Chapter 3

Imperial Palace
Tokyo, Japan
12 April 1952
2448 Hours

When Hiruko Orochi first heard the sirens, he was standing with dozens of other soldiers in the courtyard of the Imperial Palace, listening to a speech by Shōgun Hatamoto Omokaze.

The soldiers were about to ship out; their duffel bags lay on the ground at their feet, stuffed with clothing and gear. They were on the verge of a great new adventure on behalf of the Shōgunate, and they cheered with growing excitement at the Shōgun's stirring words. Their voices roared in the grassy courtyard, and their fists pumped under the blaze of electric lights that made the night as bright as day.

The Shōgun stood before them behind a podium on a stage, speaking into a microphone. Behind him hung enormous white curtains with a red disk at the center—the Rising Sun, symbol of great *Nippon*. As always, his personal magnetism radiated like a blazing beacon, flowing out over the crowd. It was impossible not to bask in it, not to share in his inspirational vision.

So why did Hiruko feel a strange tug in his heart? Why, even as he got caught up in the Shōgun's words, even as he joined the other soldiers' cheers, did a shadow linger in a distant corner of his soul?

"As you go forth on this grand mission, know that my heart is with you." The Shōgun nodded and smiled. As he turned his head, his good left eye drifted over the men; so did his blind right eye, milky white under a diagonal scar. "I think of you all as my sons. I want only the best for you and our homeland. Which is why I ask you to undertake this noble task, to the glory of Nippon!"

The men roared and clapped, Hiruko among them. Like everyone, he was fiercely loyal to the Shōgun. His greatest desire was to serve the Shōgunate and the land of his birth, beautiful *Nippon*. He was a *jōtōhei*, a superior private in the royal guard, and he was proud of his station. He was a linguistics specialist, and he was deeply honored to use his language skills as part of the Shōgunate's expansionist destiny.

So why did he still feel that tug in his heart? It made no sense to him. His devotion to *Nippon* and her leaders was unshakeable, his dedication to his duty complete. Why then did he feel this dull ache, this unease?

"You will never forget this night!" The Shōgun spread his arms wide, as if to embrace all the soldiers at once. "Someday, you will look back, and you will say, 'I was there when everything changed. I was there when *Nippon* took the next leap forward. I was there. I helped make it happen.'"

This time, Hiruko led the cheers. He pumped both arms in the air, and so did all the other men. He did it to reaffirm his faith, to banish all thoughts of unease from his mind. The last thing he wanted on the outset of this critically important mission, this culmination of everything he'd worked for and dreamed of, was the slightest seed of doubt to hinder his efforts.

He cheered again, louder this time, and the others chimed in as before.

The roar of the crowd was like the crash of a wave on the shore. Hiruko got chills up his spine as he stood on the crest of the tide of adulation.

The Shōgun let the roar continue a few moments longer, then leaned close to the microphone. "I have spoken to our beloved Em-

peror Meiji." His voice, as it boomed over the loudspeakers, cut through the adoring roar, and the men quieted. "He gives you all his divine blessing, and offers one solemn promise." The Shōgun cleared his throat, pausing as if the mere thought of the Emperor's words had deeply affected him. "He pledges that if you bring back the heavenly prize, he will use it to forge an even more glorious destiny for our precious *Nippon*."

The cheering and clapping was louder than ever. The Shōgun waited, beaming at the audience. Then, reaching down to the scabbard at his waist, he drew out his sword and raised it overhead.

"My sons! The Emperor himself has given his blessing! Go forth secure in the knowledge that your mission, divinely inspired as it is, can have but one result!" The Shōgun waved the sword as he chanted into the microphone. "Success! Success! Success!"

"*Seikouri! Seikouri! Seikouri!*" The ranks of soldiers chanted along with him in perfectly synchronized cadence. However, just as the chanting reached a fever pitch, sirens went off in the distance. And it was then, for a brief moment, that Hiruko saw the curtain fall away…literally.

