The Shadow Samurai

SHADOW SAMURAI
A Novel
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Reader's Note

This manuscript is an unpublished work in editorial development.

It is being provided for an independent assessment of narrative structure, character development, pacing, continuity, and overall reader experience.

The story moves between contemporary events and historical Japan. Both timelines are integral to the narrative.

Please approach the manuscript as a reader and editorial reviewer, noting where the story succeeds, where clarification may be needed, and where revisions could strengthen the work.

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Manuscript begins on the following page.

Chapter 1

The Gift



Japan, 1581

The sword rested between them.
Yasuke had seen weapons of extraordinary craftsmanship since arriving in Japan. Blades so finely polished they seemed to hold light within the steel. Blades carried by men who believed their honor was worth more than their lives.
But he had never seen one quite like this.
Its scabbard was black, without ornament save for a narrow band of dark red near the mouth. The hilt was wrapped in leather that looked unfamiliar to him. Beneath the wrapping, a small piece of silver had been worked into the shape of something he could not immediately recognize.
Oda Nobunaga watched him study it.
“You do not reach for it.”
Yasuke raised his eyes.
“Am I permitted?”
A faint smile touched Nobunaga's face.
“You are being given a sword, not invited to admire one.”
A few men standing nearby exchanged amused glances. Others remained expressionless.
Yasuke stepped forward.
He had learned enough of this country to understand that gifts were rarely simple things. A gift could be an honor, an obligation, a warning, or all three.
He knelt.
Nobunaga lifted the sword with both hands.
“This blade has waited for its bearer.”

Yasuke accepted it.
The weight surprised him. Not because it was heavy, but because it seemed perfectly balanced, as though the weapon had been fashioned with his hands in mind.
He bowed his head.
“I will serve you faithfully.”
“I know.”
Nobunaga's answer came without hesitation.
For a moment, neither man spoke.
Then Nobunaga leaned forward, his voice dropping low enough that only Yasuke could hear.
“There is something you must understand about this sword.”
Yasuke waited.
“You may carry it. You may fight with it. You may even lose it.”
Nobunaga's gaze settled upon the dark scabbard.
“But you must never believe that it belongs to you.”
Yasuke looked up.
“Then to whom does it belong?”
Nobunaga did not answer immediately.
Instead, he smiled.
“That,” he said, “is a question for another generation.”

Present day

The doorbell rang.
From somewhere inside the house, Malcolm Hayes shouted, “I'm not expecting anything!”
The doorbell rang again.
“Jesus Christ, I heard you!”
He came down the hallway barefoot, wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt that had seen better decades. He opened the front door.
A courier stood on the porch holding a long cardboard box.
“Delivery.”
Malcolm stared at the package.
Then at the courier.
Then back at the package.
“Oh, you have GOT to be fucking kidding me.”

The courier blinked.
“Sir?”
“No.”
“Excuse me?”
“Nope. Absolutely not.”
The courier glanced at his handheld scanner.
“I just need a signature.”
“You need to take that thing back.”
“Sir, I'm just delivering—”
“I know exactly what you're delivering.”
The courier looked at the box.
“Sporting equipment?”
Malcolm closed his eyes.
From behind him came a woman's voice.
“Who is it?”
“Nobody!”
The courier raised an eyebrow.
Malcolm's wife, Emiko Fujita-Hayes, appeared in the hallway. She was carrying a coffee mug and wearing the expression of someone who had already dealt with this man's nonsense twice before breakfast.
“Why are you yelling at nobody?”
He pointed at the box.
Her expression changed.
“Oh.”
“Yeah. Oh.”
The courier looked between them.
“Is there a problem?”
“Yes,” Malcolm said.
“No,” Emiko said simultaneously.
She stepped closer and studied the shipping label.
Then she stopped.
“Wait.”
Malcolm recognized that tone.
“What?”
She read the label again.
“This isn't addressed to you.”

He frowned.
“What are you talking about?”
She turned the box slightly.
“It's addressed to our daughter.”
For several seconds, the only sound was a lawn mower somewhere down the street.
Then a younger voice came from the staircase.
“What's addressed to me?”
Both parents turned.
Luna Hayes stood halfway down the stairs, phone in one hand, curiosity already replacing whatever she'd been doing.
“Nothing,” her father said.
“A package,” her mother said.
Luna looked between them.
“Wow. You two are really bad at coordinating your lies.”
Malcolm sighed.
“Honey, go upstairs.”
“Why?”
“Because I said so.”
“Oh, that's compelling. Did you workshop that argument?”
Emiko hid a smile behind her coffee mug.
The courier cleared his throat.
“Look, folks, I've got another forty-three stops.”
“Then you've got forty-two after this one,” Malcolm said. “Take it back.”
“Dad.”
He turned.
Luna had come down the remaining stairs.
“If it's addressed to me, it's mine.”
“Not necessarily.”
“That's literally how mail works.”
“Not in this house.”
“Are we a sovereign nation now?”
Emiko lowered the mug.
“Enough. Both of you.”
Luna crossed her arms.
Malcolm crossed his.

They looked remarkably alike when they were being stubborn.
Emiko noticed. She always noticed.
She looked at the box again, particularly the narrow strip of dark red material visible beneath one corner of the packing tape.
Her smile disappeared.
“Bring it inside,” she said quietly.
Malcolm turned toward her.
“No.”
She met his eyes.
“Please.”
Something in her voice stopped him.
The courier extended the scanner.
“Signature?”
Malcolm stared at the box for another moment, then took the device.
He signed with such unnecessary force that the courier winced.
“Have a nice day,” the courier offered.
“Too late.”
The door closed.
For a moment, the three of them stood in the hallway staring at the package.
Then Luna reached for it.
Malcolm moved it out of reach.
“Dad!”
“Not yet.”
“It's my package!”
“And it's my house.”
“Mom, are you hearing this?”
Emiko was no longer listening.
She had set her coffee down.
Very carefully, she touched the dark red strip.
“Where did this come from?” she whispered.
Malcolm looked at her.
“What?”
She shook her head.
“There's something I need to show you.”
Luna looked from one parent to the other.

“Okay. You're officially freaking me out.”
Emiko lifted her eyes.
“We open it together.”
Malcolm looked ready to object.
Then he saw his wife's face.
Whatever argument he had prepared died before reaching his lips.
He placed the box on the dining room table.
Luna fetched a pair of scissors.
And somewhere beneath the cardboard, the tape, and four centuries of unanswered questions, the sword waited.



Chapter 2

Return to Sender



The scissors were dull.
This was apparently a crisis.
“For the love of God,” Malcolm muttered, watching Luna struggle with the packing tape. “We have seventeen pairs of scissors in this house, and you found the one that couldn't cut butter.”
“They're cutting.”
“They're chewing.”
“Would you like to do it?”
“Yes.”
“Too bad.”
Emiko pulled out a dining room chair.
“Would both of you please stop?”
They stopped.
For approximately three seconds.
“Technically,” the daughter said, “he started it.”
Her father stared at the ceiling.
“Lord, give me strength.”
“He's probably busy.”
Emiko laughed.
It was brief, almost involuntary, and it eased something in the room.
Almost.
The package lay lengthwise across the dining room table. Ordinary brown cardboard. Ordinary shipping tape. An ordinary printed label bearing Luna’s name and the correct address.
There was nothing ordinary about the way her father was looking at it.

He stood at the end of the table, arms folded tightly across his chest, as though the package might suddenly leap up and attack someone.
Emiko knew that expression.
She had seen it before.
The first time had been in their old apartment, when a package arrived without a return address.
The second had been at a hotel.
The third—
Well.
She had stopped counting.
Luna had not.
“This is number seven, isn't it?”
Her father looked at her.
“What?”
“The sword. Seventh time.”
He hesitated.
“Six.”
“Seven.”
“You're counting the airport.”
“Because the airport counts.”
“That wasn't a delivery.”
“It came out of a luggage carousel in a suitcase that wasn't yours.”
“Exactly. Not a delivery.”
Their daughter looked at her mother.
“Do you see what I live with?”
Emiko sighed.
“Unfortunately, yes.”
Malcolm pointed at both of them.
“I'm standing right here.”
“We know, darling.”
“It's one of the problems,” his daughter added.
He shook his head.
“This is abuse.”
“Open the box,” Emiko said.
The room fell quiet.

The daughter slid the scissors beneath the last strip of tape and pulled.
The cardboard separated.
Inside lay a layer of heavy brown packing paper.
Beneath that was a narrow wooden case.
Dark wood. Smooth. Unmarked except for a small metal fitting at either end.
Their daughter reached toward it.
Her father caught her wrist.
Not hard.
Just quickly.
She looked up.
“Dad.”
He released her immediately.
“Sorry.”
Her mother watched him.
She knew the difference between his temper and his fear.
This was fear.
And that frightened her more than the box.
“It's all right,” she told their daughter. “Go ahead.”
The girl lifted the wooden case.
It was heavier than she'd expected.
“Holy crap.”
“Language,” her father said automatically.
She looked at him.
“Seriously?”
“Fine. Holy shit. Better?”
“Much.”
Emiko shook her head.
“I married into a traveling circus.”
“You love the circus,” her husband said.
“Some days.”
Their daughter placed the case on the table.
There was no lock.
Only two small brass catches.
She reached for the first.
“Wait,” her mother said.

Both father and daughter turned.
She leaned forward.
Something had caught her eye.
At the corner of the wooden case, almost invisible against the dark grain, was a carved symbol.
Three curved lines surrounding a small circle.
She touched it with one fingertip.
Malcolm frowned.
“What is it?”
She didn't answer.
“Mom?”
Luna moved closer.
The woman stared at the carving.
She had seen it before.
Not on this case.
Not on the sword.
Not anywhere in their home.
She had seen it in a small, handwritten book that had belonged to her grandmother.
A book she had been forbidden to show anyone outside the family.
For years she had regarded those stories as family mythology.
Strange accounts of a foreign warrior, a woman who had loved him, and a promise that could not be broken.
Stories passed from grandmother to granddaughter until nobody knew which details were true.
Her own mother had called them foolishness.
Her grandmother had never laughed.
And now the symbol was sitting on her dining room table.
“Where is that book?” she asked quietly.
Her husband looked confused.
“What book?”
“The one my grandmother gave me.”
“You have about eighty books your grandmother gave you.”
“No.”
She shook her head.
“The small one. Wrapped in blue cloth.”
His expression changed.

He remembered it.
He remembered finding her crying over it once, years earlier, before their daughter was born.
And he remembered that she'd refused to explain why.
“I thought you kept it upstairs.”
“I did.”
Luna looked between them.
“Okay, can someone explain why we're suddenly talking about Grandma's books while there's a potentially cursed samurai sword on the table?”
Her father raised a finger.
“Thank you. Finally, somebody said cursed.”
“I said potentially.”
“That's more than your mother will admit.”
His wife stood.
“Don't open it until I get back.”
Luna groaned.
“Mom!”
“Please.”
Something in her mother's voice settled the argument.
She went upstairs.
The daughter turned toward her father.
“What's going on?”
He pulled out a chair and sat.
For the first time since the courier arrived, he seemed genuinely tired.
“Baby, I wish I knew.”
“You've had this thing for years.”
“Not continuously.”
“Dad.”
He rubbed his face.
“All right.”
She sat across from him.
He looked at the wooden case.
“The first time it came to me, I thought it was some kind of inheritance. Family heirloom. Something somebody had kept tucked away and finally decided to send along.”

“From who?”
“That's the problem. I never found out.”
“No return address?”
“No name I recognized. Nothing that led anywhere.”
“And you kept it?”
“For a while.”
“Then?”
He looked at her.
“Then I sold it.”
Her mouth fell open.
“You sold a samurai sword?”
“An antique dealer offered me more money than my first car cost.”
“You sold a mysterious Japanese sword without telling Mom?”
“I told your mother.”
“When?”
“Eventually.”
She stared at him.
He shifted uncomfortably.
“Look, that part isn't important.”
“Oh, it's incredibly important.”
He raised a hand.
“Two weeks later, it was sitting in my office.”
She stopped smiling.
“What?”
“Same sword. Same case. Different box.”
“The dealer sent it back?”
“No.”
“How do you know?”
“Because I called him. He said he still had it.”
Their daughter went quiet.
He continued.
“I asked him to describe the sword. Everything matched. Every scratch. Every mark. He even sent me photographs.”
“So there were two?”
“That's what I thought.”
“And?”
“I drove over to see him.”

He paused.
“His sword was gone.”
The girl stared.
“Gone?”
“Vanished from a locked display cabinet. Security footage showed nothing. Just an empty case where the sword had been.”
“That is seriously creepy.”
“Welcome to my last several years.”
She leaned back.
“Why haven't you told me all this?”
Her father looked at her.
There were several answers.
Because she was too young.
Because he didn't understand it himself.
Because some things were easier to endure when nobody else had to carry them.
And because, ever since the day she was born, his first instinct had been to put himself between his daughter and anything that might hurt her.
Even things he couldn't explain.
“Because I'm your father,” he said.
She waited.
“And?”
“And sometimes fathers make stupid decisions.”
She considered that.
“Frequently, in your case.”
He smiled despite himself.
“Yeah. Frequently.”
Then she looked down at the package.
“But this time it came to me.”
His smile faded.
“Yeah.”
“Why?”
He looked toward the staircase.
“I was hoping Emiko could tell us.”

Japan, 1581

Yasuke had expected the sword to change the way others regarded him.
He had not expected it to change the way he regarded himself.
The weapon rested at his side as he crossed the courtyard. Its presence was unfamiliar, not in weight but in meaning.
He had carried weapons before.
He understood violence.
He understood how quickly a man's intentions could be reduced to the movement of his hands.
But this blade was different.
Nobunaga had given it to him before witnesses.
A gift, certainly.
An honor.
And perhaps a test.
He stopped beneath the shade of a tree and drew the sword partway from its scabbard.
Steel caught the afternoon light.
The workmanship was extraordinary.
Yet something troubled him.
He examined the hilt again.
A narrow silver fitting lay beneath the wrapping, almost entirely concealed.
He shifted the leather slightly.
Three curved lines.
A small circle.
He frowned.
He did not recognize the symbol.
“Beautiful, isn't it?”
The voice came from behind him.
Yasuke turned.
A young Japanese woman stood a short distance away, carrying a shallow wooden tray.
She was perhaps a few years younger than he was, although he was finding that age could be difficult to judge in this country.
Her clothing was simple but carefully arranged.
Her expression was not.

She looked at him with open curiosity.
Most people stared at him.
Some with wonder.
Some with suspicion.
Children occasionally with delight.
But this woman seemed more interested in the sword.
“It is,” he answered.
“May I see?”
He hesitated.
She noticed.
“You think I will steal it?”
“No.”
“Then you think I will break it?”
He smiled.
“I think you ask many questions.”
“And you answer very few.”
That surprised a laugh out of him.
She stepped closer.
Her gaze settled on the silver marking.
The change in her expression was immediate.
Yasuke noticed.
“You know this symbol?”
She said nothing.
He turned the hilt slightly toward her.
“Have you seen it before?”
She looked over her shoulder.
The courtyard was empty.
When she spoke again, her voice was barely audible.
“Where did you get this?”
“Lord Nobunaga gave it to me.”
She stepped back.
“Then you should put it away.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Why?”
“Because there are things men carry without understanding what they carry.”
He looked at the weapon.

“And you understand?”
She met his eyes.
“No.”
A pause.
“But my grandmother might.”
Yasuke smiled.
“Your grandmother?”
The young woman gave him a sharp look.
“Do not laugh at grandmothers.”
“I wasn't—”
“Men have been ignoring old women since the beginning of time. It is why they remain surprised by the same mistakes.”
He laughed again.
She did not.
And that made him stop.
Slowly, he returned the blade to its scabbard.
“What is your name?” he asked.
For the first time, she smiled.
“Perhaps I will tell you when you learn to listen.”
She turned and walked away.
Yasuke watched her go.
Then he glanced at the sword.
For the second time that day, he had been given an answer that explained nothing.
He was beginning to suspect this might become a habit.

Present day

Emiko returned twenty minutes later carrying a small bundle wrapped in faded blue cloth.
Her husband was standing by the window.
Luna was examining the shipping label with her phone.
“What are you doing?” the mother asked.
“Looking up the tracking number.”
“And?”
“According to the carrier, the package was shipped yesterday.”
“From where?”

Their daughter looked up.
“That's the weird part.”
Her father turned.
“What?”
“The tracking history starts at the distribution center.”
“That's normal, isn't it?”
“Sometimes. But there's no origin scan. No sender information.”
Her father exhaled.
“Wonderful.”
“And it says the package weighs zero pounds.”
He stared at her.
“Zero?”
“Zero.”
He looked at the wooden case.
“Of course it does.”
Emiko placed the blue bundle on the table.
“Come here, both of you.”
She unfolded the cloth.
Inside was a small book, its cover darkened with age.
The pages were thin and uneven.
Handwritten Japanese characters filled the paper.
Some lines had faded almost beyond recognition.
Their daughter leaned closer.
“Is this the book?”
Emiko nodded.
“My grandmother gave it to me when I was seventeen.”
“What does it say?”
“Some of it is family history. Some of it may be folklore. There are passages written in an older style that I've never been completely sure how to interpret.”
She turned several pages.
Then stopped.
There, drawn in faded black ink, was the symbol from the case.
Three curved lines.
One circle.
Her husband leaned forward.
“Well, shit.”

“Dad.”
“What? You said holy shit fifteen minutes ago.”
“Yeah, but mine was warranted.”
Emiko ignored them.
She was reading.
Not aloud.
Her lips moved slightly as she worked through the characters.
Then she turned the page.
Her daughter noticed the sudden stillness in her hands.
“Mom?”
The woman looked at her.
Then at her husband.
“What?” he asked.
She swallowed.
“There is a passage here about a sword.”
He pulled out a chair.
“Of course there is.”
She didn't smile.
“It says the blade was entrusted to a warrior from across the sea.”
Malcolm sat very still.
“An African warrior?”
She nodded.
“That's how the account describes him.”
“And?”
Her eyes returned to the page.
“The passage is incomplete. But it says the sword was not to remain with the warrior forever.”
Their daughter leaned closer.
“Then who was supposed to get it?”
Her mother hesitated.
“I don't know whether I'm reading this correctly.”
She traced a line of characters.
“Not the first bearer,” she translated slowly. “Nor those who inherit only his blood.”
Her husband frowned.
“What the hell does that mean?”
“I'm not sure.”

She continued reading.
Then her eyes filled with tears.
Luna reached for her hand.
“Mom?”
The woman looked down at the sentence.
She had read it before.
Years ago.
At seventeen, she'd thought it was poetry.
At twenty-five, family superstition.
When her own daughter was born, she'd remembered it again, briefly, before dismissing it.
Now the words seemed less like poetry.
And far less like superstition.
“What does it say?” her husband asked.
She looked at their daughter.
Then she translated.
“The sword shall return until the two paths become one.”
Nobody spoke.
Outside, a car passed.
Somewhere in the kitchen, the refrigerator hummed.
Their daughter looked at the wooden case.
Then at her father.
Then at her mother.
“Well,” she said finally.
“That doesn't sound ominous at all.”
Her father closed his eyes.
“That's my girl.”
And for one brief, ridiculous moment, all three of them laughed.
Then the daughter reached for the first brass catch.
This time, nobody stopped her.
It clicked open.
She reached for the second.
Another click.
She lifted the lid.
Inside, nestled in dark fabric, lay the sword.
Black scabbard.
Dark red binding.

A silver detail near the hilt.
Exactly as her father remembered it.
Except for one thing.
He leaned forward.
“Wait a minute.”
His wife looked at him.
“What?”
He pointed to the hilt.
“That wasn't there before.”
Their daughter bent closer.
A narrow red cord had been tied around the grip.
Attached to it was a small folded piece of paper.
She reached for it.
Her mother caught her breath.
The paper bore a single handwritten character.
Her daughter looked up.
“What does it mean?”
Her mother stared at the writing.
Then she answered.
“Daughter.”



Chapter 3

The Stranger's Name



Azuchi, Japan — 1581

The first thing Yasuke learned about the men who served Oda Nobunaga was that they enjoyed watching him.
The second was that they disliked being watched in return.
He had become accustomed to the attention. His height, his skin, the unfamiliar shape of his face—these were things he could neither conceal nor change. In the streets, children sometimes followed him until their mothers dragged them away. Merchants stared. Soldiers whispered.
Occasionally, someone attempted to touch his skin.
That was becoming tiresome.
But here, among Nobunaga's retainers, the curiosity was different.
Here, men watched to determine whether he belonged.
Yasuke intended to give them an answer.
He stood in the training courtyard with a wooden practice sword in his hands.
Across from him, a Japanese warrior named Saburō adjusted his grip.
Saburō was younger than Yasuke, compact and broad through the shoulders. He possessed the confidence of a man who had spent his life being told that his ancestors were important.
He also possessed a remarkably unpleasant smile.
“You understand the rules?” Saburō asked.
Yasuke nodded.
“Then perhaps you should repeat them.”
A few watching soldiers chuckled.
Yasuke considered his answer.

“Do not strike the head. Do not strike below the knee. Stop when instructed.”
Saburō tilted his head.
“Very good.”
Yasuke smiled.
“Would you like me to repeat them more slowly?”
The laughter changed direction.
Saburō's smile disappeared.
A senior instructor standing nearby raised his hand.
“Begin.”
Saburō moved first.
He was fast.
The wooden blade came toward Yasuke's shoulder, then changed direction sharply.
Yasuke stepped aside.
The weapon passed close enough to disturb the fabric of his clothing.
Saburō followed with another strike.
Yasuke blocked.
Wood cracked against wood.
The force traveled through his wrists.
He understood immediately that Saburō intended more than a friendly demonstration.
The young warrior attacked again.
And again.
Yasuke retreated two steps, studying him.
He had fought men before. In other lands, under other circumstances, with weapons that required different movements and different instincts.
He understood distance.
He understood timing.
And he understood something that appeared to escape Saburō entirely.
An angry man was generous with information.
Saburō came forward with a powerful overhead strike.
Yasuke shifted his weight, allowed the blade to pass, and struck his opponent's wrist.

Saburō grunted.
His weapon slipped.
Before he could recover, Yasuke's practice sword rested lightly against his chest.
Silence.
The instructor raised one hand.
“Enough.”
Yasuke stepped back.
Saburō stared at him.
Then at the wooden blade.
Then at the men watching.
His face darkened.
“You were fortunate.”
Yasuke lowered his weapon.
“Perhaps.”
Saburō took a step forward.
“Again.”
The instructor shook his head.
“The exchange is finished.”
“I said again.”
Yasuke looked at him.
“No.”
A collective intake of breath moved through the courtyard.
Saburō's eyes narrowed.
“You refuse?”
Yasuke placed the practice sword carefully on its rack.
“You wish to fight because you lost. I wished to fight because I was asked.”
He bowed toward the instructor.
“Those are different reasons.”
Then he walked away.
Behind him, someone laughed.
It was not Saburō.
The laughter followed him into the covered passageway.
“You have made an enemy.”
Yasuke stopped.
The young woman from the courtyard stood beside a wooden pillar.

The same woman who had warned him about the sword.
Today she carried no tray. Her hands were folded inside her sleeves, and her expression suggested that she had been watching the entire contest.
Yasuke bowed slightly.
“Only one?”
She smiled.
“Perhaps three. Two of them are simply too polite to say so.”
“Then I am making progress.”
“You find this amusing?”
“Not particularly.”
“Yet you smile.”
“Would you prefer I weep?”
She studied him for a moment.
Then laughed.
It was a genuine laugh, quick and bright.
Yasuke found that he liked the sound.
“You are very strange,” she said.
“So I have been told.”
“Frequently, I imagine.”
“Usually by people I have just met.”
She nodded toward the courtyard.
“Saburō will not forget what happened.”
“Neither will I.”
“He has relatives among the retainers.”
“Most men here seem to have relatives among the retainers.”
“His are influential.”
Yasuke leaned against a pillar.
“And yours?”
Her expression changed almost imperceptibly.
“My relatives are inconvenient.”
“Ah.”
“Is that all you have to say?”
“I am learning that questions about your family produce very little information.”
“Perhaps you ask the wrong questions.”
“Then tell me the right ones.”

For a moment, she seemed genuinely tempted.
Instead, she glanced toward the passageway.
“You should be careful.”
“Of Saburō?”
“Of believing that the man holding a sword is always the dangerous one.”
She turned to leave.
Yasuke straightened.
“Wait.”
She stopped.
“You never told me your name.”
“No.”
“You said perhaps you would tell me when I learned to listen.”
“And have you?”
“I am listening now.”
She regarded him with an expression that he could not quite interpret.
Then she said, “Aki.”
He repeated it.
“Aki.”
She nodded.
“Now you know one thing about me.”
“One true thing?”
Her smile returned.
“That depends upon how well you listen.”
And she was gone.
Yasuke watched the empty passageway.
He had met warriors less difficult to understand.
The summons came before sunset.
A servant approached Yasuke's quarters and informed him that Lord Nobunaga wished to see him.
Yasuke immediately wondered whether Saburō had complained.
It would not surprise him.
He followed the servant through the castle.
Azuchi was unlike any stronghold he had known. Its towering construction, elaborate decoration, and extraordinary craftsmanship declared not merely power but ambition. Nobunaga

seemed determined to build a world that would remember his name.
Yasuke admired the ambition.
He was less certain about the men gathered beneath it.
Nobunaga received him in a chamber overlooking the grounds.
Several attendants stood at a respectful distance.
The lord examined Yasuke without speaking.
Then he asked, “Did you enjoy your exercise?”
Yasuke bowed.
“It was instructive.”
“I am told Saburō found it less so.”
Yasuke remained silent.
Nobunaga smiled.
“He says you fought without proper technique.”
“Then I am fortunate he was unable to take advantage of it.”
One of the attendants made a small choking sound.
Nobunaga laughed.
It was a short, sharp laugh that seemed to surprise everyone except the man producing it.
“Come closer.”
Yasuke obeyed.
Nobunaga gestured toward a low table.
Upon it lay several pieces of correspondence.
“Tell me what you see.”
Yasuke looked at them.
“Letters.”
“Very good. You are observant.”
Yasuke suspected he was being tested again.
Nobunaga selected one document and held it up.
“This concerns a village whose headman has complained about a levy imposed by men claiming to act under my authority.”
Yasuke listened.
“The headman says the levy is unlawful. The men collecting it say the village is withholding what it owes. Both claim loyalty to me.”
Nobunaga placed the paper down.
“Who is lying?”
Yasuke considered.

“I have not met either party.”
“That was not my question.”
“It is my answer.”
Nobunaga watched him.
“Then what would you do?”
“Ask who benefits.”
“Both sides claim to be defending what is theirs.”
“Then I would ask who loses if both are telling the truth.”
Nobunaga leaned back.
“Explain.”
“If the village owes something and the collectors demand something more, both may believe themselves justified. The villagers lose their food. Your men gain resentment. And you lose the trust of people who believe they serve you.”
Silence settled over the chamber.
Nobunaga regarded him for a long moment.
“You have been listening.”
Yasuke bowed his head.
“I try.”
“Then listen carefully.”
Nobunaga's expression hardened.
“A man may defeat ten enemies in battle and still be destroyed by the one he allows to stand behind him.”
He touched the correspondence.
“Power is not merely the ability to command. It is the burden of discovering which commands are truly your own.”
Yasuke remembered Aki's warning.
The man holding a sword is not always the dangerous one.
Nobunaga continued.
“Tomorrow, a small party will travel to the village. You will accompany them.”
Yasuke looked up.
“Am I to investigate?”
“You are to observe.”
“And report?”
“Yes.”
“To whom?”

Nobunaga smiled.
“To me.”
A simple answer.
Yasuke suspected the assignment would be anything but simple.
“Who commands the party?” he asked.
Nobunaga lifted another letter.
“Saburō.”
Yasuke closed his eyes for the briefest moment.
The lord noticed.
“You disapprove?”
“No, my lord.”
“You are disappointed?”
“No, my lord.”
“Then what troubles you?”
Yasuke opened his eyes.
“I had hoped to survive my first week.”
Nobunaga laughed so loudly that an attendant outside the chamber hurried to the doorway.
“Go,” he said, still smiling. “And do try.”
Later that evening, Yasuke sat alone in his quarters.
The sword lay before him.
He had not carried it to the training ground.
Something about Nobunaga's warning during the presentation had made him reluctant to treat the weapon casually.
He drew it slowly.
The blade emerged with a soft whisper.
For a moment, he studied his reflection in the polished steel.
There was something unsettling about seeing his own face distorted along its length.
He remembered the place where he had been born.
Not clearly.
Memory had become an unreliable country, its borders changing with each passing year.
He remembered heat. Voices. The sound of someone singing in a language he had not spoken aloud in a very long time.
Other things were harder.
Names.

Faces.
The exact moment when the world he understood had begun to disappear.
He had crossed oceans and lived among people whose customs were unfamiliar, whose ambitions were not his own, and whose judgments could alter his life without his consent.
Yet here he was.
A warrior in the service of a powerful Japanese lord.
Holding a sword of extraordinary craftsmanship.
And tomorrow he would ride into a dispute he did not understand beside a man who despised him.
He almost laughed.
Life, he thought, had a remarkable sense of humor.
A soft sound came from outside.
Yasuke returned the sword to its scabbard.
“Who is there?”
No answer.
He rose.
Crossed the room.
Opened the sliding door.
The passageway was empty.
On the floor sat a small folded piece of paper.
He picked it up.
There was no seal.
Only a short message written in Japanese.
He read the characters slowly, sounding them out in his mind.
Do not trust the man who carries the orders.
Yasuke frowned.
He read the message again.
Then turned it over.
On the reverse was a simple drawing.
Three curved lines surrounding a circle.
The same symbol concealed beneath the wrapping of his sword.
He looked down the dark passageway.
“Aki?”
Nothing.
He waited.

Somewhere in the castle, a wooden door slid shut.
Yasuke returned to his room.
He placed the paper beside the sword.
Then he sat for a long time, studying both.
The message might be a warning.
It might be a trap.
Or it might be an attempt by someone who knew more than they were willing to say.
He considered taking it to Nobunaga.
That would be the proper thing.
The loyal thing.
Perhaps even the sensible thing.
Instead, he folded the paper and tucked it inside his clothing.
Tomorrow, he would ride with Saburō.
He would see the village.
He would learn who was taking food from its people, and why.
And if Aki believed he was walking into danger, he intended to discover how she knew.
For the first time since receiving the sword, Yasuke felt something stronger than curiosity about its origins.
He felt the familiar pull of a choice that could not be undone.
Someone was using Nobunaga's name to command obedience.
Someone else was trying to warn him.
And between them stood people whose lives might depend upon which man he believed.
He extinguished the lamp.
In the darkness, the sword remained where he had placed it.
For once, Yasuke paid it no attention.
He had more immediate concerns.
The village lay less than a day's journey away.
By the following afternoon, three people would be dead.
And Yasuke would discover that the most dangerous man in Saburō's company was not Saburō.



Chapter 4

The Price of Obedience



Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581

The first man died before Yasuke knew his name.
He was an old farmer, thin as a winter branch, with hands so deeply scarred by work that the skin resembled cracked earth.
He died on his knees.
And the man who killed him was wearing Nobunaga's crest.

The journey from Azuchi had begun pleasantly enough.
Morning mist clung to the fields, turning distant trees into pale silhouettes. The road followed a narrow watercourse before climbing through wooded hills. Birds called from branches overhead, and somewhere beyond the trees, farmers were already working their land.
Yasuke rode near the back of the company.
There were six armed men, including Saburō, along with two servants responsible for provisions and the horses. Another rider, a narrow-faced official named Matsuda, had joined them outside the castle gates.
Matsuda had introduced himself as a representative of the provincial administration.
He wore good clothing, carried no visible sword, and spoke with the assurance of someone accustomed to giving instructions that other men obeyed.
Yasuke disliked him almost immediately.
This was not because Matsuda had stared at him.
Everyone stared.
It was because Matsuda had not.

The official had greeted Saburō, acknowledged the others, and passed his eyes over Yasuke as though he were another horse.
There was something deliberate about the omission.
Saburō noticed.
Naturally, he enjoyed it.
“You are quiet this morning,” he remarked as they entered a stretch of forest.
Yasuke glanced toward him.
“I was enjoying the birds.”
“Birds?”
“They seem to have less to complain about than men.”
One of the soldiers laughed.
Saburō did not.
“You should pay closer attention to your companions.”
“I have been.”
“And?”
Yasuke looked at Matsuda, riding several lengths ahead.
“I find them interesting.”
Saburō followed his gaze.
“Matsuda is a capable administrator.”
“So I have heard.”
“He has served powerful men.”
“That also I have heard.”
“You doubt it?”
“No.”
“Then what?”
Yasuke considered.
“I wonder whether powerful men know everyone who claims to serve them.”
Saburō pulled his horse slightly closer.
“You would be wise not to question authority you do not understand.”
Yasuke met his eyes.
“I am trying to understand it.”
“Then begin by remembering your place.”
There it was.
Yasuke had been waiting for it.

He smiled.
“Which place?”
Saburō frowned.
“What?”
“I have been given several. A place beside my lord. A place among his retainers. A place in this company. And now you tell me there is another I must remember.”
Saburō's face hardened.
“You enjoy making yourself difficult.”
“No,” Yasuke answered. “I find that other men often do the work for me.”
The soldier behind them laughed again.
This time, Saburō turned on him.
“Have you something to say?”
“No, sir.”
“Then keep your mouth shut.”
The company continued in silence.
Yasuke returned his attention to the trees.
He was beginning to understand that Saburō's greatest fear was not defeat.
It was embarrassment.
And a man who feared embarrassment could be persuaded to do terrible things to avoid it.

They reached the village shortly after midday.
It was smaller than Yasuke expected.
Perhaps thirty houses stood among rice fields and vegetable plots, their thatched roofs clustered near a shallow stream. Smoke rose from cooking fires. Chickens wandered freely between buildings. A dog barked at the approaching horses and then apparently decided that discretion was preferable to courage.
The village itself was beautiful.
Its people were frightened.
Yasuke noticed the silence first.
Children disappeared behind doorways. Women stopped working. An elderly man carrying a bundle of reeds lowered his eyes and stepped off the road.

Matsuda seemed pleased.
“Efficient,” he remarked.
Yasuke looked at him.
“What is?”
“They know why we are here.”
The official dismounted.
Saburō ordered the others to follow.
In the village square, a wooden platform stood beneath a large tree.
Several baskets of rice had been stacked nearby.
The baskets were nearly empty.
Matsuda surveyed them with visible irritation.
“Pathetic.”
A man emerged from one of the larger houses.
He was perhaps fifty, with gray beginning to spread through his hair. He bowed so deeply that his forehead nearly touched the ground.
“Honored officials.”
Matsuda stepped forward.
“Headman Genbei.”
The man remained bowed.
“My lord.”
“Where is the remainder?”
Genbei raised his head.
“We have prepared everything we can.”
Matsuda looked at the baskets.
“This is everything?”
“The rains were poor earlier in the season. Then insects damaged the young plants. We have already delivered the required levy.”
“You have delivered part of what is owed.”
Genbei shook his head.
“No, honored sir. We have records.”
Matsuda smiled.
It was not a pleasant smile.
“Records.”
“Yes, sir.”
“Then you are accusing the administration of dishonesty.”
The headman's expression changed.

“No. Never. I only mean—”
“You dispute the amount demanded.”
Genbei swallowed.
“We cannot surrender what we do not possess.”
Matsuda stepped closer.
“That is an unfortunate position to take.”
Yasuke watched the exchange carefully.
The headman had not behaved like a man concealing wealth. His clothing was worn. The houses were modest. The fields showed signs of strain.
And the rice baskets did not appear to contain enough grain to feed the villagers through another poor harvest, much less satisfy an additional levy.
Matsuda turned to Saburō.
“Search the houses.”
Saburō hesitated.
“Our instructions were to investigate the complaint.”
“We are investigating.”
“By searching their homes?”
“By establishing whether the headman's claims are true.”
Saburō glanced at Yasuke.
The look lasted less than a second.
But Yasuke understood it.
The younger warrior knew that Nobunaga had ordered an investigation.
He also knew that Matsuda had presented himself as a lawful official.
And Saburō did not wish to challenge a man whose authority might exceed his own.
So he made the choice that required the least courage.
He nodded to the soldiers.
“Search.”
The men moved toward the houses.
Genbei stepped forward.
“Please. The women and children—”
Matsuda struck him across the face.
The sound was sharp enough to turn every head in the square.

Genbei fell to one knee.
Yasuke's hand moved toward his sword.
He stopped it.
Not because he was unafraid.
Because he was remembering Nobunaga's instruction.
Observe.
Matsuda looked down at the headman.
“You will remain silent.”
Genbei lowered his eyes.
“Yes, sir.”
Yasuke felt something cold settle inside him.
He had seen this before.
Different countries.
Different languages.
Different men declaring that cruelty was merely the proper exercise of authority.
The faces changed.
The reasoning rarely did.

The first scream came from a house near the stream.
Yasuke turned.
A woman stumbled into the road, clutching a small boy.
Behind her, one of the soldiers emerged carrying a sack of rice.
“No!” she cried. “That is for winter!”
The soldier ignored her.
The boy broke free and ran after him.
“Give it back!”
The soldier turned sharply.
“Get away!”
The boy stopped.
He could not have been more than eight.
His mother rushed forward and dragged him behind her.
Across the square, Matsuda watched with satisfaction.
“Bring everything.”
Genbei lifted his head.
“Honored sir, they will starve.”
Matsuda looked at him.

“Then perhaps next season they will work harder.”
Yasuke took a step forward.
Saburō caught his arm.
“Do not interfere.”
Yasuke looked down at the hand.
Saburō released him.
“This is not your concern.”
“A hungry child is everyone's concern.”
“This is administration.”
“Is that what you call it?”
Saburō's jaw tightened.
“Mind your orders.”
Yasuke looked toward the houses.
A second soldier was pulling bundles of dried vegetables from beneath a roof.
Others carried baskets and sacks toward the horses.
Then an old man appeared at the doorway of the nearest house.
He was barefoot.
His back was bent.
In his hands he carried a small wooden bowl.
He stepped into the path of a soldier dragging a sack.
“Please,” the old man said.
The soldier attempted to move past him.
The old man stepped sideways.
“That rice is for my grandchildren.”
“Move.”
“Please.”
The soldier shoved him.
The old man stumbled but remained standing.
He reached for the sack.
The soldier drew his sword.
Everything happened quickly.
Too quickly for anyone to decide afterward exactly when the encounter had become a killing.
The old man grabbed the soldier's sleeve.
The soldier pulled away.
Steel flashed.

The blade entered beneath the old man's ribs.
He made a small sound.
Almost surprise.
Then he fell.
His wooden bowl struck the ground and broke.
For a heartbeat, nobody moved.
The soldier stared at his weapon.
Blood darkened the earth.
The old man's grandchildren began screaming inside the house.
Yasuke crossed the distance between them before Saburō could speak.
He seized the soldier by the collar and drove him backward against the wall.
The man's sword fell.
Yasuke's face was inches from his.
“Why?”
The soldier could barely breathe.
“He attacked me!”
“With a bowl?”
“He grabbed me!”
Yasuke tightened his grip.
“Look at him.”
The soldier squeezed his eyes shut.
“Look at him!”
“Yasuke!”
Saburō's voice cracked across the square.
“Release him!”
Yasuke did not move.
Then he felt something touch his back.
A small hand.
He turned.
The boy from the earlier house stood beside him.
The child looked up, tears running down his face.
“Please,” he whispered.
Yasuke released the soldier.
The man collapsed against the wall.
Yasuke knelt beside the old farmer.

There was nothing to be done.
The man's breathing had already stopped.
The boy stared at the body.
“Grandfather?”
Yasuke closed his eyes.
He had travelled farther than anyone in this village could imagine.
He had seen grand cities and crossed oceans.
And yet the one thing he could not do was explain to a child why a man with a sword had killed his grandfather for a sack of rice.

Matsuda approached without hurry.
“An unfortunate incident.”
Yasuke stood.
The official looked at the dead man.
“He should have obeyed.”
Yasuke said nothing.
Matsuda turned to Saburō.
“Remove the body. Continue the collection.”
Saburō hesitated.
“Perhaps we should suspend—”
“Continue.”
The younger warrior's expression tightened.
Yasuke looked at him.
This was the moment.
He could see it.
Saburō could order his men to stop.
He could demand clarification.
He could insist that they return to Azuchi and report what had happened.
Instead, he turned away.
“Continue the search.”
Yasuke stared at him.
For a moment, he felt an anger so clean and powerful that it seemed to erase every other thought.
He wanted to strike Saburō.
He wanted to strike Matsuda.

He wanted to take every sword from every man in the square and throw them into the stream.
Instead, he walked toward the dead farmer's house.
The boy remained beside the body.
Yasuke knelt.
He did not know the words that would comfort him.
So he said nothing.
He placed a hand gently on the child's shoulder.
And stayed.

The second death occurred shortly before sunset.
By then, the soldiers had gathered the village's remaining rice.
The baskets stood in a neat row near the horses.
Matsuda had begun preparing a written report.
Headman Genbei approached him carrying a folded document.
“Honored sir.”
Matsuda barely glanced up.
“What now?”
“Our records.”
“I have already heard about your records.”
“Please. These bear the seal of the previous collection.”
Matsuda's brush stopped moving.
Yasuke noticed.
Genbei unfolded the paper.
“The levy was paid forty days ago. Here is the amount. Here is the date. And here is the signature of the official who received it.”
Matsuda held out his hand.
“Give me that.”
Genbei hesitated.
“Will you examine it?”
“Give it to me.”
The headman surrendered the document.
Matsuda studied the page.
Then he folded it carefully.
“You have made a serious mistake.”
Genbei looked frightened.
“Sir?”

“You have produced a fraudulent record.”
“No!”
“You accuse my office of collecting the levy twice.”
“I accuse no one! The document—”
Matsuda struck him again.
Genbei fell backward.
Yasuke rose from where he had been sitting beside the farmer's family.
Matsuda turned toward Saburō.
“Arrest him.”
Saburō did not move.
“On what charge?”
“Forgery. Sedition. Interference with lawful collection.”
Genbei scrambled to his knees.
“Please!”
Matsuda's voice sharpened.
“Do your duty.”
Two soldiers seized the headman.
Yasuke stepped forward.
“Stop.”
The square fell silent.
Matsuda turned slowly.
For the first time that day, he looked directly at Yasuke.
“What did you say?”
Yasuke approached.
“I said stop.”
“You have no authority here.”
“I serve Lord Nobunaga.”
“So do we all.”
“Then we should be concerned that his name is being used to steal food from children.”
Matsuda's face reddened.
“Take care.”
Yasuke continued.
“You have been shown proof of payment.”
“Fraudulent proof.”
“Then preserve it and allow your superiors to judge.”

Matsuda stared at him.
“You presume to instruct me?”
“No. I ask why a lawful official would destroy evidence rather than examine it.”
Matsuda's hand moved toward his sleeve.
Yasuke saw it.
Not a weapon.
The folded document.
Matsuda held it above a nearby brazier.
Genbei cried out.
“No!”
The paper caught fire.
Yasuke lunged.
He caught Matsuda's wrist and forced it away from the flames.
The document fell.
Burning fragments scattered across the earth.
Saburō shouted.
“Yasuke!”
The soldiers tightened their grip on Genbei.
Matsuda struggled.
“Unhand me!”
Yasuke released him.
Then bent to retrieve the fragments.
He managed to save one corner.
The rest had already turned to ash.
When he straightened, Matsuda was smiling.
“Now,” the official said softly, “you have assaulted an officer.”
A soldier drew his sword.
Then another.
Yasuke stood between them and the headman.
He had been ordered to observe.
He had observed enough.
“Put away your weapons,” he said.
No one obeyed.
Matsuda stepped back.
“Kill him.”
Saburō's head snapped toward the official.

“What?”
“He threatens lawful authority. Kill him.”
For one terrible moment, Yasuke wondered whether Saburō would obey.
The young warrior looked at the soldiers.
Then at Yasuke.
Then at Matsuda.
“No.”
The word was quiet.
But unmistakable.
Matsuda stared at him.
“Excuse me?”
“Lord Nobunaga ordered us to investigate,” Saburō said. “Not to execute his own retainer.”
Matsuda's expression changed.
And Yasuke understood.
The official had expected obedience.
Not argument.
Not hesitation.
Certainly not refusal.
Matsuda looked toward the soldier standing behind Genbei.
Then made a small movement with two fingers.
Yasuke saw it.
A signal.
The soldier drew a knife.
And drove it into the headman's back.
Genbei gasped.
His eyes widened.
The soldier released him.
The headman fell forward onto the ground.
Yasuke moved.
This time, he did not hesitate.
He struck the soldier with the hilt of his sword, sending him sprawling.
Then he knelt beside Genbei.
Blood spread across the man's clothing.
The headman looked up at him.

His lips moved.
Yasuke leaned closer.
“Tell them,” Genbei whispered.
Yasuke held his hand.
“I will.”
“The children…”
“I know.”
Genbei gripped his wrist.
“Please.”
Then his hand loosened.
His eyes went still.
The second man was dead.
And Yasuke knew that if he remained on his knees, there would soon be a third.

Matsuda was backing toward his horse.
“Seize him!” he shouted.
Nobody moved.
Saburō stood motionless, his face pale.
The soldier who had stabbed Genbei struggled to rise.
Yasuke straightened.
He looked at Matsuda.
“Who gave the order?”
Matsuda swallowed.
“I acted under lawful authority.”
“Whose?”
“You dare question—”
“Whose authority?”
The official glanced toward the road.
Yasuke stepped closer.
Matsuda pulled a short blade from his clothing.
“You will not touch me!”
Yasuke stopped.
The official's hand shook.
Then he grabbed a girl who had been standing near the baskets.
She was perhaps twelve years old.

He dragged her in front of him and pressed the blade against her throat.
The child's scream cut through the square.
“Stay back!”
Yasuke froze.
Matsuda's face glistened with sweat.
“Order them away!”
Saburō stepped forward.
“Release her.”
“Tell your men to stand down!”
The girl struggled.
Matsuda tightened his grip.
A narrow line of blood appeared beneath the blade.
Yasuke felt the world contract.
The village disappeared.
The watching soldiers disappeared.
There was only the child.
The weapon.
And the distance between them.
He lowered his sword.
“Let her go.”
Matsuda breathed hard.
“Move aside.”
“I will.”
“Your sword.”
Yasuke looked down.
Slowly, he placed the weapon on the ground.
Then stepped away.
Matsuda began backing toward his horse.
The girl stumbled with him.
“That's it,” the official muttered. “Stay where you are.”
Yasuke watched his eyes.
Not his hands.
Men often revealed their intentions with their eyes before their bodies followed.
Matsuda glanced toward the horse.
Then toward the road.

Then toward Saburō.
He had made a decision.
Yasuke saw it before the blade moved.
The official was not going to release the girl.
He was going to kill her.
A bowstring sounded.
The arrow struck Matsuda high in the chest.
His body jerked.
The knife fell.
The girl tore herself free and ran.
Matsuda stumbled backward, staring at the shaft protruding from his clothing.
He opened his mouth.
Nothing came out.
Then he collapsed beside the baskets of rice.
Dead.
For several seconds, nobody moved.
Yasuke turned toward the road.
A mounted man stood beneath the trees, lowering a bow.
He wore the traveling clothes of a messenger.
His face was partially concealed by a broad hat.
Saburō stared at him.
“Who are you?”
The rider did not answer.
Instead, he looked directly at Yasuke.
Then at Matsuda's body.
And finally at the sword lying on the ground.
Something in the rider's expression changed.
Not surprise.
Recognition.
He turned his horse.
“Wait!” Yasuke shouted.
The rider spurred the animal forward.
Within moments, he had disappeared into the trees.
Saburō ordered two men after him.
But the pursuit lasted only minutes.
The rider knew the country.

And apparently knew exactly where he was going.

Night fell slowly over the village.
Three bodies lay beneath white cloths.
The old farmer.
Headman Genbei.
Matsuda.
The surviving soldiers stood in uneasy silence.
Saburō sat beneath the large tree, staring at his hands.
Yasuke approached him.
For a while, neither spoke.
Then Saburō said, “I did not know.”
Yasuke remained standing.
“About the levy?”
Saburō nodded.
“Or the killings?”
The younger warrior looked up sharply.
“I would never have ordered those men killed.”
“But you ordered the search.”
Saburō's jaw tightened.
“I followed the official's instructions.”
“After being told that the village had already paid.”
“We had no proof.”
“The headman offered proof.”
“Matsuda destroyed it.”
“And you allowed him.”
Saburō looked away.
Yasuke sat beside him.
The silence lasted a long time.
Finally, Saburō spoke.
“You think me a coward.”
Yasuke considered the question.
“I think you were afraid.”
Saburō looked at him.
“Of Matsuda?”
“Of making the wrong decision in front of men whose opinions matter to you.”

Saburō said nothing.
Yasuke leaned forward.
“I have been afraid many times.”
The younger warrior gave a bitter laugh.
“You?”
“Frequently.”
“You do not behave like a frightened man.”
“Neither did you. Until today.”
Saburō absorbed that.
Then he said, “I could have stopped him.”
“Yes.”
“I should have.”
“Yes.”
For several moments, the younger warrior looked ready to strike him.
Instead, he lowered his head.
“What happens now?”
Yasuke looked toward the houses.
A family was preparing the old farmer's body.
The headman's wife sat outside her home, surrounded by neighbors.
The girl Matsuda had threatened was asleep in her mother's arms.
“We tell Nobunaga what happened.”
“All of it?”
“All of it.”
Saburō looked at him.
“Even my part?”
“Especially your part.”
The younger warrior closed his eyes.
Then nodded.
“I will tell him myself.”
Yasuke studied him.
It would have been easy to despise Saburō.
Perhaps satisfying.
But the man sitting beside him seemed smaller than the one who had mocked him in the training courtyard.
Not less dangerous.

Only more human.
Yasuke stood.
“Then perhaps something good may yet come from this day.”
Saburō looked toward the covered bodies.
“Three men are dead.”
“I know.”
“How can anything good come from that?”
Yasuke had no answer.
And he would not insult the dead by inventing one.

The village gave them shelter for the night.
Yasuke refused the food offered by the headman's widow.
Instead, he helped carry rice back into the houses.
He worked until his arms ached.
One of the soldiers joined him.
Then another.
By midnight, most of the seized provisions had been returned.
The soldier who had killed Genbei sat bound beneath guard.
The man who had killed the old farmer had also been disarmed and detained.
Saburō had given the orders himself.
It was a beginning.
A small one.
Too late for three men.
But a beginning.
Yasuke returned to the room where he had been offered a place to sleep.
His sword lay beside a folded blanket.
He had barely removed his outer clothing when he heard footsteps.
A soft knock followed.
“Enter.”
The door slid open.
A young woman stood outside.
For a moment, Yasuke simply stared.
Then he laughed.
Not because anything was funny.
Because the alternative was to believe he had finally lost his mind.

“Aki.”
She bowed.
“Good evening.”
“You are a long way from Azuchi.”
“So are you.”
He looked past her into the dark passageway.
“How did you find me?”
“I followed the road.”
“Very helpful.”
“You are welcome.”
She stepped inside without waiting to be invited.
Her expression changed when she saw the blood on his clothing.
“Are you wounded?”
“No.”
She studied him.
“You look tired.”
“Three men died today.”
Her face grew serious.
“I heard.”
Yasuke watched her.
“Already?”
She did not answer.
He closed the door.
“Who are you?”
“Aki.”
“That is not what I mean.”
“I know.”
He pointed toward the sword.
“You recognized the symbol.”
“Yes.”
“You warned me not to trust the man carrying the orders.”
“Yes.”
“Someone killed that man today.”
She remained silent.
“A rider. With a bow. He appeared at precisely the moment a child was about to die.”
Aki lowered her eyes.

Yasuke stepped closer.
“Did you send him?”
“No.”
“Do you know him?”
A pause.
“Yes.”
Yasuke waited.
She glanced at the door.
Then at his sword.
“May I sit?”
He gestured toward the mat.
She knelt.
Yasuke sat opposite her.
For a moment, the only sound was the distant movement of water.
Then Aki spoke.
“Matsuda was not collecting taxes for Nobunaga.”
“I suspected that.”
“He was collecting them for someone who wanted the villagers to believe Nobunaga had ordered it.”
“Why?”
“Because starving people become angry. Angry people rebel. And rebellion gives ambitious men an excuse to send soldiers.”
Yasuke considered.
“Against Nobunaga?”
“Perhaps.”
“Who?”
“I don't know yet.”
“You know a great deal for someone who knows so little.”
She accepted the criticism without protest.
Then reached inside her sleeve.
She withdrew a small wooden object wrapped in cloth.
Yasuke recognized the shape before she uncovered it.
A narrow fitting.
Darkened silver.
Three curved lines surrounding a circle.
He looked toward his sword.
Then back at Aki.

“Where did you get that?”
“It belonged to my grandmother.”
He waited.
“She told me it was part of something older. Something that had been divided long before I was born.”
“Divided?”
Aki nodded.
“Two pieces. Perhaps more.”
“Of what?”
“I don't know.”
Yasuke exhaled.
“You must understand how frustrating these conversations are becoming.”
Despite herself, she smiled.
“I am beginning to.”
He leaned forward.
“Then tell me something you do know.”
Aki considered him carefully.
Then her expression changed.
The amusement disappeared.
“When I first saw you,” she said, “I thought the stories my grandmother told me were nonsense.”
Yasuke frowned.
“What stories?”
“About a warrior who would come from across the sea.”
He stared at her.
“Your grandmother predicted my arrival?”
“No.”
The answer came quickly.
Too quickly, perhaps.
“She told me a story,” Aki continued. “A story about an object that must never be surrendered to a man who wishes to rule through fear.”
Yasuke glanced at the sword.
“And you believe this is that object?”
“I don't know.”
“Then why approach me?”

“Because I saw the mark.”
She unfolded the silver fitting completely.
“And because the man who gave you that sword may not understand what he has placed in your hands.”
Yasuke looked at her.
“You speak of Lord Nobunaga.”
“I speak of the sword.”
“That is a dangerous distinction.”
“Yes.”
He studied her for a long moment.
“Are you asking me to betray my lord?”
Aki's eyes widened.
“No.”
“Then what?”
She hesitated.
For the first time since he had met her, she seemed uncertain how to proceed.
“I am asking you not to assume that every gift is given for the reason you are told.”
Yasuke sat back.
Outside, a dog barked.
Aki carefully rewrapped the silver fitting.
Then she said something that changed the room.
“Matsuda knew you would be here.”
Yasuke became very still.
“What?”
“He knew your name. He knew about the sword. And he knew which road you would take.”
“How?”
“I don't know.”
He looked toward the door.
Then toward the sword.
“You said the rider knew Matsuda.”
“Yes.”
“And you know the rider.”
“Yes.”
“Who is he?”

Aki lowered her voice.
“My brother.”
Yasuke stared at her.
For a moment, he almost laughed again.
Instead, he reached for his sword.
Aki's expression changed.
“What are you doing?”
“Preparing.”
“For what?”
Yasuke stood.
“If your brother knew Matsuda would be here, then someone else knows too.”
He fastened the sword at his side.
“And if Matsuda was part of something larger, three deaths will not end it.”
Aki rose.
“You must not leave the village tonight.”
“Why?”
“Because the roads are being watched.”
“By whom?”
She looked at him.
And for the first time, he saw genuine fear in her eyes.
“Men who have been waiting for that sword longer than you have been alive.”
Yasuke said nothing.
Aki stepped closer.
“They do not know what it is. Not truly. But they know the mark, and they know it has appeared in Nobunaga's household.”
Yasuke touched the hilt.
“You keep speaking as though the sword matters more than the men who died.”
Aki looked stricken.
“That isn't what I mean.”
“Then listen carefully.”
His voice was quiet.
“The sword did not kill those men. Greed did. Fear did. Obedience did.”

He looked toward the village.
“If powerful men are planning to turn these people against one another, then that is what concerns me.”
Aki watched him.
He continued.
“I will not abandon them to chase a mystery I do not understand.”
For several seconds, she said nothing.
Then, unexpectedly, she smiled.
Not with amusement.
With something closer to relief.
“What?” Yasuke asked.
She shook her head.
“Nothing.”
“You are smiling.”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Because I think my grandmother would have liked you.”
Yasuke looked at her.
Then at the sword.
Then back at her.
“Your grandmother sounds like a very troublesome woman.”
Aki laughed softly.
“She was.”
“And you?”
She tilted her head.
“What about me?”
“Are you troublesome?”
Aki's smile widened.
“Much worse.”
For the first time that day, Yasuke felt himself smile without effort.
And then, from somewhere beyond the village, a horse screamed.
Both of them turned.
Another cry followed.
A man's voice.
A sudden shout.
Yasuke moved toward the door.
Aki caught his sleeve.

“Wait.”
He looked back.
She reached into her clothing and produced a small knife.
Not particularly long.
Not especially ornate.
But very sharp.
Yasuke raised an eyebrow.
“You carry that everywhere?”
“Only when visiting men who ask too many questions.”
He almost laughed.
Then another scream split the night.
He slid the door open.
Outside, flames were rising beyond the village square.
Men were shouting.
Horses stamped and pulled against their ropes.
And through the smoke, Yasuke saw figures moving between the houses.
Armed men.
More than a dozen.
One carried a torch.
Another dragged a wounded soldier into the road.
A third shouted something Yasuke could not make out.
Then a voice rose above the confusion.
“Find the foreigner!”
Yasuke drew his sword.
The blade caught the firelight.
Beside him, Aki tightened her grip on the knife.
For one brief moment, they looked at each other.
Neither smiled.
“Your brother,” Yasuke said.
“Yes?”
“Does he have many friends?”
Aki glanced at the approaching men.
“Apparently not enough.”
Yasuke stepped into the courtyard.
Behind him, she whispered one final warning.
“They are not here to arrest you.”

