

CHAPTER I

**Theater District
Tokyo, Japan
12 April 1952
2201 Hours**

*G*eisha women weren't known for punching soldiers in the face, but the one accompanying Takeshi "Taki" Takata did just that. In a most un-geisha-like gesture, she hauled back her arm and plowed a fist smack into the kisser of the Japanese soldier who'd made a grab for her, his brown cap flying off from the force of the blow.

The soldier was shocked, to say the least. So was his buddy...but not Taki. The woman in the geisha getup was as headstrong as they came. She'd been a thorn in his side since minute one of this covert mission.

Now there was nothing left to do but follow her lead, wrap this up fast, and hope their cover wasn't blown to kingdom come.

They might still have a chance at that, if they were lucky—the brawl had broken out in a shadowy alley on a dark night. Passersby on the street outside might not be so quick to gravitate toward the sounds of a scuffle in the shadows.

Taki undid the button on his tuxedo jacket, freeing himself for action. The other soldier, the one who hadn't been punched in the face, dropped a hand to the gun holster on his belt. Before he could get his fingers on the grip, Taki lashed out with a swift kick to his chest, stunning him.

Sparing a quick glance in the geisha's direction, he saw her pump another punch at the first soldier. This one caught him in the throat.

The geisha could take care of herself. No surprise there, considering who she was under the *kimono*, black wig, and all that heavy white makeup. Taki had heard she was as tough as any man, and he believed it.

The fact that she was a member of the 42nd Marine Special Forces said it all.

Turning back to his own opponent, Taki saw the man wrench his gun from its holster. How long would it take for him to swing it up and fire? Mere heartbeats.

It wasn't enough time for Taki to deploy the weapons secreted on his person, but it was still more than enough time to take other measures. In a flicker of motion, Taki lunged toward the geisha, snatching one of the long pins from her wig. Whirling, he swept it around and let it fly, point first, like a dart out of a blowgun.

He knew he wouldn't miss. He was a master of Okinawan *kobudō* with a special talent for turning everyday objects into deadly weapons. His aim was instantaneous and precise, whether he was hurling a *shuriken* throwing star or a hairpin.

But he took no joy in the sight of the long pin piercing the soldier's left eye. He and Taki shared the same heritage. Did it matter that the soldier lived in Tokyo, and Taki had grown up in San Francisco, California? They both had Japanese blood, didn't they?

Not that Taki would let that stop him from completing his mission. When the soldier fell screaming to his knees, he moved in fast to silence him. Wrapping him in a choke hold, he squeezed hard, cutting off the man's air until he went limp. Then he laid him gently on the dirty bricks. There was no need to bang him up any worse, now that the threat had been silenced.

Or had it? The geisha's foe also flopped to the bricks, unconscious, but before she and Taki could make another move, new voices barked

from the alley entrance.

Taki looked up to see two more soldiers in brown uniforms and caps glaring at him with pistols raised. “*Teiryuu!*” There were soldiers everywhere these days, now that Japan was at war. An invasion force had struck China weeks ago; with the conquered northeastern city of Tianjin as a base, Japanese forces were making great strides in spite of heavy Chinese resistance.

“*Teiryuu!*” repeated the soldiers. “*Teiryuu!*” The word meant “halt,” but of course Taki meant to do no such thing.

Taki’s mind raced. What could he say to these men? The evidence of what had happened was laid out around him—signs of a struggle plus two unconscious soldiers, one with a hairpin stuck in his eye. No amount of fast-talking was going to get him out of this mess.

It was time for another fight, and he knew it. He was sure the geisha knew it, too.

Could he get to the hairpinned soldier’s gun fast enough? Or should he go for the makeshift shield first—the garbage can lid propped against the wall three feet away?

Just as Taki was making up his mind, one of the soldiers at the mouth of the alley yelled and doubled over. Suddenly, his head twisted sharply left and his neck snapped.

As the other soldier gaped and backed away, the soldier with the broken neck crumpled to the street...but his pistol remained aloft, floating in midair. The barrel swung toward the second soldier, seemingly of its own volition, and took aim at his head.

Before it could fire, the soldier shrieked and turned to run, but not quickly enough. His own pistol fell as he followed it to the ground in a heap.

