting condition had been cut to just over sixty, but they were more determined than ever. Some of them spoke in hushed tones, but most of the attention was on a man with a unibrow and a worn-down outfit seated at the table holding a sheet of paper. She didn't recall his name, but she remembered seeing him in the valley.

Youxia saw Nuo and stepped away from the crowd. "Anyone tell you the news yet?"

Nuo shook her head. "What news?"

"The Japanese gave Ke a written message." Youxia gestured at the man with the sheet of paper. "They want to negotiate a truce with us, but can we trust these people to value peace? Why would they make this offer, unless it's a trap?"

The crowd turned toward them, and Mingzhu stepped forward. "We wanted to send a message, didn't we? Well, now they've received it. The Japanese can conquer towns easily, but

holding a town is more difficult. Ever since the War of Jiawu, Caishen has been known to resist occupation when other towns folded to foreign powers.”

Ke nodded. “They’re offering to meet at the iron mines. They occupy it right now, but it’s near the edge of their occupied territory. We can make it a neutral location.”

Youxia turned to Nuo. “If you want to negotiate with the Japanese, I’ll back you up. You drafted a peace offering before, and they spit in your face. But if you want a second chance to reason with them, I won’t take that from you. I have little experience attempting to reason with my enemies.”

“I know you want revenge,” Nuo said. “You’ve never given up on that.”

“That’s right,” Youxia said. “When Hou died in front of me, I saw in his eyes the focus and determination that would be needed to win this war. Even in my dying breath, I’ll take my vengeance. Hayakawa’s already been slain, but my anger isn’t satisfied. When I take my revenge, I’ll settle for anyone else who spills Chinese blood without a second thought.”

Nuo sighed. “Well, you’ll get that if it’s what you want. But I want peace, and I want my father back. If only the Chinese military wasn’t spread so thin, we might not have to do all this on our own. But alas, we must. We’ll humor these negotiations. And when I speak with the Japanese, I will have all of us in mind. Before we do, you should go in for reconnaissance. See what you can learn about what they have planned.”

Youxia met her eyes, his face grim. “I’ll find out as much as I can, but if they kill you, it will be without warning. And they may torture you. You’ve heard what happened in Da Chengzen. What will I tell your father if they put a bullet in your head? If you’re gone, and he doesn’t even get to say goodbye? He doesn’t deserve that pain, and you don’t deserve this kind of risk to your life.”

Nuo looked him in the eye. "I'm not afraid to die. Not if there's a chance of saving this town. The Japanese should fear us too."

\* \* \*

Toyama followed Nakamura to an old equipment shed far from the encampment and near the iron mines. When the lieutenant had called him, he'd acted strange, almost on edge. The sun had fallen, and there was only one man nearby that he could see. Few soldiers had visited this place, and to his knowledge even the Chinese no longer found use for most of the old equipment.

Nakamura kept glancing around, and Toyama suspected that whatever he was planning didn't have the approval of any of the captains.

As they reached the shed, Nakamura turned back to him. "Have you ever spoken to someone mentally unstable before? Someone who wished to harm or even kill themselves?"

Toyama froze, wondering where the question could possibly be going. "Half the people I met in the army hate their lives. What's this about, lieutenant? You think my experience is going to help you with someone like that?"

Nakamura shrugged. "It might not make a difference. I was just curious."

The lieutenant pushed open the door to the shed and flipped a switch, turning on a dim light. On the other side of the room, Toyama saw a man chained to a cot. It was Warrant Officer Makihara, his face still recognizable through streaks of blood. Instead of a soldier's uniform, he was dressed in plain clothing that could have belonged to a Chinese civilian. Toyama had seen him shot on the battlefield, but by some miracle, the man had survived. Nakamura had experience, and he'd removed bullets before, but Toyama had never seen him do it without help. Yet somehow, he alone had brought the warrant officer back from the brink of death. To Toyama's surprise, when Makihara saw them, there was no anger in his expression.

“Hello, Makihara,” Nakamura said. “Did you get lonely without me?”

“How long must you keep me chained here?” Makihara turned from Nakamura to Toyama. “Has he told the others about me?”

Nakamura stepped forward, letting out a soft sigh as he studied Makihara’s face. “You tell yourself you want an honorable death, but I think you just want to give up. This army still has use for you, and you tried to stab yourself in the heart. You’re lucky the shot didn’t kill you. Still you don’t see how lucky you are.”

Makihara groaned. “I didn’t choose to be lucky.”

“I chose for you.” Nakamura leaned close to the warrant officer. “I scraped together all the medical supplies I could to treat your wounds, even when others were injured just as badly. You know how hard I worked to prevent infection, to make sure you’ll be able to get up and fight when I need you? Because we do need you.”

“Please, Lieutenant, let me die an honorable death.” Makihara coughed between words, his face pale. “If I try to fight now, I’ll be nothing more than an injured soldier. Why must I be prepared to fight when our men are negotiating?”

“All things will happen in due time,” Nakamura said. “But I believe you still have the power to fight, perhaps even to avenge your son. Must I remind you of how the others abandoned you, left you for dead on the battlefield? Of how they always traded insults about you behind your back?”

“Yes, I remember all that.” Makihara sighed. “When you told me, you insisted I remember. I owe you, and I owe my son, but I am a coward. I don’t know that I have the heart to keep fighting.”

Nakamura turned to the warrant officer. "Toyama, please tell Makihara what his son told you about his dream for the future."

Toyama stepped forward, looking into the aging man's pale face. Makihara was far from peak health, but he looked stable. Bandages peeked out of his shirt and wrapped around his shoulders. He grunted as he shifted on his cot. The warrant officer might have even had another battle in him, if given the will to push forward.

"Your son spoke to me." Toyama looked down at the man, realizing Nakamura would probably rather he exaggerate. "He saw how hard you worked, your loyalty to Emperor Hirohito. He said it inspired him, and he believed you would never be afraid of pushing yourself to do what was necessary. And he wanted a position in government, as smart men often do. He said that loyal soldiers, men like you, should be rewarded and asked for input about the future of our country. These were the dreams of your son, cut short by a traitor, an ally of the Chinese. All of them pushed for his death from the depths of their rotten souls."

Makihara's eyes widened, and tears began welling up in his eyes on his face. He looked from Nakamura to Toyama, his breaths ragged. Slowly, he sat upright on the cot and wiped the moisture from his face.

"Maybe you're right," Makihara said. "Maybe I can still fight. But must you still keep me chained here?"

Nakamura smiled at him. "When you're ready, when I'm sure you won't hurt yourself, I'll let you out. Then you can fight again as one of us."

He turned and gestured for Toyama to follow him out. It was surreal watching the way Nakamura talked to the warrant officer, the way he seemed eager to control him. As they left the

shed, Toyama found himself wondering why Nakamura took so much pleasure in being needed by the man.

Nakamura closed the door to the shed and turned to Toyama. "He'll be loyal to us now. And he has a good amount of sway with the army, he and his whole family name. In good time, we can have our promotions and direct our forces to victory. I'm sure I don't need to tell you not to inform anyone else about him just yet. We can say we found him later, that he healed himself. We can say whatever story we want, and there will be no proof against us."

Toyama narrowed his eyes at the lieutenant. "I thought you didn't like it when Hayakawa kept secrets."

"I didn't." Nakamura turned, facing ahead. "But he didn't need to keep secrets. He was the highest-ranking man here, and no one was going to stand against him. And my advice always led him to victory. It was he who restrained us at the worst possible moment."

Toyama nodded slowly. It would be unwise to object when Nakamura had done so much already that would work in both their interests. And he deserved some credit for keeping Makihara alive, even if the warrant officer wished to die. The army needed all of them now, depressed or otherwise.

## Chapter 34

Sakata sat upright in his cot. He stretched his arms and legs, feeling more stabbing pain from the wounds now that the pain medication had worn off. Dr. Yin had been apologetic, seeming sincere even through his thick Mandarin accent, and he had done his best with what he had. Sakata had survived pain before, gone for months while knowing nothing else. And he was a lucky one. One of the patients sharing the room had died, and the third patient's face had turned a very unhealthy shade of white.

Qiao entered, looking from Sakata's bandages to his tired expression. He hoped he looked as healthy as he felt. He'd gotten enough pity in the last few days to last a lifetime.

"You're still here?" Sakata asked. "Is there no fighting left to be done?"

Qiao sat across from him. "The Japanese sent a peace offering. We'll negotiate with them at the mine shaft building and see if we can come to an agreement. Most likely, neither side will be satisfied."

"No, probably not," Sakata said. "There's always something else to fight over. My father was a pickpocket. If I'd been raised by the others in my family, maybe I wouldn't know so much

about killing. But I was raised by the outcast of my family, the man even my uncle and mother looked down on. I've seen the worst of humanity's inclinations, and that won't stop just because of conversation."

"Maybe it will," Qiao said. "Everyone still has a choice."

"Most of us made our choices long ago. I did, and I realize that now. As a child, I lived in a violent neighborhood. After my father taught me how to steal, he taught me how to kill if I ever needed to. The first man I killed was an opium addict who tried to stab me and take my wallet. When I had sliced his neck with a shard of glass, I left him to bleed. I like to tell myself there was no saving him. But the truth is, I just did as I was taught. And I told myself that enough killing might weaken the institution that brought me here. Killing Youxia's brother, that was only a matter of time. Everyone has their reasons for killing. I didn't like Hayakawa's reasons, so I killed him. And that's why there will always be hatred and violence."

Qiao paused for a few moments before she spoke. "Do you ever think about leaving? Escaping the war? You're in no condition to fight, and you've done enough for us already."

Sakata shook his head. "There's nowhere else to go. And I have unfinished business in this town. What about you? You've lost an eye already. You think you'll survive here?"

Qiao looked past him at the wall. "I don't know. But there's people here I care about. People I owe my life to. I never thought of fighting as some grand moral crusade. Just that I couldn't ignore seeing my friends die."

"And now that I've killed him, what will you do? Join the negotiations?"

Qiao rose to her feet. "Youxia, Guan, and I are going to recruit more resistors. Roughly speaking, our numbers were cut from a hundred able-bodied resistors to half that. Thirty-two of our members were gravely wounded, not including my injury, and twelve died. The Japanese still

have about eight hundred soldiers. If this peace deal is a trap, we need to be on guard with as many fighters as we can get.”