He knew.
Across the square, a man pointed toward him.
“There!”
The attackers began to run.
And for the first time since Nobunaga had placed the sword in his hands, Yasuke drew it against men who had come specifically to take it.



Chapter 5

Fire in the Dark



Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581

The first attacker made a remarkable mistake.
He looked at the sword.
Not at the man holding it.
Yasuke stepped aside as the warrior lunged, caught the man's extended arm, and drove his elbow into his face.
Bone cracked.
The attacker fell backward into the dirt.
Yasuke struck him with the flat of his blade before he could rise.
The man stopped moving.
One.
There were at least twelve more.
And the village was burning.
“Behind you!”
Aki's warning came just as a second attacker swung at Yasuke's exposed shoulder.
Yasuke turned, caught the blow against his blade, and felt the impact travel through his wrists.
This man was stronger.
And considerably more skilled.
Their swords met again.
Steel rang in the darkness.
The attacker pressed forward with a series of swift, controlled strikes. Yasuke gave ground, measuring the man's movement, watching his feet.
The warrior was trying to drive him toward the burning house.
Not kill him.

Position him.
Yasuke understood a moment before the third attacker emerged from the smoke.
He dropped suddenly.
The third man's blade passed over his head.
Yasuke drove his shoulder into the first warrior's stomach and sent him sprawling into his companion.
Both men fell.
He stepped backward.
Aki stood near the doorway, her knife raised.
“Inside!” Yasuke shouted.
“No!”
“Aki!”
“If I go inside, they will burn the house around me!”
He could hardly argue with that.
A burning roof collapsed across the square.
Sparks rose into the night.
Somewhere nearby, a horse screamed.
Yasuke looked toward the stables.
The animals were still tied.
“Get the horses free!”
Aki stared at him.
“They're trying to kill you!”
“And the horses haven't offended anyone!”
She looked momentarily astonished.
Then, despite everything, she laughed.
“Idiot!”
She ran toward the stables.
Yasuke turned to meet the next attacker.

Saburō had been asleep when the shouting began.
He woke to the smell of smoke and the sound of men dying.
By the time he reached the square, two houses were burning and three of his soldiers were fighting desperately near the stream.
One had taken an arrow through the thigh.
Another was bleeding from the scalp.

The third stood over the bound prisoners, trying to prevent the attackers from reaching them.
Saburō drew his sword.
“Form on me!”
The soldiers struggled toward him.
An arrow struck the wooden post beside his head.
He ducked.
Across the square, an attacker shouted.
“Take the foreigner alive!”
Saburō heard it clearly.
So did his men.
One of them looked toward Yasuke.
“Sir?”
Saburō followed his gaze.
The enormous foreign warrior stood near the burning houses, fighting three men at once.
For an instant, Saburō felt an ugly flash of satisfaction.
Let him discover what it meant to be outmatched.
Then he saw a woman dragging a child away from the flames.
And he remembered the old farmer.
The broken bowl.
The headman's dying face.
He remembered his own voice ordering the search.
Saburō looked at his men.
“Get the villagers to the stream.”
“Sir, our orders—”
“Those are my orders!”
The soldier hesitated.
Saburō seized him by the shoulder.
“Now!”
The man ran.
Saburō turned toward the nearest attacker.
For the first time in his life, he entered a fight without considering who might be watching.

Aki reached the stables just as flames climbed the wall.
Three horses pulled frantically against their ropes.

The fourth had already broken free.
She cut the first tether.
The animal reared, nearly knocking her aside.
“Go!”
It bolted.
She moved to the second.
Behind her, footsteps sounded.
She turned.
A man stood at the stable entrance.
He wore dark travelling clothes and carried a short sword.
His face was partly concealed beneath a cloth.
For a moment, neither moved.
Then the man said her name.
“Aki.”
She froze.
She knew that voice.
“Ren?”
The man lowered the cloth.
Her brother stood before her.
There was blood on his cheek.
His expression was grim.
“You shouldn't be here.”
She stared at him.
“Neither should you!”
“I came to warn you.”
“By setting the village on fire?”
His eyes widened.
“What?”
She gestured toward the square.
“Look around!”
Ren turned.
Flames illuminated the rooftops.
Men were fighting in the road.
A woman screamed for her children.
His face changed.
“No.”
Aki stared at him.

“What do you mean, no?”
“I followed them here. I didn't bring them.”
“Then who did?”
Ren looked toward the smoke.
“Men who served Matsuda.”
“Matsuda is dead.”
“I know.”
Her eyes narrowed.
“You killed him.”
Ren said nothing.
“You killed him, didn't you?”
“He was going to murder that girl.”
“I know what he was doing.”
“Then what would you have had me do?”
Aki stepped closer.
“Tell me why you were watching him in the first place.”
Ren looked away.
“Not now.”
“Ren.”
“Not now!”
A horse kicked against the stable wall.
Aki turned back toward the remaining tethers.
Ren seized a knife from his belt and cut them himself.
The animals surged out into the darkness.
When he turned back, Aki was blocking the doorway.
“You knew about Yasuke.”
Ren stared.
“What?”
“You knew he would be here.”
“Yes.”
“And you knew about the sword.”
His expression tightened.
“Aki, listen to me.”
“No. You listen. People are dying because someone wants that sword. If you know who, you tell me.”
Ren glanced toward the square.
Then lowered his voice.

“There are men inside Nobunaga's household who believe the sword contains something.”
Aki frowned.
“Contains?”
“Something hidden in the fittings. A document, perhaps. A seal. I don't know.”
“Then why don't they simply ask Nobunaga for it?”
“Because he doesn't know what they are looking for.”
Aki stared at him.
“How can you be certain?”
“I can't.”
He stepped closer.
“But someone who knows the sword has been given to Yasuke is trying to retrieve it without Nobunaga learning why.”
Aki felt a chill despite the heat of the burning stable.
“Who?”
Ren hesitated.
And that hesitation told her something.
“You know.”
“I have suspicions.”
“Ren.”
He took her hand.
“Not here.”
A shout came from the square.
“Yasuke!”
Aki turned.
Through the smoke, she saw the foreign warrior stumble backward beneath a heavy blow.
Two attackers closed on him.
A third moved around his flank.
She pulled free of her brother.
“He needs help.”
Ren caught her arm.
“Aki!”
She looked back.
“If you came to protect me, start by protecting the man they're trying to kill.”

Then she ran.
Ren cursed and followed.

Yasuke was discovering that exhaustion could make an ordinary sword feel like a temple bell.
Heavy.
Unforgiving.
And increasingly difficult to lift.
Blood ran down his left forearm.
The wound was shallow, but it stung.
His breathing had become rough.
The attackers were disciplined. They fought in pairs, rotating whenever one grew tired.
They had been instructed to take him alive.
That instruction was the only reason he was still standing.
He used it.
When one warrior closed too aggressively, Yasuke struck his knee and drove him backward into a burning cart.
Another lunged.
Yasuke caught the blade, twisted, and sent the attacker stumbling into the dirt.
Then a third man struck him from behind.
Pain flashed across his shoulder.
Yasuke turned.
Too slowly.
The attacker raised his sword.
An arrow entered the man's throat.
He dropped.
Yasuke looked toward the stables.
Ren stood beneath a tree, bow in hand.
Beside him, Aki was shouting something Yasuke couldn't hear.
Ren loosed another arrow.
A warrior fell near the well.
Yasuke took advantage of the confusion.
He advanced.
For the first time that night, the attackers retreated.
Then a voice cut through the smoke.

“Enough!”
The command came from a man standing beside the largest house.
He wore dark armour without an identifying crest.
His sword remained sheathed.
Unlike the other attackers, he seemed neither frightened nor hurried.
The surviving warriors withdrew toward him.
Yasuke lowered his blade slightly.
The stranger regarded him.
“So. You are Nobunaga's foreign warrior.”
Yasuke said nothing.
The man studied him with unsettling calm.
“I expected someone taller.”
Yasuke looked down at him.
“That must be disappointing.”
A few of the attackers shifted uneasily.
The stranger smiled.
“Hand over the sword.”
Yasuke glanced at the blade in his hands.
“This one?”
“Yes.”
“I'm using it.”
“You are surrounded.”
“I noticed.”
“You cannot defeat all of us.”
“Then you should have brought more men.”
The stranger's smile disappeared.
He took a step forward.
“That weapon does not belong to you.”
Yasuke felt something tighten inside him.
Nobunaga's words returned.
You must never believe that it belongs to you.
He studied the stranger.
“Who sent you?”
“No one whose name concerns you.”
“Then we have nothing to discuss.”
The man sighed.

“You misunderstand your position.”
Yasuke looked toward the burning homes.
“No. I understand it perfectly.”
He raised his sword.
“You brought armed men into a village. You set fire to houses. You attacked people who had already suffered enough.”
The stranger's eyes narrowed.
“And?”
“And now you want me to reward you.”
The man stared.
Then laughed softly.
“You are a remarkable fool.”
“So I have been told.”
The stranger drew his sword.
“Then let us discover whether you are also a dead one.”

The duel began without ceremony.
The stranger crossed the distance between them with startling speed.
Yasuke barely blocked the first strike.
The second forced him backward.
The third cut the fabric across his chest.
The man was good.
Better than Saburō.
Better than anyone Yasuke had faced since arriving in Japan.
He fought with a stillness that made his movements difficult to anticipate.
There was no wasted motion.
No anger.
No theatrical display.
Only precision.
Yasuke parried another blow.
The stranger stepped aside and struck him across the ribs with the hilt of his sword.
Pain exploded through his side.
Yasuke staggered.
The man advanced.

“You have strength,” he said.
Yasuke blocked another strike.
“But strength is not understanding.”
Steel rang.
“You have courage.”
Another blow.
“But courage is not wisdom.”
Yasuke retreated.
“And you have been given a weapon you do not comprehend.”
The stranger lunged.
Yasuke twisted aside.
The blade tore through his sleeve.
Then the man struck again.
Yasuke dropped to one knee.
The stranger raised his sword.
“Give it to me.”
Yasuke looked up.
For an instant, he considered surrendering the weapon.
What was a sword worth?
A village burned.
Men lay dying.
His own blood soaked his clothing.
And this stranger wanted a piece of steel badly enough to destroy everything around it.
Why not give it to him?
Then Yasuke saw something beyond the man's shoulder.
A small boy standing beside a ruined doorway.
The grandson of the murdered farmer.
The child watched with wide eyes.
And Yasuke understood something.
If he surrendered the sword now, the stranger would have no reason to leave witnesses.
The violence would not end.
It would simply become easier.
Yasuke changed his grip.
The stranger noticed.
Too late.

Yasuke surged forward, driving his shoulder into the man's chest.
They collided.
The stranger stumbled.
Yasuke struck his wrist.
The man's weapon fell.
Yasuke seized him by the collar and slammed him against the wooden post of the well.
The stranger gasped.
Yasuke placed his sword against the man's throat.
“Who sent you?”
The man glared at him.
Yasuke pressed the blade closer.
“Who?”
The stranger smiled.
It was a terrible smile.
“You truly have no idea.”
“Enlighten me.”
The man glanced at the sword.
Then whispered a name.
Yasuke froze.
He recognized it.
Not because he knew the man personally.
But because he had heard the name spoken in Nobunaga's household.
An important name.
A name associated with power, rank, and unquestioned loyalty.
Yasuke stared at the stranger.
“That is impossible.”
The man smiled again.
“Is it?”
Then he moved.
Not toward Yasuke.
Toward a knife concealed beneath his armour.
Yasuke reacted instinctively.
He struck the man's hand aside.
The knife clattered to the ground.

But the stranger twisted free and threw himself backward into the smoke.
Yasuke pursued.
The man darted between two burning houses.
Yasuke followed.
Then a section of roof collapsed between them.
Fire erupted across the passage.
Yasuke shielded his face.
When he could see again, the stranger was gone.

By the time the attackers withdrew, nearly half the village had suffered damage.
Four houses had burned completely.
Others had lost roofs or outbuildings.
Two soldiers lay dead.
Several villagers were injured.
The remaining attackers had disappeared into the surrounding countryside.
Saburō stood in the square, his armour blackened with soot.
Yasuke approached him.
“Are the villagers safe?”
“As safe as we can make them.”
“The prisoners?”
“Alive.”
“Good.”
Saburō looked at the blood soaking Yasuke's sleeve.
“You should sit.”
“I've been sitting all day.”
“You have been fighting all night.”
“Then I should sit twice.”
Saburō almost smiled.
Almost.
Instead, he looked toward the ruined houses.
“This is my fault.”
Yasuke followed his gaze.
“Not all of it.”
“I brought Matsuda here.”

“You were ordered to accompany him.”
“I obeyed when I should have questioned.”
Yasuke considered that.
“Yes.”
Saburō looked at him sharply.
“You might at least pretend to disagree.”
“Would that help?”
“No.”
“Then I shall spare us both the effort.”
For a moment, the two men stood together.
Then Saburō asked, “What happened to their leader?”
“He escaped.”
“Did you recognize him?”
“No.”
“Did he give you a name?”
Yasuke hesitated.
He remembered the whispered answer.
The important name.
The impossible accusation.
“Yes,” he said.
Saburō waited.
“Whose?”
Yasuke looked at him.
“I need to speak to Lord Nobunaga.”
Saburō's expression hardened.
“Yasuke.”
“Not here.”
“Do you believe I am part of this?”
The question surprised him.
Yasuke regarded the younger warrior.
“No.”
Saburō exhaled.
“Then why won't you tell me?”
“Because I do not know whether the name is true. And if it is false, repeating it could destroy an innocent man.”
Saburō looked away.
Then nodded.

“Very well.”
Yasuke studied him for a moment.
Something between them had changed.
Not friendship.
Not yet.
But perhaps the possibility of it.

Aki found Yasuke beside the stream.
He was trying unsuccessfully to wash blood from his arm.
She watched him for several seconds.
“You are terrible at that.”
He looked up.
“At what?”
“Remaining alive without assistance.”
“I have managed reasonably well until now.”
“Your arm suggests otherwise.”
He glanced at the wound.
“It is not deep.”
“Then you won't mind if I examine it.”
Before he could object, she knelt beside him.
From a small bundle she produced clean cloth, water, and a paste that smelled strongly of herbs.
Yasuke raised an eyebrow.
“You came prepared.”
“I try.”
“For battle?”
“For men who insist they do not require help.”
He smiled.
She began cleaning the wound.
He winced.
“Careful.”
“Oh?”
“That hurts.”
“Then stop getting cut.”
“A useful suggestion.”
“You're welcome.”
She worked quietly for several moments.

Then Yasuke asked, “Where is your brother?”
“Helping the villagers.”
“Why did he kill Matsuda?”
She paused.
“Because Matsuda was about to kill a child.”
“That is why he fired the arrow. It is not why he followed Matsuda to this village.”
Aki resumed wrapping his arm.
“You are learning.”
“Not quickly enough.”
She looked at him.
“Ren belongs to a group of men who exchange information. Travellers. Merchants. Occasionally warriors.”
“Spies?”
“Sometimes.”
“For whom?”
“That depends on the information.”
Yasuke sighed.
“Aki.”
She tied the bandage.
“Do you want the truth?”
“Yes.”
“Then understand that I do not possess all of it.”
He waited.
“My family has served households, temples, and merchants for generations. We have carried messages. Protected documents. Hidden people when powerful men wanted them found.”
“Why?”
“Sometimes for money. Sometimes for loyalty. Sometimes because the people searching deserved to fail.”
Yasuke considered that.
“And the sword?”
Her hands became still.
“The mark on your sword belongs to a record my grandmother preserved.”
“What record?”
“A history.”

“Of what?”
She looked toward the water.
“Of things that powerful men preferred forgotten.”
He was quiet.
Then he asked, “Is my sword part of that history?”
“Yes.”
“How?”
“I haven't found the answer.”
Yasuke studied her.
“Then perhaps we should stop asking the sword and start asking the men who want it.”
She looked at him.
“That may get us killed.”
He smiled.
“So far, it has been an excellent beginning.”
Aki shook her head.
“You truly are impossible.”
“So I have been told.”
She laughed.
Then her expression softened.
For a moment, neither spoke.
The stream moved quietly beside them.
Farther away, the villagers worked to extinguish the last embers.
Aki looked at Yasuke's bandaged arm.
“Why didn't you give them the sword?”
He thought about the question.
Then answered.
“Because they were willing to kill for it.”
“That is all?”
“No.”
“What else?”
He looked toward the village.
“Because the moment I surrendered it, I would have allowed those men to decide what happened to everyone else.”
Aki studied him.
“That sounds like honor.”
Yasuke shook his head.

“No.”
“What, then?”
“Responsibility.”
She considered his answer.
Then smiled faintly.
“My grandmother would have liked that.”
“You have mentioned her several times.”
“She was an extraordinary woman.”
“So I gather.”
“She also had terrible taste in men.”
Yasuke looked at her.
“Should I be concerned?”
“Probably.”
He laughed.
And this time, she laughed with him.

They departed the following morning.
Saburō had left two soldiers to assist the villagers until reinforcements arrived.
The wounded were placed on horses.
The prisoners travelled bound.
Ren disappeared before dawn.
Aki remained.
Yasuke was not entirely pleased about either development.
“You're coming with us?” he asked as she secured a small travel bundle.
“Yes.”
“To Azuchi?”
“Yes.”
“Does your brother know?”
“Yes.”
“Does Lord Nobunaga know?”
“No.”
Yasuke closed his eyes.
“Wonderful.”
Aki smiled.
“You should be grateful.”

“For what?”
“My company.”
“I am beginning to suspect your company may be hazardous.”
“Only to men who make poor decisions.”
“Then I am doomed.”
She laughed.
Saburō approached them.
He looked at Aki.
Then at Yasuke.
“Who is this?”
Yasuke opened his mouth.
Aki bowed.
“My name is Aki. I am accompanying Yasuke.”
Saburō stared.
“For what purpose?”
“To ensure he reaches Azuchi alive.”
Saburō looked at Yasuke.
“Is that necessary?”
Yasuke glanced at the bandage on his arm.
“Apparently.”
The younger warrior sighed.
“Fine. But she rides behind the soldiers.”
Aki smiled politely.
“Of course.”
Saburō walked away.
Yasuke turned toward her.
“You have no intention of riding behind the soldiers.”
“None.”
“Then why did you agree?”
“Because he seemed happy.”
Yasuke shook his head.
“You are a menace.”
“Yes.”
She adjusted her bundle.
“Are we leaving?”
He mounted his horse.
Aki climbed onto a smaller animal beside him.

For a few moments they rode in silence.
Then she said, “There's something I haven't told you.”
Yasuke stared straight ahead.
“What an extraordinary development.”
She ignored him.
“My grandmother did not simply preserve the mark.”
He looked toward her.
“She preserved a warning.”
“About the sword?”
“Yes.”
“What warning?”
Aki hesitated.
“About what happens when the wrong person learns what it carries.”
Yasuke frowned.
“You believe something is hidden inside the weapon?”
“I believe people have killed to find out.”
“That is not the same thing.”
“No.”
She looked toward the mountains.
“But I intend to discover which is true.”
Yasuke watched her.
“And you expect me to help?”
She smiled.
“I expect you will be unable to resist asking questions.”
He considered that.
Then nodded.
“Unfortunately, you may be right.”

The road to Azuchi was quieter than the road from it.
No one joked.
Even Saburō seemed reluctant to speak.
By midday, the company had entered a wooded valley.
Yasuke rode beside Aki.
He was beginning to feel the weight of the previous night's fighting.
His shoulder ached.
His ribs hurt.

And he was hungry enough to eat a horse.
Preferably someone else's.
Aki noticed his expression.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“You look unhappy.”
“I am considering lunch.”
“That makes you unhappy?”
“It does when lunch is nowhere in sight.”
She reached into her bundle and produced a small packet.
“Here.”
He accepted it.
Inside were two rice cakes.
He looked at her.
“You are a miracle.”
“I know.”
He took a bite.
Then stopped.
Aki watched him.
“What?”
He chewed slowly.
Swallowed.
Looked at the rice cake.
Then at her.
“What is in this?”
“Rice.”
“Yes.”
“And preserved plum.”
He stared.
“Why?”
She burst out laughing.
“You don't like it?”
Yasuke considered his answer.
“I have eaten worse.”
“That is not a compliment.”
“I did not intend it as one.”
She laughed harder.

Yasuke took another bite.
He was starving.
There were limits to personal dignity.
They had just passed a bend in the road when a rider appeared ahead.
The man wore Nobunaga's crest.
He approached at speed.
Saburō raised a hand.
The company halted.
The rider dismounted and bowed.
“Message from Azuchi.”
Saburō stepped forward.
“Speak.”
The man glanced at Yasuke.
Then lowered his head.
“Lord Nobunaga requires your immediate return.”
“We are returning.”
“There is more.”
The messenger hesitated.
Saburō frowned.
“Well?”
The man looked directly at Yasuke.
“You are ordered to surrender your sword upon arrival.”
Silence.
Yasuke felt Aki turn toward him.
Saburō looked equally surprised.
“By whose authority?”
The messenger reached into his clothing and produced a folded document bearing a seal.
“By command of Lord Nobunaga.”
Saburō accepted it.
He examined the seal.
Then the writing.
His expression changed.
He handed it to Yasuke.
The document was brief.
Its wording unmistakable.

The sword presented to Yasuke was to be returned immediately.
Until further instruction, Yasuke was not to carry it.
He read the message twice.
Then looked at the seal.
It appeared genuine.
Aki leaned toward him.
“What does it say?”
He handed her the document.
She read it.
Her face grew pale.
Yasuke noticed.
“What?”
She did not answer immediately.
Instead, she turned the paper over.
Examined the edge.
Then brought it closer to the light.
“There,” she whispered.
Yasuke frowned.
“Where?”
She pointed to a small mark impressed near the fold.
Three curved lines surrounding a circle.
The same symbol.
Not drawn.
Pressed into the paper.
Almost invisible.
Saburō looked over her shoulder.
“What is that?”
Aki folded the document carefully.
Then looked toward the messenger.
“Who gave you this?”
The man shifted uncomfortably.
“My superior.”
“Who?”
“I was instructed to deliver it directly.”
“Who instructed you?”
The messenger's eyes moved toward the trees.
Aki saw it.

So did Yasuke.
The man took a step backward.
Then another.
Saburō reached for his sword.
“Stop.”
The messenger turned and ran.
He made it three strides.
An arrow struck him between the shoulders.
He fell face-first into the road.
The horses panicked.
Saburō shouted for the men to take cover.
Yasuke drew his sword.
Aki grabbed his arm.
“Don't!”
He turned toward her.
She was staring into the trees.
Not at the fallen messenger.
Not at the arrow.
At something farther up the slope.
A figure stood between the trunks.
Watching.
The person wore a pale travelling cloak.
For an instant, Yasuke thought he saw a woman's face beneath the hood.
Then the figure stepped backward and disappeared.
Saburō shouted.
“After them!”
Two soldiers ran toward the trees.
Yasuke started forward.
Aki caught him again.
“Wait.”
He looked down at her.
“What?”
She held the folded document.
Her hands were trembling.
“This seal.”
“Yes?”

“It isn't Nobunaga's.”
Yasuke stared.
“It looks genuine.”
“The outer seal does.”
“Then what do you mean?”
She pointed to the small symbol.
“This mark was not made by the person who wrote the order.”
“How do you know?”
Aki looked toward the trees.
Then back at him.
“Because it was made by someone who wanted us to recognize the forgery.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Who?”
Aki hesitated.
Then said something that made the blood drain from his face.
“My grandmother taught me how to make that mark.”
Yasuke looked down at the document.
“Your grandmother is dead.”
“Yes.”
“Then who—”
“I don't know.”
She looked toward the place where the cloaked figure had stood.
“But someone else learned it.”
Yasuke slowly returned his sword to its scabbard.
Behind them, the messenger lay dead.
Ahead, the road wound toward Azuchi.
And somewhere within Nobunaga's household, a man powerful enough to issue false commands was waiting for a blade he apparently believed belonged to him.
For the first time, Yasuke wondered whether returning to his lord would be more dangerous than disobeying him.
He looked at Aki.
“What do we do?”
She considered the question.
Then glanced at the sword.
“We go to Azuchi.”

“And the order?”
“We obey the part that brings us home.”
Yasuke raised an eyebrow.
“And the rest?”
Aki smiled.
“We shall see who becomes angry when you arrive with the sword still at your side.”
Yasuke stared at her.
Then laughed.
It was not a particularly cheerful laugh.
But it was genuine.
“You really are worse than your grandmother.”
Aki smiled.
“Much.”

Present day

The daughter had been staring at the folded paper for nearly five minutes.
Her parents were losing patience.
Not with her.
With one another.
“I'm telling you,” her father said, “we should put the damn thing back in the box.”
Her mother looked up from the ancient manuscript.
“And do what?”
“Return it.”
“To whom?”
“Whoever sent it.”
“There is no sender.”
“Then we find one.”
His daughter raised her hand.
Neither parent noticed.
“We have a tracking number,” he continued.
“That doesn't tell us who sent it.”
“Then we call the company.”
“And explain what?”

“That they've delivered an antique sword to a minor.”
Their daughter lowered her hand.
“Interesting.”
Her father pointed toward the case.
“That's not normal!”
His wife stared at him.
“Darling, the sword has returned to us seven times. At what point did you begin expecting normal?”
He opened his mouth.
Closed it.
Then looked toward the ceiling.
“I hate when you do that.”
“Do what?”
“Make sense.”
She smiled.
“It's one of my more annoying qualities.”
Their daughter cleared her throat.
Both parents turned.
“Yes?” her mother asked.
“Can we discuss the fact that neither of you has asked me what I think?”
Her father frowned.
“About what?”
She stared at him.
“Seriously?”
“Honey—”
“Dad. It's addressed to me.”
“We know.”
“It has a note that says daughter.”
“We know that too.”
“And Grandma's book apparently talks about a sword being passed down through generations.”
Her mother looked thoughtful.
“That is one possible interpretation.”
“Fine. One possible interpretation.”
She leaned forward.
“So why are the two of you discussing what to do with my sword?”

Her father immediately straightened.
“Whoa. Your sword?”
She smiled.
“Oh, now you're listening.”
He folded his arms.
“It's not your sword.”
“Then whose is it?”
He opened his mouth.
Nothing came out.
His daughter leaned back.
“Exactly.”
Her mother pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh.
The father noticed.
“Don't encourage her.”
“I haven't said anything.”
“Your face is encouraging her.”
Their daughter grinned.
“Mom has a very supportive face.”
He stared at both of them.
Then shook his head.
“This is a conspiracy.”
“It's a family,” his wife replied.
“Same thing.”
They laughed.
For a moment, the strange weight hanging over the room lifted.
Then the daughter looked down at the sword.
Her smile faded.
“Seriously, though.”
Her parents grew quiet.
“What happens if I touch it?”
Her father answered immediately.
“Nothing.”
Her mother looked at him.
He hesitated.
“At least, nothing happened when I touched it.”
Their daughter considered.
“And if I pick it up?”

“I'd rather you didn't.”
“Why?”
“Because it's sharp.”
“Dad.”
“Because it's old.”
“Dad.”
“Because I don't like the idea!”
Silence.
He exhaled.
Then sat down beside her.
“Honey, I don't understand this thing. I don't understand where it comes from or why it keeps coming back. And now, for the first time, it's arrived with your name on it.”
She watched him.
He continued more quietly.
“That scares me.”
Her expression softened.
“I know.”
He looked at her.
“You do?”
“Dad, you've been standing between me and anything remotely dangerous since I learned to walk.”
“That's my job.”
“I know.”
She reached for his hand.
“But maybe your job is changing.”
He stared at her.
The words landed harder than she intended.
His little girl.
Except she wasn't little anymore.
Not really.
He looked toward his wife.
She was watching them with an expression he couldn't quite read.
Pride.
Concern.
Perhaps a little sadness.
Then she spoke.

“There's something else.”
Both turned.
She opened the old manuscript to a page near the back.
“I've been looking at the family names.”
Her husband frowned.
“What about them?”
“Some of these records were added generations after the original account. Different handwriting. Different periods.”
She turned the book toward them.
“Here.”
Her daughter leaned closer.
“What am I looking at?”
“A genealogical record. Or part of one.”
Her father looked unimpressed.
“That's helpful.”
She ignored him.
“This passage refers to a woman whose family preserved an object entrusted to a foreign warrior.”
Her daughter looked up.
“The African warrior?”
“Possibly.”
“And?”
Her mother hesitated.
“According to the account, she had a daughter.”
The room went still.
Her husband leaned forward.
“With him?”
She studied the page.
“I can't establish that from this passage.”
“But it's possible?”
“Yes.”
Their daughter looked at the sword.
Then at her mother.
“Okay.”
She swallowed.
“So what does that have to do with me?”
Her mother turned another page.

At the top was a name written in old characters.
Beneath it, a series of family entries continued across the generations.
Several were faded.
Some were missing.
Others had been added much later.
Her mother traced the line.
Then stopped.
The final entry had been written in her grandmother's handwriting.
Her daughter's name.
The girl stared.
“That's me.”
Her mother nodded.
“Yes.”
“When did Grandma write that?”
“I don't know.”
“Before she died?”
“Yes.”
“Before I was born?”
Her mother looked at the page.
Then at her daughter.
Her expression changed.
She had noticed something.
Something she had overlooked in all the years she'd possessed the book.
Beside the name was a date.
Not the daughter's birthday.
A date three years earlier.
The mother touched the ink.
Her husband leaned closer.
“What?”
She looked at him.
Then at their daughter.
“Your grandmother wrote your name in this book before you were born.”
The daughter stared.
Then shook her head.

“That doesn't make sense.”
Her father looked at the sword.
“No,” he said quietly.
“It really fucking doesn't.”



Chapter 6

Names of the Living



Present Day

Luna stared at the manuscript.
Then at her mother.
Then back at the manuscript.
“No.”
Her father nodded.
“That's what I've been saying.”
“No, Dad. I mean no. That is not my name.”
Emiko frowned.
“What?”
Luna pointed at the handwritten characters.
“You said Grandma wrote my name in the book before I was born.”
“Yes.”
“But she didn't.”
Malcolm leaned closer.
“Sweetheart, your mother reads Japanese considerably better than either of us.”
“That's not what I'm saying.”
She pulled out her phone.
Opened a translation app.
Took a picture.
Her father sighed.
“Oh, good. We're asking the internet to interpret a four-hundred-year-old manuscript. That should go beautifully.”
“Dad, shut up for one second.”
He looked offended.
Emiko raised a hand.

“Let her finish.”
Luna enlarged the image.
“Look. Grandma wrote the characters for my name. But that's not the same thing as writing me.”
Her mother regarded her.
“What do you mean?”
“People have the same names. Sometimes families reuse names. You've told me that yourself.”
Emiko considered.
“That's true.”
“So maybe somebody else had my name.”
Her father pointed toward her.
“Thank you! A rational explanation!”
She looked at him.
“Don't celebrate yet.”
He lowered his hand.
Emiko turned several pages backward.
Her daughter's suggestion had awakened something.
There were names throughout the manuscript.
Generations of them.
Some followed by dates.
Others accompanied by brief descriptions.
A few were crossed out.
But near the back, the entries became less consistent.
The final page contained only three names.
One she recognized as her grandmother's.
One was her own.
And the third—
She stopped.
Malcolm noticed immediately.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“Don't do that.”
She looked up.
“Do what?”
“That little pause before you say nothing. It always means something.”

Luna leaned forward.
“What's the third name?”
Emiko hesitated.
“I need to check something.”
She closed the book.
Her daughter stared.
“Oh, come on!”
“Just give me a moment.”
“Mom, we are literally sitting here with a mysterious sword, a family manuscript, and a possible ancestral conspiracy. You can't close the book at the interesting part.”
Her father nodded.
“She's got a point.”
Emiko looked at him.
“Don't encourage her.”
He smiled.
“Your face is encouraging her.”
She rolled her eyes.
“Very funny.”
But she did not reopen the manuscript.
Instead, she stood.
“I need my laptop.”
Luna groaned.
“Of course you do.”
Her mother paused in the doorway.
“And nobody touches the sword.”
Both father and daughter looked at her.
Then at each other.
“She's talking to you,” Malcolm said.
“She's definitely talking to you.”
Malcolm waited until his wife had gone upstairs.
Then he carefully closed the wooden case.
His daughter watched him.
“What are you doing?”
“Putting it away.”
“Mom said don't touch the sword.”
“I'm not touching the sword.”

“You're touching the box.”
“Apparently we are now conducting legal proceedings.”
She folded her arms.
“Why are you so afraid of it?”
He stopped.
There it was again.
A question he had been avoiding for years.
He looked toward the stairs.
Then sat down.
“Because the first time it came back, I thought somebody was playing a joke.”
Luna listened.
“The second time, I thought somebody was trying to scare me.”
“And the third?”
He rubbed his chin.
“The third time, I started wondering whether I was losing my mind.”
She studied his face.
“Seriously?”
He nodded.
“I had given it away. Not sold it. Not loaned it. Given it away to someone I trusted.”
“Who?”
“A friend.”
“What happened?”
“He put it in a safe.”
“And?”
“Three days later, it was in my garage.”
She sat opposite him.
He continued.
“I called him. Told him what happened.”
“Did he believe you?”
“Not remotely.”
“What did he say?”
“That I must have given him a different sword.”
She frowned.
“But you hadn't.”

“No.”
“So he checked the safe?”
“He did.”
“And?”
He looked at her.
“The sword was still there.”
Silence.
Luna leaned back.
“Two swords.”
“That's what we thought.”
“What happened to the other one?”
Her father was quiet.
Then he said, “That's the part I never told your mother.”
His daughter straightened.
“Oh, this is going to be good.”
He gave her a look.
“It's not good.”
“Sorry.”
He leaned forward.
“My friend sent me a photograph from inside his safe. I put it beside the sword in my garage and compared them.”
“Identical?”
“Every detail.”
“Okay.”
“Then I drove over.”
“And?”
“He opened the safe.”
Malcolm stopped.
His daughter waited.
“What?”
“The sword was gone.”
She stared at him.
“Again?”
He nodded.
“And when I got home, the case in my garage was empty.”
Luna said nothing for several seconds.
Then she whispered, “Where did it go?”

Her father looked toward the dining room table.
“I didn't see it again for six months.”
She followed his gaze.
The wooden case sat between them.
Closed.
Quiet.
Entirely ordinary.
“So you've never actually seen it disappear?”
“No.”
“Or appear?”
“No.”
“Then maybe somebody keeps moving it.”
Her father smiled faintly.
“That was my theory too.”
“Was?”
He nodded.
“Until somebody tried to steal it.”

Japan, 1581

The gates of Azuchi Castle rose ahead of them.
Yasuke had rarely been so grateful to see a place that might contain men who wanted him dead.
Saburō rode beside him.
Neither had spoken much since the messenger's murder.
The false order remained tucked inside Yasuke's clothing.
Aki rode several lengths behind them, accompanied by two soldiers who seemed uncertain whether they were guarding her or being guarded by her.
She had spent most of the morning questioning them about the route.
By noon, she knew their names, their home provinces, and which one had a wife expecting a child.
Yasuke was beginning to understand why Saburō had given up trying to keep her at the rear.
At the outer gate, a guard approached.
Saburō presented his authority.

The guard examined it.
Then looked toward Yasuke.
“Lord Nobunaga has requested your presence.”
Yasuke nodded.
“I was told.”
“You are to come alone.”
Saburō frowned.
“Alone?”
“Yes.”
“And the prisoners?”
“Bring them to the holding quarters.”
Saburō glanced toward Yasuke.
The two men exchanged a look.
A week earlier, neither would have trusted the other with a cup of water.
Now they had watched men die together.
It made some things simpler.
Others considerably more difficult.
Yasuke dismounted.
Aki approached.
“Where are you going?”
“To see my lord.”
She looked at the guard.
“Alone?”
“So it appears.”
Her expression tightened.
Yasuke lowered his voice.
“Find your brother.”
“He may already be here.”
“That concerns me.”
“It should.”
He looked at her.
“You really are dreadful at reassurance.”
She smiled.
“I have other talents.”
Then her expression grew serious.
“Do not surrender the sword unless Nobunaga himself asks for it.”

Yasuke touched the hilt.
“That was already my intention.”
“Good.”
She stepped away.
Yasuke followed the guard into the castle.
Nobunaga received him in a private chamber.
No attendants.
No senior retainers.
Only the lord himself, seated beside an open window overlooking the gardens.
Yasuke knelt.
“My lord.”
Nobunaga watched him.
“You have returned.”
“Yes.”
“And you have brought considerable trouble with you.”
Yasuke lowered his eyes.
“I believe some of it was already here.”
Nobunaga smiled faintly.
“An interesting answer.”
He gestured for Yasuke to sit.
“I have received reports.”
“From Saburō?”
“Among others.”
Yasuke waited.
Nobunaga regarded him carefully.
“Three men were killed in the village. A fourth during an attack on the road. Others died when armed men attempted to seize you.”
“Yes.”
“And much of this violence appears to concern the sword I gave you.”
Yasuke met his eyes.
“So it would seem.”
Nobunaga leaned forward.
“Show it to me.”
Yasuke hesitated.
Only for a moment.

Then he removed the weapon and placed it before his lord.
Nobunaga studied the scabbard.
He did not touch it.
“Do you know where this sword came from?”
“No.”
“Do you know why I gave it to you?”
“Because you wished me to carry it.”
Nobunaga laughed softly.
“That is true. But incomplete.”
Yasuke waited.
Nobunaga's expression grew thoughtful.
“The sword was presented to me by a man who claimed it had belonged to his family for generations.”
“Who?”
“A merchant with connections to several powerful households.”
“Is he still alive?”
Nobunaga looked toward the gardens.
“That is uncertain.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Uncertain?”
“He disappeared shortly after presenting it.”
“Disappeared?”
“Some say he fled. Others believe he was murdered.”
Yasuke looked at the sword.
“Why give it to me?”
Nobunaga considered.
“Because when I asked the merchant what made the blade valuable, he refused to answer.”
“That seems an unusual reason.”
“I thought so too.”
Nobunaga smiled.
“He would only say that it should be placed in the hands of a man who did not desire power.”
Yasuke stared.
“And you thought of me?”
“I thought of several men.”
Nobunaga's smile disappeared.

“Then I realized that every one of them would see the sword as a means of increasing his position.”
“And I would not?”
“You were the only man who asked whether he was permitted to touch it.”
Yasuke remembered the ceremony.
His uncertainty.
The strange warning.
Nobunaga continued.
“That interested me.”
He leaned forward.
“So I gave it to you.”
Yasuke looked at the blade.
“You have placed me in danger.”
“Yes.”
The answer was so direct that Yasuke almost laughed.
Nobunaga studied him.
“Are you angry?”
Yasuke considered.
“Yes.”
“Good.”
“My lord?”
“A man who is never angry at his master is either a fool or a liar.”
Yasuke lowered his eyes.
“I would prefer to be neither.”
“Then tell me what happened in the village.”
And Yasuke did.
He spoke of the levy.
The starving villagers.
The old farmer.
The murdered headman.
Matsuda's deception.
Saburō's hesitation.
The attack.
The stranger who demanded the sword.
He concealed nothing.
Except the name the attacker had whispered.

When he finished, Nobunaga sat in silence.
Then asked, “And Saburō?”
“He made mistakes.”
“Serious ones?”
“Yes.”
“Should he be punished?”
Yasuke considered.
“He has already begun punishing himself.”
Nobunaga looked at him.
“That was not my question.”
“No, my lord.”
“Then answer.”
Yasuke chose his words carefully.
“His obedience cost lives. But when he understood what was happening, he acted to protect the villagers.”
Nobunaga remained silent.
Yasuke continued.
“If you punish him only for making the wrong decision, he may learn nothing except how to hide his mistakes.”
Nobunaga regarded him.
“And what would you have him learn?”
“To recognize when obedience becomes cowardice.”
The lord's expression changed.
For a long moment, he said nothing.
Then he nodded.
“An expensive lesson.”
“Yes.”
“And one the dead cannot benefit from.”
Yasuke lowered his head.
“No, my lord.”
Nobunaga turned toward the window.
“Leave the sword.”
Yasuke looked up.
“My lord?”
“Leave it here.”
For a moment, neither man moved.
Then Yasuke spoke.

“May I ask why?”
Nobunaga turned back.
“Because men are dying for it.”
Yasuke nodded slowly.
“That is true.”
“Then leave it.”
Yasuke placed his hand on the scabbard.
He remembered Aki's warning.
Do not surrender the sword unless Nobunaga himself asks for it.
Well.
He had asked.
Yasuke bowed.
“As you command.”
He rose.
Walked toward the door.
Then stopped.
“My lord?”
Nobunaga looked up.
“Yes?”
“Someone sent an order bearing your seal, commanding me to surrender the sword upon my return.”
Nobunaga's expression hardened.
“I sent no such order.”
“I suspected as much.”
“Do you have it?”
Yasuke removed the folded document.
He approached and placed it beside the sword.
Nobunaga examined the seal.
Then the writing.
His face became very still.
“Who delivered this?”
“A messenger. He was killed immediately afterward.”
Nobunaga looked at the document.
Then at the sword.
Then he reached for a small bell.
An attendant appeared.
“Send for the steward of correspondence.”

The servant bowed and departed.
Yasuke remained standing.
Nobunaga looked up.
“You may go.”
Yasuke bowed.
As he approached the door, Nobunaga spoke again.
“Yasuke.”
He turned.
“Yes, my lord?”
“Do not tell anyone that the sword is here.”
Yasuke looked at his lord.
Then bowed once more.
“As you wish.”
He left.
Behind him, Nobunaga sat alone with the sword.
For several moments, he examined the false order.
Then he turned it over.
Three curved lines.
One circle.
His expression changed.
He reached beneath his robe and withdrew a small object wrapped in cloth.
When he uncovered it, the object caught the afternoon light.
A silver fitting.
Marked with the same symbol.
Nobunaga stared at it.
Then looked toward the door through which Yasuke had departed.
“So,” he murmured.
“You have found your way back.”

Present Day

Emiko returned with her laptop.
Malcolm and Luna were still sitting at the dining room table.
The wooden case remained closed.
She looked relieved.
Then suspicious.

“Have either of you touched anything?”
“No,” Malcolm said.
“Dad closed the box,” Luna added.
He turned.
“Seriously?”
“What? She asked.”
Emiko sighed.
“Fine.”
She sat down.
Opened her laptop.
And placed the old manuscript beside it.
“I found something.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Please tell me it's not another mysterious prediction about my birth.”
“No.”
Her father smiled.
“Excellent.”
“It's a property record.”
He blinked.
“A what?”
“A property record. From a family archive in Japan.”
Luna looked disappointed.
“That sounds significantly less exciting.”
“Perhaps,” her mother replied.
She enlarged an image on the screen.
It showed a faded document.
Japanese characters filled several vertical columns.
Near the bottom was a small seal.
Three curved lines.
One circle.
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Oh, for fuck's sake.”
His wife smiled.
“You recognize it.”
“It's beginning to haunt my dreams.”
She pointed toward the document.

“This property belonged to a family that maintained records for several merchant households during the late sixteenth century.”
“And?”
“The same family name appears in my grandmother's book.”
Luna sat up.
“Okay. That's interesting.”
Her mother nodded.
“Very.”
She opened another image.
A map.
Old roads.
A river.
A village.
Malcolm frowned.
“Where is that?”
“Ōmi Province. Near the historical site of Azuchi.”
Luna leaned closer.
“Japan?”
“Yes.”
“Where Nobunaga lived?”
“Where he built his castle.”
Malcolm looked from the map to the sword.
“So now we're going to Japan.”
His wife raised an eyebrow.
“I didn't say that.”
“You didn't have to.”
Luna grinned.
“I vote Japan.”
“Of course you do.”
“I've never been.”
“That's not a reason to chase a haunted sword halfway around the world.”
“Potentially haunted.”
“Thank you for the correction.”
Emiko raised a hand.
“Both of you, please.”
She returned to the laptop.

“The record refers to a storehouse maintained by the family.”
“A warehouse?” Malcolm asked.
“Essentially.”
“What did they store?”
“Documents. Household possessions. Objects entrusted to them for safekeeping.”
Luna looked toward the case.
“Like swords?”
“Possibly.”
Her mother enlarged the map.
“There is something else.”
Malcolm leaned back.
“Of course there is.”
“The storehouse was destroyed.”
“Fire?”
“No.”
She hesitated.
“According to the record, it was deliberately dismantled.”
Luna frowned.
“Why?”
“That isn't explained.”
“Then what happened to everything inside?”
Emiko looked at the screen.
“Some possessions were transferred. Others were recorded as missing.”
Malcolm rubbed his forehead.
“Wonderful.”
Luna pointed toward the document.
“What's that?”
Her mother followed her finger.
Near the bottom, beneath several lines of writing, was a short notation.
It had been added in different ink.
She leaned closer.
Then froze.
“What?” Malcolm asked.
She read the characters again.

Her daughter reached toward the laptop.
“Mom?”
Emiko sat back slowly.
“The record says one object was removed before the storehouse was dismantled.”
“What object?”
“A sword.”
Malcolm exhaled.
“Obviously.”
Emiko continued.
“Black scabbard. Red binding. Silver mark near the hilt.”
No one spoke.
Then Luna asked, “Where was it taken?”
Her mother looked at the final line.
“That part isn't clear.”
“Can you translate it?”
“I can try.”
She enlarged the characters.
Studied them.
Then opened a reference document.
Malcolm watched.
“You're doing that thing again.”
“What thing?”
“Getting quiet when you're worried.”
She ignored him.
Luna moved closer.
“Mom?”
Emiko looked at the screen.
Then whispered, “That's strange.”
Her husband closed his eyes.
“I am beginning to hate that word.”
She pointed at the final characters.
“They aren't a destination.”
“What are they?”
“A name.”
Luna frowned.
“Whose?”

Her mother stared at the screen.
“I don't know.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Can you read it?”
She nodded.
Then said the name aloud.
It was an unfamiliar Japanese name.
One neither Malcolm nor Luna had heard before.
Emiko repeated it.
Then looked toward the old manuscript.
She opened it to the final page.
There.
Beneath her daughter's name.
The third entry.
The same name.
Luna stared.
“Okay. So this person appears in both documents.”
“Yes.”
“Who are they?”
Her mother turned the page.
Then another.
She was searching for something.
Malcolm watched her face.
“Sweetheart?”
She stopped.
Her eyes widened.
Then she looked at him.
“I've been reading this wrong.”
“What?”
“The names.”
Luna frowned.
“What about them?”
“They aren't all ancestors.”
Malcolm stared.
“Then what are they?”
Emiko looked toward the wooden case.
Then back at the manuscript.

“Some are people entrusted with protecting something.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Protecting the sword?”
“Possibly.”
“And the others?”
Her mother was silent.
Malcolm touched her arm.
“What?”
She looked at Luna.
Then at the manuscript.
Then she spoke.
“The names aren't only a record of who carried the sword.”
A pause.
“They're a record of who died protecting it.”
Luna stared.
Her father looked toward the wooden case.
For the first time since the package arrived, he did not want to open it.
He wanted to take his wife and daughter somewhere safe.
Anywhere.
But the question forming in his mind would not go away.
He looked at the final page.
At his daughter's name.
Then at the unfamiliar Japanese name written beside it.
“Tell me something,” he said quietly.
Emiko turned.
“What?”
“How many names are on that page?”
She looked down.
“Three.”
He swallowed.
“And how many people are sitting at this table?”
Nobody answered.
The refrigerator hummed.
Outside, a dog barked.
And inside the wooden case, something made a small, unmistakable sound.

Click.
Luna slowly turned toward it.
Her father stood.
Her mother stopped breathing.
The sound came again.
Click.
Like a lock being opened.
From the inside.



Chapter 7

What Remains



Present Day

Malcolm stared at the wooden case.
“Absolutely not.”
Luna glanced at him.
“What?”
“Whatever that was, absolutely fucking not.”
The case sat on the dining room table, looking as innocent as a wooden box had any right to look.
Nothing moved.
Nothing glowed.
No ancient spirits emerged from the walls.
Malcolm found this deeply suspicious.
Emiko leaned closer.
“Did you hear it twice?”
“Yes.”
“From inside the case?”
“Yes.”
Luna reached for her phone.
Malcolm pointed at her.
“Don't.”
She stopped.
“Don't what?”
“Whatever you're about to do.”
“I was going to record it.”
“Of course you were.”
“Would you prefer we just tell people our haunted sword makes clicking noises and hope they believe us?”

“Stop calling it haunted.”
“You called it cursed.”
“That was before it started operating its own hardware.”
Emiko leaned across the table.
“Both of you. Quiet.”
They fell silent.
She placed one hand gently against the wooden lid.
Waited.
Nothing.
She moved her fingers toward the first brass catch.
Her husband caught her wrist.
“Wait.”
She looked at him.
He released her immediately.
“Sorry.”
Her expression softened.
“It's all right.”
“No, it's not.”
He looked at the case.
“Somebody sent that thing to our daughter. Somebody knows where we live. Somebody knows her name. And now we're standing here wondering whether the damn box is opening itself.”
Their daughter considered this.
“Technically, that's a pretty reasonable concern.”
He looked at her.
“Thank you.”
“Don't get used to it.”
Her mother examined the brass catches.
Both were closed.
She tested the first.
It moved easily.
The second resisted.
She frowned.
“That's strange.”
Her husband closed his eyes.
“Can we retire that word?”
She ignored him.

“Bring me the small flashlight from the kitchen drawer.”
Their daughter went to retrieve it.
Her mother lowered her head and examined the gap between the lid and the body of the case.
There was a thin metal plate inside.
Almost invisible.
She touched it.
Something shifted.
Click.
All three froze.
Then Emiko laughed.
Her husband stared.
“What?”
She looked up.
“It's a mechanism.”
“A what?”
“A mechanical catch. There appears to be a second locking system beneath the lid.”
Their daughter leaned forward.
“So it isn't haunted?”
Her mother smiled.
“I wouldn't go quite that far.”
Her father pointed toward her.
“See? This is why I married you.”
“Because I can recognize a latch?”
“Because you save me from having to believe in stupid shit.”
Their daughter raised an eyebrow.
“Dad, you've had the same sword delivered to you seven times.”
He thought about that.
“Fair point.”
Emiko carefully manipulated the catch.
Another click.
The lid lifted slightly.
Beneath the ordinary velvet lining was a narrow compartment.
Empty, except for a folded strip of paper.
Their daughter leaned closer.
“Holy crap.”

Her father looked at her.
“That's warranted.”
“Thank you.”
Emiko took a pair of tweezers from a nearby drawer.
Her husband stared.
“Why do we have tweezers in the dining room?”
“We don't. I brought them from the kitchen.”
“Why?”
“Because unlike certain people, I occasionally plan before doing things.”
Their daughter smiled.
“Certain people?”
“Don't start.”
Emiko carefully lifted the paper.
It was thin.
Yellowed.
And folded so tightly that its edges had become brittle.
She placed it on a clean sheet of white paper.
“Don't touch it,” she warned.
Her daughter withdrew her hand.
“I wasn't going to.”
“You were thinking about it.”
“Apparently we've added mind reading to the family résumé.”
Emiko slowly unfolded the strip.
There were no elaborate symbols.
No drawing of a sword.
No prophecy.
Just six handwritten Japanese characters.
She read them.
Then read them again.
Her husband watched her expression.
“What does it say?”
She looked up.
“It says, ‘Ask what was taken.’”
Silence.
Their daughter frowned.
“Taken from whom?”

Her mother shook her head.
“It doesn't say.”
Her father leaned back.
“Wonderful. Our sword is leaving homework.”
But his wife was already looking at the manuscript.
And this time, she knew exactly which page she wanted.

Azuchi, Japan — 1581

The sword had been in Nobunaga's possession for less than an hour when Yasuke was summoned again.
He was eating.
Or attempting to.
The meal consisted of rice, vegetables, and a piece of fish that he had been looking forward to with considerable enthusiasm.
He had managed precisely three bites.
A servant appeared.
“Lord Nobunaga wishes to see you.”
Yasuke stared at him.
“Now?”
“Yes.”
He looked at the fish.
The servant waited.
Yasuke sighed.
“Of course.”
He stood.
Then paused.
“Could you perhaps guard this?”
The servant looked confused.
“My lord?”
“The fish.”
The servant stared.
Yasuke gestured toward the meal.
“I have had an unfortunate history with interruptions.”
The man bowed uncertainly.
“I will see that it remains untouched.”
“Thank you.”

Yasuke followed him into the corridor.
Behind him, the servant regarded the fish with the solemn responsibility of a man entrusted with the fate of the realm.

Nobunaga was not alone.
Three men stood before him.
One was Saburō.
The second was an older administrator Yasuke had seen several times but never spoken to.
The third wore plain travelling clothes and had a narrow scar beneath his left eye.
Yasuke recognized him immediately.
The merchant.
Or rather, the man he had been told was a merchant.
He was the same man who had watched Yasuke's sword during its presentation.
The same man who had stood at the edge of the chamber without speaking.
Yasuke had scarcely noticed him at the time.
Now he wondered why.
Nobunaga gestured for him to enter.
“Yasuke.”
“My lord.”
“Tell me what you know of the false order.”
Yasuke repeated the events of the road.
The messenger.
The seal.
The hidden mark.
The arrow.
The figure in the trees.
Nobunaga listened without interruption.
Then turned to the older administrator.
“Does this resemble the work of anyone in my household?”
The man bowed.
“The seal could have been copied, my lord.”
“That was not my question.”
The administrator hesitated.

“Several officials have access to impressions of your authority.”
“How many?”
“A limited number.”
“Name them.”
The man swallowed.
Yasuke watched.
Nobunaga did not raise his voice.
He did not need to.
The administrator began listing names.
At the fourth, the scarred man spoke.
“That is enough.”
Everyone turned.
The man bowed toward Nobunaga.
“My lord, the question is not who copied the seal.”
Nobunaga regarded him.
“Then what is the question?”
“Who wished Yasuke to return without the sword?”
Saburō shifted.
“Someone who wanted it.”
The man nodded.
“Precisely.”
Nobunaga leaned forward.
“And what do you propose?”
The scarred man looked at Yasuke.
“Give it back to him.”
Silence.
Yasuke stared.
Saburō frowned.
“My lord ordered him to surrender it.”
“And now I suggest he carry it again.”
“Why?”
The man looked toward Nobunaga.
“Because whoever seeks the sword has already demonstrated that he knows its location within your household.”
Nobunaga's expression sharpened.
“You believe my castle has been compromised.”
“I believe your enemies are better informed than your friends.”

Yasuke considered this.
It was a dangerous thing to say to a ruler.
Nobunaga appeared almost amused.
“Continue.”
“If the sword remains here, whoever seeks it must come here. If Yasuke carries it, whoever seeks it must follow him.”
Saburō stared.
“You would use him as bait?”
The scarred man turned.
“He has already been used as bait. The difference is whether we acknowledge it.”
Yasuke looked directly at him.
“And what is your name?”
The man seemed surprised.
Then smiled.
“Jin.”
“Jin what?”
“Jin is sufficient.”
“For you, perhaps.”
Nobunaga laughed.
Jin did not.
For several moments, the two men regarded one another.
Then Yasuke asked, “Were you the merchant who brought the sword?”
Jin's expression changed.
Nobunaga raised an eyebrow.
“You have been observing.”
“I try, my lord.”
Jin looked at the sword resting beside Nobunaga.
“I carried it here.”
“That is not what I asked.”
“No.”
Yasuke waited.
Jin continued.
“I was entrusted with its delivery.”
“By whom?”
“A woman.”

Yasuke thought of Aki.
“Her name?”
Jin hesitated.
Nobunaga watched him.
Then said, “Tell him.”
Jin lowered his eyes.
“She called herself Hana.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Called herself?”
“I cannot say whether it was her true name.”
“And where is she now?”
Jin looked toward the open doorway.
“That is the question I have been trying to answer.”

Aki had spent much of the afternoon attempting to find Ren.
This was difficult because Ren had spent much of his life learning not to be found.
It was a talent he had cultivated since childhood.
As a boy, he had hidden from household chores, unwelcome relatives, and a particularly unpleasant mathematics tutor.
As a man, he hid from considerably more dangerous people.
Aki had never been impressed.
She found him shortly before sunset near the lower market, eating noodles beside a stall.
“You're an idiot.”
Ren looked up.
“Good afternoon to you too.”
She sat opposite him.
“You followed me to the village.”
“Yes.”
“You killed Matsuda.”
“Yes.”
“You disappeared before we returned.”
“Yes.”
“And now you're eating noodles.”
He lifted his bowl.
“They're very good.”

Aki stared at him.
Ren sighed.
“What do you want?”
“The truth.”
He continued eating.
She leaned closer.
“Ren.”
He put down the bowl.
“Not here.”
“Then where?”
He glanced around.
Aki followed his gaze.
Merchants.
Travellers.
A group of soldiers drinking beneath an awning.
An elderly woman arguing over the price of vegetables.
Nothing unusual.
Which, Aki knew, meant very little.
Ren stood.
“Walk.”
They moved into a narrower street.
Then through a passage between two storehouses.
Ren stopped beneath a wooden overhang.
“You should leave Azuchi.”
Aki stared.
“No.”
“I'm serious.”
“So am I.”
“The people searching for that sword are not merely thieves.”
“I know.”
“They have influence.”
“I know.”
“They can reach men inside Nobunaga's household.”
“I know.”
Ren looked exasperated.
“Then why are you still here?”
Aki stepped closer.