The airborne gun turned toward Taki and the geisha. It bobbed down the alley, pointing at one and then the other, drifting toward them inexorably.

Neither Taki nor the geisha flinched. If anything, they relaxed a little.

Because the unseen hand that held the gun belonged to a friend and ally.

“You morons,” a woman’s high-pitched voice chimed from thin air in the vicinity of the gun. “Can’t you do *anything* right?”

Maybe “friend” was too strong of a word, thought Taki.

"We're the morons?" The geisha planted her fists on her hips. Her eyes were wide, her throaty voice cracking with rage. "Weren't you supposed to cover us? Take down anyone who got *curious*?"

"That's exactly what I *did*." The invisible woman waved the gun back and forth. "Not that I'd have to if you dopes were better at not attracting attention!"

"It's not easy, dressed up in this clown suit." The geisha spread her arms wide. "I'd like to see *you* try it."

The gun bounced and landed over a subway grate. "I'd be happy to." There was a humming sound, and a shimmering silhouette appeared in the air in front of the geisha. Silver light arced and flowed around the edges, and then a female figure flashed into view. Her hand was on a control knob on the buckle of her belt. Her jumpsuit, the source of her invisibility, was made from black metallic material that shone with rainbow highlights when she moved. "At least I have the *looks* to pull off that outfit!"

Taki clenched his teeth. The two women had been butting heads since the start of the mission twelve hours ago. And when they weren't butting heads with each other, they were butting heads with *him*.

Taki was new to the 42nd Marine Special Forces. He couldn't understand why Command had put two such strong-willed women together on the same covert operation. He'd heard something about their teamwork and effectiveness in the field, but frankly, he hadn't seen much proof of it yet.

At the rate they were going, he doubted that the vanishing woman—Second Lieutenant Caitlin "Hoax" Lamsbury—and the fake geisha—Corporal Tala Aponi—would make it home alive, let alone complete their assignment.

"Looks? You?" Tala laughed. "You're not even in my *league*, honey."

Hoax sneered. "I look better than you when I'm *invisible*." She combed the fingers of one hand through her bangs, which she'd rebelliously streaked pink. The rest of her hair, which was cut in a short shag all around, was naturally black. "I heard they almost gave you the Joshua Suit just so they wouldn't have to *look* at you anymore."

Tala's long raven hair was wrapped up under her geisha wig, but she flicked her head as if she were tossing it anyway. "Well *I* heard they're getting a trained monkey to do your job."

Hoax lunged forward. She was shorter than Tala by a few inches, so she had to glare up at her. "That's it!" Hoax lashed back a fist, ready to throw a punch.

And Taki caught it before she could swing. "That's enough! Both of you!" He knew he was on shaky ground as the rookie member of the team, but the clock was ticking. The longer they bickered in the alley, the more the mission was jeopardized. "If we don't get moving, we'll miss the rendezvous!"

Hoax and Tala glared at each other for a long moment. Taki thought they might still go at it after all, with him caught in the middle.

Then, both women visibly relaxed. They didn't break eye contact, but they did lean back from each other.

Taki felt safe in letting go of Hoax's arm, though he didn't move out from between the two women just yet. "We're in enemy territory here, remember? Can we save the in-fighting for when we're back on the sub?"

Hoax and Tala turned their gazes to lock on him instead of each other. Both women looked thoroughly disgusted.

"Who died and put *you* in charge of this mission?" asked Tala.

"No one, that's who." Hoax snorted. "He must be feeling superior since he's back home on Japanese soil."

Taki shook his head in disgust. He'd stopped them from fighting with each other only to have them turn their irritation on *him*. "I'm from San Francisco." He chopped his hand through the air definitively. "I've only ever *visited* Japan."

"Whatever, Taki. We don't have time to discuss it right now." Hoax let her angry stare linger on him a moment longer, then reached for the knob on her belt. "Let's get rolling, you two. We need to make that rendezvous."

Taki gaped at her. A few moments ago, he'd had to stop her from punching the geisha Sabotage Specialist; now, all of a sudden, she was barking out orders again as if her command style had never wavered.

Was that one of their strengths as a team? That they kept their fighting edge sharp by constantly sparring with each other, then snapped into well-oiled action the second they caught a whiff of combat?