“Who else was injured?” Sakata asked. “Anyone I would know?”

“Mostly new recruits. It was the mustard gas that got most of them. Nuo had us document as much as we could about the injuries, though I don’t know how well that will prepare us for similar attacks in the future.”

Sakata looked from Qiao to the cramped room, hoping he’d be well enough to leave soon. “Who’s willing to fight that hasn’t joined us already?”

“There are some on the edge of town, near the place the army took over, who’ve expressed an interest in joining us but who until now were more distrusting and inclined to work on their own. They killed a Japanese soldier patrolling the streets. Some are surviving rebels from other towns who have come to aid the fight in Caishen. There are also the newest members of the town garrison, those with no real battle experience. And then there are just ordinary townspeople. All of them need some amount of training and direction.”

“And Youxia can give it to them?”

“He or the old mayor.”

Sakata scoffed. “The same mayor who allowed the massacre in the town square?”

Qiao shrugged. “We don’t have many options to choose from. Guan led us to victory during the battle for Caishen against smaller numbers. If we can retake control of the town, even for a time, then maybe I’ll have done enough. Then we can leave this place. Together, if you want.”

“Someday,” Sakata said. “But I’m not done here either. Hayakawa’s gone, but someone else will be leading the Japanese now. It could be anyone at all. That’s the gamble I made by killing him.”

“It was the only thing to do. You know that.”

“I don’t know for certain,” Sakata said. “It depends on whether Hayakawa’s death has changed them. After the peace talks, maybe whoever replaces him will learn from his death and scale back some of the endless massacres and abuse, even by a tiny bit. They’d face less resistance if they did, and they’d inspire fewer defectors.”

“But you don’t think they will?”

Sakata sighed. “At one time, there was a grand purpose to everything I did. Now, I don’t know. But I owe you my life. And Youxia called the doctor for me, even if he regrets it now. Once I regain my strength, I’ll keep fighting. I owe the resistors that much, even if I have my limits.”

“You don’t have to risk everything. It was never on you to end this occupation. People here care about you. I care about you. Isn’t that enough? Will you keep fighting until you collapse?”

Sakata shrugged. “What’s the worst they can do to me? Kill me? I’ve been waiting to die my whole life.”

“They can do worse.” Qiao held up her left hand, showing the stumps where her two small fingers should have been. “I almost died in Da Chengzen. The soldiers burned my father alive. They dragged my mother away, and I never saw her again. My brother was luckier than most. The soldiers shot him in the head. While Hayakawa spoke of treaties and common ground with the town leaders, his men tortured and killed everyone they could. They called it the Path of

Blood. They said they'd been ordered to take those measures, but not by Hayakawa. Someone else who took control and drove them to kill."

"Who?"

"They never gave us the name of the one who'd sent them. Only an alias. The Red Dragon."

Sakata frowned. "Hayakawa was credited for that victory, wasn't he? They never rewarded anyone else publicly?"

Qiao nodded. "As far as I know."

"Then there never was a Red Dragon." Sakata let out a breath. "How could there be? He was too perfect for propaganda purposes. Chinese or Japanese, who would downplay a story like that? An elusive legend like that is more powerful than any soldier made of flesh and bone. Those soldiers didn't need any encouragement to rape and kill. They followed their own black hearts and blamed their sins on a phantom."

Qiao frowned. "You think they invented a man? Just because they could?"

Sakata released a breath. "They'd never tell the truth to a Chinese civilian. I can assure you of that."

The door opened once more, and Nuo entered with Zhang. Nuo turned to Qiao and gestured to Sakata, speaking in Chinese.

When they were finished, Qiao turned to Sakata. "They're here to wish you well on your recovery. Nuo says she underestimated you. And Zhang feels he was wrong to distrust you."

Sakata waved his hand. "Tell Zhang it's in the past. We both have our reasons for opposing the Japanese army, and what happened between us doesn't change that. And what are our grudges now, when this war could end our lives at any moment? We can't afford infighting."

Qiao turned back to them and translated. Sakata felt the pain return to his side, but it didn't bother him as it had before. This time, he thought it might fade for good.

## Chapter 35

When Zhang arrived at the mine shaft building with Nuo and Mingzhu, several armed Japanese soldiers were already present, along with a number of armed resistors. One of the soldiers studied him and the others with an intense glare, and Zhang followed Nuo past him toward the entrance of the building. They'd agreed explicitly for each side to bring weapons, to show them visibly. This was a gamble, but if they abstained from carrying weaponry, it made an ambush all the more likely.

Zhang reached for his weapon, and he could sense a tension in the air that made her uneasy. Nuo had said that she wasn't afraid to die, and she had seemed like she meant it. And Zhang was beside her now, determined and loyal as he had always been. As he entered the building, she got a sinking feeling that his devotion might be tested. The soldiers followed them, and Zhang tightened his lips, reminding himself that the Japanese had good reason to fear the rebels now.

They ascended a flight of stairs and arrived at a meeting room on the second floor. Several armed soldiers were waiting for them, and a short Japanese man wearing a pair of spectacles stepped forward.

“That’s Captain Amaki,” Zhang whispered to Nuo. “He spoke with the mayor before Hayakawa’s arrival.”

Mingzhu scoffed. “Another negotiation with him? We were promised peace before the massacre in the town square.”

Amaki studied each of their faces. “Have a seat, all of you. When your mayor arrives, we can begin negotiations.”

“You won’t be speaking with him,” Nuo said. “I’ve been given authority to handle negotiations. I’m sure you won’t have a problem with that.”

Amaki looked her over for a fraction of a second. “Very well. I suppose it doesn’t matter who speaks for you.”

Amaki adjusted his spectacles and sat at the table. Zhang and the other rebels took seats across from him. It was his duty to be here, to protect Shude’s daughter. He’d expected to be shunned, or at least lectured for enabling the massacre in the town square. But Shude and Nuo had forgiven him, even trusted him now with so much at stake. So many deaths had occurred since Hayakawa’s arrival, and he wondered whether all the rebels who’d perished might still be alive if not for him. There were few ways to atone, but facing Amaki once more was the least he could do.

Nuo cleared her throat and stared directly into the diplomat’s face. She would have to shoot high now, because it would be impossible to expect anything better than the first thing she asked for.

“These are our terms,” she said. “You will free the Chinese prisoners you took and hand back control of the hospital. You will destroy the mustard gas you brought here and send away all forces currently occupying our town. And you will hand over some of your weapons as an assurance that this town will not be invaded again. Written copies of this agreement will be sent to both your superiors and the surrounding towns.”

“Intriguing.” Amaki tapped his hand on the table. “But not possible. Our men will not leave this town, and we will not hand over possession of the iron mines or the hospital. If that is unacceptable to you, then we will slaughter the entire resistance. You, the rebels, must lay down your arms, with a guarantee that you will not be punished. Send news of this agreement to whoever you like, but that will be your task and not ours. All of that said, I can acquiesce to one of your demands. On acceptance of our terms, we will free the prisoners we took, including your father.”

Zhang turned to Nuo. “You can’t accept this. They’ll kill us all, including your father.”

“It’s my decision,” Nuo said. “I refuse your offer, Amaki. You see, a detachment of our forces has already surrounded the hospital where my father and other rebels are being held captive. If you execute the prisoners, you expect many of your own soldiers to join them in death. Furthermore, we have carefully documented your use of chemical weapons, complete with photographs and witness testimony. You have carefully avoided escalation to chemical weapons in the Pacific theater, but when the Allies receive word of what happened here, they will have every excuse to use chemical weapons of their own in greater quantities than you will ever be capable of producing. We know the British Royal Air Force has already caused difficulties for you, and you can’t afford greater hostilities in the Pacific. Escalation on that front doesn’t help our town particularly, but it certainly harms you. I’m sure you don’t consider something so broad

to be your problem, Amaki. But your superiors learn the cause of this escalation in the war with the United States, it will become the problem of every authority sitting here.”

“Is that all?” Amaki asked.

“No.” Nuo pressed her fingertips together. “In addition to the aforementioned, one of our members has already overheard the reason for this meeting. Lieutenant Colonel Hayakwa ordered you to make peace with us in the event of his death, a fact that most in your army and everyone here is well aware of. We know he mattered more to his superiors than any of you did. So you will offer us better terms, a legitimate attempt at peace, because you have more to lose from an endless war than just the lives of your men.”

Amaki stared at her, his mouth slightly open, his eyes flashing for only a moment before he composed himself. He might never admit to being caught off guard, but Zhang could see in his fleeting expression that he had underestimated their preparations. His only regret was not being able to have Shude beside them, but if all went well, his safety would be guaranteed.

Zhang inhaled, bracing for the inevitable counteroffer. Nuo had surprised the diplomat with a stronger hand than he’d expected, but Amaki now looked at Nuo and Zhang with the same satisfied smirk he’d given the mayor.

“You’re simply being unreasonable,” Amaki said. “Our forces will stay here, to enforce whatever terms we agree to. That much is non-negotiable. We still outnumber you, and there is no honor in putting the deaths of our comrades to waste. Do not insult me with an impossible suggestion.”

“Your honor is your problem to deal with,” Nuo said. “Not ours. You have already offered us peace, and there is no honor in lying about diplomacy, even to one’s enemy. I was told that you are capable of reason.”

Amaki crossed his arms. “Even you must see how unrealistic your expectations are. But if you insist on this absurdity, then I will adjust my offer. One quarter of our forces will depart from Caishen, but they remain at an encampment nearby, prepared to return if you violate the terms of our agreement. And your forces must still lay down your arms. If you wish to see your father again, these terms are more than fair.”

Nuo smiled at him. “You learn very slowly, don’t you?”

The door burst open behind Zhang, and a Chinese man ran into the room. The Japanese soldiers glared at him, some raising their weapons, but Amaki held out a hand to stop them. The man walked over to Zhang, doing his best not to draw attention to himself.

“What is it?” Zhang whispered.

“You were very clear about which high-ranking soldiers were allowed to enter the building,” the rebel whispered back. “Some of our men saw a soldier enter who they didn’t recognize. Did you change your mind?”