“Because Grandma left us something, and you seem determined to get yourself killed before telling me what it means.”
Ren's expression changed.
“Don't.”
“Don't what?”
“Use her to win an argument.”
Aki went still.
For several moments, neither spoke.
Then she said quietly, “I'm not.”
Ren looked away.
Aki softened.
“Ren, I know you loved her.”
He gave a short, bitter laugh.
“She raised us.”
“I remember.”
“She taught us to read things other people overlooked. To listen when powerful men assumed we weren't worth hearing.”
Aki nodded.
“And to keep promises.”
Ren looked at her.
“Yes.”
She reached into her sleeve.
Removed the silver fitting.
Unwrapped it.
Ren stared.
“Where did you get that?”
“She left it to me.”
“Why didn't you tell me?”
“Because you would have taken it.”
He opened his mouth.
Then closed it.
Aki nodded.
“Exactly.”
Ren studied the object.
Then whispered, “There should be two.”
She looked up.
“What?”

“Two pieces.”
“The other is on Yasuke's sword.”
“No.”
Aki frowned.
“What do you mean?”
Ren took the fitting carefully.
Turned it over.
Examined the edges.
Then pointed to a tiny notch near one corner.
“This isn't part of the sword.”
“Then what is it?”
He looked at her.
“A key.”

Present Day

Malcolm had decided he disliked the hidden compartment even more than the sword.
At least the sword was honest about being dangerous.
A sword was a weapon.
It made no attempt to disguise itself as household furniture.
A secret compartment, on the other hand, suggested planning.
And planning suggested people.
People were considerably more troublesome than ghosts.
Emiko was studying the handwritten message.
Luna had opened a notebook.
He noticed.
“What are you doing?”
“Making a list.”
“Of what?”
“Things we know.”
He considered this.
“That'll be short.”
She ignored him.
“Number one. The sword keeps coming back.”
“Allegedly.”
“Dad.”

“Fine.”
“Number two. Somebody sent it to me.”
“Yes.”
“Number three. Grandma's book contains a symbol matching the sword.”
Her mother nodded.
“Correct.”
“Number four. Somebody hid a message inside the case.”
“Apparently.”
“Number five. We're supposed to ask what was taken.”
Her father leaned forward.
“And number six?”
She looked at him.
“We haven't asked.”
He stared.
Then smiled faintly.
“Okay. That's actually pretty good.”
His daughter looked pleased.
“Thank you.”
“Don't get used to it.”
She grinned.
“Too late.”
Emiko turned toward them.
“I think I know where to begin.”
Both looked up.
She opened the manuscript.
Turned to a passage near the middle.
“This section mentions a family that served as custodians of certain possessions.”
Her husband frowned.
“The family from the property record?”
“Possibly.”
“And?”
She traced a line of characters.
“According to this account, something was removed from their care during a period of political violence.”
“What?”

She hesitated.
“I need to check the language.”
Malcolm sighed.
His daughter pointed at him.
“Don't.”
He looked at her.
“What?”
“Don't make the joke.”
“I wasn't going to.”
“Yes, you were.”
He smiled.
“Fine.”
Her mother continued reading.
Then stopped.
“Oh.”
Her husband closed his eyes.
“That's worse than strange.”
She ignored him.
“The passage isn't describing a stolen object.”
Luna leaned closer.
“What is it describing?”
Her mother looked up.
“A person.”
Silence.
Malcolm frowned.
“Someone was kidnapped?”
“Perhaps.”
“Who?”
Her mother returned to the page.
“The account is incomplete. But it refers to a young woman taken from the household after an accusation of treachery.”
Luna sat very still.
“What happened to her?”
“I don't know.”
“Was she rescued?”
“The record doesn't say.”
“Then why would the sword be connected?”

Her mother considered.
“Perhaps it belonged to someone who tried to protect her.”
Malcolm leaned back.
“Or someone who failed.”
His wife looked at him.
He shrugged.
“I'm just saying.”
Luna stared at the manuscript.
Then at the wooden case.
“So maybe the sword isn't about the people who carried it.”
Her mother smiled faintly.
“What do you mean?”
“Maybe it's about somebody they were supposed to save.”
The father looked at her.
For a moment, he saw something in his daughter's expression that startled him.
Not fear.
Not excitement.
Certainty.
She had made a connection.
Whether it was correct was another question.
But she was no longer simply reacting to the mystery.
She was trying to solve it.
And that made him nervous.
Because he knew exactly where she'd inherited that stubbornness.
“Okay,” he said. “Before we go any further, we need some ground rules.”
His daughter groaned.
“Oh, God.”
“Number one. Nobody goes anywhere alone.”
“Dad.”
“Number two. Nobody contacts strangers about the sword without discussing it first.”
“Fine.”
“Number three. Nobody posts pictures of it online.”
She hesitated.
He stared.

“You haven't, have you?”
“No.”
“Sweetheart.”
“I took pictures.”
He closed his eyes.
“Where?”
“On my phone.”
“Anywhere else?”
She paused.
His eyes opened.
“Anywhere else?”
“I sent one to a friend.”
Silence.
Her mother looked up.
“Which friend?”
Luna shifted in her chair.
“A friend from school.”
Her father leaned forward.
“Why?”
“Because I wanted to know if she recognized the writing.”
Her mother frowned.
“Does she read Japanese?”
“Some. Her family speaks it.”
The father rubbed his forehead.
“Please tell me you didn't mention the sword.”
The daughter looked at him.
“I didn't mention anything about it coming back.”
“That is not what I asked.”
She hesitated.
Then turned her phone toward them.
The photograph showed the sword in its open case.
Beneath it was a message.
Ever seen anything like this? My family is being weird about it.
Her father stared.
Then slowly lowered his head onto the table.
His wife reached over and patted his shoulder.
“There, darling.”

He spoke into the wood.
“I am surrounded by lunatics.”
His daughter smiled.
“Genetics.”
He lifted his head.
“Don't push it.”
The mother studied the screen.
“Has your friend replied?”
“Not yet.”
“Then perhaps we should leave it alone for now.”
The father pointed at her.
“Thank you.”
His daughter looked disappointed.
“Fine.”
She placed the phone beside her notebook.
The three of them returned to the manuscript.
For nearly an hour, they worked together.
The mother translated.
The daughter recorded names and dates.
The father searched for references to the locations mentioned.
He found several possibilities.
Old castle sites.
Merchant families.
Archives.
A few obscure academic articles.
Nothing conclusive.
But gradually, the scattered pieces began to suggest a pattern.
The sword had passed through different households.
Some had preserved it.
Others had concealed it.
Several had apparently tried to destroy it.
And in more than one account, a disappearance followed.
Not always the sword.
Sometimes a person.
Sometimes an entire family.
The father looked at his notes.

“Okay. Let's say the sword is somehow connected to all these people.”
His wife nodded.
“Possibly.”
“Let's say somebody has been keeping track of it for generations.”
“Also possible.”
“And let's say whoever keeps sending it back wants us to discover something.”
Their daughter leaned forward.
“Right.”
He looked at her.
“Then why now?”
Neither answered.
He continued.
“Why didn't they send it to your mother twenty years ago? Or her grandmother? Or anybody else?”
His daughter considered.
“Maybe they did.”
He stopped.
“What?”
“Maybe Grandma had it once.”
Her mother frowned.
“I never saw it.”
“That doesn't mean she didn't.”
The mother looked thoughtful.
Then shook her head.
“There would have been some record.”
“Unless she didn't want anybody to know.”
The father glanced toward the old manuscript.
Then back at the wooden case.
For the first time that afternoon, he found himself entertaining an idea he would have dismissed as ridiculous only hours earlier.
“What if the sword didn't start coming back with me?”
His wife looked up.
“What?”
“What if it's been doing this for years? Generations, even?”
Their daughter smiled.

“Now you're getting it.”
He pointed at her.
“Don't.”
She raised both hands.
“Sorry.”
He looked toward his wife.
“Could your grandmother have known about this thing?”
She was quiet.
Then she closed the manuscript.
“There is someone I need to speak to.”
The father stared.
“Who?”
“My aunt.”
Their daughter frowned.
“In Japan?”
“Yes.”
“I thought you said she wasn't well.”
“She hasn't been.”
“Then why—”
“Because she was with my grandmother when she died.”
Silence settled over the table.
The mother looked at the manuscript.
“There's something she told me years ago.”
Her husband leaned forward.
“What?”
“She said Grandma had spent the final weeks of her life trying to find something.”
“What something?”
“She wouldn't say.”
The daughter leaned closer.
“Did Grandma find it?”
Her mother stared at the closed wooden case.
“I don't know.”
Then her phone rang.
All three turned.
The screen displayed an international number.
Japan.

Her husband raised an eyebrow.
“Well, that's convenient.”
She picked it up.
Looked at the number.
And went pale.
“What?” he asked.
She didn't answer.
Her daughter leaned closer.
“Mom?”
The woman turned the screen toward them.
The caller's name was already stored in her phone.
Her aunt.
In Japan.
The mother answered.
“Hello?”
There was a pause.
Then a woman's voice spoke in Japanese.
The mother listened.
Her expression changed.
She stood.
“What do you mean?”
Her husband rose with her.
The voice continued.
The mother gripped the phone.
Then whispered, “How did you know?”
Silence.
Her daughter stared.
The woman on the other end said something else.
The mother closed her eyes.
When she opened them, she was looking directly at the wooden case.
Her aunt spoke again.
Slowly.
Carefully.
The mother translated aloud without seeming to realize she was doing it.
“She says…”

Her voice faltered.
The father stepped closer.
“What?”
She swallowed.
“She says we must not send the sword away again.”
Their daughter sat very still.
The aunt continued speaking.
The mother listened.
Then whispered, “Why?”
The reply was short.
The mother lowered the phone.
Her husband stared.
“Sweetheart?”
She looked at him.
Then at their daughter.
“Because the last person who tried to return it…”
She stopped.
Her husband touched her shoulder.
“What happened?”
The mother looked toward the case.
Her voice was barely audible.
“Never came home.”

Azuchi, Japan — 1581

Ren placed the silver fitting on the table.
Aki studied it.
“A key?”
He nodded.
“To what?”
“Something our grandmother wanted kept hidden.”
“Where?”
Ren looked toward the castle.
“That is what I'm trying to discover.”
Aki leaned forward.
“Ren, enough.”
He looked at her.

“You've been protecting me from information for years. You think because I'm your younger sister, I can't understand what you're doing.”
“That isn't true.”
“Then tell me.”
Ren was silent.
Aki continued.
“You killed a man. People have died. And Yasuke is carrying a sword that powerful men desperately want.”
Ren rubbed his forehead.
“You think I don't know?”
“I think you know more than you're telling me.”
He stared at the silver fitting.
Then sighed.
“Our grandmother wasn't merely preserving family stories.”
Aki waited.
“She was keeping an account.”
“Of what?”
“Payments. Transfers. Names. Goods moved between households.”
Aki frowned.
“Merchant records?”
“Some.”
“And the others?”
Ren met her eyes.
“People.”
She stared.
“What kind of people?”
“Servants. Prisoners. Hostages. Women taken as guarantees of loyalty. Children moved between families to secure agreements.”
Aki sat back.
Ren continued.
“Some of these arrangements were lawful. Others were not. Some were made openly. Others were concealed.”
“And Grandma recorded them?”
“She inherited the records. Then added to them.”
Aki looked at the silver fitting.
“Why?”

“Because records can protect people.”
She looked up.
“Or destroy them.”
Ren nodded.
“Exactly.”
For several moments, neither spoke.
Then Aki asked, “What does any of this have to do with Yasuke's sword?”
Ren picked up the fitting.
Held it toward the light.
“Because the records were divided.”
“Why?”
“To prevent any one household from controlling them.”
Aki frowned.
“How many parts?”
“Three.”
She looked at him.
“Three?”
Ren nodded.
“One remained with our grandmother. One was entrusted to another family.”
“And the third?”
He looked toward Azuchi Castle.
“The third was hidden in something no one would think to examine.”
Aki followed his gaze.
“The sword.”
Ren said nothing.
Aki leaned back.
For the first time, she understood why men might kill for an object whose steel was no different from a hundred other fine blades.
Not because the sword possessed power.
Because it might contain proof.
Proof of betrayal.
Proof of theft.
Proof that men who claimed honorable service had built their fortunes on things they had no right to take.

She looked at her brother.
“Who knows?”
Ren's expression darkened.
“Too many.”
Aki stood.
“Then Yasuke is in danger.”
“Yes.”
“Does Nobunaga know?”
“I don't know.”
She moved toward the doorway.
Ren caught her arm.
“Aki.”
She turned.
“You cannot tell Yasuke everything.”
“Why?”
“Because one of the names in those records belongs to a man he trusts.”
Aki froze.
“Who?”
Ren looked at her.
Then said the name.
For several seconds, she could not speak.
Finally, she whispered, “You're certain?”
“No.”
“Then how can you—”
“Because Grandma wrote it herself.”
Aki stared at him.
Then slowly lowered her eyes toward the silver fitting.
Outside, the castle bells sounded.
She understood now that the sword was not merely drawing dangerous men toward Yasuke.
It was bringing him into a conflict that had existed long before he arrived in Japan.
A conflict in which the truth might be more dangerous than any weapon.
And if her grandmother's records were correct, the most dangerous man in that conflict was already close enough to touch the blade.



Chapter 8

The Weight of Truth



Present Day

Malcolm had never liked international telephone calls.
Not because they were expensive. That particular annoyance had largely disappeared years ago.
He disliked them because bad news seemed to travel particularly well across oceans.
And judging by Emiko's expression, Japan had just sent them a substantial shipment.
“Put her on speaker.”
Emiko looked at him.
“What?”
“Your aunt. Put her on speaker.”
“She doesn't speak English.”
“I know that.”
“Then what good—”
“Because I want to hear her voice.”
Something in his tone stopped her.
She tapped the screen.
An elderly woman's voice filled the dining room.
She spoke quickly in Japanese, her words occasionally interrupted by a dry cough.
Emiko answered.
The exchange continued for nearly a minute.
Luna watched anxiously.
Malcolm understood only a handful of words, but he recognized something in the older woman's voice.
Fear.

Not surprise.
Not confusion.
Fear.
Emiko finally turned toward them.
“She says the sword must remain in our possession.”
Her husband looked at the wooden case.
“That hasn't exactly been optional.”
The daughter almost smiled.
Almost.
Emiko continued.
“She says my grandmother knew it would eventually return.”
“Return to whom?” the father asked.
His wife translated.
The aunt answered.
The mother went still.
“What?” her daughter asked.
“She says my grandmother never believed the sword belonged to one person.”
Her husband frowned.
“We've established that nobody owns the damn thing. It's apparently got a better travel schedule than we do.”
His daughter gave him a warning look.
He raised his hands.
“Sorry.”
The aunt continued speaking.
This time, the mother did not translate immediately.
She listened.
Asked a question.
Listened again.
Then closed her eyes.
Malcolm stepped closer.
“Sweetheart?”
She opened them.
“My grandmother had the sword.”
The father stared.
“What?”
“Years ago. Before I was born.”

Luna leaned forward.
“So it really has been in the family?”
“Apparently.”
The aunt spoke again.
Her mother listened.
Then shook her head.
“No. She says it wasn't ours.”
The father looked confused.
“Then whose was it?”
His wife translated the question.
A long silence followed.
Then the aunt answered.
Emiko looked at her daughter.
“She says it was being kept for someone.”
“Who?”
The aunt spoke again.
The mother translated slowly.
“For the person who would finally ask the right question.”
The father looked toward the ceiling.
“Oh, terrific. The sword comes with a philosophy degree.”
“Dad.”
“What? That's not an answer.”
His wife looked at him.
“No,” she admitted. “It isn't.”
For a moment, all three were quiet.
Then Luna leaned toward the phone.
“Ask her something for me.”
Emiko nodded.
“What?”
“Ask her whether Grandma ever tried to get rid of it.”
The mother translated.
The response came immediately.
A sharp intake of breath.
Then a stream of Japanese.
The mother listened, her expression growing increasingly troubled.
Finally, she interrupted.
Asked a question.

The aunt answered.
And then she began to cry.
Luna sat back.
“Mom?”
Emiko spoke softly into the phone, reassuring the older woman.
When the aunt finally stopped crying, she said something brief.
Then the line went dead.
The mother stared at the screen.
Her husband touched her shoulder.
“What happened?”
She swallowed.
“My grandmother did try to return it.”
“To whom?”
“To the family that had entrusted it to her.”
“And?”
“She travelled to meet them.”
Her daughter leaned forward.
“Did she come back?”
“Yes.”
The father frowned.
“Then why did your aunt say the last person who tried to return it never came home?”
Emiko looked at him.
“Because she wasn't talking about my grandmother.”
Silence.
The mother placed the phone on the table.
“She was talking about my grandfather.”

Azuchi, Japan — 1581

Yasuke found Saburō in the training courtyard.
The younger warrior was alone, striking a wooden post with a practice sword.
Again.
And again.
And again.
Yasuke watched for a while.

Then said, “Has it offended you?”
Saburō stopped.
Turned.
“What?”
“The post. It must have done something terrible.”
Saburō looked at the battered wood.
Then back at Yasuke.
“I am training.”
“So I see.”
“Do you wish to join me?”
“Not particularly.”
“Then why are you here?”
Yasuke stepped into the courtyard.
“Because I thought you might prefer to strike something that could complain.”
Saburō stared.
Then, unexpectedly, laughed.
It was the first genuine laugh Yasuke had heard from him.
The sound seemed to surprise them both.
Saburō lowered the practice sword.
“You have become insufferable.”
“So I have been told.”
“By whom?”
“Nearly everyone.”
Saburō smiled faintly.
Then grew serious.
“You met with Lord Nobunaga.”
“Yes.”
“And?”
“He heard my account.”
“Did you tell him everything?”
“Yes.”
Saburō looked down.
“Including my failures?”
Yasuke nodded.
The younger warrior exhaled.
“I expected as much.”

“He has not yet told me what he intends.”
Saburō nodded.
Then looked toward the castle.
“I thought I understood what it meant to serve.”
Yasuke waited.
“I believed obedience was the foundation of loyalty.”
“And now?”
Saburō considered.
“I am beginning to think obedience is merely easier.”
Yasuke smiled faintly.
“That is a dangerous thought.”
“Yes.”
“Especially for a man who has spent his life following orders.”
Saburō looked at him.
“You are enjoying this.”
“A little.”
The younger warrior shook his head.
Then gestured toward the practice swords.
“One exchange.”
Yasuke raised an eyebrow.
“You wish to lose again?”
“I wish to discover whether I have learned anything.”
Yasuke considered.
Then removed his sandals and stepped onto the training ground.
Saburō tossed him a wooden sword.
They faced one another.
The younger warrior bowed.
Yasuke returned it.
This time, Saburō did not attack immediately.
He waited.
Watched.
Measured the distance.
Yasuke smiled.
“Better.”
Saburō's eyes narrowed.
“Don't encourage me.”
“Then stop improving.”

Saburō moved.
The first strike was restrained.
The second tested Yasuke's balance.
The third was a feint.
Yasuke caught it and countered.
Saburō retreated.
Then advanced again.
Their wooden blades cracked together.
For several moments, neither gained an advantage.
Then Yasuke saw an opening.
He stepped forward.
Saburō shifted unexpectedly.
His practice sword touched Yasuke's shoulder.
Both men froze.
Saburō stared.
Then lowered his weapon.
“I struck you.”
Yasuke examined his shoulder.
“So you did.”
Saburō looked astonished.
“I won.”
Yasuke considered.
“Let us not become carried away.”
“I won.”
“You touched my shoulder.”
“According to the rules, that is victory.”
Yasuke sighed.
“A terrible day for justice.”
Saburō laughed.
Then offered a formal bow.
Yasuke returned it.
The exchange had lasted only moments.
But something important had changed.
Saburō had finally fought to learn rather than to prove himself superior.
And Yasuke had discovered that respect could grow in soil previously occupied by resentment.

Aki was waiting near the lower entrance.
She looked troubled.
Yasuke noticed immediately.
“You have spoken with Ren.”
“Yes.”
“And?”
“We need to talk.”
He glanced toward the courtyard.
“Those words rarely introduce good news.”
“Not here.”
“Where?”
“Somewhere private.”
Yasuke studied her.
Then nodded.
They walked through the castle grounds toward a smaller garden beside a storage building.
The afternoon was warm.
Insects hummed among the trees.
Somewhere beyond the walls, merchants called to passing customers.
Aki waited until they were alone.
Then turned.
“Do you have the sword?”
“No.”
Her expression changed.
“What?”
“Lord Nobunaga asked me to leave it with him.”
Aki closed her eyes.
“Oh, Yasuke.”
“He is my lord.”
“I know.”
“He gave it to me.”
“I know.”
“And he asked for it back.”
She looked toward the castle.
“Do you know where it is now?”

“With Nobunaga.”
“Are you certain?”
Yasuke frowned.
“I placed it before him.”
“That was not my question.”
He studied her.
“What have you learned?”
Aki hesitated.
“My brother believes the sword contains part of a record.”
“A record of what?”
“People who were taken. Families separated. Payments made to conceal where they were sent.”
Yasuke listened.
Aki continued.
“My grandmother preserved part of that history.”
“Why?”
“Because she believed some of those people deserved to be remembered.”
Yasuke looked toward the garden.
He had seen how easily a man's life could be reduced to an order.
A levy.
An accusation.
A body beneath a white cloth.
He thought of the old farmer.
And the boy who had called him Grandfather.
“What became of the people in those records?” he asked.
Aki shook her head.
“Some survived. Some disappeared. Some were given new names.”
Yasuke turned toward her.
“New names?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“To conceal their origins. To erase obligations. Sometimes to protect them.”
“And sometimes?”
Aki met his eyes.
“To make them easier to own.”

Yasuke was silent.
For a moment, the garden seemed far away.
He remembered being called by names he had not chosen.
Remembered the sound of unfamiliar words spoken about him as though he were absent.
He remembered learning that a person could stand in a room full of people and still be treated as a possession.
Aki watched him.
“Yasuke?”
He looked at her.
“Who has the records?”
“My family has one part. Another was entrusted elsewhere.”
“And the third?”
She hesitated.
“We believe it was concealed in the sword.”
He considered.
“Then perhaps Nobunaga should know.”
Aki's expression tightened.
“Perhaps.”
“You disagree?”
“I don't know whom to trust.”
“Your brother?”
“Yes.”
“Your grandmother?”
“She is dead.”
“Her records?”
Aki nodded.
“As much as I can.”
Yasuke studied her.
“And me?”
She looked up.
For several seconds, neither spoke.
Then Aki answered.
“Yes.”
The word was quiet.
But certain.
Yasuke felt something shift.

Not in the mystery.
In himself.
He had spent much of his life being judged by men who believed they already understood him.
Aki had approached him because of the sword.
He knew that.
Yet she had remained because of something else.
At least, he hoped so.
He smiled faintly.
“That is either great confidence or very poor judgment.”
Aki smiled.
“Possibly both.”
Then she stepped closer.
“There is something else.”
Yasuke sighed.
“Of course there is.”
She ignored him.
“Ren told me one of the names in the records belongs to someone you trust.”
Yasuke's expression changed.
“Who?”
Aki looked away.
“I'm not certain the record is accurate.”
“Tell me.”
“Yasuke—”
“Tell me.”
She met his eyes.
Then spoke the name.
Jin.
Yasuke stared.
“The merchant?”
Aki nodded.
“My brother believes he was involved in transferring the missing records.”
“When?”
“Before the sword reached Nobunaga.”
Yasuke thought of the scarred man.

His careful answers.
His recommendation that Yasuke be given the sword again.
And his refusal to explain who had entrusted it to him.
“He may have been protecting them,” Yasuke said.
“Yes.”
“Or stealing them.”
“Yes.”
Yasuke looked toward the castle.
“Then we ask him.”
Aki caught his arm.
“No.”
“Why?”
“Because if he is responsible, he will know we suspect him.”
Yasuke considered.
“And if he is innocent?”
“Then we risk turning an ally into an enemy.”
He smiled faintly.
“You are learning to distrust everyone.”
Aki shook her head.
“No.”
She looked at him.
“I am learning that trust should be given carefully.”
He considered her words.
Then nodded.
“Agreed.”

Present Day

Malcolm sat down heavily.
“Your grandfather.”
Emiko nodded.
“He disappeared during a trip to return the sword.”
Luna looked confused.
“But I thought Grandpa died before I was born.”
“He did.”
“Then what do you mean, disappeared?”
Emiko took a breath.

“My family always said he suffered an accident during a business trip.”
“What kind of accident?”
“I was young. Nobody explained much.”
“And now?”
Her mother looked at the telephone.
“Now I'm wondering whether they told us the truth.”
Malcolm rubbed his face.
“Okay.”
He looked at Luna.
“New rule.”
She sighed.
“Dad—”
“No, seriously. New rule. Nobody dies because of this thing.”
She looked at him.
“That's not really a rule you can enforce.”
He stared.
“I'm your father. I can enforce anything.”
She raised an eyebrow.
“Would you like to revisit that statement?”
Emiko almost smiled.
He shook his head.
“I'm trying to be dramatic.”
“You're succeeding,” his daughter said. “Just not in the way you intended.”
He leaned back.
“Wonderful.”
For a moment, the family fell quiet.
Then Luna looked toward the manuscript.
“Mom?”
“Yes?”
“Can we ask Auntie something else?”
Emiko frowned.
“She was very upset.”
“I know.”
“But?”
The daughter hesitated.

“If Grandpa disappeared trying to return the sword, how did it get back to Grandma?”
Her father slowly turned.
He looked at his daughter.
Then at his wife.
“That,” he said, “is a damn good question.”
Emiko picked up her phone.
Dialed.
Waited.
The call rang once.
Twice.
Three times.
Then a recorded voice spoke in Japanese.
The number was unavailable.
She frowned.
“That doesn't make sense.”
Her husband looked at her.
“What?”
“She called us five minutes ago.”
“Maybe she turned off her phone.”
“Perhaps.”
She dialed again.
Same result.
Luna looked uneasy.
“Mom?”
Her mother lowered the phone.
Then checked the call history.
The number was there.
The duration.
The time.
Everything looked normal.
Except the contact name.
It had disappeared.
Where her aunt's name had been, there was now only a string of numbers.
Emiko stared.
Her husband leaned closer.

“What?”
She showed him.
He frowned.
“Maybe your phone glitched.”
“Maybe.”
But she did not sound convinced.
Luna reached for her own phone.
“What's Auntie's number?”
Emiko recited it.
The girl entered it.
Then stopped.
“What?”
The daughter looked up.
“That number doesn't exist.”
Her father frowned.
“What do you mean?”
“I searched it. It's not assigned to any carrier.”
He stared.
“That's impossible.”
Her mother looked at the phone.
Then at the sword.
Then back at her daughter.
“Call your cousin.”
The girl blinked.
“Which one?”
“The one in Tokyo.”
She did.
A young woman's voice answered after several rings.
The daughter spoke briefly.
Then handed the phone to her mother.
A rapid conversation followed.
Malcolm watched.
His wife's expression changed.
She sat down.
Slowly.
“What?” he asked.
She did not answer.

“Sweetheart?”
Her eyes filled with tears.
Luna leaned closer.
“Mom?”
Emiko spoke into the phone one final time.
Then ended the call.
For several seconds, she simply sat there.
Finally, her husband took her hand.
“What happened?”
She looked at him.
Then at their daughter.
“My aunt died.”
Silence.
Malcolm stared.
“What?”
“Three days ago.”
He shook his head.
“No.”
The mother nodded.
“Her funeral is tomorrow.”
Luna looked toward the phone.
Then the wooden case.
Then back at her mother.
“But we just spoke to her.”
The mother did not answer.
Outside, a car drove past.
Somewhere upstairs, the heating system switched on.
Ordinary sounds.
Ordinary life.
Malcolm looked at the closed case.
Then at his wife.
And for the first time, he had absolutely nothing funny to say.

Azuchi, Japan — 1581

Jin was waiting when Yasuke returned to his quarters.

The scarred man stood beside the doorway, hands folded inside his sleeves.
Yasuke stopped.
“Have you come to explain yourself?”
Jin smiled.
“That depends upon what you wish explained.”
“Your involvement with the sword.”
“Ah.”
“Your connection to Hana.”
“Yes.”
“And why men are willing to murder villagers to obtain something you carried into Nobunaga's household.”
Jin's smile faded.
“You have learned more than I expected.”
“Not nearly enough.”
The man glanced toward the passageway.
“May we speak privately?”
Yasuke opened the door.
Jin entered.
The room was simple.
A sleeping mat.
A low table.
A lamp.
And an empty place where the sword had rested.
Jin noticed immediately.
“Where is it?”
“With Lord Nobunaga.”
The man's expression changed.
“You gave it back?”
“He requested it.”
Jin closed his eyes.
For a moment, he seemed genuinely distressed.
Then he opened them.
“Did he examine the hilt?”
Yasuke frowned.
“I don't know.”
“Did he remove the fittings?”

“I don't know.”
Jin stepped closer.
“You must retrieve it.”
Yasuke studied him.
“Why?”
“Because the sword is not safe in his possession.”
Yasuke's expression hardened.
“You are speaking of my lord.”
“I am speaking of the men surrounding him.”
“Then explain.”
Jin hesitated.
Yasuke pointed toward the door.
“Or leave.”
The scarred man regarded him.
Then slowly sat.
“Very well.”
He took a breath.
“The sword was never intended to be a weapon.”
Yasuke almost laughed.
“That is an extraordinary statement about a sword.”
Jin ignored him.
“It was made to carry something.”
“A record.”
Jin looked up sharply.
“Who told you?”
Yasuke remained silent.
The man considered.
Then nodded.
“Aki.”
Yasuke's eyes narrowed.
“You know her?”
“I know her family.”
“Then you know Ren.”
Jin's expression tightened.
“Yes.”
“And Hana?”
The man looked away.

For a moment, the room became very quiet.
Then he answered.
“Hana was my wife.”
Yasuke stared.
Jin continued.
“She was entrusted with the records after her family's household was attacked.”
“By whom?”
“Men seeking to conceal a transfer.”
“What transfer?”
Jin lowered his eyes.
“People.”
Yasuke felt anger stir.
“What people?”
“Families. Children. Those taken from defeated households and moved without lawful record.”
Yasuke stepped closer.
“Why?”
“Because a person without a recorded name can disappear.”
The words settled heavily between them.
Jin continued.
“Hana believed the records could restore identities to people who had been erased.”
“And you?”
“I believed the records would get us killed.”
Yasuke watched him.
“Was she?”
Jin looked down.
“Yes.”
Silence.
For the first time, Yasuke saw something beneath the man's careful composure.
Grief.
Old grief.
But not diminished.
Jin continued.
“She died protecting the last part of the record.”

Yasuke sat opposite him.
“And you carried the sword to Nobunaga.”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Because I believed he was powerful enough to protect it.”
“Then why tell me it is unsafe with him?”
Jin looked up.
“Because I now believe someone close to him was responsible for Hana's death.”
Yasuke stared.
“Who?”
Jin hesitated.
Then spoke.
“A man who has been entrusted with the movement of messages, seals, and private correspondence.”
Yasuke thought of the false order.
The murdered messenger.
The carefully copied seal.
“The steward of correspondence,” he said.
Jin nodded.
“Yes.”
Yasuke leaned back.
Nobunaga had summoned that very man only hours earlier.
And the sword was still in his chamber.
Yasuke stood.
Jin rose quickly.
“Where are you going?”
“To Lord Nobunaga.”
“You cannot simply accuse one of his officers.”
“I don't intend to accuse him.”
“Then what?”
Yasuke moved toward the doorway.
“I intend to ask a question.”
“What question?”
He turned.
“Whether the man entrusted with guarding my lord's correspondence has also been entrusted with guarding the sword.”

Jin stared.
Then hurried after him.
They reached the outer corridor just as a bell began to ring.
Not the evening bell.
Not the call to prayer.
An alarm.
A servant ran past them.
Yasuke caught his arm.
“What happened?”
The young man stared, breathless.
“Lord Nobunaga's private chamber.”
Yasuke felt cold.
“What about it?”
The servant swallowed.
“There's been an attack.”
Jin stepped forward.
“Is he alive?”
“I don't know!”
The servant pulled free and ran.
Yasuke turned toward the main hall.
Soldiers were already rushing through the corridors.
Orders echoed.
Doors slammed.
The castle seemed to awaken all at once.
Yasuke began to run.
Jin followed.
As they rounded the last corner, they saw two guards lying on the floor.
One was bleeding.
The other was motionless.
The chamber doors stood open.
Inside, furniture had been overturned.
Papers lay scattered across the floor.
A lamp had been smashed.
Nobunaga stood beside the window, holding a short sword.
Blood stained his sleeve.
He was alive.

Yasuke stopped.
“My lord!”
Nobunaga turned.
His expression was furious.
“Find him!”
Yasuke looked around.
“Who?”
“The steward!”
Yasuke's eyes moved toward the low table.
The sword was gone.
Nobunaga followed his gaze.
Then spoke with terrible calm.
“He has taken it.”
Yasuke stared.
The lord stepped closer.
“Find him before he leaves the castle.”
Yasuke bowed.
Then turned toward the doorway.
But before he could move, Nobunaga spoke again.
“Yasuke.”
He turned.
The lord's expression had changed.
For the first time since Yasuke had entered his service, he saw something approaching uncertainty in Nobunaga's eyes.
“There is something I did not tell you about that sword.”
Yasuke waited.
Nobunaga looked toward the empty table.
Then said quietly:
“The merchant who first brought it to me was not the first man to offer it.”
Yasuke frowned.
“My lord?”
Nobunaga continued.
“Years ago, another man came to me carrying a drawing of the same blade.”
Jin went still.
Yasuke noticed.

Nobunaga looked directly at him.
“He told me the sword would one day be carried by a stranger from across the sea.”
Silence.
Yasuke stared.
The lord continued.
“I thought him a madman.”
“And now?”
Nobunaga's expression hardened.
“Now I am beginning to wonder whether madness is simply what we call a truth we do not yet understand.”
Outside, the alarm bells continued.
Yasuke looked at Jin.
The scarred man's face had gone pale.
And suddenly Yasuke understood something.
The sword had not entered his life by accident.
Someone had expected him.
Someone had been waiting.
And whatever game had begun long before he reached Japan was now unfolding around him.
He looked toward the corridor.
Then back at Nobunaga.
“My lord.”
“Yes?”
“Who was the man?”
Nobunaga considered.
Then answered.
“I never learned his name.”
Yasuke waited.
“But I remember what he looked like.”
The lord stepped closer.
“He had a scar beneath his left eye.”
Yasuke slowly turned toward Jin.
The scarred man did not move.
For several seconds, neither spoke.
Then Jin lowered his head.
And whispered:

“I can explain.”



Chapter 9

The Things We Bury



Azuchi, Japan — 1581

“I can explain.”
Jin's words hung in the chamber.
Yasuke looked at him.
Then at Nobunaga.
Then back at Jin.
“Excellent,” Yasuke said. “Because I was beginning to run out of polite ways to ask.”
Nobunaga did not smile.
Two guards lay bleeding beyond the doorway. Somewhere inside the castle, men were searching for a traitor. The sword had vanished, and the man standing beside Yasuke had apparently been lying to both of them.
Nobunaga raised his short blade.
“Speak.”
Jin looked toward the doorway.
“First, my lord, I suggest you close the gates.”
“They are already closed.”
“Then double the guards at the western passage.”
Nobunaga's eyes narrowed.
“Why?”
“Because the steward will not attempt the main gate. He has prepared another way out.”
“You know this?”
“I know the man.”
Yasuke stepped closer.
“How well?”

Jin glanced at him.
“Well enough to know he will kill anyone who stands between him and his escape.”
Nobunaga turned toward a guard.
“Send men to the western passage. No one leaves without my permission.”
The guard hurried away.
Jin waited until the footsteps disappeared.
Then he removed a small object from his clothing.
A narrow wooden box.
He placed it on the table.
Yasuke watched carefully.
“Another gift?”
“No.”
Jin opened it.
Inside lay a folded strip of paper.
Its surface was faded and stained.
Jin unfolded it with extraordinary care.
The drawing showed a sword.
Black scabbard.
Dark wrapping.
A small silver fitting near the hilt.
Even the red binding had been marked.
Yasuke recognized it immediately.
Nobunaga stared at the drawing.
“That is what you showed me.”
Jin bowed.
“Yes, my lord.”
“Years ago.”
“Yes.”
“And you told me a man from across the sea would one day carry it.”
“I did.”
Yasuke folded his arms.
“I would very much like to hear how you knew that.”
Jin looked at him.
“I didn't.”

Silence.
Yasuke blinked.
“An unexpected beginning.”
Jin continued.
“I was given the drawing by a woman who claimed the sword must be placed beyond the reach of a particular household.”
“Which household?” Nobunaga asked.
“She refused to name it.”
“Convenient,” Yasuke observed.
Jin accepted the criticism.
“She also told me the weapon would become important when a foreign warrior entered your service.”
Nobunaga leaned forward.
“And you believed her?”
“No.”
That answer seemed to surprise everyone.
Jin looked down at the drawing.
“I believed she was frightened. I believed someone had threatened her family. I believed the sword existed. But the rest?”
He shook his head.
“I thought it was a tale invented to persuade me to help.”
Yasuke studied him.
“Then why bring the drawing to Nobunaga?”
“Because she asked me to.”
“That is all?”
“At the time, yes.”
Nobunaga's expression hardened.
“You told me the sword would come into my possession.”
“I told you someone might bring it.”
“You told me a stranger would carry it.”
“Yes.”
“And now that stranger stands before you.”
Jin looked toward Yasuke.
“Yes.”
Nobunaga lowered his blade.
“Either you have been fortunate beyond reason, or you have arranged something you do not wish to explain.”

Jin was silent.
Yasuke watched him.
There was something weary about the man's face.
Something that had not been there when they first met.
Finally, Jin said, “I have arranged many things, my lord.”
Nobunaga's hand tightened around the weapon.
“Explain.”
Jin looked directly at him.
“But I did not arrange Yasuke.”

The search began at the western passage.
Saburō led eight armed men through a narrow corridor beneath the castle's storage buildings.
The air smelled of damp timber and earth.
A torch flickered against the walls.
One of the soldiers glanced nervously toward the darkness.
“I didn't know this passage existed.”
Saburō frowned.
“Neither did I.”
The soldier looked surprised.
“You've served here for years.”
“Yes.”
“Then how—”
“Apparently there are things about this castle we have not been invited to know.”
The soldier fell silent.
They reached a heavy wooden door.
It stood partly open.
Saburō raised his hand.
The company stopped.
He listened.
Nothing.
Then he heard it.
A soft scraping sound.
Metal against stone.
Saburō gestured toward two soldiers.
They moved forward.

He followed.
Beyond the doorway, the passage descended toward a narrow tunnel.
At its entrance lay a dead guard.
His throat had been cut.
Saburō knelt beside him.
The man was young.
Too young.
He wore the insignia of Nobunaga's household.
Saburō recognized him.
Takeshi.
A quiet soldier who had married only months earlier.
His wife was expecting their first child.
Saburō closed the dead man's eyes.
Then stood.
“Find the steward.”
One of the soldiers hesitated.
“Alive?”
Saburō looked toward the tunnel.
“If possible.”
“And if not?”
The younger warrior drew his sword.
“Then make certain he cannot harm anyone else.”
They entered the darkness.

Present Day

The father had a theory.
He had several theories, actually.
Most involved someone playing an elaborate practical joke.
One involved a criminal organization.
Another involved an extraordinarily dedicated antique dealer.
The latest involved his wife having married into a family whose ancestors apparently couldn't keep track of their own belongings.
He was considering sharing that final theory when his daughter spoke.
“So we're going to Japan.”

He looked up.
“No.”
She nodded.
“Okay.”
He narrowed his eyes.
“That was suspiciously easy.”
“Was it?”
“Yes.”
She returned to her phone.
Her father watched her.
“What are you doing?”
“Looking at flights.”
He closed his eyes.
“Oh, for the love of—”
“Dad, you knew I was going to.”
“That doesn't make it less irritating.”
His wife sat at the dining room table with the manuscript open before her.
She had barely spoken since learning of her aunt's death.
Her husband noticed.
He pulled out the chair beside her.
“Hey.”
She looked up.
“Hey.”
“You okay?”
She considered the question.
“No.”
He nodded.
“Fair enough.”
She lowered her eyes.
“My aunt was the last person who remembered my grandmother's stories the way she told them.”
He took her hand.
“Your mother remembers some.”
“My mother thought most of it was nonsense.”
“Your mother thinks most things are nonsense.”
His wife smiled faintly.

“She likes you.”
“Your mother once told me I was too tall for the house.”
“She wasn't wrong.”
He laughed.
Then grew serious.
“Listen. Whatever is going on, we'll figure it out.”
She looked at him.
“You don't believe any of this.”
“I believe somebody keeps sending me a sword I don't want.”
“That isn't what I mean.”
He sighed.
“I don't know what I believe.”
She nodded.
“Neither do I.”
He squeezed her hand.
“But I believe you.”
Her expression softened.
For a moment, she looked as though she might cry.
Instead, she leaned against him.
He put an arm around her.
Across the table, their daughter quietly lowered her phone.
For once, she had the good sense not to make a joke.

An hour later, they were arguing again.
Not about Japan.
About the sword.
Specifically, whether it was possible to establish its age without handing it to someone who might steal it, destroy it, or charge them an outrageous consulting fee.
“We could photograph it,” the daughter suggested.
Her mother nodded.
“Carefully.”
“And have someone examine the images.”
Her father frowned.
“Someone who?”
“A historian.”
“Which historian?”

“I don't know, Dad. One who knows swords.”
He stared.
“A sword historian.”
“Yes.”
“Do they have those?”
His wife looked up.
“Of course they do.”
He shrugged.
“I'm learning.”
Their daughter opened her laptop.
“We need somebody who specializes in Japanese weapons.”
Her mother nodded.
“Preferably someone familiar with the late sixteenth century.”
The father leaned back.
“Great. Let's send pictures of our mysterious sword to some guy on the internet. What could possibly go wrong?”
His daughter glanced at him.
“You're doing it again.”
“What?”
“Assuming everybody on the internet is an idiot.”
“Not everybody.”
“Just most people?”
“Now you're understanding.”
Her mother smiled despite herself.
Then she looked toward the manuscript.
“Wait.”
Both turned.
She reached for the folded note from the hidden compartment.
Ask what was taken.
She read the words again.
Then opened the manuscript to a page near the middle.
Her daughter leaned closer.
“What?”
“I've been assuming this refers to the sword.”
Her husband frowned.
“Doesn't it?”
“Perhaps not.”

She turned another page.
“These records describe a household that was attacked. Several possessions were removed. But there's an account of a child who disappeared.”
The daughter sat up.
“A child?”
“Yes.”
“Kidnapped?”
“Possibly.”
The father folded his arms.
“Okay. Now we're talking about something serious.”
His wife looked at him.
“I've been trying to tell you that.”
“I know.”
She continued reading.
“The child belonged to a family entrusted with preserving certain records.”
“Your ancestors?” the daughter asked.
“Possibly.”
The father leaned forward.
“What happened to the child?”
His wife scanned the page.
“I don't know. The passage ends.”
“Just like that?”
“Yes.”
“That's convenient.”
She looked at him.
“Darling, ancient manuscripts weren't written for our convenience.”
He raised both hands.
“Fair point.”
Their daughter studied the page.
“Mom?”
“Yes?”
“Is the child's name there?”
Her mother hesitated.
“Not clearly.”
“Can you make out anything?”

She brought the page closer to the lamp.
Then reached for a magnifying glass.
The father stared.
“Where did that come from?”
“The drawer.”
“We have a magnifying glass?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
His daughter sighed.
“Dad, please.”
He smiled.
“I'm just contributing.”
The mother examined the characters.
Then stopped.
Her expression changed.
“What?” her daughter asked.
She didn't answer.
Instead, she turned back several pages.
Then forward again.
She checked the handwriting.
The ink.
The way the characters had been formed.
Finally, she sat back.
“Oh.”
Her husband pointed toward her.
“There it is.”
She looked up.
“What?”
“That little ‘oh’ that means I'm about to lose another night's sleep.”
But she was no longer smiling.
“The child's name wasn't omitted.”
Her daughter frowned.
“Then what?”
“It was removed.”
Silence.
The father leaned closer.
“Removed how?”

His wife turned the manuscript toward them.
A small section of the page had been carefully scraped.
The paper was thinner there.
Almost translucent.
Someone had deliberately erased the writing.
The daughter stared.
“Why would somebody do that?”
Her mother shook her head.
“I don't know.”
The father studied the damaged page.
Then looked toward the sword.
For the first time, the mystery began to feel less like an elaborate trick.
And more like a crime.
A very old crime.
With very modern consequences.

Azuchi, Japan — 1581

The steward of correspondence had not always been a traitor.
At least, that was what he told himself.
As he hurried through the underground passage, clutching the stolen sword, he tried to remember the moment when service had become something else.
It had not happened suddenly.
There had been no grand declaration.
No dramatic promise to betray his lord.
Only small decisions.
A payment accepted.
A document misplaced.
A seal borrowed for a purpose that seemed harmless.
A name omitted from a register.
One favor had become another.
Then another.
Until the men who paid him knew enough to destroy him.
He had become their servant without ever formally leaving Nobunaga's.

Now he was running for his life.
The sword was wrapped in cloth beneath his arm.
He knew almost nothing about it.
That was the part that terrified him.
He had betrayed one of the most powerful men in Japan for an object whose importance had never been properly explained.
His instructions had been simple.
Obtain the weapon.
Deliver it to the designated household.
Accept payment.
Disappear.
But something had changed.
The men who had arranged the theft were now killing their own messengers.
Matsuda was dead.
The courier carrying the false order was dead.
The attackers sent to seize Yasuke had vanished or been killed.
And the steward had begun to suspect that the next corpse would be his own.
He reached the end of the passage.
A narrow door opened toward a wooded slope beyond the castle walls.
He pushed it.
It did not move.
He shoved harder.
Nothing.
Then a voice spoke behind him.
“You're late.”
The steward turned.
A man stood several paces away.
He wore plain travelling clothes.
His face was partly concealed.
The steward exhaled in relief.
“Thank the gods.”
The man did not move.
“Do you have it?”
“Yes.”

“Show me.”
The steward unwrapped the sword.
The man examined it.
Then nodded.
“Good.”
The steward stepped forward.
“Now my payment.”
The man looked at him.
“Of course.”
He reached into his clothing.
The steward smiled.
Then stopped.
The man had drawn a knife.
“Wait.”
The blade flashed.
The steward stumbled backward.
Blood spread across his chest.
He looked down.
Then at the man.
“You promised—”
“I did.”
The man caught him before he fell.
Lowered him gently to the ground.
Then took the sword.
The steward stared upward.
His mouth moved.
No sound came.
The man leaned closer.
“Promises are dangerous things.”
Then he stood.
The steward died looking at the door he had believed would lead him to freedom.

Saburō found the body moments later.
The steward lay in a pool of blood.
His face was pale.
The sword was gone.

Again.
Saburō stared at the corpse.
Then cursed.
One of the soldiers approached.
“Sir?”
Saburō knelt beside the body.
He examined the wound.
A single precise thrust.
Quick.
Deliberate.
He looked toward the narrow door.
“Open it.”
The soldier tried.
It would not move.
Another joined him.
Together, they forced it outward.
Cool evening air rushed into the passage.
Beyond lay a narrow path descending through trees.
Saburō stepped outside.
He studied the ground.
Fresh footprints.
Several sets.
One set led toward the castle.
Another toward the woods.
Then he noticed something near the doorway.
A small strip of cloth caught on a splinter.
Dark blue.
He carefully removed it.
There was a faint design woven into the fabric.
Three curved lines.
One circle.
Saburō stared.
He had seen that symbol before.
On the false order.
On the sword.
And now here.
He folded the cloth and placed it inside his sleeve.

Then turned to the soldiers.
“Seal the passage.”
“Sir?”
“No one enters or leaves.”
“What about the thief?”
Saburō looked toward the woods.
“The thief is already gone.”

Yasuke found Aki near the lower market.
She stood beside a merchant's stall, examining a collection of small metal fittings.
He approached quietly.
“You seem to enjoy shopping during emergencies.”
She did not look up.
“And you seem to enjoy interrupting women.”
“I have been searching for you.”
“Then your search is finished.”
He smiled.
“Wonderful.”
She selected a small piece of brass.
Turned it over.
Then returned it to the stall.
“What happened?”
“The sword was stolen.”
“I know.”
Yasuke stopped smiling.
“You know?”
She looked at him.
“Rumors travel quickly.”
“That quickly?”
“Apparently.”
He studied her.
“Aki.”
She sighed.
“Yes?”
“Are you involved?”
Her expression changed.

“In what?”
“The theft.”
She stared.
Then laughed.
Not a cheerful laugh.
An incredulous one.
“You think I stole it?”
“I think you know more than you tell me.”
“That is not the same thing.”
“No.”
She stepped closer.
“Do you trust me?”
Yasuke considered.
“I am trying.”
Her face hardened.
“Then perhaps you should try harder.”
He held her gaze.
“Trust is difficult when people keep dying.”
Aki's expression softened.
For several seconds, neither spoke.
Then she said quietly, “I didn't steal the sword.”
Yasuke watched her.
“And Ren?”
“I don't know.”
He sighed.
“That answer is becoming familiar.”
She looked away.
“I know.”
He considered.
Then nodded.
“Very well.”
Aki seemed surprised.
“That's it?”
“For now.”
She studied him.
Then said, “You're learning.”
“Apparently.”

They began walking.
The market was closing.
Merchants packed their goods.
Children chased one another between stalls.
The ordinary rhythms of life continued, indifferent to treachery inside the castle.
Yasuke looked toward the distant walls.
“Someone has been murdered.”
Aki stopped.
“Who?”
“The steward.”
Her expression changed.
“Are you certain?”
“Saburō found the body.”
Aki looked away.
Yasuke noticed.
“What?”
She hesitated.
“Ren said the steward was only one part of the arrangement.”
“Which arrangement?”
“The movement of people.”
Yasuke frowned.
“The missing children?”
“Yes.”
“And the sword?”
Aki nodded.
“The records.”
He considered.
“Then perhaps the steward was killed because he knew too much.”
“Perhaps.”
Yasuke watched her.
“You don't seem surprised.”
She met his eyes.
“Because I've been afraid this would happen.”
For a moment, he said nothing.
Then he asked, “What are you afraid of now?”
Aki looked toward the castle.

“That whoever took the sword may no longer need the people who helped him.”
Yasuke understood.
“Ren.”
She nodded.
“Yes.”

Present Day

The daughter's phone buzzed.
She glanced down.
Then froze.
Her father noticed immediately.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
He narrowed his eyes.
“Don't.”
She looked up.
“Don't what?”
“Do that thing your mother does.”
Her mother smiled faintly.
“What thing?”
“Say nothing when something is clearly something.”
The daughter stared at her phone.
Then placed it on the table.
“It's my friend.”
“The one you sent the picture to?” her father asked.
“Yes.”
“What did she say?”
The girl hesitated.
Her father leaned forward.
“Honey.”
She turned the screen toward them.
There was a message.
Where did you get that?
Beneath it, another.
Seriously. Don't joke.

Her father frowned.
“Okay.”
The daughter scrolled.
A third message appeared.
My grandfather has a photograph of something like it.
The mother sat up.
“What?”
The daughter nodded.
“That's what she said.”
Her father looked from one to the other.
Then back at the phone.
“Ask her to send the picture.”
The daughter blinked.
“What happened to not contacting strangers?”
“She's not a stranger.”
“You said—”
“I know what I said.”
The daughter smiled.
“Changing the rules?”
“Adapting to circumstances.”
She laughed.
“Very presidential.”
He pointed at her.
“Don't push it.”
She typed.
A moment later, the phone buzzed again.
A photograph appeared.
The image was old.
Faded.
It showed a Japanese man standing beside a low table.
He wore formal clothing and had a serious expression.
On the table lay a long wooden case.
Dark wood.
Brass fittings.
At one end, barely visible, was a small carved symbol.
Three curved lines.
One circle.

The daughter enlarged the image.
Her mother leaned closer.
The father stared.
“Well, shit.”
The daughter looked up.
“Warranted?”
“Extremely.”
Her mother studied the photograph.
“Ask when this was taken.”
The daughter typed.
They waited.
A reply appeared.
Grandpa says 1932.
The father frowned.
“Japan?”
The daughter typed again.
Another reply.
Yes. Kyoto.
The mother looked thoughtful.
“Ask who the man is.”
The daughter sent the question.
This time, the response took longer.
Nearly a minute passed.
Then the phone buzzed.
Grandpa says it's his grandfather.
The mother stared.
The father leaned forward.
“So her family had the sword too?”
“Maybe,” the daughter said.
She looked at the photograph.
Then at her mother.
“Wait.”
“What?”
“Mom, didn't you say the sword was entrusted to another family?”
Her mother nodded slowly.
“Yes.”
The daughter looked back at the phone.

“Maybe this is them.”
Her father considered.
Then looked toward the wooden case.
“So the sword has been moving between families for generations.”
His wife nodded.
“Possibly.”
“And now our daughter has a friend whose family apparently knows something about it.”
The daughter smiled.
“See? Sometimes sending pictures to friends is useful.”
Her father stared.
“Do not use this as evidence that you should ignore every instruction I give you.”
“Too late.”
He sighed.
His wife laughed softly.
Then the daughter's phone buzzed again.
Another message.
This one longer.
She read it.
Her smile disappeared.
“What?” her father asked.
She looked up.
“Her grandfather wants to speak to us.”
The mother nodded.
“That could be helpful.”
The daughter shook her head.
“No. You don't understand.”
She looked at the message again.
Then read it aloud.
“He says we've made a terrible mistake.”
The father frowned.
“What mistake?”
The girl swallowed.
“He says the sword was never supposed to leave Japan.”
Silence.
The mother stared.

“But it did.”
The daughter nodded.
Her father looked toward the case.
Then at the old photograph.
Then back at his daughter.
“Ask him why.”
She typed.
They waited.
Thirty seconds.
A minute.
Then the reply arrived.
The daughter read it.
Her expression changed.
“What?” her mother asked.
She looked up.
“He says the sword wasn't taken out of Japan.”
The father stared.
“What the hell does that mean?”
The daughter swallowed.
“He says it was sent.”
Her mother leaned closer.
“Sent where?”
The girl stared at the screen.
Then read the final line.
To the family of the man who was never allowed to return.
Her father sat very still.
For several seconds, nobody spoke.
Then he looked toward the sword.
And something he had always dismissed as an odd detail of his own family history suddenly seemed less odd.
His grandfather had told stories about an ancestor.
A man who had travelled.
A man who had served a powerful ruler.
A man whose name had been lost.
He had never taken those stories seriously.
Most families had stories.
And most stories grew taller with every generation.

But now he remembered something else.
A small object his grandfather had kept in a drawer.
A piece of dark metal.
A circle.
Three curved lines.
He looked at his wife.
Then at his daughter.
And for the first time, he wondered whether the sword had been returning to the wrong person all along.
Perhaps it had never been searching for him.
Perhaps it had been waiting for her.



Chapter 10

The Other Half



Present Day

Malcolm Hayes had spent most of his adult life avoiding one particular drawer.
Not because it contained anything dangerous.
Not because it was locked.
It was simply one of those places where families put things they didn't know what to do with.
Old photographs.
Birth certificates.
A watch that no longer worked.
A small collection of coins whose value had been exaggerated by every relative who ever examined them.
And a battered wooden box that had belonged to his grandfather.
He hadn't opened it in years.
Now he stood in the bedroom closet, staring at it.
“Dad?”
Luna appeared in the doorway.
He looked over his shoulder.
“What?”
“Mom says if you fall into another family mystery, she'd appreciate some warning.”
He smiled.
“Tell your mother I'm considering it.”
Luna stepped inside.
“What are you looking for?”
“Something your great-grandfather gave me.”
“Grandpa's dad?”

“No. My grandfather. Your great-grandfather.”
She considered.
“Right. Sorry.”
He pointed at her.
“See? This is why we need family trees. Nobody knows who anybody is.”
She grinned.
“Apparently we also need them to keep track of haunted swords.”
“Potentially haunted.”
She laughed.
He reached for the wooden box.
It was smaller than he remembered.
Dark brown.
Scratched.
One corner damaged.
He brushed dust from the lid.
Luna leaned closer.
“What's in it?”
“Old family stuff.”
“Like?”
“Photographs. Letters. Things I probably should've looked at years ago.”
“Why didn't you?”
He considered the question.
Then shrugged.
“Life.”
Luna accepted that.
She understood more than he sometimes realized.
He had spent years working, traveling, raising a family, trying to build something worthwhile. Every generation inherited objects from people it loved, and every generation promised to examine them someday.
Someday had a way of becoming never.
He carried the box downstairs.
Emiko had cleared the dining room table.
The sword remained in its case at one end.
The manuscript lay beside her laptop.