At first, there were just a few sirens, wailing in some far district of the city. The crowd and Shōgun kept chanting, ignoring the sound. Perhaps there was just a fire somewhere, or a vehicle accident.

But then the sirens spread and grew louder. Voices in the crowd dropped out, and the Shōgun stopped waving his sword. Soon, it sounded like the whole city all around them was filled with shrill wailing.

By then, no one in the courtyard was chanting anymore. The troops looked around, looked at each other, looked to the Shōgun for guidance.

And the Shōgun turned his back on them.

Confused and agitated, the troops broke ranks. They fell into groups, talking about what could possibly be happening and what they should do next.

As for Hiruko, he stayed at attention and remained silent. He never took his eyes off the Shōgun.

When the Shōgun turned away, he took three steps to the back of the stage and threw open one flap of the white-and-red Rising Sun curtain. It was then that Hiruko saw someone was back there, look-

ing out at the Shōgun…*two* someones.

Hiruko's blood froze when he got a look at them. One was a corpse of a man, withered and cadaverous. He wore a flowing black overcoat with red lapels, and a black leather military cap. At his throat hung the emblem of a foreign power—an iron cross, symbol of the Reich.

Looming beside him was an even more monstrous man, bald and thickly muscled, with eyes that glowed like twin fires. His face and bare arms were etched with scars that seemed to be burning, the swirls and whorls radiating an unearthly, shifting light. He wore a uniform, black as pitch, with the sleeves torn off. Instead of an iron cross, he wore an enormous iron eagle on a chain around his neck. That, too, was a symbol of the Reich.

Just seeing those two was enough to make Hiruko shudder. It was enough to make him want to look away.

But he didn't. Even when the hulking, scarred brute seemed to look right back at him.

Because he knew it wasn't right. Those men did not belong there. The Shōgun was supposed to stand beyond the influence of foreign powers; he might have treaties or accords with them, but they were not supposed to consort clandestinely on *Nippon* soil.

The Shōgun walked through the curtain and let it fall into place behind him. Hiruko's view of the strangers had lasted only an instant.

But it had been more than enough time for him to know that something wasn't right with the Shōgun; it had been enough time for him to wonder if the sense of unease he'd felt had happened for a reason. Perhaps the shadow on his soul had been the result of very definite malevolent presences.

And perhaps those presences were casting a dark pall over the mission on which he was about to embark.

After the Shōgun had been gone a moment, the curtains parted again, and another figure strode out, clad in crimson armor. His purposeful steps carried him quickly to the microphone, and he bent to speak into it without hesitation.

"Attention!" His voice snapped commandingly over the loudspeakers, overpowering the keening sirens. "All of you, return to formation *immediately*!"

Every man on the field fell silent at once and scrambled back

into the ranks they'd occupied during the Shōgun's speech. The voice they'd heard inspired instantaneous respect and compliance from all of them.

It was the voice of Iroh Minamoto, "the *Daimyō*"—widely regarded as the single greatest warrior in the Shōgunate. No one would speak or step out of line when he was addressing the troops.

The Daimyō cleared his throat and glared at the men arrayed before him. "Those sirens are not your concern," he declared, jabbing a finger at the crowd.

The men on the field stood stiffly and listened like children to the words of a stern parent. The Daimyō had complete control over every one of them.

"Pick up your belongings and prepare for transport," said the Daimyō. "We leave immediately to fulfill our divine mission in the land of our birthright."

A few of the men applauded, but it didn't last. They respected the Daimyō, practically worshipped him…and with that respect and worship came fear.

As ordered, Hiruko picked up his duffel bag. He slung the strap over his shoulder and fell into formation with the others, lining up at the gates leading out of the Imperial Palace courtyard.

He was as afraid as the rest of the soldiers, but for a different reason. He couldn't get the sight of those two men behind the curtain out of his mind. He couldn't escape the feeling that their presence boded ill for what until now had seemed like a divinely blessed quest.

Hiruko had hoped the Shōgun's rally would lift up his heart and erase all his doubts. But now, as he marched out of the courtyard, the tug on his heart was stronger than ever.