Zhang shook his head, doing his best to keep his hands from quivering as Amaki’s words were lost in a haze. Li Bo would have figured out what was afoot, unpleasant as he was, and he had trained Zhang as best he could. He’d put together Sakata’s betrayal in the desert with only a gun and some rations left behind, when all Zhang could do was guess.

“Excuse me,” he said to Nuo, rising from the table. “I’ll be back.”

“Stay alive for me,” she whispered.

He ran out of the room and sprinted down the stairs, glancing both ways down the first-floor hall. He heard the sound of a man grunting in the gunpowder room, and he reached for his gun before bursting through the door.

Gunpowder covered the floor. The room was almost completely dark, but its smell filled the room. A man was there, his silhouette somehow illuminated. There was a wound in his side, and he faced away from Zhang, breathing in gasps.

“Turn around,” Zhang said, tightening his grip on the pistol. It was a small piece of luck, to encounter a soldier who spoke Chinese.

The man turned around, his face pale. Zhang recognized him as a man who’d been shouting his name in the valley. A soldier Hou had identified as Makihara. In his right hand, he held an oil lamp. At once, Zhang understood. He looked from the gunpowder spread across the floor to the barrels of explosive powder still intact on the sides of the room. He thought of Nuo in the room above and how she had always been kind to him. And he thought of Shude, rotting away in some army prison. He couldn’t let the old man down, not after all they had been through.

Zhang leveled the gun at Makihara’s chest. “Don’t do it. You’ll die alongside us. Your army will gain nothing from this.”

Makihara stepped forward, the lamp shaking in his hand. A single tear trickled down his face, but he stared forward, his face stiff. He didn’t bother to look Zhang in the eye.

“They killed my son,” he said.

He released the oil lamp, and Zhang heard himself crying out, though it was too late. The light shattered as it hit the floor, igniting the gunpowder in an eruption of flames.

## Chapter 36

### One Way Forward

Nakamura sat in the Japanese encampment, watching the mine shaft building from afar. It made him sick to watch the place where so many stupid men had gathered to offer peace to an enemy on the verge of defeat. One ambush was no reason to fear a group of untrained rebels. He saw no reason that the men who'd dared to negotiate with the rebels were in any way capable of leading. A fight was coming, and he'd made Toyama keep track of their enemies, tell him which rebels had come to negotiate. The Wang girl, Zhang, and Mingzhu would soon be dead.

In the distance, smoke burst out through the windows of the mine shaft building. The structure crumbled apart, sending debris flying in all directions. Nakamura rose to his feet, walking forward to get a better view of the blast. Ten seconds later, an ear-splitting blast rocked the air, and several men in the camp flinched at the sound.

A soldier ran up to him. "Lieutenant, Captains Amaki and Kimura were in that building." "It was no accident," Nakamura said. "The rebels destroyed that building to create exactly this opportunity. We never should have agreed to meet with them."

Toyama approached them. "Nakamura, you're the only one who can lead us now. Should I rally the others?"

Nakamura nodded. "Our only choice is to fight. It's kill or be killed now."

\* \* \*

Junji walked to the window of his hospital room, noting that moving without the wheelchair was less painful than it had been the previous day. He opened the blinds, watching smoke rise from the pile of rubble where the mine shaft building had once been. That explained the loud blast, but it raised many more concerns. He ran to his other window and peered into the hall, seeing Japanese medics race frantically.

Gunshots broke out in the hall, and one of the Japanese medics tumbled to the ground. Others reached for their weapons, but they were blasted away. Moments later, the door to his room burst open, and two rebels entered. He was grateful, not for the first time, that he spoke their language.

"Put your hands up! Now!" one of the rebels shouted at him. "This area is now under Chinese control."

"What's going on?" Junji backed away from them, his heart pounding, still a bit stiff without the wheelchair. "I thought there was a truce."

The rebel leveled a gun at his head. "Hands up. Now."

Junji put his hands in the air. "That can't be the whole story. Hayakawa wanted peace. Speak to Wang Shude. I saw him during my recovery when the medics allowed me to leave my room. We have nothing against each other."

"You're our prisoner all the same," the rebel said. "Don't try to resist us."

"What's your name?" Junji asked.

“Ke,” the rebel said. “If you don’t fight us, we have no reason to kill you.”

A shout for backup came from further down the hall. Ke turned toward the sound, motioning for Junji to follow him. The bodies of Japanese soldiers and medics covered the ground, and Junji felt his heart pound as he was dragged through the bloodstained halls.

“The colonel is here!” one of the rebels shouted, and several of the others gasped.

“Hayakawa’s dead,” Junji said. “It’s not possible.”

“Quiet.” Ke shoved him forward. “You’re coming with me. To the entrance facing the tall hills.”

They finally arrived at the entrance to the hospital where other rebels watched the hills with their weapons. Junji looked to the top of the hill to see the man the rebel had shouted about. But instead of Hayakawa, he saw Nakamura with a few dozen soldiers, the burns on his face still visible from the ground.

“Run,” Junji said. “Give this place up, and it will be better for everyone. There’s a very dangerous man coming to kill you. Lieutenant Nakamura will torture you if given the opportunity.”

Ke swung his gun back toward Junji. “I told you not to speak.”

“Prepare to fight!” one of the other rebels shouted. He turned to Ke. “I’ll look after him and any other prisoners our people managed to get. Notify Youxia of this development. No doubt he will need some idea of the threat we face.”

Before Ke could move, several hundred soldiers crossed over the hills, flanked by two tanks. Junji’s heart sank as he realized the scope of the battle he was about to be thrust into. The Japanese had no desire for peace at all now, and Nakamura had brought half the soldiers in Caishen to take back the hospital.

“Don’t retreat!” the same rebel ordered again. “We won’t leave our injured here to die.”

“Get back inside,” Ke ordered, shoving Junji with his gun. “You’re of no value to us if you get yourself killed.”

Junji nodded. It was unlikely Nakamura would care about a hostage, but if the battle came to an unlikely stalemate, he saw how his capture might afford the Chinese some advantages. He was lucky they hadn’t executed him on the spot, or perhaps unlucky if they planned to torture him later for information. A more honorable man might have fought the Chinese to the death. But Junji had been on the edge of death for far too long, and he valued his life more than he would admit. He raised his hands high and staggered back into the hospital, watching Ke rush off to deliver news of the invasion.

Within minutes, the deafening sound of gunfire filled the air, even inside the hospital. Rebels fell to the ground outside, and windows shattered as they were struck by bullets. As he ran through the hospital in search of cover, he passed Wang Shude going the opposite way.

“What’s going on?” the old man asked. “Did the Japanese come back?”

Before Junji could answer, the door burst open, and several rebels rushed into the hospital. One of them knocked Junji to the ground and kicked him in the side.

“What’s a soldier doing here?” the rebel asked Shude. “Did he try to kill you?”

Another of the rebels pulled a gun from his belt. “He should have run when he had the chance.”

A gunshot echoed out through the hall, and the rebel tumbled to the ground. Junji turned to see a Japanese soldier approaching with a rifle. Wang Shude, who carried no weapon, pressed himself against the wall and put his hands in the air. The other rebels turned to return fire, but the soldier unloaded the rifle at them, sending them to the ground. Several more Japanese soldiers

entered the building, and the first man with the rifle said something about Nakamura's order not to put the Chinese out of their misery just yet. Junji rose from the ground a bit painfully, still trembling.

Nakamura and Toyama arrived a minute later after Shude and a dozen other rebels had been subdued. Toyama spotted Junji, but his expression remained a glower. "These savages destroyed their own building after agreeing to meet for peace."

Wang Shude stumbled forward, his hands shaking in the air. Toyama slammed the butt of his rifle against the old man's head, sending him to the ground. He hammered Shude's face with the weapon again and again until the old man was covered in blood. Nakamura finally pulled Toyama aside and barked at him to monitor the other Chinese rebels and ensure that none of them escaped. Shude groaned and he lay on the ground, wounded but alive.

Nakamura grabbed the old man by the arm and turned to several other soldiers who had captured surrendering rebels. "Take them outside."

Junji followed the lieutenant as he dragged Shude outside the hospital to the quarantine area where the rebels had been kept for a week as prisoners. A crowd of soldiers followed, dragging wounded and captured Chinese rebels. On Nakamura's orders, they lined the captured rebels up against the fence. Jinji watched, unsure whether to be happy he was alive or disappointed in Nakamura's arrogance. The lieutenant wanted to make a show of their deaths, as if that would demonstrate his power.

Shude glared up at Nakamura. "Hayakawa died for his arrogance, and so will you." "What did he say to me?" Nakamura's voice turned cold. "Never mind that. I won't let him die with that look in his eyes. Tell him Nuo is dead."

Junji froze, and the lieutenant prodded him with his rifle. The old man looked from one soldier to the next, his face pale. Junji opened his mouth, feeling Nakamura's eyes on him.

"Nuo is dead," Junji said in Chinese. "Shude, I'm sorry."

Shude's face sank, and he collapsed to his knees, his fingers managing to grasp the chain-link fence behind him. The color left his eyes, and his breathing grew quieter. Nakamura grabbed Junji's shoulder, and he stumbled back as the lieutenant and the others raised their weapons. Nakamura glared at him expectantly, but Junji stayed frozen, still watching the old man.

Nakamura turned to the other soldiers. "These prisoners are barely alive. Their comrades are dead. Reunite them."

The soldiers opened fire, and bullets tore through the captured rebels, covering the fence in blood. The metal itself tore with a loud snap, and the rebels beside Shude cried out as the bullets struck them. The old man remained silent and stone-faced, his body jerking violently before falling to the ground beside his lifeless comrades.

Nakamura fired at the old man several more times before lowering his weapon. He turned to Toyama. "Set the building on fire. No caring for the wounded. My men fight to the death."

\* \* \*

Ke panted, pushing forward and thanking his ancestors he'd left early enough to avoid being captured. They needed at least one survivor to deliver the news. Ahead, he saw the houses on the northwest corner of town where Youxia had gone to grow the resistance. This part of Caishen stood a few dozen meters higher than the rest of the town, and he hurried up the hill toward the reclusive neighborhood, panting as he ran. By the time he arrived, his face was covered in sweat.

The first person he saw was Qiao, her eye still covered in a bandage. Behind her, several dozen rebels held weapons.

“Where’s Youxia?” Ke asked. “He’s your leader, isn’t he? I have a message for him.”

