

Blood Red Sun

by Stephen Mertz, 1947–

Published: 1989

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*For
Patricia Donnelly*

Prologue

August 1945

Hitler had fallen, but the war in the Pacific raged on.

The Japanese refused to surrender.

An ancient, proud, warrior race, their cities leveled by bombing raids and the first use of nuclear weapons in war, their naval forces and infantry defeated across the Pacific, Japan fought on.

In Tokyo, in the corridors of crumbling power, some of those who remained did counsel surrender, but to most of the military commanders—and to other, more shadowy factions of power within Japan, many of them descended from the legendary samurai warriors of feudal Japan—the concept of surrender was inconceivable. Both their personal code of valor and the code of the samurai commanded death before the dishonor of surrender.

The juggernaut that was the Allied war machine occupied the hard-won Philippines and was poised to strike at the heart of mainland Japan.

A drawn-out, bloody invasion was anticipated...

Chapter 1

The ruins of Manila baked beneath a hazy gray sky. At ten o'clock in the morning, the air was already muggy, oppressive.

General Douglas MacArthur, supreme commander for the Allied powers, sat behind a wide desk in front of double windows overlooking what remained of a once beautiful city. A firm jawline, jutting like the prow of a destroyer, and a sharpness of eye and gesture belied his sixty-three years.

Grouped folders, dispatches and communiqués were carefully arranged on the desk top. A pipe, not the famous corncob but a battered meerschaum, rested in a glass ashtray. A ceiling fan barely disturbed the sweltering air. Sounds of machinery and Filipino workmen clearing away rubble from across the street drifted through the open windows.

The Manila City Hall had somehow miraculously escaped the devastation wrought by a brutal block-by-block defense of trapped Japanese troops six

months earlier. For this reason, and because of its central location, it became General Headquarters for the occupying American force. The entire top floor was now MacArthur's headquarters.

MacArthur's private office was plain, austere, the walls bare of maps or anything else except for one picture of Washington and one of Lincoln. In addition to the desk, the furnishings consisted only of a couch, one bookcase and a few chairs, two of which were presently occupied.

It had become MacArthur's routine to begin each day with a private high-level briefing attended only by his senior generals: Krueger, who commanded the Sixth Army, and Eichelberger, commander of the Eighth. On this morning of August 14, an orderly had barely departed after serving the men coffee when MacArthur initiated the briefing proper with a sudden look across his desk at Eichelberger.

"You said you had something that couldn't wait, Bob. Let's get right to it, shall we?"

The cadence of speech was oratorical but the tone was conversational, pitched in a warm, rich baritone.

Robert Eichelberger was a thin-faced man with wiry black hair. In the months following the Allied landings, his Eighth Army had been engaged in reconquering the southern islands of the Philippines.

"Last night a Nip major on Mindanao marched what was left of his command down out of the jungle," he said. "They surrendered to one of our units near Butuan."

"Let me guess. Your Jap commander said he and his men knew they were done for, they knew our boys were closing in, and he couldn't stand to see any more of his boys committing suicide to 'save face.' My field units have run into the same thing." Walter Krueger was heavysset and rosy cheeked despite being well beyond middle age. His force had been assigned the task of clearing Luzon of 170,000 enemy troops dug into the mountainous jungles of the northern provinces, the largest Japanese army in the Pacific.

"He's been cooperative as hell," Eichelberger said, "but there wasn't much he could tell us that we didn't already know. The one piece of news he did hand us was a doozey and here it is. Seems a general right here on Luzon is planning a major counteroffensive against us any day now. A General Goro."

"Well now, that is most interesting." MacArthur registered a smile that was fleeting, humorless. "Especially in view of what Walter here was telling me just before you arrived. But we'll get to that. Continue, Bob."

"Our P.O.W. says all he knows is that Goro has established communications between enemy holdout units spread all across the northern provinces. He's not massing his forces. The P.O.W. major says he doesn't know Goro's timetable or exactly what Goro has in mind but it's going to happen soon. Considering that the information was freely given, I'm inclined to believe him." Eichelberger eyed Krueger. "Now what's this news of yours, Walter?"

"A fresh intelligence report from a Filipino guerrilla unit operating north of Malolos was waiting for me on my desk this morning," said Krueger. "They have located an enemy base camp, what looks like a major staging area, five kilometers north of Malolos. The commander of that force is believed to be General Goro. I was submitting to the general here before you arrived that we put in for an air

strike at once and blow the bastards to hell. That ought to squash any counteroffensive."

Eichelberger nodded. "Sounds good to me."

MacArthur spoke after a contemplative pause. "It doesn't sound good to me. We want to stop Goro, yes, but I want him alive."

"Alive?" Krueger frowned.

"Excuse me, General," said Eichelberger, "but I don't understand sparing Goro, knowing that he has a counteroffensive in the works, especially in light of what's been occupying the majority of your time."

"You mean *Operation Olympic*." The Philippines were to become the main base from which, in November, an army of five million men would invade Japan. "It is certainly true that that operation has been my principle concern of late," MacArthur conceded, "but there is a new wrinkle, gentlemen, which you have heard me predict. There is peace in the air, believe it or not. As we speak, the Japanese are considering total surrender."

"Makes sense that they would," said Eichelberger, "considering what we did to those two cities of theirs."

It was eight days since the devastation of Hiroshima, five days since Nagasaki.

"Washington spends millions of dollars and man hours and thousands of lives to secure the Philippines for an invasion of Japan," said MacArthur, "and two bombs change everything."

Krueger was still frowning. "General, I appreciate that you possess a keen understanding of the Asian mentality, but this imminent surrender you speak of is only supposition on our part. We have no intel from inside Japan to substantiate it."

MacArthur picked the meerschaum from the ashtray and studied the pipe as if considering the advisability of a smoke. "Let me put it this way. This war is almost over, one way or another, and we will win. And when we have won, our biggest immediate problem will be those Japanese in the military who will not surrender, in Japan and throughout the Pacific. If the Japanese government chooses not to surrender, for whatever misguided reasons of their own, and we are compelled to invade the Japanese mainland, we're going to need every man we've got. Yes, we must stop Goro's counter offense and the only effective way of doing so will be to have him alive. Remember, according to our information, he is not massing his forces, which means his planned counteroffensive will consist of perhaps dozens of synchronized strikes against us where we are weakest. If we have Goro alive, he can be persuaded, I am sure, to transmit radio messages cancelling such attacks."

Krueger's frown softened. "I see what you mean. You're right, of course."

"When Tokyo does surrender, which I assure you will happen and sooner than many of us may think, those militarist factions that refuse to surrender will continue to fight on against us to the last man regardless of their Emperor's or their general's wishes. I know this will happen. It is not in the Japanese character to surrender. Well, we can't very well do anything about such elements inside Japan until we get there." He set the meerschaum back in the ashtray and lifted his eyes to the men seated before him. "But we can initiate measures to deal with the fanatical elements dug in throughout these islands. If General Goro is capable of pulling together a counteroffensive of such magnitude as we've been led to

believe, then he is an influential commander to be sure. A man to be reckoned with. A man to be used."

"If we can get this Goro under control now," Eichelberger said, "that would be one hell of a persuasive example to get the other holdouts down out of the mountains instead of fighting on when the time comes. Having Goro alive could be invaluable."

"There's the rub of it." Krueger was frowning again. "I just don't see how it's possible to take Goro alive if he doesn't want to surrender, and this counteroffensive he's supposed to have cooking is proof enough that he has no intention of surrendering. Those die-hards in the mountains fight to the death. The Filipino guerrillas who think they've found Goro's staging area are damn good fighters, but they don't have the finesse for something like that. I don't know anyone who does, not with the time element breathing down our necks. Capturing that Nip general alive is, frankly, the closest thing to an impossible mission I've ever heard of."

"It may seem impossible on the face of it," said MacArthur, "and perhaps in truth it is, but it is worth a try. We must try." He reached over and plucked a folder from the stack on his desk. "And I think I know just the man for the job."

John Ballard was thirty-five years old. A dark-haired, heavily muscled, big man, he moved with a light, easy gait. He wore sharply pressed khaki fatigues and combat boots.

Striding around the corner of a barracks building, he was just in time to see Tex Hanklin take a haymaker to the jaw that deposited two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of caterwauling Texan onto his backside in the center of a ring of men.

About twenty GIs were rubbernecking, most of them bare-chested in the heat like the combatants. A radio emitted dance music from an open window nearby, but that was pretty much drowned out by the noisy enthusiasm of those crowding in, egging the fighters on.

Hanklin brought himself to his feet, shaking off the effects of the blow that had decked him.

"You call that a punch?" he demanded of the oversized, red-headed Irishman in the circle with him. "If that's the best you've got, partner, better box it up and send it home to mama."

Ballard scanned the clustered faces, looking for Mischkie, when the man he was looking for materialized from among those circling the fighters to slide in behind Hanklin like a professional trainer.

Wilbur Mischkie was the physical opposite of Hanklin in every respect; wiry, intense rather than laconic, Brooklyn-born and raised.

"Hope your vision's good enough to see who just walked up, Reb," Mischkie said as Ballard elbowed his way through to them. "You don't want to take the count with the Sarge looking on, do you?"

When he reached them, Ballard said just loudly enough for the two of them to hear, "I had a hunch it would be you two stirring up a ruckus."

"Ruckus?" Hanklin grinned. He was missing two middle teeth. "Why, what do you mean, Sarge?" He was working a chaw of chewing tobacco.

"I mean the word's all over Nichols Field that there's good money going down on a fight over here. If the word got by my desk, it'll get to the MPs in no time, if it hasn't already."

"Sarge, Sarge," said Mischkie, shaking his head. "You've gotten a case of the jitters since they broke up the team. You think the Reb and I can't outrun a few MPs?" He patted Hanklin's broad back. "Maybe you ought to place a few bucks on the boy, pick yourself up some easy money."

There was a lot going on. The crowd continued to grow.

Ballard's attention should have been on the men he had just managed to track down, but something about the way the big Irishman turned away just so for a moment while Ballard was speaking with Hanklin and Mischkie made Ballard look closer, and that's when he saw the momentary glint of metal disappear into the Irishman's right fist.

The Irishman planted himself squarely in front of Hanklin, his fists raised, ready to trade blows.

"Let's go, you dumb shitkicker."

Hanklin grinned at Ballard. "Hey, Sarge, watch this." He bobbed in, weaving, to take on his opponent.

The enthusiasm of the crowd grew louder.

Ballard had seen this act before. Mischkie would have already placed several hefty wagers on the outcome of this "impromptu" bout. Tex always took one or two on the jaw to keep the marks from thinking they'd been had.

Ballard stepped between the fighters, facing the Irishman, before any more blows were traded.

"Hold it, fellas."

"Aw, Sarge, let me finish this creampuff," said Hanklin. "There's good dough riding on this."

"Real good dough," said the Irishman. He towered several inches over Ballard. "Take a walk, Sarge. Me and the hillbilly got some tussling to do."

"Then you do it without the brass knuckles, Red."

"Brass knuckles? What brass knuckles?"

Ballard grasped the man's right wrist with both hands, turned, pushed back into the man's chest, planted his weight and pitched the Irishman over his shoulder, slamming the man onto his back upon the ground. Ballard then stepped down with a boot heel on the man's right wrist, not with enough pressure to snap the bone, but with enough to make the fallen man cry out. His right hand opened. The brass knuckles slipped from thick, freckled fingers to glisten in the dust.

Disgust, anger, and disappointment coursed through the crowd.

"That's the Sarge." Hanklin grumbled, but he was still grinning as Ballard turned away from the fallen man. "Always looks out for the team even when there's no more team to look out for."

"Behind you, Sarge," said Mischkie.

Ballard expected it. He reacted without turning. He rammed his right elbow hard into the Irishman's gut as the man came up behind him with a ham-sized fist cocked back.

The man exhaled a loud *ooooof!* and doubled over. Ballard snapped the same elbow back again and this time it connected with the assailant's forehead and the man fell away, unconscious.

Ballard continued walking. Hanklin and Mischkie walked with him.

Mischkie threw a parting glance back at those bending over, attempting to revive the unconscious soldier.

"Guess that cancels all bets. Damn, Sarge."

"So you two are still setting up suckers. I should have known you'd go back to your low-down ways without proper supervision."

"You were a good influence at that," Mischkie nodded. "We were always too busy trying to keep our heads from getting shot off when we were with you to get into too much trouble."

"Kind of like trouble, myself," Hanklin reminded them. "Truth of the matter is, things've been real boring around here since they busted up the old unit. Biggest mistake the Army ever made was putting you behind a desk, Sarge, and assigning me and Mischkie to pull sentry duty for a bunch of flyboys and their hot shit airplanes. Hell, I took on that airman back there as much out of boredom as to earn a little spending money."

A fast-approaching jeep racing directly toward them caught their attention.

"Looks like those MPs you were coming over to warn us about," said Mischkie. "We'd better scat."

The crowd drawn by the fight had already seen the approaching vehicle and was rapidly dispersing. There was no indication of a fight. The unconscious man had been carried away. Radio dance music filtered more clearly now from an open window.

Ballard could make out that the driver was alone in the jeep.

"I've never known cops, military or civilian, to send one man to break up a fight," he said. "Let's see what's up."

The driver steered the jeep to a stop directly in front of the three, blocking their path. The driver was a young second lieutenant. He regarded them from behind reflector sunglasses. The jeep engine idled.

"Is one of you men Ballard?"

"I'm Ballard."

"I'm Lieutenant Stilwell from General Headquarters. I've been instructed to locate you and bring you in ASAP. The people at your office told me you were heading over this way. Climb aboard, Sergeant."

"Mind telling me who wants to see me so much that they sent a chauffeur to pick me up?"

Stilwell bristled at that, a tightening of the line of his mouth.

"General MacArthur sent for you. Now get a move on, Ballard. That was ASAP."

Hanklin whistled. "Dugout Doug himself. Damn, Sarge, I am impressed."

"So am I," said Ballard. "I either pulled a really smart move without knowing it or a real fuckup to get this kind of attention. Any idea which, Lieutenant?"

"Afraid not." Stilwell had a nasal voice but he was trying hard to strike a note of command. "We're through talking. Climb aboard. That's an order."

Mischkie's eyes narrowed at Stilwell's tone.

"You want us to tag along, Sarge?"

"You weren't invited, dogface," said the lieutenant. "Cool down or you're headed for the brig."

Hanklin's response to that was to raise his fists. The knuckles were bruised, dotted with flecks of blood.

"We go where we want to go when we're off duty, Lieutenant, and sometimes we like to jump up and down on fellas who think they can tell us otherwise. And right now we're off duty."

"Belay that, both of you," said Ballard. "This man's only doing his job." He hoisted himself aboard the jeep, into the passenger seat. "Drive on, Lieutenant. Wouldn't want to keep a general waiting."

Chapter 2

From this altitude the world was a yawning panorama of clouds and sunlight. The droning engine noise of the plane in flight was music to Keiko Tamura. The windy turbulence of the open cockpit enveloped her senses.

She understood it was a measure of how preoccupied Baron Tamura was that he had allowed her to pilot the plane on what had become their daily flight together.

As if by leaving the ground and taking wing they could escape their world and what it had become. Sometimes, she reflected, it almost seemed as if one could. It was an escape, however temporary, up here in a German-made bi-plane from the last war.⁽²⁻¹⁾

Her uncle had purchased the Spad from a German associate between the wars. The relic was kept in perfect flying condition and was equipped with a machine gun and a radio, though as a rule the Baron insisted on maintaining radio silence when they went aloft.

She wished the old plane had enough fuel capacity to take them to the other side of the world. Any place where there was not war.

A formation of high-flying birds soared out of their path. The plane was over the southern coast of the Boso Peninsula. From up here, across the expanse of Tokyo Bay through the haze of humidity, they could see the full breadth of destruction from the Tokyo plain through Kawasaki to Yokohama, a soul-sickening panorama of charred wood and ashes with scarcely a building left standing, the results of the raids by American bombers. It was the same at Osaka, Nagoya, and Kobe, and the fiery horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by all accounts defied description and imagination. There were rumors the Americans had a third bomb and would drop it on Tokyo.

She brought her eyes back up to the sky and worked the control stick, banking the Spad gracefully in a wide loop for the return trip to the airfield.

Baron Tamura could have had his choice of the Zeroes remaining at Tateyama airfield, even now, this close to the end with resources so depleted, but her uncle had never lost his fondness for the old Spad, and neither had she.

It was the plane he had taught her to fly when she was sixteen, when the world was a brighter place and it felt good to be alive.

So long ago.

Keiko Tamura was two months past her twenty-fourth birthday. Small-boned and slim-figured, she stayed in good physical condition through a vigorous regimen of daily exercise. She wore a flight suit, a leather flight cap, and aviator goggles.

Her mother had died in childbirth; her twin sister was stillborn. Her father had been a professional officer in the army and had died in the Manchurian campaign in 1931 when the militarists were first gaining power in Japan. Keiko was thirteen at the time. The Baron, her father's brother, had raised Keiko from childhood. She was his only living blood relation. He doted on her from the beginning. He became as her father and she, as his daughter, and throughout her growing years he was her mentor.

Before the war, she thought again.

So very long ago.

The airfield came into view in the distance. She worked the control stick, decreasing altitude, wondering what so preoccupied her uncle that he allowed her to pilot the Spad today. It was a pleasure he nearly always reserved for himself whenever they had flown together over the years.

She had been attending classes at the University of California in Los Angeles, majoring in journalism, until two weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Her uncle had instructed her to return home at once. As a good daughter of Japan, she had obeyed his summons. She had been experiencing a restlessness during that year of her studies, a restlessness to return home to contribute what she had learned in America to those causes she felt compelled to join in her own country.

There had been a struggling women's movement in prewar Japan, a struggle for workers' rights and the right to vote. She had known nothing of the impending hostilities until hearing the broadcasts of the military bragging of the Americans' defeat, which had been greeted roundly with approval by a populace by that time sharing in the mad dreams of their leaders. The hopes of Japanese women who had dared to dream of something better were quickly trampled to dust. She was assigned as a typist in the war ministry.

Three days ago she had been released from duty abruptly, without explanation. The Baron denied that it was his doing when she confronted him about it, but she could not rid herself of the suspicion that, as when he had summoned her home in the final weeks before Pearl Harbor, he knew things which she and most of the world did not.

She insisted on being allowed to make some sort of contribution, and so he had agreed to take her as his "assistant," although she was aware that most of his business interests had been destroyed by American bombing. The workers had fled to the hills and there were no more raw materials.

This was her second day on the "job." Yesterday had consisted of the Baron dictating three or four formal business letters after a morning flight, and she assumed today would be much the same.

She glanced into the small mirror mounted at the side of the cockpit. The mirror was to provide a means of communication between pilot and passenger, but at this moment the Baron's interest was riveted on some point outside the cockpit.

Baron Tamura was fifty-six years old. He had the prominent forehead and ascetic, finely lined features of a scholarly aristocrat, dominated by strangely compelling, piercing eyes. He was taller than the average Japanese man and despite his age, his lean body was muscular. The Baron had ingrained in Keiko, early in her life, a love of athletics and a passion for physical fitness.

Their eyes met in the mirror and he pointed. She looked in the direction he indicated and realized it was she who had been preoccupied.

An American B-29 bomber was a tube of silver in the distance, cruising high above them as it headed on a northwesterly course over the Bay. A course that would place it over Tokyo within minutes, she realized. She thought of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the rumors of more to come. She did not know what to do. Tokyo was only fifty kilometers away. Should she land or stay aloft? The bomber so far above and away shrank to a silvery pinpoint and disappeared into the hazy distance.

She glanced at the mirror again and caught the Baron's reflection. He did not appear overly concerned. His impassive expression showed no alarm whatsoever. He gestured ground-ward. She nodded. They were approaching the airfield.

On landing she taxied to where a ground crew waited before the Baron's personal hangar at a remote corner of Tateyama Air Base. As she cut the motor, the plane sputtered and coughed to silence. She peeled off her goggles, ran fingers through her hair. The air on the ground was stifling, far more muggy and uncomfortable than it had been thirty minutes earlier when they took off.

The Baron abruptly stalked off toward the hangar. She hurried to keep apace with his brisk step.

There had been no loud roar, no fiery flash, no rising mushroom cloud from the direction of Tokyo.

"Uncle, for a moment I thought—"

"That the American barbarians had come to destroy Tokyo as they did Nagasaki and Hiroshima?" He shook his head. "The B-29s observed before the destruction of those cities flew at extremely high altitudes. The bomber we saw was flying lower than is customary for such a plane. It is perhaps a reconnaissance flight. I intend to find out. Wait for me here."

He started to angle away from her, toward a wall phone inside the hangar.

She touched his arm. "Uncle, wait. We must talk."

"My dear, we have all day to talk. I must make a call. I will be but a minute."

"I want to know what troubles you so."

"For you to know would do neither of us any good, child."

"There is something, then."

"I but dwell on what is happening to Japan. I grieve for what is lost."

"There is more. Please, Uncle, tell me."

"Your concern is admirable, my child. Your persistence is not. I must make a call."

She watched him cross to the telephone. He stood there with his back to her and made his call, out of earshot, leaving her to think.

Baron Tamura had lost his wife and children in the 1923 earthquake and never remarried. He had taken over the family munitions business and he exerted considerable political influence because of his position and wealth. He was treated at the airfield as if he were a senior officer, and he knew things beyond the ken of wealth and position alone, such as his knowledge about the planes that had bombed Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

There had been no official reports, only acknowledgement that those cities had been destroyed by the enemy and that the enemy had employed some awesome new weapon.

She had heard whispers at the war ministry before she left. One bomb was said to have destroyed each city.

One bomb.

It was said the lucky ones were those who died instantly. Survivors of the initial blast were said to have died by inches, the flesh falling from them; convulsions, their insides oozing from every body opening.

The Baron returned and what he saw in her face caused him to inquire with sudden concern, "Keiko, what is it?"

She blinked away the nausea that wanted to rush up from inside her.

"I, too, grieve for what is lost, Uncle."

A touring car was parked alongside the hangar, a liveried chauffeur holding open the back door, awaiting them.

"Come, Keiko, we are finished here," said the Baron. "Let us return to the castle."

Chapter 3

Marquis Kido responded to a knock at his office door with a curt, "Enter."

His windows overlooked the trees and thick foliage of Fukiage Garden next to the waters of Chidoigafuchi Pond. The grounds of the Imperial Palace had been cleared of most signs of the May 25 air raid that had wrought heavy damage.

Kido's assistant entered the room breathlessly and placed a piece of paper on the desk before Kido.

"I thought it best that you see this at once, Marquis Kido. An American bomber is dropping them across the city."

Kido picked up the leaflet and scanned it.

"But this is terrible. It is the text of our acceptance of the Allied terms of surrender."

"Some will undoubtedly fall into the hands of the military."

Kido, a small, compact man in his fifties, was not given to displays of emotion, but he crumpled the leaflet into a ball in his clenched fist.

As Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, Marquis Kido was in nearly every respect the Emperor's contact with the outside world and his Royal Majesty's principle contact between the Emperor and those, in the government and military, who served him. He was the Emperor's chief advisor.

An allied ultimatum had been accepted four days earlier but knowledge of this had been strictly contained within a small circle of the government. The Supreme War Council and the Cabinet were bitterly divided to the extent that the nearly unheard of personal intervention of the Emperor himself had not shaken the resolve of General Anami, the War Minister, and his Chiefs of Staff. They held out passionately for negotiations with the Americans insisting on no enemy occupation, allowing the Imperial Armed Forces the right to disarm and demobilize themselves, and allowing war criminals to be tried by Japanese courts. The Premier, the Foreign Minister, and the Navy minister realized all was lost and were for accepting the unconditional terms. It was a deadlock.

"What do the Americans gain by informing the people that surrender is near?" the assistant asked. "Why should they not want us to divulge such information at such time as we deem appropriate?"

"They think we procrastinate, that perhaps we are reconsidering," said Kido. "They hope to stir public sentiment that would sway us to accept their terms. They do not appreciate that we must deal with a military capable of mutiny." He unfolded the leaflet and reread it. "And now, this. This will make at least the attempt of a coup d'état inevitable. We should have expected no less, asking the unbeatable Japanese Army to admit defeat; asking officers who have been taught that surrender is dishonorable, to surrender."

"It is said, sir, that the war minister himself contemplates throwing in with a coup attempt."

"General Anami is not a risk. His conscience will not allow him to defy his Emperor. It is the young officers, Hatanaka and his clique, that we must worry about. They hope through their conspiracy to pressure His Majesty to reverse his decision to surrender. An uprising by the entire army, an Imperial change of heart, a continuance of the war ... this must not be allowed to happen. Telephone Grand Chamberlain Fujita at once. Tell him it is imperative that I meet with His Majesty."

Lieutenant Stilwell braked to a stop in front of the Manila City Hall. The main entrance to City Hall was flanked on one side by blossoming sampaguita, the national flower, and on the other by a sandbag-encircled machine gun placement. Ballard and the officer left the jeep and were promptly passed through, into the building, by sentries posted on the front steps.

The elevator deposited them on the top floor of General Headquarters, which was abustle with the clacking of typewriters and dozens of simultaneous conversations. Officers and enlisted men of every rank hurried here and there.

Stilwell led the way to a frosted glass door with the legend *Supreme Allied Commander* stenciled upon it. He ignored the orderly seated behind a desk in an outer office and went directly to a heavy oak door, upon which he knocked discretely. He opened the door enough to put his head through, then withdrew and stepped to one side.

"Go on in, Sergeant."

Ballard did so. The door closed behind him. Stilwell remained in the outer office.

Three generals were waiting for Ballard in the inner office, one in each of the armchairs angled toward a desk while MacArthur himself was seated behind the desk.

Ballard faced the Supreme Allied Commander. He snapped a salute.

"Sergeant John Ballard reporting as ordered."

MacArthur made a small production of closing a file he had been studying, his brow furrowed. The only out-of-place item on his desk was a soda fountain milkshake glass, with the remains of an ice cream soda, the straw bent for easy sipping. MacArthur looked up with an imperious gaze. Seated, he presented no less a Barrymore-like persona than he had in the newsreels striding ashore from a landing craft on the first day of the invasion. He acknowledged Ballard's salute with a gesture somehow offhanded yet crisply precise.

"Good morning, Sergeant. At ease. Have a seat. Smoke if you care to."

Ballard assumed parade rest. "I'll stand if it's all the same, sir."

"Suit yourself, Sergeant." MacArthur indicated the men. "Generals Krueger and Eichelberger, Sergeant Ballard."

"I read Stars and Stripes, sir. I know who they are."

After a pause, Krueger said to the others, continuing a conversation in progress as if Ballard were not present, "I don't know, General. We may be banking too much on a long shot. This is our last chance to nix it."

Eichelberger said, "I'd like to hear what the sergeant thinks of our idea."

"By all means." MacArthur reached for a pipe in the glass ashtray on his desk. He placed the stem in the corner of his mouth and leaned back, propping an elbow on his chair. "Sergeant, your 201 file says you've been riding a desk these past five months. Tell me, honestly. Do you miss the fire?"

"Now and then, sir."

"Every one of those thirty-seven hundred P.O.W.s held at Santo Tomas University owes something to you and your men."

Two motorized task forces from the 1st Cav, covered by Marine Corps fighter aircraft, had dashed ahead of the division during the invasion. Ballard and his unit had been in the thick of it, engaging heavy resistance to free emaciated, hollow-eyed prisoners held by the Japanese at the University in Manila, survivors of the Bataan death march.

"I lost two men that day, sir, out of a five-man team."

"Do you feel a personal guilt over that, Sergeant?"

"They were good men. It was my team."

"You and Mischkie and Hanklin are all that's left of that unit," said Eichelberger. "See much of them anymore?"

"In the bars and cathouses every now and then, sir." Krueger cleared his throat.

MacArthur continued, "That special operations unit of yours was directly involved in more than a few highly classified operations, Sergeant, behind enemy lines, against incredible odds. Before Santo Tomas, your unit had a one hundred percent success record. Some of those missions will never see the light of day, even when this war is over. The Solomons, New Guinea . . . when standard military strategy wasn't good enough, where a touch of finesse was needed, you and your commandos were called in to adapt and improvise and play as dirty as the enemy, and you always made it home."

"Until Santo Tomas. We'd been pushing the odds for a long time, sir. No one's that good, or that lucky."

MacArthur rose from behind his desk and commenced pacing back and forth, across the office.

"Your file tells us all about you, Sergeant, and that includes," he paused significantly, "before the war. As I read through your file, as I read over what you and the men of that special unit accomplished, I sense that there is something more than courage behind the audacity with which you staged many of those operations, almost as if you were trying to," another pause, "commit suicide by putting yourself in as much danger as humanly possible."

"I took what was handed me, sir."

"Indeed. You're a damn good soldier, none better. You say you miss the fire from time to time. Well, mister, I'm about to hand you a ticket back into where the fires burn hottest, if you're ready."

"I've been ready since they broke up the unit and stuck me behind that desk, General."

MacArthur snorted at that. "Know what you mean. Terrible things, desks." He threw a contemptuous look at his own. "I do believe they breed at night when no one's around to watch, and that bureaucrats are their spawn." As he paced, he alternated between drawing on the cold pipe and gesturing with it often for emphasis when he spoke. "We have good reason to believe that there is a General Goro in the mountains to the north of us who is right now orchestrating a major counteroffensive."

"Word around my desk is that all that's left of the Japs on Luzon are disorganized bands up in the mountains," Ballard said.

"Seventy thousand of them," Eichelberger said glumly. "Determined to fight to the death."

Krueger spoke, addressing Ballard directly. "The Japs are vastly outnumbered, of course, but Bull Halsey learned from the kamikaze at Midway how much damage a handful of madmen can do. The Japs know those mountains and every inch of that jungle. My boys have been engaged in a sniper war for ten months, sometimes hand-to-hand. They're worn out, and in some areas my forces are severely depleted. If there is an enemy counteroffensive coming, I'll admit we could use some help." He studied Ballard. "But with all due respect, Sergeant, I'm just not sure you're it."

"You may be right, sir," Ballard said from parade rest, eyes straight ahead. "I don't know yet what the hell it is you gentlemen want me to do."

Krueger bristled visibly at that. Eichelberger chuckled.

MacArthur spoke, "A Filipino guerrilla unit thinks they've located Goro's base camp. It's located in the jungle approximately five kilometers north of Malolos. We have formulated a plan which will short circuit General Goro, whatever his intentions. If Goro is at that base and we attack with an open show of force, he and every last man there will fight to the death and we'll have learned nothing."

"What we need, Sergeant, is the big picture," said Eichelberger, "and this Jap general can give it to us. When we know what Goro can tell us, then General Krueger's forces can move in on that base."

"You want me to lead a team in and bring this Nip general out," said Ballard. "You want Goro kidnapped from his own base camp."

"Very perceptive, Sergeant, not to mention correct, but first things first." Krueger continued to measure Ballard with every word. "You may as well know that I've expressed reservations over this idea because I don't cotton to letting so much ride on one such mission. I respect what you and your men were able to accomplish with missions such as this. General MacArthur thinks you're the best special operations man we've got, and after sizing you up for myself, I'm inclined to agree. But the intelligence supplied by the Filipino guerrillas also says Goro has at least two hundred men with him at that base. I don't care how good you are, you'll have to admit those are mighty tall odds. If the Japs discover, kill, or capture you, then they'll know we're onto them and that won't be any good for my boys."

"This is what it boils down to, Sergeant," said MacArthur. "Do you think you can do it? Do you stand a chance of pulling off something like this? Can you somehow penetrate Goro's perimeter under cover of darkness and whisk him away, back to us, without two hundred Japanese infantrymen knowing about it?"

"I'll want Mischkie and Hanklin with me."

"You shall have them. That unit of yours never should have been disbanded. The men you lost should have been replaced." MacArthur glanced at Krueger. "Well, Walter, what do you think now?"

"You've heard my reservations," said Krueger, "and they stand, but I can't argue that time is of the essence. Very well."

"Lieutenant Stilwell will see to providing you with all necessary support," MacArthur told Ballard. "You'll have transportation to within one kilometer of where the Filipinos say the camp is located."

"One kilometer," repeated Eichelberger. "In that terrain, it will seem like twenty."

"I know the terrain," said Ballard. "How many guerrillas will we be going in with?"

"Five," MacArthur said. "They're all that remain of a larger group. They will be waiting for you at Malolos. Round up your two friends. Ordnance has been alerted to supply you with whatever you need. And remember, Sergeant, we want Goro alive."

"I'll give it my best, General."

"I know you will, Sergeant. Good luck."

Ballard snapped to attention, threw a salute which MacArthur returned as before, and left the office.

When the generals were alone, Eichelberger asked, "What made you change your mind, Walt?"

Krueger stared at the office door Ballard had closed on his way out.

"You saw him. What did you think?"

Eichelberger grinned. "I know what you mean. That was just about the meanest-looking son of a bitch I ever saw, and this man's army is full of mean looking sons of bitches."

"I don't want to see a one of my men killed if there's a chance in hell of it not happening," said Krueger. "Sad fact of it is, though, I figure that's about the only hope those men are going to have out in that jungle tonight. One chance in hell."

MacArthur returned to his desk. He set aside the file he had been perusing when Ballard reported and placed it with those already dealt with. He reached for the milkshake glass.

"Gentlemen, it's going to be a long day." He finished the remains of the soda with a noisy, enthusiastic slurp, then he picked up a file from the first stack. "I suggest we move on to the next item on the agenda."

Marquis Kido was chauffeured along the new road linking the Gobunko with the Imperial Housekeeping Ministry, through the Momijiyama Tunnel, across the Imperial Palace Moat. He was quickly shown through to Grand Chamberlain Fujita, who led the way into the wing that had been converted into a temporary private residence for the Emperor and his family.

The air attack of May 25 had destroyed the Imperial Palace, with a loss of forty lives, whereupon the Emperor had moved to the Imperial Library. The *Gobunko* was constructed of reinforced concrete and had withstood subsequent raids.

The Emperor received Kido from behind a delicately carved, gilt-edged table in a small office. Hirohito, was short, bespectacled, forty-four years of age, a mild-mannered man, retiring and shy in the extreme. He wore a simple military uniform.

Kido bowed from the waist.

"Your Majesty."

"Marquis Kido." The Emperor's voice was thin, reedy. "The Grand Chamberlain informs me that you are here on a matter of urgency."

"Yes, Your Majesty. It's the military again. Some of the young officers at the ministry may be preparing to cause trouble, as you know. The Americans are dropping leaflets across the city and across other cities in Japan, I've learned, making public the fact that we are negotiating for unconditional surrender. The extremists in the military ranks will surely try to exploit this to fan the flames."

"But I have made my wishes known."

"They are torn between equal, conflicting loyalties. The code of the samurai does not die easily, Your Highness.

"Surely they can see the futility of continuing what has only led us to ruin. Continuation of the war, provoking an invasion of our homeland, will mean the death of hundreds of thousands of our people. All of Japan would be reduced to ashes. We must accept the allied terms forthwith."

"Your Majesty, I humbly submit that the War Minister and his Chiefs of Staff need to hear you restate your position. You are the personification and image of the sacred homeland they have sworn to protect until death. You are the living symbol of Japan's immortality. General Anami and the others are cynical, hard-bitten, and proud, yes, but they will obey you, and they will see that the younger hotheaded zealots do not overstep their bounds."

"I will do anything that is necessary." The Emperor's bland expression revealed nothing. "I leave it to you to bring together the Cabinet and the Supreme War Council as before."

"Of course, Your Majesty. At your convenience."

"Let us say in sixty minutes. Is it not ironic, Marquis Kido, that Japan's final struggle should not be against the enemy, but against herself?"

The first part of the drive, south along the jagged coastline, passed in silence between Keiko and her uncle. At last she said, "The American bomber. It was a reconnaissance flight?"

"They are dropping leaflets. I don't know yet what the leaflets say. Perhaps when we reach home we will know."

"What could the Americans be telling the people of Japan that they have not said with their bombs? Leaflets! They do not even waste their bombs on us anymore. It is almost over then, isn't it, Uncle?"

"It can never be over, as long as there is a Japan."

"Never be over? I cannot believe that. We have just had a bird's eye view of what has befallen Japan. Homeless families congregate to sleep at night in the railway stations."

"Do you suggest betrayal of the spirits of the heroic dead, a denial of our ancestors, a denial of our gods, with the eyes of the world upon us?" the Baron practically shouted. "The blood of the samurai flows in your veins, child. Do you not understand?"

"The blood of Japan flows in my veins."

"There is no retreat. There is no surrender. That is what you are, Keiko. That is Japan. I forbid further discussion of the matter."

The silence between them was more oppressive than the heat.

The castle occupied an expanse of rocky point that projected out into the sea from the rugged coastline. A three-hundred-foot sheer cliff rose from breaking waves to become part of a thick granite wall topped with a watchtower at each corner. Baron Tamura's ancestral home, where Keiko had come to live when she was thirteen, was a sprawling four-level edifice of winged, tiled roofs, balconies, and turrets.

The touring car turned onto the curved driveway leading to the front entrance. Keiko heard the metal gates clang into place behind them after the car passed. She did not feel a sense of security.

She felt trapped.

Chapter 4

An Army half-ton transported Ballard, Mischkie and Hanklin north of Malolos that evening. Each man wore a shoulder-holstered M-1 assault rifle and wore combat webbing that supported clipped-on fragmentation grenades and bandoliers of M-1 clips. A combat knife was sheathed at the center of each man's chest for quick, easy access. A .45-caliber, Army-issue automatic pistol rounded out each man's personal arsenal.

Malolos, seventy kilometers northwest of Manila, was swollen to five times its peacetime size by refugees and the American military.

The jungle closed in around the deeply rutted dirt road as soon as the half-ton cleared the outskirts. The terrain became increasingly rugged. The road climbed.

After a while, Hanklin drawled, "So the brass say these Filipinos we're supposed to hook up with are all that's left of a larger group. That's not too damn encouraging, is it?"

"Let's hope their bad luck's behind them," said Mischkie. "Like ours is."

"If they don't make the rendezvous," said Ballard, "we go on without them."

"One small problem with that, Sarge," Hanklin pointed out. "We won't know where the hell this Goro has his camp without them to tell us."

"We'll find it if we have to."

The truck slowed to a stop. Lieutenant Stilwell leaned out the passenger window of the cab and pip-squeaked back to them, "End of the line, gentlemen."

The trace of a narrow game trail cut into the jungle at the opposite side of the road. Fronds of thick-trunked trees met overhead. The heavy air was alive with the incessant chatter of birds and insects. The heat was stifling.

Stilwell joined them while the driver backed the truck around.

"The Filipinos are waiting for you at a clearing, the first one you'll come to, one-half kilometer up that trail."

Hanklin spat upon the ground not far from the Lieutenant's spit-polished boots.

"Too bad that trail's not a tad wider. We could drive on up in this truck of yours, couldn't we, Lieutenant?"

"We're pushing it, taking you this far," said Stilwell, his eyes nervously darting around them. "And watch where the hell you spit, soldier."

"You watch your mouth, bright eyes," Mischkie said quietly. "Tex here is on a real short leash."

Stilwell addressed Ballard. "We'll be here for pickup at midnight precisely. We'll wait here exactly ten minutes, no more, no less."

"That'll do, Lieutenant."

The kid took the hint and returned to the truck.

"Don't play so rough, boys," Ballard told them as they watched the half-ton pull away.

Hanklin snorted. "I hate green looies."

"Still, the Sarge has a point," said Mischkie. "That green looie is our ticket out of here. We've got to learn how to behave, Tex."

"Tex, take point," Ballard instructed. "Combat intervals."

They moved out along the trail at a clip, their boot falls muffled by the loam, traveling through the moonlight with the practiced precision of men who had done this sort of thing many times before, making good time with a minimum of sound.

After a time, Hanklin slowed to a stop up ahead and lifted his right arm to motion for them to slow down and approach cautiously. They had reached the edge of the clearing.

"No one in sight," Mischkie noted.

Hanklin said, "Ain't that the way it's supposed to be?"

"That's the way it's supposed to be." Ballard nodded. "Give the signal."

Hanklin set down his M-1, cupped both hands to his mouth and yodeled a bird call.

There came an immediate, identical response from somewhere across the clearing.

"Bingo," Mischkie said under his breath.

"Give the countersign," said Ballard.

Hanklin did so.

A moment later, movement could be discerned at the tree line across the clearing. Four figures carrying rifles materialized to proceed warily into the moonlight.

Ballard canted his M-1. "Let's go."

They left their cover. Ballard walked forward to meet the guerrillas, Hanklin and Mischkie fanning out behind him.

The guerrillas were clad in the standard uniform of the Filipino peasant: white cotton work shirt and trousers and wide-brimmed straw hats, with a wide-bladed bolo strapped to each man's hip.

"Which one of you is the leader?" Ballard asked.

Two of the men were middle-aged, one was no more than fourteen or fifteen years of age, the fourth was in his early twenties.

"I am Luis Ramone," this one said. "I lead what remains of our group."

He and Ballard shook hands.

Ballard introduced himself and said, "Luis, they tell me you know where General Goro has his base camp."

"Another twenty minutes, no more. We must be careful from here. The Japs have patrols everywhere. They think they're safe because you Americans can't find them but we know these jungles better than they do."

"We'd better get started, then. But before we do, Luis, maybe you'd better tell your man over in those trees to lower his sights and come join us. There were supposed to be five of you."

Luis chuckled. He motioned a signal with his arm at the tree line behind them.

A figure emerged, carrying a rifle, and approached with a grace of movement and a suggestion of curves that denoted a difference.

"Damn," Hanklin muttered when he was certain. "A woman. Things just took a turn for the worse."

Mischkie smoothed back his hair with a free hand. "That's what you think, cowboy."

"My sister, Evita," Luis said.

Major Kenji Hatanaka of the Military Affairs Section left the bomb shelter. He came up short when he recognized Major Okada leaning casually against one of the trees that surrounded the huge War Ministry Building.

There was a breeze on Ichigaya Hill, but the air remained hot and humid.

Okada commanded a unit of the Kempeitai, the military secret police. He was a compact bull of a man with eyes that were opaque chips of black ice behind his glasses.

Hatanaka had been accosted only yesterday by Major Okada. His first concern, that he would be placed under arrest for his activities of the past four days, had proven unfounded. Okada had something quite different in mind.

When they met beneath the tree, Okada said, "Let us take a stroll, Major. That will not draw attention."

"As you wish."

The war ministry was abuzz. Junior and senior officers, their arms loaded down with files, scurried about. A huge pile of documents had been doused with gasoline and set on fire behind the building.

As they walked past the bonfire, Okada lighted a cigarette. "I wonder if that is the funeral pyre for the Imperial Japanese Army. Cigarette, Major?"

"Thank you, no."

"Of course, I forgot." Okada smiled, or was it a smirk? "Major Hatanaka, the pure of heart, the pure of spirit, who lives only for duty and Emperor."

"As do we all. And I have done some checking on you, Major Okada. Before the war you were associated with any number of questionable activities in the Tokyo and Yokohama underworld. You, Major, were a gangster."

"Do not be insolent with me." The ice in Okada's eyes glittered. "If your plans for this night succeed, Hatanaka, I will be very much a part of things."

"We will succeed."

"For now, Major, I should like you to bring me up-to-date on the situation here," Okada continued.

"Some would say that I'm crazy, discussing this with an officer of the *Kempeitai*. It is Baron Tamura I accommodate, not you. I want that understood between us."

"Your report."

"You must have known of the meeting of staff officers General Anami called just now in the bomb shelter, or you would not have been waiting for me."

Okada looked sideways at Hatanaka as they walked. "You are the war minister's protégé. His star pupil. You said last night you were sure he would lead the army in a last battle for the homeland."

"His mind is changed. General Anami has considered the necessity of a coup to remove the traitors from around the Emperor, to insist on more favorable terms, but since the War Council met this morning with His Majesty, I regret to say that General Anami now regards those of us who still feel that way as traitors. He told us in the meeting that since the Emperor has directly expressed his decision on two separate occasions, we have no choice but to obey. He knows there are those among his staff who feel as I do but he did not single us out. He said only that anyone who disagreed would have to do so over his dead body."