Luna's notebook had expanded to three pages.
He glanced at it.
“Are we charging admission to this investigation?”
Luna smiled.
“Not yet.”
“Good. Because I'm beginning to think somebody owes me money.”
He placed the box on the table.
Emiko looked up.
“What's that?”
“My grandfather's.”
She recognized it.
“You used to keep that in your office.”
“Yeah.”
“I wondered where it went.”
“So did I.”
Luna reached for the lid.
Malcolm gently stopped her.
“Hang on.”
She withdrew her hand.
He opened the box himself.
Inside were several photographs, tied letters, a military identification card, and a small cloth pouch.
He lifted the pouch.
The fabric was faded blue.
Emiko noticed immediately.
“That's similar to the cloth around my grandmother's book.”
He looked at it.
“Old people liked blue?”
She gave him a look.
“Darling.”
“What?”
“Just open it.”
He smiled.
“Yes, ma'am.”
He loosened the string.
Something small and metallic slid into his palm.
A piece of dark silver.

Curved along one edge.
Flat along the other.
Luna leaned forward.
“Oh, wow.”
Malcolm turned it over.
There it was.
Three curved lines.
One circle.
He stared.
Emiko reached for his hand.
“May I?”
He gave her the fitting.
She examined it carefully.
Then looked toward the sword.
“Open the case.”
He hesitated.
She met his eyes.
“Please.”
He lifted the lid.
The sword lay exactly where they had left it.
Black scabbard.
Dark red binding.
Silver fitting near the hilt.
Emiko compared the two pieces.
Her expression changed.
“What?” he asked.
She rotated the object.
Then held it beside the hilt.
The shapes were different.
But the markings were unmistakably related.
She studied the edges.
“There's a notch here.”
Luna leaned closer.
“Like a key?”
“Possibly.”
Malcolm looked at the sword.

“Don't tell me we've been carrying around the world's oldest combination lock.”
Luna smiled.
“Would explain why nobody ever found the instructions.”
Emiko turned the fitting again.
Then stopped.
“There are characters on the back.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“What do they say?”
She examined them under the lamp.
“It's difficult. They're worn.”
“Japanese?”
“Yes.”
“Can you read them?”
She nodded slowly.
“Partly.”
Luna moved closer.
“What does it say?”
Emiko hesitated.
Then translated.
“Not lost.”
Silence.
Malcolm frowned.
“That's it?”
“There's another character, but it's damaged.”
She adjusted the light.
Then looked up.
“It may mean returned.”
Malcolm stared.
“Not lost. Returned.”
Emiko nodded.
He leaned back.
“That's a little on the nose, don't you think?”
Luna laughed.
But Emiko remained serious.
She looked at the fitting again.
Then toward the sword.

“Where did your grandfather get this?”
Malcolm shook his head.
“I don't know.”
“Did he ever tell you?”
He considered.
“There was a story.”
Luna sat up.
“What story?”
He looked toward the window.
Then back at them.
“My grandfather said somebody in our family had traveled to Japan a very long time ago.”
Emiko became still.
“What?”
“Yeah. Some old family story.”
“Tell me.”
He shrugged.
“Honestly, I don't remember much. I was a kid.”
“Try.”
He thought for a moment.
“He said there was a man who went across the sea and became important to a Japanese ruler.”
Luna stared.
“Dad.”
“I know.”
“No, Dad.”
She pointed at the manuscript.
“Are you seriously telling us your family has a story about an African man serving a Japanese ruler?”
He looked uncomfortable.
“When you put it like that…”
Emiko leaned closer.
“Did your grandfather ever mention a name?”
He thought.
“No.”
“Are you certain?”
“Pretty sure.”

Luna stared at him.
“Dad, come on.”
“What?”
“You never thought this was interesting?”
He gave her a look.
“Honey, my grandfather also claimed one of our ancestors once punched a horse.”
She blinked.
“What?”
“Exactly.”
“Why would somebody punch a horse?”
“Apparently the horse started it.”
Luna burst out laughing.
Even Emiko smiled.
Malcolm shook his head.
“Family stories. Everybody's got them.”
Then Emiko said quietly, “But some of them begin with something real.”
He looked at her.
Her expression had changed.
Not fear.
Recognition.
She reached for her laptop.
Opened a browser.
Typed a name.
Luna leaned closer.
Malcolm watched.
“What?”
Emiko turned the screen.
A historical article appeared.
An illustration of an African man in Japanese clothing.
A name beneath it.
Yasuke.
Malcolm stared.
For several seconds, nobody spoke.
Then he looked at Emiko.
“You think…”

She nodded slowly.
“I think we need to investigate whether your family story has any connection to him.”
He looked back at the screen.
The image showed a man standing beside a Japanese ruler.
A figure from another century.
A life recorded only in fragments.
Luna leaned forward.
“Who was he?”
Emiko answered.
“A real African man who served Oda Nobunaga in sixteenth-century Japan.”
Malcolm looked toward the sword.
Then at the small fitting in his hand.
Then back at the image.
For a moment, he felt an unexpected sadness.
Not fear.
Not excitement.
Sadness.
Because if the story was true—even partly true—then someone in his family had carried a memory across generations without knowing how much of it mattered.
He had treated it as a curiosity.
A joke.
Something old people said.
And now he wondered what else he had failed to listen to.

Azuchi, Japan — 1581

Nobunaga did not appreciate being deceived.
Jin had known this before entering the chamber.
He understood it considerably better now.
The lord stood before him, holding the drawing of the sword.
Yasuke remained near the doorway.
Two guards had been summoned.
Neither looked particularly pleased to be involved.
Nobunaga studied Jin.

“You came to me years ago with this drawing.”
“Yes.”
“You told me a foreign warrior would one day carry the sword.”
“Yes.”
“And you now claim you did not know whether that prediction was true.”
“That is correct.”
Nobunaga's expression darkened.
“Then why repeat it?”
“Because the woman who gave me the drawing believed it.”
“And you believed her?”
“I believed she had reason to fear.”
Nobunaga stepped closer.
“Do not confuse fear with truth.”
Jin lowered his eyes.
“No, my lord.”
Yasuke watched the exchange.
Then spoke.
“May I ask something?”
Nobunaga turned.
“Speak.”
Yasuke looked toward Jin.
“You said Hana was your wife.”
“Yes.”
“You said she was killed protecting records.”
“Yes.”
“And you said she gave you the drawing.”
Jin nodded.
Yasuke considered.
“When?”
Jin hesitated.
“Before her death.”
“How long before?”
“Several years.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Then why did you bring the drawing to Nobunaga before the sword was found?”

Jin looked at him.
“Because she believed it was the only way to keep the records from being destroyed.”
“But you didn't know where the sword was.”
“No.”
“Then you wanted Nobunaga to recognize it if it appeared.”
“Yes.”
Yasuke nodded slowly.
“That explains the drawing.”
He stepped closer.
“But not the foreign warrior.”
Jin's face tightened.
Yasuke continued.
“Why tell him someone like me would carry it?”
For a long moment, Jin said nothing.
Then he looked toward Nobunaga.
“The woman who gave me the drawing did not say it would be a warrior.”
Yasuke frowned.
“What?”
“She said it would be someone who belonged to neither side.”
Silence.
Nobunaga lowered the drawing.
“Explain.”
Jin looked toward Yasuke.
“She believed the sword would be safest with a person who had no inherited loyalty to the households fighting over it.”
Yasuke considered.
“An outsider.”
“Yes.”
“Then why say a foreign warrior?”
Jin's expression changed.
“Because I believed that would interest Lord Nobunaga more than an argument about household loyalties.”
Nobunaga stared at him.
Then, unexpectedly, laughed.
It was not a cheerful sound.

“You manipulated my curiosity.”
Jin bowed deeply.
“Yes, my lord.”
“And now?”
Jin remained bowed.
“Now I ask your forgiveness.”
Nobunaga watched him.
Then turned toward Yasuke.
“What would you do with this man?”
Yasuke looked surprised.
“My lord?”
“He has admitted deceiving me. What should be done?”
Yasuke considered.
“I would ask whether his deception served himself or someone else.”
Nobunaga smiled faintly.
“And if the answer is both?”
“Then I would ask whether the truth he concealed is more important than the lie he told.”
The lord regarded him.
Then nodded.
“Interesting.”
He turned toward Jin.
“You will remain under guard until I decide.”
Jin bowed.
“As you command.”
The guards stepped forward.
But before they could take him away, Jin spoke.
“There is something else.”
Nobunaga's expression hardened.
“Of course there is.”
Yasuke nearly smiled.
Jin looked at him.
“The sword is not complete.”
Silence.
Nobunaga frowned.
“What?”

“The blade is whole. The scabbard is whole. But the object it was designed to protect is divided.”
Yasuke stepped closer.
“Into how many pieces?”
Jin hesitated.
“Three.”
Yasuke remembered Aki's silver fitting.
The symbol.
The notch.
He looked toward Nobunaga.
“My lord, I believe I know where one of the pieces may be.”
Nobunaga studied him.
“And the others?”
Yasuke shook his head.
“I don't know.”
Jin lowered his eyes.
“Then you should find them quickly.”
“Why?” Yasuke asked.
Jin looked up.
“Because the men who stole the sword already possess one.”

Present Day

Malcolm was beginning to reconsider everything he thought he knew about family history.
Luna, however, was getting impatient.
“So,” she said, “are we going to pretend this isn't the coolest thing that's ever happened to us?”
Malcolm looked up.
“Cool?”
“Yes.”
“Honey, someone has been sending us a sword for years. Your grandmother's book apparently contains a secret history. Your great-grandfather kept a matching piece of metal. And your mother's aunt may have been involved in something we don't understand.”
Luna nodded.

“Exactly.”
He stared.
“And you think that's cool?”
“Extremely.”
Emiko smiled.
“She gets that from you.”
He looked offended.
“I am a responsible adult.”
Both women burst out laughing.
He sighed.
“Fine. Apparently I'm the entertainment.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Dad, think about it. If your family really has a connection to Yasuke, that's incredible.”
He nodded slowly.
“It would be.”
“And if Mom's family has been protecting something connected to him…”
Emiko considered.
“Then we may be looking at two different family histories that intersected centuries ago.”
Luna smiled.
“Exactly.”
Malcolm looked from one to the other.
Then shook his head.
“You two are enjoying this way too much.”
Emiko smiled.
“Possibly.”
He looked toward the sword.
“I'm still not convinced it's supernatural.”
“Neither am I,” she replied.
He raised an eyebrow.
“Really?”
“Yes. We have unexplained events, but unexplained doesn't necessarily mean impossible.”
Luna considered.
“Except the phone call from someone who died three days ago.”

Silence.
Malcolm looked at her.
“Thank you for bringing that back.”
“You're welcome.”
Emiko lowered her eyes.
They had avoided discussing the call since learning of her aunt's death.
Not because they had forgotten.
Because none of them knew what to say.
Finally, Emiko spoke.
“We need to verify what happened.”
Malcolm nodded.
“Agreed.”
“And speak to my cousin.”
“Agreed.”
“And I want to examine the family records properly.”
“Also agreed.”
Luna raised a hand.
“And Japan?”
Malcolm closed his eyes.
“Don't push your luck.”
She smiled.
“Worth a shot.”
Then she glanced toward the sword.
The small silver fitting in her father's hand.
The manuscript.
The photograph from Kyoto.
Something occurred to her.
“Wait.”
Both parents turned.
“What?” Emiko asked.
“The pieces.”
Malcolm frowned.
“What pieces?”
“The metal pieces. The one on the sword and the one Grandpa left.”
Emiko nodded.
“Yes?”

“What if they're supposed to fit together?”
Malcolm looked at the fitting.
Then at the sword.
He considered.
“Maybe.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Can we try?”
He hesitated.
Then looked toward Emiko.
She studied the pieces.
“Carefully.”
Luna grinned.
Malcolm sighed.
“Wonderful. Family arts and crafts with ancient weaponry.”
He lifted the sword from its case.
Placed it on a folded towel.
Emiko examined the hilt.
There was a narrow seam beneath the silver fitting.
Almost invisible.
She traced it gently.
Then held the second piece beside it.
The shapes appeared complementary.
She adjusted the angle.
The fitting settled against the hilt.
A soft metallic sound followed.
Click.
All three froze.
Luna whispered, “Oh my God.”
Malcolm stared.
“You have got to be kidding me.”
Emiko did not move.
The piece had fitted perfectly.
Not forced.
Not wedged.
Perfectly.
Malcolm leaned closer.
“What now?”

Luna looked at him.
“Maybe there's a button.”
He gave her a look.
“It's a sword, not a television remote.”
She ignored him.
Emiko rotated the fitting slightly.
Something shifted beneath her fingers.
A narrow section of the hilt loosened.
She stopped.
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Sweetheart?”
She looked at him.
Then at Luna.
“I think there's something inside.”
For several seconds, nobody spoke.
Then Malcolm sat back.
“Okay.”
He rubbed his forehead.
“Let's establish something before we go any further.”
Luna sighed.
“Dad.”
“No. Seriously.”
He pointed at the sword.
“If a four-hundred-year-old ghost comes out of that thing, I'm moving.”
Luna laughed.
“Where?”
“I don't know. Somewhere with fewer samurai.”
Emiko smiled.
Then carefully lifted the loosened section.
Inside the hilt was a narrow hollow chamber.
And inside that chamber lay a tightly rolled strip of material.
Not paper.
Something darker.
Flexible.
Protected from the air.
Emiko stared.

Luna leaned closer.
“What is it?”
“I don't know.”
Malcolm peered inside.
“Looks like leather.”
Emiko nodded.
“Possibly.”
She reached for the tweezers.
Carefully, she lifted the strip free.
It was no longer than her little finger.
Bound with a fine thread.
She placed it on the table.
Then slowly removed the binding.
The material began to unroll.
Characters appeared.
Tiny.
Faded.
But still visible.
Emiko brought the lamp closer.
Luna watched.
“What does it say?”
Emiko studied the writing.
Then stopped.
Malcolm frowned.
“What?”
She read the first line again.
Then looked toward the manuscript.
Her expression changed.
“Oh my God.”
Malcolm leaned back.
“Here we go.”
She turned the strip toward them.
Her hands were trembling.
“This isn't a message.”
Luna frowned.
“Then what?”
Emiko swallowed.

“It's a list.”
“A list of what?”
She looked at Malcolm.
Then at Luna.
“Names.”
Silence.
Malcolm leaned forward.
“What names?”
Emiko examined the first entry.
Then the second.
Then the third.
She stopped.
Her face drained of color.
“What?” Malcolm asked.
She looked up.
“The first name is Yasuke.”
Luna stared.
Malcolm slowly lowered himself into a chair.
“And the others?”
Emiko continued reading.
Her eyes filled with tears.
Then she spoke.
“The second name is a woman.”
Luna leaned closer.
“Who?”
Emiko stared at the writing.
Then whispered:
“Aki.”
For a moment, nobody moved.
Malcolm looked at the ancient strip.
Then at Emiko.
Then at the sword.
He had spent years trying to get rid of it.
Selling it.
Giving it away.
Returning it.
Hiding it.

And all that time, a piece of his family's history had been concealed inside the hilt.
He looked at Luna.
She was staring at the names.
Not frightened.
Not laughing.
Simply trying to understand.
He reached for her hand.
She took it.
Then she said quietly, “Dad?”
“Yeah, baby?”
“Maybe this was never your sword.”
He looked at her.
She continued.
“Maybe you were just keeping it for me.”
Malcolm felt something tighten in his chest.
He looked toward Emiko.
She was watching them.
And for once, she offered no explanation.
No translation.
No clever observation.
Because sometimes the most important thing a family could discover was not the answer to a mystery.
It was the moment they understood the question had changed.
The sword had never asked to be returned.
It had been waiting to be received.

Azuchi, Japan — 1581

Aki found Yasuke at the edge of the courtyard.
He was watching the sunset.
The sword was gone.
Jin was under guard.
The castle was searching for the steward's killer.
And somewhere beyond its walls, men were carrying an object whose significance neither of them fully understood.
She approached quietly.

“You look troubled.”
Yasuke did not turn.
“I am considering the difference between being chosen and being used.”
Aki stopped.
“That's a difficult distinction.”
“Yes.”
She stood beside him.
For a while, they watched the sun descend behind the hills.
Then she said, “Ren told me something.”
Yasuke smiled faintly.
“Does he ever tell you everything?”
“Never.”
“A remarkable family tradition.”
She laughed softly.
Then grew serious.
“The silver fitting my grandmother left me.”
“Yes?”
“It's a key.”
Yasuke turned.
“To what?”
“Something hidden in the sword.”
He studied her.
“How do you know?”
“Ren examined it.”
“And?”
“He recognized the mechanism.”
Yasuke considered.
“Then the sword contains part of the records.”
“Possibly.”
He looked toward the castle.
“And the men who stole it?”
“They may not know how to open it.”
Yasuke nodded slowly.
“Then perhaps we have an advantage.”
Aki smiled.
“Perhaps.”

He looked at her.
“What?”
She hesitated.
“There's something I want to ask you.”
Yasuke raised an eyebrow.
“Only one thing?”
She smiled.
“For now.”
“Then ask.”
She looked toward the darkening sky.
“Do you ever think about going home?”
The question surprised him.
He was quiet for a long moment.
Then said, “Often.”
“Where is home?”
He considered.
“That is becoming difficult to answer.”
Aki waited.
He looked toward the distant mountains.
“I remember places. People. Voices. But each year the memories become less certain.”
She watched him.
“Does that frighten you?”
“Yes.”
The honesty surprised her.
Yasuke continued.
“I fear that one day I will remember only that I once belonged somewhere, without remembering where.”
Aki said nothing.
He looked at her.
“And you?”
“What about me?”
“Where is home?”
She smiled faintly.
“Where my family is.”
“Your brother?”
“Yes.”

“Your grandmother?”
“In memory.”
Yasuke nodded.
Then she added, “And perhaps wherever I choose to build something that belongs to me.”
He looked at her.
She met his eyes.
For a moment, the noise of the castle seemed far away.
Then Yasuke smiled.
“That sounds like a wise answer.”
Aki tilted her head.
“Are you surprised?”
“Continually.”
She laughed.
He joined her.
For a brief moment, neither the sword nor the conspiracies mattered.
They were simply two people standing beneath the evening sky.
Then Aki reached into her sleeve.
She withdrew a small folded paper.
Yasuke looked at it.
“Another warning?”
“No.”
“What, then?”
She handed it to him.
He unfolded it.
Inside was a single name.
Written carefully in Japanese.
He looked at her.
“What is this?”
“My name.”
He frowned.
“You told me your name was Aki.”
“I did.”
“Then?”
She smiled.
“Aki is what people call me.”

He examined the writing.
The characters were unfamiliar.
“What is this?”
“My family name.”
Yasuke looked up.
“And why are you telling me now?”
Aki's expression softened.
“Because I think you should know who you're trusting.”
He looked at the name again.
Then carefully folded the paper.
“Thank you.”
She nodded.
For several moments, neither spoke.
Then he asked, “Should I be worried?”
“About what?”
“Your family.”
She laughed.
“Almost certainly.”
Yasuke smiled.
Then tucked the paper safely inside his clothing.
He did not know that centuries later, the name would be written in another manuscript.
He did not know that a daughter would one day read it.
And he could not have imagined that the small act of accepting a woman's trust would become part of a story far larger than either of them.
For now, he knew only that she had given him something more valuable than a warning.
She had given him a piece of herself.
And he intended to keep it safe.



Chapter 11

The Name They Erased



Azuchi, Japan — 1581

The problem with secrets, Yasuke was discovering, was that everyone seemed to have one.
Jin had several.
Ren appeared to possess an entire collection.
Aki revealed hers selectively, usually after Yasuke had exhausted his patience.
And Lord Nobunaga, who commanded armies and possessed the authority to rearrange the lives of thousands, had somehow managed to surround himself with men who could not be trusted to deliver a letter.
Yasuke found the situation increasingly irritating.
He also found himself missing his sword.
Not because he expected to use it.
Because he had become accustomed to its weight.
The absence at his side felt strangely personal.
He stood outside his quarters, examining the folded paper Aki had given him the previous evening.
Her family name.
Written in careful characters.
He had practiced pronouncing it several times.
He was almost certain he had it wrong.
“You're going to wear a hole in that paper.”
Aki stood behind him.
Yasuke turned.
“Good morning.”
“Is it?”

“That remains to be determined.”
She smiled.
Then noticed the paper.
“You kept it.”
“Of course.”
“You've been studying it.”
“I wish to remember your name.”
Her expression softened.
Then she stepped closer.
“May I?”
He handed her the paper.
She pointed to the first character.
“Here.”
She pronounced it.
Yasuke repeated the sound.
She shook her head.
“Not quite.”
He tried again.
“Better.”
A third attempt.
Aki laughed.
“That was worse.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Your family should have selected an easier name.”
“I'll inform my ancestors.”
“Please do.”
She pronounced it once more.
This time, Yasuke listened carefully.
Then repeated it.
Aki smiled.
“There.”
He looked pleased.
“Excellent.”
“Now you sound almost respectable.”
“A remarkable achievement.”
She folded the paper and returned it to him.
For a moment, her fingers remained against his.

Neither moved.
Then footsteps sounded in the passageway.
Aki stepped back.
Saburō approached.
His expression was serious.
“Yasuke. We have found something.”
Yasuke sighed.
“Something good?”
“No.”
“Then I am pleased the morning remains consistent.”
Saburō ignored him.
“The man who killed the steward left behind a piece of cloth.”
Aki became still.
“What sort of cloth?”
“Blue. Fine weave. Marked with the same symbol as the sword.”
Yasuke looked toward her.
She avoided his eyes.
Saburō noticed.
“You recognize it?”
Aki hesitated.
“Perhaps.”
“From where?”
“My family has preserved objects bearing that mark.”
Saburō studied her.
“Your family appears unusually involved in this matter.”
Yasuke smiled.
“I have mentioned that.”
Aki gave him a sharp look.
Then turned to Saburō.
“May I see the cloth?”
He withdrew it from his sleeve.
She accepted it.
Examined the weave.
Then turned it over.
Her expression changed.
“Where did you find this?”
“At the western passage.”

“Near the steward's body?”
“Yes.”
She looked toward the castle walls.
Then whispered, “Ren.”
Yasuke frowned.
“What?”
She looked at him.
“This cloth belongs to my brother.”

Present Day

Luna wanted to see the names again.
Malcolm wanted breakfast.
Emiko wanted everyone to stop touching the four-hundred-year-old strip of material until they could determine how to preserve it.
Naturally, none of these desires was compatible with the others.
“We need gloves,” Emiko said.
Her husband looked up from the kitchen.
“We have gloves.”
“Not those gloves.”
“What gloves?”
“Conservation gloves.”
He stared.
“Are those different from regular gloves?”
“Yes.”
“Do they come with a tiny degree in archaeology?”
Luna laughed.
Her mother did not.
“I'm serious.”
“So am I. We've got a medieval grocery list sitting on our dining room table.”
“It's not medieval,” she replied.
“Fine. Renaissance grocery list.”
Their daughter leaned over the manuscript.
“Technically, Japanese historical periods don't correspond exactly to European ones.”
Her father looked at her.

Then at his wife.
“Wonderful. I've raised another one.”
She grinned.
“You're welcome.”
He returned to the kitchen.
There was comfort in ordinary things.
Coffee.
Eggs.
The sound of a pan heating.
He had spent the previous evening researching Yasuke, historical Japanese swords, and the possibility that he was slowly losing his mind.
The final subject had produced the least reassuring results.
He poured coffee into three mugs.
Then stopped.
His daughter's words from the previous evening returned.
Maybe you were just keeping it for me.
He looked toward the dining room.
She sat beside her mother, studying the manuscript.
Not frightened.
Not overwhelmed.
Curious.
Determined.
Very much her mother's daughter.
And, unfortunately for his peace of mind, very much his.
He carried the coffee to the table.
“Okay.”
Both women looked up.
“We need a plan.”
His daughter smiled.
“Oh, now we need a plan?”
“Yes.”
“Not another set of rules?”
“Plans are different.”
“How?”
“Plans are things you intend to do. Rules are things you ignore.”
Emiko nearly spilled her coffee laughing.

He pointed at her.
“Don't encourage her.”
Luna opened her notebook.
“Fine. What's the plan?”
He sat.
“First, we establish whether the sword is genuine.”
Her mother nodded.
“Agreed.”
“Second, we find out whether my family actually has a connection to Yasuke.”
“Agreed.”
“Third, we figure out why your family's records mention the same people.”
His wife considered.
“Yes.”
“And fourth—”
His daughter leaned forward.
“We go to Japan.”
He stared.
“No.”
She smiled.
“Had to try.”
He sighed.
“Fourth, we find out who's been sending this thing to us.”
His wife nodded slowly.
“That may be the most important question.”
Their daughter looked toward the case.
“Or who sent it to me.”
Her father met her eyes.
For a moment, he said nothing.
Then nodded.
“Yeah.”
He looked at the shipping label.
“Or who sent it to you.”

Azuchi, Japan — 1581

Ren arrived at the castle under guard.
He did not appear especially concerned.
This irritated Saburō.
“You understand that you are suspected of murder.”
Ren nodded.
“Yes.”
“You may be imprisoned.”
“Yes.”
“Possibly executed.”
Ren considered.
“That would be inconvenient.”
Saburō stared.
Yasuke, standing nearby, coughed to conceal a laugh.
Aki did not bother.
She was furious.
“You idiot.”
Ren turned toward her.
“Good morning.”
“Don't.”
“Don't what?”
“Act as though you've done nothing wrong.”
Ren looked at the soldiers.
Then at his sister.
“I assume you've been talking.”
Aki stepped closer.
“Did you kill the steward?”
“No.”
“Did you kill the man who killed him?”
Ren hesitated.
Saburō immediately stiffened.
“Answer.”
Ren looked toward Yasuke.
“May I speak privately?”
Saburō shook his head.
“No.”
Yasuke considered.
“Perhaps we should hear him.”

Saburō turned.
“He is a suspect.”
“Yes.”
“He may be dangerous.”
“Almost certainly.”
“Then why—”
“Because if we kill everyone who knows something, we may eventually run out of people to question.”
Ren smiled.
“I like him.”
Aki glared.
“You would.”
Saburō sighed.
Then ordered the soldiers to wait outside.
The four entered a small chamber.
Ren sat.
Saburō remained standing.
Yasuke leaned against a pillar.
Aki folded her arms.
“Talk,” she said.
Ren looked at her.
“You're becoming remarkably unpleasant.”
“Ren.”
He sighed.
“Fine.”
He reached inside his clothing.
Saburō immediately drew his sword.
Ren froze.
“Good heavens.”
“Slowly,” Saburō ordered.
Ren withdrew a small leather packet.
Placed it on the floor.
Then pushed it toward Yasuke.
“Open it.”
Yasuke knelt.
Inside lay a narrow strip of paper.
It was stained.

Folded.
And marked with several names.
Yasuke studied the writing.
“What is this?”
“A copy of a transfer record.”
“Of what?”
“A child.”
Aki went still.
Ren continued.
“A girl taken from a household outside Azuchi several years ago.”
Saburō frowned.
“Why?”
“Her father possessed documents that implicated several powerful men in unlawful seizures of property.”
“And the child?”
“She was taken as leverage.”
Yasuke looked at the record.
“Where is she now?”
Ren shook his head.
“That is what I've been trying to discover.”
Aki stepped closer.
“Is this the child Grandma told us about?”
Ren nodded.
“Yes.”
She stared.
“I thought that was a story.”
“So did I.”
Saburō looked between them.
“Your grandmother knew of a kidnapped child?”
Ren nodded.
“She preserved records for families who feared their names would be erased.”
Yasuke studied the paper.
“Who took the girl?”
Ren hesitated.
Then pointed toward the final line.

“According to this, the order came from a household connected to Nobunaga's administration.”
Saburō stiffened.
“Which household?”
Ren looked at him.
“The same one that employed Matsuda.”
Silence.
Yasuke looked at the document.
Then at Ren.
“And the steward?”
“He helped arrange the transfer.”
Saburō stared.
“So he was involved from the beginning.”
“Yes.”
“And the sword?”
Ren looked toward Aki.
She nodded reluctantly.
He continued.
“The child's father hid the original records before he was killed. One part was entrusted to my grandmother. Another disappeared. The third was believed to have been concealed inside the sword.”
Yasuke considered.
“And the child?”
Ren lowered his eyes.
“Her name was removed from every official record I have found.”
Aki whispered, “Why?”
Ren looked at her.
“Because somebody wanted her forgotten.”

Present Day

Luna had found an expert.
Or, more accurately, she had found six.
Malcolm rejected the first because his website looked like it had been designed during the invention of electricity.
The second because he appeared to specialize in replica swords.

The third because he had a video titled TEN SIGNS YOUR KATANA IS CURSED.
“Absolutely not,” Malcolm announced.
His daughter looked offended.
“He might know something.”
“He might know how to sell advertising.”
Emiko smiled.
“Next.”
The fourth was a university historian.
The fifth worked with a museum collection.
The sixth specialized in Japanese sword restoration.
Malcolm studied the list.
“Okay. Those three sound promising.”
His daughter grinned.
“So we're contacting them?”
“Not yet.”
She groaned.
“Dad!”
“First, we decide what to tell them.”
Her mother nodded.
“That's sensible.”
The daughter looked between them.
“Unbelievable. You two agree on something and suddenly it's a national holiday.”
Her father smiled.
“Enjoy it while it lasts.”
Emiko opened a blank document.
“We can describe the sword, its approximate condition, and the markings. We don't have to explain the repeated deliveries.”
The father nodded.
“Exactly.”
“And we should avoid mentioning the manuscript until we've established whether it's historically significant.”
“Agreed.”
Their daughter considered.
“So we're going to ask about the sword without telling them why we're asking.”

Her father looked at her.
“Yes.”
She smiled.
“Congratulations. You're finally learning how to be mysterious.”
He shook his head.
“I'm going to start charging you rent.”
She grinned.
“Retroactively?”
“Don't tempt me.”
Emiko began typing.
Then stopped.
The daughter noticed.
“What?”
“I just realized something.”
Malcolm closed his eyes.
“Please let it be something involving lunch.”
She ignored him.
“The sword's markings.”
“Yes?”
“We've been assuming they're a family symbol.”
The daughter nodded.
“Right.”
“But what if they're not?”
Her husband frowned.
“What else would they be?”
“A mark identifying a group.”
“Like a crest?”
“Perhaps. Or a record-keeping system. A sign used by people who needed to recognize one another.”
The daughter leaned forward.
“Like a secret society?”
Her mother considered.
“Not necessarily anything so dramatic.”
Her father smiled.
“Don't disappoint her.”
Emiko continued.

“Families, merchants, religious communities, and other networks used identifying marks for different reasons.”
The daughter nodded.
“So the symbol could connect people who weren't related.”
“Exactly.”
The father looked toward the sword.
“That would explain why it keeps showing up in different family records.”
“Possibly.”
He considered.
“Okay.”
Then he looked at his wife.
“What if we're looking at this backward?”
She raised an eyebrow.
“How?”
“We keep asking who owned the sword.”
“Yes.”
“Who carried it.”
“Yes.”
“Who inherited it.”
“Yes.”
He leaned forward.
“What if the more important question is who was supposed to receive whatever was hidden inside?”
His wife stared.
Their daughter slowly smiled.
“Dad.”
He looked at her.
“What?”
“That was actually brilliant.”
He grinned.
“Try not to sound so surprised.”
She laughed.
Emiko reached for the manuscript.
Then began turning pages.

Azuchi, Japan — 1581

Nobunaga listened to Ren's account without interruption.
This time, Yasuke watched the lord more carefully.
The ruler's expression revealed little.
But when Ren mentioned the missing child, something changed.
Not surprise.
Recognition.
Yasuke noticed.
So did Aki.
Ren continued.
“The girl was taken after her father refused to surrender documents concerning unlawful property seizures.”
Nobunaga nodded.
“And you believe those documents are connected to the sword?”
“Yes, my lord.”
“Who was the father?”
Ren lowered his eyes.
“A minor administrator named Harunobu.”
Nobunaga became very still.
Saburō noticed.
“My lord?”
Nobunaga raised a hand.
Silence.
He looked toward Ren.
“Harunobu had a daughter?”
Ren hesitated.
“Yes.”
“What was her name?”
“That is what we're trying to establish.”
Nobunaga turned toward Yasuke.
“Bring me the records.”
Ren handed them over.
The lord examined the paper.
His expression hardened.
Then he rose.
“Leave us.”
Everyone hesitated.

Nobunaga looked toward the guards.
“All of you.”
Saburō bowed and withdrew.
Ren followed.
Aki remained for a moment.
Then glanced toward Yasuke.
He nodded.
She left.
Only Yasuke remained.
Nobunaga returned to his seat.
For a long time, he studied the record.
Then he spoke.
“Harunobu served a household that once opposed me.”
Yasuke listened.
“He was not a powerful man. Not a warrior of great reputation. Merely an administrator who knew how to keep records.”
Nobunaga looked toward the window.
“Men like that are often underestimated.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Yes.”
“After the household fell, several properties were reassigned. Harunobu claimed that some of the transfers were unlawful.”
“And?”
“He requested an audience.”
“Did you grant it?”
Nobunaga hesitated.
“No.”
Yasuke was silent.
The lord continued.
“My advisers told me the complaint was trivial.”
“And you believed them.”
“Yes.”
Nobunaga looked directly at him.
“A ruler receives more requests than he can answer. Some are genuine. Others are attempts to manipulate him.”
Yasuke nodded.
“I understand.”

“Do you?”
“I understand that you cannot hear every man.”
Nobunaga waited.
Yasuke continued.
“But the man you do not hear may still be telling the truth.”
Silence settled between them.
Then Nobunaga looked away.
“Harunobu disappeared shortly afterward.”
Yasuke felt something tighten.
“And his daughter?”
“I was told he had no surviving family.”
The words hung in the room.
Yasuke considered.
“Then someone lied.”
Nobunaga nodded slowly.
“Yes.”
He looked down at the record.
“And I allowed it.”
For the first time, Yasuke saw something in the lord's expression that resembled regret.
It was brief.
But unmistakable.
Nobunaga folded the paper.
Then placed it beside him.
“Find the child.”
Yasuke looked up.
“My lord?”
“Find Harunobu's daughter.”
“And the sword?”
Nobunaga's expression hardened.
“Find that too.”
He leaned forward.
“But understand this, Yasuke. If the records are genuine, they may implicate men whose loyalty I depend upon.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Yes.”
“And exposing them may create enemies.”

“Yes.”
“Powerful enemies.”
Yasuke considered.
Then answered.
“Then I suppose we should begin with the men who have already tried to kill us.”
Nobunaga laughed.
Not loudly.
Not for long.
But enough.
He studied Yasuke.
Then said, “You have an irritating habit of making difficult choices sound simple.”
Yasuke smiled.
“I have been told I possess many irritating habits.”
Nobunaga nodded.
“So I am discovering.”
Then his expression grew serious.
“Do not mistake my permission for protection.”
Yasuke met his eyes.
“I won't.”
“You may discover truths that cannot be safely spoken.”
“Then I will choose carefully when to speak them.”
Nobunaga nodded.
“Good.”
He dismissed him.
Yasuke bowed.
As he reached the doorway, Nobunaga spoke again.
“One more thing.”
Yasuke turned.
“My lord?”
“Harunobu's daughter.”
“Yes?”
Nobunaga looked toward the folded record.
“If she is alive, she may not know who she is.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Why?”

“Because the easiest way to erase a child is not always to kill her.”
He paused.
“Sometimes it is to give her another name.”

Present Day

Malcolm had a visitor.
An unexpected one.
He was standing in the kitchen, attempting to assemble a sandwich of unreasonable proportions, when the doorbell rang.
He looked toward the hallway.
“I'm not answering that.”
Luna called from the dining room.
“Why?”
“Because I have a history of regretting it.”
Emiko laughed.
The bell rang again.
He sighed.
“Fine.”
He placed the sandwich on the counter.
Walked toward the front door.
Then stopped.
Through the glass, he could see a man standing on the porch.
Older.
Japanese.
Wearing a dark jacket.
Holding a small leather bag.
Malcolm frowned.
He opened the door only partway.
“Can I help you?”
The man bowed slightly.
“I hope so.”
His English was careful but fluent.
The father studied him.
“Do I know you?”
“No.”
“Then what can I do for you?”

The man glanced toward the house.
“I believe you have something that once belonged to my family.”
The father went still.
“What?”
The visitor smiled faintly.
“A sword.”
Silence.
The father stared at him.
Then looked toward the driveway.
No car.
No taxi.
No obvious explanation for how the man had arrived.
He looked back.
“Who are you?”
The visitor reached into his jacket.
The father immediately raised a hand.
“Easy.”
The man stopped.
Then slowly withdrew a photograph.
He held it up.
The father recognized the image.
A Japanese man standing beside a wooden case.
Kyoto.
1932.
The same photograph his daughter had received from her friend.
He looked at the visitor.
“You're her grandfather.”
The man nodded.
“Yes.”
The father glanced toward the dining room.
Then back at him.
“How did you find us?”
The visitor looked tired.
“Your daughter sent a photograph to my granddaughter. She showed it to me.”
“That doesn't explain how you got here.”
“No.”

The man lowered the photograph.
“I travelled because I was afraid to explain everything over the telephone.”
The father studied him.
“Afraid of what?”
The visitor looked toward the house.
Then answered.
“Being overheard.”
For several seconds, neither spoke.
The father considered closing the door.
He considered calling the police.
He considered a dozen sensible things.
Then he remembered his wife's aunt.
The strange phone call.
The names.
The sword.
And the old family stories he'd spent his life dismissing.
He opened the door a little wider.
“My wife needs to hear this.”
The visitor nodded.
“I expected she would.”
The father frowned.
“You know my wife?”
“Not personally.”
“Then why—”
The man looked directly at him.
“Because I knew her grandmother.”
Silence.
The father stared.
Then stepped aside.
“Come in.”
They gathered around the dining room table.
The visitor introduced himself as Mr. Nakamura.
He accepted tea.
Declined coffee.
And examined the wooden case without touching it.
Luna watched him with open fascination.

Malcolm watched him with considerably less enthusiasm.
Emiko sat opposite him.
“You knew my grandmother?”
Nakamura nodded.
“Yes.”
“When?”
“Many years ago.”
“She never mentioned you.”
He smiled sadly.
“That does not surprise me.”
The mother studied him.
“Why?”
“Because we disagreed.”
“About what?”
He looked toward the sword.
“That.”
The father leaned forward.
“Okay. Let's dispense with the mysterious old-man routine.”
His daughter closed her eyes.
“Dad.”
“No. Seriously.”
He looked at Nakamura.
“You show up at our house knowing about a sword we've been trying to understand for years. You have a photograph of the case from 1932. And apparently you knew my wife's grandmother.”
He leaned closer.
“So either you start explaining, or we have a very short visit.”
Nakamura regarded him.
Then nodded.
“Fair.”
The daughter looked astonished.
Her father smiled.
“Thank you.”
Nakamura placed his hands on the table.
“The sword was kept by several families over the centuries. Some were related. Others were not.”
The mother nodded.

“Custodians.”
“Yes.”
“Of what?”
“An account.”
The daughter leaned forward.
“Of people who disappeared?”
Nakamura looked surprised.
“You know about that?”
“We know some of it.”
He nodded slowly.
“Then you know more than I expected.”
The father folded his arms.
“We're full of surprises.”
Nakamura looked toward him.
“Yes. I believe you are.”
He reached into his bag.
Removed a thin folder.
Opened it.
Inside were several photocopied pages.
Handwritten Japanese.
Old photographs.
A genealogical chart.
He placed the chart before them.
Emiko leaned closer.
Her expression changed.
“These are my family's names.”
Nakamura nodded.
“Some of them.”
She scanned the page.
Then stopped.
“Wait.”
Her husband leaned forward.
“What?”
She pointed toward a line connecting two names.
“This isn't correct.”
Nakamura watched her.
“Which part?”

“The relationship.”
Luna leaned closer.
“What's wrong?”
Her mother looked at him.
“You have these two branches connected as though they share a direct ancestor.”
Nakamura nodded.
“Yes.”
“But according to my grandmother's manuscript, they don't.”
The visitor was silent.
The mother looked again.
Then frowned.
“Unless…”
She turned toward her daughter.
“Bring me the manuscript.”
The girl reached for it.
They placed the old book beside the chart.
Emiko compared the names.
The dates.
The handwritten notes.
Then she stopped.
Her expression changed.
“Oh, my God.”
The father sighed.
“I'm going to have that printed on a T-shirt.”
Nobody laughed.
Emiko pointed toward the chart.
“These branches were separated.”
Nakamura nodded.
“Yes.”
“Deliberately?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
He looked toward the daughter.
Then back at her mother.
“Because one branch carried the records.”
“And the other?”

Nakamura hesitated.
“Carried the bloodline.”
Silence.
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Whose bloodline?”
Nakamura looked directly at him.
“Yasuke's.”
For several seconds, nobody moved.
The father stared.
Then shook his head.
“Wait a minute.”
Nakamura continued.
“The family history is incomplete. There are gaps. Some records were destroyed. Others were deliberately concealed.”
Emiko listened carefully.
The father looked toward his daughter.
Then back at Nakamura.
“Are you telling me I'm descended from Yasuke?”
The older man regarded him.
“I am telling you there is evidence that your family may be connected to his descendants.”
Malcolm sat back.
“Jesus.”
His daughter smiled.
“Dad.”
He looked at her.
“What?”
“You might actually be descended from a samurai.”
He shook his head.
“Baby, I can't even get a decent parking space.”
She burst out laughing.
Even Nakamura smiled.
But Emiko remained focused on the chart.
She traced the second branch.
Then stopped.
“And my family?”
Nakamura looked toward her.

“Your ancestors preserved the other part of the history.”
“The Japanese woman's line?”
“Yes.”
She stared at the page.
Then at her daughter.
The girl looked between them.
“Wait.”
Emiko nodded slowly.
“Yes.”
Luna looked at her father.
Then at her mother.
“So you're saying…”
Nakamura finished quietly.
“The two lines have come together.”
Silence.
Malcolm looked at his daughter.
She looked back.
For the first time that day, she seemed genuinely uncertain.
Not afraid.
Not thrilled.
Simply aware that something larger than she had imagined was taking shape around her.
Then she asked the question none of the adults had thought to ask.
“Why would anybody want that?”
Nakamura's expression changed.
He looked toward the sword.
Then toward the manuscript.
Then back at the girl.
“That,” he said, “is what I came to warn you about.”



Chapter 12

The Keeper's Debt



Present Day

Mr. Nakamura had travelled halfway around the world to deliver a warning.
Malcolm Hayes was beginning to think he should have sent an email.
“Who benefits?” Luna repeated.
The older Japanese man regarded her across the dining room table.
“That is a very good question.”
“Then answer it.”
Malcolm smiled.
“That's my girl.”
Emiko shot him a look.
“What?”
“Nothing. Just appreciating effective communication.”
Nakamura folded his hands.
“For generations, several families have preserved portions of the same historical record. Not all of them understood what they were protecting.”
Luna nodded.
“We know that much.”
“Some believed it concerned property. Others believed it documented political betrayals. A few understood that it concerned people whose identities had been deliberately erased.”
“And you?” Emiko asked.
Nakamura looked at her.
“What did you believe?”
The old man hesitated.

“I believed the records should remain separated.”
“Why?”
“Because together, they could identify families whose ancestors benefited from those crimes.”
Malcolm frowned.
“We're talking about things that happened four hundred years ago.”
“Yes.”
“Everybody involved is dead.”
“Yes.”
“Then who gives a damn?”
Nakamura considered the question.
“People who have spent generations building reputations upon a version of history they prefer.”
Luna leaned forward.
“That's ridiculous.”
“Perhaps.”
“You can't punish somebody for something their ancestors did.”
“No,” Nakamura agreed. “And you should not.”
That answer surprised her.
He continued.
“But imagine discovering that something your family proudly claims to own was taken from another family. Imagine that the records proving it had been deliberately destroyed.”
Emiko nodded slowly.
“Land. Property. Family status.”
“Among other things.”
Malcolm folded his arms.
“Okay. That's a reason to hide a document. Not to kill people.”
Nakamura looked toward the wooden case.
“You are assuming everyone involved places the same value upon the truth.”
For a moment, nobody spoke.
Then Luna asked, “What does any of that have to do with me?”
The old man turned toward her.
“Your mother descends from one family that preserved the records. Your father's family may descend from someone who carried part of their history beyond Japan.”

“Yasuke.”
“Possibly.”
She studied him.
“Then what?”
Nakamura looked at her for a long moment.
“Then you are the first person I know of whose family history may connect both sides.”
Malcolm raised a finger.
“Hang on.”
Nakamura turned.
“You keep saying may. That's a pretty important word.”
“Yes.”
“So you don't actually know whether I'm descended from Yasuke.”
“No.”
“Or whether my wife is descended from that woman.”
“Not with certainty.”
“Or whether our daughter is the magical missing ingredient in some ancient family recipe.”
Luna burst out laughing.
“Dad!”
“What? I'm asking.”
Nakamura smiled faintly.
“I do not believe your daughter is magical.”
“Good. Neither do I.”
“Although,” the old man added, “I understand she can be difficult.”
Luna stared.
Emiko laughed.
Malcolm leaned back, delighted.
“Oh, I like this guy.”
For one brief moment, the tension dissolved.
Then Nakamura looked at Luna again.
“But I do believe someone has been waiting for your family to ask questions.”
Her smile disappeared.
“Someone alive?”
“Yes.”
“Who?”

The old man lowered his eyes.
“That is what frightens me.”

Azuchi, Japan — 1581

Harunobu's daughter had been missing for six years.
Yasuke discovered this after spending an entire morning questioning men who would rather have swallowed their own swords than admit a child had disappeared under their supervision.
The records were incomplete.
Witnesses contradicted one another.
One official insisted Harunobu had no daughter.
Another admitted there had been a girl but claimed she had died of illness.
A third remembered a child being transferred to a distant household.
He could not remember which one.
Yasuke found this particularly impressive.
“You remember a child being taken away,” he said, “but not where she was taken?”
The official shifted uncomfortably.
“It was years ago.”
“Six.”
“Yes.”
“And you have forgotten?”
“There were many transfers.”
“How many?”
The official hesitated.
“I cannot say.”
Yasuke leaned forward.
“Then perhaps you can tell me how many children you have misplaced.”
The man reddened.
“I do not appreciate your tone.”
Yasuke smiled.
“Neither do I appreciate your memory.”
Saburō, standing beside the doorway, made a strangled sound.

The official turned.
“Is something amusing?”
Saburō straightened.
“No.”
Yasuke looked at him.
“Perhaps he is remembering something.”
Saburō had to leave the room.
Later, Yasuke found him laughing in the courtyard.
“You are going to get us both killed,” the younger warrior said.
“Probably.”
“You cannot speak to officials that way.”
“Then officials should answer questions.”
Saburō shook his head.
“Do you ever consider the consequences of what you say?”
“Frequently.”
“And?”
“I usually say it anyway.”
Saburō laughed again.
Then grew serious.
“Have you considered that the girl may be dead?”
Yasuke looked toward the castle.
“Yes.”
“And if she is?”
“Then someone should know where she lies.”
Saburō studied him.
For a moment, the younger man's expression softened.
“You truly intend to find her.”
“Yes.”
“Even without the sword?”
Yasuke looked at him.
“The sword was never the child.”
Saburō nodded.
Then reached into his sleeve.
“I found something.”
He produced a folded document.
Yasuke accepted it.
“What is this?”

“A household register.”
“From where?”
“A small estate east of the lake.”
Yasuke examined the paper.
Several names appeared beneath the heading.
One had been added in a different hand.
A girl.
Age recorded as approximately nine at the time of entry.
No family name.
No birthplace.
Only a notation.
Received in service.
Yasuke looked up.
“Where did you get this?”
Saburō smiled faintly.
“I asked questions.”
“And?”
“Apparently, I am learning from a terrible influence.”

Present Day

Luna had moved her chair closer to Nakamura.
Malcolm noticed.
He did not approve.
Not because the old man had done anything threatening.
Because his daughter had begun listening to him with the particular intensity she usually reserved for people who told her things her parents hadn't.
That was dangerous territory.
“So,” she asked, “you were one of the keepers?”
Nakamura nodded.
“Yes.”
“Who appointed you?”
“My grandfather entrusted the responsibility to my father. My father passed it to me.”
“And who appointed your grandfather?”
Nakamura smiled.

“That question is more difficult.”
She leaned forward.
“Try.”
Malcolm grinned.
“She's relentless.”
Emiko nodded.
“She gets that from you.”
“I was going to say you.”
“Of course you were.”
Nakamura watched them with quiet amusement.
Then he reached into his leather bag.
He withdrew a small black notebook.
It was modern.
Unremarkable.
Its corners were worn.
He placed it on the table.
“My grandfather was not interested in mysteries,” he said. “He was interested in accounting.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Finally. A sensible ancestor.”
Luna looked at him.
“Dad.”
“What? Accounting is useful.”
Nakamura opened the notebook.
Inside were handwritten names, dates, and references to documents.
“My grandfather spent decades tracing the movement of certain objects between families.”
Emiko studied the pages.
“These are custody records.”
“Yes.”
“Not genealogies.”
“Correct.”
She looked up.
“Then the records you showed us earlier…”
“Contain both.”
Her expression sharpened.

“You didn't distinguish between them.”
Nakamura met her gaze.
“No.”
“Why?”
“Because I wanted to know whether you would.”
The room went quiet.
Malcolm slowly leaned forward.
“Excuse me?”
Nakamura turned toward him.
“I needed to establish how much your wife understood about the original records.”
“You tested her?”
“Yes.”
Malcolm stared.
“You flew here, came into my house, and gave my wife misleading information to see whether she would catch it?”
Nakamura considered.
“When you describe it that way, it sounds impolite.”
“Impolite?”
Luna quietly reached for her coffee.
Emiko raised a hand.
“Darling.”
“No, sweetheart, hang on.”
He looked directly at Nakamura.
“People have been messing with my family for years over this sword. I don't know who keeps sending it. I don't know who to trust. And now you tell me you've been conducting some kind of entrance examination in my dining room?”
Nakamura bowed his head.
“You are right to be angry.”
“Fantastic. We're making progress.”
“I apologize.”
Malcolm studied him.
The apology seemed genuine.
That made it irritatingly difficult to continue being furious.
He sat back.
“Okay.”

Luna looked surprised.
“Okay?”
“For now.”
Nakamura turned toward Emiko.
“You recognized the error because you understand the difference between a family relationship and an obligation of custody.”
She nodded.
“Yes.”
“That distinction matters.”
“Why?”
“Because for generations, some families have claimed descent from people they were merely entrusted to protect.”
Emiko became still.
Nakamura continued.
“And others have concealed genuine family relationships by recording them as custodial arrangements.”
Luna frowned.
“So the family trees might be deliberately misleading.”
“Yes.”
“On purpose?”
“Sometimes to protect people. Sometimes to control them.”
Emiko looked down at the chart.
“And you don't know which entries are which.”
Nakamura shook his head.
“Not all of them.”
Malcolm sighed.
“Outstanding. We've got a family tree with fake branches.”
Luna smiled.
“Could be worse.”
He stared.
“How?”
“We could have no tree.”
He considered.
“That's actually a fair point.”
Nakamura closed the notebook.
Then reached into his bag again.
This time he removed a small envelope.

He placed it in front of Luna.
Malcolm immediately stiffened.
“What's that?”
“A letter.”
“From whom?”
Nakamura looked at Luna.
“Your great-grandmother.”
Emiko froze.
“My grandmother?”
“Yes.”
She stared at the envelope.
“That's impossible.”
Nakamura nodded.
“I thought so too.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Why?”
The old man looked at him.
“Because she instructed me to deliver it only when the sword returned to a daughter.”

Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581

The estate lay beyond a narrow road bordered by trees.
It was smaller than Yasuke expected.
A modest residence.
Several outbuildings.
Fields stretching toward the hills.
A family compound rather than a fortress.
Saburō rode beside him.
Aki and Ren followed.
The four had agreed upon very little during the journey.
Saburō wished to approach openly, bearing Nobunaga's authority.
Ren preferred to observe the estate before announcing themselves.
Aki wanted to speak with the women who worked there.
Yasuke wanted lunch.
He had mentioned this twice.
No one had shown appropriate concern.

They stopped beneath a stand of trees overlooking the main buildings.
Saburō studied the compound.
“There are guards.”
Ren nodded.
“Four visible.”
“Armed?”
“Yes.”
“Unusual for a household this small,” Saburō observed.
Aki looked toward the washing area.
Several women worked beside a stone basin.
One was elderly.
Another appeared middle-aged.
A younger woman carried folded cloth into the main residence.
Aki watched them.
“Let me go first.”
Saburō turned.
“No.”
She looked at him.
“Why?”
“Because we don't know who lives here.”
“Exactly.”
“That is not an argument.”
“It is if you understand the question.”
Yasuke smiled.
Saburō noticed.
“Don't.”
Yasuke raised his hands.
“I said nothing.”
“You were thinking something.”
“Apparently everyone can do that now.”
Aki ignored them.
“An armed company arriving at a private estate will alarm everyone. A woman asking for water may not.”
Ren nodded.
“She is right.”
Saburō looked at him.

“You always agree with your sister?”
Ren laughed.
“Rarely. But I enjoy surviving.”
Yasuke considered.
“Let her go.”
Saburō sighed.
“If anything happens—”
“I'll scream,” Aki said.
“That's not reassuring.”
“Then perhaps you should stay close enough to hear me.”
She dismounted.
Adjusted her clothing.
Then walked toward the estate carrying a small bundle.
Yasuke watched her go.
Saburō glanced at him.
“You trust her?”
“Yes.”
The younger warrior considered.
“You answered quickly.”
Yasuke smiled faintly.
“I've had practice.”
Aki approached the washing area shortly before midday.
An elderly woman looked up.
“Good day.”
Aki bowed.
“Good day. Forgive the intrusion. I have been travelling and wondered whether I might have some water.”
The woman studied her.
“Where are you headed?”
“Toward the lake.”
“Alone?”
“My companions are resting along the road.”
The old woman considered.
Then gestured toward the basin.
“Drink.”
Aki thanked her.
She knelt and accepted a wooden cup.

The water was cool.
She drank slowly.
Then looked toward the residence.
“You have a beautiful estate.”
The old woman laughed.
“Beautiful? You should see it after the rains.”
Aki smiled.
“My grandmother used to say the same about our house.”
“Grandmothers often know what they are talking about.”
“Mine certainly believed so.”
The woman laughed.
Aki glanced toward the younger worker.
“Is this your granddaughter?”
The old woman shook her head.
“No. She works here.”
The girl lowered her eyes.
Aki studied her.
She appeared perhaps fifteen.
Her clothing was neat but plain.
Her hands showed the marks of regular labour.
She was carrying a basket of linens.
“What is your name?” Aki asked.
The girl hesitated.
The elderly woman answered.
“Yuki.”
Aki smiled.
“A lovely name.”
The girl bowed slightly.
“Thank you.”
Aki watched her.
There was nothing remarkable about the exchange.
Except the girl's reaction.
She seemed almost frightened by the question.
Aki looked toward the elderly woman.
“How long has she been here?”
The woman frowned.
“Why?”

“Forgive me. My family sometimes helps young women find positions in households. I wondered whether she had relatives nearby.”
The old woman looked toward Yuki.
Then back at Aki.
“She belongs here.”
Aki felt something tighten.
“Of course.”
The elderly woman continued.
“She has been with us for years.”
“Since childhood?”
The woman hesitated.
“Yes.”
Yuki's grip tightened around the basket.
Aki noticed.
She also noticed that the girl had begun slowly backing toward the residence.
Aki smiled gently.
“Yuki?”
The girl stopped.
“Yes?”
“Do you remember where you were born?”
The basket fell.
Cloth scattered across the ground.
The elderly woman rose sharply.
“That is enough.”
Aki remained seated.
“I apologize.”
The girl stared at her.
Her face had gone pale.
Then she whispered something.
So quietly that Aki nearly missed it.
“I had another name.”
The old woman seized her arm.
“Inside.”
Yuki flinched.
Aki rose.

“Please—”
The woman turned on her.
“You have had your water. Leave.”
Aki bowed.
“Forgive me.”
She gathered her bundle.
Then walked toward the road.
Behind her, she heard the elderly woman scolding the girl.
And beneath the scolding, she heard something else.
Crying.

Present Day

The envelope lay between them.
Malcolm had not touched it.
Emiko had not touched it.
Luna looked from one adult to another.
“Can I open it?”
Malcolm exhaled.
“Why does everything in this house eventually become your mail?”
She smiled faintly.
“Because apparently I'm popular with dead relatives.”
Nobody laughed.
Not quite.
Nakamura looked at her.
“The letter is addressed to you.”
She turned toward him.
“How?”
He hesitated.
“It does not contain your personal name.”
“Then how is it addressed to me?”
He pointed toward a line written across the front.
Emiko leaned forward.
The characters were old-fashioned.
Careful.
Deliberate.
She translated.

To the daughter who is given the sword.
Malcolm stared.
“Oh, come on.”
Luna smiled.
“That's technically me.”
“Unfortunately.”
She reached for the envelope.
Emiko touched her hand.
“Wait.”
Luna stopped.
Her mother's expression was serious.
“This belonged to my grandmother.”
“I know.”
“She died before you were born.”
“I know.”
“And whatever she wrote, she could not have known you personally.”
Luna nodded.
“Okay.”
Emiko continued.
“So please don't assume every word is some kind of prediction about your life.”
Luna looked at her.
Then smiled gently.
“Mom. I'm not.”
Malcolm watched them.
His wife seemed relieved.
Luna carefully opened the envelope.
Inside was a folded letter.
Several pages.
The paper had yellowed with age.
Emiko moved closer.
“Let me help.”
Together, they unfolded it.
The writing was Japanese.
Luna looked toward Nakamura.
“Do you know what it says?”