Qiao stepped forward. “Whatever you have to say, you can say to me.”

“Lieutenant Nakamura attacked the hospital with hundreds of soldiers. They set it on fire. I’d wager that everyone there has been captured or killed.”

“We know,” Qiao said. “With the region in chaos, it only made sense for the Japanese to send their forces to ensure the captives couldn’t escape. Especially since their soldiers observing the mine shaft building could easily rally with the rest and form a large united force. That’s what we’ve been waiting for.”

“You knew?” Ke stared at her in shock. “Why didn’t you send people to fight them?”

“By the time we’d gotten there, it would have been too late,” Qiao said. “It’s imperative that the Japanese don’t discover our number or our location. Their attack was unavoidable, but now we know where they are. We know where the bulk of their forces are defending, and we know where they’re defenseless. Better than us all being killed.”

“And what about Lieutenant Nakamura? Are you just going to let him slaughter everyone in Caishen?”

“We can only deplete his forces and try to contain him,” Qiao said. “He’ll be more well-guarded than any other soldier, and none of us here has the skills or experience needed to carry out an assassination. If we want Nakamura to die, we’ll have to wait.”

“Wait for what?” Ke asked.

Qiao stepped forward, looking out past the burning hospital. “For Sakata Ryuji.”

## Chapter 37

## The Fang from History

Sakata stepped through the hall of the old office building, wishing he had pushed through his injuries earlier and joined the recruitment effort. He could move on his feet now without too much pain, though he was still a bit stiff. He'd donned the army uniform again, but he still hadn't decoded the letter, and he doubted the army would use a code simple enough for a single man to decipher. But he was in fighting condition, as much as he had been when he'd tackled Hayakawa off the roof with a bullet in his side.

The front door swung open, and Dr. Yin entered, his face pale. Sakata had seen him briefly before, and his arms were tightly folded as usual. He gave an exasperated sigh, though Sakata thought it wasn't really directed at him.

Yin looked at Sakata. "It won't be safe here for much longer."

"What happened?" Sakata asked. "They didn't come to an agreement?"

“It wouldn’t matter if they had.” Yin leaned against the wall. “The mine shaft building exploded. It wasn’t our people that did it. It doesn’t take a genius to see this incident works to their advantage, not ours.”

“Everyone there died?” Sakata stepped back, his heart pounding. “Zhang and Nuo? Mingzhu?”

Yin nodded, lowering his gaze. They were backed into a corner now, and the Japanese army wouldn’t be interested in peace.

Sakata exhaled. “I should have been more attentive, pushed myself to watch what the army was doing. And the Japanese had people in that building too. Those orders didn’t come from the top. No, it had to have been an underhanded play for power. I can’t make sense of it otherwise.”

“There are others here,” Yin said. “Though not many people were enthusiastic about staying here to protect you and a dying man, most not even knowing your language. I was going to give them the news too, and I thought we could discuss our next move together. I believe these particular men know Japanese well enough for our purposes. And we may need you.”

“You absolutely need me. If we’re going to win this, someone at the top will have to die.”

“Are you going to fight them in your condition?” Yin asked as they reached the door. “Go and assassinate someone all on your own? It seems a bit reckless.”

“That’s what my uncle would have said.” Sakata pushed open the door. “My mother, too. It’s my father who taught me to be reckless.”

\* \* \*

Qiao crouched at the edge of a hill overlooking the Japanese encampment beside the forest. With most of their forces having followed Nakamura, there were about a hundred men left in the

encampment. The soldiers were drinking and smoking, unaware that they were being watched by members of the Chinese resistance. On the far side of the encampment, the sacred forest extended further than she could see. On the side facing the rest of the town, the terrain lowered and flattened out, and a wide plain flanked by haphazard rows of bushes extended for a dozen meters before giving way to a dirt road. There were no Howitzers still visible, but there was a truck on the side closest to her, the contents heavily sealed. If there was any mustard gas left, it would be there.

Youxia approached her. “Are you going to watch them forever?”

Qiao rose to her feet. “Are the explosives ready?”

Youxia nodded. “Guan prepared the grenade launchers. And these rebels are ready to throw their lives away. They don’t have our instincts for army organization and planning. But they chose to risk everything. That must be worth something.”

Guan approached them carrying a rifle with the ragtag group of rebels behind him. They had about a hundred fighters too, but they knew a fight was coming and the soldiers below didn’t.

“We’re ready to charge,” Guan said.

Qiao looked from him to the men behind him carrying the grenade launchers. “We should leave some alive for our dealings with Nakamura later. Explosives first.”

She and Youxia each took a grenade launcher and prepared to load explosives. Youxia moved faster than her, and he launched the first grenade while she was still fumbling to load hers. It went off a few seconds after hitting the ground, and it was soon followed by the impact of Qiao’s grenade landing on the other side of the army camp.

They reloaded and fired two more rounds, raining down explosives on the soldiers below. By now, the Japanese had begun firing back, but the rebels were moving targets, and they had the high ground. Beside Qiao, a rebel fumbled with his gun, then cried out as a shot landed in his torso. He lost his balance and tumbled down the hill.

Qiao handed the grenade launcher to one of the rebels and rushed down the hill, pistol raised, with Youxia and Guan at her heels. Several Japanese soldiers noticed them and raised their pistols, and Youxia opened fire at them. One of the soldiers fell to the ground, and Qiao shot another. A third soldier fired back at them, striking a young man beside her. Guan cried out in rage and opened fire at the Japanese soldier.

“I’ll slaughter them all!” Youxia roared.

Qiao shot one soldier in the side, and Guan bashed another in the head with the butt of his rifle. Qiao spotted a soldier near her that appeared to be in shock and still hadn’t gotten to his weapon. She shot him in his lower leg, and he crumpled to the ground as blood soaked through his uniform.

Soldiers turned, firing frantically at rebels who approached from every direction. In only a few minutes, the Japanese forces had already been cut in half. A soldier spotted Qiao and raised his weapon, but a grenade landed beside him, and the blast sent him flying into the side of a building.

She rushed through the encampment after Youxia, glancing back at the truck to ensure it hadn’t been damaged by the gunfire. There were several holes in the side of the truck, but there was nothing that could be done about that now. A bullet whizzed by her head, and a rebel several meters away fell to the ground. She turned to see a wounded Japanese soldier stumbling toward them. She and Youxia opened fire at the man, and he collapsed to the ground.

“Shoot to injure some instead of killing,” she said to Youxia. “If they’re injured, we can take them prisoner once the fight is done.”

After several more rounds of gunfire, they cornered two Japanese soldiers near the edge of the camp, the last two survivors. One of them took aim at Qiao, but Youxia shot him in the chest before he could fire. The rebels backed away, keeping their weapons trained on the last soldier. The soldier turned his gun toward his own head and fired, collapsing to the ground in a heap.

Qiao walked back to the truck, and others followed. Her skin began to blister, and she removed the covering before hurrying back and gesturing for the others to move away from the truck and wait for the gas to disperse. There were twelve canisters. Upon close inspection, nine had been damaged, and most of the gas had seeped out of them already.

“We can’t get much use out of these,” Youxia said.

“Yes we can.” Qiao turned to the group of rebels behind them. “Send a messenger to Nakamura. Tell him we’ve captured thirty-two hostages and wish to negotiate.”

“They won’t care about hostages,” Youxia said. “And when they get here, they’ll realize we’re lying.”

“Yes, they will.” Qiao said. “That’s when we’ll threaten them with the mustard gas and force them to disarm. The threat retains its full power as long as they don’t know any of the canisters are damaged.”

\* \* \*

Nakamura stood with Toyama and Junji near the hospital ruins. The rest of the detachment stood by the tanks in the valley near the hill, some men visibly shaken. Junji had spent the last hour speaking with other soldiers in the crowd, and he hadn’t bothered to inform Nakamura of what

he'd said. Nakamura resented being unaware of what the soldiers were discussing, but he would know soon enough whether Junji was with him or against him. Some had been on the front lines for many years. For others, it had been their largest battle yet. If all went as Nakamura planned, there would be larger ones to come.

Second Lieutenant Sato ran up to Nakamura from the crowd, bowing quickly before speaking. "One of the rebels arrived with a message. He said they attacked our encampment and took thirty-two hostages. I executed him, but I think he was prepared for that."

"Hostages?" Nakamura paused. "You're telling me thirty-two of our men abandoned their honor and allowed themselves to be captured alive? It's a shame. Men like that aren't remembered well."

Toyama turned to Nakamura. "Let's finish the rebels off then. Junji, let's hope you have some of your father in you."

Junji nodded slowly, but Nakamura could see in his eyes that he was unsure. As a private, his word held little weight, but as the son of Aizawa, he sometimes got the silly idea that his father's reputation made his opinions more important. Hayakawa was partly to blame for that, speaking to Junji like a friend. The best Nakamura could do was knock some discipline into him, make sure he knew who his betters were.

"It's not my decision, but I don't know if we should attack them directly," Junji said finally. "They'll be prepared for us. We'd have better control of the town if we held our current territory and didn't risk lives in another battle. We can spend our time finding a way to mine, as Aizawa and Hayakawa intended, and rule with stability. The purpose of war is peace, after all."

Nakamura scoffed at him. "They attacked us. We can't just ignore them. There's no reason to have so many soldiers here if we're too cowardly to fight. Even the traitor is more

dedicated to this fight than you are. I wonder what Sakata Ryuji thought when he entered our encampment to murder our men. Did he feel alive for the first time in his life? What do you think?"

Junji avoided his gaze and folded his hands, his face pale.

"Look at me while I'm talking to you," Nakamura growled. "You can try to endear yourself to the common soldiers, son of Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa, but your name carries little weight with your father dead. You're only a private, and you report to me now."

Toyama ignored this standoff, turning to Sato. "Only Nakamura Hideki is fit to be our leader. We have no majors or captains left to replace Hayakawa. And Nakamura advised Hayakawa longer than most of us knew him."

Lieutenant Sato nodded. "No one else here is up to the task. You're our leader now, as far as many in this detachment are concerned. Some will run barefoot over burning coals if you lead them. But others are loyal only to Hayakawa and may have other ideas about who should succeed him. Let's settle this matter of authority now."