"Was that all?"

"He urged us not to commit *seppuku*."

"Madness. Where would the army be with all of its officers committing *hari-kari*?"

"You are not samurai. You cannot understand. They wish to apologize to their Emperor for their defeat."

"You are not ready to commit *seppuku* just yet, are you, Major? They would die in apology to His Majesty. Tonight, you intend to defy him."

"His Majesty's decision to surrender was a mistaken and ill-advised judgment," said Hatanaka. "We best serve the Emperor by disobeying him, and the state by rebelling against it. We are not revolutionists. The revolutionists are the men who are forcing Japan to surrender. Japan cannot surrender! It is not part of our national policy. We are only trying to make sure that the old, natural Japan survives. We're not revolutionists; we're traditionalists."

Okada cast a glance about them. "Major, please. We are with you, you know that."

"I wish you could tell me how Baron Tamura will assist us. I am gratified he approves of what we endeavor to do and that he has approached us through you, but can you not inform me more fully—"

"I cannot," Okada interrupted, "but know this. The army command is bewildered by what is happening, just like the men. They don't know what to do. This will be used in your favor."

"Tonight our force will occupy the Imperial Household Ministry," Hatanaka said fervently. "The Palace will be cut off from all outside contact. Liaison with the Imperial Guards Division has already been established. Necessary preparations have begun. If just a few officers start an uprising, the whole army will follow. All efforts will be concentrated on helping the Emperor to preserve Japan, not destroy it. We shall not dishonor our Imperial Majesty, nor ourselves."

They completed a walk around the War Ministry.

"I will inform the Baron," Okada said. "Know, Major Hatanaka, that you are not alone."

Chapter 5

Keiko spent that afternoon writing in her journal, trying to understand her mind and her feelings. Her entries in the journal had become increasingly sporadic during her years as a typist at the war ministry. The daily grind there provided little to write about and by the end of the day, which is when she preferred to write, she would be too tired after the twelve- or thirteen-hour days to keep her eyes open. Weeks at a time would pass without her bothering to make an entry.

It had not been so this past week.

After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the pronounced change of the atmosphere in the corridors and offices of the ministry had compelled her to note in her journal the pervading sense of despair she sensed growing day by day.

Her uncle had excused himself and disappeared into his study after their return to the castle. She understood now that her "position" here was in fact nothing but a charitable act on his part. He was doting on her, as he always had. To the Baron, her independence was a show of womanly conceit to be humored.

The silence between them after she had spoken her mind in the car had not been resolved. She wrote about this. She had been born with a compulsion to set her thoughts down on paper which had ultimately led to her study of journalism at UCLA. But as she now recounted and explored on paper the feelings which had prompted her to speak her mind to the Baron, she became restless with her inability to define her feelings or to express them even to herself.

The Baron emerged from his office to dine with her, as was his custom when she was home. Dinner was a subdued affair. They barely spoke across a table laid out with lacquered boxes of rice and an oval dish bearing lobster, and for long

stretches the only sound in the spacious, high-ceilinged, dining room was the delicate shuffle of the servant's slippers across the marble floor.

After dinner they adjourned to the library, where windows offered a view of a molten orange sun lowering to spread fiery gold across the ocean. She sat, as she usually did, on the couch facing the windows and nursed a long-stemmed glass of white wine.

The Baron sat at his small writing table, as was his after-dinner custom, making an entry in his journal kept in classic kanji pictographs, the script of his samurai ancestors, using a fine-bristled brush and a black ink cake.

They generally spent this time together, she usually reading from one of the countless leather-bound books which covered two of the walls from floor to ceiling. But this night she sat and stared at the scene of ocean and setting sun, and when night began to move across the sky she realized she had lost track of time.

The Baron stood next to her, beside the couch, gazing out at the ocean which had taken on the appearance of shiny black glass.

"I overheard the servants this afternoon," she said. "They were talking about the leaflets the Americans dropped this morning. I only want you to know that I know what those leaflets said."

"My heart weeps when I contemplate what is happening." He nodded to his journal on the nearby table. "I was writing of my sorrow. I know I have seemed distant to you lately, Keiko. You must understand."

"And I would implore you to understand me. I have lost every one of my friends to the bombings."

His delicately boned hands were balled into fists. "They hoped to strangle Japan. It has been their intent since their Commodore Perry sailed his gunships into Tokyo Bay to force upon us the "blessings" of western civilization a century ago. They will strangle Japan if we allow them to, if we surrender, and it will be worse for us than it could ever have been before, after what we have inflicted upon them."

"And yet, Uncle, if the official decision is to fight on, will not Japan be caught up in a bloody whirlwind? If there is an invasion, it is said the American troops will rape every woman they find after they have slain the men and children. I know it is a rare privilege you allow me, since a woman does not speak her mind in Japan. You allow me to do so freely. I do not squander the privilege. This matters to me."

She saw in his eyes a glint of affection. He rested a hand on her shoulder.

"The blood of the samurai does flow in your veins, child. I, nor any force I could imagine, will ever alter that."

A servant stepped in. "The first of the guests is arriving." Baron Tamura dismissed the servant with a nod.

"I must take my leave, Keiko."

"I did not realize you were expecting company." She indicated the casual blouse and slacks she wore. "I'll slip into something more presentable."

"Don't trouble yourself, my dear. These are associates of mine. There is no need for you to greet them as they arrive. The national situation is in a state of confusion at the moment, as you can well appreciate. I have been asked to consider some matters and offer my advice, nothing more." He held her hand in

his and patted it paternally. His touch was icy. "I will have them escorted directly to my study as they arrive. Nothing to trouble yourself about."

"As you say, Uncle."

She stood there for a moment after he left until several seconds passed, then she went to the library door and edged it open ever so slightly until she could see the man her uncle approached in the foyer.

She recognized him from her job at the ministry. Major Okada, of the *Kempeitai*; the barrel-chested man whose bulk beneath the military uniform was muscle, not fat. He was bald headed. His extremely thick glasses reflected the lights of the foyer.

She realized with a little shock that from where Major Okada stood, he was looking directly over the Baron's shoulder at her. His pockmarked face creased into a smile dominated by a gold tooth in the center.

It was too late to close the door and pretend she did not see him. She opened the door as if it had been her intention all along.

Okada and the Baron exchanged bows. Okada said something Keiko could not hear. Her uncle turned to see her standing there for the first time. He frowned. Okada, not seeing the frown, approached her.

"Ah, my dear Keiko. The corridors of the war ministry have been drab without your charming presence."

She knew him only from passing him in those corridors. Whenever he had looked at her, she had felt like rushing away somewhere to bathe.

The Baron joined them. Keiko saw no choice but to manufacture a smile for Okada. "Major." She extended a hand which he took and kissed with a gallant bow. The brush of his lips felt like the touch of a reptile.

He looked up at her without straightening from his bow and spoke to her along her arm. "It is always a distinct pleasure to encounter one who so embodies the grace and charm and beauty of Japanese womanhood." He had foul breath.

"Thank you, Major. You flatter me."

"I speak only the truth."

He straightened but did not release her hand until the Baron said, "Major, the others will be arriving soon. I suggest we await them in my office upstairs. You will excuse us, Keiko."

"Of course."

"Of course," Okada repeated. "Charmed, my dear, I'm sure."

Okada and the Baron withdrew to the wide stairway to the second level.

The unclean feeling of Okada's touch made her skin crawl. She stepped back into the library, closing the door.

A vehicle crunched to a stop on the driveway outside, beyond the blackout curtains. She hurried to part the curtains slightly, to peer out upon the area beneath the porte-cochere where a military driver was holding open the back door of a staff car. A passenger stepped from the tonneau and walked briskly toward the front entrance, where the illumination came from, beyond Keiko's line of vision. From that brief glimpse she recognized this man also, again not personally but, as with Okada, from passing him in the corridors of the war ministry.

It was General Nagano of the Eastern Army, which was charged with the defense of Tokyo and the whole Kanto Plain. Nagano was a tall, thin man with cadaverous features.

Keiko let the curtain drop back into place. After standing there long enough for the general to be shown upstairs to the Baron's study, she left the library. She could not think of books and reading.

She proceeded up the stairway to her room, at the opposite end of the hall from her uncle's study. Alone in the hall, she could detect no sound of voices from behind the closed door of her uncle's office. She continued on into her suite of rooms, which consisted of a sitting room, a bedroom, and a bath.

The surf hammered from far below beyond an open window. Normally she reveled in the coziness of this place, in the knowledge that it was her own place, her own corner of the world, but this night an edginess gnawed at her.

Another vehicle approached outside. She went to her window to look and caught a glimpse of a military sedan, a twin to the one General Nagano had arrived in. She lost sight of the vehicle as it pulled around the front.

Three visitors.

She paced as time passed. No more visitors arrived. The group was complete.

Not knowing what was being said behind that door was tearing her apart, and she found herself considering doing something she had never done before.

When she did make up her mind after some twenty more minutes of pacing, she did not hesitate. Something was wrong. She sensed this. She knew it. Her conversations with her uncle this day about the end of the war weighed heavily on her mind, troubled her, and now three military men had come to the castle who had never come here before.

She went to the window and removed the screen. Leaning it against the wall she grabbed both sides of the window ledge and hoisted herself onto the ledge that ran beneath her window.

The breeze played with errant strands of her hair, and she remembered the times she had done this long ago, in the daylight, when she was a child growing up alone with no friends to play with, only her books and her daydreams and her own personal castle to explore. She had delighted in discovering places where the tutors would never find her, where they would never even think of looking. But she had never spied on her uncle before.

Bracing her palms on the wall to maintain her balance, she carefully side-stepped her way along the ledge toward a break in the wall where a narrow slanting section of roof allowed easy access from the ledge, onto the old battlements.

The pounding surf sounded ominous in the blackness below. The tangy sea air enveloped her. This had been a place where a rebellious teenager could sit for hours and gaze out across the sea, thinking and dreaming.

She hesitated, feeling she should turn back, not do this. Keiko had never before violated her uncle's privacy in any way. She felt like a common burglar. But she could not make herself turn back.

She dashed diagonally across the flat portion of the castle roof to a point directly opposite. She stepped over the parapet, working her way along the ledge there, toward the window of her uncle's study. There were lights below, enough

illumination so that anyone looking directly up at her would see her. She tried not to think about that.

A breeze picked up from the ocean, cool against the sheen of perspiration coating her face. Her heart hammered wildly against her rib cage. Within a few steps of the open window, she heard Major Okada's voice.

He was saying, as if concluding a report, "Major Hatanaka knows nothing beyond what he needs to know. I am positive of it."

"Excellent," another voice said. "If Major Hatanaka's coup is a success, then we will strike, and total victory will be ours."

"The Emperor is nothing more than a feeble-minded puppet in the hands of—" a third began.

"Silence." Baron Tamura's command cracked like a pistol shot. "There will be no such talk about His Majesty. Our Emperor is misguided, no more. At any other time, it could be tolerated."

One of the others, not Okada, said, "Japan must fight. We have the men and the will. Why should we surrender? We still have a huge army on the Chinese mainland. We hold 350,000 allied prisoners of war. Am I not right, Colonel Hayashi?"

Keiko knew this name also, though only by reputation. Hayashi commanded a squadron attached to the 302nd Air Force. His name was often prominently featured in war bulletins.

"Considerable air strength is being kept in reserve against invasion," Hayashi replied. "The deficiency lies in pilots and fuel."

"General Nagano assures us that a large and efficient land force remains in Japan," came the Baron's voice. "But with all that said, we have no alternative right now but to wait for news of the success or failure of Major Hatanaka's coup."

"We should commit all of our forces at once," Major Okada said. "We are being overly cautious."

"We cannot afford to underestimate the consequences of tipping our hand too soon," said the Baron. "Not everyone in Japan shares our views."

He lowered his voice. Keiko, unable to hear what was being said, carefully side-stepped closer to the window. She did not see the chunk of loose brick that her toe nudged from the ledge, but she heard the sound it made when it rattled upon the overhang of the front entrance below.

"What was that?" Okada snarled from inside her uncle's office.

She felt herself rooted to that spot on the ledge. She could never make it back along the ledge and out of sight to anyone leaning out of that window without endangering her own safety, chancing a fall from the ledge. Indecision rooted her there, indecision and rising panic.

"I'll see what it is." The Baron's voice.

His face appeared at the open window and he looked first to the left, not seeing anything, then to his right.

Directly at her.

Chapter 6

They plodded silently with rifles ready through the jungle. The trail climbed and dipped, rugged and mountainous.

Hanklin relinquished point to two of the Filipinos, introduced by Ramone as Castro and Valera, who slashed with their bolos at vines and jungle growth across the trail which tapered off to almost nothing at times and would seem to end. Castro and Valera would hatchet their way through without slowing, with the familiar, methodical skill of men who spent their lives in this jungle. Traces of the trail would reappear, and on they trudged, Ballard and Ramone behind the point men, followed by Mischkie, Evita Ramone, and Hanklin bringing up the rear.

Evita Ramone, no older than eighteen or so at Ballard's guess, moved with the stealth and wariness of a seasoned veteran of guerrilla warfare. She possessed the dusky, deceptively delicate beauty of the women of this part of the world. Her shoulder-length black hair, worn back, framed a movie star-lovely face unmarred by the hardships of her young life.

At one point Luis Ramone said, "Sergeant," his voice pitched low.

"Yes?"

"My sister and I and our men are prepared to die fighting the Japanese."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"What do you think our chances are?"

"I don't play the odds, Luis. I'm not a gambler."

"I feel compelled to point out, Sergeant, that you are gambling your life on the outcome of this mission."

"It's only a gamble if you're afraid to lose. How far are we from the base?"

"No more than a quarter kilometer beyond the next ridge."

"In that case, we'll take a short break here."

Ramone emitted a low bird call whistle that halted Castro and Valera up ahead and brought them back.

Everyone grouped.

"Five minute rest break and weapons check," Ballard told them.

Ramone instructed Castro and Valera in Tagalog, the local dialect, and they responded by falling away in opposite directions along the trail until the jungle night swallowed them.

"Lookouts," Luis explained. "The Japs patrol these trails every hour."

Ballard checked the action on his .45 as Ramone did the same with his rifle. Mischkie and Evita found a banana tree to sit under, side by side, and converse just out of earshot of anyone else. Hanklin was up ahead, leaning against a tree with the butt of his M-1 on his hip, looking impatient as hell.

Ballard knew how Hanklin felt because he felt the same way. He holstered the .45 and saw Ramone watching Evita and Mischkie.

Mischkie was leaning over close to whisper in the young woman's ear. Evita's eyes and voice in barely heard conversation sparkled with the curiosity and good humor of flirtation. She laughed at something Mischkie said. The sound reached Ballard's ears and seemed to him achingly out of place here.

"My sister seems to have found an admirer," Ramone said with a chuckle.

"I sympathize with your sister," Ballard said the same way.

"She seems to enjoy your man's company."

"That's Mischkie's big problem. Every woman does."

Hanklin sidled over to join them. "Looks like the slicker's working his line." He grinned. "No offense, Luis, but I'd warn your sister off that Romeo before—"

"Sergeant Ballard has already warned me," Luis grinned, "but I know you men speak in jest of your buddy. It is your American way to relieve tension."

"Well, actually, Luis," said Ballard, "much as Tex and I are personally fond of Wilbur, I wouldn't lie to you if it involved your sister."

Mischkie actually had the kid nuzzling him back there under their banana tree.

Hanklin looked away in disgust. "Time and place don't mean nothing to that varmint. I tell you, Sarge—meaning no disrespect to you or your sister, Luis—but this is no damn job for a female, and there's reason number one."

Ramone frowned. "Your friend, Wilbur, will become enamored of Evita and not do his job?"

"Oh, the city boy'll do his job, right enough."

"As will Evita. She has earned the right to be among us."

"I've seen her toting that rifle like she was born with it," Hanklin conceded, "so I figure maybe you're right, and I am safe enough with her along. Safe as anyone'll be out here tonight, that is. I just naturally get to worrying about a gal if she's around when the bullets start to fly."

"That's Texas talk," Ballard addressed Ramone. "It means that chivalry is not dead. It's a good thing your sister's along, Luis. We may need all the fire power we can get."

A bird call sounded from the direction Castro had taken, the chirp cutting through the constant insect and bird chatter and yet a nearly indiscernible part of it.

"A Jap patrol," Ramone whispered, "coming this way, very close."

Ballard made a motion with both hands. Mischkie and Evita and Hanklin faded into the wall of jungle on one side of the trail. Ballard and Ramone crouched down behind a fat palm tree trunk almost directly across from them.

Ballard wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, unable as yet to discern movement in either direction along the trail. He unsheathed his knife.

Ramone set down his rifle and clasped the handle of his bolo.

"We should wait until they are upon us, then jump them and quietly gut them like fish."

Ballard whispered back, "No. They're expected somewhere and when they don't show up, Goro will send out a dozen patrols to look for them. We don't want anyone to know we're here if we can possibly avoid it."

Ramone considered this.

"You're right. There are plenty of other Japs to kill, another time."

"Here they come."

The point man of the patrol materialized with a rustle of vines. More soldiers appeared, grouped more than they should have been, their rifles slung wearily over their shoulders. They slogged along, chatting amongst themselves, paying no

particular heed to the jungle night. They were young men, eight of them, no more than boys in uniform.

General Goro's first line of defense had grown lax with the routine boredom of holing up here in the middle of nowhere.

They passed by within six inches of where Ballard and Ramone crouched. Ballard held his breath and tried to ignore the mosquito that was drinking his blood on the back of his sweaty neck.

A few moments more and the last man disappeared where the trail curved. Those hidden to either side of the trail remained hidden a while longer, but there were no stragglers.

Ballard stood and the others joined him. "Break's over," he said.

The base was set on high ground. A ring of well-dug foxholes, circling the crest of the hill, was connected by a shallower communications crawlway.

General Goro stood with his aide, Captain Aki, and surveyed the scene. Placement of the big Nambu machine guns had been cunningly designed by his engineers to be mutually protective with interlocking fields of fire. Goro nodded but made certain not to allow his subordinate to see the full extent of his satisfaction. This was his personal policy and, regardless, all he could think of now was how close his carefully laid out plans, his long months of organization and preparation and hiding out in this hell on earth of a jungle, were about to be realized.

Those who were the cause of his situation here, the Americans, were about to be paid back in blood.

He had received reports of some field commanders across the Philippines actually leading their troops down out of the jungles to surrender. This was particularly bad for the morale of those who held out, and he had effectively prevented his own men from learning of such reports.

In General Goro's camp, deserters were invariably tracked down and summarily executed on the spot.

Goro had lost his entire family—his wife and four children and his mother and father—to the American bombing raids.

Yes, the enemy would pay in blood until Goro and every last man of his died fighting. As far as Goro was concerned, nothing short of an edict from the Emperor himself would cancel the blood bath he was about to unleash throughout the northern provinces of Luzon.

"Our defense perimeter looks most satisfactory, Captain Aki," he said to the man at his side. "I believe we are ready for anything."

"And so we are, General-san. I thought you would approve."

"You should hardly have expected otherwise. Moving the machine gun nests closer to the perimeter was my suggestion. After tomorrow, after the offensive has been launched, the Americans will have reconnaissance planes covering these hills. We must be prepared. If they locate us, they will attack."

"The patrols report no enemy presence in the area."

"That will change tomorrow, Captain. But let them find us. Let them come. The Nambu's will cut them to ribbons. What time is it?"

"1200 hours, General-san."

"The hour approaches. Good. We will at last strike instead of existing like miserable animals in the hills."

Goro led the way through a maze of huts, past where soldiers lounged, smoking cigarettes, some playing games of chance.

Aki said, "Discipline is becoming difficult to maintain, sir."

"They are weary. Their morale is badly shaken. And who can blame them?" Goro gestured around them. "Since the fall of Manila, this has been our lot. But when they receive their orders, you will see a revitalization, Captain. I am handing them a chance to expunge our disgrace."

"Yes, General-san."

"We will taste the enemy's blood. I will issue the communiqué to the staging areas throughout the island in less than thirty minutes. Only my commanders thus far know and they but await word from me."

The MacArthur residence in Manila was called Casa Blanca by the rank and file. The mansion, which belonged to the city's wealthiest car dealer, a man named Bachrach, was situated in a section of estates that had escaped the ravages visited upon Manila during the Japanese occupation. The house was surrounded by well-tended gardens and came equipped with a swimming pool and sauna. The study was spacious enough to provide the general with all the pacing room he needed.

He paced now, glancing down again at the message the captain had just handed him.

"A radio operator on Okinawa scribbled it less than an hour ago, sir."

"Has its legitimacy been verified?"

"Yes, sir. The Domei News Agency beamed it over from Tokyo in English."

MacArthur read aloud, continuing to pace.

"Flash, flash. Tokyo, August 14. It is learned that an imperial message accepting the Potsdam Proclamation is forthcoming."

"Unconditional surrender," said the captain. "Thank God."

MacArthur ceased his pacing. He set the message on his desk top, staring down at it as if unable to pull his eyes away.

"Thank God," he echoed. "Except for some lost souls who might not come back from a mission they didn't have to be sent on."

Baron Tamura saw Keiko hugging the wall on the ledge outside the window. They held like that for a moment, a tableau between them, her feet securely planted, her back to the wall, her arms held out to the sides, palms pressed against the building for balance.

From inside, behind her uncle, General Nagano asked, "What is it, Baron? Do you see something out there?"

He drew his head back inside.

"Nothing," he said loudly enough for Keiko to hear. He had an impression of her already easing away from the window. Looking from General Nagano to Colonel Hayashi, then to Major Okada, he hoped that the confusion in his mind would not be apparent to them. He must focus his full attention on dealing with these men and deal with Keiko later. Still he could not help but wonder how much she had heard.

The telephone rang.

He took the brief call and, after replacing the receiver, said to the others, "News from two fronts. There has been a change in the plans for His Majesty to broadcast word of the surrender to the people. His Majesty has consented to make a recording of the royal edict sometime tonight in the Administrative Office of the Imperial Household Ministry. The recording will be broadcast tomorrow at noon."

"Then Major Hatanaka's coup, our coup, must succeed!" Nagano said heatedly. "We must not allow the people of Japan to hear that broadcast." His thin face was drawn, his voice worried.

Hayashi nodded agreement. "The Emperor's word will be obeyed if he instructs people to accept the surrender terms. Then, it will be too late."

"The spirit of the samurai does not die so easily," Baron Tamura told them sternly. "I spoke of news from two fronts. The commander of the 302nd Air Corps at Atsugi has ordered his men to fight on."

Hayashi beamed. "But that is perfect. The 302nd is in possession of the newest warplanes—the Raiden, the Gekko, the Suisei." The stout colonel's jowls jiggled with his enthusiasm.

"The largest base in Japan," Nagano nodded. "It has its own underground generator, underground repair plant, sufficient food and munitions for years."

"And the commanders of these men owe their allegiance to you, Baron Tamura," said Okada. The Kempeitai major's steady eyes were resolute behind his eyeglasses. "I say again, it is my opinion that we are being overly cautious."

"The major raises a point worth discussing," said Nagano.

Hayashi addressed Baron Tamura. "Perhaps we should reconsider committing our full forces tonight. We are staking the future of Japan on this Hatanaka fellow and those hotheads at the War Ministry."

"No," said the Baron. "Nothing has changed. We will wait and see what happens tonight at the palace. Major Okada, you will instruct Major Hatanaka that he is not to harm the Emperor, but his men must search out and destroy the recording of His Majesty's speech when they seize the palace."

"Baron Tamura, please think of what is at stake and what we have," said Hayashi. "I command the air force unit stationed at Tateyama. We have planes hidden in the woods, camouflaged. The Americans think the air field is non-operational. General Nagano has his troops of the Eastern Army and Major Okada, the full resources of the *Kempeitai*."

"No one can appreciate more than I what is at stake." The Baron stared into the eyes of each man in turn. "It is the power I wield which has bonded these disparate factions together. The insurrection at Atsugi and Major Hatanaka's coup strike at key targets. But if they are unsuccessful, we will move to alternate plans and we must have, in reserve for that, the forces which we hold back tonight."

"Forgive me if I sound presumptuous, Baron-san." Okada's gold tooth flashed. "But do you not have faith in the outcome of Major Hatanaka's coup? Have you already resigned yourself to their failure?"

"We shall see." The Baron's eyes settled on the telephone upon his desk. "We will know the moment anything happens. There is nothing for us to do now but wait. The next few hours will determine our fate, and that of Japan."

Chapter 7

She retraced her way along the ledge, and again no one saw her from below. She lifted herself up onto the roof and darted back to return along the other ledge to her room. She climbed in through the window and stood there for several minutes, trembling.

She willed herself to sit on the edge of her bed and concentrate on restoring some semblance of inner calm.

The tremors subsided.

She well knew her uncle's sentiments about the war and the honor of Japan. She had somehow suspected in the back of her mind, she now realized, that something precisely like what she had overheard had been going on behind the closed door of her uncle's office.

She had suspected, she had chosen to act, to directly prove or disprove what she suspected, and her suspicions had been confirmed. But she had not expected the baron to catch her in the act of spying.

What would he believe about her? She could not erase from her mind his surprise and, yes, dismay, during that instant of eye contact between them. Certainly he would not tell those with him what he had seen. If that were the case, he would have alerted them at once. He would confront her about it, but at a time of his choosing and not in the presence of those who were with him now, plotting rebellion.

Rebellion.

Against the Emperor.

She must believe her own ears. Her uncle—a fine, good man whom she admired and respected, to whom she owed everything—and those with him were plotting rebellion. She knew her uncle well enough to know he must be bleeding inside, at terrible odds within himself.

In Japan, the ancestry of the imperial family was widely believed to be traceable back through the first emperor, Jimmu, to the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu, and beyond them to the very creators of the islands of Japan. Keiko understood this to be superstition but could sincerely appreciate the Emperor as a symbol to the Japanese people, the core of their spiritual lives from peasant to nobleman. The Emperor was indeed a Ruler From Ages Eternal, as proclaimed, and as heir to the unbroken dynasty of a single imperial house during the entire history of Japan, the Emperor was a symbol of the unity and eternal existence of Japan.

The Emperor is Japan.

Rebellion...

The open command car led the convoy of trucks past the Headquarters of the First Imperial Guards Division, toward Nijubashi Gate. The lights of the sentry command post there were reflected in the still waters of the Dokan Moat.

Tokyo's electrical power was blacked out, as usual, but the Imperial Palace and most of the other strategic centers such as the War Ministry Building were provided with electricity from their own auxiliary generators.

The command car braked to a stop, as did the convoy of more than a dozen troop transports behind it. Sentries posted at the gate with bayoneted rifles stood pinned in the headlights of the staff car.

A captain of the guards strutted out.

"What is the meaning of—" he started to say, then interrupted himself when he recognized the man seated beside the driver. He saluted smartly. "Colonel!"

A machine gun was mounted at the back of the open staff car and a soldier stood manning it.

The colonel in the car said, "Captain, I have behind me in these trucks a battalion of the Second Regiment of the Imperial Guards Division."

"But, sir, there already is a battalion on duty guarding the Palace."

"And now there will be two battalions. Lift the gate, Captain, so my men and I may pass."

Normal procedure called for one battalion to be on guard at the Palace while a second remained at command headquarters.

"But I don't understand, Colonel. No air raid alarm has sounded."

"It is not your place to understand, Captain. I am the regimental commander, am I not? I order you to open this gate to my troops. I have brought an auxiliary battalion from Division Headquarters to be deployed here as added security for the Emperor. You will not stand in my way."

The captain of the guards responded to that with another sharp salute.

"*Hai*, Colonel-san!"

He snapped orders and the gate was raised. The convoy wended its way through the grounds of the Palace until the headlights of the lead car picked out a uniformed figure standing in the center of the road. The headlights reflected off the drawn sword of a man striking a dramatic pose.

The regimental commander stepped from the staff car as the officer in the road strode forward. They exchanged salutes.

"Colonel, it is very good to see you."

"I pledged to you to commit my men, Major Hatanaka. Here we are."

"Welcome, sir." Hatanaka's eyes shone with a religious fervor. "The Palace is now effectively sealed off and in our hands. It has begun."

He could not sleep.

The events of the day weighed on his mind, as did the nagging sound of activity from outside the window of his private chambers. He heard the tramp of boots and excited voices issuing commands.

He had lived, since his enthronement in 1928, the cloistered existence, secluded and holy, that his subjects expected of their Emperor, generally awakening at seven to shave before reading the newspapers over a modest breakfast of black bread and oatmeal, followed by prayer. He would work through the day and end his day with a walk in the inner garden.

Today there had been the grueling meeting with his cabinet and the Supreme War Council, and preparation of the Rescript. He always looked forward to his

stroll through the garden, but this evening he had not found respite from the turmoil ravaging his people, his country. This evening he and Chamberlain Irie had caught a glimpse of soldiers in the garden where they had never seen soldiers before.

Later, a car had taken him to the Household Ministry Building where he had recorded the Rescript which would be broadcast the following day.

It had been extremely uncomfortable, making the recording. It was made more so because a second recording had been requested for technical reasons. There had been much open sobbing during his reading of the admission of his nation's defeat and acceptance of the enemy's terms of unconditional surrender. He had returned to the *Gobunko* and retired for the evening.

He left his bed and crossed to a window. Not turning on his bedside lamp, he peered out.

Groups of imperial guards were posted at positions between the *Gobunko* and the Fukiage Gate. He saw machine guns with their muzzles aimed at the *Gobunko*.

He heard voices faintly from the room next to his bedchamber and recognized one of the voices as belonging to Chamberlain Irie. At first the words were muffled, but he could detect a hushed urgency. He crossed to the door of his chambers and placed an ear to the panel.

"The Imperial Palace is right now entirely in the hands of the insurgent guards," a worried voice was reporting to Irie. "What of the palace police?"

"Disarmed. The grounds are surrounded, all entrances are blocked, all telephone wires have been cut."

"But this is terrible," a third voice exclaimed. "The recordings of the imperial Rescript?"

"Hidden. The recording crew was stopped and searched on their way out but they could tell the rebels nothing. The recordings have been safely hidden. They will not be found."

"But the rebels will find us," said Irie. "All doors to the *Gobunko* must be barred. There are the iron shutters to fasten over all of the windows."

One of the other voices said doubtfully, "They are led by Major Hatanaka and a regimental commander of the guards. We are in very serious danger, gentlemen, as is the Emperor."

"Should we awaken His Majesty?"

Irie said, "His Majesty has already had a most trying day, and it is late. There is no need to wake the Emperor. When he does awaken, I will see that he knows what has happened."

Their war council continued in hushed tones.

The Emperor returned to bed and stretched out. He stared up at the dark ceiling.

The terrain curled down and away from the base, then started to climb again several hundred yards beyond the moonlit killing field that had been hacked around the perimeter. A short distance further was the tree line where the jungle began, where Ballard and the others crouched, taking it in.

Night brought no relief from the sweltering heat, nor the unending drone of birds and insects.

"There." Ramone nudged Ballard with his elbow. "The two men leaving that hut."
"I see them."

"General Goro is on the left. The man with him is Captain Aki."

Goro was average in every way except for his hair which was worn unusually long.

They watched the Japanese officers strut beneath a single light bulb strung overhead between the but they had left and the one next to it.

Several thatched-roof structures were clustered there, around a flagpole; Goro's command center. Other huts across the compound were bigger, elongated; barracks for the troops.

Goro and Aki disappeared into a but from which an aerial rose. Two sentries were posted at the hut's entrance. The hum of a generator could be heard across the clearing.

"Communications shed," said Mischkie. "Wonder who the general's communicating with."

"We're going in," said Ballard. "Ramone, you and your sister and your men stay in position along this ridge."

"We will give you all the cover fire you need," Ramone assured him.

"If we need it. We're going to try this one soft and easy. We're going to get Goro out of there with him and us in one piece."

Hanklin added, to Ramone, "Which ain't to say we won't be much obliged if you do pull our bacon out if things go haywire down there."

"I think I understand what you say," Ramone nodded. "We will be here if you need us."

The Americans unlooped their dog tags from their necks. Each man taped his tags together and placed them in his pockets.

Evita watched this curiously. For the most part she only had eyes for Mischkie.

"Why do you do that?" she asked.

"Tags rattling together can make enough noise to give those Nips something to shoot at," he told her.

She touched his arm lightly. "I would not want that to happen. You must take care of yourself, Wil. We will get to know each other better when tonight is finished."

"You know, I sort of had that very same thing in mind myself."

"Let's go," said Ballard.

He and Hanklin quit the tree line in low combat crouches, down the incline, not making a sound.

Mischkie put his arm around Evita in a hug. He gave the young woman a peck on the forehead.

"Stick around, kitten. We've got a date in Malolos tonight when this job is done."

He broke from the tree line and joined up with Ballard and Hanklin. They hurtled through the dark, negotiating the incline, spreading out from each other at a distance of several feet, barely discernible to each other. Their commando clothing blended into the darkness, helping meld them with the night.

They gained the bottom of the rise and dodged across a level patch of ground before the terrain climbed again to become rockier near the machine gun placements. Ballard motioned with hand signals. Hanklin and Mischkie fell further

away to either side. They slowed their pace slightly, following Ballard's lead. Thirty yards below one of the machine gun nests, Ballard motioned again and flattened out on his stomach, his rifle gripped in both hands. Hanklin and Mischkie did likewise, and they commenced elbowing and kneeling their way up the final stretch of ground.

Two shadowy human figures loomed ahead in the nearest machine gun nest.

More hand signals from Ballard. The other two nodded their understanding. Ballard and Hanklin hit the placement from opposite angles, coming in with knives to make quick work of the two men behind the machine gun. Mischkie remained crouched outside the gun placement, watching for trouble, but the scuffle behind the Nambu was too slight to draw attention.

Ballard and Hanklin propped up the bodies of the dead men to make it look as if nothing was amiss to anyone who might pass by.

The huts further along up the hill were inky smudges in the gloom. Shafts of light here and there and pieces of conversation barely heard emanated from the direction of the barracks, but at this end, to the rear of the communications hut into which Goro and Aki had gone no less than five minutes before, all was peaceful, seemingly undisturbed except for the hum of a radio transmitter.

At a hand signal from Ballard, they advanced on the communications hut. Ballard and Hanklin stormed around the front upon the two sentries stationed there. Mischkie covered the action. Again, quick work: the left arm snaked around the neck to yank each sentry onto a blade that slid in beneath and behind the right ear. A twist to make sure, and the bodies went limp. Ballard and Hanklin each dragged a dead man around to the rear. Mischkie came over and picked up the sentries' rifles. These kills too had gone silently enough to alert no one.

Only one other hut in close proximity had a light on inside. A flag pole in front marked it as the general's orderly room, two huts away.

Ballard and Hanklin rejoined Mischkie to crouch in the shadows to one side of the doorway of the communications shed. Ballard gave a curt nod which each man returned. They knew their parts.

Ballard charged in first with Hanklin on his heels.

Chapter 8

To one side of the entrance inside the communications shed, a Japanese soldier, no more than seventeen years old whirled around in surprise, turning from a radio set. Goro and Aki stood beside the soldier. They wore holstered side arms.

Hanklin aimed his M-1 at the boy in uniform.

"Hold it right there, sonny, whether you speak English or not."

The soldier held it right there. He even raised his hands. Goro spun so quickly that some of his longish hair fell across his forehead, but he made no further move.

Aki grabbed for his sidearm.

Ballard unsheathed his combat knife from mid-chest and flung it in one smooth motion. The blade glinted in flight through flickering lamplight and buried itself to the hilt in Aki's heart. Ballard's rifle was aimed at Goro before Aki hit the floor.

"Do you speak English, General?"

Goro stood with his arms at his sides. His expression was bland, oblique.

"I speak English," he said with a precise accent.

"Good. Pull out that pistol, very slowly. Drop it to the ground. Use your fingertips. I won't kill you if you do what I say. Kick it away from you."

Goro obeyed.

"What is it you want?"

"We want you, General. You come with us or we'll kill you."

Goro said, coolly and without hesitation, "I think it would be best, then, if I accompanied you."

Ballard used his rifle to gesture to Goro to move outside. Ballard looked at Hanklin and nodded at the young Japanese soldier.

Hanklin nodded back and said to the boy, "Turn around." The kid just looked at him and started quaking.

Hanklin said, "Okey-dokey, sonny, if that's the way you want it."

He brought the butt plate of his rifle up in a short jab that connected with the soldier's right temple. The soldier's eyes rolled back in his head and he fell to the floor, unconscious.

"I must be going soft," Hanklin muttered. He swung the M-1 around at Goro as the general passed by on his way out. "But that don't go for Nip generals, General. You best bear that in mind. You even look the wrong way and I'll blow your brains out. Got me?"

Goro lost none of his enigmatic blandness. "I understand. Where are you taking me?"

"Out of here," said Ballard. "Just shut up and do as you're told. Outside."

Goro stepped from the hut. Mischkie was waiting, having shoulder-slung his rifle and unholstered his .45. He pressed the barrel of the pistol to Goro's throat.

"Don't even think about sounding an alarm, General." Ballard and Hanklin emerged from the hut.

"He's playing right along," Hanklin said. "Aren't you, General?"

"I have said I will cooperate."

"All right, everybody," said Ballard, "cork it. We're getting out the way we came in. Right now."

They moved out. Ballard took the lead.

Hanklin gave Goro a rough shove. "You heard the man." Mischkie brought up the rear, moving backwards to cover their withdrawal. "The Sarge also said to cork it."

They scuttled past the machine gun nest where the dead men remained propped up against the Nambu. From there they continued down the slope and rushed across the piece of level ground to where the clearing sloped upward.

"Looks like we're going to make it," whispered Mischkie.

"We're not out of it yet," said Ballard.

They gained the tree line. Evita and Ramone were waiting in the hazy moonlight, rifles aimed along the small group's track. Valera and Castro would be nearby.

Goro suddenly broke, short of the tree line, and dashed madly down the slope away from them, screaming in Japanese at the top of his lungs, returning toward the base.

Ballard cursed and charged after him. He tackled Goro, taking the general down with Goro still screaming his head off. He rolled Goro over onto his back and kayoed him with a sharp pop to the jaw.

Too late.

Answering calls peppered the night from the direction of the base. Ballard shouldered Goro's unconscious form and ran with him back toward the tree line.

The darkness exploded with the heavy throbbing of a Nambu from one of the machine gun placements. Everyone scattered, grabbing the ground for cover. A vicious burst of slugs lashed the tree trunks.

Ballard heard someone in the group cry out, "Oh!" and he heard the sound of a bullet popping something apart. He felt droplets of liquid splash across his hand and knew it was blood.

The machine gun fire tapered off.

"Shit." Mischkie snarled. "The girl caught one. She's gone."

Luis moaned like a wounded animal.

"Evita!"

Goro groaned and started coming to. Ballard had let the general drop when the shooting started. He lifted Goro by his tunic and backhanded him across the face.

"Wake up, General. We're moving out."

Luis Ramone flung himself away from his sister's body and at Goro, going for the dazed man's neck with both of his hands.

"She's dead! My sister's *dead!*"

He poured out a stream of fiery Tagalog and got clutching hands around Goro's throat.

Ballard stepped in with an upward cut from the butt of his rifle. He knocked Ramone's arms away.

Hanklin, who was nearest and outsized Ramone considerably, wrapped his arms around the Filipino and whispered, "Hold steady, son. You won't do your sister any good gettin' yourself killed."

Lights flared on all over the base. The clearing was flooded with a harsh, blinding, silver light that did not penetrate the wall of green at the jungle tree line.

Ballard said, "Keep your wits about you, Luis. There's still the mission. Tell Valera and Castro not to return fire. Those gunners are dug in. We'd only give them something to fire at."

Luis relaxed in Hanklin's bear grip. He made a visible effort to regain his self-control. "You are right, of course." He made a bird call into the night.

The high-pitched throbbing of more than one machine gun opened up with sustained bursts.

Mischkie said, "They don't know what the hell they're firing at."

"Let's get the hell out of here and call in that air strike," urged Ballard.

"They'll be getting around to their communications but before long," Hanklin said. "When they find the general missing, this jungle's going to be running over with pissed off Japs and no mistake."

Mischkie bent down and started to pick up Evita Ramone's body.

"American, please," Luis whispered. "I will carry her."

Mischkie nodded. "I'm sorry, Luis."

Hanklin took the point position. Ballard pushed Goro along with the barrel of his rifle. They moved swiftly back along the trail.

The terrain muffled the machine gun fire peppering the jungle behind them, and a few minutes later the Nambu fire ceased altogether.

"I expect they'll be sending out those patrols right about now," said Hanklin.

The trail dropped steadily for the last quarter mile toward the road where they were to rendezvous with Lieutenant Stilwell, their transportation back to Malolos.

Goro tripped on a vine and fell to his knees.

"I ... must rest."

Ballard hauled him onto his feet, barely slackening his own pace.

"You'll get a nice long rest when we get where we're going. Keep moving, General."

They gained the ridge overlooking the road. A truck engine idled faintly in the night, not far below them.

They pushed on. Valera ran forward from the rear. He said something to Ramone in Tagalog.

Luis, carrying his sister's body, translated. "A large number of men are closing in on us, very close behind!" He was short of breath.

Stilwell stood nervously beside the tailgate of the truck, waiting for them, smoking a cigarette. When they broke from the trail, rushing across to him, he threw the cigarette away.

"Nips on our tail," Ballard barked. "Better call in that air strike."

Luis carefully set his sister's limp body inside the truck bed and hoisted himself aboard. Ballard, Hanklin, and the two Filipino guerrillas started to board.

A half dozen Japanese soldiers burst across the road from the trail and opened fire. Castro and Valera tumbled to the ground and did not move. Ballard saw the lieutenant at the front of the truck start to climb into the cab when the hail of fire cut him down, too.

Hanklin was closest to the driver's side of the cab.

"Tex, get us the hell out of here!"

Ballard turned to face the shifting shadows across the road. He pulled up on his M-1 and returned fire. Ramone and Mischkie opened fire from aboard the truck. The incoming fire faltered, died off.

Hanklin heaved himself into the cab, yelling at the driver. "Move it on over, short legs." He popped the clutch and the rig jolted forward.

Ballard turned and hustled forward in a running leap at the cab, pulling himself aboard, the driver squeezed in the middle. Rifle fire opened up behind them. Bullets pinged off the truck.

Ballard grabbed for the radio to call in the air strike.

Chapter 9

Their instructions were to deliver Goro to the detention unit at a base just outside Malolos. The sentries were advised to expect them, and they waved the rig through after a glance at the orders Hanklin thrust down at them from the cab. Hanklin wheeled the vehicle to a halt in front of the Quonset but that served as a brig.

Hanklin killed the lights and truck engine. He and Ballard swung down from the cab and moved to the rear of the truck. The gate had already been lowered.

Mischkie knelt, handing Evita Ramone's limp body down to her brother.

Luis must have cradled his sister's body all the way back to the base. The front of his clothes was smeared with thick, wet blood. He took the body from Mischkie and cradled it, hugging her close to him.

Lieutenant Stilwell's body was stretched out in the back of the truck. Goro sat in the back, his wrists handcuffed in front of him.

Mischkie delivered a brusque shove that catapulted Goro from the truck. Goro landed on his feet, stumbled, but maintained his balance without falling. He straightened and assumed a stance of formal military bearing. Hanklin came over and vided his right arm above the elbow.

"That's being real smart, General. Reckon you could get yourself plugged right easy without offering too damn much provocation."

Goro said nothing.

"Luis, I'm sorry about your sister," said Ballard, "and about Valera and Castro."

"We knew the risks when we took on this mission," Ramone said in a voice that quavered. "I think perhaps the dead are the lucky ones. For them, the suffering is over."

He took a step toward Goro. Hanklin and everyone else tensed, not knowing what to expect, but Ramone knelt to cradle his sister's limp, torn, tattered body and only stared at Goro across a distance of less than twelve inches. Then he cleared his throat and coughed up phlegm which he spat into Goro's face.

Goro reacted by slowly lifting his left sleeve to wipe away the spittle.

Ramone turned and walked away, his back erect, carrying his sister in the direction of the front gate.

Mischkie called after him.

"Luis ... your team is dead. Where will you go?"