He shook his head.
“No.”
Malcolm frowned.
“You've had this for years and never read it?”
“The envelope was sealed.”
“And that stopped you?”
Nakamura regarded him.
“Yes.”
Malcolm sat back.
“Huh.”
Luna grinned.
“Imagine that. Somebody respects boundaries.”
He pointed at her.
“Don't.”
Emiko began reading.
At first, she translated slowly.
Then the words became easier.
The letter was not written as a prophecy.
It was an account.
A confession.
And, in places, an apology.
To the daughter who receives what we could not keep.
I do not know your name. I do not know where you live. I do not know whether you will be born in Japan or in a land I shall never see.
I know only that if this letter reaches you, someone has decided that the old arrangement must end.
Emiko stopped.
Luna looked up.
“Keep going.”
She continued.
For generations, our families preserved a history that powerful men wished forgotten. Some believed the duty was to protect the sword. Others believed the duty was to protect the records.
Both were mistaken.
Malcolm leaned forward.
“What?”

His wife raised a hand.
Then continued.
The duty was to protect the people.
We failed.
Silence settled over the room.
Luna looked at the old letter.
Emiko continued.
There was a child whose name was taken from the records. Those who removed it believed that without a name, no claim could be made. No inheritance demanded. No crime proved.
But names are not the only things families preserve.
We preserve stories. Faces. Songs. The habits of people we never met.
Malcolm was very still.
Emiko glanced at him.
Then read on.
I cannot tell you what became of every person whose name was erased. I cannot promise that the histories handed to you will be complete or true.
But I ask you to remember this: a record is not a life.
Do not become so concerned with recovering the sword that you forget to discover whom it was meant to protect.
Emiko stopped again.
Luna looked toward the wooden case.
Then back at the letter.
“Is there more?”
Emiko nodded.
She turned the page.
My husband believed the sword should be returned to the family from which it had been taken. He died attempting to fulfil that duty.
Malcolm looked up.
“So her grandfather really did die over this.”
Emiko nodded.
She continued.
I believed the records should be hidden until everyone who sought them was dead. I was wrong.

There will always be someone who wishes the past to remain buried.
If you are reading this, you must decide whether the truth belongs only to those who inherited it, or also to those whose lives were changed by it.
Luna listened carefully.
Then Emiko reached the final paragraph.
Her voice softened.
I cannot choose for you.
That is the one kindness I can offer.
The sword may have brought you here. But what you do next must be your own decision.
The room fell silent.
For several seconds, nobody moved.
Then Malcolm leaned back.
“Well.”
Luna looked at him.
“What?”
He considered.
“Your great-grandmother sounds like one hell of a woman.”
Emiko smiled through her tears.
“She was.”
Luna looked down at the letter.
Then at Nakamura.
“So why didn't you give this to my mother?”
The old man met her eyes.
“Because the instruction was to deliver it to whoever received the sword.”
Luna frowned.
“Not whoever inherited it?”
“No.”
“Whoever received it.”
“Yes.”
She considered that.
Then looked at Malcolm.
“You've received it seven times.”
He nodded.

“Trust me. I noticed.”
“But it was never addressed to you before.”
He stared.
Then slowly smiled.
“No.”
Luna looked toward the letter.
“So somebody changed the rules.”
Nakamura shook his head.
“Or somebody finally stopped following them.”

Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581

Aki returned to the trees.
Yasuke met her halfway.
“Well?”
She nodded.
“There is a girl.”
His expression sharpened.
“Harunobu's daughter?”
“I don't know.”
“What did you learn?”
“Her name is Yuki. She's perhaps fifteen. She has lived at the estate for several years.”
“Does she remember her family?”
Aki hesitated.
“She said she had another name.”
Yasuke was silent.
Saburō approached.
“Then we have our answer.”
Ren shook his head.
“No. We have a possibility.”
Saburō frowned.
“What more do you want?”
“Evidence.”
Yasuke looked toward the estate.
“Then we ask the household's master.”
Ren stared.

“You cannot simply ride in and demand the girl.”
“Why not?”
“Because if someone paid to conceal her identity, they may kill her rather than surrender her.”
Yasuke considered.
Then nodded.
“Fair.”
Saburō folded his arms.
“So what do you suggest?”
Aki looked toward the compound.
“We need to give her a reason to leave.”
Ren shook his head.
“She is watched.”
“Then we give the household a reason to send her outside.”
Yasuke looked at her.
“You have an idea.”
“Yes.”
“Will I enjoy it?”
“Probably not.”
He sighed.
“Wonderful.”
Aki smiled.
Then turned toward Saburō.
“How convincing are you when you pretend to be important?”
The younger warrior stared.
“Pretend?”
Yasuke began laughing.
Saburō looked offended.
“I am important.”
Aki nodded.
“Excellent. Then this should be easy.”
They approached the estate openly.
Saburō rode at the front, accompanied by Yasuke and two soldiers.
Aki and Ren remained concealed near the road.
The household's guards stiffened when they saw Nobunaga's crest.
A senior servant hurried forward.
“Honoured visitors.”

Saburō dismounted.
“I carry instructions concerning a former administrator named Harunobu.”
The servant went pale.
Yasuke noticed immediately.
Saburō continued.
“We are examining records relating to transfers of property and household servants.”
The servant bowed.
“Our master is away.”
“Then we shall speak with whoever manages the estate.”
The man hesitated.
Saburō stepped closer.
“Now.”
The servant hurried away.
Yasuke leaned toward Saburō.
“You sound very important.”
Saburō glared.
“I am important.”
“Of course.”
“Stop smiling.”
“I cannot. I am impressed.”
A woman emerged from the residence.
She was perhaps forty, dressed in formal household clothing.
Her expression was guarded.
“I am the lady of this estate.”
Saburō bowed.
“We seek information concerning a girl transferred here approximately six years ago.”
The woman's eyes moved toward Yasuke.
Then back to Saburō.
“We have several servants.”
“A girl called Yuki.”
The woman's face changed.
Only slightly.
But enough.
“What about her?”

Saburō produced the register.
“We require her presence.”
“She is working.”
“She can stop.”
The woman looked toward the guards.
Yasuke noticed.
He also noticed one of the men quietly moving toward the residence.
He stepped into the guard's path.
“Where are you going?”
The man stopped.
“To fetch her.”
Yasuke smiled.
“Then I shall accompany you.”
The guard hesitated.
Saburō looked toward the lady of the house.
“That would be appropriate.”
She forced a smile.
“Of course.”
The guard led Yasuke toward the rear buildings.
They passed the kitchen.
A storage room.
A small garden.
Then the guard stopped beside a narrow door.
“She is inside.”
Yasuke looked at him.
“Open it.”
The man hesitated.
Yasuke's expression hardened.
“Open it.”
The guard slid the door aside.
The room was empty.
Yasuke stared.
A folded blanket lay against one wall.
A small wooden bowl sat beside it.
There was no girl.
He turned.

“Where is she?”
The guard stepped backward.
“I don't know.”
Yasuke looked toward the small rear window.
It stood open.
Beyond it lay a narrow path leading toward the woods.
He felt a sudden flash of fear.
Had someone taken her?
Or had she escaped?
Then he heard a scream.
A woman's voice.
From the courtyard.
Yasuke ran.

Present Day

Nakamura had become unusually quiet.
Malcolm noticed.
He watched the old man as Emiko carefully folded the letter.
“You knew what she wrote.”
Nakamura looked up.
“No.”
“You guessed.”
“Some of it.”
Malcolm studied him.
“Then tell me what you're not telling us.”
Luna sighed.
“Dad.”
“No, honey. We're done with the mysterious visitor routine.”
Nakamura regarded him.
Then nodded.
“There is one thing.”
Malcolm spread his hands.
“Of course there is.”
Nakamura looked toward Luna.
“The photograph you sent to my granddaughter.”
“Yes?”

“It was not the first time I had seen this sword.”
Luna frowned.
“I figured that.”
“No. I mean recently.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“How recently?”
Nakamura hesitated.
“Three months ago.”
Silence.
Emiko stared.
“Where?”
“In Japan.”
Malcolm looked toward the case.
“That's impossible.”
Nakamura shook his head.
“I saw a sword matching this one in a private collection.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Whose collection?”
The old man looked uncomfortable.
“A family with considerable influence.”
“Name?” Malcolm asked.
Nakamura hesitated.
Malcolm folded his arms.
“Come on. We've established the suspense business isn't working for me.”
Nakamura sighed.
“The Kuroda family.”
Emiko went very still.
Malcolm noticed.
“What?”
She looked toward the manuscript.
Then at Nakamura.
“Kuroda?”
He nodded.
“Yes.”
She opened the book.
Turned several pages.

Then stopped.
Malcolm leaned closer.
“What?”
She pointed toward a name written beside a notation from the late sixteenth century.
“The same family name.”
Nakamura nodded.
“Yes.”
Luna looked between them.
“So somebody from that family had the sword three months ago?”
“A sword matching it.”
“And now it's here.”
“Yes.”
Malcolm considered.
“Could it be a copy?”
“Possibly.”
“Could it be the same sword?”
Nakamura did not answer.
Malcolm stared.
“That's what you're thinking.”
The old man nodded slowly.
“Yes.”
For a moment, nobody spoke.
Then Luna asked, “Did you touch it?”
Nakamura looked at her.
“No.”
“Examine it?”
“Only from a distance.”
“Then you can't be certain.”
“No.”
She considered.
Then turned toward Malcolm.
“Dad.”
He looked up.
“What?”
“The antique dealer.”
He frowned.

“What about him?”
“When you sold the sword years ago, he said he still had it even after it came back to you.”
“Yes.”
“And when you went to see him, his was gone.”
He nodded.
“So?”
She leaned forward.
“What if there really were two?”
Malcolm stared.
Then looked at Nakamura.
“Copies?”
The old man nodded.
“There have been copies.”
Emiko looked up.
“How many?”
“I don't know.”
“And why?”
Nakamura studied the sword.
“Because people have spent centuries trying to identify the original.”
Malcolm leaned back.
“Wonderful.”
Luna smiled faintly.
“Maybe your haunted sword has competition.”
He looked at her.
“Please don't.”
Then Emiko asked a question that changed the room.
“Mr. Nakamura, how do we know this is the original?”
The old man looked at her.
Then at the small silver fitting.
And finally at the strip of material bearing the names.
“We don't,” he answered.
Silence.
Luna stared.
“But the pieces fit.”
“Yes.”

“And the writing matches the manuscript.”
“Yes.”
“Then—”
“That proves someone constructed the pieces to fit. It does not prove when.”
Malcolm looked toward the sword.
For years, he had treated the weapon as a single impossible object.
Now he was being asked to consider something considerably more unsettling.
What if the object itself was ordinary?
What if the mystery lay entirely in the people moving it?
He looked toward Nakamura.
“Are you telling me this could all be staged?”
The old man considered.
“Yes.”
Luna frowned.
“By whom?”
Nakamura looked toward the front door.
Then back at the table.
“That is the question I came here hoping you could answer.”

Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581

Yasuke reached the courtyard as the household's lady was shouting at Saburō.
“You have no right!”
Saburō stood rigid.
“I carry Nobunaga's authority.”
“You come into my home and accuse me of concealing a servant!”
Yasuke approached.
“The girl is gone.”
The woman froze.
Saburō turned.
“What?”
“Her room is empty.”
The lady's expression changed.
For the first time, she appeared genuinely frightened.

“Gone?”
Yasuke studied her.
“You didn't know?”
She shook her head.
“No.”
Saburō stepped closer.
“Where would she go?”
The woman looked toward the rear buildings.
Then toward the woods.
“I don't know.”
Yasuke watched her.
Something was wrong.
The fear seemed real.
But not the fear of a woman who had lost a servant.
The fear of someone who had lost something entrusted to her.
He stepped closer.
“Who is Yuki?”
The woman looked at him.
“I told you. A servant.”
“No.”
His voice was quiet.
“She was placed here under another name. You know who she is.”
The woman stared.
Then looked toward Saburō.
“I cannot speak of this.”
“Why?” he asked.
“Because I gave my word.”
Yasuke considered.
“To whom?”
She lowered her eyes.
“My husband.”
“Where is he?”
The woman hesitated.
“Dead.”
Silence.
Yasuke looked toward the woods.
Then back at her.

“Did your husband know Harunobu?”
The woman's expression changed.
“Yes.”
“And the girl?”
She swallowed.
Then whispered, “He brought her here.”
Saburō stepped forward.
“Why?”
The woman closed her eyes.
For a moment, Yasuke thought she would refuse to answer.
Then she spoke.
“Because the men searching for her had already killed her father.”
Yasuke stared.
The woman continued.
“My husband promised to keep her hidden.”
“By making her a servant?” Yasuke asked.
Her face tightened.
“She was safer that way.”
“Was she?”
The question struck harder than Yasuke intended.
The woman looked away.
Then whispered, “I thought so.”
Yasuke considered.
“Why did she flee?”
The woman shook her head.
“I don't know.”
Then a voice came from the entrance.
“Because I told her to.”
Everyone turned.
Aki stood beneath the gate.
Beside her was Yuki.
The girl looked terrified.
Aki held her hand.
The lady of the estate gasped.
“Yuki!”
The girl flinched.
Aki stepped forward.

“Her name isn't Yuki.”
Silence.
Yasuke looked at her.
“Aki?”
She nodded.
“Her real name was taken from her. But someone remembered it.”
The girl looked down.
Aki squeezed her hand.
Then spoke softly.
“Tell them.”
The girl hesitated.
Her voice trembled.
“My father called me…”
She stopped.
Tears filled her eyes.
Yasuke waited.
No one moved.
Then she tried again.
“My father called me Hana.”
The courtyard fell silent.
Yasuke felt something cold settle inside him.
Hana.
Jin's dead wife.
The woman who had drawn the sword.
The woman whose records had started this entire mystery.
He looked toward Aki.
She was staring at the girl.
Something in her expression told him she had reached the same conclusion.
Yasuke stepped forward.
“Hana?”
The girl looked up.
He knelt so that their eyes were level.
“Do you remember your father?”
She nodded.
“He used to write things.”
Yasuke felt his chest tighten.

“What things?”
“Names.”
The girl began to cry.
“He said people shouldn't disappear just because someone erased them from a book.”
Yasuke remained very still.
Then he asked, “Did he give you anything?”
She nodded.
“What?”
The girl reached inside her clothing.
She withdrew a small cloth pouch.
Opened it.
And placed something in Yasuke's hand.
A piece of dark silver.
Curved along one edge.
Flat along the other.
Three curved lines.
One circle.
Yasuke stared.
The missing fitting.
The third piece.
He looked toward Aki.
She nodded slowly.
For the first time, they possessed something the men hunting the sword did not.
And it had been carried for six years by a child everyone had been ordered to forget.
Yasuke closed his fingers around the silver.
Then looked at the girl.
“Hana.”
She met his eyes.
“You have done something very brave.”
She shook her head.
“I was frightened.”
He smiled gently.
“So was I.”
The girl stared.

“You?”
“Yes.”
“Of what?”
Yasuke considered.
Then answered.
“Of failing to find you.”
The girl's expression changed.
For a moment, she looked as though she didn't understand.
Then she began to cry.
Not the frightened crying of a servant expecting punishment.
The deep, exhausted sobbing of a child who had waited years for someone to come.
Yasuke opened his arms.
She stepped into them.
He held her carefully.
Around them, the courtyard remained silent.
The sword was still missing.
The conspirators were still free.
The records remained incomplete.
But one name had been restored.
And for Yasuke, that was enough to make the journey worthwhile.

Present Day

Luna read the final paragraph of her great-grandmother's letter again.
Then carefully placed it beside the sword.
Malcolm watched her.
“What are you thinking?”
She looked up.
“That we're asking the wrong questions.”
He smiled faintly.
“Apparently that's hereditary.”
She ignored him.
“We keep asking why the sword comes back.”
“Yes.”
“Who sends it.”

“Yes.”
“Who owned it.”
“Yes.”
She leaned forward.
“But Grandma's letter says the important thing isn't the sword.”
Emiko nodded slowly.
“It's the people.”
“Exactly.”
Nakamura watched her.
Luna continued.
“So maybe we should start with the names.”
Malcolm looked toward the strip of material removed from the hilt.
“Yasuke. Aki.”
“And the others,” she said.
Emiko turned toward the ancient writing.
There were more names.
Some faded.
Some difficult to read.
One had been damaged.
And one appeared to have been deliberately scratched away.
Luna pointed toward it.
“That one.”
Emiko frowned.
“We can't read it.”
“Not yet.”
Malcolm looked at her.
“What are you proposing?”
She smiled.
“We find somebody who can.”
Nakamura leaned forward.
“There are specialists who may be able to recover damaged writing.”
Malcolm looked at him.
“Without destroying it?”
“Yes.”
“Without stealing it?”
The old man smiled faintly.
“I cannot guarantee the second.”

Malcolm nodded.
“Appreciate the honesty.”
Then Luna looked toward Emiko.
“Mom?”
“Yes?”
“What if the name we're missing is the one that matters?”
Emiko considered.
“It may be.”
Luna looked toward the sword.
Then the old letter.
Then the photograph.
For several moments, she was quiet.
Finally, she spoke.
“I think we need to go to Japan.”
Malcolm opened his mouth.
She raised one hand.
“Before you say no, hear me out.”
He stopped.
She continued.
“Mom's family records are there. Mr. Nakamura's family records are there. The Kuroda collection is there. And whoever has been moving this sword around may be there too.”
Malcolm considered.
Emiko watched him.
Luna leaned closer.
“We can't solve all of this from our dining room.”
He sighed.
“I was afraid you were going to say something reasonable.”
She smiled.
“Sorry.”
He looked toward Emiko.
“What do you think?”
She considered.
Then nodded.
“I think we should go.”
He stared.
“Seriously?”

“Yes.”
He looked toward Nakamura.
“And you?”
The old man smiled faintly.
“I think you should have come years ago.”
Malcolm leaned back.
For a long moment, he studied the sword.
Then Luna.
Then Emiko.
He had spent years trying to get rid of an object he didn't understand.
And now the two people he loved most were asking him to follow it across an ocean.
He sighed.
“Fine.”
Luna grinned.
“Fine?”
“Yes.”
She nearly jumped from her chair.
“We're going to Japan?”
He pointed at her.
“Under certain conditions.”
She groaned.
“Oh, God.”
“First, we don't tell anybody why we're going.”
“Fine.”
“Second, nobody wanders off alone.”
“Fine.”
“Third, nobody touches ancient swords without supervision.”
Luna smiled.
“Fine.”
“And fourth—”
Emiko laughed.
“Darling.”
“What?”
“We haven't even booked the flights.”
He sighed.

“I'm trying to establish order.”
Luna leaned over and kissed his cheek.
“Good luck with that.”
He smiled despite himself.
Then looked toward the sword.
“Japan,” he muttered.
Luna grinned.
“Japan.”
Emiko smiled.
And Nakamura, sitting quietly at the end of the table, looked toward the old photograph from 1932.
For a moment, his expression darkened.
Because there was one thing he had not told them.
Three months earlier, when he had seen the sword in the Kuroda collection, the man who owned it had asked him a question.
A very specific question.
Has the American family had a daughter?
Nakamura had lied.
He had said no.
And two weeks later, the sword had disappeared.
He looked at Luna.
She was laughing with her parents.
Excited.
Unaware.
Still believing that the greatest adventure of her life was about to begin.
Nakamura lowered his eyes.
He hoped he had done the right thing by coming.
Because if the Kuroda family knew the sword had reached her, the question would no longer be whether the family should travel to Japan.
It would be whether they could reach Japan before someone came looking for them.

Chapter 13

The Crossing



Present Day

Malcolm Hayes had always maintained that international travel was best undertaken under three conditions.
First, everyone possessed a valid passport.
Second, somebody knew where the luggage was.
Third, nobody was trying to kill them.
At present, he was confident about only the first.
“Tell me again why we're doing this.”
Luna looked up from her laptop.
“Because we agreed to go to Japan.”
“I remember agreeing. I'm questioning my judgment.”
“That's healthy.”
“Thank you.”
“Personal growth is important at your age.”
He stared at her.
Emiko laughed from the kitchen.
“She's got you there.”
He pointed toward the doorway.
“You're supposed to be on my side.”
“I am.”
“Could've fooled me.”
Luna returned to her screen.
“I found flights.”
He leaned closer.
“How much?”
She told him.
He recoiled.

“For three people?”
“Yes.”
“Round trip?”
“Yes.”
“With seats?”
She stared.
“Dad.”
“I'm asking. At that price, I want to be sure we're not travelling in the cargo hold.”
Emiko entered carrying coffee.
“Nakamura offered to help with arrangements.”
Malcolm's expression changed.
“Absolutely not.”
“Darling.”
“No. That man arrives uninvited, delivers a series of disturbing revelations, and suddenly wants to be our travel agent?”
“He has connections in Japan.”
“So does the Japanese government. I'm not letting them book my flights either.”
Luna smiled.
“Technically, Mom has connections in Japan.”
He turned toward her.
“Which is exactly why your mother is handling the Japanese part of this operation.”
Emiko raised an eyebrow.
“The Japanese part?”
“Yes.”
“What are you handling?”
He considered.
“Security.”
Luna burst out laughing.
He looked offended.
“What's funny?”
“Nothing, Dad. I just love that you've promoted yourself to head of security.”
“Someone has to be responsible.”
“Of course.”

“And I'm also handling luggage.”
Emiko smiled.
“An ambitious portfolio.”
He pointed toward both of them.
“Keep laughing. Neither of you knows how much shampoo is allowed on an airplane.”
Luna opened her mouth.
He raised a hand.
“Don't answer that.”
By evening, the dining room had become a temporary headquarters.
Three laptops.
Two phones.
A stack of photocopies.
The family manuscript.
And a sword that nobody had yet figured out how to transport legally.
That last problem was proving particularly irritating.
“We are not carrying it onto the airplane,” Emiko announced.
Malcolm looked up.
“I wasn't planning to.”
“You suggested putting it in a guitar case.”
“That was before I remembered what was inside.”
Luna grinned.
“So we're checking it?”
“No,” Malcolm replied. “We're researching how to transport it properly, with documentation and whatever permissions are required.”
Emiko nodded.
“And until we know, it stays here.”
Luna considered.
“Then what happens if it follows us?”
Her father closed his eyes.
“Please don't put that thought into the universe.”
“I'm just saying.”
“Don't.”
She smiled.
“Okay.”

Emiko opened a folder on her laptop.
“I've been in touch with my cousin in Tokyo.”
Malcolm looked up.
“The one who confirmed your aunt's death?”
“Yes.”
“How is she?”
“Exhausted. The funeral was difficult.”
His expression softened.
“I'm sorry.”
She nodded.
“Thank you.”
Luna reached across the table and touched her mother's hand.
Emiko smiled.
Then continued.
“My cousin says Grandma's papers were divided among several family members after her death. Some stayed with my mother. Others went to my aunt.”
“And the rest?” Luna asked.
“Apparently a small collection was deposited with a private archive.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Where?”
“Kyoto.”
Luna grinned.
“Kyoto!”
Her father looked at her.
“Indoor voice.”
“Sorry.”
Emiko continued.
“The archive has records connected to merchant families from the Azuchi period. Some may be relevant.”
“Can we see them?” Luna asked.
“Possibly. My cousin is helping arrange an appointment.”
Malcolm nodded.
“Good. Actual research. I like actual research.”
Luna smiled.
“Because it doesn't involve haunted swords?”

“Because it involves people who can answer questions without speaking in riddles.”
Emiko laughed.
Then her phone buzzed.
She glanced at the screen.
A message from Nakamura.
She read it.
Her smile disappeared.
Malcolm noticed.
“What?”
She turned the phone toward him.
The message was brief.
Please do not tell anyone your arrival date until we speak.
Malcolm stared.
Then slowly set down his coffee.
“Oh, hell no.”

Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581

The girl named Hana did not wish to return to the estate.
That much was clear.
Yasuke sat beneath a tree while Aki spoke with her.
The child had eaten little since leaving the household. She kept her small cloth pouch close and looked toward the road whenever horses approached.
Ren stood several paces away, speaking quietly with Saburō.
Yasuke watched Hana.
She was fifteen now, or near enough.
When Harunobu had disappeared, she had been a child.
Six years.
Long enough to forget the sound of a parent's voice.
Long enough to learn another name.
Long enough to begin believing that the life remembered in dreams had belonged to someone else.
Aki returned.
“She wants to know where we're taking her.”
Yasuke nodded.

“Somewhere safe.”
Aki gave him a look.
“What?”
“You might wish to be more specific.”
Yasuke considered.
“Do you know somewhere safe?”
Aki hesitated.
“No.”
“Then I would prefer not to lie.”
She sat beside him.
For a while, neither spoke.
Then Aki said, “She thinks you're going to return her.”
Yasuke looked toward the girl.
“Why?”
“Because everyone who has ever promised to help her has eventually handed her to someone else.”
The words struck him.
He studied Hana.
She was examining the small metal fitting, turning it slowly between her fingers.
Yasuke stood.
Walked toward her.
Then knelt at a respectful distance.
“Hana.”
She looked up.
“Yes?”
“I am told you are concerned about where we are going.”
She nodded.
“That is reasonable.”
She watched him.
He continued.
“I cannot promise that we will never encounter danger.”
Her expression tightened.
“But I can promise that I will not return you to that household against your will.”
She studied his face.
“Even if they order you?”

Yasuke considered.
“Even then.”
“Even if your lord orders you?”
That was a considerably more difficult question.
He did not answer immediately.
Hana noticed.
“You're thinking.”
“Yes.”
“About whether you'll obey?”
“About what I should do if the man I serve asks me to do something I believe is wrong.”
She looked down.
“My father used to think like that.”
Yasuke smiled faintly.
“Did he?”
She nodded.
“He said a man who never questions an order is only borrowing someone else's mind.”
Yasuke laughed softly.
“A wise man.”
“He was.”
Her voice cracked.
Yasuke waited.
Then she asked, “Do you think he's dead?”
The question came so quietly that he almost missed it.
He looked at her.
“I don't know.”
She swallowed.
“Everyone says he is.”
“I know.”
“Do you believe them?”
Yasuke considered.
“I believe someone has worked very hard to prevent us from learning what happened to him.”
Hana stared.
Then nodded slowly.
“That's what I think too.”

For the first time, Yasuke saw something in her expression beyond fear.
Determination.
He recognized it.
It reminded him of Aki.
Which was, he thought, a worrying development for everyone.
Ren approached shortly afterward.
“We need to move.”
Yasuke looked up.
“Why?”
“The household will send word of her disappearance.”
Saburō joined them.
“I have men watching the road.”
Ren shook his head.
“That won't be enough.”
“Why?”
“Because whoever arranged Harunobu's disappearance has spent six years keeping the girl hidden. They will not simply allow her to leave.”
Yasuke glanced toward Hana.
“She remains with us.”
Ren nodded.
“Then we must decide who can be trusted.”
Saburō sighed.
“A familiar problem.”
Aki looked toward the hills.
“My grandmother once spoke of a place where families kept records outside the reach of military households.”
Ren turned sharply.
“Aki.”
She met his gaze.
“What?”
“Don't.”
“Why?”
“You know why.”
Yasuke looked between them.
“Would either of you care to include the rest of us?”

Aki folded her arms.
Ren sighed.
Then looked toward Yasuke.
“There is a storehouse near the lake.”
“What kind of storehouse?”
“One that does not appear in ordinary property registers.”
Saburō frowned.
“Then how do you know it exists?”
Ren glanced toward his sister.
“Our family helped maintain it.”
Yasuke considered.
“And what is stored there?”
“Records. Letters. Objects entrusted for safekeeping.”
Aki added, “And perhaps information about Harunobu.”
Yasuke looked toward Hana.
The girl was watching them.
Listening.
He turned back.
“Then we go.”
Ren frowned.
“It isn't that simple.”
Yasuke smiled.
“Nothing involving your family ever is.”

Present Day

Mr. Nakamura had returned to his hotel.
This was a source of considerable relief to Malcolm, who had begun to suspect the old man possessed an unlimited supply of troubling information.
Unfortunately, he continued sending messages.
The latest had arrived less than an hour after the warning about their travel dates.
We should meet tomorrow. There are matters concerning the Kuroda family that I did not wish to discuss in front of your daughter.
Malcolm stared at the screen.

Then showed it to Emiko.
She read it.
Her expression hardened.
“No.”
He looked surprised.
“No?”
“If he has information concerning our daughter, he can tell us while she is present.”
He smiled.
“That's why I married you.”
She looked at him.
“Because I don't tolerate nonsense?”
“Among other reasons.”
Luna entered carrying a bowl of cereal.
“What nonsense?”
“Nakamura wants a private meeting,” Malcolm said.
She frowned.
“About what?”
“Apparently you.”
She stopped chewing.
“Me?”
“Yeah.”
She swallowed.
“And he doesn't want me there?”
“Correct.”
She considered.
“Then I'm definitely going.”
Her father laughed.
“That's my girl.”
Emiko took the phone.
Typed a reply.
Then showed it to them.
We will meet as a family. If you have concerns about our daughter, she deserves to hear them.
Malcolm nodded.
“Send it.”
She did.

Luna smiled.
“Thanks, Mom.”
Emiko reached over and touched her cheek.
“Always.”
For a moment, the three of them sat quietly.
Then Luna's phone buzzed.
She looked down.
Her expression changed.
“What?” Malcolm asked.
She didn't answer.
He sighed.
“Here we go.”
She turned the screen toward them.
A message from her friend.
Grandpa says Nakamura isn't his real name.
Silence.
Malcolm stared.
Then slowly leaned back.
“You have GOT to be fucking kidding me.”

Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581

The storehouse stood among trees overlooking the lake.
It was not large.
From the outside, it resembled a merchant's warehouse, with heavy wooden doors and a low roof.
There were no guards.
No banners.
No indication that anything valuable lay inside.
Yasuke found that reassuring.
Then he noticed Ren examining the surrounding ground.
That was less reassuring.
“What?”
Ren crouched near the entrance.
“Someone has been here.”
Saburō dismounted.
“How recently?”

Ren touched the earth.
“Within a day.”
Aki looked toward the doors.
“Are they open?”
Ren shook his head.
“Locked.”
Yasuke approached.
“Then perhaps whoever came left without entering.”
Ren did not answer.
Instead, he examined the doorframe.
A narrow scratch marked the wood near the lock.
His expression changed.
“No.”
Aki stepped closer.
“What?”
“Someone tried.”
She studied the mark.
Then looked toward the building.
“Did they succeed?”
Ren reached into his sleeve.
Removed the silver fitting.
Aki's fitting.
The small object he had identified as a key.
He fitted it against a metal plate near the door.
Turned it.
A soft click followed.
Yasuke raised an eyebrow.
“Your grandmother was an interesting woman.”
Ren smiled faintly.
“You have no idea.”
The doors opened.
Inside, the storehouse smelled of old paper, timber, and dust.
Shelves lined the walls.
Wooden chests stood beneath cloth coverings.
Several low tables occupied the centre.
Nothing appeared disturbed.
Aki entered first.

She looked around slowly.
“I haven't been here since I was a child.”
Ren nodded.
“Grandmother brought us once.”
Yasuke stepped inside.
Saburō followed with Hana.
The girl looked around in wonder.
“What is this place?”
Aki smiled gently.
“A place where people kept things they were afraid to lose.”
Hana considered.
“Like names?”
Aki's smile faded.
“Yes.”
“Then perhaps my father's name is here.”
No one answered.
The girl looked toward the shelves.
Then she began searching.
Yasuke watched her.
For a moment, he considered stopping her.
The room was old.
The documents fragile.
There might be dangers they had not anticipated.
But then he remembered her words.
Like names?
He turned toward Aki.
“Let her look.”
Aki nodded.
“Carefully.”
Hana moved toward the nearest shelf.
Ren began examining the chests.
Saburō guarded the entrance.
Yasuke studied the room.
It was remarkable how ordinary it appeared.
No treasure.
No glittering jewels.
No weapons displayed upon stands.

Only records.
Names.
Documents.
The quiet evidence that people had once lived and worked and loved and suffered.
He thought of Nobunaga's castle.
Its towers.
Its beauty.
Its ambition.
A place built to proclaim the greatness of one man.
And here, hidden in a modest storehouse, lay the forgotten traces of hundreds.
Yasuke wondered which would endure longer.
Aki found the first relevant document.
It was folded inside a wooden box marked with the same three-line symbol.
She called the others.
“Here.”
Ren approached.
She opened the paper.
Inside was a list of household transfers.
Names.
Dates.
Locations.
Some were crossed out.
Others annotated.
Aki scanned the entries.
Then stopped.
“Harunobu.”
Hana turned.
“What?”
Aki looked up.
“Your father.”
The girl hurried over.
“Where?”
Aki pointed.
The name appeared near the middle of the page.

Beneath it was a short notation.
Removed from service by order of the receiving household.
Yasuke frowned.
“Receiving household?”
Ren examined the document.
Then turned it over.
A second seal appeared on the back.
Saburō leaned closer.
His expression changed.
“I know that mark.”
Yasuke looked at him.
“Whose?”
Saburō hesitated.
Then answered.
“A family associated with one of Nobunaga's senior commanders.”
Ren looked up sharply.
“Which commander?”
Saburō said the name.
The room fell silent.
Yasuke recognized it immediately.
The same name whispered by the attacker in the burning village.
The man who had demanded the sword.
The man who claimed the weapon did not belong to Yasuke.
Aki watched his expression.
“What?”
Yasuke looked toward Saburō.
“We need to return to Nobunaga.”
Ren shook his head.
“Not yet.”
“Why?”
“Because we have only part of the record.”
Yasuke gestured toward the document.
“We have a name.”
“A name is not proof.”
“It is a beginning.”
Ren nodded.

“Yes. But if we accuse a powerful commander without proof, we may destroy the very people we're trying to protect.”
Yasuke considered.
He disliked the answer.
Mostly because it was sensible.
Aki touched his arm.
“Let us keep looking.”
He nodded.
“Very well.”
They returned to the shelves.

Present Day

Malcolm called Nakamura.
He did not bother with pleasantries.
“Who are you?”
A pause.
Then the older man's voice.
“I beg your pardon?”
“You heard me.”
Emiko sat beside him.
Luna stood near the window, watching the street.
Malcolm continued.
“My daughter's friend tells us Nakamura isn't your real name.”
Silence.
Then the old man sighed.
“I was hoping to explain that tomorrow.”
“Congratulations. Tomorrow came early.”
Another pause.
Then Nakamura spoke.
“My name is not false.”
Malcolm frowned.
“That's an interesting way to avoid answering.”
“It is a name I have used for many years.”
“Is it the name you were born with?”
“No.”
Malcolm closed his eyes.

“Oh, for fuck's sake.”
Emiko took the phone.
“Mr. Nakamura. Or whatever name you prefer. We need you to be straightforward with us.”
The older man was quiet.
Then he said, “My birth name was Kuroda.”
Silence.
Emiko stared.
“Kuroda?”
“Yes.”
Malcolm took the phone back.
“As in the family that had the sword three months ago?”
“Yes.”
He stood.
“Are you kidding me?”
“No.”
“You've been telling us to be careful of the Kuroda family, and you're one of them?”
“I was born into that family.”
“That's not an answer.”
“I left it decades ago.”
“Why?”
The old man hesitated.
Then spoke quietly.
“Because I learned what my family had done.”
Malcolm stared.
“What did they do?”
“Something I have spent most of my life trying to repair.”
Emiko leaned closer.
“What?”
Nakamura sighed.
“Your wife's grandmother was not merely someone I knew.”
Emiko went still.
“What?”
“She helped me escape my family's control.”
Silence.
Malcolm looked toward his wife.

Her face had gone pale.
Nakamura continued.
“She taught me that the history we inherited was incomplete. That some of the people we called traitors had been protecting others.”
Emiko swallowed.
“And your family?”
“My family believed the records should remain hidden.”
“Why?”
“Because they believed the truth would destroy everything they had inherited.”
Malcolm stared.
“Property?”
“Some.”
“Reputation?”
“Yes.”
“And the sword?”
Nakamura paused.
“The sword was never the treasure.”
Malcolm closed his eyes.
“Please don't start with the riddles again.”
“It was a container.”
“We know.”
“A means of preserving a record.”
“We know that too.”
“But the record inside the sword was only one part.”
Emiko leaned forward.
“What was the other part?”
Nakamura's voice lowered.
“A record of those who survived.”
Silence.
Luna turned from the window.
“What?”
The old man continued.
“Your manuscript records losses. Disappearances. Names removed from registers.”
“Yes,” Emiko said.

“But there was another account. One that followed the people who escaped, who took new names, who built new lives.”
Malcolm considered.
“Descendants.”
“Yes.”
Luna stepped closer.
“So there might be proof of what happened to Yasuke's family.”
Nakamura hesitated.
“Perhaps.”
“And where is it?” she asked.
A long silence followed.
Then the old man answered.
“Kyoto.”
Luna looked at her parents.
Malcolm stared toward the ceiling.
“Of course it's Kyoto.”

Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581

Hana found the chest near the rear wall.
It was small.
No larger than a box used to store clothing.
Unlike the others, it bore no family crest.
Only the three-line symbol.
She knelt beside it.
Then called softly.
“Aki?”
Aki approached.
“What is it?”
Hana pointed.
“This.”
Aki examined the chest.
Its lock was unusual.
A narrow opening ran across the front.
She touched it.
Then looked toward Ren.
“Bring the fittings.”

Ren approached.
He placed the first piece against the lock.
Nothing happened.
He tried another angle.
Still nothing.
Yasuke watched.
“Perhaps it requires more than one.”
Ren looked toward him.
“More than one what?”
“Key.”
Aki's expression changed.
She reached into her clothing.
Removed the second fitting.
Hana carefully opened her pouch.
The third piece lay inside.
Three pieces.
Three curved edges.
Three small notches.
Aki placed them beside one another.
They formed a circle.
At the centre was a small opening.
Yasuke leaned closer.
“Interesting.”
Ren fitted the pieces together.
A soft click sounded.
The circle held.
Aki lifted it.
Then placed it against the chest.
The metal settled into the lock.
Perfectly.
For a moment, no one moved.
Then Ren turned it.
The lock released.
The lid opened.
Inside lay a bundle wrapped in dark cloth.
Aki lifted it carefully.
Unfolded the fabric.

Several documents appeared.
And beneath them, a small wooden tablet.
Hana leaned forward.
“What is that?”
Aki examined it.
Then looked at Ren.
Her expression changed.
“It's a name tablet.”
Ren nodded slowly.
Yasuke frowned.
“A memorial?”
“Perhaps.”
Aki turned it over.
On the back was a line of writing.
She read it silently.
Then stopped.
“What?” Yasuke asked.
Aki looked toward Hana.
Then back at the tablet.
“This belonged to your father.”
The girl froze.
“My father?”
Aki nodded.
Hana reached toward it.
Then withdrew her hand.
“May I?”
“Of course.”
Aki placed the tablet in her palms.
The girl stared at the writing.
Her lips trembled.
Then she began to cry.
Yasuke knelt beside her.
“What does it say?”
Hana swallowed.
“My father used to write that.”
She pointed toward the characters.
“He said it was something his father taught him.”

Aki looked at the inscription.
Then translated.
What is taken may be returned.
Yasuke studied the words.
He thought of the old farmer.
The murdered headman.
The stolen food.
The girl whose name had been changed.
Then he looked toward the documents.
“What else is there?”
Ren began examining the papers.
His expression grew serious.
“These are records of people who escaped.”
Aki leaned closer.
“Escaped where?”
“Different places. Some remained in Japan. Others travelled.”
Yasuke looked up.
“Travelled?”
Ren nodded.
“By sea.”
For a moment, Yasuke felt an unexpected pull in his chest.
The sea.
He remembered the endless water.
The ships.
The strange ports.
The languages.
The feeling of moving farther and farther from everything he had once known.
He looked toward the documents.
“Where did they go?”
Ren scanned the page.
“Some destinations are recorded. Others are not.”
Yasuke considered.
“Why keep the records?”
Aki answered.
“Because perhaps one day someone would come looking.”
Yasuke looked at her.

Then at Hana.
The girl still held her father's tablet.
For the first time, he understood something about the people who had hidden these records.
They had not merely been preserving evidence of crimes.
They had been preserving the possibility of reunion.
A family divided.
A child taken.
A name erased.
A life moved beyond the reach of those who remembered it.
And somewhere, perhaps generations later, someone might come searching.
He looked toward the open chest.
Then said quietly, “We should make copies.”
Ren nodded.
“Yes.”
“Several.”
“Yes.”
“And place them in different hands.”
Aki smiled faintly.
“Now you're thinking like my grandmother.”
Yasuke looked at her.
“A terrifying development.”
She laughed.
But her expression soon grew serious.
Because she had noticed something at the bottom of the chest.
A second compartment.
Narrow.
Almost invisible.
She reached toward it.
Then stopped.
“Ren.”
He looked up.
“What?”
She pointed.
He leaned closer.
The compartment was sealed with dark wax.

And pressed into the wax was a family crest.
Saburō saw it first.
His face drained of colour.
Yasuke noticed.
“What?”
The younger warrior stared at the seal.
Then whispered a name.
The same commander.
The same household.
The same accusation.
Yasuke looked toward Aki.
Then at Ren.
Then back at Saburō.
“What does it mean?”
Saburō swallowed.
“It means someone in that household knew these records existed.”
Ren examined the seal.
Then shook his head.
“No.”
Saburō frowned.
“What?”
“This seal wasn't used to close the compartment.”
Aki looked at him.
“Then what?”
Ren pointed toward the edge.
“It was used to show that someone had opened it.”
Silence.
Yasuke leaned closer.
The wax had been broken.
Then pressed back into place.
Not perfectly.
Someone had entered the compartment.
Removed something.
And attempted to conceal the theft.
Aki carefully lifted the wooden panel.
Inside was a single folded paper.
Nothing more.

Ren opened it.
Read the first line.
Then stopped.
His expression changed so violently that Yasuke thought he might be ill.
“What?” Aki asked.
Ren looked at her.
Then at Yasuke.
The paper trembled in his hands.
“It's an order.”
“From whom?” Saburō demanded.
Ren swallowed.
Then read aloud.
The order instructed that the girl known as Hana be moved from the estate.
Her identity was to be altered.
Her father's records were to be destroyed.
And any surviving documents were to be recovered.
Yasuke's expression hardened.
“Who signed it?”
Ren looked toward the bottom.
Then whispered the name.
Saburō stepped backward.
“No.”
Aki stared.
“What?”
Saburō shook his head.
“That cannot be.”
Yasuke felt a chill.
“Whose name?”
Saburō looked at him.
The shock on his face was genuine.
Then he answered.
“My father.”

Present Day

Luna had stopped packing.
Her suitcase lay open on the bed.
Clothes were scattered around it.
A pair of trainers sat on the floor.
Her passport rested beside her laptop.
She was staring at the family photograph on her desk.
Her parents stood on either side of her.
All three were laughing.
It had been taken during a holiday years earlier.
Before the sword became an obsession.
Before the strange packages.
Before Japan had become something more than a place she wanted to visit.
She looked toward the photograph.
Then toward the doorway.
Malcolm stood there.
“Hey.”
She smiled.
“Hey.”
He entered.
Looked at the suitcase.
“Packing?”
“Attempting.”
He nodded.
“Good.”
She studied him.
“Dad?”
“Yeah?”
“Are you scared?”
He considered.
“Of what?”
“Japan.”
He smiled.
“No.”
She raised an eyebrow.
He sighed.
“Okay. A little.”

She nodded.
“Me too.”
He sat beside her.
For a while, neither spoke.
Then he looked at the photograph.
“You know something?”
“What?”
“When you were little, I used to think the hardest part of being your father was keeping you safe.”
She smiled faintly.
“And now?”
He considered.
“Now I'm beginning to think the hardest part is knowing when to let you take a risk.”
She looked at him.
“That's kind of sweet.”
He shrugged.
“Don't tell anybody.”
She laughed.
Then leaned against him.
He put an arm around her.
For several moments, they sat quietly.
Then she spoke.
“Dad?”
“Yeah?”
“What if we find out the family stories aren't true?”
He looked down at her.
“What do you mean?”
“What if you're not descended from Yasuke? What if Mom's family history is different from what we think? What if all of this is just people trying to make connections that aren't really there?”
He considered.
Then smiled.
“Then we'll have learned something.”
She looked up.
“That's it?”
“Yeah.”

“You won't be disappointed?”
He shook his head.
“Baby, I don't need a samurai in my family tree to know who I am.”
She smiled.
“And me?”
He kissed the top of her head.
“You don't need one either.”
For a moment, she looked as though she might cry.
Instead, she laughed.
“Okay. That was really sweet.”
He grinned.
“I have my moments.”
She nodded.
“Rarely.”
He stared.
“Get out.”
She burst out laughing.
“This is my room!”
“Then I'll get out.”
He stood.
Walked toward the doorway.
Then stopped.
Luna looked up.
“What?”
He turned.
“One more thing.”
She waited.
“If anything about this trip makes you uncomfortable, you tell us. No pretending you're fine just because you think we expect you to be brave.”
She nodded.
“Okay.”
“Promise?”
“Promise.”
He smiled.
Then left.
She watched him go.

For several moments, she sat quietly.
Then her phone buzzed.
A message from an unknown number.
She frowned.
Opened it.
There was no greeting.
No explanation.
Only a photograph.
Her suitcase.
Open on her bed.
Taken from the doorway.
Exactly as it appeared now.
Her blood went cold.
She stared at the image.
Then slowly turned toward the door.
The hallway was empty.
Her phone buzzed again.
A second message appeared.
You should have stayed home.
For a moment, she could not move.
Then she stood.
Walked quickly to the hallway.
“Dad?”
No answer.
“Dad!”
Her voice rose.
Footsteps sounded downstairs.
Malcolm appeared at the foot of the staircase.
“What?”
She held up the phone.
He saw her face.
And whatever joke he had been about to make disappeared.
He climbed the stairs two at a time.
“What happened?”
She handed him the phone.
He looked at the photograph.
Then the message.

His expression changed.
Not slowly.
Not gradually.
Instantly.
He looked toward the bedroom.
The window.
The hallway.
Then back at his daughter.
“Where's your mother?”
“Downstairs.”
He took her hand.
“Come with me.”
“Dad—”
“Now.”
They went downstairs together.
Emiko stood in the kitchen.
She looked up.
“What happened?”
Malcolm handed her the phone.
She examined the screen.
Her face went pale.
Then she looked toward the staircase.
“Someone was in her room?”
He nodded.
“Or close enough to take that picture.”
Emiko looked toward the front door.
Then the windows.
Luna stood between them.
For the first time since the sword arrived, she looked genuinely frightened.
Malcolm pulled out his own phone.
Emiko watched.
“Who are you calling?”
“The police.”
Luna looked up.
“Dad, what about Japan?”
He met her eyes.

For a moment, the question hung between them.
Then he spoke.
“Japan can wait.”
He looked toward the staircase.
Then at the threatening message.
“Somebody just brought this bullshit into my house.”
Emiko stepped beside him.
Her expression was calm.
Too calm.
The kind of calm that meant she was furious.
She looked at the photograph.
Then at Malcolm.
“We're not going anywhere until we know how they got inside.”
Luna swallowed.
“Do you think it's the Kurodas?”
Emiko shook her head.
“I don't know.”
Malcolm looked at the phone again.
Then toward the closed wooden case on the dining room table.
For years, he had believed the sword was the danger.
Now he understood something worse.
The sword was only an object.
The danger was whoever wanted it.
And whoever that was had just made a very serious mistake.
They had threatened his daughter.

Azuchi, Japan — 1581

Saburō sat alone beneath the trees.
The paper lay before him.
His father's name stared upward from the final line.
He had read it six times.
Each time, the characters remained the same.
Yasuke approached quietly.
For a while, he stood without speaking.
Then he sat beside him.
Saburō did not look up.

“My father was an honourable man.”
Yasuke waited.
“He served powerful households. He was respected. Men sought his judgment.”
Yasuke nodded.
“I understand.”
Saburō shook his head.
“No. You don't.”
Yasuke remained silent.
Saburō continued.
“Everything I have become was built upon his example.”
He looked toward Yasuke.
“My position. My training. My loyalty. Everything.”
Yasuke considered.
“And now you have found something that contradicts it.”
Saburō nodded.
“Yes.”
For several moments, neither spoke.
Then Yasuke said, “The document may be false.”
Saburō looked up.
“You believe that?”
“I believe it is possible.”
“But not likely.”
Yasuke considered.
“I don't know.”
Saburō looked down.
“My father died three years ago.”
Yasuke nodded.
“He cannot defend himself.”
“No.”
“He cannot explain.”
“No.”
“He cannot tell me whether he signed that order.”
Yasuke remained quiet.
Saburō clenched his hands.
“What am I supposed to do?”
Yasuke looked toward the lake.

Then answered.
“Find out whether it is true.”
Saburō laughed bitterly.
“And if it is?”
Yasuke turned toward him.
“Then decide what kind of man you wish to be.”
The younger warrior stared.
Yasuke continued.
“You cannot change what your father did.”
Saburō looked away.
“But you can decide what you do with the truth.”
For a long time, neither spoke.
Then Saburō reached for the document.
Folded it.
Placed it inside his clothing.
And stood.
Yasuke looked up.
“Where are you going?”
Saburō considered.
Then answered.
“To find out whether the man I have spent my life trying to become is a man I should never have admired.”
He walked toward the horses.
Yasuke watched him go.
Then looked toward the storehouse.
Aki stood near the entrance.
She had been listening.
She approached.
“You were kind to him.”
Yasuke shook his head.
“I told him the truth.”
She smiled faintly.
“Sometimes that is kindness.”
He looked at her.
“And sometimes?”
“Sometimes it is the cruelest thing we can do.”
Yasuke considered.

Then nodded.
“Yes.”
Aki sat beside him.
For a moment, they watched Saburō prepare his horse.
Then she said, “You know what frightens me?”
Yasuke looked toward her.
“What?”
“That we may discover everything.”
He frowned.
“Why would that frighten you?”
“Because knowing the truth does not guarantee we will know what to do with it.”
Yasuke considered.
Then looked toward the lake.
Beyond the water, mountains rose against the sky.
Somewhere beyond those mountains lay the castle of a man who had given him a sword.
Somewhere beyond the castle lay the people who had stolen it.
And somewhere beyond those people lay a history of names, betrayals, and broken promises that seemed to grow larger with every answer.
He looked at Aki.
“Then perhaps we should concern ourselves with doing the next right thing.”
She smiled.
“That sounds simple.”
“It isn't.”
“No.”
“But it is something.”
Aki leaned against him.
For a moment, he allowed himself to be still.
The wind moved through the trees.
The lake shimmered.
And far away, beyond the mountains, the future waited without revealing anything of itself.
Yasuke looked toward the open storehouse.

Then at the girl named Hana, who was carefully copying her father's name onto a fresh piece of paper.
He smiled.
There.
That was something worth protecting.
Not the sword.
Not the records.
Not even the truth, taken alone.
The chance for a person to reclaim what had been stolen.
He looked at Aki.
She looked back.
And for the first time, he wondered whether the life he was building in Japan might become something more than service to a powerful lord.
Perhaps it might become a home.



Chapter 14

The Quiet Hand



Present Day

The police officer had been in the house for twenty-three minutes when Malcolm Hayes began to understand that he was not going to enjoy the conversation.
“Any signs of forced entry?” the officer asked.
“No.”
“Anything missing?”
“Not that we've found.”
“Security cameras?”
“Doorbell camera. Front of the house.”
“Anything on it?”
“No one approaching the front door around the time the photograph was taken.”
The officer made another note.
“And you're certain the photograph was taken today?”
Malcolm stared at him.
“My daughter's suitcase is in the picture. She started packing today.”
“Someone could have taken it earlier.”
“Earlier than what?”
“Earlier than when the message was sent.”
Malcolm opened his mouth.
Closed it.
Then looked toward Emiko.
“Am I missing something?”
She touched his arm.
“Let him finish.”

He leaned back in his chair.
The officer continued.
“Has your daughter shared this photograph with anyone?”
“No,” Luna answered.
“Posted it anywhere?”
“No.”
“Could a friend have taken it?”
Malcolm shifted.
“Friend?”
“Someone she knows. A prank that went too far.”
Luna looked offended.
“My friends don't sneak into my bedroom and send death threats.”
The officer glanced at the phone.
“It's not technically a death threat.”
Malcolm stood.
Emiko closed her eyes.
“Darling.”
“No, sweetheart, I'm interested. What exactly do we call it when somebody takes a photograph inside my daughter's bedroom and tells her she should've stayed home?”
The officer remained seated.
“I'm not minimizing your concern.”
“Then stop making it sound like a disagreement between teenagers.”
A silence followed.
Luna looked at the floor.
Malcolm saw it.
That frightened him more than the message.
He sat down.
The officer softened his tone.
“We're taking a report. We'll document the messages and the photograph. We can request information from the service provider, though that can take time. I also recommend changing your passwords, reviewing account access, and checking your home security.”
Emiko nodded.
“We will.”

“Until we know more, don't delete anything. If another message arrives, contact us.”
He gave them the report number and his card.
At the door, Malcolm asked one final question.
“What if someone comes back?”
The officer looked at him.
“Call 911 if anyone is attempting to enter or threatening your family. Don't confront them.”
Malcolm nodded.
He understood.
He also knew there were limits to what any police officer could promise.
When the patrol car finally disappeared, he locked the door.
Then checked it again.
Emiko watched him.
“You'll wear out the lock.”
“Then I'll buy a better one.”
She said nothing.
He looked toward the stairs.
Luna had gone back to her room, though she'd left the door open.
He lowered his voice.
“I'm not comfortable with this.”
“Neither am I.”
“Somebody was in her bedroom.”
“Possibly.”
He turned.
“Possibly?”
Emiko held out the phone.
“Look carefully.”
He examined the photograph again.
“What am I looking for?”
“The mirror.”
He enlarged the image.
The bedroom mirror stood opposite the doorway. Part of the bed was visible in its reflection.
Emiko pointed toward the edge.
“The photograph was taken from this angle.”

“Right.”
“But there's no reflection of the person holding the camera.”
He frowned.
“They could be standing outside the mirror.”
“Yes. Or the image could have been taken with a remotely operated camera. Or edited.”
He studied it.
“So we don't know anyone was physically inside.”
“We don't.”
He looked toward Luna's room.
“That doesn't make me feel better.”
“It shouldn't.”
She handed him the phone.
“But it means we shouldn't assume the person who sent it knows everything they want us to believe.”
He looked at her.
She gave him a small smile.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“Darling.”
“I'm just glad one of us is thinking.”
She kissed his cheek.
“Then try not to interrupt her.”

Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581

Saburō's horse was already saddled when Yasuke found him.
The younger warrior tightened the girth with unnecessary force.
“You intend to leave without the others?” Yasuke asked.
Saburō did not look up.
“I intend to reach Azuchi before nightfall.”
“And do what?”
“Find out whether my father was a traitor.”
Yasuke approached.
“From whom?”
Saburō stopped.

For a moment, only the horses moved, shifting their weight in the morning chill.
“I have friends in the households,” Saburō said.
“Friends who knew your father?”
“Yes.”
“Friends who served him?”
“Some.”
“And you believe they will tell you the truth?”
Saburō turned.
“Do you have a better suggestion?”
“Yes.”
“Which is?”
“Don't go alone.”
The younger man laughed bitterly.
“You think I need protection?”
“I think a man whose family name appears on a secret order concerning a kidnapped child should consider the possibility that someone else knows about the order.”
Saburō said nothing.
Yasuke continued.
“And if that someone believes you have found it, your skill with a sword may not be enough.”
Saburō looked away.
After a while, he said, “I don't know what to believe anymore.”
Yasuke nodded.
“That is not always a bad place to begin.”
Saburō looked at him.
“Easy for you to say. Your father isn't accused of this.”
Yasuke's expression changed.
“No,” he said quietly. “He isn't.”
The words left more silence behind them than Saburō expected.
He studied Yasuke.
“I didn't mean—”
“I know.”
Yasuke rested a hand on the horse's neck.
“There are men whose fathers can be questioned. Whose family records can be examined. Whose childhood homes can be visited.”

He looked toward the distant lake.
“And there are men who have lost even the means of asking.”
Saburō lowered his eyes.
Yasuke continued.
“You still have a name to investigate. Use it carefully.”
For the first time that morning, Saburō loosened his grip on the saddle.
Then nodded.
“I'll wait.”
“Good.”
“But not long.”
Yasuke smiled.
“I hadn't expected patience to become your defining virtue.”
Despite himself, Saburō laughed.

Present Day

By ten the next morning, Malcolm had purchased two new outdoor cameras, changed four passwords, and conducted an inspection of every window in the house.
He had also discovered that one of the kitchen windows had been painted shut.
This produced a fifteen-minute argument about home maintenance.
Luna watched from the breakfast bar.
“I think we've officially entered the home-improvement portion of the conspiracy.”
Malcolm pointed a screwdriver at her.
“You laugh now.”
“I laughed yesterday too.”
“And you know what? You're grounded.”
“For what?”
“General disrespect.”
Emiko didn't look up from the laptop.
“You can't ground someone for being funnier than you.”
Luna smiled.
“Thank you, Mom.”
Malcolm considered both women.