Nakamura kept his face neutral, though inside he was relieved that Sato had brought the matter to him. It helped to have a lieutenant like him on his side. The power vacuum he'd created by sending Makihara to destroy the mine shaft building would not last long, and authority often landed in the hands of whoever grabbed it first. Toyama would be rewarded for his loyalty, and if Sato proved his devotion as well, similar arrangements could be made for him.

He studied Sato's face closely. "I'll lead these men. But I won't hide in Hayakawa's shadow any longer. The reason you and Toyama have such respect for me is that you know who I really am. You know that only I will take the measures necessary to secure our victory. I've been silent on my accomplishments for too long."

Sato nodded slowly, silently eyeing him. Junji looked from one face to another, seeming unsure exactly what he was referring to.

Nakamura walked toward the place where the rest of the soldiers had gathered. He called them forward, and Lieutenant Sato echoed this command. The soldiers approached him, some covered in sweat, and many failing to meet his gaze. Toyama pulled Junji into the crowd, smiling at Nakamura for a brief moment before looking away.

“Line up,” Nakamura ordered, watching the men shuffle into position. “I’m your leader now. The rebels attacked our encampment, so we’re going to crush them. If you have any doubts, voice them now.”

One of the soldiers at the front of the group moved his eyes to Nakamura, lowering his gaze. “Where are Amaki and Kimura? They’re both dead, aren’t they?”

Nakamura folded his hands and looked from the young man who’d spoken to the others. “You’re going to fight like you’ve never fought before. I want it known that I have no use for cowards. You must always be ready to unleash pain, to set your enemies on fire even if you yourself are burned. If you torture your enemies, if you make them suffer, then do it with pride. Take credit for your achievements before your name is lost to history, before your existence itself is doubted. Don’t let anyone order you to keep your past a secret. Wrath and the will to destroy must never be hidden away, forced to hide in the shadow of empty platitudes.”

He had their undivided attention now, and if anyone else had wanted to make a play for power, they’d let the opportunity slip by. He had let others have all the credit for too long, and he wouldn’t make that mistake again.

“My achievements became a thing of legend, as did the nickname bestowed upon me by those who witnessed my wrath.” He pulled back his right sleeve, unveiling the fang-shaped scar

that had earned him his title. "I am First Lieutenant Nakamura Hideki, the Red Dragon Who Sets His Enemies on Fire. The warrior who all true servants of Emperor Hirohito salute. Tremble before me, and follow my footsteps to victory!"

The crowd of soldiers saluted at once. Nakamura looked over each man's face, keeping his own expression neutral. Every soldier in Caishen had heard at least one story about the Red Dragon, some embellished and others needing no embellishment. They trusted him completely now, and he would lead them to victory, no matter how many lives it cost.

## Chapter 38

### A Fragile Road to Victory

Nakamura marched forward alongside Toyama and Junji in the back of the crowd, the other soldiers and tanks leading the procession. The streets ahead were sparse, and Nakamura's hand moved to the gun on his belt as he glanced around, looking for any rebels who might be standing in wait to ambush them.

Toyama leaned toward Nakamura, keeping his voice low. "Even now, I could order any one of these men to slice his own finger off, and he wouldn't hesitate. Just imagine what they'd do on your command. Keep the reputation Hayakawa kept, and they'll follow you forever."

"Hayakawa tried to reason with the Chinese when they took the Lotus Tower." Nakamura turned to Junji, making sure the private was listening. "That was his greatest mistake. Strike down the rebels when you get the chance. Don't hesitate. You got that, Junji?"

Junji sighed, studying the ground. "I'll take the opportunities I can. But they've surpassed our expectations up to this point."

Toyama turned to Junji. "Do you know why we march forward? It's not because the place we're going is any better than the place we are now. It's not because any one battle will secure this town or its iron mines. Ever since we were boys, we knew what it meant to be Japanese. To be more civilized than any other race. We know the importance of duty, the importance of serving Emperor Hirohito, no matter the cost in lives or the risk of failure. We're soldiers, and soldiers march forward. That's what the traitor forgot when he decided to become an assassin. Sakata, if I remember correctly. We'll have to deal with him eventually. He might have killed Hayakawa, but he's not immortal."

Nakamura shook his head. "Sakata Ryuji is a very strange man. His father was a common thief, a lowly vermin who crept through the alleys of Tokyo with no sense of honor. But Sakata's uncle was a well-respected veteran from the First World War. You can see the resemblance in the way Sakata kills his enemies. If only the boy had taken after his uncle and joined us early in the war, we might have crossed paths under much different circumstances. But now he's proven himself capable of setting us back."

Junji turned to him. "When he had me at gunpoint, I saw something in his eyes I'd never seen before. More anger and determination than I've seen in any of our men, but here it was directed at our own country. These past years, each of you have spoken to Aizawa more than I have. You know how important honor and dedication were to him. It's a shame what happened to Sakata, a soldier with so much potential. If he'd stayed on our side, he might have been the man Aizawa wanted."

Toyama shrugged. "Well, he's our enemy now. We have a lot of those. We can show them what happens to soldiers who betray Emperor Hirohito."

“He’ll come for me,” Nakamura said. “Just as he came for Hayakawa. And I’ll be ready. The men above me heard the legends of the Red Dragon and said I was fit only for torture, not for command. They told me I was only good for killing untrained townspeople. And I almost believed it. But Hayakawa failed, and now it’s all up to me. I’ll fight Sakata, as Hayakawa fought that infamous warrior. Sooner or later, all great soldiers find a warrior to rival, and there are few men worthy of fighting me. These Chinese rebels aren’t fit to fight the Red Dragon.”

Toyama scoffed. “You might be happy to go out in a fight against Sakata, but these men bet everything on following you. You can’t afford to die.”

“Fighting him is my fate,” Nakamura said without hesitation. “Sakata might shoot first, but I’ll get the better of him. I’ll wear him down until he begs for a quick death. And just before I see the light in his eyes go out, I’ll look into his soul to see what drove him to betray our cause. He gave up the life of a soldier to join the vermin we trample beneath our feet. Were his accomplishments ignored as mine were? Or was he just a fool?”

Junji turned to him, his voice hollow. “You have everything you want now, don’t you? What will you learn from Sakata?”

Nakamura sighed and answered quietly enough that the soldiers behind them could not hear. “His path is different from mine. I dedicated my life to this army, only to find that it was filled with idiots. Idiots who can’t achieve anything on their own and try to compromise with the enemy. If they had any sense at all, I’d have been made a lieutenant colonel long ago. Even now, I too have masters. It’s a wonder I was even sent here. My superiors decided that Hayakawa should take most of the credit for Da Chengzen, even though he never bragged about it. Even though some part of it haunted him, making him dedicate his career toward ruling with unattainable stability. Saying yes, following exact orders, that’s all our commanders were

willing to tolerate. They made me a first lieutenant because they needed me, but weren't going to let me have all the glory I deserved. After I was burned, some of them couldn't even stand to look at me."

Toyama shook his head slowly, speaking after a pause. "Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa must have known you would be important. He worked alongside Hayakawa when they planned this attack. Sending you here, informing only a few men of your identity. It has Aizawa's fingerprints all over it. He would have wanted someone powerful backing up Hayakawa, and he repeated the legends of the Red Dragon more than anyone else. Some do mock you, but others know of you as a destructive force. Aizawa was wise to consider that."

"It's possible," Junji said. "I know he respected you, Lieutenant. He probably thought you could make us better soldiers."

Nakamura nodded, taking a drink from his canteen. He'd been giving orders since noon, and the sky had just begun to darken. For their part, the soldiers who marched behind him had given no words of protest since he'd revealed himself as the Red Dragon. This was the power of reputation that Hayakawa had always possessed. He saw now how ineffective the colonel had been in Caishen, how he'd wasted his power on ineffective half measures. Nakamura swore he wouldn't make the same mistake.

\* \* \*

Sakata sat with Dr. Yin and a scar-faced rebel around a round wooden table in a back room of the old office building, waiting for a third man to return. Most of the other rebels had fled or gone to meet up with the new recruits, and these men had been the only ones who spoke Japanese well enough to bother staying with him.

The door swung open, and the third man reentered the room. He stroked his long, unkempt beard, and Sakata noticed for the first time how tired he looked.

“The news is bad,” the bearded man said, approaching the table. “The new Japanese leader, First Lieutenant Nakamura, is leading troops to attack Youxia’s encampment near the forest. They outnumber the rebels, but we don’t yet know by how much. We shouldn’t have allowed ourselves to become splintered like this, but I suppose we couldn’t have anticipated the explosion. Now the Japanese are between us and Youxia’s group. Reconvening with his men will require a fight.”

“Do we leave now to fight them?” Yin asked. “Or do we try to stay alive and fight them later?”

The scar-faced rebel sighed. “One of our people overheard something important, heard the soldiers chattering excitedly about it. They say Nakamura is the warrior known as the Red Dragon. He’s not a large man, but he’s seen plenty of combat. They say the burns on his face are from Da Chengzen. We won’t defeat him on the battlefield without a well-planned ambush.”

So the stories had been true after all. He was fighting against a legend now, a figure who’d inspired more mystery than even Hayakawa. The one who’d orchestrated the Path of Blood in Da Chengzen. Whether that made him a bigger threat than the colonel was yet to be determined.

Sakata folded his hands on the table. “If the Red Dragon is such a powerful tactician, why wasn’t he the one leading the assault on the abandoned library? We have word now that two Japanese majors were leading them.”

“The point remains,” the bearded man said, taking a seat. “Nakamura has the upper hand whether or not we join Youxia on the battlefield. We should avoid the Red Dragon for the time being and hope Youxia does the same.”

Yin turned to Sakata. “Is it true that you have a letter addressed to Lieutenant Colonel Hayakawa?”

Sakata nodded. “I don’t know why he wanted me to have it. I can’t decipher it. Who knows what a dying man even thinks about?”

Yin stroked his chin. “Maybe it wasn’t about you at all. Maybe he was trying to keep whatever information is inside from the Japanese.”

“That’s an interesting theory.” Sakata folded his hands on the table. “No matter who we’re against, whether it’s Hayakawa or Nakamura, they all want the same thing. Power in whatever form is available to them.”