The Filipino turned to face them.

"I go to bury my sister in the churchyard where our parents lay, if the Japanese have not destroyed that. I will grieve for them and for what has befallen us, and then I will join up with other Filipinos and I will fight on and pray some day for an end to this madness."

"Amen to that," said Hanklin.

Luis walked away.

"I know how he feels," Mischkie said, looking at Goro. "That Evita was a real good kid, General. I could strangle the life out of you right now with my bare hands and not feel a thing."

"Slow down, city boy," said Hanklin. "Orders are to deliver the general with some life left in him."

"You are treating me in a civilized fashion," Goro said stiffly. "I thank you for that."

"A damn sight better than you treated our boys on Bataan," said Ballard. "Come on, General. Inside."

The front door of the brig swung inward before they reached it, and a milky rectangle of light poured out. A figure stood silhouetted there, holding a billy club at his side like a cop on the beat back in the States.

"That you, Ballard?"

"It's us."

"Where's Lieutenant Stilwell?"

"What's left of him is in the back of this truck."

The driver appeared from the cab.

The silhouette said, "Soldier, see that the night duty officer is advised."

"Yes, sir."

The driver seemed glad to get away.

"Ballard," the silhouette said, "bring our guest inside where we can get a better look at him."

Ballard heard something in that voice. Goro heard it, too. He dug in his heels in a momentary show of resistance, but Hanklin's superior strength prevailed and they pushed forward.

The figure stepped out of the doorway and was waiting for them behind a gray metal desk when they herded Goro in.

The interior of the Quonset but had been partitioned into office space, cells, and interrogation rooms. In the front receiving area, high-wattage bulbs inside wire mesh on the ceiling made Ballard and those with him squint at first. There was a desk, a battered file cabinet painted o.d. to match the walls, a couple of straight back chairs, the guy at the desk, and two staff sergeants holding rifles aimed at the prisoner.

The one behind the desk, the silhouette, was big and bulky, a salt-and-pepper crew cut atop a scarred face, the first signs of beer belly flab bulging above his belt.

"I'm Major Corbin. What the hell are you staring at, Ballard?"

Ballard knew what he and Goro had heard in that voice. Combat touches a man and changes him forever. Too much and some men harden themselves against life. Others let it push them to, and sometimes over, the edge.

"Guess I just didn't expect a major to be honching a field interrogation. The brass usually keeps its hands clean of the dirty stuff. Sir."

"I asked for the chance at the general here," Corbin said with that something stronger in his voice than before. He came around the side of his desk to stand in front of Goro. "We want scum like this to receive only the best of treatment."

Corbin held the billy club with both hands. Ballard saw what was coming. Before he could do anything to stop it, Corbin swung the billy in a short, savage punch, striking Goro in the crotch.

Goro bleated out in agony and doubled up, collapsing to his knees and onto his side, curling himself into a fetal ball, dry heaving, mouth pressed to the bare wood floor.

The two sergeants stood with their rifles aimed at Goro as if nothing had happened.

Ballard stepped in to grab Corbin's right arm. He swung it back as Corbin was leaning in to deliver Goro another blow with the billy. Ballard gripped the arm with enough strength to arrest the movement and almost topple Corbin off balance. Corbin straightened up without following through on the strike. Unadulterated rage flushed his face.

Ballard said, coolly, "Nix on that stuff. You're not the first guy who's wanted a crack at this little shit tonight, but if everyone gets a crack at him, there won't be anything left. Our orders from General MacArthur were to bring Goro in in condition to talk."

Corbin stared pointedly down at where Ballard gripped his arm, then up at Ballard.

"Get your paw off me."

Ballard saw no point in pushing this unless it became necessary. He released Corbin's arm.

"Sorry, Major, but the general here is my responsibility and orders are orders. I wasn't told to turn him over to you. Maybe I should ask to see your authority in this before we go any further."

"I am in charge of this detention unit, Sergeant."

"Yeah, and I'm in charge of the general here. He's a VIP, not one of your regular prisoners, and you damn well know it.

Let's get the intelligence team that's supposed to question him over here and see what they have to say."

"I get it," Corbin said. "You're a goddamn Jap lover, is that it?" He sneered at the balled-up form of Goro who was somewhat recovered but not enough to stand. "Maybe you forgot Guadalcanal, Saipan, Bataan. I commanded infantry when we retook Manila, and I hope never to see hell like that again, mister. We fought these yellow slime hand to hand, house to house, room by room. The bastards. The yellow-bellied little bastards. They burned out eighty percent of that city. Killed 100,000 Filipinos. Strapped patients to their beds and burned the hospitals down. Mutilated the men before and after they killed them. Raped females of all ages before they killed them. Babies' eyeballs were gouged out and smeared on walls like jelly."

"We took fire in that one, too, sir," Ballard returned. "We walked through the same hell and I'll never forget what I saw and what I did, no matter how hard I try. I've lost count of the buddies I've made and lost in this man's war. Guys you come in contact with, share your smokes with, your gripes and your jokes with, your memories of back home. You get to like the guy and then one day you have to watch him die by inches with his guts hanging out on some lousy beach, screaming with his dying breath for his mother to come take him. But we've given every bit of that and more back at them, sir. We went after their civilians, too. We atomized two of their cities and every other city in Japan has been bombed back into the Stone Age. They say 100,000 people died during one night of bombing in Tokyo."

"Japs aren't people, Sergeant. So what are we supposed to do about it, kiss this douchebag's skinny yellow ass? Are you telling me how to run my unit?"

"The battle for Manila wasn't that long ago, sir. Maybe you just saw too much."

Corbin said, in a quieter voice than before, "You are Jap lovers, all three of you."

"Better get a hold of yourself, Major," Mischkie advised in a brittle tone. "We're all gut tired of this war."

"There wouldn't have been a war," Corbin snapped, looking down at Goro who was starting to drag himself to his knees, "if it weren't for shit like your pal General Goro."

He drew back his right boot to kick at the kneeling man. Goro saw it coming and started to scoot away.

Ballard stepped in and again grabbed Corbin by the arm as he had before. He extended his straightened left leg between Corbin's legs and caught Corbin in the process of pulling his leg back for a kick. Ballard gave a shove, tripping the major.

Corbin went down heavily into a corner. The partitions forming the room shuddered.

Ballard said, "Go somewhere else and let off steam, Major. We'll deliver the general to those intel boys on our own."

"Like hell you will," Corbin snarled. "You're not taking this ugly little bastard anywhere and you're not going anywhere either, you son of a bitch. You're under arrest for assaulting an officer."

He picked himself up, taking extreme care to distance himself from Ballard as much as the confines of the room would allow.

The two sergeants reacted by tracking their rifles around on Ballard. Hanklin and Mischkie had their rifles aimed at the sergeants.

"Tex, Wil, leave the general here with me," said Ballard. "He'll be all right. Track down those intel people."

"Right," said Hanklin. He and Mischkie started out. Corbin snapped, "Hold it right there, you two. No one goes anywhere."

They paused at the door.

"So what the hell did we do?" Mischkie groused.

"You're witnesses. Both of you saw Ballard strike me. I'll press formal charges against you first thing in the morning, Sergeant, but as for now," he nodded at the cell door behind Ballard, which led deeper into the Quonset, "you can shack up with your pal, the Jap, and the rest of the bad apples."

"If that's the way you want to play it, Major, that's okay with me," Ballard told him. "I've done time in worse shit holes than this. But my men were assigned with me to bring the general in and your penny ante crap is not going to change that."

"I'm going to see you rot in a jail cell, Ballard, until you die."

"Maybe so, but leave the general alone. This is a critical, highly classified mission, Major, and right now General Goro is the man of the hour."

Corbin considered this.

"All right, all right, your men can go and the general here won't get roughed up, thanks to you, unless it's by those boys from intelligence you've got such a hard-on for."

Mischkie said, "Maybe Tex should go and I should stay, Sarge."

Corbin snapped, "Move your asses out of here."

Mischkie and Hanklin waited for Ballard's nod to that, and he gave it.

"Get your hands on the people who want to get their hands on the general. I can handle this."

Hanklin and Mischkie left. The screen door slammed behind them on their way out.

Corbin waved a thumb at Goro.

"Get this puke out of my sight," he instructed his NCOs.

Goro moved gingerly after the billy club blow to his privates, but he allowed himself to be led by the arms without resistance through the cell door, leaving Ballard and Corbin alone.

Corbin grinned. "So, Sergeant. Everything's been fixed just the way you want it, hasn't it? Your men are about their business. General Goro is locked up nice and safe."

"That leaves just you and me then, doesn't it, Major?"

"That's right, Sergeant. Just you and me." Corbin strutted in closer. "And you're not about to try and pull any more shit on me, are you, Sergeant?"

"I'm stupid sometimes, sir. I'm not that stupid."

"You don't think much of me, do you, Ballard?"

"I don't think much of the way you've been acting. What we've been through in this war, you and me, it can't help but drive a guy a little nuts. You just seem to be getting too much of a kick out of it."

"I'll show you how crazy I am."

Corbin made a fist of his right hand and threw a punch at Ballard.

Ballard saw it coming but did not dodge. The punch connected with considerable force. It snapped his head back, and his senses exploded with a swirling flash of pain. Then everything went dark.

He lost consciousness.

Chapter 10

"Yes, Colonel. Yes. That is quite all right. It was very good of you to call with the news."

Baron Tamura replaced the telephone receiver. He felt the eyes of every man in the room on him. They already knew the essence of this last telephone report, but they would want to hear everything.

Midmorning sunshine shone through the shroud of thick summer mist that had wrapped itself around the point and the castle during the night. Gulls wailed mournfully beyond the open windows.

The hours had dragged by, the reports coming in sporadically, sometimes thirty minutes apart, sometimes ninety. The four men in Baron Tamura's study had passed the time together in silence.

At one point, Baron Tamura produced, from a desk drawer, a slim leather folder from which he withdrew sheaves of paper. Using a fountain pen, he spent much of the vigil reworking a particularly difficult line of a poem he had begun four days earlier, a poem about the bittersweetness of watching the cherry blossoms fall, of the impermanence of this world.

Major Okada had paced the study floor as a caged animal would. The opaque black eyes only seemed to grow more icy behind the lenses of his glasses as the hours wore on.

The Baron had gone to the window and looked down to see Okada pacing across the grounds of the castle courtyard below, looking every bit as restless and caged as he had indoors.

Colonel Hayashi had selected a book of Buddhist philosophy from the Baron's book shelf. He sat in an armchair beneath a corner lamp and immersed himself in the tome, looking up only when the phone rang. Seated there, the overweight Air Force colonel looked something like a Buddha in uniform to Baron Tamura.

General Nagano took a twin to that chair in another corner, had rested his head back around dawn and immediately began emitting soft snoring noises. He too looked up whenever the phone rang, then promptly nodded off again into a light sleep.

"The coup has failed," the Baron told them. "That was one of our men in the military affairs section. Several minutes ago on the green in front of the Imperial Palace, Major Hatanaka placed a pistol to his forehead and pulled the trigger. His rebels have surrendered to the First Guard Regiment and the Kempeitai. General Anami has committed suicide also."

"I had better be getting back to headquarters," said Okada. "I will be expected."

"Major Yasuki reports that an attempt to assassinate the Premier has also ended in failure. The rebellion of the force at Atsugi continues but is not expected to last."

Hayashi said with some pride, "I knew the men of my 302nd would not disappoint us."

"And I knew it was over when we received word that that hot headed fool, Hatanaka, had killed General Mori tonight during the coup attempt," said Nagano. "Mori was a good man, a good soldier. We were wrong to put so much faith in the hands of those fanatics."

"And we were wrong in not committing the full resources at our command," added Okada.

The Baron glared at Okada.

"Not at *our* command, Major. Certainly not at *your* command. At *my* command. You understand, Major Okada?"

Okada lowered his voice and his eyes. "Certainly, Baron-san. I meant no disrespect."

Nagano said, "I believe it is a wise course we have taken, remaining in the background as we have concerning the palace coup, the attempted assassination of the Premier, the insurrection at Atsugi. We now have freedom to formulate contingency plans. If we were known to be a part of what has happened, we would all be dead or under arrest." Nagano's thin features looked more cadaverous than usual in the morning light.

"I must admit I expected Hatanaka's coup to succeed," said Baron Tamura. "Certainly the major was a hothead, but a man like that is necessary at times to whip up sentiment in the ranks. I felt certain that once the palace grounds were secure and the desire to resist government policies made known, the full military would rise to take up the cause. I am disappointed, gentlemen."

"What shall we do next?" Nagano asked. "What avenues are open to us?"

"The resurrection at Atsugi will not be quelled," Okada said respectfully. "It will spread."

The Baron said, without turning, "Major, you were returning to your post. The *Kempeitai* will be extremely busy these next several days. You will be privy to much useful information."

"As you say, Baron."

Okada let himself out. After the door had closed behind him, Nagano said, under his breath, "Peasant."

"Indeed." The Baron nodded agreement. "But he may prove useful to us."

"He will become more difficult to deal with."

"What do you suggest, General?"

"Only that we be cautious in our dealings with him."

"And so we shall."

"I do not like to say it," Hayashi interjected, "but Okada may be right about this being the time to commit the remaining resources available to us, before the situation deteriorates any further."

"No," said the Baron. "We bide our time. Our mistake was in overestimating the morale of the troops. The men did not rally to the Bushido code as we thought they would. Were we to attempt to stage another coup, one as or more sweeping than Major Hatanaka's and the rebellion at Atsugi, we still could not succeed without broad support from all levels of the military, from the officers to the lowliest private."

"The failure of Major Hatanaka's coup serves as evidence, gentlemen, that such support does not exist; otherwise, it would have come forth last night, as we, not to mention the unfortunate major, had anticipated."

"You make it sound as if all is truly lost," Hayashi said with dawning understanding. "Is all that remains for an honorable man ... *seppuku*?"

"That is not what I meant to suggest," the Baron said sharply. "My father was born when Japan was feudal, with a shogun in Yedo and the land divided among the *daimyo*. He used to tell my brother and me stories when we were very young about when he was a small boy, when he would see great lords arrive in Yedo borne in palanquins, surrounded by their retainers carrying swords. He remained until his death a figure from that age."

The Baron reached up and removed a sword from where it hung displayed upon the wall. The polished Muramasa blade glinted in the sunlight streaming through the window. He held the sword firmly, straight up. He studied Hayashi and Nagano from behind the blade.

"I promised my father on his deathbed that I would never sheath the sword of the samurai, and I never shall."

"I am with you to the end, no matter the outcome," said Nagano solemnly. "I am in it to the death."

"And I," said Hayashi. "But what can we do to sway this support in the military to our cause?"

"The men have lost hope." Baron Tamura sliced the air with the sword. "We will find a way to give them back their hope, to renew their spirit and their faith in

themselves. We will show the world that the spirit of Japan, the Bushido code, lives."

Keiko watched from her window as Nagano and Hayashi stepped into their cars and were whisked away. She had been watching from her room since dawn. Okada had left a short time earlier. Her uncle would be alone now.

The hours since that moment on the ledge outside his window were a blur. She felt exhausted, drained physically and emotionally.

She had bathed to relax after returning to her room, then sat in a chair that had been her favorite since she was a child, the overstuffed one close to the window. She had stared out into the night, listening to the boom of the surf.

A profound sadness enveloped her and, for some reason, shame, in knowing that her uncle and those soldiers with him were plotting rebellion. They had spoken of a coup in progress.

She turned on the radio, but there was no mention of a coup. After lowering the volume she had drifted off into a fitful sleep cut short by nightmares she could not remember though their jangly traces left her edgy the moment she awoke.

Keiko watched the cars carrying General Nagano and Colonel Hayashi disappear down the drive and through the front gate. The waiting was over. She had bided her time patiently for this moment, until after her uncle's visitors were gone.

Keiko did not know what she would say to her uncle, nor did she fully understand her own feelings. She only knew she could no longer put off confronting him about what had happened. She must take action.

She went to find him.

There was not enough air in the cubicle that served as an interrogation room. As the sun outside climbed, the heat in the Quonset intensified until now, at 1130 hours, it was nearly intolerable, made worse by a constant, grating commotion, a distraction from the rest of the brig on the other side of a thin partition.

McGiver sat to one side of the table, General Goro across from him. They had not said a word to each other for the past half hour.

They just sat there, sweating, listening to the flies buzz. McGiver had nearly smoked his way through a pack of Luckies. Goro looked as if he wanted badly to ask for one, but said nothing. McGiver blew smoke across the table into Goro's face, reached over and snubbed out another butt in an overflowing ash tray. McGiver wore a .45 automatic in a shoulder holster.

Captain Delaney stepped in. McGiver wondered again at the way the younger man never seemed to sweat, as if ice ran through veins in a body controlled by a cool intellect and nothing else. Delaney closed the door to the cubicle and leaned back against it.

"Looks like we're all through with you, General, for now."

"What will happen to me?"

"You're going to be our guest a while longer, but you're out of my hands. For now."

"Major Corbin—"

"Has been relieved of duty."

"He should have been relieved of duty before he could harm me."

"The major earned his right to every chance the brass gave him," said McGiver. He lit a cigarette. There were large circles of sweat under his armpits. He blew smoke at the Japanese officer.

Delaney told Goro, "Those radio messages you agreed to send from here did the trick, General. The word is in from all over the island. The counteroffensive is off. Your troops are coming down out of the hills to surrender, as you instructed them to."

"Just out of curiosity, General," McGiver grinned, "Why did you send that message to your forces, telling them to call it off?"

"You know why."

"I want to hear you say it, monkey face." McGiver's tone grew sullen.

"The message from the government news service you showed me," Goro said. "My Emperor's wishes."

"Your Emperor," McGiver snorted. "You're not going to have an emperor when we get through with you, what do you think about that?"

"Mac," Delaney said.

"That is unthinkable," said Goro.

"Listen to him." McGiver blew more smoke into Goro's face. "Go ahead and think the unthinkable, you goddamn little—"

Delaney said, "That'll do, Mac. We had enough of that from Corbin. Get the general into a cell."

"Glad to. Let's go, monkey face."

Goro rose and allowed himself to be led out.

As they passed, Delaney instructed McGiver, "See that he doesn't get his hands on anything sharp. We're going to have some conversations in the future with the general and we don't need a hari-kari to foul us up."

"Will do."

Goro paused for a moment in front of Delaney.

"Captain, I have cooperated, have I not?"

"You did just fine, General."

"And you will see to the matter of Sergeant Ballard?"

"Striking an officer is a serious offense."

"Even such an officer as your Major Corbin? I am in enemy hands. I expect no favors and would grant none if our positions were reversed. But it is to your benefit, not mine, that you take steps to help Sergeant Ballard from the trouble he came into in protecting me, in following his orders from General MacArthur and delivering me into your hands safely. I know the value of a good soldier, Captain, if you do not. A man like Ballard and those with him ... one does not throw away such men."

"I'll see what I can do."

Chapter 11

When Eichelberger walked into MacArthur's office, Krueger was already there. MacArthur paced, sucking on a pipe, his head wreathed in a cloud of gray smoke.

MacArthur said, "On the desk, Bob."

Eichelberger crossed to the desk and picked up the onionskin there. He read aloud.

"Emperor will order end to hostilities 4:00 P.M., Tokyo time, this date." He set down the piece of paper. "It's finished, then."

MacArthur did not interrupt his pacing. He muttered, "I told them months ago to be alert for conciliatory gestures, that the break would come from Tokyo, not the Japanese army, but no one would listen to me. I felt sure peace was near. Had my advice been followed, the resort to atomic weapons would have been unnecessary."

"I don't much care for the one condition of their surrender," said Krueger. "That continuation of the imperial reign stuff. Unless Hirohito is dethroned, the whole war in the Pacific will have been in vain."

"You're wrong, Walt," MacArthur countered. "The Japanese people would never renounce their emperor, and without him there can be no orderly transition to peace. They would never submit to allied occupation unless he ordered it. I have no desire whatsoever to debase the emperor in the eyes of his own people."

"I have plans for Japan's future, gentlemen. Big plans. A vision, if you will. First, of course, we must disarm and dismantle their military structure, send the soldiers home, dismantle the war industry. We will then use the instrumentality of the Japanese government to implement the occupation. Free elections will be held. The formation of labor unions will be encouraged. Military indoctrination will be eliminated from the schooling. And we will see to it that women are given the right to vote."

"Good luck on that one," Eichelberger said dryly.

Krueger chuckled. "That particular task could prove more difficult than fighting our way across the Pacific. Women have been second class citizens in Japan since before their recorded history, haven't they?"

"That is why we must ensure it being done at this time," MacArthur said. "Women don't like war. The military will be totally discredited."

Eichelberger frowned. "I just hope this whole surrender business isn't a grand-scale trap. They've proven their treachery every day since Pearl Harbor."

"And there's the internal struggle over there to take into consideration," Krueger added. "We don't have any real idea what the hell's happening inside Japan, given the fanaticism of their military. Let's not forget it was the generals who got Japan into this. The Emperor is supposed to have resisted them at the start but they conned him into it. The army ran the show then and they do now."

"They anticipate internal strife," said MacArthur. "They've requested a preliminary meeting in Manila and have asked for a short time to set their house in order. They've admitted that die-hard officers are talking rebellion or might even try to sabotage the surrender. They assure us steps are being taken to deal with these problems. We've given them two weeks. That gives us some breathing room, too. But that doesn't mean we won't have our hands full until then."

"I want reservations made for an entire floor of the finest hotel in Yokohama. We are going into the enemy's camp, gentlemen, and we shall stand tall and walk proud and show no fear. We shall thus earn their respect and, most likely, their cooperation. We shall—"

He stopped speaking when upraised voices erupted from the outer office, beyond a closed door.

"What the hell," Krueger growled.

He pulled himself from his chair and went to the door and threw it open. Eichelberger joined him in the doorway and MacArthur came to stand behind them, towering over both.

The first thing to assault their senses was the stench of body odor and the smell of death.

A pair of GIs stood arguing with the general's aide who had blocked their way into the inner office. They had obviously not changed clothes since coming in from the field. Each man still wore grimy fatigues, combat webbing, knife, pistol, a rifle slung over his shoulder. They did not look like men who would be stopped by someone standing in their way if they truly wished to pass.

MacArthur's aide was reaching for his sidearm. The general touched the gun arm, staying the pistol in its holster. "Hold it, Captain, that won't be necessary."

Krueger turned toward the phone on MacArthur's desk. "We'll have the MPs here in a jiffy."

"That won't be necessary either, Walt." MacArthur stepped from the doorway. "I recognize both of you men from your files. Mischkie and Hanklin. Ballard's team."

"What's the meaning of this?" Eichelberger demanded of the two.

"We apologize for the interruption, sir," Mischkie said.

"I find that somewhat reassuring." MacArthur glowered sternly. "But it doesn't tell us what warrants you two causing a scene in my office."

"Like my buddy says, sir, we're right sorry about barging in here like this," said Hanklin, "but there's a matter requiring your immediate attention, sir."

"Soldier, there's more needing my attention than you'll ever know about. Now what are you doing here, and it better be good or you'll be on your way down to the brig to sit in a cell with Ballard."

Mischkie blinked. "Then you know. That's what we were trying to get in to tell you about, General."

Hanklin put in, "Couldn't get no help from nobody but the Sarge said we were on direct orders from you. We figured you ought to know about the fix he's in."

"I know about the fix he's in. I don't approve of enlisted men striking officers."

"Uh, yes sir, we understand that, sir," said Mischkie. "You being an officer and all, sir," Hanklin added.

Mischkie shot him a look to shut up and said, "Sir, Major Corbin was preventing Sergeant Ballard from carrying out your orders, namely keeping General Goro in one piece like we'd been told to. Believe me, we went through hell getting our hands on him. Real hell."

"I know about that and I know about Major Corbin." MacArthur lost some of his sternness. "I ordered him relieved of duty. Delaney from Intelligence is keeping us informed. He's informed us that General Goro is cooperating fully. As for you two, we'll forget this incident, considering what you've been through and the good job

you did, if I have your assurance that when you leave here you'll return to your quarters on the double and burn those fatigues and reacquaint yourselves with some soap and water."

"Reckon we can give our assurance on that right enough, sir," said Hanklin. "What about the Sarge?"

The general's aide snapped, "You were dismissed, soldier."

MacArthur said, "Don't worry about Sergeant Ballard. I have something in mind for him and for you." He turned back into the inner office, saying to Krueger and Eichelberger, as if nothing had happened, "Now where were we? There's much to be done," and the office door closed after them.

She found him on the parapet that faced across Cape Nojimba to the east, out across the endless ocean beyond. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, the salty breeze playing with wisps of his hair.

For a moment, seeing him standing so, she saw in her mind's eye with instant clarity a nearly identical setting years earlier when she was thirteen years old. She had been sent up here by one of the house staff to bring her uncle to the phone, not knowing what the horrible news would be. He had been standing, gazing out across the ocean, exactly as she found him now.

That was the day she had learned her father had been killed in China. She blinked away the memory and with it the ache that reached across the years.

Keiko walked over to stand beside the Baron, the breeze playing with the strands of her hair. The morning mist had dissipated. A fierce sun beat down upon sparkling blue water beneath the harsh sky.

Several seconds, a half minute, passed with neither of them saying a thing. Then she spoke.

"What are you thinking, Uncle?"

"I am thinking that out there is the enemy, poised to strike at the heart of Japan."

"And what do you think of me? I must know."

"Do you recall when you were a child, the day you came up here to summon me to the telephone for the call about your father?"

She tried not to reveal a jolt of surprise at his words, and the ache from those years ago stabbed again.

"I remember."

"I thought in the years since that I had come to know you. I have seen you blossom from a lovely, gifted child into a beautiful, talented young woman. I thought I knew you."

"Uncle, may I speak freely?"

"You always have, child."

"What I heard you and those men plotting last night is wrong."

"Do not speak to me of wrong," he rasped with controlled emotion. "It is wrong to turn one's back on traditions which have sustained us as a people since our beginnings." He held his arms straight at his sides, his hands clenched. "You disappoint me, Keiko, and you concern me. I am in a quandary. Who were you spying for out there on that ledge? Was it to satisfy your own curiosity or for someone else?"

"You think I work for the enemy?"

"Not for the Americans, no, certainly not. We have discussed your time in the United States often enough for me not to doubt the sincerity of your rejection of Western values. However, your loyalties could be divided. I on the one side, your former superiors in the War Ministry on the other. There are powerful factions on Ichigaya Heights as adamantly opposed to the idea of rebellion as yourself. The War Minister, General Anami, chose seppuku over disobeying his Emperor. Perhaps one of these factions has exploited your closeness to me."

"You know that could not be true."

"I do not know what to believe about you. Your sentiments are with the premier and the old women politicians who have misled His Majesty."

"Have you considered, Uncle, that politicians, for all their failings, are better at running countries than generals? Our nation would not be in this situation today had the armed forces stayed out of politics. The military has abused its power. Your beloved generals have shown themselves to be cruel, arrogant, stupid. These are the men who brought the good name of Japan into disrepute around the world. This is what I feel. I spied upon you last night only out of personal concern, not for anyone else. This I swear to you."

"I want to believe you, Keiko. What happened would be difficult enough to accept if what you say is true, but were I to learn the other is true, I confess I do not know what measures I would feel compelled to take against you."

"Uncle, the coup you hoped for has failed. It can only be so or there would have been something broadcast on the radio."

What you and those men were plotting will not materialize. I overheard you urging restraint in committing forces loyal to you. Surely you have had the opportunity to reconsider your position. Will you and your men concede defeat when the voice of our Emperor beseeches you to?"

He produced a watch and chain. He regarded the watch.

"In ten minutes His Majesty's voice will be broadcast for the first time in history." He pocketed the watch. "Come, Keiko. We will listen to it on the radio in my study."

He started to turn his back and walk away. She touched fingertips to his forearm.

"Uncle, please. Let us resolve this now. It was you who taught me that one must endure well in any circumstance. You must accept what is happening. I do not want this to come between us."

He turned to peer searchingly into her eyes.

"The samurai is taught that woman's nature is inherently evil. 'Woman is a creature with the look of an angel but a diabolical spirit in its innermost heart,' " he quoted. " 'Nothing is to be dreaded so much as a woman.' I have told myself all my life that you were somehow different, Keiko. Now, I wonder."

She watched as he turned and walked away. He ordinarily would have offered his arm, made some conversational invitation.

Nothing was ordinary anymore.

His world, the traditions he was heir to were in transition after a thousand years. His world was falling apart.

And so is mine, she told herself.

She followed him inside.

Chapter 12

They were quarreling again.

Tenney had dropped him off moments earlier in the unmarked sedan. Carla wanted the family car for errands that day and had dropped him off that morning at the precinct house.

He gave a tired wave to Tenney and started across the street.

"Tomorrow, Al. Bright and early."

"Bright and bleary," Tenney punned.

He shifted into gear and pulled away.

Ballard watched the tail lights disappear around the corner down the block, and glanced at his watch. Four in the morning.

He trudged past the coupe where Carla had parked it in front of the one-bedroom house they'd lived in throughout their seven years of marriage. He had been a cop for eight years.

He'd never outgrown his earliest concepts of right and wrong. There were good, decent, hard-working people in this world who were too often victimized by the greedy, the ruthless, the immoral who resorted to any means necessary to take what was not theirs. Ballard felt that helping protect decent people from such spoilers and takers was important.

He was an oldest son and his father, a successful attorney, had intended to provide him with an education in law, but that fell away along with everything else in the crash of '29, when he was nineteen. In short order he enrolled in the police academy.

He pounded his share of pavement and waited until he made detective before asking Carla to marry him. They had known each other since high school. Had lusted for each other since high school, was more like it.

Lust had always been the only common denominator between them, and now even that was gone, or seemed to be.

She was waiting up for him in the living room, listening to one of her dance band shows on the radio. A half-empty bottle and a glass sat on the end table next to the couch. He could see that she was looped.

The ten pounds and a few gray hairs she'd acquired over their years of marriage made her no less attractive to him, but at this moment he did not like what he saw. He went over and picked up the bottle and carried it back to the liquor shelf. He poured himself a shot of bourbon, threw it back, poured another, capped the bottle and replaced it on the shelf without looking at her.

"We've got to talk, Johnny," she said in that cloying voice she thought he liked.

"I'll buy that. You know I don't like you hitting the sauce."

"That's what we've got to talk about." A drunken thickness slurred the words. "Johnny, I can't tell you how much I worry about you when you're out on the streets at night. I know that anytime the phone rings or there's a knock on the door, it could

be someone calling to tell me you're lying dead in an alley somewhere and that you'll never be coming home again. I worry my stomach into knots. I drink because sometimes that lets me forget why I worry." Naked emotion knifed through the booze.

"Carla, I'm sorry, honey. You have to understand how it is. You said you would."

"That was when you still kept up the pretence that you wanted a transfer to something else. That was three months ago, Johnny."

"I said I was going to get a transfer after we nailed Evelio."

"Three months, Johnny."

"Okay, okay, so it's taking longer than we expected. What do you think Tenney and I were doing tonight?"

"I don't care what you and Tenney were doing. I don't want you out on the street, Johnny. I want you home."

"This is taking a lot of time," he conceded, "but it can't be any other way, Carla, believe me. When we get the goods on Lou Evelio, we'll have the man behind everything illegal that goes on in this city."

"Lou Evelio, Lou Evelio," she sing-songed. "I can't stand to hear that man's name anymore. I would gladly kill Lou Evelio myself if it would get him out of our lives. I think I would almost prefer finding out that you were seeing another woman instead of the way things have been going between us."

"Carla, you know there isn't anyone else."

There wasn't. No woman had ever made his hormones jump to attention the way his wife did. But lately...

A funny, deep look he did not understand flashed in her eyes, then disappeared.

"I know there's no one else," she said. "But, Johnny, this thing with Evelio. It's become an obsession with you."

She was right about that. His childhood impressions of right and wrong and good and evil in this world had only been confirmed and more deeply ingrained during his years patrolling the streets. Day in and day out he saw good, hard-working people exploited and intimidated by thieves, dope dealers, pimps, con artists of every stripe, murderers, and his blood boiled to know that he could only deal with it, any of it, on a small scale.

His promotion to plainclothes had changed all that. He was able to go after some of the real causes of all the suffering and misery, though it took some years more before he became aware of the importance, the culpability—hell, the very existence—of Louis Evelio. He had managed to keep a respectable name for himself thanks to a well publicized camaraderie with the elite of Chicago's ruling class and several not-so-well-known alliances with the mobsters who ran the city's underworld.

Evelio was one of the big guys. The biggest. He supplied the start-up capital for new rackets and expansion, while raking in a healthy cut of every illegal activity in the city in return. He was as dirty as the hoods themselves.

Lately, very much on their own, Ballard and Al Tenney had, through a combination of informants, wire taps, luck, and old-fashioned, monotonous police work in City Hall, gotten closer than anyone ever had in getting the real goods on Evelio; legal proof that would hold up even in a court of law.

Maybe it had become an obsession, but they were closer than anyone had ever dreamed of getting, even the Feds. Two city detectives were that close to bringing in Lou Evelio.

"It won't be much longer, Carla," he told her. "I promise."

"John Ballard, I can't go on living like this. The worry, the nights alone without you. Do you remember the last time we made love? It's been more than a month."

Her sudden bold intimacy caught him off guard. He lost his voice for a moment.

Everything she said was true. At first he had assumed the seemingly mutual lack of interest in their bedroom to be nothing more than a normal lag in ardor as he supposed any longstanding couple might experience from time to time. You couldn't expect a person to feel like jumping in the sack every spare second he had, he told himself, and for a while life had continued with little change, except that the days became weeks and the weeks had grown to more than a month and neither of them had spoken of it until now.

He cleared his throat, feeling himself losing ground here. "Honey, listen, I don't know what to say."

"Well, I know what to say. You're using this Evelio thing as an excuse not to make love with me and I want to know why."

"Carla, that isn't true."

"It's not too late, Johnny. Why don't you just go in tomorrow and tell them you want off the Evelio case?"

"You know it's not that easy."

"You've had vacation time coming for more than a year now. Why don't we go up to Michigan or Wisconsin, get away from the city for a few days, how does that sound, Johnny? Remember our honeymoon? That cabin in the north woods with just the two of us?"

Right then something clicked to the surface of his mind. The hurting in her voice. The way she held her eyes downcast. "Where did you go with the car this afternoon?"

"Johnny, what do you mean?"

"Why are you so anxious for us to go on a trip all of a sudden?"

"Because I want to save our marriage."

"I didn't know things had gotten that bad between us."

"Well, they have ... they have."

"Answer my question. Where did you take the car today? You weren't running errands, were you?"

"You already know," she said. "I can see it in your eyes. I hear it in your voice."

"My God, you've taken a lover!"

"No." She shook her head. "It never went that far. This afternoon was the last time I'll see him. I told him so and I meant it."

"Who is he? Where do you know him from?"

"It doesn't matter. I told you I'll never see him again."

She picked up the empty whiskey glass from the end table and walked across the room, away from him.

That's when the quarreling really began.

"God damn!" he snarled. "I've been out busting my backside sixty hours a week to buy us groceries and put a roof over our heads and clothes on your back and you're out running around on me."

"I was tempted, Johnny, okay? Nothing happened, nothing will happen. Maybe you have some responsibility in this too, have you thought about that? Maybe you'd better set things right around here before it's too late."

Rage and humiliation surged through him. His emotions flared.

"You've got some gall. Out chasing around with another man and issuing me ultimatums. By rights I should throw you out in the gutter where you belong."

"A vacation might be nicer, Johnny. Let's not throw this away."

"Maybe you already have, Carla, from the minute you started cheating on me."

"Well then, the hell with you and your goddamn dream house!" she erupted, every bit of the pent-up pressure pouring from her at once. "Maybe I'll tell my friend I changed my mind!"

She threw her glass at the opposite wall. It hit, bounced off, and before it landed on the carpet, she was storming to the closet and angrily pulling on her coat.

He thought briefly, strangely, of how attractive she still was to him even in her anger, especially in her anger, her rage like her passion, close to the surface. It ignited him.

She grabbed her purse and had her hand on the doorknob when something made him say, "Carla, wait."

She glared back at him.

"For what?"

"I'm ... sorry," he said with difficulty. Emotions rioted in his brain. His throat was dry. "I wallow in filth all day." He had difficulty finding the right words. He was not sure what he was trying to say. She was seeing another man! "Maybe it's crazy, but ... I feel dirty all the time, like if I touch you I'll make you dirty and I don't want to do that to you, honey. I know it's nuts."

"We've grown apart, Johnny," she said, sounding almost sober. "Living together under one roof, sleeping in the same bed ... we've grown apart."

She hadn't taken her hand from the doorknob.

"You said we could work on it," he said, trying to keep the sudden desperation he felt from showing in his voice. "So let's work on it."

"Not tonight, Johnny."

"What do you mean, not tonight?"

"I mean tomorrow we can work on it, talk about it. Tonight I think we need a break from each other, maybe just for one night."

She opened the door to leave. His frayed nerves flared. A wave of jealousy hit him.

"You don't know what you want, that's your problem!" he heard himself shout. "You don't know if you should spend the night with your husband or one of your men friends!" He had no control over the words spewing out of him. "Well, I'll tell you what, you bitch, you can take as long a break from me as you want, how does that sound? You don't ever have to come back!"

She said in a quiet voice, "Maybe I won't," and she was gone, slamming the door on her way out.

He started after her impulsively.

The telephone rang. He paused, cursed, went over and caught it on the third ring.

"John, you okay?" It was Captain Harrelson.

Ballard stood there with the telephone receiver in his hand, trying to get a rein on his emotions, his temples pounding. Harrelson sounded worked up.

"Yeah, I'm fine, skipper. What's wrong?"

"It's Tenney. He just walked into an ambush outside his house. Two guys with Tommy guns, for Chrissake. Were you birds still trying to pin a rap on Evelio? I told you nix on that. It looks like Evelio is hitting back, and I'd say you're next."

Ballard whirled toward the front door without replying, throwing the receiver aside, shouting Carla's name. He heard the hollow thump of a closing car door outside. He gained the door and threw it open.

She had the headlights on. She always turned on the headlights before she switched on the ignition.

He stormed from the house screaming her name at the top of his lungs.

"Carla!"

The car, the night, the world exploded into a bursting fireball, a blossoming, blinding, deafening conflagration.

The heat and power of it flung him from his feet, his scream lost in the awful thunderclap of sound.

He awakened with a gasp like a man reaching the surface after having been submerged underwater for too long, the abrupt return to reality a jarring jolt that lurched him into a sitting position, and for that first instant all he could hear was his own ragged breathing and all he could feel was his body coated with sweat.

Someone was shaking him awake.

"Hey, Sarge. Hey. Snap out of it."

Then the old combat instincts took over and he was wide awake with a full awareness of where he was.

The narrow cell.

The dream became what it was, not reality but submerged mental images of what happened five years ago coming back to haunt him, tentacles from the past that would never let him go.

Hanklin was shaking him, crouched in the narrow space next to the cot. Mischkie leaned against a wall opposite the open cell door, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

"You were having a nightmare, Sarge."

"What the hell do you call this? Tell me you guys are here to spring me." Ballard sat up.

"We're here to spring you, Sarge," Hanklin grinned. "Carried the orders over from General MacArthur and dropped them off out front not one minute ago."

"On your feet, Sarge," said Mischkie. "No offense, but you look like hell and you don't smell so good either."

"No argument there," said Ballard, coming to his feet. "What the hell's been going on while I was in dreamland?"

"The general says you're to shower up and catch a good twenty-four hours of shut-eye," Hanklin told him. "He wants you in his office tomorrow morning at 0800 hours."

Ballard buttoned up the fatigue shirt he'd been using for a pillow.

"You talked the general into turning me loose?"

"Not us," said Mischkie. "That's why we went there, but he already had the idea when we showed up. We just ran the orders over."

"The general says he's got plans for you," Hanklin grinned. "I reckon in this particular case, 'you' means us."

"Did he say what's up?"

"Uh-uh. Guess that must be one of the things you're going to find out tomorrow morning at 0800."

They left the brig, stepping into the blistering sunshine that almost felt comfortable to Ballard after the airless confines of the cell.

"What about Goro?"

Mischkie nodded back toward the Quonset. "His own special cell and everything. They're pulling him out to Manila sometime today. He cooperated fully."

"Anything else I should know?"

"Something's in the air," Hanklin said in a lowered voice. "Scuttlebutt is that the Japs are about to announce they're throwing in the towel. No one's talking around the headshed, just rumors."

"And what about the reason I had to sit and rot in this shitpit? What about Corbin?"

"Corbin's dead," Mischkie told him. "We just heard about it on the way over."

"They went looking for him," Hanklin said. "Corbin hung himself with his belt off a shower fixture. He was croaked when they found him."

Chapter 13

The crane is the symbol for the Emperor of Japan, much as the Crown is synonymous with the reigning monarch of England.

Keiko listened attentively to the high-pitched, distant-sounding voice of the Sacred Crane, the Voice of the Emperor, emanating from the radio in the library.

The royal Rescript was phrased in the strange, archaic, imperial language.

"To our good and loyal subjects:

"After pondering deeply the general trends of the world and the actual conditions obtaining in our empire today, we have decided to effect a settlement of the present situation by resorting to an extraordinary measure.

"We have ordered our government to communicate to the governments of the United States, Great Britain, China, and the Soviet Union, that our empire accepts the provisions of their Joint Declaration."

She listened, standing several paces behind her uncle. He knelt, his hands closed before him, his face contorted. Tears coursed down his face.

Across the width and breadth of the country, she knew millions would be similarly weeping with this ultimate shame and humiliation of the unthinkable.

She eased away and let herself out of the library.

The baron remained kneeling before the now silent radio.

His frame shook with soundless weeping. She fought down an impulse to rush over to him, to touch and comfort him. This she could not do. She knew he would not allow it.

Particular phrases of the voice from the radio echoed in her mind.

"The war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage. Moreover, the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is indeed incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should we continue to fight, it would not only result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization ... This is the reason why we have ordered the acceptance of the provisions of the Joint Declaration of the Powers. Beware most strictly any outbursts of emotion which may create confusion, lead ye astray and cause ye to lose the confidence of the world. It is according to the dictates of time and fate that we have resolved to pave the way for a grand peace for all the generations to come by enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable."

She left the library and closed the door, latching it behind her without a sound. Within her a gnawing ache of something left undone would not go away.

Marquis Kido accompanied His Majesty on the Emperor's evening stroll. As the Emperor's chief advisor, he often did so.

Kido was thinking that Fukiage Garden was as sedate and peaceful as ever. It was impossible to tell that less than twelve hours ago the palace had been in rebel hands, that young soldiers with fixed bayonets and determined scowls had run amok. Blood had been spilt here, and yet now the crickets chirped and peace reigned. Or so it seemed to Marquis Kido, who did not presume to guess how His Majesty might feel.

The Emperor was by nature a man of few words, a light sleeper who neither drank nor smoked, Kido had learned during his tenure. Conversation between them was generally sparse and functional at times like this, but His Majesty did generally comment on some aspect of the garden's beauty.

His Majesty would have much on his mind, on his conscience, this night, Kido told himself.

He thought again of trying to bolster His Majesty's mood by adding his own personal endorsement of the path His Majesty had chosen for the country. Kido told himself this would be presumptuous, and so kept his thoughts private.

His Majesty had been deceived from the beginning. It had been a crucial mistake to allow a fanatical militarist to become Minister of War. The war had been started without the Emperor's knowledge or permission, fueled by his generals' wrongheaded belief that the true mission of their country was to spread and glorify the imperial way to the ends of the four seas. Now, the Emperor had spoken and the war ceased. Where one week ago the Japanese people had dedicated themselves to repulsing the barbarian, with bamboo spears if need be, now this same people would ease their emperor's heart by following the ways of peace.

After some time, the Emperor said reflectively, "You are aware of the situation at Atsugi, Marquis Kido?"

Kido nodded. "Regrettable, Your Majesty."

"I am told that after the broadcast of the Rescript this noon, men who could not accept the idea of a surrender tried to get their planes in the air, swearing they would refuse to accept surrender. Reinforcements were needed to quell a riot there."