Frankly, Taki thought tea and meditation worked just as well. But his was not to reason why, not with the Japanese military on the move. Not when a secret agent with the key to their battle plan was out there in the night, waiting to hand it over. Not when this could be the Union's only chance to gain insight into the ruling Shōgunate, whose mysterious machinations had until recently been confined to Japan's home islands.

"Bring their weapons." Hoax nodded at the unconscious soldiers. "Any I.D. papers they're carrying, too."

She didn't have to say it. Tala was already gathering guns and papers from the first pair of soldiers. Taki avoided the soldier with the hairpin in his eye and salvaged weapons and documents from the pair near the mouth of the alley.

"Let's go, people." Hoax snapped her fingers impatiently. "Shake a leg already."

This time, it was Taki and Tala's turn to do the glaring.

"Got a problem with that?" Hoax turned the dial on her belt and a silvery nimbus rippled to life around her. "Tell it to the thin air." With that, she flickered out of sight, disappearing into the shadows of the Japanese night.

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Tala was dying to kick off her wooden clogs, whip off the wig, and free herself from the binding geisha kimono once and for all. She was sick of hobbling around after Taki Takata like some subservient little concubine, staying several paces behind him at all times as the culture dictated. It was only an act, a temporary disguise, but it ran against her grain so much that she could hardly stand it.

She couldn't imagine living like a geisha, or even a more ordinary, but still submissive, Japanese woman. The thought of it made her feel sick to her stomach. For a Navajo like her, being trapped in such a role—living like a slave under the oppressive Meiji Civil Code—would be worse than death itself.

As she followed Taki down the boulevard, she passed an actual geisha, shuffling behind her escort with head bowed. The woman glanced up and their eyes met...but Tala saw no spark of life in them. The spirit had been crushed out of her.

That poor woman would never know how it felt to be a Navajo,

riding bareback on a charging horse in the Arizona desert heat, wearing nothing but a doeskin bodice and leggings. She would never know what it was like to light the fuse of a bomb and hurl it, the roar of the blast mingling with her war cry in the blistering wind.

Poor woman. And now the Japanese wanted to make more of her, claiming new foreign lands in which to oppress the female soul. That made the bastards Tala's special enemies, and this mission deserving better than the lousy attitude she'd dumped into it so far.

As the other geisha moved on, Tala straightened. She was going to get through this, even if it meant getting along with Hoax and Taki.

The invisible woman's voice came to her just then, from somewhere off to her left. "Almost there, guys. The rendezvous point is in that little park up the block on the right."

Tala forced herself not to say something nasty in reply. The truth was, Hoax had a way of grating on her like no one else—and that was really saying something, because *a lot* of people grated on Tala. It probably had a lot to do with the intense level of competition between the two hard-edged women. It might also have been a factor of Hoax being five years younger but still outranking Tala. On this particular mission, there was also the matter of Hoax beating Tala in a bar fight a week ago.

So Tala had good reason for butting heads with Hoax...but she resolved not to let it affect the mission from this point forward. It was far more important to stop the Japanese from spreading their influence.

Anyway, if there was one thing she was sure of, it was that she could depend on Hoax in a fight. Could she say the same about Taki?

"This is it." Taki straightened the jacket of his tux and turned right off the boulevard, following a cobblestone path into the parklet.

Tala wobbled after him with some difficulty. The wooden clogs didn't agree with the cobblestones, not a bit. She hoped no one was watching who might blow her cover.

As she followed Taki down the path, her way was lit by paper lanterns hanging from the cherry tree branches on either side. The lanterns rocked softly in the breeze wafting in from the sea; nearby wind chimes played a tinkling melody.

Bouquets of pale blossoms enrobed every branch, freshly opened to mark the arrival of spring. The air was thick with the blossoms' scent, a sweet perfume like blooming roses.

Tala inhaled deeply, and a sense of peace flowed through her. The blossoms reminded her of home...of one of her homes, anyway: Washington, D.C. She'd known some happy times there, even with all the craziness and trouble.

It was such a pretty little park, she thought. How could the Japanese create something so lovely, yet be capable of such brutality? How could such a monstrous war machine arise from a land that could also give birth to something so peaceful?

Up ahead, Taki paused at an intersection of paths and looked both ways. As Tala approached him, she heard Hoax's voice amid the ringing of the wind chimes, the sound of a woman where no woman could be seen.