“Well, they have it.” The bearded man looked at him and sighed. “I wish we had the power to fight against them. We have no choice but to abandon Youxia, as hard as that is to admit.”

“You’d abandon Qiao?” Sakata asked. “And the rebels who came here from other towns? Do you know what the Red Dragon did, what he’s going to do when he finds ones rebelling? They didn’t order him to invent new kinds of torture in Da Chengzen, but that’s just the kind of person he is.”

Yin sighed. “He’d have more to lose now trying to rule with fear alone. Hayakwa’s been promoted several ranks since Da Chengzen, and he was behind this mission. He demanded stable rule here. And there are others above Nakamura who need the iron here, who have him on a tight leash. Caishen is too important for even the Red Dragon to abandon their objectives. If he takes

control of the town, sooner or later, he'll start mining again. And for that, he'll need some level of cooperation."

Sakata frowned. "You want to bet everything on that?"

"It's not an easy choice." The scar-faced man stared down at the table. "We'll wait to see who survives and make a plan with them. It's better than rushing in blind."

Sakata rose from his seat and took a gun from a side table, placing it on his belt. He started for the door, feeling the eyes of the three men on him.

"Are you leaving?" Yin asked.

Sakata turned back to him. "I'm going after Nakamura."

Yin rose from his chair. "You want to lead us to battle? Against a man we know only rumors about?"

"I didn't ask for your help." Sakata looked from the doctor to the other two men. "Not one of you has the will to challenge a monster you don't fully understand. But I do. I killed Hayakawa. I have too much blood on my hands to become anything other than a killer. So the burden is mine alone."

The bearded man narrowed his eyes. "There are people who attempt things just because they're impossible. Don't be one of them."

Sakata turned away and hurried through the hall. He could hear the others calling after him as he pushed open the door to the office building and stepped out onto the street. It was quiet, and the only sound was the faint hum of an engine in the distance. Likely a military vehicle.

He ran toward the sound, turned a corner, and found several bodies on the ground. There were three Chinese men and a teenage boy, and they held no weapons. Perhaps they'd crossed

paths with Nakamura's men without time to run. Or maybe they'd been rebels after all, and the soldiers had taken their weapons.

He heard footsteps, and he looked up to see the door of a teahouse swing open and a Japanese soldier emerge holding a pistol. As Sakata reached for his gun, the soldier spotted him and started laughing, before his eyes moved to Sakata's hand.

"I killed them already," the soldier said. "What are you doing?"

Sakata pulled the weapon from his belt, taking a few steps away from the soldier. "What are you doing here?"

"That's what I asked." The soldier studied his face with a growing look of suspicion. "There's a traitor in our camp. He's working with the Chinese rebels. Of course, his face might have changed since his picture was taken. I want you to put that gun down and back away slowly."

Sakata gritted his teeth, hesitating only a second before diving to the side. The soldier fired, and the bullet struck the brick wall on the building behind him. Sakata crawled to the side as the soldier fired again, this time barely missing his torso. Sakata turned back with a shaky hand and aimed at the figure hurrying toward him, trying to ignore the pounding in his chest.

Three gunshots rang out, and the soldier fell to the ground. Sakata rose to his feet, turning to see who had fired. Dr. Yin stepped forward, looking from Sakata to the man on the ground.

"You ran off so fast," Yin said. "What are you doing? You can't kill Nakamura in this condition. Let go of your anger, and think about keeping yourself alive."

Sakata shook his head, staring out into the forest. "I'm not angry anymore. I can't change the military, and I can't stop the war. That's just the world I was born into. I can't even change my own nature. But for now, I can be a soldier. I can fight to the end."

“You want to be a soldier now? What did you leave the army for?”

Sakata chuckled, straining his throat, before turning to look at the doctor. “I’ve only ever been a common soldier. I have comrades, enemies, a reason for fighting. Friends I trust, and people I’ll follow into combat. I had a chance to confront the people who made me suffer. Now I have an opportunity to go after the Red Dragon. How many people even have that much?”

Yin stared him in the eye, his voice uncertain. “You’re risking everything, Sakata. For what? Is there someone you’re trying to protect?”

Sakata nodded. “She saved my life.”

“So did I, twice.” Yin looked him over with a frown. “Don’t go and get yourself killed.” “The man who killed her family is still out there.” Sakata stepped past Yin and headed toward the forest. “Thank you, Doctor. I’ll just have to be more careful.”

## Chapter 39

### Bitter Words Remembered

Qiao stood at the edge of the Japanese encampment, looking out over the bushes at the town. The three undamaged canisters they'd found were still intact, but most of the equipment for dispersing the gas had been destroyed in the gunfight. Youxia and Ke had begun discussing how they could release it without harming themselves. She'd left them for a minute to clear her mind.

Youxia approached her. "Guan managed to keep one of the soldiers alive. That's one hostage, at least."

Qiao didn't allow herself to smile just yet, but it was better news than she had expected. "I wanted to be mad at the mayor, after I heard about him keeping the festival open. But there's no point holding a grudge now. I can tell he's pushing himself harder than any of us. Pushing himself for when Nakamura arrives and our survival becomes a gamble. The lieutenant will come here to wipe us out, and we just have to hope the threat of mustard gas deters him."

"We've all been pushing ourselves." Youxia looked past her, past the encampment itself. "When I met my brother during the battle for Caishen, he told me that behind their honor, behind

their facade of loyalty, the Japanese really worship themselves. Their cause must always be the greatest, their killings noble. Like most of my brother's advice, I didn't realize how true it was until far too late. Do you think Nakamura will really come here to fight us, Qiao? Or will he think he's too good to bother with us?"

Qiao gestured at the camp. "He'll have to come. The Japanese invested in this place, and they can't just ignore the attack. If they're two kilometers away, it should take them half an hour from when the news arrives. Then they'll have to choose between throwing away their lives or disarming."

"Is that it?" Youxia asked. "We rely on them to act rationally? You depend on that. You have to take them by surprise and fight for every ounce of blood you can spill, because you might be slaughtered tomorrow. When I'm close to death, you won't see me begging for mercy or compromising with my enemies. So why do you? Do you really trust the Japanese to make the right decision?"

"If they have an ounce of self-preservation, they just might." Qiao sighed. "If Nakamura refuses to disarm when we've threatened to kill all his men with the apparent means to do it, it could turn them all against him. But we must be prepared to fight at a moment's notice."

"In that case, your grand plan is just a wager," Youxia said. "There could be soldiers preparing to come in undetected and free the supposed captives. If it comes to a show of strength, we'll be easily outmatched. We have only seventy-three fighters left, and Nakamura is leading hundreds."

Qiao nodded, studying his pale expression. "If nothing else, maybe we can buy some time for Sakata. Another assassination won't end the occupation on its own, but it might throw the Japanese into chaos."

“How do you know he’s coming?” Youxia said the words with a venom Qiao had only ever heard from Li Bo. “You’d trust the Japanese soldier who killed my brother with the fate of this town?”

“I lost my fingers to the Japanese army. My eye. We have to use what little we have left, and that includes Sakata. I know him, Youxia. He supports us now. And he doesn’t kill without reason.”

“You think my brother deserved to die?” Youxia narrowed his eyes at her. “So what if he did? He was still my brother, whether or not Sakata knew it.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Qiao said. “Sakata was desperate, and he’d almost died so many times before that. Let’s not make more enemies than we have to.”

“I was right there at his cot,” Youxia said. “I should have avenged my brother when Sakata was right there in front of me. I couldn’t even avenge the brother who saved me. You think I want to die owing something to Li Bo? We didn’t speak much, and I found reasons to resent him. That makes dying in his debt all the more unforgivable.”

Qiao shook her head. “I won’t let you die. If you trust me, then learn to live with Sakata. Everyone here is making sacrifices. What matters now is keeping each other alive.”

“That’s fine for you to say.” Youxia crossed his arms. “You only knew Shude in passing, through Zhang. When you all made the call to sacrifice his life, you weren’t losing a friend. Even if I’d given my feelings, you wouldn’t have considered them. But you’d never sacrifice Sakata, would you?”

“I’m sorry.” Qiao lowered her gaze. “This whole time, I’ve been thinking of the massacre in the town square. If Nakamura lives, there will only be more blood. The Red Dragon is an

irredeemable monster beyond compare. To have a real chance at victory, someone needs to assassinate him. Sakata's proven he has that skill set. That's why I need you to trust me on this."

Ke ran to them, his face pale. Guan followed close behind.

"We have news from one of the scouts," Ke said. "Nakamura's men approach from the main road. His forces are as big as we suspected."

Qiao nodded. "Send our forces to conceal themselves and attack from the side. I'll stay out here and threaten the Japanese."

Guan held out a hand. "No. I'll speak with them. The Japanese have hundreds of men, and I'm sure they'll have someone who speaks Chinese. If not, then you can speak to them. But I'm the one who allowed the festival to proceed during Hayakawa's arrival. Even now, you're paying for my sins."

\* \* \*

Junji marched alongside Nakamura behind the other soldiers as they approached the forest. Parts of the encampment were visible, but Junji didn't see rebels with weapons waiting for them.

As they got closer, he saw a short man standing in the encampment. It was the old mayor, less overweight and with scratches on his face. The war hadn't been kind to him.

Nakamura called for the other soldiers to stop and began walking to the front of the crowd, summoning Toyama and several others to stand guard around him while the other soldiers surrounded the encampment from the flanks. The lieutenant reached for his weapon and held it at his side, but he didn't raise it at Guan. Junji stepped forward to translate.

Nakamura studied the rebel's worn face. "Guan, it's been a while. What leverage do you think you have here? Could you possibly be the first man to challenge me, you in your tattered

Chinese rags? Or are you prepared to be forgotten in the dirt beside your comrades like so many insignificant men before you?"

Guan nodded as Junji repeated these words. "You're right. It has been a while."

Nakamura stepped forward before Junji was done translating. "Where are the rest of them, Guan? Are they hiding from me? That's all right. We have the numbers to hunt them down and destroy them. The rebels we found at the hospital have all been executed."

Junji repeated the words. The old mayor nodded, but he kept his eyes on the lieutenant.