"It is the same at Oita and at many other bases, Your Majesty. Men blind drunk, shouting, cursing wildly. Soldiers walking about as if in a stupor. Most regrettable."

"And yet understandable," said the Emperor with what Kido took to be infinite sadness. "From the beginning they were told that the war was not a contest between armaments but a pitting of their faith in spirit against the superiority of the enemy's resources. Our spirit was insufficient. It was matched in battle by the spirit of the American people."

"We must look to the future, Your Highness. There is bound to be unrest, but your subjects will obey your wishes.

They will defend the good name of Japan. They will do so by obeying their Emperor.

"We must command the respect of the world, even in our shame."

"And so we shall, Majesty. We are a nation that saw the respect other great nations earned through military might. We embarked on a course to equal them. We have learned that aggression is not the road to honor."

"We have gained so little," said the Emperor. "We have suffered so much. The old ways must be discarded. There must be international cooperation. There must be peace."

"Your subjects will not disappoint you, Majesty. Your subjects want peace as much as you do."

"Most of them. It is the small faction of militarists that concerns me most."

"Dissention will be subdued, Your Highness."

"I hope so, Marquis Kido. I truly do."

The narrow, low-ceilinged passage echoed with whispering footfalls. Baron Tamura and his late brother had learned of the network of secret passages that honeycombed the castle from their father on his death bed. The widely spaced, low-wattage lighting barely illuminated the passageway. The Baron's elongated shadow wavered upon the walls and curved ceiling.

He reached a heavy iron door and slid back the bolt, easing the door open. Shafts of daylight poured in, accentuating the gloom of the passageway. He stepped into a thicket of small trees. They had been allowed to grow heavily here, effectively concealing the entrance to the secret passage.

It was exceedingly warm and bright. Tall trees towered above, then thinned away to where thick vegetation covered a hillside.

He stood for a moment, watching, listening. He saw nothing, heard nothing but the lazy drone of the cicadas. He stepped into the clearing and stood there, waiting.

They appeared from the tree line on the far side of the clearing facing the hillside. They had been waiting for him, watching. They did not wear camouflage.

It was as if they had been invisible until they chose to be seen. Their approach was wholly without sound.

Three of them, men of indeterminate age, grimy of face, one of them limping with the aid of a staff, another walking stoop shouldered, each carrying a worn pack, dressed in the tattered civilian clothing of peasants. They wore the look of vacant despair of the war refugee or the demobilized soldier.

The countryside was rife with such people since the broadcast of the royal Rescript.

As they drew closer, the man in the middle stepped forward to separate himself from the others as leader or spokesman. Baron Tamura saw upon closer inspection that they appeared, beneath facial grime and weariness, to be no older than in their early twenties. They stood before him and bowed deeply. He returned the bow with a bare inclination of his head.

The man who had stepped forward said, in the local dialect, "I am Ota Nakajima. We are the humble emissaries of our *jonin*, Seiko Yamashita, who wishes you a long life for all you have bestowed upon the Shikotan clan."

"When did you arrive in this area?"

"Last evening, Baron-san."

"You have been bivouacked out here all night and all of this day? I have men patrolling the outside of these walls every hour."

"Our *jonin* instructed us to arrive early. A precaution."

"Were you followed?"

"Two men. They have been watching us since the railroad station in Tateyama. They have kept their distance. They spent the night believing they had us under surveillance, not aware that we were at times close enough to touch them without their knowledge. Local police. They think we are refugees who will resort to thievery. They will catch us in the act and thus win your favor and appointment with your private force. These are their own words. They will be somewhere behind us now in the trees, observing us."

Baron Tamura scanned the tree line over Nakajima's shoulder. He saw nothing.

"They cannot hear us," he said, "but they will have seen. They must not divulge what they have seen."

Nakajima bowed from the waist. "*Hai*, Baron-san. Saito!"

The man at his right spun around with a coordinated speed and smoothness of movement that belied his unkempt, weary appearance. Something glinted in the sun, flung over handed by Saito too rapidly for the eye to follow, though the Baron knew it would more than likely be a *shuriken*, the ancient, multi-pointed throwing weapon.

A human cried out, a sharp, agonized bleat, and a collapsing body fell into view from behind the trunk of a tree.

There came a flurry of unseen movement as someone in the trees made haste to escape.

"Mikassa!" Nakajima snapped.

The man at his other side spun and hurled an object which rendered the same result: a choked-off scream. The noise of someone running through the underbrush abruptly ceased.

Saito and Mikassa trotted across the clearing to retrieve whatever they had thrown. They returned to take their place behind Nakajima.

Another bow from Nakajima.

"We await your further instructions, Baron-san."

"My men will dispose of the bodies. You will come with me. It is good you are here. There is much to be done."

Chapter 14

The orderly showed Ballard into MacArthur's office the next morning at 0800 hours sharp.

Ballard felt like hell, and a bleary-eyed glance in the mirror propped on the latrine wall before leaving the tent he shared with Hanklin and Mischkie had showed him that he looked no better than he felt.

Krueger was not present this morning. Eichelberger sat in the same chair he'd sat in two days before.

MacArthur stood in the center of his office exactly as Ballard had left him the last time. Ballard wondered if the general had been pacing nonstop since then.

"You look as if you've had a rough time of it, Sergeant. I thought I told those men of yours to tell you to get some sleep."

Ballard assumed parade rest, as he had last time.

"That wasn't real easy, sir. There was a lot of celebrating going on."

"There is much to celebrate."

"I had a rough night the night before. And I'd spent some time cooling my heels in the brig. Guess I didn't much feel like celebrating."

MacArthur started in on the pacing, talking around the pipe stem clenched between his teeth.

"You left me no choice in that, Sergeant. I understand what happened was Corbin's fault but when word got out about what happened, if I hadn't taken some sort of disciplinary measure, why, the men would get the idea that it was perfectly all right to punch an officer in the snoot. The good Lord knows an officer's life is thankless enough as it is."

"Yes, sir."

"With that unpleasantness out of the way, I should like to take this opportunity, Sergeant, to commend you on the fine work you and your men did in bringing General Goro down out of the hills. As you know, the general was induced to radio his troops to cancel the offensive and since word of the surrender has been confirmed, he has also instructed his command to lay down their arms and surrender. Early word from the field is that they are complying with this order as well. Having General Goro in our hands has saved countless thousands of lives, Sergeant Ballard, and you and those who went with you after Goro are to thank for that."

Ballard could only think of those who had not made it back, of a young woman who should have been flirting with the school boys and studying her homework

and going to parties with friends, not dying in the jungle, her life pulped brutally from her by enemy fire.

He replied with another "Yes, sir," wondering why he'd been sent for.

MacArthur went on. "With the cease-fire and end to hostilities, a whole new task looms ahead for us, and I am not referring to the occupation of Japan, but to the mechanics of the surrender itself."

Ballard could think of nothing to say to that.

Eichelberger said, "The Nips have requested a two week delay to quell internal unrest." He added, as if for Mac-Arthur's benefit, "Two whole weeks for them to burn records, cache arms and money. They'll demobilize before we even get there."

This was said as if continuing a disagreement.

"All for the best," MacArthur countered. "Those two weeks will also give them time in which to compose their collective face. We must hold back and allow this to happen. It will only be to our advantage."

"I wish I could be as trusting of those devils as you are," Eichelberger said.

"Nevertheless, General Chamberlain will be landing an airborne division at Atsugi and armored units at Yokohama on or about the twenty-ninth. I intend to formally accept the Japanese surrender on Bull Halsey's flagship, the MISSOURI, in Tokyo Bay, on September second. Reservations have been made at the New Grand Hotel in Yokohama for the thirtieth of August. We will be checked in by two o'clock that afternoon.

"That is two weeks from today, Sergeant. Two whole weeks. You might think this would give us enough time for careful planning. Well, it does and it doesn't. The next two weeks—the next two years, for that matter—are going to be an obstacle course in every way imaginable; the surrender, transition, occupation. There are a multitude of details that need attending to at this preliminary juncture, none more important than our security once we arrive inside Japan."

"And is that where I come in, sir?"

"That is precisely where you come in. My dogface grunts have done one hell of a job fighting their way across the Pacific, island by island, to get us this far. But, Ballard, if you ask any one of those boys out there, they'll tell you themselves that they're just ordinary fellows caught up in extraordinary events, doing the best they can.

"Well, Sergeant," the general moved to the black leather swivel chair behind his desk and dropped into it, "I have need of a man, of a few men, who are not ordinary fellows. I am talking about you and your two friends, Mischkie and Hanklin."

"You said the fighting's over, sir. That's about all those men and I know how to do."

"Yes, and you're the best there is, they tell me. After seeing what you can do, I'm inclined to agree. And don't worry, Sergeant, if you survive this one, I suspect your country will always have need of those few like yourself who share your extraordinary capabilities."

"Tell you the truth, sir, that's not a real comforting thought."

"The last time you were here, I told you that I was cognizant of your pre-war personal history."

Ballard said nothing.

"You were a police detective in Chicago. You were about to close in on a mob boss. He had a bomb planted in your car, which resulted in the death of your wife. You went after the men responsible and killed them one by one. They always died with a weapon in their hand, but you broke so many departmental regulations, the District Attorney had no choice but to bring charges against you. There were two attempts on your life while you were awaiting trial. Pearl Harbor happened the day before your trial began and an honest judge offered you a deal. The charges were dropped and you enlisted. And from that day to this you have consistently beaten the odds on missions that should have been impossible from step one. You're a man who wouldn't mind dying."

"I loved my wife. As for signing up, I would've done that anyway."

"You possess extraordinary capabilities as a soldier, you have the instincts of a good cop, and you have a code of honor that is your own. Yes, you'll do." He looked at Eichelberger. "What do you think, Bob?"

"Your safety is my responsibility, General," Eichelberger replied. "I think the security I plan to provide you with after we land in Japan on the 30th will be more than adequate."

"I'm sure it will, but it will be manned by ordinary men in extraordinary circumstances, no matter how many of them we throw in. Bob, I want Sergeant Ballard and his men in on security planning. I want them with us when we touch down and all the way into Yokohama."

He looked back at Ballard. "General Eichelberger's people will run security but you won't be attached to them. The civil affairs units will deal with the civilians. What I want, Sergeant, is to know there are men close to me who can deal with the extraordinary, should someone in Japan choose to test our mettle after we arrive."

"And I want Mischkie and Hanklin there with you. You fellows work well together. Extremely well. I wouldn't want to break up a set. You'll be contacted by General Eichelberger's people and you can work out the details with them."

"I doubt if we'll be seeing one another until we take off from Manila on the 30th but from that point on, you will be my special contingency squad, Sergeant. I'll be counting on you. That will be all. See you in Japan."

"Yes, sir." Ballard saluted, about faced, and exited.

MacArthur said, "You still don't think much of Ballard or of my plans for him, do you, Bob?"

"Oh, I can appreciate the logic of it well enough, General," said Eichelberger. "I guess I'm just leery of a character who was sitting in the brig twenty-four hours ago honchoing a special contingency squad for the SCAP. Special contingency squad? That's a new one on me, sir."

"Now, Bob, that altercation with Corbin was not Ballard's fault."

"Granted, and I admit the man's one hell of a fighting machine, but he's a misfit, General. Don't tell me you can't see it in his eyes. Ballard is a walking time bomb waiting to explode and the same applies to those hard cases with him."

"Bob, the Japanese are an altogether different species of the human race than you or I. They were a feudal society seventy years ago! The lord of the land was the shogun and his word was the law of the samurai. They are a mystical race, as only a war-like people can be."

"In some ways, I know what to expect from the Japanese. In many other ways, Japan will forever remain a mystery to me as to every other Occidental. I don't know what to expect over there but whatever comes our way, I want John Ballard and his men in the thick of it with me."

The oblong room where Okada and Nagano met, in the public bath house, was partitioned with rice paper and cedar panels. The shadow of each man's personal bodyguard was a silhouette on the paper-lined sliding doors near the twin tubs sunk in the tiled floor.

"I will say it was unexpected, this invitation to join you, Major," Nagano said after a suitable length of time had been spent soaking in the superlatively heated water.

Like any man of his class, even in these troubled times, Nagano looked forward to a daily soak in heated water as part of the routine of every afternoon.

"I thought there might be matters best discussed between us in private, General Nagano. Have I incited your curiosity?"

"I confess you have."

There was something about the icy, black eyes of the *Kempeitai* officer that gave Nagano chills despite the warmth of the bath.

The telephone call from Okada had come just after the noon meal of rice. The army general had come to meet the major, as requested.

"Since Baron Tamura brought us together with Colonel Hayashi," said Okada, "I have come to respect you, General Nagano, as a man deeply committed to His Majesty and to Japan."

"You could say the same of any soldier in His Majesty's armed forces. Please, Major. Come to the point."

"Very well. I wonder, General, how shall I put it? Between the two of us, am I the only one who finds dissatisfaction with the way our alliance with the Baron has progressed?"

"I know you think we should have committed more forces last night," Nagano ventured.

"I grow weary of anticipating developments which never occur," said Okada. "Within days an American reconnaissance patrol will land at Atsugi. The rebellion there will be quelled by then unless something unforeseen happens. Time is running out. Aggressive leadership is required."

"I wonder if it is not already too late."

"As you know, General, I command many units of *Kempeitai*." The secret police officer's bald head glistened with perspiration.

"That is why the Baron chose to bring you into our circle, Major."

"If they know they do not stand alone, I know men who will risk everything to repulse the barbarians, even at this late hour."

Nagano paused, choosing and enunciating his words carefully.

"You are not quite the patriot you pretend to be, are you, Major?"

Okada took no offense at this.

"I was one of seven children," he said. "We lived on a one acre household farm on Kyushu. The *Kempeitai* is to be one of the last arms of the military to be demobilized, in order that we may help ferret out," Okada's gold tooth flashed a

smile, "rebellious factions. When we are demobilized, I will be expected to return to that farm, to the dirt and the poverty."

"Who are you with? I have heard General Kurita is planning something."

"You will appreciate, Colonel, that *seppuku* is not my way, nor is suicide by any means. I will not end as Hatanaka did or General Anami. I had thought Baron Tamura held the power to sway the allegiance of all the rebel factions in the military and the government."

"No man, not even Baron Tamura, is that powerful. Not even the Emperor. Do you ask me to betray the Baron?"

"Hardly that."

"What is it you want of me, then?" Nagano no longer found his bath relaxing.

"You anticipate me, surely, General. I suggest you join those I have joined. Yes, General Kurita's group. They will not make the same mistakes Hatanaka did. General Kurita does not in any way intend to subvert Baron Tamura, whom he holds in only the highest regard. There are entire units at your command, General, who have given in to pressure to conform to the terms of surrender. These units would rise up again if you but gave the signal."

"Every man you speak of would give his life for Japan," Nagano agreed, "but I wonder if we have not lost our chance. The soldiers, the people, have heard their Emperor's voice in tears, instructing them to accept the terms of surrender, to cooperate with the occupying forces. I will not order more men to die without cause."

"Our moment has not passed. It is with us now. I would call to your attention the youth groups roaming the streets of Tokyo and Yokohama. They personify the unrest waiting to be organized."

Nagano shook his head. "Common street hoodlums."

"They call themselves the Righteous Group for Upholding Imperial Rule and Driving Out Foreigners," the Kempeitai officer said. "They occupy the Yoyogi parade ground and Atago Hill. They have laid siege to the Prime Minister's home. The flames of rebellion but need to be fanned."

"And then you would not have to return to your family farm on Kyushu, would you, Major? You could build the power that is yours now, and you would become a very powerful man indeed. A very dangerous man. Perhaps you would be promoted out of the Kempeitai altogether."

"No one in the military will be allowed to hold government jobs under the laws of occupation," Okada said. "If this happens, you will be no better off than I, General, perhaps far worse. You are a commander."

"I am ready to meet my fate, whatever it may be," Nagano said. "However, I will reserve my decision on this proposal of yours until I have heard what Baron Tamura has to say at our next meeting." He stood from the tub and reached for a towel. "A shame to squander such luxury as an afternoon soak on matters such as these."

They slipped into robes and went toward individual dress cubicles.

"You will consider my proposal then, General?"

"I promise only the confidentiality I guaranteed before we met."

Nagano started into his cubicle and turned to pull the curtain shut. Okada stepped forward and gripped the curtain, staying it from being drawn.

"There is one last thing I would like to add, General Nagano. You will appreciate the great personal risk I incur in confiding in you." Okada was not wearing his glasses. His dark eyes pierced like daggers.

"Do you doubt my honor, Major?" asked Nagano.

"I only wish to impress upon you, General, that I will hold you stringently to your vow of confidentiality. Remember, I command an entire unit of Kempeitai. There are no secrets from me."

"That sounds like a threat, Major."

Okada released the curtain.

"We will act soon, General. With or without you."

Chapter 15

Beyond the windows of the C-47, sunrise rouged the slopes of Mount Fujiyama rising majestically from its cloud-shrouded base. The cold, the vibrations of the fuselage, and the throbbing roar of the plane's engines had made sleep impossible during the flight from Okinawa.

This was the lead plane of a long trail of forty-five C-47s.

Hanklin sat in the seat next to Ballard, having spent the flight engrossed in a western pulp magazine. He slipped the magazine under his seat and leaned across Ballard for a look out the window.

A fighter plane flew escort off their starboard side.

"Gives me some peace of mind knowing those flyboys are riding shotgun."

Mischkie had a reputation for being able to sleep anywhere, and had proven it once again, but he was awake now, leaning forward from the seat behind them.

"Yeah, but when we touch down it's going to be just us and a couple million Japs and we're going to be all on our own, cowboy. Colonel Tench will be the first foreign conqueror ever to set foot on the soil of Japan."

Colonel C. T. Tench, seated at the back of the plane with his aides, and the one hundred and fifty men aboard these C-47s, were about to touch down at Atsugi Air Base to reconnoiter and set up communications. A Division of the 11th Airborne, five hundred men strong, would touch down the following day. MacArthur's group was scheduled to land the day after that.

Hanklin chuckled. "I hear the colonel's fellow officers were getting on his nerves back on Okinawa."

"Taking bets," Mischkie nodded soberly. "The odds were fifty-fifty that we'd get ourselves blown from the sky before we touched down, or that they'd wait until we landed before they massacred us."

"No one knows what's going to happen when we touch down," said Ballard. "Not even the Japs."

"Intel says rebel groups are still roaming all over Japan," said Mischkie. "Atsugi was in a state of open rebellion no more than forty-eight hours ago."

"What do you want," Ballard growled, "a walk in the park? I thought you were bored wasting away back there on Luzon."

"Uh, you got me there," Mischkie grinned.

Ballard cast another glance out the window. "Here we are."

They were circling over a sprawling network of hangars, administration buildings and barracks. Many of the buildings showed extensive damage from American bombing raids.

Ballard saw rows of planes, the propellers removed and stacked off to the sides of grounded formations. He saw hundreds of troops positioned along the perimeter of the base, supposedly to protect their enemy from danger.

The plane banked around for its final approach toward a bomb-pocked runway puddled from recent typhoon rains. Sunlight glinted on rice paddies surrounding the base.

Tench came forward. Like Ballard and his men, he wore khakis and a .45 automatic, shoulder-holstered beneath his left arm.

They buckled their seatbelts.

"I will be the first one out," Tench said. "My interpreter will come next and you men will file directly behind him. The others will stay in the plane."

Another thirty seconds and the C-47 bumped down along the pot-holed stretch of runway. The pilot taxied to a stop and shut down the motors.

The abrupt silence exaggerated the smallest sounds in the plane.

Tench unbuckled his seatbelt and rose without another word. They deplaned as arranged along an empty stretch of landing strip, well removed from any buildings.

Circling C-47s rumbled overhead but down on the ground it was unnaturally quiet.

Tench strode several paces from the plane and kicked his right heel into the ground as if to mark this moment. Ballard and his men fanned away to form a wide, three-point perimeter.

There was no one in sight. Nothing stirred, besides the gently swaying brown grass that grew high in the field between the runways.

Ballard scanned the field toward the nearest hangars, perhaps a quarter mile away. He could now discern a row of field tents pitched before one of the hangars over there. He spotted movement coming this way.

"My guess is our pilot touched down on the wrong runway."

Slow-moving military staff cars could now clearly be seen approaching, and behind these, a crowd of men was running in their direction.

Ballard and his team swung their rifles around to port arms.

"Be ready for anything," Tench instructed.

Hanklin, observing the approaching horde, cleared his throat and spat a wad of chewing tobacco.

"Only thing I'm not ready for is to get my damn fool head blown off."

The convoy of staff cars bumped across the field and careened to a stop before the unwavering men in khaki. Of the dozens of men running along behind the cars, none seemed to be armed with anything more than cameras, many of them toting tripod setups. Ballard lowered his rifle.

"Hold it, fellas. This is the reception committee."

Chauffeurs scurried around to hold doors open. A short, heavily medaled Japanese officer emerged from the lead car. Accompanied by an interpreter, he

crossed stiffly to where Tench stood waiting at attention. The Japanese officer rendered a smart salute.

"I am in charge of the Atsugi reception committee." His accent was thick. "I will be your Japanese liaison officer." Tench returned a salute of equal precision.

"Colonel C. T. Tench, commanding the advance party for the supreme commander for the Allied Powers."

The clipped exchange was strictly military protocol with no trace of cordiality.

The journalists and photographers were setting up their equipment. Many of them were already snapping pictures. There was still no sign of any armed Japanese military presence.

Arisue and Tench commenced an exchange, translated by their interpreters. The cameras really started up then. Ballard could not hear what was being said.

A few minutes later, Tench returned to the plane and issued instructions to his men. Then he and his interpreter moved out on foot toward the reception area across the field.

Mischkie and Hanklin did not need telling. They moved out with the group, as did Ballard who hung never more than a dozen paces behind Tench and Arisue and their interpreters. Personnel were streaming out of the plane now, members of Tench's team and the allied photographers who had been assigned to record this event for posterity.

Across the field, the other C-47s were touching down one at a time.

Keiko felt her uncle's eyes upon her.

She lowered the binoculars. They stood side by side on an outcrop of high ground approximately one-half kilometer from the southern perimeter of the Atsugi Air Base.

The binoculars they had each used to observe the landing of the American plane were the best make available and yet, given the distance between them and the scene unfolding far below on a corner of the air field, the figures down there had only been barely recognizable by their uniforms.

The group was walking away from the first plane.

Keiko and the Baron had witnessed the entire drama. Servants had awakened her hours earlier. Her uncle had insisted that she accompany him in a tone that brooked no response save obedience.

They were chauffeured across dark, pock-marked roads that even at that hour were busy with what had become a common sight in the twelve days since the Emperor's speech. The country was on the move. Demobilization of the military forces was being rushed through. Abandoned factories and disbanding military across the width and breadth of Japan were feverishly distributing their remaining supplies to soldiers, sailors, and workers to keep them out of the victors' grasp. Convoys wended their way north toward those regions that would be last to be occupied, carrying thousands of demobilized soldiers, discharged crews and laborers being sent home to their villages.

The chauffeur waited with the touring car, behind them on a gravel road. They had arrived at this spot less than thirty minutes ago.

Her uncle had known precisely where to position them for the best possible vantage point.

"I wanted you to witness this at my side," he said. "This, the moment of our greatest shame."

"Then you have not changed your mind since we last spoke?"

They had exchanged no words since leaving the castle.

"I do not know the ways of your mind as I supposed I did, Keiko. I wish it were otherwise, that my presumption all these years had been correct. I harbor the hope that you will yet come to understand what I stand for and what I must do."

"I do understand you, Uncle. What is it you must do?"

"You have not changed your views. I can tell by your eyes, by your voice. I know you that well, at least. I have known you all of your life, child."

She said, without venom, "And all of that time, Uncle, even when I was truly a child, did you believe that my woman's nature was inherently evil? It hurt to hear you say that."

"We are all that remains of the Tamura line, Keiko. The family is the basic unit of a sound empire. It has ever been thus. That cannot change, or there is no hope. The family must be preserved from generation to generation. I believe this with all my heart. It would be the sorrow of my life to die knowing that what has been will end with my passing. I ask of you, child, do not let such a thing happen."

"And I ask you, Uncle, to put aside whatever it is you intend to do and heed the word of your Emperor."

"If those are your feelings, then we have nothing further to discuss," he said in a level voice. His eyes frosted. "I am convinced that you do not spy for those in the War Ministry, that you only sought to satisfy your own curiosity in eavesdropping outside my office that night. But I most strongly advise you not to leave the castle and to keep to yourself anything you may know or guess. To do otherwise will result in dire consequences for you."

"When I left the War Ministry three weeks ago, you offered me a home," she said. "Has it become my prison? Could you be a party to harming me, or worse?"

He peered into her face with a steady, disconcerting stare, then he turned from her without replying and walked the path which wound away from the outcrop of rock to the unseen car.

She remained a moment more, surveying the panorama before her. She watched that long, graceful line of circling and landing four-engine American transports.

Keiko had not flown since that morning, the fourteenth, when she and her uncle had seen the American bomber flying toward Tokyo. Civilian flight restrictions were in effect and the Baron was either compelled or felt obliged to conform.

She had seen little of him about the castle. They rarely took their meals together and when they encountered one another, he had no more than a curt nod for her. When they spoke it was only an exchange of vacuous niceties, nothing of substance. She perceived a chasm widening between them day by day, hour by hour.

She watched the planes until she heard the car engine purr to life, then she turned and walked in that direction.

There was a memo on Eichelberger's desk for him to come to MacArthur's office as soon as he reported in.

He found MacArthur slouched in one of the chairs facing his desk, a chair Eichelberger could not recall ever having seen the general occupy. MacArthur puffed his famous corn-cob pipe. A cloud of gray smoke obscured his features. The lights were off and though sunlight streamed in from the windows, the office seemed more dim than usual.

"Early morning?" Eichelberger asked.

"Late night," MacArthur said. "Couldn't sleep. Too much going on. They made it, Bob. Tench and his planes set down at Atsugi shortly after dawn this morning."

"Looks like I was wrong. The Japs weren't laying a trap."

"Tomorrow the 11th Airborne lands five hundred men, and the day after tomorrow you and I head in. That's when they'll strike, Bob, if they intend to spring a trap."

"Why do you say that, General?"

The wreath of smoke obscured MacArthur's expression. "Because I personify the conqueror, and if it is a trap, I'm the one they'll want and they'll want me dead."

Chapter 16

A servant showed Okada into the meeting twenty-five minutes after it was scheduled to begin.

"My profuse apologies, Baron-san."

The stocky *Kempeitai* officer bowed deeply, then barely inclined his bald head as a greeting to Hayashi and Nagano. Baron Tamura began as if there had been no delay.

"I never thought demobilization would be accomplished so quickly, but I have managed to arrange for ammunition and weapons to be cached where the Americans will never find them."

"The time to strike is now," Okada said, "before the Occupation begins. There has been widespread unrest."

"I listened to His Majesty's Rescript, knowing my duty was to obey my Emperor," said Baron Tamura. "And yet, those of us of the samurai class understand that it was a hatred of the barbarians that diverted loyalty to the Emperor in the first place. When we last gathered here together, I spoke of a symbolic gesture to reawaken the spirit of Japan."

"You spoke of giving the people hope," Nagano recalled. His thin, normally cadaverous face was animated with anticipation. "There are many who grow restless, restraining their impulse to rebel," Hayashi said. "They wait for leadership, they're afraid they will end up like those rebels two weeks ago."

"We shall not endure the sad fate of Major Hatanaka," said Baron Tamura. "We shall strike first with a bold, symbolic gesture designed to rekindle the fires of patriotism in our people. Our forces will then be brought into action according to the contingency plans we have already agreed upon."

"What is to be the nature of this symbolic gesture?" The stout air force colonel's jowls shook as he spoke.

"No!" Okada shouted. "I cannot abide by this. I have heard enough. I must leave."

"Major, please."

Nagano's entreaty was lost. Okada blustered on. "I have had my fill of leaving this business to others. The enemy already bivouacs at Atsugi Air Base. Something must be done, I say!"

"Let us hear the Baron out," Hayashi suggested.

Okada shook his head. "I have heard everything I need to hear. I must follow my path as you must follow yours." His iced dark eyes pinned each of the men in turn.

Hayashi said, "Major, please reconsider."

"I am through considering. It is time for action. And I would caution any man here against attempting to take action against me." He smiled without humor. His gold tooth winked. "I have the power to arrest and detain any man in this room." He bowed curtly. His voice changed and in a much different voice, full of respect he added, "Apologies for my bluntness, Baron-san. And please extend my best wishes to your beautiful niece."

He left them.

Nagano sighed. "Major Okada proves to be a complication." His thin face was pulled taut with anger.

"One which will be dealt with in due time." The Baron appeared unperturbed by the outburst and hasty departure. He crossed to the bookcase which covered one wall of the study. "And now, if you will follow me, I shall share with you what Major Okada was too impatient to wait for."

"It was almost as if the Major was looking for an excuse to leave," Hayashi mused.

Baron Tamura pulled two thin volumes from a shelf slightly above eye level. He held the books in one hand and with the other reached into the niche left by them and activated a soft whirring sound.

A portion of the bookshelf opened inwardly to become an entranceway wide enough for one at a time to step through.

The Baron led them down the dimly lighted passage. The entrance closed behind them. Down a steep, winding, narrow stairway, past where a passage branched off in another direction; unlighted, a dark tunnel. After a short while, their passage widened to become an underground chamber of impressive dimensions.

Flickering torches along one wall cast barely enough light to show a high ceiling where shadows were murky. The opposite walls supported pillars which added to a fathomless gloom that echoed even the slight footsteps of Nagano and Hayashi as they joined Baron Tamura on either side.

The Baron raised his right hand and snapped his fingers once, loudly.

A stirring of the shadows. Three figures appeared as if propelled from the Stygian gloom. Two of the human figures somersaulted down from somewhere high overhead, the third tumbled acrobatically from beneath a stone archway directly across from them. They landed with catfooted grace.

They wore black from head to foot, only their eyes visible through slits in black cloth masks. They bowed deeply in unison. Each wore a short sword strapped to his back.

Nagano emitted an audible gasp.

"Ninja!"

"But ... this is incredible," Hayashi whispered in the tone of one humbled and yet questioning the reliability of his own eyes. His jewels quivered more than before.

"Their loyalty is to me, to the death," said Baron Tamura. "Their *jonin*, chief of the Shikotan clan, is beholden to me. I sponsor them in large part, you see. It is my way of keeping alive the traditions we are heir to."

"The colonel is right, this is incredible," said Nagano. "Ninjutsu is thought to be extinct in Japan."

"The art of stealth and invisibility," said the Baron in a reverential tone. "Ninjutsu lives. It will work for us. It will reawaken the flames of Bushido."

"One possible use for them," noted Hayashi, "could be in dealing with the impatient Major Okada."

"Not yet," said the Baron. "We may well have need of the major before this is finished. I think it better to allow him to continue to live awhile longer, so long as it suits us."

"Perhaps Major Okada will be persuaded to see things our way," said Nagano.

Hayashi asked the Baron, "Have you a specific strategy in mind?"

"I will go into it at greater length when we return to my study," said Baron Tamura, "but as I started to say before I was interrupted by Major Okada, I intend our strike against the enemy to be symbolic, yes. The Americans will learn too late that they have walked into a trap. And Japan will rise again to continue the struggle. I speak of symbols. The ninja are the symbol of the glory of Japan's past that cannot be extinguished by time or decree. And what symbol embodies in one man all that we have come to hate among the barbaric hordes that would destroy us? Who is our conqueror?"

"MacArthur." Nagano whispered the name.

Hayashi nodded. "We would be striking at the heart of the enemy. It would signal Japan and the world that we are not finished. When will your ninja strike, Baron-san?"

"I will tell you that also, upstairs."

He nodded once and the three ninja took several steps back in unison and vanished into the shadows.

Keiko drew back deeper into the shadows of the passageway from where she had stood poised, listening to what she could hear of the conversation like a light-footed forest creature ready to bolt.

They were about to return this way, back through the passage!

Without hesitation, she withdrew.

Ninja!

She had heard of the famed, dread assassins of medieval Japan, of course. None had wreaked more havoc nor spawned more terror in the pages of Japan's history than the clans of ninja.

Trained from birth in the spiritual and martial arts discipline of ninjutsu, it was said the ninja trained day and night to attain their superhuman skills. They become masters of disguise, different dialects, sabotage, assassination, poison, and every aspect of cunning and force in the art of subterfuge and combat.

When the three same military men who had been here that other night arrived at the castle, the same curiosity began gnawing. She had thought for some time about whether or not she should eavesdrop again, despite what had happened the last time, and if the "secret" passages might not have been the best way of going about it in the first place.

The passages were no secret to a youngster whose inquisitiveness had known no bounds, who had not been adverse, then as now, to going where she knew she had no business being. She had been there then because the network of passages running through the castle walls was there to be explored; no more motivation was needed of a curious child. The castle had been a wonderful place to grow up. She had not realized how extraordinary her upbringing had been until well after she left this place. With her own castle to play about in, scary tales had never frightened her. Now she felt compelled to learn, if she could, exactly how wide the chasm was between her and the Baron.

She had not gone down into the musty darkness in years. The first time was when she was fourteen years old. She was supposed to be doing her mathematics exercises but her tutor was ill that day. Keiko had been left to study on her own and so, as she often did, she had gone off exploring.

Though she had not gone far, she had been drawn back again and again to the winding passages that were frightening and seductive at the same time. With a lantern Keiko would spend time relating in her mind the passageways, their winding stone steps, with the rooms of the wing of the castle inhabited by herself and the Baron. She had never gone beyond the juncture, though, where the passage led to her uncle's study. As a young girl, her greatest fear was that she would be standing by that door and it would open and she would be discovered. Those fears of a young girl were with her every step of the way this night when she left her rooms.

On this latest visit she had gone unseen to the wine cellar, twisted the bottle in the shelf that operated the sliding panel, and entered the passage revealed there. She followed it. Nothing had changed, and something had pulled her up short where the passageway branched off toward her uncle's study. They would be in there, discussing, plotting, as they had been the last time.

She paused at that spot.

To her right were narrow, worn stone stairs that branched away to other wings of the castle and an underground entrance on the other side of the castle wall. She had taken one step toward her uncle's study, wondering if the bookcase on the opposite side would make it impossible for her to hear conversation from within.

Her body stopped short at the purr of an operating mechanism, and gained cover in the branching-off passage with scant seconds to spare.

The Baron and his visitors had passed. She followed, standing just short of the entrance to the underground chamber. She had seen the ninja appear, had overheard the complete conversation up to the point of the Baron suggesting they return upstairs.

The only reason they had not caught her listening in was because the Baron and his men stood between the ninja and her position, blocking their line of vision.

It was said the ninja's skills were almost supernatural. How long had they been about the castle?

Fear surged within Keiko. She took great care to tread lightly until she reached the passage which took her back to the wine cellar. The dread racing through her did not subside until she returned to the wine cellar and replaced the proper bottle in its slot, causing the sliding portion to close.

She leaned against the wall.

Ninja!

Chapter 17

The recon party was bivouaced in neat little rows of pitched tents near the C-47s lined up in the moonlight. Lights were visible across the field. The beacon in the landing tower flashed rhythmically a half mile away. Atsugi Air Base was abnormally quiet for a base of its size. There would be few if any landings or takeoffs before tomorrow, when the 11th Airborne would land its men and equipment. Kerosene lamps burned in many of the pitched tents. No one was getting much sleep this night.

Ballard and his men had just completed one of their hourly inspections of the American perimeter when they were accosted by the noncom head of security for Colonel Tench's group, a sergeant by the name of Kujack.

"Looks good, Sarge," Ballard told him.

"Everyone's sharp and on their toes," Hanklin added.

"They ought to be," Kujack grouched. "You've been breathing down our necks every hour on the hour and we've had to rearrange the sentry placement three times because you didn't like it."

"Just doing our job," Ballard said.

"Some job. Getting in the way of my men doing their job."

"I'm not crazy about your company, either, Kujack. If you want to take it up with General MacArthur, I suggest you do so first thing the general touches down, day after tomorrow. In the meantime, the boys here and I'll be breathing down your fat neck so I also suggest you get used to it and stop being such a pain in the backside."

Kujack started to frame a retort until he realized he was talking to the backs of three men striding away.

They crossed over to where they had pitched their tent.

Hanklin said, "That sergeant doesn't seem too fond of us bird doggin' him around, does he?" He patted his pockets, located his pouch of chewing tobacco and took a bite.

"At least he's cooperating," said Ballard. "Let him do his job, we'll do ours."

"Everyone's on edge," Mischkie offered. He looked at the semidarkness surrounding them. "You've got to admit this is a weird way to end a war."

"That gunfire we heard this afternoon," said Hanklin, "sounded like the nips are still hashing things out amongst themselves."

The Japanese liaison officer had assured Colonel Tench that the sounds of gunfire from across the base were no more than a minor disturbance near the enlisted men's barracks. The disturbance had been quelled; there was nothing to worry about.

Mischkie grinned, "My favorite part of the day was when the Nip liaison offered Colonel Tench that glass of orange drink."

"The Colonel wouldn't take a drink until the Nip took a taste from the glass to show it wasn't poisoned." Hanklin chuckled. "The Colonel's a careful one."

"He's got the right idea," said Ballard. "MacArthur thinks the Jap government is on the level and that has to be good enough for us. It's the rebel factions we've got to be on the lookout for, and that's some of the best they've got."

Mischkie fired a cigarette. "Well, we made it this far. I'd say we can handle this."

Hanklin worked his chew of tobacco. "We've never been inside Jap-land before, there's the difference, so don't get too smug, city boy. That could make you careless and that could make us all dead."

"At least it's over for the boys back on Iwo and Luzon and all those other goddamn islands," said Mischkie. "And if we do pull through this one, it's over for us too. Seems impossible. We'll be heading back to the States."

"Maybe," said Ballard. "Maybe you guys will."

Hanklin warmed up to that notion, working the fresh chaw in the corner of his mouth.

"Me, I'd welcome the chance to see Nacogdoches again. Got me some folks to track down. Namely Bobbi Sue and a little varmint what's supposed to look just like me."

Mischkie blinked. "You've got a wife and kid?" he blurted with some astonishment.

"Didn't say that. Me and Bobbi Sue, why, we only had one night of joy and it weren't with no preacher's okay. That was the night before I signed up, but sometime later I got word from a buddy back home that old Bobbi Sue was seen buggying around the cutest little tadpole you ever did see and they say that, yup, the little geezer looks just like yours truly."

"Why have you waited this long to think about tracking them down?"

"Wasn't no need to track 'em down. I knew where they were, but hearing from old Tex wouldn'ta done anybody any good. See, Bobbi Sue was the mayor's wife.

"Course, this war coulda changed that too and Bobbi Sue, why, she was an angel to linger on your mind. Wouldn't mind seeing how Tex, Junior turned out, if he is Tex, Junior. Old Tex just might settle down once he gets back home. Always had a hankering to be a tater baron."

Mischkie looked blank. "A what?"

"Grow taters," Hanklin explained with little patience. "Damn, what do they teach you slickers up in them Yankee schools?"

"Guess it's just kind of hard thinking that far ahead. What did you say about not heading back to the States, Sarge? You going to stay in when this thing is over?"

"I can't think that far ahead yet, either," said Ballard. "I'm just damn glad for every man who's got a home to head back to."

Hanklin spat. "Fifty years from now this war'll be nothing but dates and places in a history book."

"I feel a million years older, and I thought I was a wise guy when I came in," Mischkie said, looking at the ground. His voice changed slightly. "And after everything I've seen in this war, everything that's happened, all I can see now when I close my eyes is that kid, Evita, catching a bullet back there on Luzon, and the look on her brother's face the last time we saw him, carrying away her body. I wonder how this tired old world can ever be the same after so much misery."

"The future'll take care of itself," Hanklin opined. "What I'm worried about is the real near future, like tonight and the next three days. Think there's much chance of the shit hitting the fan, Sarge?"

"I'm just a dogface like you, Tex," Ballard said. "We're not supposed to think, that's officers' work. But the General's landing a division tomorrow and he wants us going everywhere with him except to the head after he touches down in case that division isn't enough. I'd say our Supreme Allied Commander expects something to hit the fan."

"And that," said Hanklin with a sigh, "means it's a long way from over for us."

The offices of the *Kempeitai* were on the third floor of the Ministry of War building.

At 0200 hours, the gloomy corridors of the central building were tomblike. There was usually some activity even at this hour, but this had lessened each day since demobilization began. The light in Okada's office was the only one on the building's third level.

He sat at his desk, cleaning his pistol. A desk lamp threw a small circle of light that included the desk top and Okada's bald head. The rest of the office was barely illuminated.

He tried not to think of what happened after he left the meeting at Baron Tamura's castle. He must keep his mind clear, he told himself.

Upon his return to Tokyo, he had visited the House of One Thousand Joys and paid for a whore. He thought of Keiko Tamura as he used the whip on the prostitute. When he was satiated and removed the gag from the young woman's mouth, he discovered with some surprise that he had killed her.

There was some trouble because he had gone too far. He had to pay for the removal of the body, and had to bribe the mama-san and three witnesses. It helped that he was *Kempeitai*.

Okada could not get lustful thoughts of Keiko Tamura out of his mind; the flawlessness of her beauty, the scent of her, the texture of her skin. His thoughts became feverish whenever he thought of how she would look, naked, strapped to a chair like the whore . . .

The footfalls he had been waiting for were coming along the outer corridor toward the office. He finished reassembling the pistol and was putting away the rags when Major Abiko stepped in.

Abiko was a slender, feminine fellow. Okada and Abiko were of the same approximate age and social class. They had shared this office for the last three

years. Okada had always been the more ambitious, but Abiko recognized and accepted this.

"I have reports from the men maintaining surveillance of General Nagano," Abiko reported. "General Nagano has had no communication with Baron Tamura or Colonel Hayashi during the past twenty-four hours." Abiko spoke with a slight lisp.

Abiko's men filed hourly reports on Nagano's movements and telephone conversations. The *Kempeitai* had spies at every level of the military and government, and Abiko's men in this case were carrying out standard *Kempeitai* procedure in monitoring the Eastern Army commander.

"Excellent," said Okada. "If there has been no contact between them, it means their plan has yet to be set in motion. When it begins, then they will gather. That was their plan."

"I could have Nagano placed under arrest. He could be persuaded to divulge what he knows."

"In due time. We shall have use of General Nagano soon enough. What the Baron has planned does not concern me so much as the certainty that something is planned.

"It is my understanding that you intend to use General Nagano against the Baron. Why do we wait?"

"We play a most dangerous game, Major Abiko. Baron Tamura misses little. The military secret police could well become suspect in his mind were anything to happen to any member of his group, especially so closely following my withdrawal from their circle."

"Still, I wish we could arrest General Nagano. We could make him talk." A shiver seemed to course through Abiko's slender frame at the thought. "If General Nagano told us what he knows, we would know exactly what the Baron has in mind."

"Ours is to be a quiet rebellion," Okada continued. "It is the intention of the Baron and his group to arouse the spirit of Bushido throughout the ranks of the military and the populace. With the men we already have in place and by cooperating with General Kurita, supporting his coup instead of the Baron's, we shall be in a position to exploit both their efforts."

The dissatisfaction in the military with the recent turn of events was widespread but hardly coordinated. There had been so many cases in Japan alone of units of army and air force men defying the command to surrender—and of fighting with those units sent to force them to comply—that Okada's office had only enough resources to investigate a handful of such incidents.

The *Kempeitai* major had ordered investigations of any incidents, even rumors, involving commanders of prominence in their private lives, and he added such pertinent information to an ever growing file.

In the course of one such investigation, he had learned of a rebellion being plotted by General Kurita, of the Second General Army, who commanded a battalion of infantry.

Okada had nursed dissatisfaction about his association with Baron Tamura's group almost since the beginning but had kept his feelings to himself until today, determining at the start that playing a more passive role in the Baron's conspiracy

would make it that much easier to gather information on the other participants. It did not take long for the sheer power the Baron commanded to impress Okada.

But the Baron's wide-flung sphere of influence had not made him cognizant of the simultaneous coup being planned by Kurita. If the Baron had been aware of this, Okada would have been instructed to investigate.

Instructed.