"Go left," said Hoax. "Our contact's at a fountain, alone. I scouted the area and couldn't find anyone else hanging around."

Taki nodded and turned left. Tala fell in step behind him, wobbly on the cobblestones and keeping her distance as always.

Not far ahead, they emerged into an open circle that seemed to be the heart of the park. As promised, there was a fountain, and a man standing in front of it.

He had close-cropped silver hair and wore a black robe with white trim. As he gazed into the fountain, streams of water trickled from the triple mouths of the three-headed cement fish perched in the middle of it.

When Taki drew up alongside the robed man, he turned and bowed without smiling. Taki bowed in return and cleared his throat. "The cherry blossoms are lovely this time of year." He said it in English. It was the prearranged signal for the meeting.

The man in the black robe stared at him with narrowed eyes and clenched jaws. For a moment, Tala thought they might have the wrong man, that he might not give the correct countersign.

But then he did. "I cannot enjoy them because of this cold I have." He spoke with a Japanese accent, but his English was flawless. He'd gone to school in the U.S., Tala knew that much; she guessed that was why he was sympathetic to the Union cause.

Taki looked at Tala and nodded. She moved closer so she could

catch the whole exchange.

The man in the robe bowed for her benefit. "I am Dr. Kichida. I have something with me that you might find of interest." He wasted no time pulling a folded and sealed manila envelope from the sleeve of his black robe. He handed it to Taki without a word of explanation.

Taki slipped it into an inside pocket of his tux jacket. "Do you think it will be a stormy spring, my friend?"

Dr. Kichida fixed his gaze on Taki. His dark eyes glittered in the flickering light of the paper lamps. "I have no doubt of it," he said. "It could well be the stormiest on record."

Taki turned to Tala and they shared a look. They both knew what "storm" he was talking about. This confirmed it: the Japanese Shōgunate had big plans, and they were happening soon.

"A wise man should hurry in out of the rain," said Kichida. "He should take his umbrella and try his best to beat the storm."

The implications of what he said were not lost on Tala. He'd handed over information concerning Japan's battle plans; now it was up to the Union's covert team to get those secrets into the hands of those who could put them to use.

It was all up to Tala, Taki, and Hoax.

"Thank you for the kind advice, Doctor." Taki bowed. "I promise your insight will not be in vain."

"I will hold you to it," said Kichida. "I love this *Nippon*, this land of the rising sun, with all my heart. I cannot bear the thought of her future falling permanently under the influence of shadows."

Just as he said those words, Tala heard the twang of a bowstring. Even amid the splashing of the fountain and the tinkling of the wind chimes, she heard it. The sound was unmistakable to a Navajo woman like her, who'd been attuned to it for as long as she could remember.

A second later, before she could make a move to defend against it, an arrow leapt from the trees and plunged into Dr. Kichida's chest.

He gasped and clutched at the shaft, eyes wide with shock and horror. It looked to Tala like the point had sunk into his heart, or at least damn close.

As Taki grabbed him, Tala spun and looked in the direction from which the arrow had flown. She saw the shadowy figure of a man standing stiffly in the darkness under the cherry blossoms, bow

raised. The man drew a fresh arrow from a quiver at his hip and swung it up to nock it into place.

Tala knew she had only seconds before the bowstring twanged again. Shoving a hand through the folds of her kimono, she took hold of one of the little surprises she'd hidden in there for just such a moment: an M15 white phosphor smoke grenade.

As she pulled the pin and rolled her arm back for the throw, she rode a wave of mixed emotions. On the one hand, she was furious at what had happened to Dr. Kichida. On the other hand, she couldn't help feeling secretly glad—not for his misfortune, but for the opportunity to do what she loved best.

As she hurled the grenade toward the archer, and clouds of white smoke billowed out to obscure his shot, Tala felt like herself for the first time all evening. The hell with pretending to be a submissive little geisha hobbling through the streets of Tokyo.

She was the kind of girl who liked to blow things up and hurt people—the ones who deserved it, of course.

She was only too happy to kick off her wooden clogs, pitch the wig, and rip off the bottom three feet of the kimono, leaving her legs bare from the knees down. As she shook out her long black hair and reached for another smoke grenade, she smiled ruefully.

Whoever had done this, she was about to make them pay.