Guan cleared his throat. "Our forces have captured twelve canisters of mustard gas from the truck behind me. If you look around, you'll see that we've placed those canisters in the bushes. We can rain explosives, blow open the canisters and release mustard gas into the air. You know what happens to mustard gas when it burns. Many of you would die immediately, but my people are far away. You'll have to find us before you can kill us. All we want to do is talk. Order your men to put down their weapons, now."

Junji glanced at the bushes, seeing a glint of metal, then the edges of several canisters. They were spread out on both sides of the Japanese forces, walling them in. Nakamura nudged Junji, and he repeated the threat in Japanese.

Toyama stepped forward. "The rebels are here, then? Hiding near this forest? Where are the hostages?"

Guan narrowed his eyes as Junji repeated the question, looking from Toyama to Nakamura. "You are the hostages. If you attack us, you will die."

As he translated, Junji studied Nakamura's pale expression. Guan was right about their position, and the lieutenant had walked right to where the rebels wanted him. The others stood a better chance of living if the mustard gas was released, but the Red Dragon was right at the front,

surrounded by a dozen canisters of toxic gas. If he died now, he wouldn't lead the soldiers to victory.

As Nakamura opened his mouth to respond, Toyama drew his pistol and shot Guan in the chest. Guan tumbled back, clutching at the wound and falling to the ground with a soft groan. Nakamura turned to Toyama, a momentary flicker of surprise showing on his face for the first time Junji had ever seen.

Toyama shrugged. "You said not to hesitate."

A Chinese rebel wearing a gold bracelet emerged from the forest with a gun to the head of a wounded Japanese soldier.

"Nakamura!" the rebel roared in Japanese. "I'm not finished with you!"

Nakamura gestured to a soldier beside him with an automatic weapon, and the gunman opened fire on the rebel with the hostage, sending them both to the ground in a mess of blood. He reached for his weapon, fully committed now. One of the other soldiers ran forward and pulled Nakamura back, away from the canisters.

A grenade landed beside one of the canisters and blasted it open, sending toxic mist into the crowd as several rebels emerged from the forest a dozen meters away and began shooting. Junji dove to the ground, and the other soldiers returned fire as Nakamura called one of the tanks forward. The soldier with the automatic weapon was hit, and Toyama took the large gun, spraying gunfire at the rebels in the forest. Junji crawled away from the front line, reaching for his weapon as bullets whizzed past him.

## Chapter 40

## Voices in the Haze

Qiao waited at the edge of the forest as the other rebels sprinted through the trees. Guan and Youxia had fallen, and many of the rebels had abandoned her posts. She still had the grenade launcher, and she'd managed to make a dent in the Japanese forces, though she hadn't seen the lieutenant fall. Several meters away, she saw a rebel standing by the place Youxia had abandoned the second grenade launcher.

"Pick it up!" she shouted at him.

The rebel complied, his movements robotic. Qiao nodded at the bushes where the last two functional canisters had been placed. Then she loaded the grenade launcher and sent the explosive toward one of the canisters. It went off as the rebel fumbled with the second grenade launcher, appearing happy to be told what to do. He fired, catching the attention of several soldiers, who rushed toward their position. Qiao sprinted further into the forest, grabbing her pistol and firing back at them. Sweat poured down her face, and her legs ached from running, but

she pushed forward, fueled by adrenaline. One of the Japanese soldiers began launching grenades, and a blast took down three rebels.

Ke and several other rebels were up ahead. Qiao sprinted toward them, hearing shouting in Japanese behind her. The voices were getting closer. More gunshots rang out, and she ducked down as one of the rebels was hit.

She turned back just as a grenade landed by her leg. Ke shouted out a warning, but it was too late. The explosive went off, and the blast sent her flying back. She felt an agonizing jolt of pain, and she looked down to see that her right leg had been severed just below the knee. She heard deafening screams and realized seconds later that they were her own. Ke rushed toward her, shouting for the others to help him carry her. Her consciousness began to slip, and she blinked to stay awake, forcing herself to focus as every instinct shouted at her to give into the darkness and allow herself to pass out.

She groaned, forcing words out through the pain. “Just leave me. Get the others somewhere safe. I may not stay conscious for long.”

Ke grabbed her. “Don’t be silly. I’m getting you out of here.”

“Leave me!” she roared at him.

As he released her, several others ran up to them and shouted for Ke to drag her with them. After hesitating for a moment, Ke obeyed them, picking up Qiao and sprinting through the forest away from the Japanese soldiers.

Another rebel shouted after them, catching up to Ke as he was running. Ke turned back, and Qiao could make out several soldiers standing in the distance.

“We spotted several dead Japanese soldiers near the edge of the forest,” the rebel said. “None of our men had been there.”

“Are you sure?” Ke asked. He kneeled down, grabbing a stick and tearing off part of his shirt to tie around Qiao’s leg. “Some of our men might have gotten there before you.”

“I’m sure,” the rebel said. “I kept a close eye on our forces.”

“Sakata.” Qiao allowed herself to smile as Ke applied the tourniquet, forcing herself not to let the darkness envelop her. “He’s here. I was right about him after all.”

Ke sighed. “Can we really put our faith in one man alone? Maybe a miracle will happen, and maybe not. But I wouldn’t bet my life on that.”

A second rebel stepped forward. “Then what would you bet your life on?”

“I’ll give my life willingly,” Ke said. “For all of us. For Caishen. We can’t just stand by as our people are slaughtered, even if our chances of victory are slim. Caishen is a symbol, a place where the most determined rebels from neighboring towns come to continue the fight. So there is always hope.”

The first rebel turned from them, glancing around for approaching soldiers. “You’re right. We’ve spilled too much blood to give up now.”

\* \* \*

Sakata ran along the edge of the forest, looking for the rebel encampment the bearded man had spoken of. Some soldiers ran through the forest, and others patrolled the streets outside the forest, gunning down rebels who emerged. Sakata hadn’t yet spotted Nakamura, but if he could find any rebels still positioned at the encampment, he thought one of them might know where the Red Dragon was.

At the edge of the forest near the hill, he found the ruins of what had once been an army encampment. A Chinese man lay on the ground, blood soaking through his clothing. Sakata ran

up to him and recognized him as the old Chinese mayor. Guan's face was white, and blood trickled from his lips, but he was still breathing.

Sakata knelt down and summoned all the Chinese he had put together over the past weeks among the resistance. "Lieutenant? Where?"

Guan raised a trembling hand and pointed toward the center of the forest. After a few moments, he coughed out blood and dropped his arm. Sakata still heard faint breathing, but he knew it wouldn't last much longer.

Rising from the ground, Sakata marched toward the forest, hearing the voices of the shouting soldiers grow louder and more vicious. His first gun had run out of bullets, and he now carried the half-full Nambu pistol of one of the men he'd killed. Another Nambu was on his belt, fully loaded. With determination he hadn't felt since his fight with Hayakawa, he stepped into the forest.

## Chapter 41

### All Eyes on Caishen

Sakata sprinted through the forest, past the bodies of the fallen, toward the thick of the trees where Guan had pointed. If Nakamura was still at the front lines, getting to him fast would be the best chance for an assassination. Most of the fight was ahead of him, and Sakata ducked behind a tree, glancing through dozens of faces meters away, searching for the distinctive burns that would identify the lieutenant. Soldiers hurried through the forest, some faster than he could identify them, others blocking his line of view to the men further away.

He sprinted forward, staying behind the thick of the battle as best he could while scanning through the sea of faces. A soldier came toward him, shouting something about the Chinese, and Sakata shot him twice in the chest, sending him to the ground. As he darted forward, another soldier came in his direction and he fired his last two shots at the man's torso. As the soldier crumpled to the ground, he threw aside his empty gun and pulled the fully-loaded Nambu off the soldier's belt.

As he approached a clearing, he caught a glimpse of the man he was looking for a few dozen meters away. There were others around him, moving quickly, one carrying a can of gasoline. Getting closer without any of them noticing him would require perfect timing. Sakata ducked behind a tree, pistol at the ready, glancing through the clearing and trying to identify the figures ahead as they moved further away. He just needed a single moment, and a single killing shot would be drowned out among hundreds of others.

A man moved toward the clearing, his walk awkward and uneven. He was injured, and his uniform was stained with blood, but the familiar gold bracelet still clung to his wrist. Youxia's face had grown very pale, and his movements lacked the grace they had once possessed. He held out a pistol with a shaky hand, clutching at his wounds with the other.

Sakata darted around the tree, looking from Youxia to the dark figures ahead. If either of them was spotted, his position would be given away.

“Sakata,” Youxia breathed. “You dare to show yourself to me again?”

There was harsh anger in his eyes, and it was unlikely he had long to live with all his injuries. He'd been pushed too far for too long. In his dying moments, Youxia would probably settle for whatever small victory he could get. That made this a precarious situation, but the time for playing things safe had passed long ago.

Sakata kept his voice low, raising his pistol a few centimeters and keeping his eyes locked on the injured rebel. “Nakamura isn't far from here.”

“Is that the truth? Or another lie? A dying man can only put his faith in one thing.” Youxia glared at Sakata and raised the pistol. “Karma.”

He pulled the trigger just as Sakata raised his own weapon and fired three shots at Youxia's torso. The rebel clutched at his chest and tumbled backward, landing somewhere out of

sight. Sakata had been shot too, and felt for the wound in his chest. He stumbled back, slumping down against the tree he'd hidden behind less than a minute earlier.

He heard Youxia groaning on the ground ahead of him, barely alive. He slowed his own breathing, trying not to think of the blood pouring down his uniform. He'd been so blinded by hatred for the military, so eager to kill whatever commander he could. But he had never been special, and risking his life so many times had finally caught up to him. It was a good shot the injured rebel had made, the kind of shot he would've made himself. Just a very bad time for it. The voices of Chinese and Japanese fighters were reduced to a faint hum as they hurried through the forest.

A dark figure appeared in the forest ahead. A gunshot rang out, and the moaning stopped. Sakata sighed as Nakamura stepped into the clearing, eyes filled with venom.

Nakamura knelt down, his expression now difficult to read. "Are you Sakata? Sakata Ryuji?"

Sakata stared past him, into the dark forest where soldiers and rebels ran for their lives. The sound of gunfire still rang out through the forest. And now the man leading the soldiers was here. A single gunshot would end the pain.