Okada had come to loathe his association with the Baron's group. They took it as a given that they were far better than he based only on the circumstance of birth. They made no secret of their disdain for working with one whom they considered so far beneath them.

Okada hated them with a passion.

He had learned that Kurita was of peasant stock, had worked his way up through the ranks. Okada saw far more advantage in working with someone like Kurita. Kurita had little taste for subtlety. His rebellion would be direct, hard hitting and, Okada reasoned, stood a far greater chance of success than Baron Tamura's idealistic daydreams. Consequently, Okada stood to gain far more power.

The key to power, he had well learned during his years with the *Kempeitai*, was information. Information had won him Kurita's trust. Okada had kept General Kurita well informed of all pertinent intelligence that would aid in Kurita's impending coup, and such information had included much about Baron Tamura.

"We know the details of General Kurita's plans," said Abiko. "Can you at least surmise, Major Okada, what Baron Tamura intends?"

"If I had the joint resources of those men Baron Tamura has gathered about him, I would strike at MacArthur," said Okada without hesitation. "It would be the ultimate vengeance for Japan."

"But time has practically run out. The surrender is scheduled for less than five days from now."

"If the Baron succeeds, we succeed," said Okada. "If they fail and the Americans occupy Japan," he smiled and the gold tooth sparkled in the light of the lamp, "we will still succeed."

"And General Kurita?"

"Useful for our purposes for the present, nothing more."

"If the coup fails," Abiko pointed out, "by this time next week the *Kempeitai* will have been disbanded. What then?"

"Then we return to our homes for perhaps a year or more and then, you and I, Major, and those few we trust, will put our files to use. Those files will bring us money to live well on, and they will give us power no matter who wins."

"We will become targets ourselves when we blackmail others."

Okada shook his head, having considered this at some length. He had been quietly, methodically building up dossiers on key people in the government and military for some time. He had waited until the preceding week to bring Abiko into it with him. As the *Kempeitai* became scaled down, it would be increasingly difficult to complete his dossiers without Abiko's knowledge, since the two of them had been charged with destruction of top-secret files.

"No one we approach would go to the authorities. They have, to a man, far more to lose than we do if we expose what is in those files."

"I grow impatient for it to begin."

"It has already begun. You and I have but to wait and bide our time, Major Abiko. Our time will come, and untold power will be ours."

The brass instruments of the paratrooper band were dazzling beneath an unbelievably blue sky. Not far from the band stood a cluster of officers including Eichelberger, some of his aides, the Japanese liaison, Colonel Tench, and some ranking officers of the 11th airborne.

Eichelberger had landed ninety minutes earlier. It was 2:15 P.M.

Ballard, Mischkie, and Hanklin stood together midway between the group of officers and a mob of some two hundred photographers, most of them Japanese although a half dozen allied photogs stood ready, well placed at the front.

More than five hundred troops of the 11th formed a defense perimeter around an area that included two hangars, directly across the tarmac and cleared of all Japanese military personnel and aircraft, and a ragtag line of vehicles parked on the other side of the band. The troops were very much on the alert for trouble.

Ballard felt the tension in the air, the apprehension; the fidgeting from the mob of photogs, the off-key, preparatory tootling from the band, the buzz of conversation, and nearly everyone's eyes on the patch of sky at the other end of the runway.

Hanklin asked Ballard, "Reckon the General will be on time?"

Mischkie replied before Ballard could. "This is his last chance to show the world how fearless he is. He'll be on time. The 4th Marines went ashore this morning to spike the harbor guns on Tokyo Bay."

Hanklin brought his eyes down from the sky. He unleashed a spurt of chewing tobacco on the ground a good distance from them.

"It's one thing for a batch of marines armed to the teeth to stage a cutting-out operation with Halsey's battleships giving 'em cover. This five-star of ours is setting down smack dab in the middle of a nation of folks who were pledged up to two weeks ago to cut his heart out and eat it if they happened to see him."

"Here he comes," said Ballard.

The fidgeting, the tootling, the human buzz tapered away to nothing. A steady stream of cargo planes continued touching down on the other runways of Atsugi.

A C-54 came banking in for an approach to the runway, touching down, skidding across the bumpy airstrip to taxi in, the single word *Bataan*, brightly emblazoned upon its nose, coming to a stop directly in front of the grouped officers. The props coughed and died.

A ramp was wheeled toward the plane. Ballard and his men moved forward from the sides. The group of officers stepped forward and the mob of reporters came closer, more raucous than before.

Slowly, the door of the plane opened. The band struck up a lively march.

Ballard positioned himself close to Eichelberger. Hanklin and Mischkie moved to either side of the bottom of the ramp.

Paratroopers tightened in to form a cordon around the group of officers, rifles held at port arms.

Eichelberger saw Ballard and nodded to him.

MacArthur appeared at the top of the ramp in immaculately pressed khaki, the aviator glasses, the campaign cap, the corncob pipe protruding from above the determined prow of a chin, the pipe and cap set at jaunty angles. He surveyed the scene before him while he lit the pipe at the top of the stairs. Two steps down, a couple of puffs on the corncob was a properly dramatic pause for the cameramen to click and whir away with utter abandon. Then the General descended smartly, the pipe clenched between his teeth.

At the foot of the ramp, he and Eichelberger shook hands. "Welcome to Japan, General."

"Bob, this is the payoff." MacArthur beamed with high good humor. He turned to Ballard. "Good to see you, Sergeant. How has Japan been treating you and those two ruffians of yours?"

Ballard lifted his voice to be heard above the band.

"Kind of quiet until you got here, sir."

MacArthur laughed at that. The band finished playing. He strode over to the band leader, the press of photographers now only barely held back by the cordon of paratroopers. MacArthur shook hands with the band leader.

"Thank you very much. I want you to tell the band that that's about the sweetest music I've ever heard."

"Thank you, sir. I will."

Ballard spotted Hanklin and Mischkie, their attention on the photographers who continued snapping and filming as MacArthur and Eichelberger conversed with some enlisted men nearby.

Senior General Headquarters officials began debarking from the plane, practically unnoticed. The group surrounding MacArthur gradually began drifting toward the caravan of vehicles lined up to escort them into Yokohama.

Only one of the vehicles was in halfway decent shape, a Lincoln Continental of indeterminate vintage. The Japanese had assembled a fleet of decrepit, charcoal-burning sedans and trucks for the rest of the Americans. They were all that could be found amidst the bombed out rubble of Tokyo and Yokohama.

Personnel scrambled to get organized and board the other vehicles.

Ballard seated himself in the front of the Lincoln, next to the driver, by prior arrangement. Hanklin went to one side of the car, Mischkie to the other, each hopping onto a running board. The vehicles before and behind the Lincoln filled up with paratroopers. MacArthur and Eichelberger boarded the Lincoln.

An ancient fire engine leading the procession opened up its siren. There was much wheezing and clanking and uncertain sputtering to life of engines along the line and the procession got under way, following the fire engine through a side gate, onto a dusty road straight as a ruler beneath the punishing sun.

It was very hot. Ballard was thirsty and sweaty.

Japanese infantrymen lined either side of the road for as far as the eye could see, a man standing every few feet at parade rest like an endless line of statues, bayonets fixed, mute, stoic in their rigidity, their backs turned to the motorcade as it sailed past.

MacArthur noted dryly, "I see the Japanese have more than fulfilled their promise to guard the road into Yokohama for us."

"Guards," Eichelberger said, without enthusiasm. "Thirty thousand Nipponese infantrymen!" There was edginess to his voice.

"Why, we've got Sergeant Ballard and his boys to guard us from the guards," MacArthur said good naturedly. He gazed upon the spectacle passing by. "You've noticed, Bob, that their backs are to us."

"I've noticed."

"A sign of submission and profound respect. Until today, those troops have averted their faces only for the Emperor."

"I've heard about the discipline of the Japanese," Eichelberger acknowledged. "I also know that one undisciplined fanatic with a rifle—"

"Bob, you must develop an appreciation for the Eastern mentality," MacArthur interrupted gently. "Their dream of a Greater Japan has been crushed. We crushed it. All that's left for them is their sorrow, and the future. They've wept in seclusion, that was part of the reason they wanted those two weeks. Japan will enter tranquilly into its defeat."

"Everything counts on that being the case, sir."

"Well, in the event it's not, we do have our Japanese guards and the 11th Airborne in addition to Sergeant Ballard and company." MacArthur addressed Ballard. "How would you assess our situation, Sergeant?"

Ballard had been following the conversation because he had no choice, but his attention was outside the car, watching for snipers in the fields and homes dotting the route.

"I'd say it's worth keeping an eye on, sir."

MacArthur laughed heartily. "Well put, Sergeant, well put. A man of few words. There are those who wish the same could be said of me." He spoke again to Eichelberger and some of the humor melted away. "Bob, don't think for a moment that I don't appreciate the danger we're putting ourselves in, but it's necessary. It's what the last four years have all been about. This is the greatest adventure in military history.

"Here we sit in the enemy's country with only a handful of troops, looking down the throats of nineteen fully armed divisions and seventy million fanatics." He settled back, the outer mask of serenity returning, to watch the passing scene. "One false move and the Alamo will look like a Sunday school picnic."

Chapter 18

Keiko reached the heavy iron door and slid back the bolt. She eased the door inward slowly at first and peered out through the thicket of trees that concealed the passage from the outside.

She could detect the presence of no one out there, nor in here behind her back beyond the turns and twists of the passageway, except for the squeal and shuffle of unseen rats.

Good.

She left the passage and simply stood there for a time, gulping in the fresh air. Two steps more and she froze—the sound of voices was coming her way.

She could not force herself to step back to the passage. The castle was no place for her any longer. She was free to roam through most of it, as she had always been, but now it was claustrophobic despite its vastness. It was as if the very atmosphere of the place would smother her.

She crouched behind a tree. Her baggy trousers and a plain blouse would not stand out amid the devastation and suffering she knew she was heading for. Before leaving, she had slipped a dagger—a jewel-handled weapon her uncle had given her years ago for protection—into her purse.

The faint clink of equipment confirmed her guess: one of her uncle's security measures, a periodic foot patrol around the outside of the castle walls.

A patrol of several men walked by. The voices belonged to two men debating amongst themselves whether or not Captain Kozono's latest alert was but another drill or were they expecting something?

She doubted that Captain Kozono, the commander of her uncle's security force guarding the castle, even knew about the network of passages, much less these foot soldiers.

Moments more and their voices faded to nothing. They would be back. They would follow the wall around to the cliff's edge on the other side, then return, but she estimated she had more than enough time before then.

She bolted across the clearing and down the hill, toward the trees on the far side where the land gradually dipped. The road was accessible from there. She knew which paths to take to keep her from view of the castle.

There was always the chance she would encounter another patrol, a chance she was willing to take, the pressure having so built up in her that she desperately needed to escape those walls behind her.

Walls everywhere.

This bolt across the clearing in itself would be worth whatever happened to her. She felt like a bird on the wing after being caged for too long.

There would be more walls, soon enough.

She would go to the city, although she was not exactly certain what she would do when she got there. She could no longer only think about it and nothing more. She had to act.

Passing the library that day, she had looked in through the open door and seen the Baron seated at his writing table, using the delicate, fine-bristled brush and black ink cake to make an entry in his journal, but she had not gone in to join him as she might once have.

An attack on MacArthur ... Ninja.

She had seen no trace of the ninja on the grounds and this time had not gone spying. She knew enough, but she did not know who to turn to with what she knew.

The radio spoke of cooperation with the conquerors, according to the Emperor's decree, but she was sure there would be others who felt as her uncle did and they could possibly be in positions of authority.

Who would listen to what she had to say? Who could she trust?

General MacArthur had landed yesterday and thus far, nothing had happened. She tried to tell herself that something happened to cancel the plans of her uncle and his circle of conspirators; that she would not have to betray her uncle.

Then, about thirty minutes ago, the cars bringing the rotund Colonel Hayashi of the Air Force and cadaverous General Nagano of the Army had arrived.

She watched again as they disappeared inside. Not wanting to encounter Okada, she stayed in her rooms until she was sure they had withdrawn to the Baron's study. Surprisingly, the *Kempeitai* major did not attend this meeting.

Keiko had tried leaving the grounds as if for one of her walks through the countryside, but they stopped her at the front gate. Captain Kozono himself had told her he had no choice, that he was following her uncle's orders that no one be allowed to leave the castle. There were to be no exceptions.

She had submerged her anger at this and made a show of submissive obedience, for she knew her actions would be reported to the Baron. She then proceeded to the wine cellar, to the passage and outside.

If Hayashi and Nagano were again present, it could only mean that this was to be the night of the attempt on MacArthur's life by the ninja assassins. A symbolic strike against the enemy, she had overheard the Baron telling them. It would not matter if the ninja escaped or were slain in the act. The deed would be done and there would be no turning back. The killing and destruction that were so close to ending would go on and on.

The ninja had a very good chance of succeeding in their task against conventional military sentries if only a tenth of the legends about the ninja were true, she told herself.

She alone stood some chance of at least getting a warning through to the Americans in Yokohama. It would require her going into Yokohama. The radio continued to broadcast regular reports about General MacArthur's group billeted at the New Grand Hotel. She must go there. This was too much responsibility to walk away from.

Someone would believe her.

Beyond sight of the castle, the countryside undulated away before her. She trod along a small pathway through a grove of fig trees, past a deserted Buddhist shrine. She crossed a goat pasture. The sun in the west warmed her not unpleasantly as she hurried along, and she thought of the child she had been long ago, at play in these fields and forests, and of how that child and the world had changed so much. A sadness coursed through her that only reinforced her resolve.

She wished she had made the decision yesterday to tell someone what she knew to betray the man who had given her everything—but she had been unable to do this.

Her emotions still confused her. She told herself again that she must follow through on this course of action she had chosen, no matter what the consequences.

Terraced tiers of paddies rising away from the fields and the tiny pastures she passed through were barren of cattle or of any human presence. She reached the road, which was in terrible disrepair, potholed from erosion and the American bombers. There was no traffic in sight at this time. Buses traveled the road north into town, but with no semblance of regularity.

Turning north, in the direction of the train station at Tateyama two kilometers distant, she began walking.

Fifteen minutes later, Baron Tamura stood with Hayashi and Nagano in the entrance of the passage by the stand of trees. They watched three raggedly dressed figures shamble across the hillside and disappear from sight in the direction of the road. The ninja assassins—Nakajima, Saito, and Mikassa—left as they had arrived, clothed in tattered combinations of uniform and civilian clothes.

"It is indeed incredible," said Hayashi. "No one looking at them would suspect those three of being what they are." The pudgy Air Force colonel's face was awash with perspiration.

"They are Japan's heritage," said Baron Tamura, "and its future." His eyes gazed off in the direction taken by the ninja.

"I have two divisions on standby and know of other officers who have shifted troop strength unnoticed during the confusion of demobilization," Hayashi said.

"And I have one division of the Eastern Army," said Nagano. "I trust we will be more successful than the rebels of two weeks ago."

Baron Tamura said, "The invisible assassins shall not fail us."

"And if they are captured?"

"They will not allow themselves to be captured alive. The American will be no match for ninjutsu."

"All is in readiness, then," said Hayashi. "Our forces yours and ours, Baron-san, are poised to strike. They but await the word from us."

"I only hope we have not made an error in judgment in allowing Major Okada to live," said Nagano.

"We have nothing to fear from the Kempeitai," said Hayashi. "They are all but disbanded."

"Okada is even more powerful than his duties would suggest," Nagano said earnestly. "He poses a serious threat to us, heading up the secret police as he does."

"General Nagano," said the Baron, studying the cadaverous man, "you seem inordinately concerned over Major Okada."

"I only wish us to succeed, Baron-san."

Baron Tamura turned and gestured toward the entrance to the passage.

"Come, let us return. We will drink saki and wait for word from Yokohama."

Nagano and Hayashi nodded and stepped back into the passageway, Nagano first.

Nagano did not see the look that passed between Hayashi and Baron Tamura.

The New Grand Hotel was a luxury establishment built after the earthquake of 1923, a magnificent structure that had survived the bombing raids with slight damage, an oasis in a wilderness of ruin. It would be MacArthur's base until the official signing of the peace treaty on Sunday aboard the MISSOURI, after which he would establish headquarters in Tokyo.

MacArthur, along with Eichelberger and their immediate group including Ballard and his men, were met at the hotel entrance by the hotel owner, an elderly Japanese in a wing collar, swallow-tailed coat and pin-striped trousers. He had bowed deeply to MacArthur before showing the party to room 315, which had

connecting chambers, providing the hotel's best suite, although it was far from sumptuous by American standards.

The corridors became a madhouse shortly afterward as more than a hundred lesser officers jockeyed for rooms. One hundred and fifty-nine general officers from all the allied armies and navies found quarters in the hotel, taxing room service and the maids to the limit and beyond.

Eichelberger established a defense perimeter around the hotel with the same five hundred paratroopers from Atsugi wearing jungle greens.

MacArthur inadvertently helped things along by remaining closeted in his suite of rooms during the following day, the 31st, concerning himself primarily with effecting the immediate, safe release of the allied P.O.W.s held in the Japanese home islands.

Room 315 became the operations center for the early stages of the allied occupation of Japan as U.S. soldiers and marines continued pouring into the country by aircraft and ship.

Ballard and his men were in and out of Room 315 throughout the day in their capacity as MacArthur's personal bodyguards.

There were, of course, rifle-carrying guards stationed to either side of the door in the hallway and, were the general to take a notion to travel outside the hotel, truckloads of troops would have accompanied him.

But in the meantime Ballard and his team remained a "floating unit," circulating all through the New Grand, double-checking security and staying close to MacArthur most of the time, accountable solely to him.

Ballard had been present earlier that evening when Major General Jonathan M. Wainwright, himself a recently released P.O.W., came to see his old boss. MacArthur was visibly moved by the spectral figure leaning on a cane, an emaciated scarecrow with sunken eyes, pitted cheeks, hair snowy white, and skin like old leather; the man who had taken the general's place on Corregidor was now wasted by his years of internment and clearly bore the burden of having surrendered to the enemy. The two embraced warmly and Ballard quietly let himself out.

Ballard was sent for by the general around dusk. As MacArthur, pacing determinedly as ever, finished dictating to a stenographer, Ballard went from window to window, drawing the drapes. MacArthur's voice boomed in his ears.

"...thus, occupation troops are forbidden to consume local victuals. They shall eat only their own rations. Finally, martial law and all curfew decrees imposed upon the city are hereby cancelled. The first step in the reformation of Japan is to be an exhibition of generosity and compassion by all members of the occupying force." MacArthur stopped his pacing and said to the steno, "That will be all for now. Have those directives cut and distributed immediately."

"Yes, sir."

The steno withdrew, leaving MacArthur and Ballard alone during a break in the stream of activity flowing in, out, and through room 315.

MacArthur exhaled like a man who wanted to drop into one of the comfortable-looking wing chairs surrounding them. He remained standing. He tamped tobacco into his meerschaum.

"And how does everything look from your perspective, this evening, Sergeant?"

"Eichelberger's men have the hotel sealed tight from the street up to the roof and we're monitoring the checkpoints on each floor as well as those outside the hotel."

"Very good." A thin smile from MacArthur. "It looks as if we might very well pull this one off as planned."

"As long as you work and take your meals and sleep inside this hotel room, General, I think I can guarantee your safety. As for out there," Ballard nodded beyond the draperies, "well, Japan is a world I don't know much about."

MacArthur touched fire to the bowl and puffed the pipe to life. "You were relieved then, I take it, that I dined up here today instead of down in the dining room."

"You're safest up here, General." Ballard glanced again at the draperies that flapped slightly in a breeze off the bay, the windows open wide against the warmth. "And I'm not all that sure about up here."

Rather than dine in his suite the first evening at the hotel, MacArthur had dined in the main dining room with his staff, one of whom had thought the general's steak might be poisoned and suggested that a Japanese taste it first, which had pretty much been what Ballard was about to suggest as the food was served. The general had laughed and said it was a good steak and he did not care to share it with anyone, a gesture that hardly passed unnoticed.

The hotel staff, it seemed, had expected a tasting of the food, and the elderly owner quickly reappeared at the table to gush gratitude for the demonstration of what he called "great trust."

MacArthur now said to Ballard, "Word of everything I say and do will quickly spread through the country. Our war with these people has been brutal and without mercy on either side. It was important that a gesture of trust be made in the good faith of the Japanese people."

An aide joined them.

"Sir, the members of the liaison committee are here."

"Show them in." MacArthur frowned at Ballard as the aide left them. "The Japanese have been reporting instances of American servicemen raping Japanese women. I intend to assure the Japanese liaison that I have already ordered an immediate investigation of such allegations and have reaffirmed the death penalty for convicted rapists. The Army and the Navy will maintain discipline among their forces."

"Yes, sir," Ballard said. The general was well known to be a tangential conversationalist. "I'll get out of your way then, sir."

"I haven't gotten around to why I sent for you, Sergeant. I wanted to pass on to you a commander's hunch."

"Sir?"

"If they intend to attempt to assassinate me, it will come tonight and it won't be poisoned food or any nonsense like that."

"My men and I spent this afternoon resting up for tonight, sir. Security around this hotel is tight as a drum."

"They could try to sabotage the treaty signing in two days," MacArthur said, "but my hunch is it will come before then. That's when I've expected all along that you and your men would earn your keep, Sergeant. After dark. Tonight."

Chapter 19

The old steam locomotive, pulling a string of decrepit cars, wheezed, clattered, and shrieked to a stop in the main Yokohama station.

Keiko had boarded too far along the line to get one of the wooden seats, but she managed to find space to stand in the aisle of the third coach behind the engine. The over-crowded car lurched, and the tightly packed mass of humanity—the farmers, and country women in their shapeless mompei and wide straw hats—commenced pushing and shoving, especially the men who thought nothing of elbowing or rudely pushing a woman out of the way or to make her move faster.

The station was mass confusion.

She made her way quickly through to the street, past countless men milling about, their backs loaded down with large bundles wrapped and tied with cloth strips, everything they could carry to escape American requisitioning. She passed an unarmed group of soldiers standing at attention, meekly obeying an officer who had already been stripped of his braid, but had not yet relinquished his long samurai saber. Here and there in the swarm of travelers she thought she identified detectives of the Tokko, the civilian plainclothes police. They stood off to the side grimly observing what went on around them as if waiting to pounce.

There were far fewer women about than men. The general consensus seemed to be that the conquerors were hairy barbarians who would rape the women. Keiko had heard radio broadcasts urging women to flee into the hills if at all possible.

Civilians were advised to leave watches and other valuables at home when they did venture out, and women were advised to wear only loose-fitting clothing and to make themselves unattractive. They were urged to refrain from such "provocative" acts as smiling or smoking a cigarette.

Keiko had been told by one of the servants at the castle that female employees at some of the remaining government plants were being given cyanide capsules to swallow if attacked.

She still did not know exactly what she would do when she reached the New Grand Hotel. It occurred to her that she might falter at the last second and change her mind and turn back.

She told herself this would not happen. She was stronger than that.

It was dark when she left the station and began walking in the direction of the hotel.

Nakajima motioned Saito and Mikassa back. They waited until Baron Tamura's niece disappeared beyond the milling crowd inside the terminal.

Nakajima worked to quell the indecision nagging him. It was something he was unaccustomed to. He had been born a ninja, had started training as a ninja apprentice when he was old enough to walk, and had gone on to develop under the tutelage of Sakano, a successor to the Togokure School of Ninjutsu that stretched back over seven hundred years.

Saito said, in a voice low enough not to be overheard by passersby, "Do you think she knows why we have come to the city?"

Nakajima reached his decision.

"She did not see us," he said, "on the train nor at the castle."

"Why is she in the city then?"

"A coincidence, no more. Baron Tamura would not have allowed her to learn of our mission, and we were well hidden throughout our time there. She can know nothing."

"We should contact Baron Tamura."

"No!" Nakajima glared. "We cannot trust the telephones. We continue to the hotel. The girl will not concern us. Nothing can stop us."

There came a discreet knock at the door.

"Come," Baron Tamura called.

Kozono, commandant of the castle's security force, stepped in and bowed deeply.

"If I may impose upon a moment of your time, Baron san ."

The Baron said, with a nod to Nagano and Hayashi, "You may speak in front of these men, Kozono."

"As you wish, Baron-san. I only wish to regrettably report that," a pause for an audible swallow, "your niece does not seem to be on the castle grounds."

The Baron stood. "What do you mean?"

"The servants report to us that she has not been seen since this afternoon. After a preliminary search yielded nothing, a more thorough search of the castle and grounds was undertaken. She is gone, Baron-san."

"I see. That will be all, Kozono. Report to me immediately when she returns."

"*Hai*, Baron-san."

Kozono again bowed before departing.

Hayashi stared into his cup of saki.

Nagano said, "Do you think she knows?"

Baron Tamura said nothing.

Ballard told Mischkie and Hanklin about the commander's hunch.

Hanklin snorted. "So we're supposed to expect an attack tonight, huh? Hell, I've been expecting an attack every night for the past four years!"

They were among the few enlisted men billeted at the hotel. They shared a room directly across from 315. Their room had been cleared to make space for rifle racks that held three M-1s and three .45-caliber Thompson submachine guns. On a table next to the racks were boxes of spare ammunition.

"So what do we do that we haven't done already?" Mischkie wanted to know.

"Not much," said Ballard, "just more of the same. Tex, you park yourself across the hall in 315 and stick next to the general."

Hanklin made a face. "Aw, do I have to, Sarge? Everybody's so goddamn quiet and polite over there, it's enough to drive a poor country boy plumb insane."

"You're already insane. Stick to the general everywhere he goes unless it's to answer a call of nature. Wil, you take a stroll out back. See what the perimeter looks like."

"Will do."

"Let's get to it then. I'll be down front taking a look around."

Yokohama was a phantom city. Some of the larger structures had survived, but much of the city had been destroyed by fire bombs. Of the buildings here and there that remained, blinds were drawn and shop windows were boarded up.

The few people Keiko passed along the network of narrow streets—some bicyclists, mostly pedestrians—wore gauze masks and were dressed in rags. Several times she felt eyes upon her and would look around to see emaciated, harrowing faces peering out through jumbles of fragmented masonry.

The darkness echoed eerily with women's laments and the wailing of hungry children. Occasionally a battered vehicle would thread its careful way over the pitted, rubble-choked streets.

Most of the businesses had been closed for months. There were no longer willow-lined boulevards, no more did the women wear colorful kimonos. The city was dreary, lifeless.

She heard the buzz of activity around the New Grand Hotel two blocks before she stopped walking to stand at the curb opposite the hotel's main entrance.

A line of American soldiers with rifles encircled the hotel. The entrance was well lit. There were shadows along the sides of the building, she noted.

The ninja would use this to their advantage.

There was a smattering of curious civilians across from the hotel entrance. Keiko made herself a part of them for a short time.

She was right in doing what she had come here to do, she told herself. Her identity would not be divulged to the Americans. If they somehow forced her to, she would give a false name.

Keiko would warn them of what was about to happen. She would tell them about the ninja, to save General Douglas MacArthur's life, because this was her duty as a human being, to stop the suffering that would befall Japan if MacArthur were assassinated. Only she could do this, but she would not tell the Americans anything about her uncle, no matter what they did to her. She would not betray the Baron, she told herself. She could not do that.

Across from where she stood, several American soldiers stood around a jeep equipped with a radio antennae, a command post of sorts. She started across the street toward them.

The three assassins found the perfect spot of concealment behind a single wall portion left standing several hundred meters down and across the street from the New Grand. There was no one about to witness the silent transformation.

Shedding the shabby garb worn since Tateyama, they donned the all black costume of the ninja. Jackets equipped with various pockets for holding a wide variety of weapons, a hood covering the face with slits for eyes, and leggings covering the lower part of the body, completed the effect of completely blacking out each man's presence in the darkness. Their feet were concealed in sandals cushioned with cotton padding that would muffle any trace of their feather-light approach, and each man wore a short sword slung across his back. They pressed against the wall as a truckload of American soldiers rumbled past.

The night was alive with the activity extending along the streets in either direction from the hotel. When the troop transport was well past, Nakajima looked around the corner of the wall section, then left the cover of the wall and surrounding rubble to dart across the street to the front of a line of buildings that remained standing. Saito and Mikassa followed to join him without a word spoken. They advanced on the hotel at intervals like wraiths in the night.

Mischkie paused at the window on the second floor landing of the stairwell which led down to the side entrance of the New Grand.

The sentries stationed throughout the hotel were looking sharp and alert as far as he could see. The hallways had quieted down. Conversation drifted through some doors left open.

He gazed at his reflection in the darkened glass of the window. He had a strange sensation that the reflection reminded him of someone else, and realized it was the tired, haggard face of his father.

Night made the ruined city an ocean of blackness that stretched outward to infinity from beneath the window. It reminded him of standing on the beach and staring out at the black vastness of the ocean as a boy on hot summer nights like this.

No, not like this. He blinked away thoughts of home. And when he blinked he saw the girl on his eyelids. The Filipino kid. He'd seen that face on his eyelids and in his sleep every time he closed his eyes since it happened.

Evita. Sweet kid. Flirt. Nice kid. Deader than hell from a Jap bullet.

He turned from the window and continued down the stairs.

Corporal Santella tried to look sharp when Kujack came down the line. Kujack always seemed to have it in for him. "Goldbricking as usual, Santella?"

"I'll open fire soon's I see something to fire at, Sarge, less of course you want us to mow down those civilians across the street."

As he spoke, Santella noticed the slightest trace of a breeze when there was no breeze, the sensation so fleeting he dismissed it.

"Cork the lip and keep your eyes peeled," Kujack snapped, and he continued down the line.

They gained the base of the side wall without detection and paused there. They had passed within inches of the sentries.

Controlled breathing techniques allowed them to remain absolutely motionless until certain they had not been seen. Then they went about their task with a soundless economy of movement, each unwinding from his belt a rope with a three-pronged grappling hook at one end, the prongs resembling three iron talons of a claw, designed to serve dually as a wall-climbing device and weapon.

Each man swung his climbing rope above his head and let fly. The discreet click of the prongs grabbing hold on masonry above the line of third floor windows was indiscernible. Each man tested his rope with a double pull and placed one foot to the wall to begin climbing.

Saito tapped Nakajima lightly on the shoulder and pointed. Nakajima looked. He saw Keiko Tamura speaking with the American sergeant he had slipped by during their penetration of the perimeter.

Keiko and the soldier were having a spirited exchange. He could not hear what was being said, but he clearly saw the impatience with which the young woman pressed her point.

Saito and Mikassa eyed him in the faint light for some signal. He nodded.

Without a sound, they began scaling up the shadows of the front wall of the hotel.

Chapter 20

Hanklin needed a chaw of tobacco so bad he could taste it, but of course there was no place to spit, and so the pouch stayed in his pocket and he worked hard at trying not to look as antsy as he felt. He and the general were alone in the suite of rooms. MacArthur sat at a writing table, going over reports.

Hanklin went to one of the windows. He stood to the side of it and peered out past the curtain at the street scene below. There was plenty going on down there, but there seemed to be no danger.

So much for commanders' hunches.

He wondered how smart an idea it would be to sneak a chaw while the general wasn't looking and just spit it out through that open window.

Ballard emerged from the front entrance of the hotel and the first thing he saw was Kujack going at it with a Japanese civilian female, over by the jeep.

She was in her early twenties. Ballard noted that she had a good figure, on the slender side but nice, a lovely face of high cheekbones and full lips and a steadiness of eye that bespoke confidence and self-reliance. He realized that he had not inventoried a woman so in years, maybe not since Carla.

He strode over in their direction.

Kujack saw him coming. "I was just getting ready to send for you, Ballard. Got a hot one here. Could mean trouble."

"I must speak to someone in authority," the woman said to Ballard. "It is most urgent."

"Says someone wants to bump off General MacArthur," said Kujack.

"Is that true?" Ballard asked her.

She returned his stare unflinchingly with a curt nod. "Ninja," she said evenly. "It will happen tonight."

"Ninja," Kujack muttered. "What the hell's a ninja?"

"Invisible assassins," said Ballard. To the woman he said, "The ninja were five hundred years ago. The ways of the warlords are a long time gone."

"The ninja will come tonight," she insisted, "to kill MacArthur." Not panicky, but imploring him. "You must believe me."

He studied her face.

"I believe you. Come with me. Tell me what you know."

"You don't understand. There is no time. Wherever General MacArthur is, you must get him to safety. It could happen at any second."

He cast a glance over his left shoulder, in the direction of the line of lighted windows of Room 315.

One of the windows was at a juncture where a corner of the extended front entrance met the front of the hotel, and there were plenty of shadows at that juncture.

"Not a thing," Kujack grumbled. "What the hell, Ballard, you figure we got us a looney here? I'll take her into custody."

Ballard did not reply. He glanced at the woman to make sure she was staying in place. She wasn't going anywhere. She had seen the direction of his gaze and was looking that way, too.

He grabbed a spotlight mounted on the jeep with his left hand and swung it around, thumbing on the beam. He could not be sure but he thought he saw a blur of something skitter out of the beam at almost the instant he flicked it, somewhere between the first and second story windows at that juncture where the deeper shadows had been.

"There!" the woman shouted.

He knew what he had seen, what that blur of movement barely sensed up there meant. He unholstered the .45 automatic brought the pistol around into a straight-armed target acquisition, and pegged off a round, the buck of the .45 sounding flat in the thick night air.

A pulsing finger of angry orange flame spat at that point where he had seen movement.

There came a shout of pain.

He held the .45 straight-armed on that section of wall, oblivious to the excited reaction to his firing.

Holding his fire, he moved the spotlight around in circles. He found nothing more to shoot at.

A falling body pitched away from the wall and landed with an audible thump on the pavement close to the jeep, seconds after the sound of the shot faded; an awkwardly twisted pile of black clothing, lay unmoving on the sidewalk.

Kujack muttered a vivid curse.

"Good shooting, Ballard. You stopped him cold!"

"There are more."

Spotlights were switching on up and down the line, rifles tracking upward toward the front of the hotel. Ballard saw nothing up there except heads popping out of windows along the full length of the wing. Someone else saw this and started yelling, "Don't fire! Hold your fire, hold your fire!"

"Don't let that woman get away," Ballard barked at Kujack.

He broke away from the jeep at a run without looking back and stormed through the hotel entrance. Soldiers came pounding along after him. He took the stairs three at a time at a dead heat gallop, hoping Mischkie heard the shot and was closing in, hoping Hanklin and MacArthur were not already dead up there in 315.

Mischkie heard the pistol shot from out front. He was along one side of the building, checking up on the line of sentries posted there.

The first priority was to protect the general. He fisted his .45 from its shoulder rig and slammed back into the building, heading up the stairwell toward the third floor.

A big bass drum started pounding inside his head, and all he could hear was the drum beating louder and louder and faster and faster but it did not slow him down.

The shot sounded like it came from right outside and directly below the line of open windows.

"Aw, horsefeathers," Hanklin grouched.

He pawed out his pistol with his right hand and a plug of chewing tobacco with his left, bit off a healthy chomp and rushed the nearest window. A flurry of black movement sprung through one of the windows, passed the drapes, into the room, enveloping him, pitching him backwards to the floor under the momentum of the assault.

Hanklin felt the .45 fly from his grasp.

Ballard heaved his way down the third floor corridor, elbowing through the swelling confusion and commotion as people poured from their rooms.

No more than forty seconds had elapsed since he picked off that ninja from the shadows near the windows of Room 315. Rifle-bearing soldiers were trying the handle and pounding on the door of MacArthur's suite but there was no real concern at this point since the single shot had come from outside. Another few seconds and there would be real concern.

Ballard reached the door as Mischkie pushed his way through from the opposite direction. The sentry banging on the door stepped aside in deference to them. Ballard planted himself directly in front of the door, lifted back his right foot, and sent the door off its hinges with one powerful kick.

He went in low, catching a quick view of Tex Hanklin, flat on his back with a man straddling him, a ninja like the one below, raising a foot-long sword with both hands above his head to deliver a death blow.

Hanklin erupted with a volcanic snarl, half rebel yell, half primal ferocity unleashed. He pressed one foot against the floor beneath him for leverage and bent his other leg to place that foot against the ninja's chest, flipping his attacker off and almost out the window through which the ninja had obviously gained entry.

Mischkie stormed in behind Ballard. Soldiers from the hallway started pouring in after them.

Another ninja flew into the room feet first from outside, landing silently. This one flung something at Ballard, a small, whizzing, spinning, deadly-looking something that glinted in the light.

Ballard leaned to the side from the waist. The weapon sizzled past and one of the soldiers in the doorway uttered a gurgling scream and fell into those behind him.

The ninja reached behind his back to unsheath his sword. He assumed a combative stance, slicing the air with the sword, his eyes like polished black marbles through the slits in his mask.

Across the room the first ninja recovered from having been slammed into the wall by Hanklin and charged in again. Hanklin met him, coming off the floor with his fists clasped. He slammed his left elbow with all of his strength into the ninja's crotch with the good-natured hoot of a country boy having a time. The ninja squealed at the devastating blow, his knees buckling. He gripped himself where it hurt the most, and the sword dropped from his hands.

Hanklin reached out and caught the sword before it hit the floor. He lunged with the sword and the ninja squealed again when Hanklin, with a triumphant snarl, shoved the sword to the hilt into the man's heart. Then he withdrew the sword and stepped back. The ninja collapsed.

Ballard pointed his .45 at the remaining assassin, motioning with his pistol emphatically, ordering, "Drop it, drop it," knowing the man most likely did not speak English.

Ballard saw Mischkie swing his pistol around on the ninja.

"No, Wil," he snapped. "We need one of them alive."

The ninja ignored the .45s aimed at him. He screamed some sort of battle cry and flung himself at Ballard, the sword flashing high over his head.

Mischkie shouted something unintelligible, filled with rage, and fired once, twice, three times and kept on firing his full clip of seven rounds, the pounding blasts sharp and violent indoors, every round lurching the ninja back a step until he dropped his sword and with a small sigh, nearly lost beneath the reverberating echoes of the gunfire, slumped to the floor not far from the man Hanklin had killed.

Hanklin casually spat a wad of tobacco that meteored across to slap the forehead of Mischkie's ninja. "I think you got him, Wilbur." He waved an open hand back and forth to clear the wafting gun smoke from near his eyes.

Ballard asked, "Tex, where's the general?"

Hanklin chuckled. "The one place you told me I didn't have to watch him."

There came the sound of a flushing toilet from somewhere in the suite, and MacArthur appeared in a connecting archway, surveying the carnage, every ounce of the famous bravado in place.

"You gentlemen make it extremely difficult for a man to appreciate his time alone," he admonished in a dry deadpan, then became all business with a jolt of surprise when he saw the dead American soldier in the doorway and the two black-clad corpses. "What the devil. Ninja!"

"Excuse me, General," said Ballard. "There's something I've got to check on."

MacArthur started to speak. Ballard was already gone, stepping past where men in the hallway had stretched out the soldier who had died from having some sort of multi-pointed throwing weapon embedded between his eyes.

Ballard rushed down the stairs, but when he got to the jeep there was no sign of the woman.

Kujack wore a contrite expression. "Sorry, Ballard, she'd already powdered when you took off."

A young corporal came hurrying over to them.

"Uh, Sarge."

"Yeah, what is it, Santella?"

"Uh, the boys say a Jap woman was involved, that one you were talking to."

Ballard's mental stopwatch ticked.

Less than four minutes had lapsed. She could not have gotten far.

"Did you see her, son?"

Santella nodded, pointed.

"She took off that way. There was that bunch of civilians across the street, and when the shooting started they all amscrayed like the war was on again and I guess she took off with them. No one knew—"

"Thanks, Corporal," Ballard cut in. "Good work."

He turned and strode off across the street, in the direction

Santella had pointed.

Kujack started to call after his back, "Hey, Ballard!

Where the hell are you—"

He gave up when he realized Ballard had already disappeared into the shadows across the street and was gone.

Chapter 21

Run! her mind screamed when she saw the big American loping after her.

He moved with an athletic, panther-like grace that indicated the type of man she had known him to be from the first, when he sighted and shot down the ninja outside the hotel.

This was a man of violence with the smell of death about him, not accustomed to being taken by surprise.

Everything had gone wrong. She should have come here yesterday instead of waiting until the last minute. Her warning had come too late and she had almost fallen into the Americans' custody, which might still happen. She should have fled with the rest of the crowd of onlookers.

She had never been in a situation such as this before, and she was surprised that she retained clarity of thought despite icy stomach cramps of fear.

She crouched down behind the remains of a building that had stood across and down from the hotel.

Something made her stay behind to witness what transpired after she fled from the American sentries: the scramble in front of the hotel, the fleeing civilian onlookers, and then the American she had spoken with reappeared and was now no more than a couple hundred meters away, coming for her through the night like a stalking beast. If she remained here, he would find her. She had already lingered for too long.

Keiko tried to move lightly, an impossibility with all of the loose rubble and mortar, and with her second step she made enough noise for him to hear her. She started to run as fast as she could.

In the empty street all she could hear was her own breathing and the accelerating footfalls of the American running after her, gaining on her.

She rounded a corner where the last standing wall of a destroyed building offered some cover. She crossed a street and went into an alley, then to her right again when the alley became a narrow walkway between buildings rising above like the walls of a canyon.

Casting a look over her shoulder to see if he was behind her, she ran into him with such force that she bounced backwards, off her feet and onto the ground with the wind knocked out of her.

He said, "I want you to come quietly. There are some questions you've got to answer."

She had failed. She could not run from him. Nor could she be taken back to answer their questions. She had failed. Now she lunged toward him, the dagger lancing upward, intending to catch him low in the stomach as her uncle had taught her.

He deflected the dagger with a straight arm that cuffed the lunge aside. His left hand tightened around her wrist and twisted sharply.

She could not stem a sharp cry. The dagger dropped from her fingers. She tried to pull away from him to kick him. He spun her around, came up behind her, and yanked her against him violently, one of her arms bent behind her. His right arm looped under her throat to hold her securely to him, his breath hot and dangerous in her ear.

"I can carry you back and have you handcuffed or you can walk back with me and it will be a lot better for you. Decide." She ceased struggling.

"I will go with you. Please, it will not be necessary to harm me."

Abiko replaced the telephone receiver and looked thoughtfully across the small office at Okada.

"The Eastern Army Division at Kawaguchi has been put on alert. That makes the fourth such alert reported in the past hour."

"Baron Tamura is beginning his action, whatever it will be. It is a pity, Abiko, that General Nagano eluded the surveillance you had placed upon him."

Major Abiko's feminine features were cast in thought.

"For a commander in the army, General Nagano walks a dangerous line. After you asked him to join our side in this, when you met with him in the public bath house, why did he not go to Baron Tamura and tell the Baron about it?"

"General Nagano will not confide in the Baron that he met with me," Okada said confidently. "To do so would only sow the seeds of distrust between the Baron, General Nagano, and Colonel Hayashi. The Baron, I think, truly trusts only Colonel Hayashi. They share a passion for flying. I can tell you where General Nagano is. He is with the Baron and that air force colonel, Hayashi. This can only mean that they intend to strike tonight. This is why those Air Force and Army units go on alert."

"I hope you did not err in judgment in approaching Nagano. If he did tell the Baron, they will move against us."

Okada's dark eyes flashed pure steel from behind his spectacles.

"They would not dare move against us. Not tonight. That would only serve to call attention to themselves if anything should go wrong, and there is far more at stake for them than you and I and our schemes, Major Abiko."

"Why have we heard nothing from Yokohama, then? When will Baron Tamura strike? General Kurita expects you to give him a signal tonight on when to commit his troops."

General Kurita had insisted his own troops remain poised until word from Okada that some strike by the Baron's forces had been launched against MacArthur, so as to exploit the confusion which would result.

"The night has only begun," said Okada. "The call will come that something has happened at the New Grand Hotel in Yokohama, I would wager you on it."

The telephone on his desk sounded. He permitted himself a tight smile and reached for the receiver. He spoke briefly and replaced the receiver, then stood, reaching for his cap.

"There has been trouble at the New Grand Hotel. They were not specific." He strode toward the door. "I as ranking officer of the *Kempeitai*, have been ordered to leave at once for Yokohama in order to," Okada permitted himself another tight little smile, "assist in the investigation."