“This alliance is becoming a problem.”
“It's been an alliance for years,” Emiko replied.
“You're only noticing?”
He shook his head.
“Unbelievable.”
The doorbell rang.
All three froze.
The screwdriver lowered.
Malcolm looked toward the small monitor beside the refrigerator.
A delivery driver stood on the porch holding a rectangular package.
“No,” he whispered.
Luna leaned closer.
“Dad?”
“No.”
The driver checked his phone.
Looked toward the door.
Waited.
Malcolm stared.
“If that's another sword, I'm moving.”
Emiko checked the tracking number on her phone.
“It's the cameras you ordered.”
He looked at her.
“I ordered those eighteen minutes ago.”
“Yes.”
“How are they already here?”
“Because you chose same-day delivery.”
He considered.
“That's an impressive service.”
Luna began laughing.
He pointed toward her.
“You're still grounded.”
He went to the door.
Checked the camera.
Then opened it.
The driver handed him the package.
“Have a good one.”
“You too.”

He closed the door and examined the shipping label.
His name.
His address.
No mysterious symbols.
No Japanese writing.
No ancient weapon.
He carried it into the kitchen.
Luna applauded.
“Congratulations. Your first normal package in months.”
He set it on the counter.
“Don't tempt fate.”
Emiko closed her laptop.
“We need groceries.”
He stared.
“Now?”
“Yes, now.”
“We have people threatening us.”
“And we have no milk.”
“We can order it.”
“We can also spend twenty minutes outside the house like ordinary human beings.”
He looked toward Luna.
“You staying here?”
“No chance.”
“Good.”
Emiko stood.
“Then all three of us are going.”
Malcolm nodded.
He liked that arrangement.
The three of them together.
In daylight.
In a crowded place.
A simple errand.
Something normal.
He had almost forgotten how badly he wanted normal.

Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581

Aki found Hana at the edge of the lake.
The girl was washing ink from her fingers.
Beside her lay several sheets of copied names.
Aki sat nearby.
“You work quickly.”
“My father taught me.”
“He taught you to write?”
Hana nodded.
“Even when I was very young. He said there were people who preferred girls unable to read.”
Aki smiled.
“He sounds like a man I would have liked.”
“He was.”
Hana dipped her hands into the water.
“May I ask you something?”
“Of course.”
“Why did you come looking for me?”
Aki considered.
“Because we found records suggesting your identity had been hidden.”
“That isn't what I mean.”
Aki waited.
Hana looked at her.
“Why did you care?”
The question was simple.
The answer was not.
Aki glanced toward the storehouse.
“My family has kept records for generations. Sometimes I thought it was foolish. Old papers, old names, old arguments.”
She smiled faintly.
“My grandmother would spend hours telling me what each document meant. I wanted to be outside.”
Hana listened.
“I remember asking why she cared so much about people she'd never met.”
“What did she say?”

“She told me that forgetting is sometimes an accident. But erasing someone is a decision.”
Hana lowered her eyes.
Aki continued.
“She said that when people make such decisions, somebody else must decide to remember.”
Hana looked toward the water.
“My father said something like that.”
“I imagine they would have liked one another.”
For a moment, the girl smiled.
Then she asked, “What happens to me now?”
Aki hesitated.
Hana noticed.
“Everyone hesitates when I ask that.”
Aki laughed softly.
“Perhaps because too many people have already decided your future without asking you.”
The girl studied her.
Then said, “I want to know what happened to my father.”
“I know.”
“And I want my name back.”
Aki nodded.
“Then those are the things we begin with.”
Hana looked at her.
“Even if it's dangerous?”
“Even then.”
The girl considered.
Then reached for her papers.
“I'd better make more copies.”
Aki smiled.
“Yes,” she said. “I think you should.”

Present Day

The grocery store was busy.
Ordinarily, Malcolm disliked shopping on a weekday.

He considered it a strange punishment inflicted upon people who had refrigerators.
Today, however, he appreciated the crowded aisles, the familiar music, and the cheerful indifference of strangers.
Emiko examined a basket of apples.
Luna stood beside a display of imported snacks, debating the merits of three different Japanese brands.
He pushed the cart.
For the first time since the threatening message, his shoulders began to relax.
Emiko selected four apples.
He looked at them.
“That's it?”
“Yes.”
“We're shopping for three people.”
“We're also buying other food.”
“You're very literal today.”
She placed the apples in the cart.
“Someone has to be.”
Luna approached carrying two packages.
“Mom, have you tried these?”
She examined them.
“Yes.”
“Are they good?”
“Very.”
Luna placed both in the cart.
Malcolm raised an eyebrow.
“How much?”
She told him.
He stared.
“For crackers?”
“They're not crackers.”
“What are they?”
She read the package.
He considered.
“So expensive crackers.”
Luna sighed.

Emiko smiled.
They moved toward the refrigerated section.
That's when Emiko noticed the man.
He stood near the far end of the aisle.
Dark jacket.
Baseball cap.
A phone held low in one hand.
Nothing about him appeared unusual.
Except that he had been in the produce section.
And the snack aisle.
And now here.
Always several paces behind them.
She didn't turn.
Instead, she examined a carton of milk.
“Darling?”
Malcolm looked over.
“Yeah?”
“Would you get the yogurt? The one our daughter likes.”
He nodded.
“Sure.”
“And take her with you. She knows which one.”
Luna opened her mouth.
Emiko gave her a look.
The girl stopped.
Then nodded.
“Come on, Dad.”
Malcolm followed, pushing the cart.
Emiko remained beside the milk.
She selected a carton.
Read its label.
Then put it back.
In the curved reflection of the refrigerated door, she watched the man approach.
He was younger than she'd first thought.
Perhaps thirty.
He moved with the confidence of someone accustomed to pushing through crowds without apologizing.

He stopped beside her.
Pretended to examine a carton of orange juice.
Then spoke quietly.
“Your family should cancel the trip.”
She did not look at him.
“Excuse me?”
“Japan. Cancel it.”
Her hand remained on the refrigerator handle.
“I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone else.”
“No.”
He stepped closer.
“I haven't.”
She turned.
His face was expressionless.
“Who are you?” she asked.
“Someone offering advice.”
“Then you should learn to give better advice.”
His jaw tightened.
“You don't understand what you're involved in.”
She smiled politely.
“Neither, apparently, do you.”
He looked toward the aisle where Malcolm and Luna had disappeared.
“Where is the sword?”
The smile left her face.
“Who sent you?”
He took another step.
“Answer the question.”
She moved away from the refrigerator.
He followed.
She turned toward a quieter aisle near the storeroom door, away from the customers.
The man came after her.
“You think we're playing games?”
“No,” she replied. “I think you're making several mistakes.”
He gave a short laugh.
“Such as?”

“Following my family.”
He stepped directly into her path.
“And?”
“Threatening my daughter.”
His expression flickered.
That was all she needed to see.
“You sent the photograph.”
He smiled.
“Maybe.”
She took out her phone.
“I think we're finished.”
He caught her wrist.
Hard.
“Not yet.”
For a moment, neither moved.
Then Emiko looked down at his hand.
Her voice became very quiet.
“Let go.”
He tightened his grip.
“You're going to listen to me.”
She looked into his eyes.
“I strongly suggest you let go.”
He started to pull her toward the storeroom corridor.
What happened next took less than three seconds.
She turned with his pull instead of resisting it.
Her free hand caught his sleeve.
Her hips shifted.
One foot crossed neatly into position.
The man suddenly found himself moving in a direction he had not intended.
His balance vanished.
His feet left the floor.
Then he struck the ground with a sound that caused a nearby shopper to drop a carton of eggs.
Before he could recover, she had controlled his arm and rolled him onto his stomach.
He tried to rise.

She adjusted her grip.
He stopped.
“Don't,” she said.
He struggled again.
She increased the pressure just enough to make the warning clear.
“I said don't.”
He swore.
She remained perfectly calm.
A small crowd had gathered.
Someone shouted for a manager.
A woman hurried to the customer-service counter.
And at the far end of the aisle, Malcolm appeared carrying two tubs of yogurt.
He stopped.
Looked at his wife.
Looked at the man lying on the floor.
Looked at his wife again.
Then slowly lowered the yogurt.
“What the hell?”
Luna appeared beside him.
She saw the scene.
Her eyes widened.
“Mom?”
Emiko looked up.
“Could one of you please call the police?”
Malcolm stared.
“Are you—”
“Darling.”
“Yes?”
“The police.”
He pulled out his phone.
“Right.”
The man beneath her shifted.
She tightened her hold.
He stopped.
Luna came closer, keeping a cautious distance.
“Mom, did you just throw that guy?”

“Yes.”
“Like actually throw him?”
“Yes.”
“Was that judo?”
Emiko glanced at her.
“Yes.”
Luna stared.
“Oh, my God.”
Malcolm, phone pressed to his ear, was still struggling to process what he'd witnessed.
He looked at the man.
Then at his wife.
Then at the yogurt.
One of the tubs had split.
Strawberry was dripping onto his shoe.
“Unbelievable,” he whispered.

Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581

The first arrow struck the storehouse door.
Saburō heard it before anyone else.
He turned sharply.
“Inside!”
Yasuke had already moved toward Hana.
A second arrow buried itself in a wooden post.
Aki pulled the girl behind a stack of chests.
Ren drew his sword.
Outside, a horse screamed.
Then came the sound of men shouting.
Yasuke crossed to the doorway and looked through the narrow opening.
Five riders.
Perhaps six.
A second group approached on foot through the trees.
They carried no identifying banners.
That troubled him more than if they had displayed the crest of a powerful household.

Saburō joined him.
“They found us.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Can your men hold them?”
“Not for long.”
Yasuke looked toward the rear wall.
“Another exit?”
Ren shook his head.
“Only a narrow passage to the water.”
“Where does it lead?”
“To an old landing.”
“Boats?”
“Sometimes.”
Yasuke turned.
“Aki, take Hana.”
She stood.
“No.”
He looked at her.
“This is not the time.”
“Exactly.”
She pointed toward the documents.
“If they came for the records, we cannot leave them here.”
“Take what you can.”
“And the rest?”
Yasuke considered.
Then looked toward the shelves.
Thousands of pages.
Generations of lives.
He understood the choice immediately.
He could remain and defend the records.
Or he could ensure the girl escaped.
There was no time for both.
“Hana,” he said.
She looked up.
“Take your copies.”
She gathered the papers.
He turned toward Aki.

“Go.”
She stared at him.
“And you?”
“I'll follow.”
Aki studied his face.
She knew what that phrase sometimes meant.
“No.”
Yasuke stepped closer.
“Aki.”
She caught his hand.
“Do not make promises merely because you think I need to hear them.”
For a moment, the noise outside seemed to disappear.
He looked at her.
Then said, “I'll do everything I can to follow.”
She nodded.
“That I believe.”
He kissed her forehead.
Briefly.
Then turned toward the door.
Ren led Aki and Hana toward the rear passage.
Saburō stood beside Yasuke.
“You and I?”
Yasuke glanced at him.
“Apparently.”
Saburō drew his sword.
“Against six riders and whoever is coming through the trees?”
“Possibly more.”
The younger warrior sighed.
“This is a terrible plan.”
Yasuke smiled.
“It improves if you stop counting.”
The first attacker struck the door.
The wood shuddered.
Saburō lifted his blade.
Yasuke stood beside him.
And waited.

Present Day
The man from the grocery store was handcuffed when the police arrived.
He was furious.
He was humiliated.
And he was considerably less interested in speaking than he had been before meeting Emiko.
Malcolm found this satisfying.
He also found it profoundly confusing.
Emiko sat near the customer-service counter, speaking with an officer.
Luna stood beside her.
Malcolm hovered several feet away.
He had asked Emiko whether she was hurt four times.
She had answered no four times.
He was considering a fifth.
The officer asked, “Where did you learn to do that?”
“Judo,” she answered.
“How long did you train?”
“Several years when I was younger.”
“Competitively?”
“For a while.”
Malcolm turned.
“Competitively?”
She looked at him.
“Yes, darling.”
He blinked.
“Competitively?”
Luna grinned.
“Dad, she heard you.”
The officer continued taking notes.
A store employee brought water.
Malcolm accepted one, then forgot to drink it.
Eventually the officers escorted the man outside.
The family gave their statements and provided the earlier threatening messages.

The police would investigate whether the man was responsible for both incidents.
His identity was not immediately disclosed to them.
Malcolm didn't like that.
But this time, he didn't argue.
Emiko had already explained why staying calm and preserving evidence mattered.
When they finally reached the parking lot, Malcolm walked beside her in silence.
Luna trailed a few steps behind.
Then he stopped.
Emiko turned.
“What?”
He stared at her.
“How long?”
She frowned.
“How long what?”
“How long have you been able to do that?”
She considered.
“Since university. Before that, I trained as a teenager.”
He blinked.
“University?”
“Yes.”
“How many years?”
“Perhaps eight years of serious training, altogether.”
He looked toward the sky.
Then back at her.
“Eight years.”
“Yes.”
“And you never thought to mention this?”
She smiled.
“I have mentioned judo.”
He stared.
“When?”
“More than once.”
“Sweetheart, I've been married to you for years. How have I missed this?”

“You don't always listen when I'm talking about my younger life.”
Luna winced theatrically.
“Ouch.”
Malcolm looked toward her.
“This conversation doesn't require a commentator.”
She smiled.
“Apparently it does.”
He turned back to his wife.
“Okay. So all these years, you've been perfectly capable of kicking my ass?”
She considered.
“Not precisely the language I would use.”
“Answer the question.”
“Yes.”
He placed a hand against his chest.
“I'm wounded.”
She smiled.
“I thought you were impressed.”
“I am impressed. I'm extremely impressed.”
“Then what's the problem?”
He leaned closer.
“Because all this time, I thought you were this sweet, gentle, wonderfully submissive woman.”
Her eyebrows rose.
Luna closed her eyes.
“Dad. Please.”
He continued, unable to help himself.
“Especially in the bedroom.”
“DAD!”
Emiko burst out laughing.
He grinned.
Then she stepped closer.
“Darling?”
“Yes, sweetheart?”
“Being submissive in the bedroom was always my choice.”
He went still.
She smiled.

He blinked.
“Wait.”
Luna covered her ears.
“No.”
He pointed at his wife.
“WAS?”
Emiko tilted her head.
“Would you like to discuss that tonight?”
Malcolm stared.
His mouth opened.
Nothing came out.
Luna turned toward the car.
“I'm walking home.”
He looked after her.
“Get back here!”
“Nope!”
Emiko laughed harder.
Malcolm finally found his voice.
“Woman, I have questions.”
She slipped her hand into his.
“I know.”
“A lot of questions.”
“I'm sure.”
“Possibly requiring demonstrations.”
She gave him a look.
He smiled.
“Of the judo.”
“Of course.”
Luna shouted from the car.
“I CAN STILL HEAR YOU!”
Malcolm shook his head.
Then looked at Emiko again.
Something had changed.
Not because she was suddenly a different woman.
But because he'd discovered an entire part of her life he had never properly understood.
There was a difference.

And he was wise enough—just barely—to recognize it.
He squeezed her hand.
“Seriously, though. Are you okay?”
She met his eyes.
“Yes.”
He nodded.
“You scared me.”
“I know.”
He pulled her into his arms.
She held him.
For a moment, the jokes disappeared.
Then she whispered, “He frightened me too.”
He drew back.
She looked at him.
“I wasn't frightened of being hurt. I was frightened he might go after our daughter if I couldn't stop him.”
Malcolm touched her cheek.
“You stopped him.”
“This time.”
He nodded slowly.
Then kissed her.
Not dramatically.
Not for the benefit of the curious people passing through the parking lot.
Simply because he loved her.
And because he understood that being capable of defending oneself did not mean being incapable of fear.
When they separated, she smiled.
“Come. We need to get home.”
He looked toward the car.
Then down at the broken yogurt tub he'd inexplicably carried outside.
She laughed.
“Why do you still have that?”
He examined it.
“I have absolutely no idea.”

Ōmi Province, Japan — 1581
The door collapsed inward.
Saburō moved first.
His blade caught the attacker's weapon and drove it aside.
Yasuke stepped past him, striking with the wooden staff he had taken from beside the entrance.
The first man fell.
A second stumbled over him.
Yasuke drove the staff against his shoulder, sending him backward into the men behind him.
“Go!” Saburō shouted.
Yasuke understood.
They were not trying to defeat the attackers.
They were buying time.
He stepped into the doorway, using his height and reach to prevent the men from entering together.
An arrow struck the doorframe beside his head.
He ducked.
Another attacker lunged.
Yasuke turned the weapon aside.
Then drove his shoulder forward.
The man staggered.
Behind him, Saburō seized a burning oil lamp from a nearby table.
Yasuke stared.
“Don't.”
Saburō looked toward the shelves.
“I know.”
For a moment, both men understood the temptation.
Fire would deny the records to their attackers.
It would also destroy the very history they were trying to preserve.
Saburō placed the lamp down.
Then grabbed a chest and dragged it against the doorway.
Yasuke helped him.
Outside, the attackers regrouped.
The barricade would not hold long.
“We need to leave,” Saburō said.
Yasuke glanced toward the rear passage.

Aki and Hana had disappeared.
Ren remained near the water entrance, waiting.
“Go!” he shouted.
Saburō looked toward the shelves.
“All of this—”
“We cannot save everything.”
The younger warrior hesitated.
Yasuke caught his shoulder.
“But we can save someone.”
Saburō nodded.
They ran.
Behind them, the attackers broke through.
The sound of splintering wood followed them into the narrow passage.
At the landing, Aki stood beside a small boat.
Hana crouched inside, clutching the documents.
Ren held the rope.
“Where have you been?” Aki demanded.
Yasuke smiled.
“Delayed.”
“By what?”
“An inconvenient number of men.”
Saburō looked toward the passage.
“They're coming.”
Ren released the rope.
Yasuke pushed the boat from the shore.
Aki helped Hana settle.
Saburō stepped aboard.
Then Yasuke climbed in.
Ren followed last.
An arrow struck the gunwale.
Another splashed into the water.
They pushed toward the lake.
The distance widened.
Onshore, armed men emerged from the passage.
One shouted an order.
Another raised a bow.

But the boat had already drifted beyond easy reach.
Yasuke took an oar.
Ren took the other.
Together, they pulled toward the opposite shore.
For several minutes, nobody spoke.
Then Hana looked toward the trees.
“Will they burn it?”
Aki followed her gaze.
Smoke had begun rising above the storehouse roof.
Her expression tightened.
“I don't know.”
The girl held her copied pages close.
“But we saved some.”
Aki looked at her.
“Yes.”
Hana stared toward the smoke.
Then said quietly, “Then they haven't erased us.”
Yasuke stopped rowing for a moment.
He looked toward the child.
Then at the pages in her hands.
And he understood.
The men onshore might destroy the storehouse.
They might scatter its keepers.
They might burn records gathered across generations.
But they could no longer make the girl believe she had never existed.
He began rowing again.
Across the water, the storehouse caught fire.

Present Day

That evening, Emiko sat alone in the dining room.
The house was quiet.
Luna was upstairs, video-calling a friend.
Malcolm was installing the new cameras, accompanied by a running commentary directed toward the manufacturers.

Every few minutes, she heard him mutter something about passwords.
She smiled.
Then turned back to her laptop.
A document was open.
Not the manuscript.
Not the family genealogy.
A folder of photographs she'd taken during a visit to Japan years earlier.
She scrolled.
A childhood house.
A school entrance.
A temple courtyard.
A group of young women wearing judo uniforms.
She stopped.
There she was.
Perhaps nineteen.
Hair tied back.
Standing beside an older instructor.
Her face was serious.
Her posture straight.
She touched the screen.
For a moment, she remembered the smell of the training hall.
The slap of feet against mats.
The bruises.
The discipline.
Her instructor's voice.
Strength is not permission.
She had heard those words so often that they had become part of her.
She remembered the first time she'd thrown someone larger than herself.
The shock of discovering that force could be redirected.
That weight could become a disadvantage.
That control required attention rather than anger.
She smiled faintly.
Then opened another photograph.

A group portrait.
The same young women.
And standing at the edge—
A man.
She leaned closer.
Her smile vanished.
She enlarged the image.
The photograph had been taken decades earlier, outside the training hall.
She recognized most of the students.
But the man standing beside the instructor wore ordinary clothes.
He had never trained with them.
She remembered him visiting once.
Speaking quietly to her instructor.
Her grandmother had known him.
She'd been told he was a family acquaintance.
Now she studied his face.
The older version was thinner.
His hair white.
His posture more stooped.
But there was no mistaking him.
Nakamura.
Or Kuroda.
Whatever name he had chosen.
She sat very still.
Then looked toward the wooden sword case on the sideboard.
She had spent years believing certain parts of her life were separate.
Her childhood.
Her family history.
Her marriage.
Her daughter.
The sword.
But the photograph suggested that someone else had seen those connections long before she had.
She opened her messages.
Found Nakamura's number.
Typed a single sentence.

How long have you been watching my family?
She read it.
Then pressed send.
The reply arrived almost immediately.
Longer than I wanted to.
Her expression hardened.
A second message followed.
There is something your grandmother asked me never to tell you.
She stared at the screen.
Then began typing.
You have ten minutes to explain.
Before she could send it, a third message appeared.
The man who approached you today was not sent by my family.
She froze.
Then another.
He was sent by someone who believes the Kurodas have been protecting you.
Her eyes narrowed.
She looked toward the stairs.
Toward Luna.
Toward the garden, where Malcolm was still struggling with a camera mount.
Then she typed:
Who?
This time, no answer came.
Instead, a photograph arrived.
A young Japanese woman stood in a garden beside an older woman.
The older woman was her grandmother.
The younger woman was herself.
She remembered the photograph.
She had been seventeen.
It was the summer before she left home for university.
Her grandmother had insisted on taking it.
But there was something different about this copy.
Something she'd never seen.
On the back, photographed separately, her grandmother had written a sentence.

Emiko enlarged the characters.
Read them.
Then read them again.
When the two lines meet, do not give the child to the keepers.
She felt a sudden chill.
Another message arrived.
I believed she meant the sword.
Emiko stared.
Then the final message appeared.
I no longer believe that.
She looked toward the stairs again.
Luna's laughter drifted from the bedroom above.
Ordinary.
Bright.
Comfortingly familiar.
Emiko closed her eyes.
For years, she had thought her grandmother's secrets concerned the past.
Now she began to understand that some of them had concerned the future.
Not prophecy.
Not magic.
A warning.
About people.
People who had watched.
Waited.
And believed that a child born into two families might belong to someone other than herself.
Emiko stood.
Walked to the back door.
Opened it.
Malcolm turned from the ladder.
“Hey, sweetheart. You wouldn't believe how badly these instructions are written.”
She stepped outside.
He saw her face.
Climbed down immediately.

“What happened?”
She held out the phone.
He read the messages.
Slowly.
Then looked up.
“Who are the keepers?”
She shook her head.
“I don't know.”
He glanced toward the house.
“And Nakamura?”
“He knows more than he's told us.”
Malcolm drew a long breath.
“I'm starting to think that should be printed on his business card.”
She didn't smile.
He noticed.
Then gently took her hand.
“What do you want to do?”
She looked toward the house.
Luna was still laughing upstairs.
Emiko straightened.
“Find out who these people are.”
He nodded.
“And then?”
Her expression changed.
It was the same expression she'd worn in the grocery store.
Quiet.
Focused.
Entirely without hesitation.
“Then we make certain they understand something.”
He waited.
“Our daughter belongs to no one.”
Malcolm looked at his wife.
Then smiled.
Not because the danger had lessened.
But because, for the first time, he understood exactly who was standing beside him.
“I love you,” he said.

She looked at him.
“I know.”
He grinned.
“And I have a few more questions about this judo business.”
She sighed.
“Darling.”
“Just one.”
“What?”
He leaned closer.
“Are there belts involved?”
She stared.
Then burst out laughing.
From upstairs came Luna's voice.
“WHY ARE YOU TWO LAUGHING?”
Malcolm called back.
“NOTHING!”
A pause.
Then:
“THAT'S WHAT YOU SAID LAST TIME!”
Emiko rested her forehead against his chest.
For a moment, despite everything, they laughed together.
Inside, the sword lay silent in its case.
And far away, across the ocean, people who had spent generations guarding a secret were beginning to understand that the family they had been watching might not behave as expected.
Especially the mother.



Chapter 15

The Names We Carry



Present Day

Malcolm Hayes had a problem with the word keepers.
It sounded respectable.
Librarians were keepers of knowledge. Museums employed keepers of collections. People kept promises, kept faith, and kept their hands to themselves.
He liked those kinds of keeping.
What he did not like was a group of people apparently keeping track of his daughter.
“I'm telling you, the name is wrong,” he said.
Emiko sat at the dining room table, translating her grandmother's handwriting.
Luna occupied the chair opposite her, surrounded by notebooks.
“What would you call them?” Luna asked.
He considered.
“Creepy bastards.”
“Catchy.”
“Accurate.”
“Not very Japanese.”
“I'm not trying to impress them.”
Emiko looked up.
“The Japanese word might not mean what you're assuming.”
He turned toward her.
“Does it mean creepy bastards?”
“No.”
“Then I prefer my translation.”
She smiled and returned to the document.

It was nearly midnight.
The grocery store incident had left them with more questions than answers. The man who had confronted Emiko was in police custody, but they had not yet learned whether he was connected to the threatening photograph.
Nakamura, meanwhile, had stopped answering his phone.
Malcolm considered that particularly suspicious.
Emiko considered it unsurprising.
Luna considered it annoying.
Between them, they had arrived at a working consensus: nobody was leaving the house alone, nobody was responding to unfamiliar messages, and Nakamura was no longer entitled to the benefit of the doubt.
There remained the question of Japan.
Malcolm had declared the trip postponed.
Emiko had agreed.
Luna had said nothing.
That silence bothered him more than an argument would have.
He looked toward her now.
She was sketching the three-curved-line symbol beside the photograph of the old silver fittings.
“What are you doing?”
“Thinking.”
“Dangerous hobby.”
She looked up.
“Runs in the family.”
He smiled.
Then noticed what she had written beneath the symbol.
Three names.
YASUKE
AKI
HANA
He sat down beside her.
“What's that?”
“Names from the documents.”
“I can see that.”
“Then why'd you ask?”

“General parental curiosity.”
She pointed at the page.
“We keep talking about the symbol as if it belongs to the sword.”
Emiko looked up.
“And?”
“What if it belonged to the people who protected the records?”
Malcolm considered.
“Like a secret society?”
“Or a network. Not necessarily secret in the beginning.”
Emiko leaned closer.
“Go on.”
Luna pointed toward the three curved lines.
“Three pieces. Three people. Maybe three families. But this circle in the middle…”
She paused.
Malcolm waited.
“What?”
“Maybe it isn't a family at all.”
Emiko studied the drawing.
“What do you think it is?”
Luna looked up.
“A place where the families meet.”
For a moment, the room was quiet.
Then Emiko turned toward the manuscript.
She opened it to an earlier page.
Scanned the characters.
And stopped.
“What?” Malcolm asked.
She read a line beneath her breath.
Then another.
“Oh.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“I know that ‘oh.’ That's not a normal ‘oh.’”
Emiko ignored him.
She examined the silver fitting again.
Then looked at Luna.
“You may be right.”

Luna straightened.
“About what?”
“The circle.”
Emiko turned the manuscript toward them.
A small notation stood beside a list of names.
It had been overlooked because it seemed unrelated to the transfers.
“The word used here can mean an enclosure or gathering place,” she explained. “But in this context, it may refer to a meeting point.”
“Where?” Luna asked.
“I don't know.”
Malcolm looked at the page.
“So the symbol could be a map?”
“Possibly.”
He leaned back.
“Wonderful.”
Luna grinned.
“Dad, you said that like it's terrible.”
“Baby, the last time we discovered a new meaning in this thing, your mother threw a man across a grocery store.”
Emiko looked up.
“He wasn't thrown across the store.”
“Fine. Across a respectable portion of the dairy aisle.”
“He landed approximately two meters from where he grabbed me.”
Luna laughed.
Malcolm turned.
“See? She's measuring her victims now.”
“I didn't injure him seriously.”
“That sounds like something an assassin says.”
Emiko gave him a patient look.
He raised both hands.
“Sorry. Retired assassin.”
And for a brief, lovely moment, they were simply a family again.
Then Emiko said, “There's something else.”
Malcolm sighed.
“Of course there is.”
She reached for her laptop.

“Nakamura's photograph from my judo club.”
Luna looked up.
“The one from when you were young?”
“Yes.”
“What about it?”
“I contacted my old instructor's daughter.”
Malcolm stared.
“When?”
“This evening.”
“You called Japan?”
“I sent a message.”
“Oh.”
“She remembers Nakamura visiting her father. But she says there was another man with him.”
Emiko opened a photograph on the laptop.
It was grainy, faded, and slightly crooked.
A group of young athletes stood outside a training hall.
Emiko pointed toward the older man beside the instructor.
“Nakamura.”
Then she moved her finger.
To the edge of the image.
A second man stood half-hidden behind the group.
Only part of his face was visible.
His coat was dark.
His hair carefully combed.
He looked older than the students but younger than the instructor.
Luna leaned closer.
“Who's that?”
“My instructor's daughter doesn't know.”
Malcolm studied the photograph.
“Then why is he important?”
“Because she remembers her father telling her not to speak to him.”
A silence followed.
Malcolm examined the image again.
“That's not a particularly glowing recommendation.”
“No.”
Emiko enlarged the corner.

“Her father called him a collector.”
“A collector of what?” Luna asked.
Emiko shook her head.
“He never said.”
Luna leaned back.
Then suddenly looked at the old Kyoto photograph showing the sword case.
“Mom?”
“Yes?”
“Can you put those two photographs beside each other?”
Emiko did.
The first: a man beside a sword case in Kyoto, 1932.
The second: a young Emiko at her judo club decades later.
Luna studied them.
Then pointed.
“Look at the sleeve.”
Malcolm frowned.
“What about it?”
“The man in the judo photograph. He's wearing a pin.”
Emiko enlarged the image.
The pin was barely visible.
A small circle.
Three curved lines.
But the arrangement was different.
The lines pointed inward.
Toward the center.
Not outward.
Malcolm looked at his wife.
“Is that meaningful?”
She studied it.
“I don't know.”
Luna picked up her notebook.
Drew both arrangements.
Then said, “What if we've been reading the symbol backwards?”

Lake Biwa, Japan — 1581

They reached the eastern shore shortly before sunset.
The storehouse was still burning when they made land.
From across the lake, smoke rose into a sky already darkening with evening.
Yasuke stood beside the water.
Aki joined him.
Neither spoke for some time.
Finally, she said, “My grandmother helped build that place.”
He nodded.
“She told me the records would survive wars because no great lord would ever consider the building important enough to destroy.”
Yasuke looked toward the smoke.
“She was wrong.”
“Yes.”
Aki's voice remained steady.
But he saw the way she held her hands.
Tightly.
One against the other.
He reached for them.
She allowed him to take them.
“I should have saved more,” she said.
“You saved Hana.”
“I know.”
“And the copies.”
“Yes.”
“Then don't speak as if you've lost everything.”
She looked across the water.
“For every name we copied, there were a hundred we left behind.”
Yasuke did not contradict her.
He had learned that comfort offered too quickly could become another form of dismissal.
Instead, he stood beside her.
After a while, Aki withdrew her hands.
“We must tell my grandmother.”
Yasuke looked at her.
“Can she be reached?”
“Yes.”

“Safely?”
Aki hesitated.
Then shook her head.
“Perhaps not.”
Behind them, Hana sat beside Ren, examining the papers rescued from the storehouse.
Saburō was tending the horses.
His expression had remained troubled since discovering the order bearing his father's name.
Yasuke watched him.
Then turned toward Aki.
“Your family has kept these records for generations.”
“Yes.”
“Who began it?”
She considered.
“I don't know.”
“Surely your grandmother told you.”
“She told me stories. Not everything.”
Yasuke smiled faintly.
“A family tradition.”
Aki almost smiled.
Then her expression changed.
“What?”
She looked toward the lake.
“Perhaps we've misunderstood something.”
Yasuke waited.
“The symbol. Three lines surrounding a circle.”
“Yes?”
“I always believed it represented the families responsible for guarding the records.”
“And?”
“What if the lines represent paths?”
“Paths to where?”
Aki looked toward Hana.
“Toward something they were meant to protect.”
Yasuke considered.
“The names?”

“Perhaps.”
“Or the people?”
Aki turned to him.
“Yes.”
They looked toward the girl.
Hana was reading one of the copied lists.
Her lips moved silently as she sounded out unfamiliar characters.
Every so often, she stopped and asked Ren a question.
He answered patiently.
Yasuke studied the pair.
“Aki.”
“Yes?”
“When your grandmother gave you the silver fitting, what did she tell you?”
Aki thought for a moment.
“She said it would open something when the others were brought together.”
“Nothing more?”
“She told me the object itself was unimportant.”
Yasuke looked across the lake.
“Unimportant?”
“She said the danger began when people cared more about the key than the door.”
Yasuke was silent.
Then he smiled.
“That sounds like a woman worth meeting.”
Aki looked at him.
“Oh, you might regret saying that.”
“Why?”
“She would ask you questions.”
“I have been asked questions before.”
“Not like hers.”
Yasuke laughed.
Aki smiled.
Then the sound of approaching hooves ended their brief peace.
Saburō turned.
His hand moved toward his sword.

Three riders emerged from the trees.
One carried Nobunaga's colors.
Yasuke stepped forward.
The lead rider dismounted.
He bowed.
“Lord Nobunaga summons you.”
Yasuke nodded.
“We were already returning.”
The man hesitated.
“There has been a change.”
Saburō moved closer.
“What change?”
The messenger looked toward Yasuke.
“His lordship has ordered an inquiry into the missing records.”
Yasuke frowned.
“He knows?”
“Yes.”
“How?”
The messenger hesitated again.
Then said, “A report reached Azuchi before we departed.”
Saburō stepped forward.
“From whom?”
The man looked toward him.
Then lowered his eyes.
“From a member of your father's household.”
Saburō went still.
Yasuke watched the messenger carefully.
“What did the report say?”
“That you have removed a girl from lawful custody, stolen property belonging to a noble family, and taken records that do not belong to you.”
Aki stared.
“They're accusing us?”
The messenger nodded.
Yasuke felt his jaw tighten.
Then asked, “And what are Nobunaga's instructions?”
The man hesitated.

“Present yourselves at Azuchi. All of you.”
Yasuke glanced toward Hana.
The girl had gone very still.
The messenger followed his gaze.
Then added quietly, “Especially the girl.”

Present Day

Emiko waited until morning to call Nakamura again.
This time, he answered.
“Good morning.”
“Who is the collector?”
A pause.
“Which collector?”
“The man in the photograph from my judo club.”
Silence.
Then Nakamura said, “You found that photograph.”
“Yes.”
“I see.”
“Do you know him?”
A long pause followed.
Emiko closed her eyes.
“Please don't make me drag every answer out of you.”
“I knew him.”
“His name?”
“Masaru Ishida.”
She wrote it down.
“Was he part of the Kuroda family?”
“No.”
“Then why was he with you?”
“Because he believed your grandmother possessed something that belonged to his organization.”
Emiko looked toward the sword case.
“What organization?”
“I cannot explain everything over the telephone.”
She felt her anger rise.
“Nakamura.”

He sighed.
“An association of families and private collectors. Some descended from households that controlled the old records. Others acquired portions much later.”
“The keepers?”
“That is one name they have used.”
She took a breath.
“Are they still active?”
“Yes.”
“Is Ishida alive?”
“I don't know.”
“Was he connected to the man who approached me yesterday?”
“Possibly.”
She closed her eyes.
Then opened them.
“Did my grandmother know he was watching us?”
“Yes.”
The answer came without hesitation.
Somehow, that made it worse.
“Did you?”
“Yes.”
She gripped the phone.
“How long?”
Nakamura was quiet.
Then said, “From before your marriage.”
Her hand tightened.
She looked toward the window.
Outside, Malcolm was carrying garbage bags toward the bin.
Luna was making breakfast.
Their ordinary, ridiculous, wonderful family.
Watched.
For years.
“Why didn't anyone tell me?”
“Your grandmother believed knowledge might endanger you.”
“Knowledge of what?”
“The records. The families. The importance some people attached to your ancestry.”

Emiko stared at the wall.
“My ancestry?”
“Yes.”
“Do you actually know who my ancestors were?”
“Not completely.”
“Then what exactly were they watching?”
Nakamura hesitated.
“The possibility that your family's line might one day reconnect with another.”
She laughed.
There was no humor in it.
“You've been watching our lives because of a theory.”
“I never wanted you harmed.”
“That's not an answer.”
“No,” he said quietly. “It isn't.”
She took a breath.
Then asked the question that mattered most.
“Did anyone arrange my marriage?”
The silence was immediate.
Absolute.
Her heart began beating harder.
“Nakamura?”
“No,” he said.
She waited.
“No one arranged your marriage,” he repeated. “Not to my knowledge.”
She closed her eyes.
Relief came.
But only a little.
“Did anyone know my husband before I met him?”
Another pause.
“I don't know.”
She stared.
Then spoke very carefully.
“From this moment onward, you will tell me everything you know. No more selective truths. No more warnings without explanations.”
“I understand.”

“No. I don't think you do.”
She looked toward the garden.
Malcolm had stopped by the back gate to rescue a football from beneath the hedge.
The sight made her chest ache.
“This is my family,” she said. “Not a collection. Not a genealogy. Not something entrusted to men who think they know better than I do.”
Nakamura said nothing.
“And if someone has been interfering in our lives, I will find out.”
For a moment, the old man remained silent.
Then he said, “There is a place in Kyoto you should see.”
She almost laughed.
“Of course there is.”
“It is connected to your grandmother.”
“What place?”
“A building once used by one of the record-keeping families. It survived several changes of ownership.”
She took up her pen.
“Address?”
He gave it.
She wrote it down.
Then he added, “But please, don't go there alone.”
Emiko looked toward the garden again.
She watched Malcolm struggle to pull the football from beneath the hedge.
He succeeded.
Then promptly slipped on the wet grass.
She winced.
A moment later, he stood, inspected his trousers, and looked around to see whether anyone had noticed.
She smiled despite herself.
“No,” she said into the phone. “I won't be alone.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Nobunaga listened without interruption.
Yasuke stood before him.

Aki and Ren remained nearby.
Saburō knelt several paces behind them.
Hana sat with an attendant in the adjoining room, close enough that Aki could see her through the open partition.
The documents lay on a low table.
Nobunaga examined the accusation.
Then the order bearing Saburō's father's name.
Then the copies made by Hana.
Finally, he looked up.
“Which of these is genuine?”
Ren bowed.
“We believe all three are genuine, my lord.”
Nobunaga studied him.
“Belief is not evidence.”
“No, my lord.”
“Then why bring them to me?”
Yasuke answered.
“Because someone has already begun destroying the evidence.”
Nobunaga looked toward him.
“The storehouse?”
“Burned.”
“Witnesses?”
“Us.”
“Attackers?”
“Unknown.”
Nobunaga considered.
Then turned toward Saburō.
“Your father's name appears here.”
Saburō bowed deeply.
“Yes, my lord.”
“Do you believe he signed the order?”
“I don't know.”
Nobunaga watched him.
“Would you conceal the truth to protect his reputation?”
Saburō's face tightened.
Then he said, “I hope not.”
Nobunaga raised an eyebrow.

“You hope not?”
Saburō swallowed.
“I cannot promise that learning the truth will be easy for me, my lord. I can promise that I will not knowingly destroy evidence.”
For a long moment, Nobunaga studied him.
Then nodded.
“An answer I trust more than a proud oath.”
Saburō lowered his head.
Nobunaga turned toward Hana.
“Bring the girl.”
Aki moved immediately.
She entered the adjoining room and returned with Hana.
The girl approached carefully.
She knelt.
Nobunaga studied her.
“Your name?”
She hesitated.
Then answered.
“Hana.”
“Whose daughter?”
“Harunobu's.”
“Who gave you that name?”
“My father.”
Nobunaga nodded.
“Do you have proof?”
Hana looked toward Aki.
Then drew the small wooden tablet from her sleeve.
She placed it before him.
Nobunaga examined the writing.
“Who taught you these characters?”
“My father.”
“Can you write them?”
“Yes.”
He motioned toward a brush.
Hana looked frightened.
Aki began to speak.
Nobunaga raised a hand.

“Let her.”
Hana took the brush.
Her hand trembled.
She steadied it.
Then wrote.
Not merely her own name.
Her father's.
And beneath it, the phrase from the tablet.
What is taken may be returned.
Nobunaga watched.
When she finished, he examined the characters.
Then looked at Yasuke.
“You believe this child was unlawfully taken.”
“Yes.”
“And you believe a household connected to my own commanders was involved.”
“Yes.”
“And if these claims prove true?”
Yasuke met his gaze.
“Then the child must be restored to her name and freedom.”
Nobunaga looked toward the papers.
“Freedom.”
He repeated the word as if weighing it.
Then asked, “What of the people who took her?”
Yasuke considered.
“They should answer for it.”
Nobunaga leaned back.
“Even if their punishment causes unrest among men I need?”
Yasuke remained still.
The question hung between them.
At last he said, “If a lord cannot correct wrongdoing within his own household, others will eventually stop believing his justice.”
A silence followed.
Ren lowered his eyes.
Saburō did not move.
Aki watched Nobunaga.

The ruler studied Yasuke for so long that the room seemed to grow smaller.
Then he smiled.
Not warmly.
Not unkindly.
But with the sharp interest of a man confronted by something he had not expected.
“You have become bold.”
Yasuke bowed his head.
“I have learned from my lord.”
Nobunaga laughed.
The sound startled Hana.
Then he looked toward her again.
“Until the inquiry is complete, you will remain under my protection.”
Hana looked frightened.
Aki stepped closer.
Nobunaga noticed.
“What?”
Aki bowed.
“My lord, the girl has already spent years confined under the protection of others.”
Nobunaga's expression changed.
“You question my protection?”
Aki lowered her head.
“I question what protection means to someone who has repeatedly been denied a choice.”
Silence.
Nobunaga studied her.
Then turned to Hana.
“Where do you wish to stay?”
The girl looked toward Yasuke.
Then Aki.
Then Saburō.
“I wish to stay with them.”
Nobunaga nodded.
“So be it.”

Aki bowed deeply.
Yasuke felt himself breathe again.
Then Nobunaga's expression darkened.
“But understand this. If these accusations reach my commanders before I have secured the truth, there may be bloodshed.”
Yasuke nodded.
“I understand.”
“Then we proceed carefully.”
Nobunaga turned to an attendant.
“Summon the men responsible for the household records.”
The attendant bowed.
“And the commander named in this document?” the man asked.
Nobunaga considered.
Then said, “Not yet.”
Yasuke watched him.
Nobunaga looked toward the order.
“First,” he said, “I want to know who told him the girl was still alive.”

Present Day

That afternoon, Luna found Emiko in the garden.
She was wearing loose trousers and a T-shirt, standing barefoot on the grass.
Her movements were slow.
Deliberate.
She stepped forward, turned, shifted her weight, then repeated the sequence.
Luna watched for a while.
“Is that judo?”
Emiko stopped.
“Partly. Footwork and balance.”
“Can you teach me?”
Emiko looked surprised.
“Really?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”

Luna shrugged.
“Because apparently my mother is a secret action hero.”
Emiko laughed.
“I'm not.”
“You took down a man twice your size.”
“He was not twice my size.”
“Close enough.”
Emiko smiled.
Then grew thoughtful.
“Why do you want to learn?”
Luna considered.
“Because I don't like being scared.”
Emiko's expression softened.
She stepped closer.
“Learning to defend yourself doesn't mean you'll never be afraid.”
“I know.”
“And it isn't a guarantee you'll be safe.”
“I know that too.”
Emiko nodded.
“Then yes. We can begin.”
Luna grinned.
“Today?”
“Today.”
She pointed toward the grass.
“Stand here.”
Luna obeyed.
“Feet apart.”
She adjusted.
“Relax your shoulders.”
She tried.
“Now imagine someone pushes you.”
Luna braced herself.
Emiko smiled.
“That's the first mistake.”
“What?”
“You're preparing to fight the force directly.”
“Isn't that the point?”

“No.”
She placed her hands gently against Luna's shoulders.
“Your first task is to remain balanced. Then to move safely.”
She demonstrated.
A small shift.
A turn.
The pressure traveled past her.
Luna tried.
Emiko corrected her stance.
Then they repeated it.
Again.
And again.
From the back door, Malcolm watched.
He was carrying a glass of lemonade.
He had been instructed to remain out of the lesson.
Naturally, he found that intolerable.
“Looking good, ladies.”
Neither answered.
He sipped his drink.
“Just saying.”
Emiko looked toward him.
“Would you like to join us?”
He straightened.
“Me?”
“Yes.”
Luna turned.
“Oh, please.”
He smiled.
“Well, I don't want to embarrass either of you.”
Emiko nodded.
“Of course.”
He set down the lemonade.
Then stepped onto the grass.
“Okay. What are we doing?”
“Balance,” Emiko said.
“Excellent. I've got balance.”
Luna looked at the patch of grass where he'd slipped earlier.

“Debatable.”
He pointed at her.
“General disrespect.”
Emiko stood opposite him.
“Place your hands lightly against mine.”
He did.
She smiled.
“Don't try to overpower me.”
“Sweetheart, I wouldn't dream of it.”
“Good.”
She shifted her weight.
Turned.
Guided his momentum.
And before he understood what had happened, he found himself stumbling three steps sideways.
He caught his balance just before reaching the flowerbed.
Luna exploded with laughter.
He turned.
Stared at Emiko.
Then at the grass.
Then back at her.
“What was that?”
“Balance.”
He frowned.
“That felt suspiciously like sorcery.”
Luna doubled over.
Emiko laughed.
“Again?”
He considered.
Then smiled.
“Absolutely.”
They repeated the exercise.
This time he moved more carefully.
She guided him through the motion.
Explained his footing.
Showed him how to shift without resisting.
He listened.

Really listened.
And gradually, something changed.
The lesson became less about being knocked off balance and more about understanding how little force was sometimes required.
Luna watched them.
Then stepped forward.
“Okay. My turn.”
Emiko smiled.
“Your turn.”
For the next half-hour, the three of them practiced on the grass.
They laughed.
They argued.
Malcolm accused Emiko of employing advanced techniques against beginners.
Luna accused Malcolm of having the coordination of a refrigerator.
He informed her that refrigerators were perfectly stable appliances.
Emiko reminded both of them that stability was not the same as mobility.
And somewhere between the jokes and the corrections, Luna began to feel something she had not felt since the photograph appeared on her phone.
Not invincible.
Not fearless.
Simply less helpless.
That was enough.
For now.

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

The inquiry began quietly.
Nobunaga's men questioned clerks, messengers, and household officials.
Records were compared.
Seals examined.
Dates checked.
Yasuke spent much of the following day beside Saburō, listening to testimony from men who had known his father.

The stories did not agree.
One man remembered a loyal retainer.
Another remembered a ruthless administrator.
A third recalled that Saburō's father had once argued privately with Harunobu.
Over what, he could not say.
By evening, Saburō looked exhausted.
They sat beneath a covered walkway overlooking the gardens.
Yasuke offered him water.
He accepted.
“My father was two men,” Saburō said.
Yasuke looked at him.
“Perhaps more.”
Saburō gave a bitter laugh.
“That's comforting.”
“People seldom fit inside the stories told about them.”
The younger warrior stared into the cup.
“Then how do we judge them?”
Yasuke considered.
“By what they did. As best we can discover it.”
“And if we cannot know everything?”
“Then we must be careful about what we claim to know.”
Saburō looked toward him.
For a while, neither spoke.
Then a messenger approached.
He bowed.
“Yasuke-dono. You are summoned.”
“By whom?”
“The lord.”
Yasuke rose.
Saburō began to follow.
The messenger hesitated.
“Only Yasuke.”
The younger warrior stopped.
Yasuke looked toward him.
“Stay here.”
Saburō nodded.

Yasuke followed the messenger.
They passed through several corridors.
The castle was quiet.
Servants moved silently.
Guards stood near the doors.
At last, they reached a small chamber.
Nobunaga stood beside a table.
The recovered order lay before him.
Beside it was another document.
Yasuke bowed.
“My lord.”
Nobunaga turned.
“I have learned something.”
Yasuke waited.
“The seal on the order is genuine.”
He nodded.
“But the signature may not be.”
Yasuke looked up.
Nobunaga continued.
“Saburō's father was absent from the province when the order was supposedly signed.”
“Then someone forged it.”
“Possibly.”
Nobunaga studied him.
“But the household still carried it out.”
Yasuke frowned.
“How?”
“Because the order was accepted as genuine.”
He gestured toward the second document.
“This is a record of the seal's custody.”
Yasuke examined it.
He could read some of the characters, though not all.
Nobunaga pointed.
“On the day the order was issued, the seal was held by another official.”
“Who?”
Nobunaga gave a name.

Yasuke recognized it.
The steward.
The man who had stolen the sword.
The man later found dead in the western passage.
Yasuke looked up.
“He used the seal.”
“Perhaps.”
“To move Hana.”
“Yes.”
“And then someone killed him.”
Nobunaga nodded.
Yasuke considered.
“Then the steward may have known who ordered it.”
“Yes.”
“Or acted on his own.”
Nobunaga studied him.
“Possible, but unlikely.”
Yasuke looked toward the document again.
There was a notation beside the steward's name.
A small mark.
Three curved lines.
And a circle.
He pointed.
“What is that?”
Nobunaga frowned.
“I don't know.”
Yasuke leaned closer.
The symbol was familiar.
But something was wrong.
The lines did not curl away from the circle.
They curved inward.
Toward it.
He remembered Aki's fitting.
The markings in the sword.
The symbol on the cloth found beside the steward's body.
The difference was subtle.
Yet unmistakable.

He looked toward Nobunaga.
“My lord, I think there are two symbols.”
Nobunaga approached.
“Two?”
Yasuke pointed.
“One appears on the records of those protecting the names.”
“And the other?”
Yasuke studied the inward lines.
“I don't know.”
Nobunaga examined the mark.
Then said quietly, “Perhaps one belongs to those who wished the records preserved.”
Yasuke looked toward him.
“And the other?”
Nobunaga's expression darkened.
“To those who wished to possess them.”

Present Day

That night, Luna returned to the dining room.
Her parents had gone upstairs.
The house was quiet.
She opened her notebook.
Turned to the page containing the two versions of the symbol.
One set of curved lines pointed outward.
The other inward.
She studied them.
Then opened the photograph of the sword case.
The old fittings.
The manuscript.
The picture from Emiko's judo club.
She placed the images side by side.
The outward symbol appeared on the records.
The inward symbol appeared on the collector's pin.
She drew a line between them.
Then another.
And suddenly, she saw something.

Not a map.
Not a sword.
A distinction.
One group had guarded the names.
The other had gathered them.
She turned toward the wooden case.
Malcolm had left it on the sideboard, secured with a lock.
She looked at it for a long moment.
Then closed her notebook.
She was beginning to understand why everyone had been arguing over who should possess the sword.
But possession was not the same as protection.
Her grandmother had known that.
Aki, perhaps, had known it centuries earlier.
And Emiko had demonstrated something similar in the grocery store.
Power could be used to control.
Or to prevent someone else from taking control.
The distinction mattered.
She looked down at her notes.
Then wrote one question beneath the symbols.
Who gets to decide what happens to the people in the records?
She stared at the words.
For a long time, she did nothing.
Then her phone buzzed.
A message from her Japanese friend.
Grandpa found something else in the 1932 photograph.
She sat forward.
Another message arrived.
There's writing on the back.
Then a photograph.
Faded ink.
Japanese characters.
She enlarged it.
Some she recognized.
Others she didn't.
She copied the message into her translation app.

The result appeared.
She read it once.
Then again.
Her heart began beating faster.
The translation was imperfect.
But the meaning was clear enough.
The sword has been sent across the sea.
The last keeper must not be allowed to choose the next.
She stared.
Then called toward the stairs.
“Mom?”
No answer.
She stood.
“Mom!”
Footsteps sounded upstairs.
Malcolm appeared first.
“What now?”
She held up the phone.
He saw her expression.
Then the image.
He read the translation.
Slowly.
Then looked at her.
“What does that mean?”
She swallowed.
“I think somebody sent the sword away to stop the keepers from controlling who received it.”
Emiko appeared beside him.
“Let me see.”
She examined the original Japanese.
Her expression changed.
She read it again.
Then quietly corrected the translation.
“The last keeper must not be permitted to appoint the next.”
Malcolm frowned.
“Appoint?”
“Yes.”

Emiko looked toward the sword case.
Then at Luna.
“It suggests the position was meant to pass by someone's decision.”
Luna nodded.
“And someone objected.”
Emiko studied the photograph.
“Yes.”
Malcolm looked between them.
“Okay. I have a question.”
Emiko turned.
“What?”
“Who appointed the person who keeps sending this damn thing back to us?”
Nobody answered.
He looked toward the sword.
Then toward Luna.
And something occurred to him.
Something he'd been avoiding.
“Wait a minute.”
Emiko studied him.
“What?”
He looked at the package label preserved among their papers.
The one addressed to Luna.
Then he turned back.
“What if the sword wasn't being returned to me?”
Luna watched him.
He continued.
“What if somebody was trying to get it to her all along?”
The room fell silent.
And for the first time, Malcolm understood that his repeated attempts to get rid of the sword might have been doing exactly what someone wanted.
Keeping it moving.
Keeping it visible.
Keeping him frustrated enough to notice every return.
Until the day the name on the package changed.
He stared at Luna.

Then at Emiko.
And whispered, “Who the hell decided she was next?”



Chapter 16

The Right to Refuse



Present Day

Luna Hayes had never particularly enjoyed family meetings.
They usually involved household responsibilities, school schedules, or explanations of why an empty milk carton belonged in the recycling bin rather than back in the refrigerator.
This one concerned an ancient Japanese sword, a centuries-old conspiracy, and whether someone had selected her for a responsibility she had never agreed to accept.
In her opinion, the milk carton meetings had been considerably less stressful.
Malcolm sat at the dining room table with the original shipping label in front of him.
He had been examining it for nearly twenty minutes.
Emiko was beginning to wonder whether he expected the paper to confess.
“There's something we're missing,” he said.
Luna looked up from her notebook.
“Several things.”
He nodded.
“Thank you for your optimism.”
“You're welcome.”
He pointed toward the address.
“The sword came back to me seven times.”
Emiko corrected him.
“Seven that we know of.”
He looked at her.

“Sweetheart, please don't tell me you've secretly been receiving swords.”
“No.”
“Good. Because we've reached our household limit.”
Luna smiled.
He continued.
“Every time I tried to get rid of it, something happened. Somebody returned it. Somebody found it. Somebody shipped it.”
“Except the last time,” Luna said.
He looked at her.
“The package came to me,” she continued. “Not you.”
“Yes.”
“And you didn't send it away.”
“No.”
“Because you opened it with us.”
He considered.
“That's true.”
“So whoever sent it managed to make you stop trying to get rid of it.”
He leaned back.
There it was.
A possibility that had been staring him in the face for weeks.
Emiko studied the label.
“The previous returns were not identical,” she said.
He nodded.
“Not even close.”
“One came through a courier. Another was brought by a stranger. One simply appeared outside the house.”
“And one was delivered to my office,” he added. “Without a return address.”
Luna looked between them.
“Did you keep everything?”
Malcolm frowned.
“Everything?”
“Labels. Receipts. Photographs. Emails. Anything connected to the earlier deliveries.”
He considered.

Then glanced toward the garage.
“Oh.”
Emiko followed his gaze.
“Darling.”
“Yes?”
“You didn't throw them away?”
“Not intentionally.”
Luna closed her eyes.
“Dad.”
He stood.
“I have a system.”
Emiko smiled.
“Of course you do.”
“It's called a garage.”
Luna looked toward the ceiling.
“We're doomed.”
The garage smelled of cardboard, sawdust, and several abandoned ambitions.
Malcolm had once intended to build shelves along the eastern wall. Two years later, the timber remained stacked beside a lawnmower that worked only when threatened.
He moved a box of Christmas decorations.
Then another.
Then a case of old records.
Luna watched.
“Are you sure we're looking in the right place?”
“Absolutely.”
A moment later, he opened a box marked TAXES — IMPORTANT. Inside were electrical cables, three mismatched trainers, and a coffee mug.
Luna stared.
“Your system is fascinating.”
“Don't judge the methodology before the results.”
“I'm judging both.”
Emiko, standing in the doorway, spotted a brown envelope beneath a paint tray.
“What's that?”

Malcolm picked it up.
Turned it over.
Then smiled.
“Aha.”
Luna looked surprised.
“You found something?”
“Yes.”
He opened the envelope.
Inside were old shipping labels, two postal receipts, a business card, and a folded sheet of paper.
Emiko joined them.
Luna spread the items across a workbench.
There were six labels.
Not seven.
One return had apparently left no paperwork.
She arranged them by date.
Then studied the handwriting and printed addresses.
“Dad?”
“Yeah?”
“Who was the first person you gave the sword to?”
He thought back.
“A collector.”
“What collector?”
“A man who specialized in old weapons. I met him through somebody who knew somebody.”
Emiko raised an eyebrow.
“That's reassuring.”
“He seemed legitimate.”
“What was his name?”
Malcolm searched his memory.
“Something Henderson. Or Hendricks.”
Luna examined a receipt.
“Henry?”
He leaned closer.
“That's it.”
“Henry what?”
She showed him the document.