"I read your file." Nakamura looked from Sakata's face to his wound. "I read it a dozen times. You could have kept your head down, taken after your uncle and followed every order you got. If only you'd joined of your own volition. You could have trained to be a major, even stayed away from the front lines if you wanted. Why did you leave the army? Were your commanders so stubborn they'd never recognize you for anything? Did you know your escape would end like this?"

Sakata allowed his hands to rest at his sides, the feeling in his chest reduced to a slight tingling. He'd lost a lot of blood, and soon the darkness would envelop him. There'd been no battle with the Red Dragon and little in his attempted assassination that would become legend. Perhaps becoming a hero twice had been too much to hope for.

"Was a month of freedom worth more than a lifetime of servitude?" Nakamura stared into his eyes. "Well, was it? It's not too late, Sakata. Get up and fight me if you still can, before I burn this place to the ground. If I win, you can tell me what you threw everything away for. Was the freedom worth it?"

Sakata's arms were stiff, and he could barely adjust his fingers on the ground. He closed his eyes, his body growing numb. Even the tingling in his chest was fading. The sound of gunshots grew faint, and all voices were drowned out except the lieutenant's, which came through a thick haze. Wherever his spirit went from here, it had to be somewhere better.

"Don't you dare bleed to death without answering me!" Nakamura grabbed his shoulder and shook him. "You look at me while I'm talking to you!"

\* \* \*

Junji stepped past a dozen dead Japanese soldiers and emerged from the forest, approaching a street bench where Toyama sat with his arms crossed. Approval was the least of his worries now, and he didn't bother to bow to the warrant officer. To his surprise, Toyama seemed unbothered by this slight. The fire that had started at the center of the sacred forest just a few hours ago had now spread to claim most of it, ravaging trees, bushes, and all those unlucky enough to be caught in the flames.

Junji sat beside the warrant officer, folding his hands and staring into the growing blaze. Nakamura would be arriving soon to take credit for whatever shreds of victory had been gained from the destruction of the forest.

“Sakata is dead, according to the lieutenant.” Toyama smiled. “If you wanted to kill him and become a hero, you lost your chance.”

Junji ignored the comment, looking at the bodies of the slain soldiers that covered the ground in front of them. Hundreds had fallen already, against a smaller but invisible enemy. They would drive the rebels away, but it would be a costly endeavor. He wished more than ever that Hayakawa was still alive, that soldiers felt a duty to rule the Chinese with stability. But a single spark of chaos had propelled Nakamura to power, and the old days would never return. The facade of camaraderie had been torn apart, reduced to ashes by the Red Dragon. For years, Junji had believed in honor. He’d been more loyal to his superiors than anyone else, and it had earned him no reward.

Finally, he turned to Toyama. “Hayakawa never lost this many men. Nakamura was always scheming, always had something up his sleeve against the rebels. But he never led troops with tactical brilliance or efficiency like Hayakawa. There are no longer any majors or captains to delegate to, thanks to what happened at the mine shaft. And the only strategy Nakamura has is burning everything down.”

“This fight isn’t over,” Toyama said.

Junji nodded at the dead soldiers on the ground. “It is for them.”

Toyama sighed. “In every town, the Chinese cause trouble for us. Our leaders crush their rebellion into dust. But the rebels escape and run to the next town. No more negotiations or attempts at a peaceful transfer of power. We’ll crush the rebellion here before they can escape.”

Junji frowned. "Hayakawa would've wanted more stability. He'd have focused on getting the iron we need."

Toyama shrugged. "He shouldn't have died, then. Hayakawa was a fool, plain and simple. In the iron mines, we found only an eighth of what was promised to us. Mining those scraps was his grand strategic plan for this town."

Junji narrowed his eyes. "It's funny to hear you disparage the mines, so soon after someone decided this town would be better off without the mine shaft building."

Toyama frowned. "What's funny about it?"

Junji folded his hands and smirked at the warrant officer. "The destruction of the mine shaft building killed people on both sides. And though it killed our commanders, it didn't help the Chinese. No one else seemed to be interested in solving that mystery, so I took the challenge upon myself. No witness alone could implicate you, of course. You were very careful. But many witnesses together tell a story, and fellow soldiers were often happy to answer questions. One man saw you enter a building with Nakamura, and a man who looked like Makihara emerged minutes later. Others swore they saw a man who appeared similar to Makihara shoot several soldiers and run into the mine shaft building before it exploded. You and Nakamura spoke with others about Makihara's disappearance, led us all to believe you knew nothing about it. That's enough to implicate both of you. I don't believe that Makihara acted alone. Maybe Nakamura's career will survive this, but yours won't. You're expendable, just like me, and you'll be demoted as a liability. Not unless you help me blame this on him."

"All of this behind my back?" Toyama leaned forward, glaring at him. "We've brought you this far. Have you no honor? No loyalty to our cause?"

“You betrayed the army first,” Junji said. “You betrayed Hayakawa and killed our own men. What victory is that? If I was forced to abandon my honor, it’s because of you and Nakamura.”

Toyama frowned and didn’t answer. Junji studied his expression, waiting for a denial of guilt or a grudging acceptance, or even an attempt to convince Junji that their plan had been the best way forward.

Instead, Toyama pulled a folded sheet of paper from his uniform pocket and handed it to Junji. “The lieutenant found this in Sakata’s uniform. Written by Aizawa on his deathbed and sent by his aide-de-camp. His aide was wise enough to encode the message before he sent it to us. Sakata had no idea what he was carrying.”

“What makes you say that?” Junji skimmed the paper, seeing numbers he couldn’t make sense of.

“Ah, yes. You wouldn’t understand that code.” Toyama smiled. “I showed it to a few others, but they were all higher-ranking than you. More significant than you or the traitor. If Sakata had known the document’s true significance, he would have destroyed it. Instead, fate has brought it back to us, ensuring that our commanders do not lose the information therein. That document was delivered to Hayakawa one week ago. It contains an inventory of weapons given to battalions at neighboring towns and denotes which of them have soldiers to spare. It seems Hayakawa neglected to share this information with the rest of us. The message begins: ‘To Hayakawa, my stubborn friend.’ That sets the tone for the rest of the letter.”

“Maybe Hayakawa kept it secret for a reason.”

“Hayakawa believed that further reinforcements would be excessive. Aizawa never should have trusted his plan to Hayakawa alone. But we won’t repeat their mistakes. Nakamura

has already written to the Japanese high command, told them to speak with Aizawa's aide-de-camp. It was always a nightmare getting them to listen to reason. But when they learn of this letter and Aizawa's plan, they will listen. Those neighboring battalions will send us reinforcements if we ask for them to fulfill Aizawa's vision. Perhaps Aizawa's assistant will know even more. This whole time, Hayakawa led us to believe we were sent here for iron."

Junji put down the document. "Why else would we be here?"

"Aizawa never cared about industry," Toyama said. "But he knew what Caishen would become if we did not intervene. Even facing overwhelming numbers, the townspeople did not submit to us. I don't think they ever will. And for this reason, months before his death, Aizawa devised one final plan. A plan shunned by Hayakawa, and one that was almost lost to history forever."

"What plan?"

"To set Caishen on the Path of Blood, just as we did to Da Chengzen. This plan has already begun. As Aizawa anticipated, all eyes are on the resistance in Caishen. The resistance the Chinese believe has a better chance of success than any other. Survivors from the neighboring towns have come to aid the fight here, where we have promised mercy and feigned dependency on iron. And with all our potential enemies here, every one of the most dedicated rebels concentrated in one location, we will eliminate them all in one swift stroke. Everyone who comes here for refuge will be welcomed with a painful death. I always knew that Aizawa was a brilliant tactician who hated to lose, and seeing these savages suffer before they die will be the true victory. To think that knowledge of this plan almost died with Hayakawa. We outnumber the rebels nine to one now, maybe three to one if they recruit everyone they can. But once we pull in every reinforcement possible, we'll outnumber them fifteen to one even if their recruitment

exceeds expectations. We'll have new tanks, new artillery, new explosives. And we'll throw as many bodies at the Chinese as it takes to destroy them. Nakamura has already begun learning about our primary targets, preparing to have them assassinated. Qiao Lan. Ke Ping. We'll know about others soon."

"You know where to find those people?"

"Soon enough," Toyama said. "Thanks to Aizawa's planning, of course. We can begin making plans for what to do after our victory. That's the only uncertainty now. Well, that and where your loyalties lie. You picked the wrong person to threaten, Junji."

"My father would have told me." Junji's face grew hot. "He wouldn't send me here and call for a genocide that even Hayakawa was against. I know my father. Hayakawa was a son to him."

"More than you ever were." Toyama smirked at him. "Aizawa wanted nothing more than to train loyal, dedicated soldiers who would do anything at all for their country. You were only a disappointment to him."

Junji lunged forward and punched Toyama in the face, knocking the warrant officer to the ground. Toyama looked up at him, blood dripping from his nose. Junji kicked him in the side before pausing and then kicking him again.

Toyama caught his breath, feeling the spot where Junji had punched him. "You struck me."

Junji nodded, glaring daggers down at the warrant officer. "Still proud of your rank, Toyama? Proud it got you here?"

Toyama looked up at him, speaking after only a short pause. "Go ahead. Beat me to death or shoot me in the face. Make your accusations against us as we approach the last great military

victory of Aizawa's career. Do it right now if you want. I won't stop you from throwing away your own future."

Junji stepped back, glaring down at Toyama with his fists clenched. He fought the urge to stomp on the warrant officer's face until his skull caved in.

"No?" Toyama rose from the ground, wiping the blood from his face. "How sensible of you. Earlier, you said that the purpose of war is peace. But you were wrong."

"Was I?" Junji did not try to hide his contempt.

"The purpose of war is war." Toyama held out a hand and paused. "One more thing. You will broadcast news of what happened here today. You will explain how the Chinese rebels burned their own sacred forest in a desperate attempt to survive. And you will speak of the great victory that occurred in this forest."

Junji frowned. "Whose victory, Toyama?"

Toyama raised his head as if considering something important. "Credit this triumph to First Lieutenant Nakamura. The Red Dragon Who Sets His Enemies on Fire, the Slayer of Seven Thousand Men, and the Destroyer of Villages."

Toyama walked away, leaving him on the bench to watch the forest burn. Junji stared through the flames, past the bodies of fallen soldiers, into the darkness that devoured all men.

The End