"The ninja have failed," said Baron Tamura.

The telephone call had come less than a minute ago. He had delivered the news to Nagano and Hayashi and a pregnant silence followed as each man grappled with his own thoughts.

"Perhaps it was not meant to be," said Nagano at last. "We have always thought the Japanese spirit could conquer any odds of superior machinery. Perhaps ... perhaps that is not so."

"The army and air force units loyal to our cause remain on alert," Hayashi pointed out.

Baron Tamura shook his head. "We must continue to hold these troops in reserve."

"The signing of the treaty is but a day away," said Nagano. The general's narrow face was a mask of defeat. "Our army is being stripped of resources by the day."

"We will wait," the Baron reiterated dispassionately. "It is true we have little time and our chances for success diminish, but without some grand, dramatic gesture to the world, we will fail. This only means we must fully utilize what resources remain. We must have the hearts and minds of every man yet remaining in Japan's armed forces, not just a handful of zealots."

"What do you propose, Baron?"

"I propose that we adjourn for the evening. Call the units off alert."

He escorted them from the office and down to their waiting cars. Nagano's car was in the lead and they reached it first.

Nagano bowed. "I will stand by, ready, Baron-san."

"I know you will, General."

Nagano was driven off. The Baron and Hayashi watched his car disappear through the stone archway of the main gate.

"Do you sense, Colonel Hayashi, as I do, that something is amiss with General Nagano?"

"I do sense what you say, Baron-san. But it is difficult for me to believe that Kentaro Nagano is a traitor to our cause. I have known him since we were children. He is my brother-in-law." The air force colonel's round face wore a frown.

"He is not a traitor, but something is not right. Something troubles him deeply," said Baron Tamura.

"Do you suggest that he is in any way responsible for what happened at the New Grand Hotel tonight?"

"Your brother-in-law was not responsible, Colonel Hayashi, but I suggest we implement our final contingency plan without benefit of General Nagano's participation. Can I count on you not to confide in your brother-in-law?"

"I will not confide in him, but why do you trust me when you do not trust General Nagano?"

"I will trust the general when the time is right. As for you, Colonel Hayashi," the Baron lifted his eyes to the night sky and said, "We are brothers of the sky, and I can sense that you are not troubled by that which lies before us."

"What is it you wish of me, Baron-san?"

"For now, return to your home and tomorrow, to your duties. I will contact you tomorrow. Be prepared to implement the contingency plan you and I alone have discussed."

"As you wish, Baron-san."

When Hayashi's car disappeared through the archway, Baron Tamura went to find the chief of his security force.

"I have come to inquire about Keiko. Is there any word of her whereabouts?" Kozono bowed.

"None, Baron-san, I regret to say."

"You will notify me at once when she has been located, no matter the hour."

"Your Majesty."

"Marquis Kido."

"I fear I bear bad news."

"Then do not hesitate."

"There has been an attempt on General MacArthur's life in Yokohama. The general was not harmed and the assailants were killed by the general's personal bodyguard."

"Were there other casualties?"

"No, Your Majesty, only the would-be assassins, but I fear their identity is the most troubling news of all."

"Who were they? Members of my military?"

"I honestly wish they had been, Majesty."

"Marquis Kido—"

"Ninja, Majesty. Three ninja assassins entered General MacArthur's suite of rooms."

"I see. Is there more?"

"At this moment, no. I thought you should know. I am sorry to have awakened you."

"I could not sleep, Marquis Kido. And now you inform me that ninja stalk the land. The peace we have suffered so to acquire grows more fragile with each

passing second. When will it end, Marquis Kido? I cannot imagine what awaits us next."

When they got back to the hotel entrance, Ballard turned the woman over to Kujack with orders to place her in a room for interrogation. He briefly returned to MacArthur's suite to explain where he had been and make sure the situation there was under control. Finding this to be so, he went back to the ground floor, to the office at the end of a corridor off the lobby where Kujack waited for him with men standing guard at the office door.

"She's in there." Kujack threw a thumb over his shoulder. He handed Ballard the purse the woman had been carrying. "We went through this. No more daggers. No I.D., either."

"Has she said anything?"

"Buttoned up."

A small desk sat against one wall of the office, flanked on either side by typing tables, one with a typewriter, the other with an adding machine. The walls were lined with file cabinets. There was one chair, an armless swivel, and the woman sat upon it with her hands clasped in her lap, staring at the door, staring at Ballard as he stepped in.

He leaned against the door and put his hands in his pockets. He studied her and she studied him, the hum of the crowded hotel muted in the background.

"You will interrogate me?" she asked.

"I will interrogate you."

Her chin lifted slightly, a subtle show of defiance. "With no one else present?"

He saw no reason to allow her to dictate the line of questioning. He glanced at her clothes. She had consciously dressed down. From a time in the past he recognized fine fabric when he saw it.

He said, "You're better dressed than most of the women I've seen on the street in Japan."

She blinked. "You are an observer of women's fashion?" She asked with a trace of irony.

"You speak English with only a trace of an accent. You've spent time in America."

The irony moved from her voice to her eyes. "A detective, too. An impressive array of talents."

He became aware of the first flicker of something happening then, something subtle beneath the surface. He liked the way this woman handled herself. The bravado was a thin veneer, but he could tell she was genuinely tough in spirit and body without losing any of her attractiveness as a woman.

He said, "My name is Sergeant Ballard. How about telling me your name."

"The general. Is he all right?"

"He's all right. Let's talk about you. How did you know ninja assassins were coming here tonight? Things will go a lot easier for you if you cooperate."

"What will happen to me?"

"I don't know. All I can do is pass on the word that you'll cooperate."

"I have already done that, have I not, by coming here to warn you? Is not that enough? I alerted you to save General MacArthur's life. Why can you not allow me to leave?"

"You know why. Why can't you cooperate?"

"There is nothing I can tell you."

She sat erect, as if her backbone were a length of steel. Her lower lip trembled.

He studied her for a long time, then he said, "We'll see." He turned and went out.

The only reminder of what had happened in Room 315 was the dark stain on the carpet near a window. No amount of scrubbing could remove it.

The suite had been cleared except for MacArthur, Ballard and his men, a ranking Japanese civilian police detective, and a Major Hiroshi Okada, dispatched from the nearly demobilized war ministry in Tokyo.

MacArthur was not pacing the floor for a change. He sat in an armchair, facing the two Japanese who sat stiffly upon a couch opposite him.

"What happened will be kept entirely off the record, of course," he told them, "and I want to make especially sure the newspapers don't get ahold of this."

"Whatever you think is best," Okada deferred. His English was heavily stilted but adequate. He translated for the police detective, who spoke no English. Okada said to MacArthur, "This is highly irregular."

MacArthur grunted around his pipe stem.

"As is being attacked by assassins outfitted like cloak-and-dagger artists from the Seventeenth Century."

"A group of lunatics," Okada assured them, flashing a gold tooth, "but I can assure the general that the Kempeitai will launch a full investigation."

"I repeat, I intend to keep what happened here tonight unknown to the rest of the world."

"You do not wish an investigation?"

"There will be time enough for that after things have settled. You would not be able to initiate an effective investigation without word getting out, and that's what I want to avoid."

Okada bowed stiffly. "You are right, General-san."

"Your government has assured me and my men of our full safety while we're in your country. I do not wish to cause those who made that promise to me to lose face, nor do I intend to provide propaganda to those who would inflame the fanatical elements that remain in your country. I would not care to estimate the negative propaganda value of three dead assassins wearing the costume of ninja. Inform your superiors, Major Okada, that the matter is to be closed pending further notification."

After the Japanese were shown out, Hanklin said, "That rattler, Okada, is about as sincere as a medicine show pitchman."

"Pardon a practical question," said Mischkie. "I made plenty of racket taking care of one of those ninja. Everyone on this floor heard the fireworks. What should I..."

"An officer drank too much saki and celebrated. He has been reprimanded." MacArthur started his pipe going. He commenced pacing in even, thoughtful

strides. "A soldier died tonight protecting me. Ninja! Incredible! And yet, perhaps not. It was the spirit of ninjutsu that led the Japs to strike at Pearl Harbor so treacherously." He swung to face Ballard. "What about the woman, Sergeant? You've questioned her?"

"We've got an unusual situation here, sir, in more ways than one."

"You wouldn't be getting ideas about that little lady now, would you, Sarge?" Hanklin grinned. "Heard she is a looker. I thought romancing the gals was me and Mischkie's job." Ballard ignored that.

"This was no ordinary assassination attempt."

"Not with those ninja punks involved, it wasn't," Mischkie nodded agreement. "You think that little Jap kitten knows who sent them?"

"She knew they were coming here. Right now, that's all we've got."

"If she doesn't want to cooperate," said MacArthur, "how are you going to make her change her mind? I have found, Sergeant, that it is far easier to win a war than it is to change a woman's mind."

"I've got an angle, sir. You've got an airborne division here to guard the hotel and the Jap authorities are covering the rest."

MacArthur nodded. "That leaves you and your men."

"And the woman."

"*Cherchez la femme*, Sergeant? Your police training in civilian life seems to be paying off again."

"If she goes for my pitch," said Ballard, "I can't say where it'll take us. Whatever it is we're up against may call for some unorthodox measures."

"Sergeant, if I had full faith in the efficiency of strictly orthodox procedure, I would hardly have assigned you and your men to this operation."

"I've got a funny feeling," Hanklin sighed. "Japan's about to get a whole lot hotter for three grunts I know."

"So what's next?" Mischkie asked Ballard. "You going back down to grill the bim?"

"In a while. It might help to let her stew a bit, and it might help us to rest up some. Tex is right. From here on out when something happens, it's going to come fast and mean."

Chapter 22

She had no idea where she was. A beam of sunlight brought her awake. The first thought to enter the fog of her mind was that it was no longer night. She became aware of the bed beneath her, that she lay atop the covers, fully dressed.

She sat up, swinging her feet to the floor. The fog cleared and she remembered everything.

After the American, Sergeant Ballard, had left her in the office last night, the soldiers on guard came for her and brought her to this small room with a single bed, also on the ground floor.

The sentries stood outside the door, and she saw another sentry outside the window.

Keiko had not intended to fall asleep, had meant only to rest her eyes, and now it was morning.

There was a knock at the door. She rose, instantly awake. Her mind must be in a sort of shock, she thought. She was not physically upset, no quickened heartbeat or clammy perspiration or cramped abdominal muscles. She appreciated the gravity of her situation, but her intellect continued to function with cool-headed precision.

She crossed to the door, pausing by the mirror just long enough to smooth her hair into place with her hands. Her clothes were slightly wrinkled, she noticed, but that would have to do.

She said in English, "Yes, who is it?"

"Sergeant Ballard. I want to speak with you."

There was no escape. She fought off the claustrophobia that wanted to grab hold. She was relieved that at least it was this one who had come again to question her. She briefly considered this.

He wore the smell of death about him like an invisible aura, but she did not think him capable of cruelty. Her first impressions of people were generally reliable. This American, Ballard, was precisely the type of man she had hoped she would find here.

The door was locked from the outside. His request to enter was a courtesy.

"Come in, Sergeant." She returned to sit on the bed.

He came in and stood there. They appraised each other across the space of the room for a full thirty seconds, much as they had in the office last night, except that she saw him fully, clearly, for the first time now in the light of day.

He said, "I hope a night of thinking about the trouble you're in has made you cooperative."

"I'm sorry to say I slept the night through. The bed was very comfortable."

"Feel like telling me your name this morning?"

"I will tell you nothing. I do appreciate the civilized treatment you have extended me, Sergeant. I wish only to be released."

"I know the feeling, but I don't think there's much chance of either one of us getting off this roller coaster that easily."

"I will tell you nothing."

"Then I'll tell you something. Maybe something you haven't thought about yet. You risked a lot coming here, didn't you?"

"I thought the risk justified. But rather than show your appreciation, I am treated like a prisoner."

"That's because you are a prisoner. You and I, lady, and my men, we saved General MacArthur's life together. I appreciate your part in it, I really do, and so does the general, but you're going to have to do more before you walk away. That's what you haven't thought about."

"I have thought about that."

"The ninjas were historically assassins for hire. Someone sent those assassins here last night. They struck out, as we say in the States, but that doesn't mean they won't try again. They will. If not the ninja, then whoever sent them. I don't

intend to let that happen, and I think you know who's behind this and where we can find them."

"I do not. I'm sorry. I do not."

"You do know," he insisted. "You traveled all this way from somewhere to save the general's life because you knew what his death would cause for your people."

"You are as perceptive as you are skilled in the arts of death," she said. "I would not have expected that at first. I also did what I did because it is our Emperor's wish that hostilities between our countries cease. I have no love for General Douglas MacArthur."

"Tell me your name. You see how impractical this is. You say you've thought about it. Then have you decided? Are you going to stand by and let whoever is behind it try again? Maybe next time they'll succeed. Or are you going to tell me what you know so my men and I can try and stop it?"

"My knowledge is the only thing I have to bargain with."

"This is no time for bargains."

"It is for me. I want to get out of here."

"What do you want?"

"I will show you what I can," she said. "You will take me with you."

This is what she had decided last night after he interrogated her the first time.

He was right in everything he said about those who had sent the ninja not giving up, about MacArthur remaining in danger because of this, but something inside her remained undecided no matter how hard she hammered at it with reason.

She would lead them as far as Tateyama and then she would escape. Or perhaps she would lead them to the castle. She didn't know. She would improvise according to what happened every step along the way after they left the hotel.

Ballard considered her offer.

"When people lead me into traps, I get mad as hell, lady."

"I will not lead you into a trap. That is the truth. You must trust me. You have no choice."

He grimaced. "You're right about that. I guess we have a bargain."

She stood from the bed. "Can we leave now?"

"Soon enough, but doesn't a bargain require some degree of mutual trust? You know my name, I still don't know yours."

"My name is Keiko."

"That's a first name."

"It is the only name you need to know."

He thought about this too, and nodded.

"All right, Keiko. You stay put while I round up my men and some transportation, then we'll take that drive together."

Hanklin caught up with Ballard in front of the hotel, alongside the busy front entrance. They wore fatigues and full combat webbing and in addition to pistol and knife, each had added a rifle to his personal arsenal.

"How's the general?" Ballard asked.

"Acting like it never happened." Hanklin bit off the corner of a plug of tobacco and commenced chomping. "Ask me, he just don't want word to get around that Dugout Doug got caught with his pants down when them ninja came calling."

"It works out better for us if he wants it kept quiet," said Ballard. "I want to nail these sons of bitches hard, our way. If we don't, they'll sure as hell be back. Here comes Mischkie."

Hanklin watched the approaching jeep.

"What happened last night would have been a lot easier to keep quiet if Wilbur hadn't flown off the handle like he did and pumped that Jap full of holes. You going to talk to him about that?"

"I'll talk to him."

Mischkie braked to a stop in front of them.

"Where's the tour guide?" he asked.

Ballard and Hanklin stepped in closer so their conversation would not be overheard by passersby.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Wilbur," Ballard said.

"What do you mean, Sarge?"

"I mean I'm starting to wonder if I should be worrying about you in addition to the Japs."

"He means there's more than enough to keep our hands full, city boy," Hanklin put in, "without having to worry about you popping your cork like you did last night when you gave that ninja more holes than a screen door."

Mischkie started to voice denial.

"That ninja last night in the General's room," said Ballard. "You could have winged him. You're that good, Wil. I've seen you do it. I wanted one of them alive. I told you so. What about it? You lost it last night, buddy. From here on is where it gets real crazy. I can't have a loose cannon rolling around on deck."

"Don't worry, Sarge," Mischkie said, as if he meant it. "I, uh, I know I lost it last night, but I've got it back today. I'll be all right. I'm not going to be held responsible for you and this Texan catching a bullet. Guess I was just ... dwelling too much on what happened to that kid back on Luzon, Evita. I've seen a lot of shit but for some reason I can't get that kid's face out of my mind."

Ballard thought of the dreams he had about Carla and did not know what to say.

Hanklin spat a spurt of tobacco.

"Maybe we're all going crazy. Maybe guys like us'll be like the dinosaurs now that they can wipe out a whole city with one bomb. Hell, we had the whole team to give cover fire not too damn long ago and where are those mothers' sons now? Now it's just the three of us. I've got a feeling about this one, boys."

"Knock off that talk, both of you," said Ballard. "We've got a job to do."

Mischkie patted the steering wheel.

"It took some sweet finagling to get this baby from the motor pool. I'm not taking it back without plenty of extra mileage or they'll chew my ass. I said you didn't have to worry, Sarge. I meant it. I'm ready. I'll deal with what's inside my brain. I won't screw up."

"Good," Ballard said, "because here comes the lady now." Two sentries strode over with Keiko between them. Ballard nodded his thanks to them.

"I'll take responsibility from here," he said.

The sentries walked away. She studied Ballard. "So I am still a prisoner. Will you handcuff me?"

Mischkie chuckled. "A live wire. This ought to be interesting."

"Keiko," said Ballard, "this is Wilbur Mischkie of Brooklyn, New York, and Tex Hanklin of Nacogdoches, Texas. Don't let their gruff exteriors fool you. They get gruffer the more you know them."

"Howdy, ma'am." Hanklin delivered a broad smile. "Understand you're taking us to a rodeo."

Keiko said nothing. She boarded the jeep, seating herself in the back, holding her posture erect, staring straight ahead. Mischkie grinned. "Cool and aloof. Better and better."

"Snooty, I calls it," Hanklin grumbled, swinging aboard, "but I reckon she's entitled."

Ballard sat beside Keiko.

"Let's roll."

Hanklin looked around them, at the scruffy crowd of loitering civilians that had gathered as usual beyond the lines across the street; at the signs of devastation stretching out in every direction beneath a brassy sun blazing down through the haze.

"Now I know how Custer felt."

"Forward, ho," said Mischkie.

The jeep pulled away from the curb.

Ballard looked at Keiko. She continued to stare straight ahead.

"Do us both a favor," he said. "No tricks."

"Take the highway north out of Yokohama," she instructed Mischkie. "I will not lead you into a trap. I betray not you, but my own blood and heritage."

A single tear pearly in the corner of her left eye and slid down her cheek.

Eichelberger entered Room 315 that morning, with a briefcase under his arm, to find MacArthur standing at one of the windows, staring down at something outside.

Eichelberger joined him in time to see a jeep with four people aboard pull away from the front of the New Grand. "Morning, General."

"Bob."

"Well, you were right, sir. I stand corrected. Having Ballard and those roughnecks of his around last night made all the difference."

MacArthur watched the jeep drive away.

"This is the second impossible assignment I've handed those men in two weeks time, and this war is supposed to be over."

"Is that the mystery woman with them?"

MacArthur nodded. "She's taking those good men into the belly of the monster. We can't guarantee their safety worth a damn, and no one knows it better than they do. Anything could happen out there, Bob. The girl? A wild card, an unknown quantity, but she's the key. Ballard thinks so. With a man like that, hunches mean a lot. But by god, I wish I didn't have to send those men out like this one last time."

The jeep disappeared from their view. Eichelberger cleared his throat.

"Uh, General, I've got verification on those remaining P.O.W. locations we haven't been able to account for."

"Right, let's get to work." MacArthur turned from the window, rolling up his shirt sleeves. "And have someone call room service, will you, Bob? I'm in the mood for a strawberry shake."

When Okada walked into the office they shared, Abiko was asleep on the couch. Okada shook his partner awake roughly. He understood, having passed much of the return trip from Yokohama in a fitful sleep in the back seat of the staff car.

"Abiko, rouse yourself. It's a new day."

A short time later, as he poured them each a cup of warmed saki, Abiko reported.

"The military alerts were called off shortly after midnight."

"By that time Baron Tamura would have received word of what happened at the New Grand Hotel."

"And what did happen?" Abiko asked. "Don't you intend to tell me?" The query was somewhat petulant.

"MacArthur lives. There was an attack on his life that failed," Okada told him.

"You saw MacArthur?"

"I spoke with him at some length. He is a formidable presence, a worthy adversary. He is a shrewd man. He understands our ways."

"What happened to his assailants?"

"Slain by his personal bodyguards, a team led by a man named Ballard." Okada's sharp eyes were thoughtful behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

"Can the dead be traced to Baron Tamura?" asked Abiko. Okada sipped from his cup. "I think not. The Baron is more clever than to allow that to happen."

"Have the assailants been identified?"

"Ah, they have, and you will like this, Major Abiko. The would-be assassins were ninja."

Abiko reacted with such a start that he splashed saki across some papers on his desk. The almost feminine line of his mouth tightened.

"Ninja? But that cannot be!"

"It can be, unless the Americans are lying."

"They would have no reason to do that. But ... it is unbelievable."

"Difficult to believe," Okada corrected. "It is a measure of the threat the Baron poses. The *Kempeitai* was dispatched, as were the Yokohama civilian police, because the hotel staff reported the incident before the Americans were able to contain it."

"General Nagano returned to his quarters at 0300 hours this morning," Abiko said. "Should we not order him placed under arrest? This is sure to put us at odds with Baron Tamura. We had hoped to avoid that."

"It was unavoidable," Okada said, "but we will not arrest General Nagano quite yet."

"The investigation—"

"Has been ordered stopped by General MacArthur personally. General Nagano becomes more important than ever to our survival, Major, but we shall deal with him at the proper time. We will deal with the Baron, also. Soon. Very soon."

Abiko frowned. "Did the Americans say more than that ninja were involved?"

"A woman is involved. I got that impression listening to them speak amongst themselves as we were shown in."

"Do you know her identity?"

"I do not, and I see no reason to trouble ourselves about it. We have been ordered not to investigate the incident. Baron Tamura will be aware of this also and so will not concern himself with us at this time."

"What will his next move be?"

"We will let General Nagano tell us that."

"We must persuade him to talk. Things will come to a head very quickly now, I think."

"Sometimes pain is the best persuader, Major Abiko. By this time tomorrow, the *Kempeitai* may well have ceased to exist. We must exploit whatever happens before then to the fullest. The reckoning is at hand."

Chapter 23

Baron Tamura was chauffeured to a secluded corner of the Tateyama Air Base where Hayashi awaited him at the chain link fence perimeter. The overweight air force colonel looked uncomfortable in the extreme heat of the day. They exchanged bows. Hayashi led the way through a hole which had been cut in the fence, along a short path away from the base, into a scattering of trees. A short way further they came to where camouflage netting had been strung up to cover the three Zero fighter planes parked with their wings locked in the up position.

Baron Tamura gazed upon the sight, as did Hayashi, for close to a full minute.

"I have spent the morning in prayer to the spirits of my ancestors," said Hayashi. "There is a sacred obligation to remove the slur that darkens Japan's good name. This dishonor must be expunged. I have three pilots who have volunteered from what was the Tateyama Fighter Wing of the 11th Air Fleet. They were, they are, kamikaze."

"We cannot change the course of destiny," said the Baron. "But we shall give history cause to remember who we were and what we stood for. This will be the legacy of Bushido."

From Yokohama north through Kawasaki and Tokyo, where the main highway followed the contours of the Bay and cut east, the passing scene was one of unending devastation.

When the remains of Tokyo were behind them and the country finally opened up, Mischkie gave the jeep more gas on the open stretch of highway. The breeze cooled their sweat.

There was not a trace of an American presence on the streets and roads they traveled. Pedestrians stared enigmatically at the jeep traveling past with the three American soldiers and a young Japanese woman aboard.

At one point Mischkie commented, "This Emperor of yours sure knows how to lay down the law. A month ago these people would have chopped us to hamburger."

Hanklin swung around in his seat to regard Keiko.

"How about it, miss? You folks don't really buy that hogwash about your Emperor being descended from a sun goddess, do you?"

"Why do you find that so difficult to believe?" she asked. The question caught Hanklin off guard.

"Uh, I dunno, just sounds kind of silly, is all."

"Is not much of western civilization built upon the concept that your lord once walked this Earth, and was he not a son of God?"

"Uh..." was as far as Hanklin got, and the sentence trailed off.

Mischkie was grinning widely. "She's got you there, Tex."

Hanklin studied her. "Uh, yeah, I reckon she does at that."

That concluded the conversation for awhile, until they were approaching Chiba, some ten miles along where the map detailed how the highway would drop south on the eastern shore of the Bay.

The countryside became more hilly, more forested, the further south they traveled.

Except for the brief exchange with Hanklin, Keiko spoke only to give occasional directions. She sat staring straight ahead as she had since leaving the hotel, her dark tendrils of hair loosened by the wind. Ballard thought again that she was a beautiful woman.

"I have a question, Keiko."

"I will tell you what you need to know when we arrive at our destination."

"I'm not talking about where we're going, I'm talking about where we've been. Why did you show up at the hotel last night to warn us about those ninja assassins?"

"Why should my motives concern you?"

"I'm curious. I know why you said you did it, for your country, for peace. That took great courage. You must hate and fear us. I know about your motives. I'm wondering where that courage came from."

"It is true, I should hate you. I should hate all Americans for the suffering I have seen, the suffering wrought by your bombs."

"Why don't you hate us?"

"Because I understand in my heart that what happened to us in the end is our fault, no one else's."

Mischkie overheard this. He called back over his shoulder to her as he drove.

"You still feel that way after we dropped those atom bombs on your people?"

"I know about Bataan," she said, "and Pearl Harbor, and the atrocities committed by our military throughout this part of the world. America lost so many men. Is it to be wondered that your hearts would be filled with anger and vengeance? You must remember, I have lived in America. I know you to be a coarse but amiable race, not warlike by nature."

"The last four years have changed that plenty, gal," Hanklin put in. "These days we're warlike as hell."

"And, I know this," she concluded. "If our military leaders had such a weapon, they would have certainly used it against you."

"You're a honey, all right." Mischkie admired her in his rear-view mirror. "I sure as hell hope you aren't leading us into a double-cross, sister."

She looked at Ballard again, briefly.

"You do not think it is a trap, or you would not be letting me take you like this, just the three of you."

"We're only supposed to reconnoiter," Ballard told her.

"We'll run for it if we have to."

"As you say, Sergeant."

Mischkie grinned. "Don't believe that one, huh, sweetheart?"

"I saw Sergeant Ballard in action last night," she said. "I expect you men to be of the same caliber. I think you will be the ones to deal with what I will show you."

"Then why not tell us where the hell we're heading?"

Hanklin demanded irritably.

Ballard said to Keiko, "You're giving yourself leeway to change your mind if you decide to."

"Perhaps."

The reply was softly spoken.

She lapsed back into silence.

Chiba was more agricultural than industrial and had been spared the heavy bombing, but signs of suffering and of a conflict lost were everywhere. The streets in town were clogged with refugees, farmers, and demobilized soldiers. Pantalooned housewives scrounged for food, hunger and desperation in their eyes. Many of them did not even look up as the jeep drove past.

At the southern tip of town, they passed a small square where a crowd of ten or twelve people could be seen shouting at each other amid much waving of fists and some clubs. A teenage boy crouched fearfully, shielded by two people who must have been his parents. A man raging, on the verge of violence, was being restrained by those near him from lashing out at the teenager. Half of the crowd shouted encouragement, the other half pleaded for the boy to be spared.

Keiko said sharply, "Please, you must stop. There is trouble."

"It ain't our trouble, lady," said Hanklin.

She reached over, touched a hand to Ballard's left hand, placing her palm upon the back of his hand.

"Please stop," she pleaded emphatically. "They will kill the boy. This sort of thing has been happening all over Japan! We must stop it."

"Pull over," Ballard told Mischkie.

The jeep braked to a stop practically unnoticed by the small mob. Keiko leaped to the ground. She strode toward the center of the excitement.

Ballard did not take his eyes off her. He felt Hanklin and Mischkie glancing at him inquiringly.

"This could be her changing her mind," said Mischkie. "Think she's going to try and take a run-out powder?"

"That, or it's a trap," said Ballard, a finger curled around the trigger of his M-1. "Or it's the real thing."

"Why'd you have me stop, Sarge?" Mischkie wanted to know.

"Curiosity. Let's see what happens."

Keiko stepped between the two factions, striding over to stand directly between the parents shielding their boy and those restraining the man inciting the others to join him in doing the boy harm. The people seemed to defer to something in her bearing, or perhaps, thought Ballard, they were responding to whatever she was saying as she addressed the two factions in her language, her delivery precisely cadenced, her tone reasoning and persuasive.

Hanklin said, "Sounds like she's trying to talk some sense into their fool heads."

"She's an aristocrat," Ballard said, "and they know it."

"She ain't the hoi polloi, that's for damn sure."

"She's got to be tied in with someone big," Mischkie put in. "You're right, Sarge. That little girlie is upper crust all the way."

Having begun by ordering back those who would harm the cowering teenager, before long Keiko was moderating some sort of compromise between the two factions.

There was a general backing down on both sides. Finally, although continuing to glower angrily at the boy, those who wanted to assault him swung about and walked away, leaving the child and his parents and those with them to disperse in other directions.

Keiko returned to the jeep. She rejoined Ballard in the back seat.

"They said the boy stole a loaf of bread," she explained. "In these times, that is the worst crime. They wanted to publicly whip the child. They would have killed him. The boy admitted stealing the bread for his family. It happened only today. The parents did not know. They promised to return the loaf of bread."

Ballard leaned over and tapped Mischkie on the shoulder. "Let's get out of here." They drove on.

"Do I stay on the highway south?" Mischkie asked.

"This highway south, yes."

Hanklin leaned around to look her way.

"That was good work back there, miss. And we're much obliged you didn't try running out on us."

"Yeah," Mischkie nodded. "Would have been a shame to have to shoot you just when we were getting to like you."

Ballard grunted. "Excuse him," he advised Keiko. "That's what passes for humor in America. Mischkie sometimes thinks he's Bob Hope."

"I understand American humor," she said.

"Well, now you're talking," Hanklin grinned. "Any gal with a sense of humor is okey-dokey with old Tex, yes sir."

"I said I understand American humor," she deadpanned. "I did not say I appreciate it."

"Ouch." Hanklin winced. He turned around to continue riding with eyes front.

"That must have been quite a speech you gave them back there," Ballard said. "You inspired them. I could see that. What did you say?"

"May I ask why you should want to know?"

"Same reason I had Mischkie stop when you asked us to. Curiosity."

"I told them that we Japanese must not let feelings of defeat and dishonor turn us against each other. I told them that bad luck and pain are the masters and we must be amenable to their pleasure. We must welcome the new world opening before us and work to make it a better world and not devour ourselves, as almost happened back there."

"You sound more liberated than defeated."

"We are liberated. That is what I tried to make those people understand. Peace will lift from us the shackles of military oppression. The Japanese have in their hearts long detested servitude to the military which has so abused their faith."

"You're very eloquent. You're no ordinary woman, are you, Keiko? We saw that back there, too."

"My social class should have no effect on how you see me." A brief, self-conscious smile flickered across her face that Ballard found very easy on the eyes. "You see," she said, "there are some things about your country of which I do approve. Japan will return to being a democracy again one day soon."

"Japan is where you feel you belong, isn't it?"

An American fighter plane soared by some three thousand feet overhead, a speeding blur of sound against the stark blue of the sky. Her eyes followed the plane.

"My heart is up there," she said. She returned her gaze to his. "Why do you ask me these questions?"

If Mischkie or Hanklin overheard their conversation above the sounds of the open jeep, they gave no indication, for which Ballard was profoundly grateful.

"I've been wondering the same thing. I'm not sure."

Again the briefest of smiles.

"You are an honest man, John Ballard. That is good. And what about you? Where do you belong? Is there someone waiting for you back in America?"

Hesitation.

He thought of the dreams. He thought about Carla and of how she died...

"I have no one," he said.

Chapter 24

The vehicle appeared as nothing more than a speck in the distance where the road cut into view at the valley's far end.

Corporal Ugaki became aware that it was not Japanese—but American military!—only after long minutes of tracking it carefully through his binoculars. He knew that if he did not report the sighting, and word of it reached Tanaka, then Tanaka might quite possibly do him severe harm, perhaps kill him.

He handed the binoculars to Tanaka and pointed.

"Sergeant, look there. Coming down the road, about one half kilometer."

Tanaka irritably swiped at a bug buzzing around his meaty, perspiring face and rested his elbows for support on a boulder, taking his time to focus and center the binoculars. He snorted like the bull he always reminded Ugaki of.

"The arrogance of those barbarians!"

A hundred meters behind them, three open, armored vehicles, each with a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on its back, were parked, well removed from view of the road. Eight men in soiled army uniforms lounged about idly in the shade. They had spent the afternoon here with nothing to do, not knowing where to go, the desperation quietly building with the ache of hunger in their bellies.

Ugaki and Tanaka stood atop a pine-wooded hill that overlooked the road which passed through a village near where men, women and children worked sparse fields baking beneath the sun.

"What shall we do, Sergeant?" Ugaki inquired.

"What do you think we shall do? We attack!" Sergeant Tanaka whirled, stalking back toward the vehicles. "Action at last, men!"

Rikihei Ugaki was born and raised in a nearby village. He had often wished, patrolling these mountainsides as a member of Sergeant Tanaka's platoon, that he was still a youngster, not yet grown into a world where young men were sent to die for their Emperor.

They had demobilized ten days earlier. The others in the platoon had returned home. Ugaki had no home to return to. Every member of his family had perished in the American bombing raids on Tokyo, and it was the same with the other men who stayed on.

They had managed to hold onto these vehicles and survive by living on the charity of the people. They had thus far victimized no one, but the inactivity, the rootlessness, the sleeping on the hard ground with an empty stomach, had begun to eat away at nerves and values. Sergeant Tanaka particularly had grown more irritable by the day.

Ugaki knew this could not go on. They were lost souls. He wished he had not seen the American vehicle approaching. He could not tell how the others felt.

They were rousing themselves. They had deserted without turning in their weapons. Each man toted a rifle and wore extra ammunition belts.

Ugaki caught up with Tanaka and said, in front of the others, "But, Sergeant, there are civilians down in those fields, women and children."

"We are Japanese, we are soldiers," Tanaka snarled. He waved an arm in the direction of the Americans. "There is the object of our humiliation and defeat. We outnumber them, we have more vehicles. We will surround them and they shall know our vengeance. It is unfortunate about the civilians. The fortunes of war."

Ugaki saw the men responding to the heat of Tanaka's words, muttering assent amongst themselves.

"But the war is over," he told them. "We are no longer soldiers. It would be murder!"

Tanaka's right arm lashed out and delivered Ugaki a backhanded slap.

Ugaki stumbled off his feet under the power of the blow.

"You will obey my orders." Tanaka's hand rested on the butt of a pistol holstered at his waist. He looked from face to face of those before him. "Is there anyone else who does not want to make quick work of those barbarians?"

No one said anything. They avoided Ugaki's eyes.

"Good." Tanaka looked at one of the men, a team leader before demobilization. "You will take these three and come in on the Americans from this side along the road. Follow that foot path down there as best you can."

He looked at another. "You will take these men. Follow my vehicle. When we reach the road, cut across and follow the river on the other side. I will meet them head-on. We will catch them in three lines of fire. Quickly now, before we lose our chance. Banzai!"

The cry was answered in kind. The men ran to board their vehicles.

Ugaki rose and brushed himself off. He retrieved his rifle. Tanaka stared at him from where he stood at the rear of the lead vehicle. His hand had not left the butt of his pistol.

"Corporal, you will join in avenging your fallen comrades and the good name of Japan."

Ugaki had spent the last two years living with these men, obeying Tanaka's orders.

He boarded Tanaka's vehicle, seating himself behind the steering wheel, switching on the ignition key.

Tanaka made a motion with his arm and they moved out.

Ballard looked up from the map.

"This road you've got us on only goes as far as Cape Nojimba," he told Keiko. "That's the end of the line. The peninsula ends at Cape Nojimba. It's been a fun ride but I'm afraid the polite conversation is over. Where are you taking us?"

They were entering a small village of thatched-roof farmhouses clustered next to a running stream. The wooded slopes on either side of the valley along this stretch were stair-stepped with narrow terraced fields. In one such field on their right, a dozen men, women, and teenagers worked with primitive tools.

Set slightly apart from them, a group of young children, some of them no more than toddlers, played in the sunshine.

There had been no sign of any concentrated Japanese military presence since leaving Yokohama. The police had been visible only in the larger towns. The scores of refugees and demobilized soldiers had thinned away below Chiba until, this far south, the jeep pretty much had the road to itself.

"Intelligence reports claim there's a large air base outside Tateyama," Mischkie said over his shoulder as he drove.

"That is not where I am taking you," Keiko said. "You were correct, Sergeant Ballard, when you suggested that I was delaying telling you what I knew because I continued to be uncertain of my feelings and did not wish to commit myself, in the event I changed my mind."

"That wasn't too hard to figure out. Have you changed your mind?"

"I have not. I cannot. Everything you said at the hotel about them not giving up was true. They are not sane. I must realize this. They will try again and again to kill General MacArthur until they succeed, unless you stop them."

"Who are we talking about?"

"I speak of my uncle."

"What's his name and where do we find him?"

"Holy shit!" Mischkie muttered.

He took his foot off the gas and braked.

Racing toward them at high speeds were three vehicles, approximately a quarter of a kilometer away.

Hanklin grunted a curse. He flung an angry look at Keiko.

"Reckon you couldn't wait till we got to that air base, could you, sweetheart?"

Her denial was buried beneath the heavy yammering of two, then three mounted machine guns from the backs of those approaching vehicles.

The vehicles separated on the far side of where the villagers worked, where the children played.

The vehicles stormed on, plumes of dust clouding up behind each one, the machine gunners firing random, choppy bursts. One came in from slightly higher ground. One raced directly at the people dispersing wildly in the field, on the right. The third blazed in directly at the jeep.

Bullets whistled dangerously close above and around the jeep. A few rounds pinged off the chassis.

Mischkie strong-armed his steering wheel, almost tipping the jeep onto its side in his haste, but he straightened it out and the jeep sprung from the road, bumping across a gully and down an incline separating the road from the river several hundred yards away.

The machine gun fire from the approaching vehicles ceased when the gunners lost sight of the jeep.

Mischkie braked to a sharp halt and everyone jumped out to crouch behind the vehicle for cover, the men aiming their rifles over the jeep at the road approximately where the attacking vehicles would blaze into sight within seconds. Keiko crouched down with them.

In the adjacent field, the civilians scattered. Ballard heard women screaming from that direction.

Keiko tugged his sleeve, pointing.

"Over there!"

He had lost sight of the children playing in the sunshine, his attention riveted on the attack, assuming the children had been gathered up in the civilians' run for cover.

He was wrong.

The infants squalled their fright near the fallen body of a teenage girl who had been left to oversee them. The girl lay face down in the dirt, lifeless.

Frantic shouting came from women running across the field toward the children, obviously the mothers. Villagers seeking cover wailed out their anguish and fear.

The Japanese military vehicles sailed into view, cresting the slope from three directions. The gunner of the vehicle racing in along the river opened fire.

One of the young women running across the field toward the children threw up her hands and spilled forward onto her face. The other women scrambled away to escape the path of the oncoming Japanese vehicles.

A pair of vehicles stormed in from the road but the gunner in the vehicle coming along the river was the only one firing.

Hanklin invested several extra seconds in sighting along the length of his M-1.

"The gunner's mine."

"He's out of range," said Mischkie.

"He just came into range."

Hanklin squeezed the trigger once. The machine gunner toppled out of the vehicle in a spread-eagled dead fall. Hanklin triggered another round that took out the driver.

The vehicle yawed this way and that at high speed, then slammed into a tree head-on and exploded into a fiery inferno.

"Yeah!" Mischkie shouted like someone having a great time. "One down and two to go!"

Keiko started to rise.

"I must get those children to safety."

The mothers across the field started in the children's' direction again. The remaining two vehicles were bearing down on the jeep from opposite directions.

Mischkie reached out and grabbed Keiko to stop her.

"Oh no, you don't, sister. You got us into this. If we go down, you're taking the fall too."

Ballard brushed Mischkie's arm aside.

"Let her go, Wil. Keep your mind on those guys."

He nodded at where the Jap vehicles had sluiced into sideways skids about twenty yards away.

"But, Sarge—"

"Those kids are more important than anything else," Ballard told him.

He started to nod to Keiko to go ahead, but she was already dodging toward the children, crouching as she ran in anticipation of more fire. Mischkie watched her herd the children toward the river where the bank angled low enough for them to drop from sight.

"You're right, Sarge," he sighed. "I think that doll is on the side of the angels."

"Look out, fellas," Hanklin drawled. "Hell's a'poppin'."

The villagers across the field saw their children being led to safety by Keiko and hesitated, skittishly eyeing the Japanese soldiers pouring to the ground behind their vehicles.

The machine guns opened fire with pounding bursts that kicked up soil not far short of the jeep. The Americans returned fire, toppling one of the machine gunners, causing the surviving one to pause in firing for a moment's reflection on whether he might not be safer behind cover.

The other Japanese soldiers fired from behind the cover of their vehicles—hurried, frightened rifle fire that went high and wide. A sergeant could be seen wildly exhorting his men to charge the Americans trapped with their backs to the river.

Hanklin said, "Won't be long before that NCO has those boys riled up enough to come after us."

"I'll take care of that," said Mischkie.

He sighted across the hood of the jeep.

"Wait a minute," said Ballard. "What's this?"

The civilians who had sought cover were emerging. There was no sign of Keiko or the children.

Some of the civilians were lifting up the bodies of the fallen and carrying them away, but most of the villagers, walking in a line three or four abreast came, not hurrying but purposefully walking, directly into the field of fire between the opposing forces.

"What the hell?" Mischkie grunted.

The small band of villagers, men and women of every age, many of them carrying farming implements, the knees of their clothes damp from working the land, filed across the field, following an elderly man carrying a hoe as if it were a walking staff. The people, like their leader, looked neither to the left nor right as they moved to form a human wall between the two sides.

Rifle fire from behind the Japanese vehicles tapered off despite the rantings of the sergeant who stood in the rear of his vehicle haranguing his men, pointing at the Americans. He reminded Ballard of a mad dog foaming at the mouth.

The Japanese soldiers did not resume firing, did not attack, but stared at the villagers from behind their vehicles and listened when the village leader faced them and spoke in a plaintive, pleading voice. Some of the soldiers rose from behind their cover, their rifles lowered, aimed at the ground.

"Now what the hell?" said Mischkie.

"They've had enough," Hanklin said without much conviction.

The elder next turned and called over to the Americans in barely intelligible, broken phrases.

"G. I. ... no killing ... enough!"

"Looks like we're not the only ones who feel that way," Ballard said under his breath.

He stood up from behind the jeep, as the Japanese soldiers had stood behind their vehicles. He braced the M-1 to his hip, canting the barrel high. Mischkie and Hanklin did the same.

Hanklin said quietly, "Looks like a Mexican stand-off."

"Your geography's off base, cowboy," said Mischkie, "but you got the idea."

"Those men are demobilized soldiers," said Ballard. "They've got nothing to gain by risking their lives fighting us. The war's over." He raised his rifle, not in a threatening gesture but to motion. "Drop your rifles," he shouted, knowing that they did not speak his language but that they would understand.

They dropped their rifles. Their sergeant, remaining standing in the back of one of the vehicles, was not pleased. His men looked weary. There was some dispirited exchange among them, then they boarded the vehicles. The sergeant barked something at his driver, a corporal who sat with his hands on the steering wheel.

The other vehicle chugged to life. The driver circled around, those aboard avoided looking at the villagers. Ballard stepped from behind the jeep.

"Where are you going, Sarge?" Mischkie asked with a note of rising concern.

"I'm going to try to make these people know we're not here to fight them."

Hanklin's attention stayed on the Jap sergeant across the way. The demobbed soldier had given up exhorting his men, apparently yielding to the dissension, but his glare glowed like burning coals.

"That jasper don't appear any too sociable."

"So cover me."

"You can bet your ass on that."

"I am," said Ballard.

He strode toward the village elder, never taking his eyes off the sergeant glowering down from the rear of the vehicle parked just beyond where the villagers stood.

The Japanese sergeant erupted with a shriek at the top of his lungs, full of naked madness, and threw himself behind the .50 caliber mounted at the rear of his vehicle and kept right on screaming as he tracked the muzzle in a lightning arc around on the Americans and the villagers.