Malcolm nodded.
“That's the fellow.”
Emiko looked at him.
“You never told me you tried to sell the sword.”
“I told you I was trying to find it a good home.”
“You said you donated it.”
“That was another time.”
She folded her arms.
“How many times did you try to get rid of this sword?”
He considered.
“Define try.”
Luna began laughing.
Emiko didn't.
He sighed.
“Quite a few.”
Emiko examined the business card.
“Do you remember what happened with this collector?”
“He examined it. Said it might be old but couldn't authenticate it. Offered me a ridiculous amount of money.”
“How much?”
He told her.
She stared.
“You turned that down?”
“It was a ridiculous amount.”
“Darling, that is precisely why I'm surprised.”
Luna snorted.
He looked wounded.
“Can we focus?”
Emiko nodded.
“Of course.”
“Anyway, I declined. Told him I wanted no part of the thing.”
“And?”
“A week later, it came back.”
“From him?”
“Apparently.”
He pointed to the first label.

“That's his return address.”
Luna compared it with the later labels.
Then stopped.
“What?”
She turned the first label sideways.
“Look at the tracking number.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“What about it?”
She placed another beside it.
Then a third.
Different carriers.
Different dates.
Different addresses.
But the same six-digit sequence appeared inside every tracking or internal reference number.
She pointed to each occurrence.
Malcolm frowned.
“That can't be normal.”
“It isn't,” she said.
Emiko looked closer.
“Could they be account numbers?”
“Maybe. But across different shipping companies?”
Luna began photographing the labels.
Malcolm studied the sequence.
“What does it mean?”
Luna smiled faintly.
“I don't know yet.”
He looked toward Emiko.
“I'm developing a strong dislike for that sentence.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Yasuke had expected the missing sword to become the center of Nobunaga's inquiry.
Instead, the ruler asked for a list of every person who had handled the stolen household records during the previous ten years.
The list was long.

Clerks.
Stewards.
Merchants.
Guards.
Messengers.
Household servants.
Some names belonged to men already dead.
Others to men who had changed their allegiance.
Several entries had been deliberately removed.
Yasuke stood beside a low table while Ren examined the surviving registers.
Aki sat nearby, comparing names against Hana's copied pages.
Saburō remained silent.
For the better part of an hour, nobody spoke.
Then Aki placed one document beside another.
“Here.”
Yasuke approached.
“What?”
“This clerk.”
She pointed to a name.
“He appears in the transfer records before Harunobu disappeared.”
Ren leaned closer.
“He also witnessed the order bearing Saburō's father's seal.”
Saburō looked up.
“Who?”
Aki gave the name.
Masanori.
Saburō frowned.
“I know him.”
“Where is he?” Yasuke asked.
“He serves a household west of Azuchi.”
Ren examined the register.
“Not anymore.”
Saburō turned.
“What do you mean?”
“He was transferred after the steward's death.”
“To whom?”

Ren checked the notation.
Then hesitated.
Yasuke noticed.
“What?”
Ren looked up.
“The household that accused us of abducting Hana.”
Saburō stood.
“Then he knows something.”
“Possibly,” Aki said.
Yasuke considered.
“We should question him.”
Ren shook his head.
“Not openly.”
“Why?”
“Because if Masanori helped arrange the girl's disappearance, he will know why we're looking for him.”
Saburō reached for his sword.
“Then we find him before anyone warns him.”
Aki looked toward Yasuke.
“Or we find someone he believes he can trust.”
Yasuke turned.
“Who?”
Aki smiled faintly.
“Someone he thinks has no reason to understand the records.”
Ren stared at his sister.
“No.”
She ignored him.
Saburō frowned.
“What are you proposing?”
Aki folded the document.
“A visit.”
Ren closed his eyes.
“You are becoming entirely too comfortable with dangerous ideas.”
She looked at him.
“We were raised by the same grandmother.”
“Which is how I know what you're thinking.”
Yasuke studied Aki.

“You wish to go?”
“Yes.”
“Alone?”
“No.”
She looked toward Saburō.
“With him.”
The young warrior straightened.
“Me?”
“Your family still has connections to that household. Masanori may speak to you.”
“And if he doesn't?”
Aki smiled.
“Then perhaps he'll speak to me.”
Yasuke looked at her.
There was something in her expression he had learned to recognize.
She had already decided.
Now she was waiting to see whether the men in the room would catch up.
He sighed.
“Very well.”
Ren stared.
“You cannot possibly think—”
“I think,” Yasuke interrupted, “that Aki understands this world better than either of us.”
She looked at him.
Surprised.
Then smiled.
Yasuke continued.
“But there will be precautions.”
Aki raised an eyebrow.
“I expected nothing less.”

Present Day

The six-digit sequence led nowhere.
At least, nowhere obvious.
Luna tried it as a date.

A postal code.
A catalog reference.
Coordinates.
A numerical substitution.
Nothing produced a convincing answer.
Malcolm watched for nearly half an hour.
Then said, “Maybe it's a combination.”
She looked up.
“For what?”
“A lock.”
“Which lock?”
He gestured vaguely.
“An old one.”
She stared.
“Dad.”
“What?”
“It's six digits.”
“Modern locks have six digits.”
“Yes. But you're suggesting someone spent years returning a sixteenth-century sword using multiple shipping companies so we'd eventually notice a code for a keypad?”
He considered.
“When you say it like that…”
Emiko approached carrying tea.
“Have you tried treating the number as an identifier rather than a message?”
Luna looked up.
“What do you mean?”
“Perhaps it identifies the sender's account with an intermediary. Or a file. Or a person.”
Luna frowned.
“A person?”
“Something someone else would recognize.”
Malcolm nodded.
“Like a case number.”
“Exactly.”
Luna turned back to her screen.

Then stopped.
“Wait.”
Both parents looked at her.
She opened the courier photograph from the final delivery.
Enlarged the lower corner.
Beneath the shipping barcode was a small field labeled CUSTOMER REFERENCE.
The same six digits appeared there.
She looked at the older labels.
Then at her parents.
“It's not hidden.”
Malcolm leaned closer.
“What?”
“The number. We kept assuming someone was disguising it inside the tracking references. But on the last package, it's actually entered as the customer reference.”
Emiko nodded slowly.
“Then perhaps all the shipments were initiated through the same account.”
Luna shook her head.
“Not necessarily the same account. But someone deliberately reused the reference.”
Malcolm considered.
“Can we ask the courier who booked it?”
“We can try,” Emiko said. “Though they may not disclose customer information.”
He nodded.
“Fair enough.”
Luna continued examining the label.
Then noticed another detail.
“Mom?”
“Yes?”
“The recipient name.”
Emiko leaned forward.
Luna's full name appeared on the last package.
Underneath, in small print, was an additional line.
ATTN: DESIGNATED RECIPIENT

Malcolm frowned.
“What's that mean?”
Emiko studied it.
“Normally, it means the delivery is intended for a particular individual.”
Luna looked up.
“But why would somebody add that when my name is already on the package?”
No one answered.
Malcolm glanced toward the sword case.
“Because maybe the person who sent it wanted absolutely no confusion about who should open it.”
Luna considered.
Then closed the photograph.
“I want to say something.”
Both parents turned.
She looked from one to the other.
“I don't want us to keep assuming whoever sent that package was doing me a favor.”
Emiko nodded.
“Good.”
Malcolm frowned.
“What do you mean?”
“Somebody knew my name. Somebody knew where I lived. Somebody knew the sword had been in our family. And somebody decided I should receive it.”
She paused.
“That doesn't automatically make them one of the good guys.”
Malcolm considered.
Then nodded.
“No. It doesn't.”
“And if this whole keeper thing is about deciding who gets the sword next, I don't want anybody deciding for me.”
Emiko watched her carefully.
“What would you prefer?”
Luna looked toward the case.
“I want to know what they're asking me to do.”

“And then?” Malcolm asked.
She met his eyes.
“Then I decide whether I want to do it.”
For a moment, neither parent spoke.
Then Malcolm smiled.
“There she is.”
Luna frowned.
“What?”
“Your mother.”
Emiko laughed.
Luna groaned.
“I'm both of you, Dad.”
He nodded.
“That's the part that scares me.”

Near Azuchi — 1581

Masanori was not the man Aki expected.
He was small, elderly, and appeared to suffer from a persistent cough.
His house stood near a narrow stream behind a row of merchant buildings.
When Saburō announced himself, the clerk hurried to the entrance.
“My lord.”
Saburō nodded.
“Masanori.”
The older man bowed.
“What brings you here?”
“A question concerning my father's household.”
Masanori's expression tightened.
Then he noticed Aki.
“And this lady?”
“My associate,” Saburō said.
Aki bowed politely.
“We are examining some old accounts.”
The clerk relaxed slightly.
“Accounts?”

“Yes. Documents concerning property held under the authority of several households.”
Masanori hesitated.
“I fear I may be of little assistance.”
Aki smiled.
“Then perhaps you can help us avoid wasting our time.”
The old man considered.
Then invited them inside.
His room was modest.
A writing table occupied one wall.
Shelves held scrolls and ledgers.
A kettle steamed near the hearth.
Aki noticed immediately that the shelves contained far more paper than a retired clerk would ordinarily require.
She said nothing.
Masanori poured tea.
Saburō began asking questions about household seals.
The clerk answered carefully.
Too carefully.
Every statement was technically possible.
None was particularly useful.
Aki waited until Saburō had exhausted the obvious questions.
Then she spoke.
“My family once maintained merchant records near the lake.”
Masanori looked up.
“Did they?”
“Yes.”
“Which family?”
She gave her grandmother's family name.
The old man froze.
Only for a moment.
But she saw it.
“You know them?” she asked.
Masanori set down his cup.
“I have heard the name.”
Aki nodded.

“My grandmother taught me that a record might be altered in two ways.”
The old man watched her.
“By changing what is written,” she continued, “or changing who is permitted to read it.”
Masanori said nothing.
Aki reached into her sleeve.
Removed a small piece of paper.
On it she had drawn the three-line symbol.
The lines curved outward.
She placed it between them.
Masanori's eyes widened.
Then she turned the paper over.
The same symbol.
But the lines curved inward.
His face lost color.
Saburō noticed.
“What does it mean?” he demanded.
Masanori swallowed.
“I don't know.”
Aki looked at him.
“Then why are you frightened?”
The old man stared at the symbols.
His hands trembled.
For a long moment, the only sound was the kettle.
Then he whispered, “You should not have come here.”
Saburō leaned forward.
“Why?”
Masanori looked toward the door.
“Because they watch everyone who served the old households.”
Aki lowered her voice.
“Who?”
The clerk swallowed.
“The men who collected the names.”
She glanced toward Saburō.
Then back at Masanori.
“Collected them for what purpose?”

The old man shook his head.
“They said it was necessary. That people who fled had to be found. That the records could not remain scattered.”
“Who said that?” Saburō asked.
Masanori shut his eyes.
Then spoke a name.
Not the steward.
Not Saburō's father.
Someone else.
A man serving under a commander close to Nobunaga.
A man Yasuke had seen in the castle.
A man who had stood silently during the inquiry.
Aki felt the room become very cold.
Saburō stared.
“Are you certain?”
Masanori nodded.
“I copied his orders.”
“And Harunobu?” Aki asked.
The clerk's eyes filled.
“He refused.”
“Refused what?”
“To surrender the lists.”
“What happened?”
Masanori looked down.
“They took his daughter.”
Saburō clenched his jaw.
“And Harunobu?”
The old man swallowed.
“I never saw him again.”
Aki remained still.
Then asked, “Where are the original lists now?”
Masanori shook his head.
“Some were destroyed.”
“And the others?”
The old man looked toward his shelves.
Then toward the floor.
Aki followed his gaze.

Beneath the writing table, one floorboard was slightly different from the others.
She looked back at him.
“Masanori.”
He began to cry.
Quietly.
Without drama.
“I kept one,” he whispered.

Present Day

Malcolm had spent most of his adult life believing he knew the basic ingredients of family protection.
Keep the doors locked.
Make sure the bills were paid.
Teach your children not to trust strangers offering suspiciously attractive opportunities.
And, wherever possible, stand between the people you loved and whatever might harm them.
It had seemed a reasonable system.
Now he found himself watching Luna build a spreadsheet of historical records while Emiko searched for photographs of a man who had apparently been monitoring her since adolescence.
The system required updating.
He stood in the kitchen, making sandwiches.
Luna entered.
“Dad?”
“Yeah?”
“Can I ask you something?”
He looked at her.
“Always.”
“Would you still want us to go to Japan if there wasn't a sword?”
He considered.
“Absolutely.”
She smiled.
“Really?”

“Yes. Your mother has family there. You've wanted to go for years. There's food I need to eat and people I need to meet.”
She laughed.
“That's a very Dad answer.”
He put a sandwich on a plate.
“It's an excellent answer.”
Then he grew serious.
“Why?”
She hesitated.
“Because I don't want my first trip to Japan to be entirely about people who think I belong to them.”
He stopped.
Set down the knife.
Then looked at her.
“Baby, nobody owns you.”
“I know.”
“No, I mean it. Not some mysterious organization. Not a family in Japan. Not even us.”
She studied him.
He continued.
“Your mother and I have spent our lives trying to help you become your own person. It would be a hell of a thing if we suddenly handed that responsibility over to somebody with an antique sword collection.”
She laughed.
He smiled.
“And Japan is more than this mystery. It's your mother's home. It's part of your family. Nobody gets to take that away from you.”
She looked down.
Then nodded.
“Okay.”
He pushed the sandwich toward her.
“Eat.”
She picked it up.
Then looked at him.
“Dad?”
“Yeah?”

“If I decide I don't want the sword, will you help me get rid of it?”
He considered.
For years, he'd been trying to accomplish exactly that.
Now the question felt different.
He looked toward the dining room.
The wooden case sat on the sideboard.
Silent.
Ordinary.
Infuriating.
Then he turned back.
“Yes.”
She studied him.
“Even if it means we never find out what happened?”
He hesitated.
Then answered.
“Yes.”
“Why?”
He smiled faintly.
“Because you're more important than the story.”
She looked at him for a long moment.
Then stepped forward and hugged him.
He wrapped his arms around her.
For a few seconds, neither moved.
Then she murmured, “You know, that was almost a perfect father-daughter moment.”
He looked down.
“Almost?”
“You forgot the pickles.”
He sighed.
“Get out of my kitchen.”

Near Azuchi — 1581

The hidden record was smaller than Aki expected.
Masanori lifted the floorboard and removed a narrow wooden container.
Inside lay a roll of paper wrapped in cloth.

He placed it before them.
Saburō reached for it.
Aki caught his wrist.
“Wait.”
He looked at her.
“What?”
She turned toward Masanori.
“Who knows you kept this?”
The old man shook his head.
“No one.”
“Are you certain?”
He hesitated.
Aki understood.
“No,” she said. “You aren't.”
Masanori lowered his eyes.
“They came once.”
“Who?”
“Men from the household.”
“When?”
“After Harunobu disappeared.”
“And?”
“They searched the room. They found nothing.”
Saburō looked toward the floorboard.
“Then perhaps it is safe.”
Aki shook her head.
“Not if anyone has watched this house since.”
She looked toward the narrow window.
Outside, the street appeared empty.
A child passed carrying a basket.
An old woman swept her doorstep.
Nothing unusual.
Aki turned back.
“We need to copy it.”
Masanori nodded.
“Yes.”
“Here?”
“No.”

He shook his head more firmly.
“Not here.”
Saburō frowned.
“Where?”
The old man looked toward a small shrine visible beyond the roofs.
“There is a priest who keeps records for families displaced by war.”
Aki considered.
“Can he be trusted?”
Masanori hesitated.
Then answered.
“He does not ask which lord they served.”
Aki nodded.
That was not proof of trustworthiness.
But it was a beginning.
She turned to Saburō.
“We take the document and leave separately.”
He looked at her.
“Separately?”
“Yes. You go first.”
“And you?”
“I'll follow.”
Saburō studied her.
“You sound like Yasuke.”
Aki smiled.
“An unfortunate development.”
He almost laughed.
Then Masanori spoke.
“There is something you must know.”
They turned.
The old clerk looked at the document.
Then toward the door.
“The names are not merely of those who were taken.”
Aki frowned.
“What do you mean?”
He swallowed.
“Some are names given to the children afterward.”
Saburō went still.

“New identities.”
“Yes.”
Aki looked down at the wooden container.
“Why?”
Masanori's eyes filled again.
“Because they wanted to ensure the families could never find one another.”
Silence.
Aki looked toward the window.
The sun was beginning to set.
She thought of Hana.
Of the girl's trembling hands as she copied her father's name.
Of Yasuke rowing across the lake while the storehouse burned behind them.
Then she looked at Masanori.
“And you kept the record.”
He nodded.
“Why?”
The old man wiped his eyes.
“Because I helped write it.”
Aki said nothing.
He continued.
“I told myself I was a clerk. That I wrote what I was given. That it was not my place to question powerful men.”
He looked at his hands.
“Then one day a woman came asking for her son.”
Aki remained still.
“She had walked for weeks. She carried a piece of cloth he had worn as a child. She gave me his name.”
His voice broke.
“I knew where he was.”
Saburō looked down.
Masanori continued.
“And I told her I did not know.”
Silence filled the room.
Aki asked quietly, “What happened to her?”
“I don't know.”

The old man began to cry again.
“She thanked me for my time. Then she left.”
He covered his face.
“I have remembered that every day.”
Aki waited.
Then reached toward the document.
“Perhaps we can still help someone find their child.”
Masanori lowered his hands.
His eyes were red.
He nodded.
“Yes.”
Aki picked up the wooden container.
Then said something Yasuke had told her beside the lake.
“We cannot save everything.”
Saburō looked toward her.
She continued.
“But we can save someone.”

Present Day

The call came at six forty-seven in the evening.
Malcolm answered because the number belonged to the officer who had taken their statement.
“Hello?”
“Good evening. I'm calling with an update concerning the man who approached your wife.”
Malcolm straightened.
Emiko looked up from the sofa.
Luna stopped typing.
The officer continued.
“The individual has been identified. We're investigating potential connections to the messages your daughter received.”
“Who is he?” Malcolm asked.
The officer gave a name.
It was unfamiliar.
“Is he Japanese?”
“He is an American citizen.”

“Does he work for somebody?”
“We're looking into that.”
Malcolm closed his eyes.
“Right.”
“There is something else.”
He looked toward Emiko.
“What?”
“During the investigation, we found evidence suggesting he had been watching your residence.”
Malcolm felt his stomach tighten.
“How long?”
“We don't know yet.”
“Did he enter the house?”
“We haven't established that.”
The officer paused.
Then added, “But we did recover photographs of your home.”
Malcolm looked toward Luna.
She stared back.
“What photographs?”
“Exterior images. Vehicles. The front and rear entrances.”
Malcolm took a breath.
“And?”
Another pause.
“There was also a photograph of a package being delivered.”
He stopped breathing for a moment.
“What package?”
“We believe it may be connected to the one you reported receiving recently.”
The sword.
He looked toward the sideboard.
“Was the man in the photograph?”
“No. The image appears to have been taken from a distance.”
Malcolm swallowed.
“Can you tell when?”
“We're still determining that.”
Then the officer added, “I'd also like to ask whether you've received any new contact from the person who sent that package.”

Malcolm looked toward Emiko.
She shook her head.
“No,” he answered.
“If that changes, please let us know.”
The call ended shortly afterward.
For several moments, none of them spoke.
Then Luna said, “So somebody was watching the delivery.”
Emiko nodded.
“Apparently.”
Malcolm looked toward the sword case.
“Maybe the person who kept returning it wasn't the person watching us.”
Luna considered.
“Maybe there were two groups.”
Emiko looked up.
“Or more.”
Malcolm exhaled.
“I was happier when we thought it was haunted.”
Luna gave a weak smile.
“Were you?”
“No. But I'm trying to remember a happier time.”
Emiko stood.
“There's something we should do.”
He looked at her.
“What?”
“Stop keeping everything in one place.”
Luna glanced toward the documents.
Malcolm understood.
“Copies.”
“Yes.”
“Digital too?”
“Yes. With secure backups and copies held separately.”
He nodded.
“Agreed.”
Luna stood.
“I can organize the files.”
Emiko smiled.

“And I'll catalog the originals.”
Malcolm looked toward the sword.
“And me?”
Emiko considered.
“Find somewhere secure for the case.”
He nodded.
“Finally. A job involving a box.”
Luna laughed.
Then the doorbell rang.
All three stopped.
Malcolm looked toward the security monitor.
Nobody stood on the porch.
He frowned.
“That's strange.”
He checked the camera history.
The bell had activated.
But no person appeared in the image.
Emiko came closer.
“Don't open it.”
“I wasn't planning to.”
He changed the camera view.
Looked toward the driveway.
Nothing.
Luna leaned over his shoulder.
“Dad.”
“What?”
“Look at the bottom.”
At the edge of the porch camera, barely visible, lay a small white envelope.
He stared.
Then looked toward Emiko.
She took out her phone.
“Call the officer.”
Malcolm nodded.
For once, he didn't argue.

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Yasuke returned to his quarters late that evening.
Hana sat beside a lamp, writing.
Aki had not yet returned.
Saburō was with her.
Ren stood near the window.
When Yasuke entered, the older man looked up.
“Any word?”
“Not yet.”
Ren frowned.
“They should have returned before dark.”
Yasuke nodded.
“I know.”
He looked toward Hana.
“What are you writing?”
She smiled faintly.
“Names.”
He approached.
The paper contained two columns.
In the first were the names recovered from the records.
In the second, empty spaces.
Yasuke frowned.
“What are the spaces for?”
“The names they were given afterward.”
He looked at her.
“How will you find them?”
She shrugged.
“I don't know.”
He sat beside her.
“Then why leave the spaces?”
She considered.
“Because they're still out there.”
Yasuke looked at the paper.
Somewhere beyond the castle walls, people lived under names they had never chosen.
Some knew their histories.
Others did not.

Some might be searching for families who had vanished.
Others might believe nobody remembered them.
The blank spaces seemed suddenly important.
He smiled.
“A good beginning.”
Hana continued writing.
Yasuke watched her for a while.
Then asked, “Do you remember anything your father told you about the people who took him?”
She stopped.
Thought.
Then shook her head.
“Not much.”
“Anything at all?”
She looked toward the lamp.
“He said one thing.”
Yasuke waited.
“He said the men who take names always want people to believe they are giving them something better.”
Yasuke considered.
“What did he mean?”
Hana shrugged.
“I was little.”
She resumed writing.
Then stopped again.
“Oh.”
Yasuke looked up.
“What?”
“He told me something else.”
“What?”
She looked at him.
“He said if anyone ever came asking whether I wished to keep my name, I should remember that the name belonged to me.”
Yasuke felt something move inside him.
He looked toward her.
“What would you answer?”
Hana considered.

Then smiled.
“I would tell them yes.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Good.”
She returned to her writing.
Outside, the castle settled into evening.
And somewhere beyond its walls, Aki and Saburō were carrying a document that might restore names to people who had lived without them for years.
Yasuke looked toward the door.
He wished they would return.

Present Day

The police collected the envelope.
They photographed it before opening it, checked the porch, and asked the family to remain inside while they examined the footage.
Malcolm's patience was wearing thin.
Emiko sat beside him.
Luna watched from the stairs.
After a while, the officer returned.
He held a clear evidence sleeve.
Inside was a single sheet of paper.
No return address.
No signature.
Only a message printed in English.
The officer read it aloud.
“The sword is not yours to keep. The girl is not yours to appoint.”
Malcolm stared.
Then looked toward Emiko.
“What the hell does that mean?”
She shook her head.
Luna stood.
“Can I see it?”
The officer showed her the paper.
She studied the words.
Then frowned.

“Wait.”
Malcolm looked at her.
“What?”
“That's not a threat.”
The officer raised an eyebrow.
“It certainly could be interpreted as one.”
She shook her head.
“Maybe. But look at the wording.”
Emiko leaned closer.
Luna pointed.
“The sword is not yours to keep. That's directed at someone who thinks they own it.”
Malcolm nodded slowly.
“And the second part?”
She read it again.
“The girl is not yours to appoint.”
Emiko went still.
Luna looked toward her.
“Mom?”
Emiko took the photograph of the envelope's contents.
Read the sentence.
Then reached for her grandmother's earlier letter.
She placed the two texts beside one another.
One warned:
Do not give the child to the keepers.
The other declared:
The girl is not yours to appoint.
Her expression changed.
Malcolm noticed.
“What?”
She looked toward the sword case.
Then toward Luna.
“I think we've misunderstood the warning.”
Luna frowned.
“How?”
Emiko took a breath.
“Perhaps the keepers aren't trying to appoint you.”

Malcolm stared.
“Then who is?”
She looked toward the repeated delivery references.
The package addressed to Luna.
The sword that had traveled repeatedly across the country.
The signatures.
The missing sender.
Then she said, very quietly:
“Someone else.”
Malcolm considered.
“And the keepers are trying to stop them?”
“Possibly.”
Luna looked down at the message.
Then at her parents.
For the first time, the possibility of two opposing groups did not make the situation feel simpler.
It made it worse.
Because both groups seemed to be arguing about who had the right to decide her future.
And neither had bothered to ask her.
She looked at the officer.
“Can I say something?”
“Of course.”
She pointed toward the paper.
“Whoever sent this, I want them to know something.”
Malcolm turned.
“Baby—”
She continued.
“I don't belong to whoever sent the sword. And I don't belong to the people trying to take it.”
Emiko watched her.
Luna looked toward both parents.
“Not even if our families have been involved for hundreds of years.”
Malcolm nodded.
“Damn right.”
She turned toward the case.

“Because if there's a job attached to that sword, nobody gets to give it to me without telling me what it is.”
The officer looked somewhat confused.
Understandably.
He had been called to investigate a suspicious envelope.
He now appeared to be witnessing a family dispute with a seventeenth-century inheritance system.
Malcolm noticed his expression.
“Long story,” he explained.
The officer nodded.
“I gathered.”

Near Azuchi — 1581

Aki and Saburō reached the shrine after sunset.
The priest was waiting.
Masanori had sent word ahead through a servant.
Inside a narrow chamber, the three of them examined the recovered record.
It contained forty-seven names.
Beside many were new identities.
Beside others were locations.
And beside one name, a notation that made Aki's breath catch.
She leaned closer.
Read it again.
Then looked toward Saburō.
“What?”
She pointed.
A child had been transferred from Harunobu's household.
Not Hana.
Another child.
A boy.
Younger than Hana.
The entry was dated two years after Harunobu disappeared.
Saburō frowned.
“I thought Hana was his only child.”
“So did I.”

The priest examined the characters.
Then said, “This may not indicate a son.”
Aki looked at him.
“What do you mean?”
“The child may have been placed under Harunobu's household protection. The record identifies custody, not parentage.”
Aki studied the notation.
He was right.
The wording was ambiguous.
She felt a sudden wave of relief.
Then another feeling replaced it.
Dread.
Because the child had still been taken.
And the next column contained a destination.
A port.
A vessel.
A date.
Saburō leaned closer.
“He was sent abroad?”
The priest nodded.
“It appears so.”
Aki stared.
“Where?”
The priest read the characters.
Then hesitated.
“The destination is incomplete.”
Saburō looked toward her.
“Can we trace the ship?”
“Perhaps.”
Aki studied the record.
The name had been deliberately altered.
But one detail remained.
A description.
A boy of unusual appearance, entrusted to the foreign warrior's household.
She went completely still.
Saburō noticed.

“What?”
Aki looked at him.
Then back at the paper.
Her heart began to race.
“The foreign warrior.”
Saburō frowned.
“You don't think—”
“I don't know.”
She read the words again.
The entry did not name Yasuke.
It did not identify the boy's parents.
It did not establish any blood relationship.
But it suggested that a child had once been placed under the care of someone connected to a foreign warrior's household.
She looked toward the priest.
“Can this be verified?”
He nodded slowly.
“If the port records survive.”
Aki folded her hands.
Outside, the night wind moved through the shrine's wooden shutters.
For the first time, she wondered whether the story they were uncovering would reach far beyond Japan.
Not because of a prophecy.
Not because anyone had planned the future.
But because people fleeing violence sometimes carried their lives into places no one expected.
And history did not always end where its records stopped.
She looked toward Saburō.
“We must bring this to Yasuke.”
He nodded.
“Yes.”
Aki gathered the papers.
Then stopped.
Because another question had occurred to her.
If the boy had been entrusted to a foreign warrior's household—
Why had someone gone to such trouble to erase where he was sent?

Present Day
Luna remained awake long after her parents went to bed.
She sat beside her bedroom window.
The new security camera's indicator glowed faintly outside.
Her notebook lay open.
On one page she had drawn two versions of the symbol.
Outward.
Inward.
On the next, she had written the messages.
Do not give the child to the keepers.
The last keeper must not appoint the next.
The girl is not yours to appoint.
She studied them.
Then added a fourth sentence.
A question.
What if the sword doesn't choose anyone?
She looked toward the hallway.
The house was quiet.
Downstairs, the sword lay secured in its wooden case.
She imagined it traveling through centuries.
Passing from hand to hand.
Across war.
Across oceans.
Through households that might never have known what they possessed.
She thought of her father trying to give it away.
Again.
And again.
She thought of the final package.
Addressed to her.
Not because she had asked for it.
Not because anyone had explained the responsibility.
But because someone, somewhere, had decided.
She picked up her pen.
Beneath the question, she wrote:
What if somebody has been making it look like the sword chooses?

She stared.
Then smiled faintly.
For the first time, that possibility felt like an opening rather than another trap.
Because a sword could not argue.
It could not explain.
It could not consent.
People did those things.
And if people had been orchestrating the sword's returns, then people could be found.
Questioned.
Challenged.
She turned to a fresh page.
At the top, she wrote:
WHO SENT THE SWORD?
Then she began listing the evidence.
Not family legends.
Not mystical explanations.
Not assumptions about ancestry.
Actual evidence.
Dates.
Addresses.
Tracking references.
Photographs.
Names.
She worked until the page was full.
Then started another.
Outside, the neighborhood settled into silence.
And downstairs, behind a locked door, Malcolm slept beside the woman who had surprised him with a judo throw and an entire history he had never thought to ask about.
Luna smiled at the thought.
Then returned to her notes.
Somewhere, someone believed they had appointed her to a role.
She intended to find out who.
And when she did, she had a question prepared.
Not about the sword.

Not about the past.
About the future.
Who gave you the right?



Chapter 17

The Uninvited



Present Day

Malcolm Hayes had decided that the sword needed a new home.
Not permanently.
Not even necessarily outside the house.
He simply wanted it somewhere less conspicuous than the dining room, where it had become the centerpiece of every conversation and an increasingly unwelcome participant in family meals.
He stood in the hallway studying the cupboard beneath the stairs.
Emiko watched from the kitchen.
“What are you doing?”
“Thinking.”
“That usually involves less furniture.”
He ignored her.
The cupboard was large enough.
It had a lock.
And, best of all, it was nowhere near Luna's bedroom.
He opened it.
A vacuum cleaner fell against his leg.
He caught it before it struck the floor.
Emiko smiled.
“An excellent beginning.”
“I'm assessing the space.”
“For what?”
“Something that needs to be kept secure.”
She looked toward the dining room.
“The sword?”

He nodded.
She considered.
“I wouldn't keep it there.”
“Why?”
“Because everyone in this house knows that's where you hide things when you don't want to think about them.”
He looked offended.
“That is not true.”
She glanced at the cupboard.
“Your unused exercise equipment is in there.”
“That's different.”
“The tax records you couldn't find last year.”
“A filing issue.”
“And the birthday present you bought me three years ago.”
He froze.
She smiled.
“Yes, darling. I found it.”
He closed the cupboard.
“Well, that's disappointing.”
She laughed.
He looked toward the wooden case.
“Fine. We'll find somewhere else.”
Luna appeared on the stairs.
“Maybe we should stop moving it around.”
Both parents turned.
She descended carrying her laptop.
“What do you mean?” Emiko asked.
“Every time Dad moves the sword, we create another opportunity for someone to interfere with it.”
Malcolm frowned.
“I'm only moving it across the house.”
“Right. But we keep taking it out, opening the case, photographing it, showing it to people.”
Emiko nodded slowly.
“She's right.”
Malcolm sighed.
“It's becoming an irritating habit in this family.”

“What is?” Luna asked.
“Everyone being right except me.”
She smiled.
“Personal growth, Dad.”
He pointed at her.
“You're on very thin ice.”
She walked past him and kissed his cheek.
“Love you.”
He shook his head.
Then smiled despite himself.
“Love you too.”
Their daughter's investigation had produced a small but important discovery.
The six-digit customer reference did not correspond to any obvious shipping account.
It did, however, appear on an old invoice from Henry Vale Antiquities.
The invoice was dated six years earlier.
And it contained a service description Malcolm had never noticed.
Private historical object — custody transfer
Luna enlarged the document on her laptop.
Malcolm leaned over her shoulder.
“I thought I was selling it.”
“You said he never actually bought it.”
“He offered. I declined.”
“And yet he invoiced you for a custody transfer.”
Malcolm frowned.
“Why?”
Emiko joined them.
“Perhaps he was acting as an intermediary.”
“For whom?” Luna asked.
Malcolm thought back.
Henry Vale had been an older man.
English, perhaps.
Well dressed.
Pleasant.

He had examined the sword carefully, asked a surprisingly large number of questions, then offered a price that seemed absurdly high.
At the time, Malcolm had assumed he was dealing with an eccentric collector.
Now he wondered whether the entire meeting had been arranged.
He remembered something else.
“Wait.”
Luna looked up.
“What?”
“He asked about you.”
She stopped.
“Me?”
“Yeah.”
Emiko leaned forward.
“What did he ask?”
Malcolm tried to remember.
“Whether I had children.”
Luna's expression tightened.
“And what did you tell him?”
“That I had a daughter.”
Silence.
Emiko looked toward him.
“Did he ask her age?”
Malcolm considered.
“I think so.”
“And?”
“I told him.”
Luna stared.
“Dad.”
He raised both hands.
“Six years ago, it was a perfectly normal conversation.”
“Was it?” Emiko asked.
He looked at her.
“A man asked whether I had a family. I didn't know I was supposed to treat that as classified information.”
She nodded.

“Of course.”
But her expression had changed.
Luna looked back at the invoice.
“So Henry Vale knew I existed years before the sword came addressed to me.”
“Yes.”
“And he handled the sword.”
“Yes.”
“And his customer reference appeared on the later deliveries.”
Malcolm considered.
Then said, “I think we're overdue for a conversation with Mr. Vale.”
Emiko opened her laptop.
“I'll see whether he's still in business.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Aki returned before sunrise.
Yasuke was waiting.
He stood when he heard her footsteps.
She entered with Saburō, both travel-worn and exhausted.
For a moment, neither spoke.
Then Yasuke crossed the room and embraced her.
She closed her eyes.
“You were worried.”
“Yes.”
“I told you I would return.”
“You also told me not to make promises I could not guarantee.”
She smiled against his shoulder.
“I see you've been listening.”
He drew back.
“Occasionally.”
Saburō cleared his throat.
“If the two of you are finished, we've found something.”
Yasuke looked toward him.
“Good morning to you too.”
The young warrior placed the wooden container on the table.
Aki opened it.

Inside lay the recovered record.
Masanori's confession had been copied and witnessed by the shrine priest.
It detailed the use of false names, forged custody orders, and transfers that had separated families across the provinces.
Yasuke examined the pages.
Then stopped at the entry Aki had marked.
“A boy?”
She nodded.
“Apparently placed under the protection of a household associated with a foreign warrior.”
Yasuke looked up.
“When?”
“Two years after Harunobu disappeared.”
He studied the entry.
“Does it name the warrior?”
“No.”
“Does it name the boy?”
“The original name has been altered.”
Yasuke looked at her.
“Then we cannot assume it concerns me.”
“Agreed.”
Saburō seemed surprised.
“You don't think it's connected?”
Aki answered.
“It may be connected. But we have no proof.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Then we must find the proof.”
He studied the destination column.
“A port?”
“Yes.”
“And a vessel?”
“Only part of its name.”
Yasuke examined the characters.
He knew ships.
He knew ports.

He knew how quickly a person could disappear once carried across the sea.
He also knew that men who recorded cargo often cared more about goods than passengers.
But even a careless record might preserve something important.
“Can we identify the ship?” he asked.
Aki hesitated.
“Perhaps through the merchants.”
“Which merchants?”
“Those who maintained records of foreign trade.”
Yasuke considered.
The answer was not comfortable.
Because he knew some of those merchants.
And they knew him.
Before he had been accepted into Nobunaga's service, he had traveled through Japan in the company of Jesuit missionaries.
He had seen ports.
Warehouses.
Trading houses.
Ships that carried men, weapons, cloth, and goods between distant places.
He understood how easily a name could become a description.
A foreigner.
A servant.
A child.
A passenger.
Not a person.
A category.
He looked at the entry again.
“Whoever wrote this may never have considered the boy important enough to identify properly.”
Aki nodded.
“Yes.”
Yasuke touched the page.
“Then we find someone who did.”

Present Day

Henry Vale Antiquities had closed four years earlier.
The website remained online, but its final update announced the retirement of its proprietor.
The business address now belonged to an accounting firm.
The telephone number was disconnected.
Malcolm regarded this as deeply inconsiderate.
“People should not retire while they're involved in conspiracies.”
Luna looked up.
“I'll add that to the regulations.”
“Please do.”
Emiko continued searching.
“There may be a record of the business sale.”
Luna nodded.
“And archived listings. Maybe we can find photographs of the shop.”
Malcolm folded his arms.
“What if he's dead?”
“Then we find out who handled his business affairs,” Emiko said.
He sighed.
“Everybody in this story either disappears, retires, or dies.”
Luna glanced at him.
“Except us.”
He went still.
She noticed.
“Dad?”
He looked at her.
Then managed a smile.
“Let's keep it that way.”
Luna studied him for a moment.
Then returned to her laptop.
By afternoon, they had found a newspaper interview with Henry Vale from several years earlier.
He had described his interest in objects that traveled between cultures.
A photograph accompanied the article.
Malcolm recognized him immediately.

“There.”
Luna leaned closer.
“That's him?”
“That's him.”
Emiko studied the photograph.
Then frowned.
“What?” Malcolm asked.
She pointed toward the man's hand.
He wore a signet ring.
The design was small.
Nearly impossible to distinguish.
But Emiko recognized the general shape.
Three curved lines.
Surrounding a circle.
Luna enlarged the image.
The pixels blurred.
“Could be anything,” she said.
Emiko nodded.
“Yes.”
Malcolm looked between them.
“But probably not.”
Emiko shook her head.
“We shouldn't decide before we can see it clearly.”
He nodded reluctantly.
“Fine.”
Luna opened another search result.
An auction catalog.
Henry Vale had apparently donated part of his collection to a regional museum shortly before retiring.
The catalog listed several Japanese objects.
Ceramics.
Lacquerware.
A seventeenth-century document case.
And a small wooden box described as:
Unidentified Japanese archival container, estimated late sixteenth to early seventeenth century. Provenance incomplete.
The photograph showed a rectangular box.

Dark wood.
Metal fittings.
Luna leaned forward.
“Mom.”
Emiko turned.
Luna enlarged the image.
On the lid was a symbol.
Three curved lines.
Pointing inward.
Malcolm stared.
Then slowly pulled out a chair.
“Okay.”
He sat down.
“I officially withdraw my objection to research.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Hana was not pleased to learn that another child had been taken.
She studied the entry in silence.
Then asked, “Where is he now?”
Aki shook her head.
“We don't know.”
“Is he alive?”
“We don't know that either.”
Hana looked at the record.
“Then why are we sitting here?”
Yasuke glanced at Aki.
She said nothing.
Hana continued.
“If there is a record of where they sent him, someone must know what happened.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Perhaps.”
“Then we should ask.”
He smiled faintly.
“That is our intention.”
“Today?”

Aki reached for her hand.
“Hana, finding a ship from years ago will take time.”
The girl withdrew her hand.
“Everything takes time.”
Aki waited.
Hana looked down.
“My father disappeared six years ago. Everyone told me to be patient. Then they changed my name. Then they told me to forget.”
Her voice rose.
“And now there's another child, and we're supposed to wait again?”
Yasuke crouched beside her.
“No.”
She looked at him.
“We are not asking you to forget.”
“Then what are you asking?”
He considered.
“To help us find the truth without giving those responsible another chance to destroy it.”
She stared.
Then lowered her eyes.
Aki spoke softly.
“You can be angry.”
Hana nodded.
“I am.”
“Good.”
The girl looked up, surprised.
Aki smiled.
“Anger can tell us when something matters. But it cannot always tell us what to do next.”
Hana considered.
Then asked, “What do we do next?”
Aki looked toward Yasuke.
He answered.
“We go to the port.”
Hana straightened.
“Can I come?”
“No.”

Her face fell.
Yasuke continued.
“Not because you cannot help. Because those searching for you know your face.”
She looked away.
“I hate being hidden.”
“I know.”
“You promised I wouldn't be given to anyone.”
“I did.”
“Then why can't I decide?”
Yasuke felt the question strike home.
He glanced toward Aki.
She watched him carefully.
Waiting.
He had given his word that Hana would not be returned against her will.
But he had not promised to obey every wish that placed her in danger.
He considered.
Then said, “You deserve a say in where you go.”
Hana looked up.
“And?”
“And I will explain why I believe the port is dangerous. Then we will decide how you can help without walking into the hands of the men searching for you.”
She studied him.
“You'll listen?”
“Yes.”
“Even if I disagree?”
“Especially then.”
Aki smiled faintly.
Yasuke noticed.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
He narrowed his eyes.
“That expression suggests something.”
She looked toward Hana.

“Only that she's learning quickly.”
Hana smiled.
For the first time that morning, the room felt less burdened.
Then a servant appeared at the doorway.
“Yasuke-dono.”
Yasuke turned.
“Yes?”
“There is a visitor requesting you.”
“Who?”
“A man from the port.”
Yasuke stood.
“Which port?”
The servant bowed.
“He says you will know him.”
Yasuke exchanged a glance with Aki.
Then asked, “His name?”
The servant answered.
Yasuke felt the breath leave his chest.
He knew the man.
Had not seen him in years.
And had never expected to encounter him again.

Present Day

The museum was three hours away.
Malcolm immediately proposed driving there.
Emiko immediately objected.
Luna immediately opened the museum's website.
In less than two minutes, the family had achieved its customary balance of enthusiasm, caution, and internet research.
“We don't even know whether the box is on display,” Emiko said.
“Then we'll call,” Malcolm replied.
“And if it's in storage?”
“Then we'll ask for an appointment.”
“And if they refuse?”
He considered.
“I'll be charming.”

Luna looked up.
“Oh, we're doomed.”
He pointed toward her.
“Your sarcasm is becoming a health concern.”
She smiled.
“Yours or mine?”
Emiko took the telephone.
“I'll call.”
The museum answered on the fourth ring.
A curator explained that the Japanese archival container was indeed in storage.
Researchers could request access, subject to approval.
A written inquiry would be necessary.
Emiko asked several careful questions.
The curator was helpful.
And then, unexpectedly, curious.
“May I ask why you're interested in that particular object?”
Emiko glanced at the sword case.
“Family research.”
“Japanese family history?”
“Yes.”
“I see.”
A pause.
Then the curator said, “There may be something else you should know.”
Emiko sat straighter.
“What?”
“The box arrived with several papers. We originally believed they were unrelated.”
“Why?”
“Because the documents appeared to be from a later period.”
Emiko looked toward Luna.
“Have they been cataloged?”
“Partially.”
“Are they available for examination?”
Another pause.
“Possibly. But I should mention something.”

“Yes?”
“A gentleman contacted us about those papers last month.”
Emiko went still.
“What gentleman?”
“He claimed to represent a Japanese family with an interest in the collection.”
“Did he give a name?”
“Yes.”
Emiko reached for a pen.
“Would you tell me?”
The curator hesitated.
“I believe it was Kuroda.”
Emiko closed her eyes.
Across the table, Malcolm saw her expression.
He knew that look now.
The look that meant someone had once again inserted themselves into their lives without permission.
She thanked the curator, arranged to send a formal inquiry, and ended the call.
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Well?”
She looked at him.
“The Kuroda family contacted the museum last month.”
He stared.
“About the box?”
“And the papers.”
Luna leaned closer.
“Before or after the sword disappeared from their collection?”
Emiko considered.
“After, according to Nakamura's account.”
Silence.
Malcolm looked toward the wooden case.
Then back at his family.
“So we've got the sword, they've got their eye on a box, and somebody's trying to appoint our daughter to a job nobody has explained.”
Emiko nodded.

“That's one way of putting it.”
He leaned back.
“I'm beginning to miss the days when our biggest problem was the electricity bill.”
Luna smiled.
“We still have the electricity bill.”
He closed his eyes.
“Thank you, baby.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

The visitor entered slowly.
He was older than Yasuke remembered.
His beard had grown gray.
A scar crossed one side of his neck.
But his eyes were unmistakable.
Yasuke stood.
For a long moment, neither man spoke.
Then the visitor smiled.
“You've grown comfortable here.”
Yasuke stared.
“I could say the same of you.”
The man laughed.
“Hardly.”
Aki watched from beside the table.
Saburō stood near the doorway.
Hana remained behind them.
Yasuke stepped forward.
The visitor opened his arms.
Yasuke embraced him.
It was brief.
Strong.
And when they separated, both men seemed uncertain what to say.
Aki approached.
“You know each other?”
Yasuke smiled.
“Yes.”

The visitor bowed.
“My name is Tomé.”
He spoke Japanese with a foreign accent.
“I traveled with Yasuke before he entered Lord Nobunaga's service.”
Aki nodded.
“A friend?”
Yasuke considered.
“An old companion.”
Tomé grinned.
“Which means he owes me money.”
Yasuke laughed.
“I paid you.”
“You paid me in promises.”
“Excellent promises.”
“Worthless in any market.”
Hana smiled.
The exchange loosened the room.
Then Yasuke grew serious.
“Why are you here?”
Tomé's smile faded.
“I received a message.”
“From whom?”
“A merchant who remembers your name.”
Yasuke frowned.
“What message?”
“That you were searching for a vessel.”
Aki stepped closer.
Tomé looked toward her.
“And for a child whose name had been changed.”
The room fell silent.
Yasuke studied him.
“How do you know that?”
Tomé reached into his coat.
Removed a folded piece of paper.
Placed it on the table.
The document was old.
Creased.

Marked by salt and damp.
Yasuke opened it.
A shipping account.
Several entries.
Goods.
Payments.
Passenger descriptions.
Then one line.
A child.
Transported under protection.
No name.
Only a notation identifying the escort.
Yasuke stared.
Because he recognized the name.
Not his own.
Not Aki's.
Not Harunobu's.
A man he had traveled with before Japan.
A man who had once helped him survive a storm at sea.
A man he believed had died.
Tomé watched him.
“I thought you should see it.”
Yasuke looked up.
“Where did you get this?”
“From a captain who no longer needed it.”
“When?”
“Years ago.”
“Why keep it?”
Tomé hesitated.
Then said, “Because I knew the escort.”
Yasuke felt a chill.
“And?”
Tomé looked toward Hana.
Then toward Aki.
“I knew the child too.”
Silence.
Yasuke stared at him.

“Who was he?”
Tomé swallowed.
“A boy who should never have been on that ship.”
Yasuke's expression hardened.
“Where is he now?”
Tomé looked down.
Then answered.
“I brought him back.”

Present Day

Emiko received Nakamura's message shortly after dinner.
It contained no greeting.
Only an address.
A date.
And a request.
Please meet me tomorrow. Alone, if possible.
She stared at the screen.
Then laughed.
Malcolm looked up from the sofa.
“What?”
She showed him the message.
He read it.
Then shook his head.
“That man has a death wish.”
Luna leaned over the back of the sofa.
“Why does he keep trying to meet you alone?”
Emiko considered.
“Because he thinks I'll be more willing to listen without either of you present.”
Malcolm smiled.
“That hurts.”
“It's probably true.”
Luna laughed.
Malcolm pointed toward his wife.
“I'll have you know I'm an excellent listener.”
She raised an eyebrow.

“Darling.”
He considered.
“Fine. I'm a passionate listener.”
Luna burst out laughing.
Emiko shook her head.
Then began typing.
Malcolm leaned closer.
“What are you saying?”
She turned the phone toward him.
My family will be present. You will explain the missing records, the collector, and your connection to my grandmother. If you cannot agree to that, we have nothing further to discuss.
Malcolm nodded.
“Beautiful.”
She sent it.
Then placed the phone on the table.
For a moment, the room was quiet.
Luna settled onto the sofa beside them.
Malcolm looked at her.
“You okay?”
She shrugged.
“Mostly.”
He nodded.
“Fair answer.”
She leaned against Emiko.
Her mother put an arm around her.
After a while, Luna asked, “Do you think we'll ever get to Japan?”
Malcolm looked toward Emiko.
She looked back.
Neither answered immediately.
Then Emiko said, “Yes.”
Luna turned.
“Really?”
“Yes.”
“Even after everything?”
Emiko nodded.
“We'll go when it's safe enough to make a responsible decision.”

Malcolm added, “And we'll do things that have absolutely nothing to do with swords.”
Luna smiled.
“Like what?”
“Eat.”
“Dad.”
“Sightsee.”
“Okay.”
“Eat some more.”
She laughed.
“Anything else?”
He considered.
“Your mother can show us where she grew up.”
Luna's smile softened.
Emiko looked at Malcolm.
Then nodded.
“Yes.”
Luna leaned against them.
For a few minutes, the sword was forgotten.
The threats were forgotten.
The strange messages and family records became distant.
They talked about Japan.
The real Japan.
The place Emiko remembered.
The streets where she had walked to school.
The shops she had visited with her grandmother.
The mountains she had seen from train windows.
The summers.
The rain.
The food.
The people.
And for the first time in days, Luna felt something other than dread when she imagined crossing the ocean.
She felt excitement.

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Yasuke stood beside the open window.
Tomé sat at the table.
Aki remained nearby.
Saburō had taken Hana into the adjoining room, where the girl was attempting to question him about the recovered shipping account.
He was handling the interrogation poorly.
Yasuke could hear it.
“No, I do not know where the boy is.”
“Then why didn't you ask?”
“Because I wasn't there.”
“Would you ask if you had been?”
“Hana—”
“Would you?”
Aki smiled faintly.
Yasuke turned back to Tomé.
“You said you brought him back.”
“Yes.”
“From where?”
“A voyage beyond the southern ports.”
“Where did you leave him?”
Tomé hesitated.
“That is complicated.”
Yasuke sighed.
“Then make it simple.”
The older man looked at him.
“The boy was placed in the care of people who could protect him.”
“Who?”
“A family living near the coast.”
“Which family?”
Tomé considered.
Then shook his head.
“I promised not to tell.”
Yasuke stared.
“Someone has been searching for this child for years.”
“I know.”
“Then you must tell us.”
Tomé's expression hardened.

“No.”
Aki stepped closer.
“Why?”
“Because the people who sent him away were not all his enemies.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Explain.”
Tomé looked toward the window.
“When the boy was placed aboard the vessel, the men who arranged the transfer intended to send him somewhere he could never be traced.”
“Why?”
“Because of whose household he had lived in.”
Yasuke considered.
“Mine?”
Tomé looked at him.
“Not yours exactly.”
Aki leaned forward.
“Then whose?”
Tomé hesitated.
Then said, “A household that wished to protect him from men who believed his existence was dangerous.”
Yasuke shook his head.
“That tells us nothing.”
“It tells you that the records alone cannot explain what happened.”
Aki studied the older man.
“You know the boy's true name.”
Tomé looked at her.
“Yes.”
“Do you know his parents?”
A long pause.
Then he answered.
“I knew the woman who cared for him.”
Aki remained still.
“His mother?”
Tomé shook his head.
“I don't know whether she was his mother.”
Yasuke watched him.

Tomé continued.
“She was killed before the ship departed.”
Silence.
Aki felt her chest tighten.
“What was her name?”
The older man looked toward Yasuke.
Then answered.
“Hana.”
Yasuke stared.
The room seemed to grow silent around him.
He thought of Jin.
Of the scarred merchant.
Of the dead wife whose name had appeared in their records.
He looked toward Tomé.
“Jin's wife?”
Tomé's face changed.
“You know Jin?”
“Yes.”
The older man closed his eyes.
For a moment, he looked exhausted.
Then he whispered, “Then perhaps it's time somebody told you what really happened.”

Present Day

At eleven forty-three, Emiko received a reply from Nakamura.
She read it.
Then handed the phone to Malcolm.
He examined the message.
His expression changed.
“What?”
Luna leaned closer.
Malcolm read it aloud.
“I will meet with all three of you. There is something I must confess concerning the sword's return.”
Luna straightened.
“Finally.”

He continued.
“But I ask that you do not bring the sword.”
Emiko nodded slowly.
“That makes sense.”
Malcolm looked at her.
“Does it?”
“Possibly.”
Luna frowned.
“Why wouldn't he want us to bring it?”
Emiko considered.
“Perhaps he believes someone is watching for the sword.”
Malcolm shook his head.
“Or perhaps he wants to make sure it's left unattended.”
Luna nodded.
“Good point.”
Emiko examined the message again.
Then said, “We won't take it.”
Malcolm looked surprised.
“You agree?”
“Yes.”
“Just like that?”
“We'll leave it secured and document its condition before we go.”
Luna smiled.
“Mom's got a plan.”
Malcolm sighed.
“Mom always has a plan.”
She looked toward him.
“You have plans too.”
“Mine apparently involve broken yogurt and expensive cameras.”
Luna laughed.
Emiko smiled.
Then opened the final line of Nakamura's message.
She had almost missed it.
It appeared beneath the meeting details.
A single sentence.
I was not the person who sent the sword to your daughter.
She stared.

Then read it again.
Malcolm noticed.
“What?”
She showed him.
He frowned.
“That's a strange thing to volunteer.”
Luna considered.
“Unless he knows who did.”
Emiko nodded.
“Exactly.”
For a moment, the three of them were silent.
Then Malcolm looked toward the dining room.
The sword case sat where they'd left it.
He thought about the deliveries.
The strange references.
The collectors.
The old photographs.
The family histories.
The groups trying to preserve or possess the names.
Then he looked toward Luna.
The person who had received the final package.
The person around whom the mystery now seemed to turn.
He considered something he had resisted from the beginning.
Perhaps this was not a story about a sword choosing an heir.
Perhaps it was a story about people trying to choose one.
And perhaps the greatest danger was not that Luna would accept the responsibility.
It was that she might refuse.
He looked toward Emiko.
She met his eyes.
Neither spoke.
But the thought was shared.
Somewhere, someone had gone to extraordinary lengths to place the sword in their daughter's hands.
And they had never considered the possibility that she might give it back.
Not because she was frightened.

Not because she was unworthy.
But because she understood something they had forgotten.
An inheritance was not the same as an obligation.
And no one, living or dead, had the right to make that choice for her.



Chapter 18

The Price of Silence



Present Day

Malcolm Hayes had never liked hotel conference rooms.
They were places where people discussed important matters beneath lighting designed to make everyone look vaguely unwell.
This one was particularly depressing.
Beige walls.
Beige carpet.
A long table surrounded by beige chairs.
A framed picture of a sailboat that appeared to be regretting its own existence.
And at the far end of the room sat Mr. Nakamura.
Or Mr. Kuroda.
Or, as Malcolm had privately begun calling him, Mr. Whatever-the-Hell-Your-Name-Is.
The older man stood when they entered.
“Thank you for coming.”
Malcolm looked around.
“You picked this place?”
“Yes.”
“Interesting.”
Nakamura frowned.
“Why?”
“I was expecting something more sinister.”
Luna examined the ceiling.
“Dad.”
“Secret underground chamber. Dramatic lighting. Maybe a few mysterious gentlemen in expensive suits.”

Emiko gave him a look.
He shrugged.
“I'm just saying, this is a disappointing headquarters.”
Nakamura almost smiled.
Almost.
Then his gaze settled on Luna.
“I'm glad you're here.”
She stopped beside her chair.
“Are you?”
“Yes.”
“Then why did you keep asking my parents to meet without me?”
The old man lowered his eyes.
“Because I thought some of what I had to say might frighten you.”
She pulled out her chair.
“And you've been doing such a good job preventing that?”
Malcolm sat beside her.
“That's my girl.”
Emiko took the remaining seat.
“Nakamura-san, we're finished with partial explanations.”
The older man nodded.
“I understand.”
Malcolm leaned back.
“Good. Because if you tell us there's something you can't explain over the telephone, I'm going to throw this chair through that picture.”
Luna glanced at the sailboat.
“It's suffered enough, Dad.”
“Fair point.”
Nakamura folded his hands.
For a moment, he seemed to be gathering himself.
Then he said, “I helped arrange the sword's first return to your family.”
The room became very quiet.
Malcolm slowly leaned forward.
“I'm sorry?”
“Not the delivery addressed to your daughter. That was not my doing.”

“But the others?”
“Some.”
“How many?”
“Three that I can confirm.”
Malcolm stared.
“Three?”
“Yes.”
“Of seven?”
“Yes.”
“And the other four?”
“I don't know who arranged them.”
Malcolm looked toward Emiko.
Then back at Nakamura.
“You understand why that is a very unsatisfying answer.”
“I do.”
“Good. We're making progress.”
Emiko leaned forward.
“Why return the sword at all?”
Nakamura considered.
“Because I believed your husband was safer possessing it than leaving it in the hands of collectors.”
Malcolm blinked.
“You thought I was safer?”
“Yes.”
“Let me explain something. I've spent years trying to get rid of a sword I didn't understand. And every time it came back, I became more convinced something was wrong.”
Nakamura nodded.
“I know.”
“Then how exactly was that keeping me safe?”
The old man looked down.
“It wasn't.”
Silence.
Malcolm stared.
Nakamura continued.
“I believed I was protecting a family inheritance. I did not understand the consequences.”