By this time Ballard had unsheathed the knife worn across his chest. He pulled back his arm and let fly even before Hanklin or Mischkie could trigger their weapons. The blade buried itself in the center of the Jap's chest and his scream gurgled into an inhaled gasp of surprise and finality. His body thudded from the vehicle to the ground.

The corporal behind the wheel started up the engine, steered around, and followed the first vehicle onto the road, out of sight in the direction from which they had come. They did not look back. Left in their wake was a grim quiet broken only by the weeping and sobbing of the families of the dead beneath the burning late afternoon sun.

Mischkie could not take his eyes from the line of villagers which was slowly breaking up.

"Never saw anything like it," he said. "This war must really be over."

"Let's find Keiko," said Ballard, looking around.

A few of the older children from the group of kids appeared above the drop-off of the river bank, considerably further downriver from where Keiko had disappeared with them.

"She did a good job getting them out of the line of fire," Hanklin said.

Some of the villagers broke from the group in the field to hurry toward the children. Ballard nodded his thanks to the village leader, then he and his men moved along toward those scooping up children in their arms amid much frightened jabbering of the kids.

A rise in the terrain formed hillocks which placed a shelf of land here, well out of sight from where the main drama had occurred moments ago.

It was to this spot Keiko had brought her charges to safety. From here the river continued a distance beyond the shelf of land before disappearing around a bend.

There was no trace of Keiko.

Chapter 25

Baron Tamura and Colonel Hayashi watched with the Baron's chief security officer, Kozono, as an armored vehicle drove in through the stone archway and came to a stop before them. Three men of the security force leaped from the vehicle, two of them holding Keiko by her wrists. They led her forward. She allowed them to lead her with her chin held high. A thin cut, a bruise on one cheekbone, and scuff marks on her clothing testified to the struggle required to subdue her.

Kozono's men bowed deeply to the Baron. She did not bow to her uncle or the men with him.

"There was fighting," one of the soldiers reported.

"Who was it?" Kozono demanded.

"We could not see. We only saw her, hiding with children."

"I was not hiding," Keiko snapped. "I was saving lives."

Baron Tamura told the men, "You have done well."

They bowed again, radiating gratitude at the compliment.

"What will you do with your niece?" Kozono inquired.

"Shackle her." The Baron's words rang colder than a blade piercing flesh. "I warned you, Keiko, the day we witnessed the first landing of the barbarians. I advised you then not to leave the castle, that to do otherwise would result in dire consequences for you."

One of Kozono's men held her hands together, while the second clamped heavy metal cuffs over her wrists, snapping them shut.

"What will you do with me now, Uncle? Torture me?"

"Do not make light of such things."

"You would do that. Or you would have it done."

"Such extremes will not be called for. We know where you have been. You can have no comprehension of my dismay, nor my anger."

"Nor you of mine."

"Somehow you found out about the ninja. I am told there was a woman who went to the hotel to warn the Americans. It was you."

"Will you kill me?"

He snapped his eyes at the men who flanked her.

"Take her to the dungeon."

"Dungeon? You live in the Dark Ages, Uncle. It will be your undoing."

"I live by the tradition of my sacred ancestors," he said sternly. "I live by the code of Bushido. It will not be my undoing, child, but my destiny and the destiny of Japan."

"Tradition does not make wrong right," she retorted. "It is your tradition, Uncle, and yours, Colonel Hayashi, which brought this national tragedy upon us. The folly begun in Manchuria, compounded at Pearl Harbor, has come to its inevitable end. You militarists," she spat, "you say you love Japan. How could you let such a fate befall her? You will forever be a black stain on the pages of our history. Your ways, your beloved tradition, led our country to the brink of annihilation and now you would seize from us even the most fragile of hopes for peace."

Hayashi's pudgy features were nonplussed at this effrontery. He was speechless.

"Take her away," the Baron ordered.

Kozono nodded to his men, who escorted her off.

She called over her shoulder to the Baron and Hayashi, "Your day is past. It is normal for people to want peace. It is not normal to want war. The people will make the difference. You will see."

When they were alone again, Hayashi asked, "How much do you think she knows, Baron-san?"

"About tomorrow? She knows nothing about that, rest assured."

The air force colonel appeared unconvinced.

"She preached a stirring ode to collective strength. What will we do with her?"

"She is my responsibility, Colonel Hayashi. Do not concern yourself further about it. My niece will be dealt with."

Shortly after dusk, Ballard steered the jeep off the main road onto a narrow, dusty trail at a point just before where the main road crested a rise. The trail climbed a short distance into a cluster of pines.

He parked the jeep among the trees. They left the jeep to move cautiously through the trees to a craggy outlook exactly where the village elder had told them they would find it: a beautiful vantage point that offered them an unobstructed view of the road as it went directly past the high, foreboding stone walls of a castle perched on a sheer cliff above the sea, about a quarter mile away from their position.

A breeze nipped in off the ocean, cool and refreshing in the gathering gloom after the heat of the day.

The leader of the village where Keiko disappeared managed to convey to Ballard that he had picked up a smattering of English, to put it mildly, from the days when he worked at a restaurant in Tokyo before the war. He was profuse in his bowing.

"You not want war, we not want war," he kept saying over and over between bows and smiles.

The language barrier and the general confusion cost them another thirty minutes in getting a few simple answers from the old-timer, but the time and effort proved well invested.

The village leader recognized the young woman as Keiko Tamura. She was in some way related to someone named Baron Tamura who, if Ballard interpreted the man's directions correctly, resided in the medieval castle on the cliff below them.

One of the residents of the village had witnessed Keiko being spirited away by soldiers of the Baron's personal army. Again, if Ballard's understanding of the village leader's translation was accurate.

They heard chugging engine noises. Moments later, in the final, uncertain light of day, an armored vehicle lacking any military markings topped the rise of the road and approached the main gate of the castle set squarely in the high wall facing the road. A sentry emerged from a station and waved the vehicle on through without stopping it.

Hanklin worked a chew of tobacco. "So now what do we do?"

"That's a dumb question, hillbilly," Mischkie ribbed. "Yeah," Hanklin admitted sheepishly, "I guess it is. We're going in, right, Sarge?"

"Right," said Ballard. "I don't see any other way. This is where Keiko was taking us."

"Something's in the wind down there."

A lighted area around one wing of the castle appeared from here to be a command post for a paramilitary setup. Ballard made out a motor pool and numerous men bearing rifles, walking about.

"Whoever this Baron's working with and whatever it is they're planning," said Ballard, "we've got between now and dawn tomorrow to put it out of commission before the surrender signing. This has to be about that. That doesn't leave us time to go back to Yokohama for reinforcements, and I'm not about to trust the telephones even if we could find an operator who spoke English or a phone that worked."

"So who said anything about reinforcements?" Hanklin wanted to know.

"What size force you think they've got down there?" Mischkie wondered.

"My guess would be company strength. Our only chance is to get in and out without them realizing it until it's too late, and for that we're going to need a real light touch and a whole lot of luck. Mission objective is to stop the Baron and to do that we need to know just what we're up against. Keiko can tell us that. If she's in there, we'll find her. That's priority one. From there, we take it as it comes."

Another armored vehicle without markings approached the castle's main gate from the other direction. As before, the sentry waved the vehicle through without stopping it.

"This Baron Tamura's got to be a real big noise," said Mischkie. "A shortage of vehicles and gasoline and this guy's running a full fleet."

"My guess is the Baron had patrols out looking for Keiko," said Ballard. "One of the patrols stumbled onto her when she was with the children back at that village. The other patrols are reporting back in."

Hanklin watched the second vehicle pass onto the castle grounds and turn toward the command post. "You figure that's our way in?"

The approach of a third vehicle could be heard climbing the rise behind them where the road crested before dropping beneath their position.

"Let's find out," Ballard said.

They broke from the crag and started a fast slip-slide descent together through the gathering darkness, toward the road below.

A Japanese infantryman threw open the door of the Kempeitai office with such force that it slammed against the wall, startling Major Okada and his partner, Abiko.

The soldier glared around the office, ascertained that they were its only occupants and nodded to someone in the corridor, then returned to the hallway, leaving the door open.

General Kurita stormed in. Kurita was of slight build. A long-healed sword scar marked the army officer's face from his left ear to the corner of his mouth, giving it a permanent sneer.

Okada and Abiko both came to their feet.

"General," Okada began, "you should not have come here."

Kurita glared at Abiko. "Who is this?"

"He is one of us. He can be trusted."

"I awaited word from you last night, Okada. I had one thousand men ready to march at my command. It was you who convinced me not to deploy my troops until I had received word from you of the death of MacArthur. Nothing short of that would have decided me to hold back. As late as an hour before dawn, I held my men back, as did the others. And today you do not return my telephone calls,

and I must risk everything coming here like this. Much planning has gone into this coup. It cannot fail!"

Okada had spent the day making arrangements for the safe storage of the files he had amassed. He had given a scaled strongbox to the mama-san at the House of One Thousand Joys for safekeeping. She showed him the hole beneath the cellar that only she knew about. He knew he could trust her. She knew what would happen to her if anything happened to the files.

General Kurita's scar grew livid as he stormed on. "Nothing happened to MacArthur! He is alive! You joined with my group after your falling out with the Baron. I should never have trusted you, Okada. What sort of deceit do you practice?"

"There was an attack on MacArthur's life," Okada insisted. "The Baron sent ninja assassins after MacArthur. We have been ordered to investigate Baron Tamura," Okada lied. "That is why I thought we should avoid contact, General Kurita."

General Kurita did not curb his torrent of anger.

"You should have told us! Now I have no choice but to strike at the last possible moment before the treaty is signed. We are at a complete disadvantage." Kurita gripped the handle of his sword. "I would kill you slowly, Okada, but I cannot afford to draw attention to you or to myself, and killing you now would do that. But be warned. If you ever get in my way again, I will kill you slowly. Our coup will succeed!"

Kurita spun about sharply and left the office. The soldier in the corridor went with him.

Abiko sank into the chair behind his desk.

"They are insane to go through with a rebellion at this late date! They will fail. They will die, every one of them."

"And what makes you think General Kurita does not know this?" Okada asked. "And why should it matter to us? General Kurita's uprising will serve as a useful diversion for us. We must concern ourselves now with protecting our own interests. It is Baron Tamura who poses the biggest threat to us."

"What shall we do?"

Okada looked out at the night. "The time has come for us to deal with General Nagano. Then, Baron Tamura."

And then, Okada thought, Keiko Tamura will belong to me...

They gained a drop-off at the bottom of the slope. The headlights stabbed twin beams into the black sky, seconds short of appearing over the rise. The road passed directly below where they crouched.

The vehicle—open, armored, military but without markings, like the others—crested the hill, exhaust fumes polluting the clean ocean air, and began gaining speed on the descent.

When it passed beneath them, three shadowy figures left the drop-off above the road to land with cat-like grace in the rear of the vehicle.

The two with the driver twisted around in their seats. Mischkie took the one sitting next to the driver. Hanklin killed the man in the back seat.

Ballard crouched beside the driver. His left hand wrapped around the steering wheel to make sure they stayed on the road, his right fisted the .45, touching the muzzle of the pistol to the driver's temple. The driver's face spasmed with surprise and fear.

Mischkie and Hanklin opened the side doors of the vehicle and pitched out the corpses of the other two with enough force to send the bodies flopping off the side of the road and into a ravine, well beyond sight of anyone who might be passing by on the road later tonight.

The castle was coming up on their left. Ballard eased back the .45 and gestured forward to the terrified driver, in the direction of the main castle gate. The driver only registered more confusion and some disbelief.

Ballard made his point by cracking the barrel of the pistol across the back of the driver's head, not with enough force to render him unconscious but enough to hurt some and persuade him to cooperate. He waved again in the direction they were heading. The driver nodded his understanding.

Ballard returned the nod and removed his hand from the steering wheel. He sat in the seat next to the driver and said to the men in back, "One down, one up. Look sharp."

The driver focused half of his attention on steering and half on the pistol which glinted a dull blue in the dash lights, pointed directly at him.

The walls of the castle towered above.

The driver, a kid of no more than nineteen or twenty, had obviously decided the wisest thing to do was to cooperate. He touched the brakes as they approached the guard station.

Chapter 26

As before, the sentry satisfied himself with no more than a glance of familiarity at the vehicle and the indiscernible forms in the dark of three men aboard. He waved them on through, already turning as the vehicle rolled past without coming to a complete stop.

They passed through a stone archway. The driver, as if by habit, started to steer in the direction of the command post at the far wing of the sprawling structure.

There were a dozen or more men in the uniform of Baron Tamura's private army strolling about over there.

Ballard touched the nose of the .45 against the driver's sweat-glistening temple and growled warningly. He nodded in the opposite direction, toward a large courtyard that ran the length of the house. The kid behind the wheel obeyed, driving them to a less lighted end of another wing. Ballard motioned the driver to pull over. The driver did so and at further motioning from Ballard, he extinguished the vehicle's lights and engine.

Hanklin positioned himself in the seat behind the driver, looping his left forearm under the driver's throat, pulling him back. He brought his combat knife around so the point of the blade was pressing against the base of the driver's neck.

"Go ahead, Sarge, ask him what we want to know."

"He's been out driving since they brought Keiko back," Ballard said. "He won't know anything."

Mischkie positioned himself in the rear of the armored vehicle, looking out.

"Whatever you want to do with him, better snap it up. Some of those punks at the far end are coming this way to investigate why we're here and not there."

"Let's get out of here," Ballard said.

"What about him?"

Hanklin indicated the driver he still held in the murderous grip.

"Bring him with us. They find him dead and the alarm will go out and we'll be dead."

They left the vehicle parked at the end of the wing and exited into the gloom with the driver, while the men striding toward them were still several hundred yards away. The driver was in a state of panic, certain he was about to die.

When they reached the rear of the building, they came to a line of shrubs, inky black against the wall.

Ballard said, "This should do," and slugged the driver with the barrel of the .45.

Making sure the unconscious form was well hidden beneath and behind the shrubs, they moved out in single file at combat spacing against the back wall, along a stretch of barely illuminated acreage separating the back of the main residence from the outer wall which towered above them. This area was illuminated only by lanterns on posts spaced far apart from each other.

The other side of this wall met the sheer face of the cliff and dropped to the sea churning on the rocks below. Whoever was in charge of the defenses here would think his manpower better deployed elsewhere, and so they encountered no sentries or patrols as they hurried along.

All lights that were on in the main residence were on the second floor. They gained the rear of the far wing which was the command center for Baron Tamura's private force. At this end would be the living quarters.

What appeared to be a full-scale alert was in progress. The living quarters would most likely be the quietest sector in this sprawling labyrinth of stone.

Ballard eased a look around the corner at the same instant two of the Baron's force emerged from a door a hundred feet down from the corner. They were uniformed men with rifles slung over their shoulders and they turned and started toward the corner, not seeing Ballard. He drew back from the corner, pressing his back to the wall.

"Two sentries. We need to talk with one of them."

"Don't worry, we will," said Mischkie.

He and Hanklin sprang on the sentries as soon as they cleared the corner. Mischkie grabbed one by his tunic, jerked him around, grabbing his belt and collar and smashing the top of the man's head into the brick wall.

The sentry's legs buckled, and he sat down against the wall and commenced snoring softly. Hanklin had the second one by this time, the blade of his knife pressed against the man's throat.

"Ask away, Sarge."

Ballard said to the startled man, "Keiko," as clearly and forcefully as he could. "Keiko Tamura."

The man did not reply. He shook his head frantically, confused, as if the words did not penetrate.

Ballard grabbed the front of the man's tunic.

"Keiko Tamura?" he said again, making a question of it. The man shook his head uncomprehendingly, his eyes trying to crawl out of their sockets.

"Maybe you're just not speaking the lingo right, Sarge," said Hanklin. He applied the slightest degree of pressure to the knife blade and a single red droplet formed along it. The sentry could not see this, but he felt it. He opened his mouth but before he could scream, Hanklin placed his right hand over the man's face, palming the scream back down the throat, thumb and forefinger pinching the nostrils, effectively cutting off the intake of oxygen. Hanklin placed his mouth close to the sentry's ear. "Keiko," he whispered.

The sentry's head bobbed up and down and he indicated the doorway he and the other had stepped from.

"At least you're not dumb all the time, cowboy," said Mischkie approvingly.

Hanklin released the sentry, shoving him toward Ballard. "There. He understands."

Ballard grabbed the back of the soldier's collar and with a straightened arm placed the nose of his pistol against the base of the man's neck. The soldier led Ballard in the direction of the door.

"Let's not forget Sleeping Beauty," said Mischkie.

He leaned down and flung the unconscious sentry over his shoulder.

Hanklin cast a glance along their trail.

"We best get a move on before those boys looking after that truck out front start nosing around back here."

Inside the doorway was a vestibule, a door to one side and a hallway jutting off in either direction. Before these were stairs leading down. Mischkie opened the door, found a broom closet. He deposited his unconscious load in among the mops and pails.

Ballard continued to press the nose of the .45 against the base of the sentry's head.

"Keiko."

The sentry nodded and started ahead toward where the vestibule formed a T to join the main corridor of this wing. Men entered that corridor from somewhere close by, the noise of boot falls and conversation advancing briskly toward the T, one of the men saying something that made the others laugh as they rounded the corner and started down the stairs into the vestibule.

They saw the Americans and their Japanese captive. Laughter gave way to surprise, which gave way to flaring instinctual response.

The dungeon was dank with the smell of mildew and other unpleasant, unidentifiable odors. Light came from a single, low-wattage bulb within a metal wire covering. There were no windows.

She had lost all track of the time. She wished she had her diary with her. It would have at least helped pass the time.

All was quiet except for the squeaking of mice or rats somewhere nearby.

She regretted having been caught and returned, but she did not regret what she had done. She felt a strange peacefulness inside.

Her one real regret was that she had not been able to tell the Americans that it was her uncle they were after and where they could find him.

She thought about Ballard and she thought with a small smile of his companions, Hanklin and Mischkie, but mostly during the time she sat there, losing track of time, she thought about Ballard.

It was easy in Japan these days for a woman to learn to hate men, she thought; hate them for the way they prolonged the war, the way they treated women. There did not seem to her to have been nearly enough men like those courageous men in the village who had joined with their women to diffuse the fighting.

Ballard was a warrior, yes. Every bit as much as the samurai, and yet a lively intelligence functioned beneath that combat-hardened exterior, an innate humaneness that exhibited itself even in a moment of extreme personal hazard, such as when those demobilized soldiers attacked. Outnumbered by an opposing force closing in from separate directions, Ballard had thought about getting those children out of harm's way.

She was stunned at how quickly her uncle's men had swooped down upon her after she led the children to safety at that river bank, away from the shooting. Her uncle had long ago taught her the basics of judo and she had thus defended herself for a short time, but it was three to one and when they aimed their rifles at her, she could not be certain the men would not fire, and so she allowed herself to be apprehended.

She hoped John Ballard would know she had not betrayed them, that she had not led them into a trap in that village.

He would know.

A warrior. Fierce, brutal. Caring, humane. A man of direct action. A strong man who cared. That is why I think of him, she told herself. Her uncle and Hayashi and Nagano and Okada ... plots, plots, plots. A man like John Ballard could stop Baron Tamura. They were worthy opponents.

It would take direct action. She had tried and failed, and now she was a prisoner while the world teetered between peace and continued strife and suffering and war.

Keiko wondered if she would ever see him again and surprised herself with the realization that she very much wanted to. Or were these emotions only a part of the madness she and the rest of the world were caught up in? Would the feelings pass, as she hoped the madness would pass?

Where is he now? she wondered.

Gunfire startled her from her reverie, brought her to her feet with a quick rise of strange excitement and one word burst from her, unbidden.

"Ballard!"

There was no time to fall back.

With rifles tracking in their direction, Ballard pushed away the sentry he had been leading and got down on one knee to steady his aim with his .45. Mischkie and Hanklin bellied to the floor and opened fire with their rifles. Those on the landing tripped back and fell under the hail of fire before triggering only a few

rounds, most of which went high except for one that caught the man Ballard had shoved.

It ended as quickly as it began, leaving rumbling echoes to rampage throughout the endless labyrinth of the castle.

The echoes faded. Men's voices could be heard somewhere nearby shouting to each other. Confused reactions to the sounds of this fire fight filled the night.

The wafting blue haze of burnt cordite stung Ballard's eyes and nostrils. Mischkie slapped a fresh clip into his M-1.

"Guess this sort of cuts down on how long we've got to look for the girl."

"This place is going to be crawling with guys before we know it," said Hanklin.

"We've got to take a look around," said Ballard. "If there were any more people at this end, they'd be on us already. The Baron's got his own army. He'll have holding cells for prisoners. He'll keep them separate from the rest of the castle. There's a good chance Keiko is near us right now. We've got to take a quick look. If she is, she goes with us."

"A real quick look," Mischkie grunted.

Hanklin laughed. "Damn, you do have that little Jap gal on your mind, don't you, Sarge?"

"I've got the mission on my mind," Ballard said. "Wil, you see what you can find downstairs. Tex, you take that hallway to the left, I'll take the right. If you find her and can get her out, fine. It's enough if you can just pin down where they're holding her. We rendezvous at that truck we left, in," he glanced at his watch and so did they, "four minutes."

They split up. Ballard and Hanklin deftly sidestepped the pretzeled bodies by the T. Ballard said, "I'll take this way," and he started off down the length of corridor from which the men had come.

He moved along swiftly, keeping the M-1 slung over his shoulder, preferring the .45 pistol as head weapon as he ran from door to door along the corridor. The doors along this stretch were all unlocked. He would throw a door open and step to one side to dodge possible fire from within, but the rooms were deserted.

The castle was in an uproar. Somewhere outside a siren started wailing in the night.

Ballard reached another bend off which a corridor ran. It had an ornately curved ceiling, sparse lighting, and a mood of medieval foreboding.

The echoes of shouts and pounding feet drifted like ghosts through the spacious hallways. In a minute or less, they would find the bodies in the vestibule and shortly after that, this wing of the castle would be overrun.

He began trying doors along this hallway. The first one he came to, indented slightly in the wall, was locked. He stepped back, about to launch a kick at the door, when he heard men tromping down a hallway behind him. Pressing himself in against the indentation in the wall, his back scrunched against it, he held his breath and prepared himself mentally to kill.

Four of Baron Tamura's force charged past on their way somewhere else. They did not see him in the gloom as they rushed by.

When they were gone, he stepped back, kicked the door off its hinges and dodged to the side, pistol up and ready. Nothing but an empty conference room.

He started down toward the next door, conscious of time running out. He wondered how Wil and Tex were doing. His combat senses probed the semidarkness, sensing no other presence anywhere near him.

He was reaching for the next door handle, coming at it along the wall, when something was thrust out at him from the darkness at ankle level, catching him totally unaware. His forward momentum sent him falling. He twisted his body to hit the floor with a shoulder, using his momentum to roll over onto his back and onto his feet, coming up in a combat crouch with the .45 held ready.

Another blur from the shadows.

A bamboo staff, about five feet long, whooshed quietly to crack the pistol out of his hand with a numbing burst of pain to his fingers.

The man wielding the staff, his features totally indiscernible to Ballard, swirled away again.

Ballard unslung his rifle and brought it around. The shadow fighter emerged from another direction, outflanking him. Another whispered *whoosh* and the rifle went spinning, clattering somewhere to the side.

Ballard felt naked. He pawed for the combat knife. An impression of his opponent stepping back, then the other uttered a fierce cry, and the end of the staff came out at him from nowhere. He caught the blow in the stomach. He doubled over with enough force to fall off his feet to his knees. The whoosh again and the staff caught him squarely on the jaw, flipping him onto his back. His world became shooting pain and bleary images wavering in and out of view.

The man appeared from the shadows, a lean, muscled man in his fifties with the reflexes and physique of a man half his age.

Ballard looked up through his pain and loss of breath into an intelligent face tightened around eyes that smoldered with a fanatical light. He stood there with one foot pinning Ballard to the floor. With a quick flip of his wrist, a long knife inserted at one end of the staff flashed out. Ballard felt it prick his Adam's apple.

He winced and did not move. He looked beyond the staff to see Mischkie and Hanklin standing there with their hands raised, and men in uniforms behind them aiming their rifles at the Americans. One of them must have poked Hanklin a bit too hard because the Texan reached back and swatted the rifle barrel away irritably.

"That's a gun, boy, it ain't the knife. If you're going to shoot me, shoot me, damn ya. Don't go to tickling me to death with the damn thing."

The man with the rifle stepped back a pace, intimidated by the raging behemoth whose tongue he did not understand. "Hey, there's Sarge," said Mischkie.

"Silence," the Baron commanded.

"Well, now we're cooking with gas!" Hanklin said. "One of these jokers speaks English!"

Ballard felt the pressure of the foot on his chest increase, and the man above him applied more pressure to the point of the blade that felt hot and cold at the same time where it pricked his throat.

"One more word, unless you are spoken to, and this man dies."

That quieted down Hanklin and Mischkie.

The blade did not move from Ballard's throat, nor the foot from his chest.

"I am Baron Tamura. You are trespassers here. Which of you is the leader?"

"That questionable privilege belongs to me," Ballard said. "I suppose if you were going to kill us, we'd already be dead."

"Do not be too confident, American. You barbarians! All brawn with nothing of grace or discipline about you. I am fifty-six years of age. I bested you easily."

"I've got a hunch you're no average guy, Baron."

"And I can see that you *are* average. Coarse, crude, foolish barbarians."

"I guess that is a fairly accurate assessment, at that."

"I know what has brought you here. You have come for my niece, Keiko, have you not? And you come for me. You have found me. And now, I shall take you to her."

Chapter 27

They paused before a heavy wooden door.

"Hell," Mischkie muttered. "I never made it this far. A half dozen of the little bastards came down on me from both sides."

"Same thing happened to me," said Hanklin.

Baron Tamura motioned to one of his men, who produced an old-fashioned key ring from his belt, opened, and held the door. Men standing behind Mischkie and Hanklin shoved them forward and the two stumbled into a dungeon.

"Keep in touch, Sarge," was Hanklin's parting shot. "Yeah," added Mischkie. "Don't forget to write."

The man with the keys slammed the door shut and spun a key in the lock.

Ballard was gripped by either elbow and propelled to the next door which the soldier unlocked, swinging the door open. Keiko stood against the far wall opposite the doorway, eyeing them apprehensively.

In English, Baron Tamura said to her, "Since you are so fond of barbarians, my dear, perhaps you would care to share your final hours with one."

Another command in Japanese.

Ballard was heaved bodily into the dungeon. The door slammed shut behind him, isolating the two of them.

"Hello, Keiko."

"John, I have led you and your men to your deaths. I am sorry."

"Not yet you haven't."

"That is a courageous thing to say. You are a courageous man. But how can we escape from here?"

Looking around the cell for the first time, Ballard said, "That, as we say in America, is the hundred thousand dollar question."

The apartment Kentaro Nagano shared with his wife was a modest two rooms separated by a sliding partition. The sliding doors on the south side of the room were partially open. A sea breeze wafted the curtains.

Miyuki Nagano had prepared a meal of a bowl of noodles and a pot of tea. Since setting down his chopsticks hours earlier, her husband had not spoken a word.

While she sat reading the newspaper, he stretched out upon the futon, staring at the ceiling and listening to the thin and reedy singing of old folk songs on the radio. After awhile he closed his eyes, and though he lay thus for more than an hour, Miyuki could tell from his breathing that he was not asleep.

"I know what troubles you," she said at long last, setting aside the newspaper. "You have been expecting to hear from Baron Tamura and Colonel Hayashi. You have not left the apartment in more than twenty-four hours."

He always confided everything in her. She was truly his partner in life, and the passing years had only served to deepen his feelings for her. Shortly after their marriage, they had learned that Miyuki could not have children, but rather than drive a wedge between them as it might have done, especially with the extreme emphasis in Japan on large families, they had grown only closer during their years of marriage.

The general's thin features were focused on the ceiling from where he lay as if he might find answers there.

"I wonder if Baron Tamura knows that I conferred with Major Okada about throwing in with Kurita and those peasants."

"I could speak with my brother."

"No." He sat up with an angry, dismissive gesture. "Colonel Hayashi is not my brother-in-law where this is concerned. This is man's business. You will not interfere."

"It is strange you have not heard from the *Kempeitai* officer."

"Okada will be disappointed to learn that I have been excluded from Baron Tamura's circle of trust."

"Will he believe you?"

"I am still a general in the army. It does not matter what he thinks."

"And he is *Kempeitai*."

The telephone pealed. He answered.

It was Okada.

"General, I was wondering--"

"My answer is no, Major."

Okada did not hesitate, as if expecting the rebuff.

"There are those who will be disappointed, my dear General."

Nagano had the impression of being played with, of being mocked. He imagined the secret police officer's gold tooth glinting in a sinister smile.

"Extend my regrets to General Kurita. Goodbye, Major." He replaced the telephone receiver with deliberate force. He turned to Miyuki.

"There, wife. I have heard from Major Okada and he has heard from me. I will not work against the Baron or your brother."

She smiled. Something she did not often do these days. "I never doubted your loyalties, Kentaro."

She began to say something else. A knock at the door interrupted her. She sent him a worried glance.

He frowned. "That did not take Major Okada very long."

"Don't answer it," she whispered. "Go out the back way!"

"They will have the building surrounded. They had it surrounded before Okada made his telephone call."

"Kentaro, no—"

He went to her, touched her on each arm and kissed her forehead lightly. Then he crossed to the front door.

Three imperial soldiers stood there, a lieutenant and two troopers. Each wore the insignia of the *Kempeitai*.

"General Nagano, you are under arrest," the lieutenant announced crisply.

"For what charge am I being arrested?"

"You will come with us, General. I have orders to bring you in, alive or dead. The choice is yours."

Keiko squatted to keep from sitting on the hay and tattered blankets in one corner of the cell. She watched Ballard make a thorough inspection of the walls and ceiling.

He brushed away at spots where the aged plaster exposed brick. He tried making voice contact, calling to the two in the next cell, but the only response was a sentry shoving his face against a barred window in the door, yelling at Ballard in Japanese.

"It is of no use, John," Keiko said after the sentry had gone.

He stood in the center of the cell, hands on his hips, and slowly turned in a complete circle, studying walls and ceiling intently one more time, shaking his head with dissatisfaction.

"A part of me hoped that you and your men would not come," she said. "I knew it was your job. I feared the three of you would be killed."

"I wonder why we weren't."

"Baron Tamura raised me from a child. I have known him longer than any other person in the world. But after these past days, I cannot say what he is capable of or what his reasoning may be."

"The boys and I have information he can use," said Ballard. "That's why he's keeping us alive. He thinks he can torture us for information if he needs to. So what about you?"

"You speak harshly."

"I'm in a harsh mood, kiddo. I didn't come here to be thrown into a dungeon."

"I do not know what the Baron is capable of regarding me, either. I don't think he knows, himself. I am his prisoner until he decides what he is capable of."

"This castle is an armed camp. Your uncle obviously intends to see something through."

"There, too, I do not know what he is capable of, believe me."

"I want to, Keiko. I also want to know what it is you haven't told me. How did you know your uncle was sending ninja assassins after MacArthur?"

"I overheard my uncle showing the ninja to the other conspirators."

"Do these other conspirators have names?"

"There is General Nagano of the Eastern Army and a man named Okada, a major in the *Kempeitai*."

"Okada." Ballard repeated the name.

"You know him?"

"We've met. Who else is in on this?"

"The only other one I know of at the top level is Colonel Hayashi. He is with the Air Force."

"The Air Force base near here?"

She nodded. "Tateyama, less than five kilometers to the north."

"There was a kamikaze detachment stationed there."

"Yes.,,

"You said something funny this afternoon."

"Funny?"

"Not that kind of funny. I asked you in the jeep if Japan was where you felt you belonged. You looked at a plane flying by overhead and said, 'My heart is up there.' "

She permitted herself a small smile.

"I am not a kamikaze pilot."

"What did you mean?"

"I meant that my first love is flying."

"Is flying airplanes a usual pastime for Japanese women these days?"

"My uncle taught me to fly. I am an expert pilot." She glanced at the walls around them. The despair that felt as if it were smothering her soul could no longer be contained. She blurted out, "I wonder if I will ever fly again."

She immediately felt acute embarrassment as the anguish in her voice assaulted her own ears.

"The Baron is a flyer," he considered aloud. "A detachment of kamikaze is stationed just up the road."

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking about a couple of Zeros hidden away with no one knowing where they are except your uncle and this Colonel Hayashi and some kamikaze he's kept hidden since demobilization. If your uncle could dredge up ninja from four hundred years ago, a couple of disgruntled pilots should be a cinch. He sounds like quite a guy."

She grinned briefly at his choice of words.

"He is quite a guy." She chuckled at her use of his slang, then became serious again. "Yes, John, he could do all of those things." The full awareness of what he had said began to dawn on her. "The signing of the peace treaty tomorrow morning in Tokyo Bay! Is that what you are thinking?"

"That's what I'm thinking."

"My uncle ... would do that," she conceded haltingly. "He is the living spirit of the code of Bushido. To him, nothing is more sacred than the sanctity of Japan's traditions, and these traditions decree that he never surrender to you."

"You feel differently about tradition?"

"I betray tradition only because tradition has betrayed the people of Japan. My father was the Baron's brother. He was a militarist, a colonel in the army. He died in Manchuria. Tradition stole him from me. Tradition has been an excuse for treating women in this country lower than animals. When I learned that my uncle and those men were plotting to kill MacArthur, I think I knew from the first what I must do, that I must disobey the man who raised me, the man who has been like a father to me, who has been nothing but generous and loving to me since the day he took me in and raised me." She bit her tongue, feeling vulnerable, exposing her

thoughts to him in this way. "Tradition must not always be allowed to dictate the future," she said in a cooler, reasoning voice. "There must be hope for new beginnings between countries, between people, or there is no hope at all."

The words sounded hollow to her.

She sat down upon the grimy floor across from him and drew up her knees.

"There is no hope," she said.

She rested her arms upon her knees, placed her forehead upon her arms, and began to cry very quietly.

When Eichelberger checked in that evening to say good night, he found MacArthur exactly as he had first seen him that morning, at the same window, staring down into the street in front of the New Grand Hotel.

MacArthur was in shirt sleeves, tieless, and with his collar open.

"All the preparations are wrapped up for tomorrow morning, General. The procession to the quay will leave the hotel at 0600 hours."

"And by ten o'clock tomorrow morning," MacArthur said, "this war will be over."

"Over." Eichelberger nodded. "The word has a sweet ring to it. There's been no word from Ballard, I take it."

"We tied up a lot of loose ends today, Bob, but no Ballard. He, those men of his, and that girl have been stuck in the back of my mind all day. I began the day watching them pull out. I'd like to see them back before I turn in.

"If those guys are still out there fighting, then this war isn't over no matter how many signatures are affixed to how many documents tomorrow morning on Bull Halsey's ship." He lifted his eyes to stare out over the vast sea of darkness that was the city. "There are forces out there we are not even aware of, plotting against us. The treaty signing tomorrow morning on that ship is their last chance."

"I've urged you to postpone the signing ceremony."

"The Japanese want peace, Bob, and I won't let a pack of lunatic anarchists intimidate us."

"We've taken every possible precaution. I'd feel better, though, if we knew where Ballard was and what he's up to."

"You weren't very enthusiastic about me bringing Ballard along on this little expedition over here, as I recall."

"I was impressed with Ballard and his team from the start. I just wasn't sure how effective three G.I.s could be inside a foreign land with no backup. Those guys are the wild cards in this mix. I don't like wild cards."

"You've read their files. No one is better at what they do. I know they're flesh and blood. Bullets will stop them. There's been a lot of talk since Hiroshima and Nagasaki that this is the dawn of an atomic age that will make the conventional soldier obsolete. Well that might happen someday in the future and it might not, but right now the whole ball game depends on those three men and that woman with them."

The deserted farmhouse was set far back from the road and any other houses. A sentry was posted outside the front door. Inside, General Nagano sat tied to a wooden chair left behind by former tenants.

He had been stripped to the waist. Cigarette burns marked his torso. The fingers of his left hand were broken.

Abiko held the forged orders on the table. Nagano, nearly unconscious from agony, leaned over to weakly affix his signature at the bottom of the orders.

The *Kempeitai* officer's breathing was fast and filled the room. The major's slender, almost feminine body seemed nearly to tremble with some strange excitement beneath his uniform. Abiko had done the torturing while Major Okada made the demands.

Nagano completed affixing his signature. The pen dropped from his fingers to roll across the table and fall to the floor with a small sound lost beneath his ragged gasping and Abiko's breathy sounds.

"There, you devils, I have done your bidding."

Nagano sank back against the chair. "Now, please, Okada... kill me. The dishonor... the pain..."

Okada, standing next to the chair, bent forward from the waist to speak close to the bound man's ear.

"I do not believe you know nothing of Baron Tamura's plans. I want to know, General, what you know. You knew about the ninja." The flicker of candlelight reflecting from Major Okada's spectacles made Nagano think of some supernatural evil.

"Yes, I knew of the ninja but that was all, I swear."

"Let me do more things to him," Abiko implored. "I can make him talk."

"No more," Nagano pleaded weakly. His chin dropped against his chest. "I have told you everything."

Okada straightened.

"I believe you."

He moved to stand in front of Nagano. He unholstered his sidearm, held it out straight before him, and pulled the trigger. The bound man and the chair flew over violently.

Okada holstered the pistol, not sparing a glance at what remained of Nagano nor at the pool of blood spreading on the floor beneath the bound body like an oil slick in the faint flicker of candlelight.

Okada snatched up the signed orders. He scanned them.

"An infantry detachment with artillery, under my command. Excellent. We will strike Castle Tamura at once. I know the exact placement of the defense force from my visits there. We will be heroes, Major Abiko, for putting down the insurrection to be led by Baron Tamura, and the Baron will cease to be a danger to us." He waved the orders in the air. "All very official, with General Nagano's own signature." He glanced at Nagano's corpse with obvious distaste. "This will remain an unsolved homicide."

Abiko's breathing began returning to normal.

"You have seen to every contingency, Major Okada. What shall we do next?"

"You will return to the ministry. You will monitor all developments regarding General Kurita and his coup."

"And you, Major?"

"I intend to hand deliver these orders to Eastern Army Headquarters. I will lead the column to the castle, to carry out General Nagano's orders. We shall strike the

castle in force and cut off all communications. We shall overcome the Baron's defenses at any cost. My assault force will slaughter anyone they find."

"Including the Baron's niece?"

"No, not Keiko," Okada said. He thought of what he had done to the prostitute at the House of One Thousand Joys and felt a strange heat rising within him. "I will order them to bring Keiko to me."

Chapter 28

She knelt beside Ballard and observed his fitful sleep. His head moved from side to side, and the words he spoke in his dreams were unintelligible to her. He lay stretched out on the hay and blankets along the wall near the corner he had chosen as his own, opposite the one she'd claimed.

He opened his eyes and looked up at her, kneeling there beside him, studying him. Remaining on his back, he lifted his wrist and looked at his watch.

"Does it matter what time it is?" she asked.

"It matters. When we make our play at busting out of here, we want it to be an hour or so before dawn. That's when any position is most vulnerable. Sentries get careless when they're tired, and they start to think about their shift almost being over. That's when we try something."

"What will you try?"

"I don't know yet," he admitted. "Still working on it."

"You were dreaming."

"How long have you been watching me?"

"Long enough to know they were dreams that troubled you."

He propped himself onto one side, supporting his weight on an elbow.

"Dreams of the past," he said.

"You must try to dream of tomorrow, and of the day after that."

"Now we're talking dreams." Ballard made a sound that could have been a small laugh, but there was no humor in it.

"Where I've been these last few years, you try to forget there's a tomorrow because all tomorrow means is more of the same with no end in sight." He stretched out again, curving one arm to pillow his head, returning his gaze to the ceiling as if extremely uncomfortable speaking these thoughts. "I'm starting to think that running into you was a good thing for me, Keiko."

"I hope it was."

"For a while today I saw the world through someone else's eyes, your eyes, and for the first time in a long time, kid, I saw hope and I saw promise, and those are some things I haven't seen in a real long time. Maybe that's why I haven't been able to get you out of my mind. Something crazy gets hold of me when I look at you."

She laid her hand on his. Her touch was warm.

"I have ... similar feelings for you," she said hesitantly. "It is not easy to understand. I want you to hold me, John. Will you do that?"

That caught him off guard. He raised an eyebrow, studying her intently, not knowing what to think, uncomfortable.

"I surprise myself," she added quickly. "But I have never been this close to death before. It causes one to act ... differently, does it not?"

"You could say that."

"At the hotel in Yokohama last night, and this afternoon in that village, you behaved and fought like a man wholly unafraid to die, as if you welcomed the opportunity to confront death."

He sat up, leaning against the wall.

"You could say that, too."

"Earlier, you asked me to explain something I had said as we rode together this afternoon. May I ask the same of you?"

"Go ahead."

"You said you had no one. Have you no one truly, or did you have someone and did you lose her? Is she still in your heart?"

"I was married," he said, "before the war."

He told her, succinctly, about being a policeman in America and of the criminals who killed his wife and of the vendetta that followed.

"I regret everything that happened," he concluded, "but I regret most that Carla and I were fighting the last time I saw her. We never even had the chance to say goodbye."

"And is that what you dream of?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"I know. I don't know why. Will you hold me, John?"

"I'll hold you, Keiko. Come here."

He extended his right arm. She moved in against him. Her head nestled in the crook of his arm.

An unbidden sigh of weariness escaped her. "I have had to be braver than I really am."

"You and the rest of the world," he said with a sigh, a sigh that matched her own.

"You must understand this about me, John. I am a daughter of Japan, and there is much that is sacred to me. Family. Chastity before marriage. I have been saving myself, you understand?"

"Keiko—"

"We may be dead within hours," she said. "We must face that. Life is incomplete without experiencing some things. I know this is shameful of me, but I feel no shame."

The face of a guard appeared in the barred window set in the door. The guard laughed shrilly.

"The whore lays with the American!" he called to another sentry. The other pushed the first aside and snickered at Keiko.

"Do not worry, little one. Our orders are to let no harm befall you. We will not interrupt your pleasure."

They both cackled some more.

Keiko translated for Ballard what they had said.

"Let us move," she suggested, indicating a corner of the cell not visible from the barred window.

"Let's not," said Ballard, not budging. "If they can see us, and there's nothing to see, they'll leave us alone."

"You think I am brazen." She returned her head to the crook of his arm. "I was in love before the war with the son of one of my uncle's business partners whom I met on holiday with my uncle. A gentle young man. He was strong in the good ways. We would meet often in the cafes when the boulevards of Tokyo were still beautiful. We spoke of history and philosophy, and we fell in love. He was accepted at the university in Tokyo. I remained true to him when I was in America.

"When the militarists came to power, he was appointed to the air force. They changed him, the gentle boy I had known. He fell slave to their madness. Toward the end, he became a kamikaze pilot. I am a pilot. I can close my eyes and visualize him in the cockpit, rolling into his final dive. In his last letter to me, he wrote that he would die with a smile and with my name on his lips. The day after, he was gone."

The guard at the door gave a bored snort and disappeared from the barred window.

"You see, John," said Keiko, "I had a reason for asking if you had lost someone. We, neither of us, has recovered from the loss of one we loved. We are alone in this world. I think we have carried our burdens long enough, John, you and I. We must put behind us what is past. We can help each other.

"You cannot go back and bring your Carla to life. It was not your fault your wife died; it was the gangster, Evelio, and his gang, and you took your vengeance on those responsible. And I will forever harbor one more reason to hate the militarists who have nearly destroyed my country and stolen from us a generation of young men and all they could have offered a world at peace, like the boy I loved."

"Keiko, what you want to happen between us can't happen now. We're in the eye of a storm."

"You are a man who knows the world, John. This attraction we feel ... is it love?"

"What I've been up to these last few years doesn't exactly qualify me as much of an expert on anything except killing," he told her soberly. "I hope there'll be a time to find out about us, Keiko, but it's going to have to be later."

She said, "I hope, with all my heart, that there will be 'later.' And you are right. We cannot understand our feelings at a time like this. Perhaps I feel ... death seems to be everywhere, closing in."

"Don't talk, Keiko," he said. "This is a good time to rest up." She felt his lips moving against her hair as he spoke. "We may need all of our strength very soon."

This made sense to her. He held her and she drifted off to sleep.

Hanklin found Mischkie's snoring particularly irritating. Hanklin had been trying to get his bulk into a comfortable position in his grimy corner of the cell, but every time he tried a new position, he discovered new aches he didn't even know he had.

"Hey, Wil, wake the fuck up."

Mischkie gurgled in mid-snore, stopped snoring, and looked groggily across at Hanklin.

"Damn, Tex, what is it? I thought we were going to grab some shut-eye so we're ready for the first break that comes our way."

They had made a thorough search of their cell and upon realizing that there was no way in hell they were going to bust out, Mischkie had suggested they rest.

"Sleep!" Hanklin made a rude sound. "I know you can sleep anywhere, Mischkie, but this is ridiculous. At least the Sarge gets thrown in the clink with a pretty gal. I've got to listen to you snore! I'll bet the Sarge is working on a way out of here. We ought to be doing the same."

He stopped talking when he realized Mischkie was snoring again.

Shortly before dawn, against all regulations, Baron Tamura's chauffeured limousine glided through the main gate of Tateyama Air Base. The sentries stationed at the gate did not stop it.

The limousine continued across the base, passing lines of barracks, administration buildings, and hangars that sat ghostly silent, unpopulated in the wake of demobilization. The car crossed the fields and runways and reached the hangar where the Baron stored the Spad, his vintage biplane. The hangar sat removed from the rest of the base, near where the three Zeros had previously been camouflaged beneath the canopy of trees just beyond the perimeter. The shape of the biplane was barely discernible where it was parked beside the hangar.

The area around the hangar was patrolled by roving teams of sentries as well as stationary guards at each entrance of the deserted-looking structure. There were no lights.

Colonel Hayashi appeared from a side door to greet the Baron. The overweight man's little eyes beamed with excitement.

"Baron Tamura. All is in readiness."

"Show me."

As they stepped into the black interior of the hangar, Hayashi flicked the light switch on. The windows of the hangar had been hung with blackout curtains. The three Zeros sat in the center of the hangar, each with a 550-pound bomb mounted beneath the fuselage. Before them, three young men in full flight gear stood at severe attention, the ancient white scarf that is the badge of the samurai around their heads.

Baron Tamura nodded his approval.

"Very good. Very good."

Keiko emitted a bleat that was half frightened scream, half plea for help.

There came a pounding of boots from outside the cell. The face of one of the guards filled the barred window.

In the cell, Ballard put one of his arms around Keiko and shoved her against the wall of the cell opposite the door, grinding himself against her with the snarl of a raging bull, pawing with a free hand at her hips and thighs through her clothing. She wailed her pain and humiliation.

Laughter came from the barred window.

Keiko pushed away from the wall, furiously raking Ballard's face, her fingernails clawing furrows across his left cheek like ripping talons. He snorted in pain. His grip loosened.

She darted away with another cry for help to the sentries crowding each other in the window for a better view. She gained the wall beside the door, beyond the guards' line of vision. Ballard flung himself at her.

After a pause and a short discussion between the guards, a key clicked in the lock and the door eased inward. The barrel of a rifle preceded the first tentative sentry through the door.

Ballard moved fast from where he crouched directly beside the door. He grabbed the rifle barrel and yanked with a strong, two-handed grip, trotting the sentry in, separating man from rifle with a vicious twist. He raised the rifle and smashed it forward. The butt plate caved in the back of the guard's skull with a crack! Ballard pivoted before the dead man fell.

The second sentry standing in the doorway wheeled about in a mad dash to get away. Ballard stepped forward and extended the rifle to catch this one between the ankles, tripping him. He flung himself upon the man's back and brought the rifle around under his throat. Holding the rifle by stock and barrel, he wrenched sharply. The dry snap of the neck breaking popped flatly without an echo in the dungeon.

The stink of death suddenly overpowered the other stenches there.

Ballard went to the closest body and grabbed from its belt the old-fashioned key ring, which he tossed to Keiko. He picked up the second rifle and spare ammo clips from the bodies.

"Let's get our neighbors."

She averted her eyes from the corpses. Ballard stood watch while she unlocked the second door.

Mischkie and Hanklin bounded out. Ballard tossed the spare rifle he carried at them. Mischkie grabbed it out of the air before Hanklin could.

Hanklin was too happy to be free again to complain. "Kinda thought you'd get around to thinking up a plan to bust us out of here."

"We gave up on ideas," said Mischkie. "How'd you manage it?"

Ballard winked at Keiko.

"It wouldn't have worked for you lugs." To Keiko he said, "Do you know a way out of here?"

"I know of a secret passage. The soldiers will not know about it."

"Lead the way. And listen," he told his men. "MacArthur gave us an ace up our sleeve to use as a last resort. If we get separated and can't regroup and you somehow get your hands on a radio, our identification is *Yankee Clipper*. Our flyboys and the army have been ordered to give us full and immediate support if we make contact. Remember. *Yankee Clipper*."

They double-timed along the corridor to the nearest flight of stairs and started up.

As they hurried along, Hanklin spotted the angry red scratch marks on Ballard's face.

"Hey, Sarge, what happened? You tussle with a mountain lion?"

"Tell you about it when we get the hell out of here, Tex."

"I'm glad we're getting out," said Mischkie. "But where the hell are we going?"

"If I've got this right, Baron Tamura is at that air field nearby with a bunch of kamikaze pilots and they're getting ready to take off to try and blow the MISSOURI

out of the water this morning during the surrender ceremony. Now let's keep quiet."

This was no time for talk, but Ballard knew every mind among them was grappling with the unreality of what had become reality.

Baron Tamura had hatched and was in the process of unleashing one final, sinister, far-reaching plot of unthinkable proportions, with millions of American and Japanese lives at stake if the plot succeeded and a madman's dreams of prolonging this war were realized. And even if those long-range objectives were not realized, the life of every person aboard the MISSOURI was in imminent peril.

They gained the top of the stairs.

"To the left," said Keiko.

The light of a cloudy gray dawn filtered through windows on one side of the corridor. They trotted a short distance. A cluster of the Baron's private security force appeared at the far end of the hall. Ballard motioned his group to fall quickly back.

Shouts from the far end of the corridor gave way to the sounds of rifle shots.

Mischkie cried, "Oooooof!" horribly as a bullet caught him in the chest and tumbled him off his feet.

Ballard pumped off round after round at falling and scattering bodies while they continued to fire.

Hanklin grabbed up the rifle Mischkie had dropped. Bullets snapped through the air. The world exploded.

The far end of the corridor where the enemy first appeared blew apart amid an eruption of brick and mortar and shattering glass and shrapnel that sent reality reeling.

When Keiko's senses cleared, and that took several unsettling moments, the far end of the hallway was a dust-shrouded rubble, and from that billowing haze came the moans of the seriously injured.

She fought to fully regain her senses. What happened? her mind cried.

Sounds of combat drifted in from beyond the shattered windows of the corridor, more explosions like this one, light artillery scoring hits somewhere inside the castle walls.

Mischkie lay sprawled flat on his back, legs together, arms outflung like a man crucified, his eyes closed and his mouth open. A red pool was spreading quickly across the tiles beneath him.

Hanklin knelt to press his ear to Mischkie's chest. When he pulled back, he wore a grimace, and some of Mischkie's blood was smeared across his right cheek. He did not wipe it away.

"Damn, damn, *damn*, city boy," he rasped at the dead man and, to Ballard, "*Damn.*"

Ballard forced himself to look away. A warrior lived, fought, and died, witnessing, perpetrating, suffering the horrors of war. And if he were lucky when his turn came, he went out as Mischkie had, quick, final, before he knew what had happened.

Ballard grabbed Hanklin's arm.

"Come on, Tex, there's nothing we can do for Wil."

"Damn, Sarge." Hanklin rose to join Ballard and Keiko. "That leaves just me and you from the team."

"That leaves the mission. We've got to make it to that airfield. We've got to stop Baron Tamura."

Errant rounds from outside blew the remaining glass from one of the windows, causing them to duck instinctively. "That might take some doing," Hanklin said.

"The secret passage," said Keiko. "I was taking you there, but I know another way. We can go back the way we came, around the outside behind this wing, along the back. The fighting is in front. We must get to the cellar."

"Let's do it then." Ballard looked down at the body on the floor, stifling the sorrow he knew he could not afford, not now. "So long, Wil."

They moved out. The sounds of combat from outside intensified.

At precisely 7:30 A.M. four black limousines appeared, traveling at high speed past the leveled dock area of Yokohama, to draw up at the foot of the boarding ramp of the U.S. Destroyer LANSLOWNE, docked in the heart of the gutted seaport. Eleven diplomats and soldiers, the Japanese delegation to the MISSOURI, emerged from the cars.

The leaders of the delegation, Shigemitsu and General Umezu, had ridden from Tokyo in the lead car. Like his staff, Shigemitsu wore a tall silk hat, ascot, and cutaway. He walked with a limp, his frail form on a walking stick. He had been crippled years ago by a terrorist bomb in Shanghai. Umezu, the chief of the imperial general staff, moved like a robot, his eyes blank, unseeing, the chest of his uniform covered with ribbons, hung in gold braid.

Without fanfare, without words, the delegation boarded the LANSLOWNE for the sixteen-mile run out to the MISSOURI.

Chapter 29

Captain Inoguchi peered through binoculars at the castle below. He had positioned his pieces of light field artillery side by side on a ridge overlooking the castle. Behind these were parked the personnel carriers recently vacated by his detachment of infantry which could be seen storming the castle below. Well-placed shells had reduced to ruin the stone archway of the main gate.

Inoguchi's men entered the castle grounds, spewing rifle fire ahead of them.

The command post and the motor pool had taken several direct artillery hits. Vehicles were overturned, some used for cover by the defending force. Fallen bodies were scattered everywhere and fires burned, while black smoke snaked lazily toward the low, steely cloud ceiling.

The fighting below was fierce, though little more than flat traces of rifle fire traveled up to the ridge.

Inoguchi lowered his binoculars. He rejoined Major Okada, who stood in the rear of an open armored car, next to the machine gun mounted in the back. Okada also viewed the carnage below through binoculars.

They were alone on the high ground except for the artillerymen several meters away on the crest of the ridge.

"I'm losing men down there, Major," Inoguchi snapped. "Where is General Nagano? Something is wrong here."

Okada lowered his binoculars.

"I told you, Captain, he has been delayed. Do you question my authority?"

"I did not at first. I should have. I do now." Inoguchi turned to observe the fighting further. "It is too late now but when this is over, Major, I will see to it that a full investigation—"

"It is over for you, Captain," Okada said from behind him.

Inoguchi turned, curious, and was startled into an involuntary back step when he found himself looking into the elongated barrel of the .50-caliber machine gun.

"General Nagano is dead," Inoguchi quietly spoke the realization. "Why are you doing this, Major?"

Okada's gold tooth glinted. His bald head looked pale in the dawn's light.

"Not that it need concern you, Captain, but I wish to have Baron Tamura's force eliminated for reasons of my own. This seemed to me the most efficient method of doing so. Farewell, Captain."

The knowledge of imminent death which had drawn Inoguchi's facial muscles taut gave way to surprise at something he saw behind Okada.

"No, wait!" he blurted. "Behind you—"

Okada laughed. He triggered an extended burst of machine gun fire that blew Inoguchi apart, lifting the infantry officer off the ground, spilling him into a slide backwards across the dirt.

The men manning the artillery whirled about, but by this time Okada had already quit the machine gun, diving for the seat behind the steering wheel, when he sensed movement down-range; what Inoguchi had tried to warn him about.

Three figures rushed up from behind the vehicle and in that one instant the *Kempeitai* officer recognized Ballard from the meeting in MacArthur's suite in Yokohama. Okada twisted to hurl himself back for the machine gun but he never made it. He heard them open fire, and his world ended in a white flash.

Ballard climbed behind the steering wheel. He pushed Okada's body roughly to the ground. Keiko jumped into the seat beside him. Hanklin took over the machine gun.

"Mighty obliging of these rascals to bump each other off and save us the trouble."

The artillerymen on the ridge started running toward them. Hanklin hammered off a dozen or so rounds in their direction, causing much scrambling for cover.

Ballard fired the vehicle to life.

"It is time," Hayashi said.

For the first time in weeks, a new day had dawned cool and comfortable. The rituals had been observed: the last rites for the dead, customarily administered before the final takeoff of suicide pilots, were intoned, the patriotic songs sung, the saki imbibed.

The pilots again stood at rigid attention, listening to Baron Tamura.

"I repeat, your minds must center on the word, attack!" The Baron addressed them in a sharp tone of command. "Fly low and their radar will not detect you. They patrol the skies, but no matter what happens, keep your planes separate, well-distanced from each other, so that you come in on the MISSOURI from different angles of attack. I know that you can and will do it. You are five minutes flying time from your target. When your approach is detected, they will strike at you with everything they have from the sea and the air, but even if one of you is downed, they will not have time to react against the three of you.

"Allow no obstacle to stop you from carrying out your mission. You will plunge directly into the MISSOURI. This will be the legacy of Bushido. Your sacred ancestors cry out for justice, and you are the instruments of that justice. Know this when you command your planes into that last power dive at the true enemies of Japan. *Banzai!*"

The lifted arms and the chanting of *Banzai!* echoed back at him from them. The pilots spun on their heels, running toward their planes.

Hayashi crossed to the main door of the hangar. He switched off the lights and slid open the door.

Hayashi returned to where the Baron continued to observe.

"A most historic day, Baron Tamura I hope it shall not be our last."

"A samurai lives in such a way that he will always be prepared to die, Colonel Hayashi."

"And so I am, Baron. My only regret would be to die not knowing if my sister's husband has betrayed us. This would bring much dishonor to me."

"General Nagano would not betray us, Colonel. My fear is that he has fallen into enemy hands."

"The Americans—?"

"No, I mean our internal enemies. Major Okada and his assistant, Abiko; that faction. But I have already taken steps. These men will be dealt with."

The pilots and their wingmen were wheeling the first of the Zeros onto the tarmac.

Major Abiko sat at his desk in the *Kempeitai* office in the War Ministry Building. Daylight coming through the windows did nothing to elevate the tomb-like atmosphere of the *Kempeitai* offices. Abiko stared at his telephone, wishing he somehow had the power to make it ring, wishing he somehow had the power to control his own fate.

He had taken some steps to that end. He had his own cache of files, pilfered from the filing cabinets he shared with Okada, which would do quite nicely when it came time to support himself financially after the war, regardless of what happened with Okada. He would live in style. A different boy every night. He stopped himself from thinking along those lines. The time would come . . .

He did not trust Okada, but at this moment he would have given anything to hear his partner's voice on the telephone, informing him that all had gone according to plan, that the Baron's castle had been taken, that Baron Tamura was dead.

The last call to come in had been the report of the collapse of General Kurita's intended rebellion. That coup had failed to materialize. Kurita's force had simply

disappeared during the night, deserting their posts. Kurita had committed *seppuku* before a Shinto shrine in his home.

Abiko experienced a strange prickling sensation at the nape of his neck. He started to turn in his chair.

A length of rope slipped down around his throat from behind, and he felt the warm breath of his assailant at his ear as the assassin began strangling him with amazing force, crushing Abiko's esophagus.

Abiko's hands frantically fought the ever-tightening rope biting into his flesh. He could not get his fingers under the rope. He kicked his chair away and tried to stand. His assailant kicked him in the knees from behind. Abiko went down, and the silent assassin went down with him. It felt to Abiko as if he were sightless and falling into a bottomless pit. Only one word—*ninja!*—seared itself into his fading consciousness before he died.

Ballard kept the vehicle's gas pedal to the floor, rocketing along, doing his best to avoid the deeper ruts and potholes in the road. They met no traffic along the way on this sleepy Sunday morning.

When the outer reaches of the Tateyama Air Base came into view in the distance, Keiko raised an arm to indicate a dirt road that cut off, seemingly to nowhere, away from the road they were on. The dirt road led in the opposite direction of the air base.

Ballard pumped the brakes for the first time since hijacking the armored vehicle. He steered off the road, following the narrow trail.

"Where are you taking us?"

"My uncle has influence at the base. It may be demobilized, but there will be men there who will obey him to the death. This trail leads along the perimeter, very close to the hangar where my uncle stores an antique plane for his private use. This will be the hangar they will use."

"Sounds like what we're looking for."

Ballard drove over a rise after the road curved, and there was the air base stretched out below. The main road they had been on cut off into the distance past a concentration of barracks and administration buildings. Closer by, on this side of the network of runways, some hangars well separated from each other appeared unused, vacant, except for three idling Zeros in front of the nearest hangar.

He saw the bombs mounted beneath the planes.

"This is it."

The vehicle left the trail. A chain link fence stretched along the perimeter. The engine screamed as they plowed into and through the fence, never losing speed.

He aimed down an incline, eating up the distance toward the hangar and the planes less than five hundred yards away. The men standing near the planes whirled, yelling to each other, pointing at the vehicle barreling down on them.

"I'll make a pass," Ballard yelled over his shoulder at Hanklin. "Take out those pilots."

Hanklin braced himself for the wild ride with a bent-knee stance, turning the big Nambu machine gun around toward the front of the hangar where the pilots were scrambling onto the wings of their Zeros.

"Better step on it, Sarge."

Ballard was already stepping on it, but somehow he managed to goose a bit more speed out of the vehicle. They sped past the hangar. Soldiers fired off hurried rounds that came nowhere near them.

"Keiko, stay down," said Ballard.

She obeyed.

The .50-caliber opened up just behind them, one continuous, extended, murderous blast that did not wholly drown out Tex Hanklin's hooting rebel yell. Figures dodged in every direction. Heavy fire raked the aircraft. Two of the planes gushed into flames. The third pilot was blown off the wing of his plane.

Ballard completed the pass. They were taking more fire now, heavier than before. He steered wildly away.

In his rear-view mirror he saw soldiers yanking back the camouflage netting from a machine gun placement.

Baron Tamura struggled to his feet from (the ground) where he and Hayashi had thrown themselves when the machine-gunning vehicle stormed by. He looked around for Hayashi and found the fat man sprawled on his chest, unmoving. The Baron knelt and gingerly rolled Hayashi over.

Much of Hayashi's chest was dark red pulp encircling a gaping exit wound. A trickle of blood snaked from the corner of his mouth. His eyes fluttered.

"Americans," he said weakly. "How did they know..."

"I must leave you, old friend," the Baron said. "I must see if any of the planes can still fly."

"But, the pilots... I saw them fall..."

"I will fly the mission. Goodbye, Colonel."

"Wait... Baron-san, please ... my pistol..."

Baron Tamura unholstered Hayashi's pistol and placed it in the man's open hand. Then he hurried away.

Men were hosing down the ruins of the burning Zeros with extinguishers. Pungent smells of raw fuel and fresh blood hung over the scene of devastation and slaughter in front of the hangar.

Baron Tamura ran to the remaining Zero. Bullet holes gaped in its fuselage. One cockpit window was broken.

He clambered aboard the wing toward the cockpit with the agility of a man one-third his age.

Chapter 30

"We've got to go back." Ballard lowered the binoculars. "There's a pilot getting ready to take off."

The base was responding. A horde of figures in the distance were charging toward them from the barracks, but they were a long way across the runway system yet, and there were no vehicles in sight.

Hanklin saw this also through binoculars.

"Goat piss. I took out every damn one of those fly boys, Sarge, but damned if you ain't right."

Keiko picked up Ballard's binoculars and focused on the remaining Zero in front of the hangar.

"It is Baron Tamura."

"You can stay behind if you don't want to be a part of this," Ballard told her. "Just get out, quickly."

"I must go with you."

"Suit yourself. Take the wheel."

The Zero began moving forward on the tarmac.

Keiko took over the steering as they shot forward. The vehicle's growling engine noise filled their ears. Ballard picked up the rifle propped next to him.

"Tex, try to keep that machine gunner pinned down on the approach! Swivel around and try to take out the plane when you can."

Ballard noticed Keiko's fists tighten on the steering wheel at his words.

The Zero had gained the runway, its engine whining up for the takeoff.

Then they were speeding into range of a machine gun placement. It opened up on the vehicle bolting along on a course that would intercept the Zero now traveling down the runway at an ever increasing rate of speed.

The bright red sun painted on the Zero's fuselage made Ballard think of blood. Then he got busy triggering rounds at the gun placement, adding to Hanklin's .50-caliber fire as they roared past.

Some people were lifted off their feet by the incoming fire, but sandbags absorbed most of it and kept heads down. The heavy pounding of the Nambu tapered off.

Hanklin swung his mounted machine gun around on the Zero and started pumping out bursts over the heads of Keiko and Ballard, who were showered with hot brass.

Ballard paused just long enough to slip a fresh clip into his rifle, but in that time the machine gun opened up again from the placement and he heard the *plunk! plunk!* of the bullets on the armored chassis.

He glimpsed the Zero lifting off, climbing away toward the east, toward Tokyo Bay, into the sun. Then they hit a hole in the ground well short of the runway.

Keiko fought for and lost control of the wildly yawing vehicle.

Hanklin cursed. Keiko screamed. The vehicle went into a crazy, end-over-end, forward flip.

During his long tenure as chief advisor to the Emperor, Marquis Kido could not recall ever having seen His Majesty look more wane, more distant.

Seated as was his custom upon his throne atop a dais draped in gold brocade, His Majesty impressed Marquis Kido as a pitiable figure.

Marquis Kido was instantly shocked and ashamed of himself for the thought.

The Emperor was normally a man of exceedingly few words. He looked up as Kido was shown in and said nothing, waiting for his advisor to speak.

Kido could not recall his own spirit ever being lower. "It is time, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, Marquis Kido. The radio, please."

Marquis Kido crossed to a walnut table and switched on the radio. The low hum of warming tubes filled the silence. The Emperor spoke.

"My sorrow is great, Marquis Kido, but far greater is my hope for a brighter future."

"I share your optimism, Majesty."

"It is a piece of rare good fortune that a man the caliber of Douglas MacArthur has been designated as the Supreme Commander to shape the destiny of Japan. In this dark hour of despair and distress, a bright light is ushered in. I would listen to the broadcast in solitude."

"Of course, Majesty. I will be close at hand."

Marquis Kido bowed out from the imperial presence.

The MISSOURI, slate-gray, at forty-five thousand tons one of the four largest battleships in the world, dominated the Allied armada anchored across Tokyo Bay.

MacArthur waited in the captain's cabin with Nimitz and Halsey, whose flagship it was. They had watched the destroyer LANSLOWNE pull alongside with the Nipponese delegation aboard.

MacArthur's gaze left the LANSLOWNE and settled on the horizon like a farmer watching for an expected change in the weather.

"Why is it, I wonder," he said to no one in particular, "that the largest armada ever assembled is around me, and I feel like a sitting duck in the middle of a pond?"

There came a discreet knock at the door. A junior officer informed them that the Japanese delegates were in place on the quarterdeck. The ceremony was ready to begin.

After the cool dawn, the quarterdeck felt uncomfortably hot beneath the gray, moody sky.

Near a microphone stood a mess table covered with green baize, with chairs set on both sides of the table. To either side of this was lined the full array of Allied generals and admirals; the English, Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders, the Russians, the Chinese, the Dutch, and of course endless rows of Americans in khaki.

War correspondents and cameramen crowded the scaffolding provided for them, giving them a clear angle of the eleven members of the Japanese delegation. Sailors in immaculate white, many of them holding cameras, everyone craning their necks for a better view, crowded every available inch of the ship.

MacArthur, flanked by Halsey and Nimitz, strode briskly toward the admirals, who stepped to their positions.

MacArthur assumed a rigid military stance at the microphone and read aloud from a piece of paper held in his hand.

"We are gathered here, representatives of the major warring powers, to conclude a solemn agreement whereby peace may be restored."

Ballard landed in a loose-limbed roll, grabbing the ground and shaking his head to clear it. The Nambu opened up again, peppering close by overhead.

He twisted around and saw the Zero continuing its climb, soaring away from the airfield. Their vehicle had landed right side up and still shimmied on its shocks

from the roll. Keiko was a hundred feet away. She seemed to be okay. Hanklin was another couple of hundred feet downrange from her.

Geysers of dirt zipped in a steady line just short of Keiko and Hanklin, the gunner behind the Nambu triggering off hurried bursts, tracking the weapon too low. The remaining sentries had grabbed cover in and around the hangar, content to pop occasional but ineffectual fire and leave the fight to the machine gunners. It would not remain that way for long.

The human tide of uniforms and weapons from across the airfield poured closer by the minute, less than two minutes away from overrunning his position, at Ballard's estimation. He caught a movement from Hanklin and looked just in time to see Tex pull back down to a crouch after having thrown something.

Those behind the Nambu had time for startled shouts, then the thrown grenade detonated with no more than a flat *blam!* of sound. Men were hurled across sandbags where they did not move, the sandbags beneath them splattered with blood.

Ballard and Hanklin ran over to rendezvous with Keiko. "Where'd you get that pineapple, Tex?"

"Rolled over next to me pretty as you please with the pin still in her. Musta fallen outta that rig we over ended."

Ballard's eyes sought the black dot of the Baron's plane rapidly dwindling in the sky. His eyes moved to the biplane parked alongside the hangar. Keiko followed his gaze.

"We would never catch him in that!" she said.

"Let's try. We don't have a choice. He's got to be stopped!"

The handful of soldiers by the hangar were content to fire sporadically and wait for the fifty or more soldiers charging in this direction across the runways.

Hanklin looked over at the vehicle fifty yards away. The machine gun mounts were bent. The .50-caliber was knocked loose on the ground, a belt of ammunition coiled around it like a brass snake.

"I'll give you cover."

"We'll pick you up on our way past," Ballard promised. "If you can."

Hanklin broke away.

Ballard triggered rounds in the direction of the hangar. He motioned to Keiko, and they ran toward the old World War I-era biplane.

Keiko's dusky face gleamed with excitement and fear. Ballard thought that without a doubt she was one hell of a beautiful woman.

Hanklin yanked up the .50-caliber machine gun from the ground. The oncoming horde would be in range soon, but not yet. He held the big machine gun effortlessly, the ammo belt trailing down to the ground.

Turning toward the hangar, he tugged off an extended burst from a spread-legged stance, the recoil convulsing his body like a cottonwood shuddering against a norther. The spray of bullets cut with deadly accuracy, toppling figures, puncturing the cover behind which men sought safety.

Ballard and Keiko broke past the remains of the machine gun placement and headed at a run toward the Spad.

Hayashi lifted his face from the dirt. Blood dripped into his eyes. He thought to brush it away with his left hand, but the hand was too heavy to move. He tried again and weakly brushed his fingers across his eyes, smearing the blood, stinging his eyes. At least he could see.

He saw the American and the one with him. A woman. He recognized her. Keiko.

They reached the old biplane. He saw this and at first he could not move, could utter no sound. All about him, he could hear the moaning and screaming of the wounded. He could feel nothing but a sting where pebbles had scratched his face when he fell. Everything else was a numb coldness he knew would pass soon enough, when the pain of those screaming would consume him, if he lived that long.

His right hand grasped his service revolver and he willed the muscles in his arm to respond.

He had failed Baron Tamura.

The edges of his vision began to shimmer darkly, and he knew he would die before the pain got to him. He must not fail now. Somehow he managed to raise the pistol.

The American soldier leaped onto the wing of the Spad and reached down, extending a hand to the woman.

Hayashi squeezed the trigger.

He saw the man lurch and start to fall from the wing. Keiko cried out and he started to smile. Then a stab of pain pierced his body and he shrieked once where he lay. Darkness consumed him and he died.

Ballard hit the tarmac with a jolt he barely felt, Keiko's cry filling his disintegrating senses. In that fading moment of awareness, he knew everything had turned to shit.

He'd been shot and he was dying and he thought, *Perfect. Goddamn perfect. You get this close and you fumble and lose it and that's the thought you die with.*

He sensed Keiko kneeling beside him, touching him. He felt the touch clearly enough, the woman's touch he had not felt in so long, the touch of a woman who cared. There was nothing like it in the world.

It could have been mine again, but it's too late, it's too goddamn late!

He heard the alarm in her words but he could not hear what she said because a fog of pain washed through him.

Like Mischkie. You fought and you died and if you had someone who cared, maybe you were remembered for a while before the world forgot.

He thought, Keiko.

And the black fog swallowed him.

Chapter 31

Hanklin threw the Nambu into the armored vehicle and climbed behind the steering wheel when he saw Ballard go down. As he expected, the vehicle's connecting wires had not survived the rollover intact. The engine failed to start. He

hopped from the vehicle, toting the machine gun over his shoulder, and hurtled across the distance to where Keiko knelt beside Ballard, holding one of Ballard's hands in both of hers.

"He's alive!"

Hanklin took her word for it.

Ballard did not look good. Blood oozed from a bullet hole high in the left side of his chest, near the shoulder.

Hanklin took a quick look around. The Jap survivors at this end weren't even pegging shots anymore, as if loathe to further arouse the Texan's wrath. The swarm of uniforms pouring across the airfield was crossing the next runway down. Some carried rifles, others wielded clubs and sabers.

Hanklin tossed aside the Nambu and looped his arms through Ballard's. Together he and Keiko got Ballard onto the wing and into the rear seat of the Spad.

Keiko leaned across to fasten Ballard's seat belt. She pulled a leather flight cap across his head, leaving the chin flap with the small radio microphone attachment hanging loose. His eyes fluttered once. He did not regain consciousness. She straightened from fastening the belt, and Hanklin saw the fingertips of one hand flit ever so lightly across the scratches on Ballard's face. Her lips brushed Ballard's for just a second. Then she hopped down to the ground and together they made quick work of rolling the Spad onto the tarmac and firing it up, with Keiko grabbing the controls and Hanklin working the propeller.

He ran over to her side of the plane.

"Good luck!" he said through cupped hands above the noise of the Spad.

"What are you doing, Tex? Quickly! There is room for you with Ballard. We must stop my uncle if we can!"

Hanklin scooped up the machine gun from the ground.

"You'll have a tough enough time doing that without me weighing you down. Keiko, you're a good woman," he nodded at Ballard, "and that there's a good man. You've got a chance. Take it, don't stand here jawin'. Git!"

He turned his back to her.

"Thank you, Tex," she said, knowing he could not hear her.

She taxied the Spad away, ramming the throttle forward to gain full power.

She heard the clatter of the .50-caliber machine gun opening fire behind her, then it was lost beneath the increasing engine drone as she powered into the takeoff.

When the last belt of ammo ran out and the loud stammering and the red-hot flame spitting from the Nambu's muzzle ceased, Hanklin stopped trying to match it with his rebel yelling rage, and for a moment there in the sun the only sound was the clunk of the last brass bullet falling upon the ground.

They were standing, the ones he'd left to stand, and they were starting to close in from three sides in slow, even strides, shoulder to shoulder, those with the rifles in front, bayonets fixed, followed by the ones carrying clubs and swords. Some were firing at the Spad accelerating along the runway, soaring into the air with a burst of engine power, but mostly they closed in on him in an inexorable, tightening circle.

Bayonets glinted in the sun, lunging.

For Hanklin, dying became part of a dream about the night with Bobbi Sue Matson back home on the banks of the Sabine and the way her tanned wet body had glistened in the moonlight that night they made love.

Something was wrong with the Baron's plane, some malfunction (just now making itself known) no doubt caused by damage during the attack on the ground. Keiko could see a thin stream of black smoke trailing from the Zero flown by her uncle.

Despite the relative slowness of the Spad, Keiko had no trouble catching up with the Zero within minutes after takeoff. The Zero made terrible speed but continued on nonetheless. She drew in behind it and slackened her speed to maintain that position at a hundred yards, her right index finger curled to trigger the 7mm machine guns aimed at the Zero in the scope mounted before her.

She knew she must lose herself in the drone of the plane's engine, must become one with this hurtling piece of machinery soaring through space. She must become like a machine herself. She must not think. Not of the man in the plane with her. Ballard. Bleeding, unconscious. Dying? She must not think. So much death.

The end so near, and who knew what could have happened between her and this man when it was over? Something, nothing? She would never know because instead of flying him directly to a medical facility, she was chasing after the plane ahead of her, and she hated her uncle for that.

I must not think, she told herself.

Not of her last sight of Tex Hanklin as the Spad had taken wing away from Tateyama. She had seen the bayonets glint in the sun, the moment seared into her memory forever.

It should have made it easier to trigger the machine guns at the Zero flown by her uncle. It did not. It did not.

The Baron had taught her to fly in the early days of the war, had taught her what he could of the ways of aerial combat, and his tutoring, combined with her own natural skills, had produced a pilot he had been proud of.

He had taught her to fly. To fight. To think. To live. He had taught her everything.

His voice in the radio headset startled her, his voice as she rarely heard it, clipped, authoritative, emotionless.

"Who is behind me?"

"It is I, Uncle."

His voice changed.

"Keiko!"

The crackle of static. The drone of the engine. The whip of the wind. Her finger remained on the trigger, but she could not fire.

"Uncle, you must turn back."

"I cannot."

"And neither can I. It has come to this between us. I must stop you or die trying. Uncle, turn back! They will stop you if I do not."

No reply. He heard, but chose not to respond.

They were over the Bay now, and in the distance ahead she saw the Allied armada, less than two minutes flying time away.

I must not think.

She shouted his name into her radio. No response.

The Zero knifed to the side, surging with renewed speed, drawing away.

She saw her uncle in her mind's eye as she had so often seen him seated at the controls: back erect, eyes steely with concentration.

She dived the Spad after the streaming black cloud. The Spad would normally have been no match for the Zero, but the other plane showed signs of slowing again, its mechanical problems growing worse. She closed the gap between them.

Two American fighter planes—she recognized them as Hellcats—stormed in at them.

Her attention had been focused on staying on the tail of the Baron's plane.

She saw the wings of her uncle's plane wink sparkling flames as he opened fire on the American fighters. The Hellcats broke formation, one snapping into a tight loop, rolling out to tail the Zero, its twin swinging around to similarly line up behind the Spad.

Her sights were still on the Zero flown by Baron Tamura, directly ahead of her.

Don't think! her mind screamed. *Do it!*

She screamed her anguish and pressed the trigger. The machine guns stuttered their staccato chatter.

The Baron was taking no evasive action. A tongue of slashing tracers ate up the fuselage of the Baron's plane. The stream of black smoke swelled like a fattening snake in the sky amid an eye-searing, blossoming fireball, and the Zero went whining down into a wild, uncontrolled dive.

The high keening whine of the Spad's tortured engine filled Keiko's head.

Meanwhile, one Hellcat had locked onto the Spad's tail. Instinct made Keiko pull into a roll away from the Hellcat trying to get a fix on her an instant before he fired. The American fighter plane sailed past her. The Hellcat so outclassed the ancient Spad that it had been moving too fast to catch the biplane's sharp evasive dive.

"Friendly!" Keiko shouted into her radio. "Don't shoot! Friendly!"

The Hellcat closed the gap from behind to one hundred yards, and her instincts took over again. She worked the control stick, soaring upwards.

The pilot of the Hellcat squeezed off a burst of gunfire. A shuddering row of ragged holes stitched away bits of the Spad that tore loose and went shredding away in the slipstream.

The control stick wobbled roughly in her grasp. She fought the plane back onto an even keel. The other Hellcat was sweeping around to join the first.

"Goodbye, John," Keiko said into her radio, to the unconscious man seated behind her. "I think I loved you."

"I think I love you too, kid." Ballard's voice was weak, gritty, in her headset. "Just don't give up so goddamn easy."

In the first instant of barely regained consciousness, he thought he was dead before he identified the tumult of sensations. The turbulence and the nearly lulling throb, were really the air whipping through the open cockpit and the

scream of the old biplane's motor. The gray blur that had seemed to envelope him for that first instant became the gray cloud ceiling.

He was strapped into the rear seat of the Spad, and one glance ahead at the swirling midnight dark hair twisting wildly from around the leather headgear of the pilot told him the situation.

She banked into a sharp dive, the engine whine climbing in decibels, rocking him roughly in the shoulder harness.

An awful pulsation spasmed him into full awareness. A machine gun from behind opened up and he felt the bullets hitting the old plane.

He thought of Mischkie.

He thought of Hanklin.

He forced himself to lift the chin strap radio mike to his mouth. Fighter planes honed in close behind them for a twin angle fire that would blow them apart in the sky. Pain tried to smother his voice but he forced it out.

"Yankee Clipper. Yankee Clipper. Repeat, Yankee Clipper."

The pain was almost too much, grinding away at his strength. He fought off the urge to give in to merciful unconsciousness.

There was something to live for now, damnit, and no, they would not take it from him. He would not die. He would... not... die...

The fighters on their trail pulled back a notch.

"Repeat," a voice commanded.

"You heard me," Ballard rasped, gathering up all his strength, "I said, *Yankee Clipper*, damnit. We were ... after that plane."

"What can we do to assist you, Sergeant Ballard?" a deep, friendly Texas drawl asked, reminding Ballard of Hanklin. "Did I just hear a gal's voice up there with you?"

Keiko broke in.

"I am flying this plane. Sergeant Ballard is badly injured. He needs immediate medical attention."

"The airfield at Yokosuka is closest." The Texan became strictly business. "We'll escort you."

"There is an insurrection in progress at Tateyama Air Base," she told them. "We have just escaped from there. American soldiers have died."

"We'll radio it in," said the first pilot. "And we'll radio ahead to Yokosuka. They'll be ready and waiting, *Yankee Clipper*."

"One question." Ballard's voice sounded strained, growing weaker. "Is it ... over?"

"As of two-and-a-half minutes ago." The Texan drawl grinned across the air. "We're at peace with Japan."

The Hellcats tore off ahead to guide them.

Keiko felt something touch her right shoulder lightly from behind. She reached her left hand across and over to grasp Ballard's strong hand.

"Can you make it?" she asked.

Ballard released her hand, sank back.

"I ... can make it. I'm looking forward to making it. Just don't take too long getting us there."

The plane canted sharply as she swung in a long bank to port, after the American fighter planes.

At 0930 hours precisely, the Japanese delegation aboard the Missouri filed down the ladder for the trip back to Tokyo. The signing ceremony had taken less than twenty minutes.

MacArthur left the ceremony deck and went to another microphone which would broadcast his message to America.

"Today the guns are silent," he said. "A great tragedy has ended. A great victory has been won. The skies no longer rain death, the seas bear only commerce, men everywhere walk upright in the sunlight. The entire world is quietly at peace. The holy mission has been completed. A new era is upon us.

"Even the lesson of victory itself brings with it profound concern, both for our future security and the survival of civilization. Military alliances, balances of power, leagues of nations, all in turn failed, leaving the only path the crucible of war. The utter destructiveness of war now blots out this alternative.

"We have had our last chance. If we do not devise some greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door..."

Epilogue

Shafts of sunlight pouring through the window intensified the stark whiteness of the room and its furnishings.

Ballard sat propped up in bed against the headboard. A bed sheet covered the lower half of his body. He relaxed when the American doctor replaced the shoulder of the hospital gown back into place across the freshly dressed wound.

With U.S. troops spreading across Japan at an ever increasing rate, American medical personnel were already in place at a string of Japanese military hospitals like this one at Yokosuka Air Base where Ballard was recuperating. One wing of the hospital at Yokosuka became a fully operational American medical unit at the precise moment of the official surrender aboard the Missouri.

Ballard had hardly been off the operating table and had been fading fast from the pain killers they'd pumped into him, when he was visited, very privately, by a harassed-looking junior officer from General Headquarters.

He could not recall the officer's rank or name because the conversation was the last thing he remembered before sinking into the drug-induced sleep. Strangely, he did remember the conversation itself with perfect clarity.

It had been mutually agreed upon between the American and Japanese authorities that all matters pertaining to the activities of Baron Tamura and his circle of conspirators would be kept secret and off the record. It was felt that to do otherwise would only serve to embarrass the Emperor and the people of Japan and make more difficult the looming task of postwar reconstruction.

So had spoken the junior officer from GHQ.

The doctor stood back from his examination. His name was Captain Fields. His spotless smock and pale complexion blended in with the stark whiteness of the room. His pinched face was pockmarked, his mouth a narrow gash.

He stepped to the foot of the bed and jotted some scratchy lines across a sheet attached to a clipboard.

"You're making a remarkable recovery, Sergeant. I wouldn't have given you better than twenty-eighty odds for survival when they dragged you in here five days ago."

"I've got something to live for, Doc. I feel human again for the first time in a long time."

Fields started toward the door on his way out. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" It was an exit line, purely professional, the words clipped of any personal warmth.

"You know what you can do to make my life a whole lot easier, Doc. As ranking officer of this American facility, you're the commanding officer, and regulations say I need my C.O.'s permission to marry a Japanese civilian."

The doctor paused with a hand on the door handle.

"We've been through this for the past three days, Sergeant, and the answer is still no. I refuse to grant permission for you to marry that Tamura woman."

"You're not much for romance, are you, Captain?"

"I don't understand you, Ballard. I've seen too many good men and boys bleed their lives out on operating tables in field hospitals for me to have anything but hatred in my heart for those people. You've been in the thick of the fighting since this war began, and during the past week alone you've lost men of your unit, friends, and how many others have you seen die at the hands of these Emperor-worshiping scum? You took a bullet that almost cost you your life and now you want to marry one of them. Frankly, Sergeant, it's beyond my comprehension."

"Yeah, I guess maybe it is. But here's something you must comprehend, Doc. The war's over. You've read the papers, I've read the papers.

"They had their internal troubles, but the Japs that are left are welcoming us more like liberators than conquerors. The average Jap Joe on the street has been indoctrinated to feel the way he does about his Emperor, but they've got nothing but hatred in their hearts for the militarists who sent a generation of their men and boys to be slaughtered. As for Keiko, she risked her life to help end the killing. She saved my life, flying me here so you sawbones could go to work on me. That and a whole lot more make her okay with me."

"You've got pull in this man's army, and I'm not going to be the one to say you haven't earned it. I've seen your combat record, and I've seen the pull you have in the way you got permission for that young woman to come visit you every day and stay for as long as she pleases." Disapproval dripped from Fields' every word. "You may get your request for permission to marry approved in time but I doubt it. Anyway, I'll be damned if I'll approve it, and that's my final say on the matter."

Before he could open the door to step out, the door opened for him, and Keiko breezed in, beaming freshness and looking summery in a white cotton dress.

She held a piece of paper.

She had spent all the time she could at Ballard's bedside since he'd emerged from that drugged sleep after first being brought here.

They had not spoken of her uncle. He knew this was not because she did not think about what had happened, but because her immediate concern was for the living, for the survivors.

He had asked her to marry him three days ago. She had accepted with a kiss as soft and tender as the yes she whispered close to his ear.

Ever since Fields had denied granting them permission to marry, she had spent long hours each day knocking on doors throughout the less than organized U.S. command structure which was in the process of situating itself in Tokyo.

"How'd it go today, kid?" Ballard asked her. "Another day of doors slamming in your face?"

She handed the piece of paper to Fields as she passed him in the doorway. She crossed directly to sit next to Ballard on the bed.

"Doors slammed in my face until I knocked on the right door. Your name opened that door, darling. A very important man knew all about you."

Ballard's good arm went out to receive her, drawing her to him. She kissed him then, and he barely noticed the snort from Fields. The medical officer crumpled up the piece of paper and flung it angrily upon the bed. He left them in a clinch which Ballard chose not to break.

Ballard finally uncrumpled the piece of paper and read it along the length of his wounded arm, which he could barely move. He was aware of Keiko's happy brown eyes on him, waiting for him to share the joy of what she already knew, of whatever had so irritated Fields.

He read the order, cut at General Headquarters, granting permission for Sergeant John Ballard to marry Keiko Tamura, Japanese national.

The order was personally signed by the Supreme Allied Commander.

Beneath the typed official notice across the page in a bold, sweeping hand that matched the MacArthur signature, were scrawled the words:

Thanks, soldier! Good Luck to both of you!



⁽²⁻¹⁾ Note: The Spad was a french airplane, built by Société Pour L'Aviation et ses Dérivés.