Emiko studied him.
“Then tell us about Henry Vale.”
Nakamura's expression changed.
“He is dead.”
Malcolm closed his eyes.
“Of course he is.”
“He died two years ago.”
“Did you know him?”
“Yes.”
“Did he work for you?”
Nakamura hesitated.
“No.”
Malcolm straightened.
“Careful.”
The old man nodded.
“He did work on my behalf. But he was not my employee.”
“What does that mean?”
“We were part of an informal network of people who attempted to recover historical objects and records before they reached collectors who wished to suppress them.”
Luna leaned forward.
“You mean the keepers?”
Nakamura shook his head.
“No. Those we opposed.”
She frowned.
“Then what did you call yourselves?”
The older man smiled sadly.
“Nothing particularly grand.”
Malcolm raised an eyebrow.
“No secret name?”
“No.”
“Membership cards?”
“No.”
“Matching jackets?”
“Darling,” Emiko murmured.
He raised his hands.
“Fine.”

Nakamura continued.
“Some were descendants of families who had hidden the records. Others were researchers, archivists, or collectors. We did not always agree about what should happen to what we recovered.”
Luna studied him.
“And you agreed that my father should have the sword?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Because the surviving records suggested that an earlier member of his family had been connected to its custody.”
“Connected how?”
“We weren't certain.”
“Blood?”
“Possibly.”
“Then you didn't know.”
“No.”
She folded her arms.
“You keep using family history as a reason to make decisions, but every time we ask whether you can prove the family history, the answer is no.”
Nakamura looked at her.
For a long moment, he said nothing.
Then he nodded.
“You are right.”
Malcolm smiled faintly.
He liked hearing that.
Especially from Nakamura.
The old man continued.
“And that is part of what I came to confess.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Tomé sat beside the open window.
Yasuke stood across from him.
Aki remained near the table, where the shipping record lay unfolded.

Outside, the sounds of the castle carried faintly through the evening air.
Servants moving.
Guards calling.
The distant clatter of hooves.
Ordinary life continuing while the past rearranged itself around them.
“You knew Hana?” Yasuke asked.
Tomé nodded.
“Jin's wife.”
“Yes.”
“And you knew the child?”
“For a time.”
Yasuke glanced toward Aki.
She had not spoken since Tomé mentioned the woman's name.
Now she approached.
“Tell us from the beginning.”
Tomé considered.
Then nodded.
“Jin was not always a merchant.”
Yasuke frowned.
“What was he?”
“A clerk. Sometimes a messenger. He worked for several households.”
Aki leaned forward.
“Harunobu's?”
“For a period.”
Yasuke considered.
“And his wife?”
“Hana helped families leave places where their names had become dangerous.”
Aki looked up sharply.
“She belonged to the record keepers?”
Tomé shook his head.
“She worked with them. That was not the same thing.”
He glanced toward the shipping account.

“She believed the records mattered because people mattered. Some of the men who controlled the records believed the opposite.”
Yasuke nodded slowly.
“And the boy?”
Tomé's expression darkened.
“He was placed under her protection.”
“By whom?”
“I never knew.”
“His parents?”
“Perhaps. Or someone acting for them.”
Aki frowned.
“What do you know?”
Tomé took a breath.
“The boy was young. Perhaps four. He understood some Japanese, though he rarely spoke. Hana kept him hidden.”
“Why?”
“Because men were searching for him.”
“Which men?”
“Men employed by households involved in transferring children and servants.”
Aki looked toward the papers.
“The ones collecting the names.”
Tomé nodded.
“Yes.”
Yasuke folded his arms.
“What happened?”
“One night, Hana came to the harbor. She brought the boy and asked me to arrange passage.”
“To where?”
“Anywhere the men searching for him would not think to look.”
Yasuke considered.
“And you agreed?”
“I knew her. I knew Jin. I believed her.”
“What happened to Hana?”
Tomé lowered his eyes.
“She was followed.”
Silence.

He continued.
“Before the ship sailed, men came to the warehouse where she was hiding.”
Yasuke felt his chest tighten.
“Did they find the boy?”
“No. She had already placed him aboard.”
“And Hana?”
Tomé looked down at his hands.
“She did not escape.”
For a while, no one spoke.
Then Aki asked, “Did Jin know?”
Tomé nodded.
“Eventually.”
“And that's why he's been searching for the sword?”
“Partly.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Explain.”
Tomé looked toward the documents.
“Hana had carried a copy of the child's original record. Jin believed it had been hidden inside the sword.”
Yasuke went still.
“The sword?”
Tomé nodded.
“Yes.”
“But the sword had not yet been given to me.”
“No.”
“Then why would Jin believe that?”
“Because the sword was being prepared before Nobunaga presented it to you.”
Aki leaned forward.
“Prepared by whom?”
Tomé hesitated.
“By people who understood its purpose.”
Yasuke stared at him.
“And what was that purpose?”
Tomé looked toward the open window.
Then back at Yasuke.

“To carry a record that could survive when its keepers could not.”
Aki examined the shipping account.
“And did it?”
Tomé shook his head.
“I don't know.”
Yasuke considered.
“You said you brought the boy back.”
“Yes.”
“Back to Japan?”
“Yes.”
“Then where is he?”
Tomé's expression changed.
“I need you to understand something before I answer.”
Yasuke's jaw tightened.
“What?”
“The woman who died protecting him believed that no one had the right to claim him simply because his name appeared in a record.”
Aki looked up.
Tomé continued.
“She made me promise that if I found a safe home for him, I would not tell anyone where he was unless the boy himself wished it known.”
Yasuke stared.
“How could a child that young make such a decision?”
“He could not.”
“Then someone made it for him.”
“Yes.”
Yasuke shook his head.
“Then what makes that different from the men who took him?”
Tomé looked exhausted.
“Perhaps nothing.”
The answer surprised Yasuke.
Tomé continued.
“That question has troubled me for years.”
Aki studied the old sailor.
Then asked quietly, “How old is the boy now?”
“Perhaps eight. Perhaps nine.”

“And does he know who he is?”
Tomé lowered his eyes.
“I don't know.”
Aki's expression softened.
“Then perhaps we should begin there.”

Present Day

Nakamura placed a folder on the conference table.
Malcolm looked at it.
“More paper.”
“Yes.”
“I'm beginning to hate paper.”
Luna reached for the folder.
“May I?”
Nakamura nodded.
“Please.”
Inside were copies of correspondence, photographs, and invoices.
Several documents bore Henry Vale's signature.
Others came from Japanese collectors.
One contained a photograph of the sword taken years earlier.
Luna examined it.
Then looked up.
“That's ours.”
Malcolm leaned closer.
The sword lay on a dark cloth.
Its fittings were worn.
The distinctive markings were visible.
“Looks like it,” he agreed.
Nakamura nodded.
“That photograph was taken before your father first approached Vale.”
Malcolm frowned.
“How?”
“Because the sword had passed through another collection before it reached you.”
“Which collection?”

Nakamura hesitated.
Then answered.
“The Kuroda family.”
Silence.
Emiko studied him.
“So the sword came from your family.”
“At one time.”
“And you arranged for my husband to possess it?”
“No.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Wait.”
Nakamura looked at him.
“I helped return it after he tried to relinquish it. I did not arrange its original arrival.”
Luna turned.
“Then who gave it to Dad in the first place?”
Malcolm considered.
“I inherited it.”
Emiko looked toward him.
“From your grandfather's things.”
“Yes.”
Luna studied him.
“Was there paperwork?”
He shook his head.
“Not much. It was stored with several old objects.”
Nakamura nodded.
“That is what we believed.”
Luna looked at him.
“Believed?”
The old man hesitated.
Then withdrew another photograph.
It showed a wooden trunk.
Dark.
Heavy.
Its metal corners were worn.
Malcolm recognized it.
“That was my grandfather's.”

Nakamura nodded.
“Yes.”
“How do you have a photograph of it?”
The old man looked toward Emiko.
“Your grandmother sent it to me.”
The room fell silent.
Malcolm stared.
“My wife's grandmother photographed my grandfather's trunk?”
“Yes.”
“When?”
“Many years ago.”
He looked toward Emiko.
She was equally stunned.
Nakamura continued.
“They had corresponded.”
Emiko leaned forward.
“About what?”
“The sword.”
Malcolm stared.
“Before we met?”
“Yes.”
Malcolm leaned back.
Then slowly exhaled.
“Well, isn't that interesting.”
Luna looked between them.
“Did our families know each other?”
Nakamura nodded.
“Some members did.”
“Then why didn't anybody tell us?”
The old man looked down.
“I can't answer for everyone.”
Emiko studied the photograph.
“Were they trying to arrange something?”
Nakamura looked up.
“No.”
She held his gaze.
“Are you certain?”

“As certain as I can be.”
Malcolm frowned.
“That's not exactly comforting.”
Nakamura nodded.
“I understand.”
Luna examined the photograph again.
Then noticed something.
At the bottom of the trunk was a small metal plate.
She enlarged the image.
The same symbol.
Three curved lines.
Pointing outward.
She looked toward her parents.
“That's the protecting symbol.”
Emiko leaned closer.
“Perhaps.”
Luna turned to Nakamura.
“What did you call the people who opposed the collectors?”
He hesitated.
“We did not have a formal name.”
“But there was a symbol.”
“Yes.”
“Three lines pointing outward?”
He nodded.
“That was used by some families.”
“And the inward one?”
Nakamura's expression changed.
“That belonged to another association.”
“The keepers?”
“Yes.”
Luna folded her arms.
“Then why did you tell us the keepers protected the records?”
Nakamura looked down.
“Because at different times, they did.”
She frowned.
“What?”

“Some members preserved what others wished destroyed. Later generations began treating those same records as property they had the right to control.”
Emiko nodded slowly.
“So the organization changed.”
“Yes.”
“And the people who opposed them?”
“Sometimes they were former members.”
Luna studied him.
“So there aren't two perfectly separate sides.”
“No.”
“And not everyone on either side agrees.”
“No.”
She looked at her parents.
“That makes more sense.”
Malcolm sighed.
“Of course it does.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Yasuke found Jin near the western gate.
The scarred merchant was preparing to leave.
He carried a small pack.
No guards accompanied him.
When Yasuke approached, Jin stopped.
“You've been avoiding me,” Yasuke said.
Jin looked tired.
“I have business elsewhere.”
“Business involving a child?”
Jin went still.
For a moment, neither man moved.
Then Jin asked, “What child?”
Yasuke watched him.
“A boy entrusted to Hana before her death.”
Jin's expression changed.
Slowly.
Painfully.

Then he looked away.
“Who told you?”
“Tomé.”
Jin closed his eyes.
“Tomé is alive.”
“Yes.”
“I thought he had left Japan.”
“He returned.”
Jin nodded.
Then sat on a nearby stone.
Yasuke remained standing.
“Why didn't you tell me?”
Jin looked up.
“Would you have believed me?”
“I might have.”
“You serve Nobunaga. I have spent years avoiding men who serve powerful households.”
Yasuke considered.
“Not all men are the same.”
“No,” Jin said. “But power makes it difficult to tell which are dangerous until someone has already suffered.”
Yasuke sat beside him.
For a while, neither spoke.
Then he asked, “Was the boy your son?”
Jin looked toward him.
“No.”
“Are you certain?”
“Yes.”
“Then whose?”
Jin shook his head.
“I don't know.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Your wife protected a child whose parents you never knew?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
Jin looked toward the castle.
“Because she believed the child deserved protection.”

Yasuke considered.
“And you?”
Jin smiled bitterly.
“I believed she was putting herself in danger.”
He looked down.
“We argued about it.”
Yasuke waited.
“She told me that a child did not become less worthy of protection merely because protecting him was inconvenient.”
Jin's voice broke.
“I told her she was risking everything for someone who wasn't ours.”
He wiped his face.
“And she asked me whether I would feel differently if he were.”
Yasuke remained still.
Jin continued.
“I had no answer.”
For a while, the sounds of the castle seemed very distant.
Then Yasuke asked, “What happened?”
Jin looked toward the gate.
“She went to the harbor. I was supposed to follow with supplies.”
“And?”
“I was delayed.”
“By whom?”
“Men who wanted to know where the boy was.”
Yasuke felt his jaw tighten.
“They stopped you?”
Jin nodded.
“By the time I reached the harbor, Hana was dead.”
He looked down.
“And the boy was gone.”
Yasuke considered.
“Tomé says he brought him back.”
Jin looked up sharply.
“What?”
“Back to Japan.”
The merchant stood.

“Where?”
“He will not say.”
Jin stared.
“Why?”
“Because he promised Hana.”
Jin went still.
Then slowly sat again.
For a long moment, he said nothing.
At last he whispered, “She would have made him promise that.”
Yasuke watched him.
Jin looked toward the sky.
“She was afraid someone would turn the boy into a prize.”
“A prize?”
“An heir. A hostage. A symbol. Something to be claimed.”
Yasuke considered.
“And who wanted to claim him?”
Jin shook his head.
“I never knew.”
“Then why did they search so desperately?”
Jin looked at him.
“Because someone believed the boy could prove something.”
“What?”
The merchant's eyes filled again.
“That a family line had survived when it was meant to disappear.”
Yasuke felt a chill.
“Which family?”
Jin looked toward the castle.
Then answered.
“I don't know.”
Yasuke studied him.
For the first time, he believed it.
Jin was not hiding a great revelation.
He had spent years chasing a question he could not answer.
And his wife had died because others believed the answer was worth killing for.

Present Day

Luna had listened patiently for nearly an hour.
Now she was finished being patient.
“Nakamura-san.”
The old man looked toward her.
“Yes?”
“I want to ask you something.”
“Of course.”
She sat forward.
“Why me?”
He hesitated.
She continued.
“Not my father. Not my mother. Me.”
Nakamura studied her.
“The sword came addressed to you.”
“I know that.”
“And some people believe your family's histories have converged.”
“That's not an answer.”
He lowered his eyes.
She spoke more firmly.
“Do you have proof that I'm descended from Yasuke?”
“No.”
“Do you have proof that my mother is descended from Aki?”
“Not conclusive proof.”
“Do you know who sent me the sword?”
“No.”
“Do you know who keeps returning it?”
“Not all of them.”
She paused.
“Then why does everybody keep acting like they know what I'm supposed to do?”
Nakamura said nothing.
Malcolm looked at her.
He was proud.
And worried.
And trying very hard not to interrupt.
Luna continued.

“You've spent years watching my family. Other people have been watching us too. Somebody threatened me in my own home. Somebody confronted my mother in a grocery store.”
Her voice tightened.
“And nobody will tell us what they actually want.”
Nakamura looked pained.
She leaned closer.
“So I'm going to ask one more time.”
She paused.
“Why me?”
The old man looked at her for a long moment.
Then said something none of them expected.
“Because your mother refused.”
Silence.
Emiko stared.
“What?”
Nakamura looked toward her.
“Years ago, your grandmother wanted you to receive certain family records.”
Emiko went still.
“You never told me.”
“I know.”
“Why?”
“Because you refused the responsibility before she could explain it fully.”
Her expression hardened.
“I refused what?”
Nakamura hesitated.
Then answered.
“To become the next custodian.”
Malcolm looked toward her.
She stared at Nakamura.
“I have no memory of that.”
The old man nodded.
“Because you did not know what was being offered.”
She leaned forward.
“Then how could I have refused?”

“Your grandmother asked whether you would dedicate your life to preserving the family records.”
Emiko went still.
A memory surfaced.
A conversation.
Her grandmother's house.
A summer afternoon.
She had been young.
Preparing to leave for university.
Her grandmother had spoken about family duties.
About preserving names.
About responsibilities passed between generations.
And the young woman had laughed.
Not cruelly.
Simply with the impatience of someone who wanted a life beyond the expectations of older relatives.
She remembered saying she did not wish to spend her life guarding old papers.
She wanted to travel.
To work.
To marry.
To build something of her own.
Her grandmother had looked at her.
Then smiled.
And said that was her right.
Emiko sat very still.
“I remember.”
Malcolm touched her hand.
She looked toward Nakamura.
“My grandmother never told me the records were connected to the sword.”
“No.”
“She never told me people were being threatened.”
“No.”
“Then my refusal was not informed.”
Nakamura nodded.
“You are right.”

Luna looked between them.
“Wait.”
Emiko turned.
“What?”
“If Mom refused, why would that make me next?”
Nakamura closed his eyes.
“Because some members of the network believed the responsibility should pass to the next generation.”
Luna stared.
“But Grandma didn't?”
“No.”
“How do you know?”
“Because she wrote that no child should inherit an obligation without the freedom to reject it.”
The room fell silent.
Malcolm looked toward Emiko.
Then at Nakamura.
“So somebody ignored her.”
“Yes.”
“Who?”
Nakamura hesitated.
Then said, “I don't know.”
Malcolm leaned back.
“Well, that's becoming your favorite answer.”
Nakamura accepted the criticism.
Luna remained quiet.
Then she asked, “Did my grandmother know about me?”
Nakamura smiled faintly.
“Yes.”
“Did she meet me?”
“When you were very young.”
Luna looked toward Emiko.
Emiko nodded slowly.
“You were a baby.”
Luna returned her gaze to Nakamura.
“What did she say?”
The old man hesitated.

Then smiled sadly.
“She said you had your father's stubbornness.”
Malcolm brightened.
“Excellent.”
“And your mother's ability to make everyone else feel foolish.”
Emiko laughed.
Luna smiled.
Then Nakamura continued.
“She also said she hoped you would never have to worry about any of this.”
Luna's smile faded.
The old man looked toward her.
“I think she would be very unhappy with what has happened.”
For the first time, Luna saw something in his expression that seemed unguarded.
Regret.
Real regret.
She studied him.
Then said quietly, “So would I.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

The next morning, Yasuke and Aki walked through the castle gardens.
The inquiry continued.
Masanori had been brought under guard.
The forged seal was being examined.
And Tomé had agreed to speak with Nobunaga's investigators, though he remained unwilling to disclose the boy's location.
Yasuke found the situation exhausting.
Aki seemed energized by it.
He glanced toward her.
“You enjoy solving puzzles.”
She smiled.
“Sometimes.”
“This is not a puzzle.”
“No.”

“People have died.”
“I know.”
He stopped.
She turned.
“What?”
Yasuke looked toward the garden wall.
“I am beginning to wonder whether the records themselves have become part of the danger.”
Aki considered.
“How?”
“Everyone wants to possess them. The men who stole names. The families who hid the lists. Nobunaga's officials. The collectors.”
She nodded.
“Yes.”
“And now a child may be endangered simply because his name appears in one.”
Aki remained quiet.
Yasuke continued.
“Perhaps the answer is to destroy them.”
Her expression changed.
“Destroy the records?”
He nodded.
“If no one can possess the information, no one can use it to claim the child.”
Aki looked at him for a long moment.
Then asked, “And how would the child find his family?”
Yasuke hesitated.
“How would the families find their children?” she continued.
He said nothing.
Aki stepped closer.
“You're thinking about protection.”
“Yes.”
“So am I.”
She took his hand.
“But if we destroy every record that could be misused, we also destroy every record that could restore what was taken.”
Yasuke looked toward the trees.

“Then what do we do?”
“We must decide who controls access.”
He frowned.
“Who?”
Aki considered.
“Perhaps no single family. No single lord. No single keeper.”
Yasuke looked toward her.
She continued.
“Perhaps the records should be divided among people who cannot easily be forced to surrender them.”
He smiled faintly.
“Three pieces.”
“Or more.”
“And the sword?”
Aki looked toward him.
“A container. Nothing more.”
He laughed softly.
“Nobunaga may object to hearing his gift described that way.”
“Then perhaps we shouldn't tell him.”
Yasuke smiled.
Aki continued.
“And the people named in the records should have a say in what happens to their own histories.”
Yasuke considered.
“Hana?”
“Yes.”
“And the boy?”
“If we find him.”
Yasuke looked toward the castle.
“Then perhaps our task is not to find an heir to the records.”
Aki nodded.
“Perhaps it is to ensure no one ever owns them.”
For a long moment, neither spoke.
Then Yasuke squeezed her hand.
“I think your grandmother would approve.”
Aki smiled.
“She would ask how you intended to accomplish it.”

He laughed.
“Of course she would.”

Present Day

The meeting had lasted almost three hours.
Malcolm was ready to leave.
Emiko had taken photographs of every document Nakamura allowed them to copy.
Luna had made notes and asked questions until the old man appeared physically diminished by the effort of answering them.
As they stood, Nakamura reached into his coat.
He withdrew a small envelope.
Malcolm froze.
“Oh, absolutely not.”
Nakamura looked surprised.
“What?”
“No more envelopes.”
Luna smiled.
“Dad.”
“Every envelope in this story contains something terrible.”
The old man almost laughed.
“This one contains a photograph.”
“That's worse.”
Emiko held out her hand.
“May I?”
Nakamura gave it to her.
Inside was a photograph taken in Japan decades earlier.
Three people stood beside a wooden gate.
An elderly Japanese woman.
A younger Japanese man.
And a Black man.
Malcolm went still.
He leaned closer.
The Black man was tall.
Broad shouldered.
His hair was short.

He stood with one hand resting against the gate.
The photograph was old, but clear enough to show his face.
Malcolm's expression changed.
“That's my grandfather.”
Emiko looked up sharply.
“Are you certain?”
He nodded.
“Yes.”
Luna leaned closer.
She had seen photographs of her great-grandfather.
The resemblance was unmistakable.
Nakamura watched them.
Emiko pointed toward the elderly woman.
“My grandmother.”
“Yes,” Nakamura said.
Malcolm stared.
“They met.”
“Yes.”
“When?”
“The photograph was taken during a visit to Japan.”
Luna frowned.
“When did Grandpa go to Japan?”
Malcolm shook his head.
“I didn't know he had.”
Nakamura looked toward the photograph.
“He came searching for the history of the sword.”
Malcolm stared.
“Why didn't he tell anyone?”
“I don't know.”
The old man hesitated.
“Perhaps he did tell someone.”
Luna studied the photograph.
Then looked at the third person.
The younger Japanese man.
“Who's that?”
Nakamura's expression changed.
For a moment, he seemed reluctant to answer.

Then he said, “My brother.”
Silence.
Emiko frowned.
“You never mentioned a brother.”
“He died many years ago.”
Malcolm studied the photograph.
Something about the younger man's posture bothered him.
The angle of his shoulders.
The way he stood slightly apart.
Then he noticed the object in his hand.
A narrow wooden case.
Not the same as the modern sword case.
But similar.
He pointed.
“What's that?”
Nakamura looked toward the photograph.
Then quietly answered.
“The container your grandfather brought to Japan.”
Malcolm frowned.
“The sword?”
“No.”
Luna leaned closer.
“Then what?”
Nakamura looked toward her.
“His family's records.”
Malcolm went still.
“My grandfather had records?”
“Yes.”
“Where are they now?”
The old man hesitated.
Then said something that made the room seem suddenly colder.
“My brother took them.”
Malcolm stared.
“Why?”
Nakamura looked down.
“Because he believed the records could be used to identify the next custodian.”

Luna crossed her arms.
“And?”
Nakamura looked up.
“He believed that custodian should be chosen.”
“By whom?”
The old man's voice was barely audible.
“By him.”

Present Day — Later That Night

Malcolm stood in the garage.
His grandfather's old trunk sat open before him.
He had searched it once already.
Now he searched it again.
The papers.
The photographs.
The dark silver fitting.
Every object had taken on new significance.
Emiko stood beside him.
Luna sat on a stool nearby.
For nearly an hour, they examined everything.
Nothing new appeared.
Then Luna reached toward the inside of the lid.
“Dad?”
He looked up.
“What?”
“The lining.”
He leaned closer.
The trunk's interior was covered in worn fabric.
Near one corner, the material had begun to separate.
She pointed.
“There's something underneath.”
Malcolm studied it.
Then carefully lifted the loose edge.
A narrow fold of paper lay between the fabric and the wood.
He stopped.
Looked toward Emiko.

Then back at the paper.
Luna whispered, “Open it.”
He drew it out.
The paper was old.
Yellowed.
Folded several times.
He opened it slowly.
Inside was a short message written in English.
His grandfather's handwriting.
Malcolm recognized it immediately.
He read aloud.
If this is found, know that I was never trying to prove we came from a great man.
He stopped.
The room fell silent.
Then he continued.
I was trying to learn why so many people believed our history belonged to them.
Luna moved closer.
Malcolm read the next line.
The sword was given to me with a promise attached. I made that promise without knowing what it would cost.
He swallowed.
Emiko touched his arm.
He continued.
I do not want my children or theirs to inherit that promise.
Luna's eyes filled.
Malcolm read the final line.
If the sword reaches one of them, tell them they are free to refuse.
Silence.
For a long time, none of them moved.
Then Malcolm lowered the paper.
He looked toward Luna.
She looked back.
And in that moment, something settled between them.
Not an answer.
Not proof of ancestry.

Not an explanation for the sword's strange returns.
Something simpler.
A choice.
His grandfather had understood it.
Emiko's grandmother had understood it.
And now they did too.
Malcolm folded the paper carefully.
Then handed it to Luna.
“This is yours.”
She looked down.
“Dad—”
“Not the sword. Not the job. Not somebody else's expectations.”
He smiled faintly.
“The right to decide.”
She held the paper.
Then hugged him.
Emiko joined them.
For a long time, the three remained together beside the open trunk.
And somewhere in Japan, a man whose family had spent generations controlling names still believed that the next custodian could be appointed.
He had not yet learned that the person he intended to appoint might reject him.
Nor had he understood that the people he was trying to control had begun asking a more dangerous question.
Who had given the keepers authority in the first place?



Chapter 19

The Man at the Gate



Present Day

Malcolm Hayes was beginning to suspect that his grandfather had been considerably more interesting than anyone had given him credit for.

He stood in the garage, examining the photograph Nakamura had provided.

Three people.

A Japanese grandmother.

A younger Japanese man.

And his own grandfather, standing beside a wooden gate in Japan.

The man had apparently crossed an ocean, investigated a centuries-old mystery, carried secret family records, and returned home without telling his grandson a damned thing.

Malcolm found that last part particularly offensive.

“You couldn't leave me a letter?” he muttered.

Emiko looked up from the trunk.

“He did.”

“A useful letter.”

She smiled.

“Ah.”

“You know. Names. Addresses. Maybe a warning about the mysterious Japanese family that keeps showing up in our lives.”

Luna sat cross-legged on the garage floor, organizing photographs.

“Grandpa did warn us, Dad.”

“About what?”

“Not letting somebody else choose what happens to us.”

He considered.

Then nodded.
“Fair.”
She held up the picture.
“But I think there's something more interesting.”
Malcolm turned.
“More interesting than my grandfather secretly visiting Japan?”
“Potentially.”
She pointed toward the gate.
Malcolm leaned closer.
“What?”
“Look at the background.”
He examined the photograph.
A stone path ran beneath the gate. Behind it stood a narrow building, its wooden walls dark with age.
“Okay.”
“Now look at the photograph Mom got from Nakamura.”
Emiko joined them.
Luna opened the image of the Kyoto building Nakamura had recommended.
Malcolm compared them.
Then frowned.
“Same gate?”
“Maybe.”
Emiko studied the details.
“The roof tiles appear similar, but that isn't unusual.”
“The stone beside the entrance,” Luna said.
Both parents looked.
A large, irregular stone stood near the right-hand post.
Its upper edge formed a distinctive notch.
The same stone appeared in both photographs.
Emiko leaned forward.
“Oh.”
Her husband smiled.
“There it is.”
She ignored him.
Luna pointed toward the older picture.

“Grandpa was standing outside the building Nakamura wants us to visit.”
Her mother nodded slowly.
“Yes.”
“And nobody thought to mention that?”
Malcolm laughed without humor.
“Apparently not.”
Emiko looked at the photograph again.
Then said, “I think we should stop asking Nakamura to explain everything.”
Malcolm turned.
“Finally.”
She smiled.
“I didn't say stop asking questions.”
“Damn.”
“I said we should find independent evidence.”
Luna nodded.
“Like the museum.”
“Exactly.”
Malcolm looked toward the old trunk.
Then at the photograph.
“Okay. But before we make any more decisions, there's something I want to know.”
Emiko raised an eyebrow.
“What?”
He pointed toward the younger Japanese man.
“Nakamura says that's his brother.”
“Yes.”
“And the brother took my grandfather's records.”
“Apparently.”
“And now he's dead.”
“According to Nakamura.”
Malcolm nodded.
“Then where the hell did the records go?”
No one answered.
He folded his arms.
“Because a dead man can't collect them.”

Luna looked up.
“No.”
“But somebody can inherit them.”
Emiko studied the picture.
For the first time, she considered that the people threatening her family might not be trying to recover the sword at all.
They might be looking for something the sword was supposed to lead them to.
Something her husband's grandfather had carried into Japan.
And something Nakamura's brother had taken.

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Jin had not slept.
Yasuke found him before dawn beside the courtyard well, sitting with his hands wrapped around a cup of tea gone cold.
For a while, Yasuke stood beside him.
Then he sat.
“Tomé says he brought the boy back.”
Jin nodded.
“I know.”
“Have you spoken with him?”
“No.”
“Why?”
The merchant considered.
“Because I'm afraid of what he might tell me.”
Yasuke looked toward him.
“About Hana?”
Jin nodded.
For several moments, neither spoke.
Then Jin said, “When my wife died, I needed someone to blame.”
Yasuke waited.
“The men who followed her. The households that ordered the searches. The officials who erased the child's name.”
He stared into the cup.
“But I also blamed myself.”
“For being delayed?”

“For arguing with her.”
Yasuke said nothing.
Jin continued.
“The last thing I said to my wife was that the boy wasn't our responsibility.”
His voice tightened.
“She told me that responsibility wasn't always something you chose. Sometimes it was simply what stood in front of you.”
Yasuke looked toward the well.
“Was she right?”
Jin smiled sadly.
“I hated her for being right.”
A long silence followed.
Then he looked toward Yasuke.
“Do you think I'm a coward?”
Yasuke considered.
“No.”
“You don't know everything I've done.”
“No,” Yasuke replied. “I don't.”
Jin looked down.
Yasuke continued.
“But I know you have spent years searching for something that might help explain your wife's death. And I know grief can turn a man toward terrible decisions.”
Jin's expression changed.
“You sound as though you understand.”
Yasuke looked toward the castle walls.
“I understand what it is to carry questions that may never be answered.”
Jin studied him.
Then asked, “Would you forgive me if I had done something wrong?”
Yasuke turned.
“That depends.”
“On what?”
“Whether you were asking forgiveness because you regretted the harm or because you wanted to stop feeling guilty.”

Jin stared.
Then slowly lowered his eyes.
Yasuke stood.
“Tomé is willing to speak with you.”
Jin looked up.
“When?”
“Now.”
The merchant remained seated.
For a moment, Yasuke thought he might refuse.
Then Jin set down his cup.
And stood.

Present Day

The museum curator's name was Dr. Eleanor Mercer.
She was a compact woman with silver hair, thick glasses, and the brisk manner of someone who had spent decades explaining to visitors why they could not touch valuable objects.
Malcolm liked her immediately.
She did not speak in riddles.
She answered questions.
And when he asked whether anyone had tried to interfere with the museum's records, she said, “Not successfully.”
That was the first reassuring sentence he had heard in days.
Their visit had been arranged for the following week, but Dr. Mercer had agreed to a video call in the meantime.
The family sat around the dining room laptop.
Onscreen, the curator displayed photographs of the Japanese archival box.
“We have not established a firm date,” she explained. “The construction suggests an early modern origin, but certain fittings may have been replaced.”
Emiko nodded.
“And the symbol?”
Dr. Mercer enlarged the lid.
Three curved lines directed inward toward a circle.
“We haven't identified it conclusively.”

Luna leaned forward.
“Does anything inside the box explain it?”
“Possibly.”
The curator switched images.
A series of narrow compartments appeared.
Several were empty.
One contained folded papers.
Another held a small wooden plaque.
Luna stared.
“Can you show us the plaque?”
“Of course.”
The image changed.
The plaque bore Japanese characters.
Emiko leaned close to the screen.
She read them once.
Then again.
Her expression altered.
“What?” Malcolm asked.
She didn't answer immediately.
Dr. Mercer watched.
“Do you recognize the writing?”
Emiko nodded slowly.
“I think so.”
She translated.
“Received, not possessed.”
Malcolm considered.
“That's encouraging.”
Luna pointed toward a second line of smaller writing.
“What about that?”
Emiko studied it.
“To be returned upon request.”
A silence followed.
The curator looked interested.
“That's consistent with the possibility that this was a document deposit box rather than a collector's container.”
Luna sat straighter.
“Meaning?”

“Meaning someone may have entrusted records to a custodian without surrendering ownership of them.”
Emiko turned toward her.
“Exactly.”
Malcolm frowned.
“So the keeper was just supposed to look after the papers?”
“Possibly,” Dr. Mercer said. “But we'd need more evidence.”
Luna studied the symbol.
Three lines pointing inward.
A box designed to receive records.
A promise to return them.
Something clicked.
“Mom?”
“Yes?”
“What if we got the symbols backwards?”
Emiko frowned.
“How?”
“We thought outward meant protection and inward meant collection.”
“Yes.”
“But collecting records isn't automatically wrong. What if the inward symbol originally meant a place where families could deposit their documents?”
The curator nodded.
“That's plausible.”
“And the outward symbol,” Luna continued, “might have meant the records were being dispersed or returned.”
Emiko considered.
“Or that copies were being sent beyond the central repository.”
Malcolm leaned back.
“So the same organization could have used both symbols?”
“Perhaps,” Emiko said.
He looked upward.
“Well, that's irritating.”
Luna smiled.
“History usually is.”
Dr. Mercer laughed.

Then said, “There's something else.”
Malcolm's face fell.
Emiko noticed.
“Be nice,” she whispered.
He muttered, “I'm developing a medical condition triggered by that phrase.”
The curator held up a document.
“One of the papers deposited with the box is considerably more recent. We believe it dates to the twentieth century.”
The image appeared.
English handwriting.
Malcolm leaned forward.
His face changed.
“Wait.”
Luna turned.
“Dad?”
He stared.
The handwriting was familiar.
The same careful lettering.
The same distinctive capital letters.
He felt his throat tighten.
“That's my grandfather.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Tomé and Jin faced one another in a small chamber overlooking the eastern courtyard.
Aki remained near the doorway.
Yasuke stood beside the window.
Neither man spoke at first.
Finally, Tomé bowed his head.
“I should have come to you.”
Jin stared.
“Yes.”
“I was afraid.”
“Of me?”
“Of what you would ask.”

Jin's expression hardened.
“Where is the boy?”
Tomé took a breath.
“He's safe.”
“Where?”
“I cannot tell you that.”
Jin stepped forward.
Yasuke shifted slightly.
But Jin stopped himself.
“You watched my wife die.”
Tomé closed his eyes.
“Yes.”
“You carried away the child she died protecting.”
“Yes.”
“And you left me believing both were lost.”
Tomé said nothing.
Jin's voice began to shake.
“Why?”
The old sailor looked up.
“Because the boy had already been betrayed by too many people who claimed a right to him.”
Jin stared.
“I'm not one of them.”
“I know that now.”
“You knew Hana.”
“Yes.”
“Then you should have known me.”
Tomé looked down.
“I thought I did.”
Silence followed.
Aki approached.
“May I ask something?”
The two men turned.
She looked toward Tomé.
“Does the boy know Hana's name?”
Tomé hesitated.
“Yes.”

“Does he remember her?”
“A little.”
“And Jin?”
Tomé looked toward the merchant.
“Yes.”
Jin stopped breathing for a moment.
“He remembers me?”
Tomé nodded.
“He remembers a man who carved small wooden boats for him.”
Jin's face crumpled.
He turned away.
Yasuke watched him struggle to regain control.
Tomé continued quietly.
“He used to ask whether the man would come back.”
Jin covered his face.
For a long while, nobody spoke.
Then Tomé said, “I never told him you had abandoned him.”
Jin lowered his hands.
“What did you tell him?”
“That you were searching.”
The merchant stared.
“I was.”
“I know.”
Tomé looked toward Yasuke.
“And now perhaps the boy deserves to know.”
Aki stepped closer.
“Then ask him.”
Tomé turned.
“What?”
“Ask the boy whether he wishes to see Jin.”
“He is young.”
“Yes.”
“He may not understand.”
“Then explain it in a way he can understand.”
Tomé hesitated.
Aki continued.

“You've spent years deciding who should know what, and when, because you believed it would keep the boy safe.”
The sailor lowered his eyes.
“Perhaps it did.”
“Perhaps.”
She stepped closer.
“But safety cannot become a reason to deny someone every choice.”
Yasuke watched her.
The words were gentle.
The judgment was not.
Tomé was silent.
Then he nodded.
“I'll ask him.”
Jin looked up.
“When?”
Tomé considered.
“Before the next new moon.”
The merchant opened his mouth.
Then closed it.
At last he nodded.
“Thank you.”
It was not forgiveness.
Not yet.
But it was a beginning.

Present Day

The document from the museum was a receipt.
Malcolm's grandfather had signed it during his visit to Japan.
Beside his signature appeared the name of Nakamura's younger brother.
The document recorded the transfer of a small collection of family papers for examination.
Not sale.
Not donation.
Temporary custody.
The terms were explicit.

The records were to be returned to their owner upon request.
Luna read the translation provided by Dr. Mercer.
Then looked up.
“They never belonged to Nakamura's brother.”
Emiko nodded.
“No.”
Malcolm stared at the screen.
“So he kept them.”
“Possibly,” the curator said. “The document establishes the intended terms. It doesn't establish what happened afterward.”
Malcolm looked toward his grandfather's handwritten letter.
I made that promise without knowing what it would cost.
He had assumed the promise concerned the sword.
Now he wondered whether it concerned the records.
Dr. Mercer continued.
“There is a second signature on the reverse.”
She displayed the image.
Emiko leaned closer.
The signature belonged to her grandmother.
The woman had witnessed the agreement.
For a moment, the family said nothing.
Then Luna spoke.
“So our great-grandparents weren't secretly arranging anything.”
Emiko smiled faintly.
“No.”
“They were trying to get the records examined and returned.”
“It appears so.”
Malcolm looked relieved.
“Good. Because I was beginning to wonder whether my marriage had been organized by a committee.”
Emiko glanced at him.
“If it had been, I would have demanded better references.”
Luna laughed.
He looked offended.
“Excuse me?”
Emiko smiled sweetly.
“I'm teasing.”

“That's what you said before you started throwing people.”
Dr. Mercer looked briefly confused.
Luna shook her head.
“Long story.”
The curator wisely returned to the document.
“One more detail. There was a note written later in another hand.”
Malcolm braced himself.
The image changed.
A short sentence appeared beneath the signatures.
Emiko translated the Japanese.
Then stopped.
“What?” Luna asked.
She read it again.
“The deposit has not been returned. The claimant has withdrawn his request.”
Malcolm frowned.
“My grandfather withdrew it?”
“That's what the note says.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Who wrote the note?”
Dr. Mercer examined her catalog.
“We haven't identified the handwriting.”
Emiko looked at Malcolm.
He stared at his grandfather's letter.
Then shook his head.
“He wouldn't have just walked away.”
Emiko spoke softly.
“Perhaps he had a reason.”
“Maybe.”
But he didn't sound convinced.
Dr. Mercer nodded.
“We'll examine the original under magnification. If you have authenticated handwriting samples or other correspondence, they may help.”
Malcolm agreed to send copies.
When the call ended, he remained seated.
Luna watched him.

“Dad?”
He looked up.
“Yeah?”
“Are you okay?”
He considered.
Then nodded.
“I think so.”
She waited.
He looked at the old photograph.
His grandfather stood beneath the Japanese gate.
A younger man.
Healthy.
Alive.
Searching for something the family had never known was missing.
Malcolm touched the edge of the image.
“I wish I could ask him.”
Luna moved beside him.
“What would you ask?”
He considered.
Then smiled sadly.
“Why he stopped.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Nobunaga was displeased.
Yasuke had seen him irritated before.
This was different.
The ruler stood beside a low table covered with documents, his expression cold.
“The records were removed from my officials,” he said.
Ren bowed.
“Yes, my lord.”
“Household seals were forged.”
“Yes.”
“Children were transferred without lawful authority.”
“Yes.”

“And now men within my administration may have killed those who questioned it.”
No one answered.
Nobunaga looked toward Yasuke.
“You told me a lord must correct wrongdoing within his own household.”
Yasuke bowed.
“Yes, my lord.”
Nobunaga approached.
“What if the wrongdoing extends farther than the household?”
Yasuke considered.
“Then the correction must also extend farther.”
The ruler studied him.
Then gave a short laugh.
“You speak as though power is a simple thing.”
“No, my lord.”
“Do you understand how many men depend upon the households implicated in these records?”
“Not fully.”
“Do you understand how quickly an accusation can become rebellion?”
“I understand that possibility.”
Nobunaga turned toward the documents.
“Yet you would have me investigate.”
“Yes.”
The ruler was quiet.
Then he asked, “And what of the child?”
“Hana?”
“Yes.”
“She wants her name restored.”
Nobunaga nodded.
“And if restoring it exposes her to the men who erased it?”
Yasuke hesitated.
The question was not abstract.
It was the problem they faced every day.
Nobunaga continued.
“You would publish the truth and place her in danger?”

“No.”
“Then you would conceal it?”
Yasuke considered.
“Perhaps for a time.”
Nobunaga smiled faintly.
“Now you begin to understand.”
Yasuke looked toward him.
“My lord, there must be a difference between hiding someone to protect them and erasing them to control them.”
Nobunaga studied him.
“An important difference.”
“Yes.”
“And who decides which is which?”
Yasuke had no immediate answer.
The ruler watched him.
Then nodded.
“Exactly.”
He returned to the table.
After a moment, he picked up the forged order.
“Bring me Masanori.”
Yasuke bowed.
Nobunaga continued.
“And summon the commander whose household received these instructions.”
Ren looked up sharply.
“My lord?”
Nobunaga's expression hardened.
“Quietly.”
He looked toward Yasuke.
“I will not have men use my authority to steal children.”
A silence followed.
Then Nobunaga added, “Nor will I allow accusations to destroy loyal servants without proof.”
Yasuke bowed again.
“Yes, my lord.”
As he turned to leave, Nobunaga spoke once more.
“Yasuke.”

He stopped.
“My lord?”
The ruler studied him.
“When I gave you the sword, I believed I understood what it represented.”
Yasuke waited.
“Strength. Service. Loyalty.”
He glanced toward the empty stand where the weapon had once rested.
“Now I wonder whether I gave you something I did not understand at all.”
Yasuke considered.
Then answered.
“Perhaps, my lord, that makes two of us.”
Nobunaga laughed quietly.
“Go.”
Yasuke bowed.
And left.

Present Day

Nakamura arrived at the house shortly before sunset.
He had not been invited.
Malcolm opened the door only after checking the camera and confirming that no one else stood behind him.
The older man looked tired.
More tired than he had in the conference room.
“I apologize for arriving unexpectedly.”
Malcolm considered.
“That's becoming a theme.”
Nakamura nodded.
“I deserve that.”
“Yes, you do.”
Malcolm did not move aside.
“What do you want?”
Nakamura looked toward the dining room.
“I have information concerning my brother.”

Malcolm's expression changed.
“You told us he was dead.”
“He is.”
“Then what's new?”
The old man reached into his coat.
Malcolm immediately raised a hand.
“No envelopes.”
Nakamura stopped.
Then slowly withdrew a small photograph.
“Only this.”
Malcolm studied it.
A younger man stood beside a wooden box.
The man's face was partially obscured.
But Malcolm recognized the box.
It was the same archival container photographed at the museum.
He frowned.
“When was this taken?”
“Last year.”
Malcolm stared.
“Last year?”
“Yes.”
“But your brother died years ago.”
Nakamura nodded.
“That is not my brother.”
Malcolm looked at the photograph again.
“Then who?”
The older man's expression tightened.
“His son.”
Silence.
Malcolm studied him.
“Your nephew.”
“Yes.”
“And he has the box?”
“He did.”
“What happened to it?”
“He sold it.”
“To Henry Vale?”

“No. Through several intermediaries. It eventually reached the museum.”
Malcolm considered.
“Why?”
“Because he believed the box was empty.”
Malcolm looked toward the photograph.
“And the papers?”
“He thought they were worthless.”
“That's convenient.”
Nakamura nodded.
“Yes.”
Malcolm studied him.
Then asked, “Does your nephew know about my daughter?”
The older man hesitated.
Malcolm felt something harden inside him.
“Answer me.”
“Yes.”
For a moment, neither moved.
Then Malcolm stepped aside.
“Come in.”
Nakamura entered.
Malcolm closed the door.
Locked it.
Then called toward the kitchen.
“Sweetheart?”
Emiko appeared.
She saw Nakamura.
Her expression changed.
“Why are you here?”
The old man bowed.
“I owe you an explanation.”
She folded her arms.
“You owe us several.”
Luna appeared behind her.
Nakamura looked toward the girl.
Then away.
Malcolm noticed.

He pointed toward the dining room.
“Sit.”
Nakamura obeyed.
The family took their places.
Malcolm remained standing.
“Your nephew,” he said. “What's his name?”
Nakamura hesitated.
Then answered.
“Daichi Kuroda.”
Emiko went still.
Malcolm noticed.
“What?”
She looked toward Nakamura.
“Daichi?”
The old man nodded.
Her expression hardened.
“I know that name.”
Luna turned.
“From where?”
Emiko thought back.
“A man contacted me several years ago. He claimed to be researching my grandmother's family.”
Malcolm stared.
“When?”
“Before we found the sword's hidden compartment. Before the recent packages.”
“What did he want?”
“Copies of family documents. Photographs. Anything connected to my grandmother's papers.”
“Did you give him anything?”
“No.”
Nakamura lowered his eyes.
Emiko continued.
“He was polite. Very persistent.”
Malcolm folded his arms.
“And you didn't mention him?”
She looked at him.

“At the time, he was one of several people who contacted me about Japanese family history. There was nothing obviously threatening.”
He nodded.
That was fair.
Nakamura spoke quietly.
“Daichi believes my brother's work was unfinished.”
Luna looked toward him.
“What work?”
“Identifying the person who should control the combined records.”
Malcolm sighed.
“Here we go again.”
Nakamura continued.
“My brother believed one custodian should hold the complete collection. Someone capable of controlling access, authenticating claims, and preventing misuse.”
Emiko frowned.
“That might sound reasonable until the custodian begins deciding whose history may be known.”
Nakamura nodded.
“Yes.”
Luna leaned forward.
“And Daichi agrees with him?”
“More strongly than my brother ever did.”
“Does he think I'm the next custodian?”
Nakamura hesitated.
“I believe he thinks you could lead him to the records.”
The room fell silent.
Malcolm stared.
“Lead him?”
“Yes.”
“How?”
“Through the histories of both your families.”
Luna crossed her arms.
“So he doesn't necessarily want me to have the sword.”
“No.”
“He wants me to find the rest.”
Nakamura nodded.

“Yes.”
Malcolm turned toward Emiko.
“And somebody else has been trying to get the sword to her.”
“Apparently.”
“Which means?”
She considered.
“Which means Daichi may not be the person arranging the deliveries.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Could he be the one who sent the threatening photograph?”
Nakamura looked down.
“I don't know.”
Malcolm stared.
“Then why are you here?”
The old man took a breath.
“Because Daichi is coming.”
Silence.
Emiko looked up.
“Coming where?”
Nakamura met her eyes.
“To the United States.”
Malcolm stood very still.
“When?”
The older man hesitated.
Then answered.
“He may already be here.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Hana found Yasuke sharpening a blade.
It was not the stolen sword.
Only an ordinary weapon.
A tool of war.
She sat nearby and watched.
For several minutes, neither spoke.
Then she asked, “Can I learn?”
Yasuke looked up.

“To sharpen a blade?”
“To use one.”
He studied her.
“Why?”
She considered.
“Because I don't want to be taken again.”
Yasuke lowered the blade.
The answer was understandable.
That did not make it simple.
“You believe a sword would prevent it?”
“Perhaps.”
He considered.
“Then let me show you something first.”
He set the weapon aside.
Picked up a wooden staff.
Then stood.
Hana rose.
Yasuke placed the staff in her hands.
It was too long.
She struggled to balance it.
He smiled.
“Too heavy?”
“A little.”
He took it back.
Selected a shorter one.
“Try this.”
She held it.
Better.
Yasuke stood opposite her.
“Now, if I move toward you, what do you do?”
She raised the staff.
He shook his head.
“Not yet.”
She frowned.
“Why?”
“Because I have not threatened you.”
“You said you would move toward me.”

“And moving toward someone is not always an attack.”
She considered.
He stepped closer.
She remained still.
“Good.”
Then he shifted suddenly to one side.
She turned too late.
He stopped.
“What did you see?”
She frowned.
“You moved.”
“Yes.”
“Quickly.”
“Yes.”
He smiled.
“What else?”
She thought.
“Your feet.”
“Good.”
He repeated the movement.
Slowly.
Then faster.
She began to follow.
At first, awkwardly.
Then with growing confidence.
Aki appeared at the doorway.
She watched for a while.
Then smiled.
“Training?”
Yasuke nodded.
“Observation.”
Hana looked toward her.
“He won't let me hit him.”
Aki laughed.
“A wise man.”
Yasuke turned.
“She wishes to learn to defend herself.”

Aki nodded.
“Then teach her more than how to strike.”
He looked at her.
“What would you suggest?”
Aki approached Hana.
“First, learn when to leave.”
She pointed toward the garden path.
“If someone threatens you and there is a safe way to escape, take it.”
Hana nodded.
“And if there isn't?”
Aki looked toward Yasuke.
“Then you use what you know to make one.”
Yasuke smiled.
“Precisely.”
The girl considered.
Then asked, “Will you both teach me?”
Aki looked at Yasuke.
He nodded.
“Yes.”
Hana smiled.
“Good.”
Then she pointed the staff toward Yasuke.
“Can I hit him now?”
Aki burst out laughing.
Yasuke closed his eyes.
“I am beginning to regret this arrangement.”

Present Day

Malcolm stood beside the kitchen window.
Outside, the evening was settling over the neighborhood.
The security cameras were working.
The doors were locked.
The police had been informed of Nakamura's new information.
And the sword remained inside its case.
Nothing unusual moved in the street.
No suspicious vehicles.

No strangers.
No mysterious couriers.
He should have felt reassured.
Instead, he felt angry.
Not the explosive anger he'd experienced when his daughter's threatening photograph appeared.
Something colder.
More deliberate.
Emiko joined him.
For a while, she said nothing.
Then asked, “What are you thinking?”
He considered.
“That I've been reacting to this thing from the beginning.”
She nodded.
“Yes.”
“Every package. Every warning. Every new name. Somebody does something, and we scramble to understand it.”
She looked toward the dining room.
“What would you prefer?”
He turned.
“To make somebody else answer a question for once.”
She smiled faintly.
“A novel concept.”
He nodded.
“I know.”
She leaned against the counter.
“What question?”
He looked toward Luna.
She sat at the dining table, speaking with Dr. Mercer by email.
The museum.
The photograph.
The old documents.
The sword.
The grandfather who had traveled to Japan and left behind a promise.
Then he turned toward Emiko.
“Who is actually trying to help us?”

She considered.
“And who is trying to use us?”
He nodded.
“Exactly.”
She took his hand.
“Then perhaps we should stop treating everyone who knows something as someone we can trust.”
He smiled.
“Baby, I stopped trusting Nakamura about six revelations ago.”
She laughed.
Then grew serious.
“We also need to be careful not to assume everyone withholding information is an enemy.”
He considered.
“Fair.”
“Your grandfather kept secrets.”
“Yes.”
“So did my grandmother.”
“Yes.”
“They may have had good reasons.”
He nodded.
“Or made bad decisions while trying to do good things.”
She smiled.
“Exactly.”
They stood together.
Then he looked at her.
“Can I ask you something?”
“Of course.”
“Do you regret any of this?”
She frowned.
“Any of what?”
He gestured vaguely.
“The sword. The family history. Finding out people have been watching us.”
She considered.
“I regret that our daughter has been frightened.”
He nodded.

“I regret the danger.”
“Yes.”
“But I don't regret learning that my grandmother's life was more complicated than I knew.”
He looked at her.
She continued.
“And I don't regret seeing you discover something new about your grandfather.”
He smiled faintly.
“Even if it turns out we're not descended from Yasuke?”
She looked at him.
“Especially then.”
He laughed softly.
“What?”
She touched his cheek.
“Because I married you. Not your ancestors.”
He smiled.
“That's good. Some of them might have been unbearable.”
She laughed.
He leaned closer.
“And you married a hell of a man.”
“Modest, too.”
“Very.”
She kissed him.
Then drew back.
“Now help me with dinner.”
He sighed.
“Romance is dead.”
“Not dead.”
She smiled.
“Just hungry.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Yasuke received the message after sunset.
A servant brought it wrapped in plain cloth.
There was no official seal.

No signature.
Only a short sentence.
He read it once.
Then again.
Aki watched him.
“What?”
He handed her the paper.
She examined it.
Her expression changed.
The message read:
If you wish to know where the boy was taken, come to the eastern gate before dawn.
She looked up.
“Who sent this?”
“I don't know.”
“Then it's a trap.”
“Possibly.”
“Perhaps certainly.”
Yasuke smiled faintly.
“You've become pessimistic.”
“I've become experienced.”
He nodded.
Then examined the paper.
The handwriting was careful.
The characters precise.
At the bottom was a small mark.
Three curved lines.
Pointing inward toward a circle.
Aki saw it.
Her expression hardened.
“Collectors.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Perhaps.”
She studied him.
“You're going.”
He considered.
“Yes.”

“Alone?”
“No.”
She raised an eyebrow.
“Good.”
He looked toward the adjoining room.
Hana slept beneath a thin blanket.
Saburō stood guard outside.
Ren had taken the surviving records to a separate chamber.
Everyone was waiting for the next piece of the mystery.
And now someone had invited Yasuke to the gate.
He looked at Aki.
“We should tell Nobunaga.”
“Yes.”
“And prepare carefully.”
“Yes.”
“And perhaps bring several men.”
“Certainly.”
Yasuke smiled.
“You see? We agree on everything.”
She looked at him.
“Not everything.”
He frowned.
“What?”
Aki folded the message.
“You're assuming they want you.”
Yasuke considered.
“Who else?”
She looked toward the room where Hana slept.
Then back at the paper.
“Perhaps they want someone you would bring.”
Yasuke's expression changed.
He looked toward the eastern gate.
Beyond the castle walls, the night was deepening.
Someone had sent a message promising information about a child.
Someone had used the symbol of those who collected names.
And someone apparently believed Yasuke would be desperate enough to come.

He was.
But desperation was not the same as carelessness.
He looked toward Aki.
“What do you suggest?”
She smiled.
“Let's find out who is waiting.”

Present Day

Luna discovered the final detail just before midnight.
She had been comparing her grandfather's receipt with the museum's photographs.
On the reverse of the receipt, beneath the note claiming her great-grandfather had withdrawn his request, was another mark.
Small.
Almost invisible.
A short sequence of numbers.
Six digits.
She stared.
Then opened the shipping labels.
Compared them.
Her heart began beating faster.
The numbers matched.
Exactly.
She sat perfectly still.
Then called toward the stairs.
“Mom?”
No answer.
She stood.
“Dad?”
Footsteps sounded.
Malcolm appeared in the hallway.
“What?”
She held up the document.
He approached.
“What is it?”
She pointed toward the numbers.

Then toward the shipping labels.
He looked.
Read.
Then slowly sat down.
“Well, I'll be damned.”
Emiko appeared behind him.
“What happened?”
Luna showed her.
She examined both documents.
Then looked up.
“The same reference.”
“Yes.”
“But this receipt is decades older.”
“Yes.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“So someone has been using my grandfather's old deposit number to send the sword back to us.”
Luna nodded.
“That's what it looks like.”
Emiko studied the receipt.
Then said quietly, “Or someone has been using that number to identify which documents belong together.”
Luna frowned.
“What do you mean?”
“The sword. The archival box. The records your grandfather entrusted to Nakamura's brother.”
She laid the papers side by side.
“Perhaps the number isn't a shipping instruction at all.”
Malcolm looked toward her.
“Then what?”
She looked at the old receipt.
Then toward the sword case.
“A claim number.”
Silence.
Luna stared.
“A claim for what?”
Emiko considered.

Then looked at the document again.
“The return of property that was never surrendered.”
For a long moment, no one spoke.
Then Luna reached for the folded letter hidden in her great-grandfather's trunk.
She opened it.
Read the final sentence.
If the sword reaches one of them, tell them they are free to refuse.
She looked toward her parents.
Then toward the receipt.
And suddenly, the pieces began to arrange themselves differently.
The sword was not necessarily a mysterious object searching for an heir.
It might be evidence of an unresolved claim.
Something her grandfather had tried to recover.
Something he had not been able to bring home.
Something successive people had attempted to return without revealing exactly what they were returning.
She looked toward Malcolm.
“Dad.”
“Yeah?”
“I think Grandpa might have been trying to get something back.”
He nodded slowly.
“The records.”
“Maybe.”
“And the sword?”
She looked toward the case.
“Maybe the sword was what he was supposed to present to claim them.”
Emiko sat straighter.
A key.
A container.
A family record.
A deposit that had never been returned.
And a girl whose name now appeared on the package.
Malcolm looked toward his daughter.
His expression hardened.

“Then whoever sent you that sword knew about the claim.”
She nodded.
“Yes.”
“And wanted you to make it.”
“Maybe.”
He leaned back.
Then looked toward Emiko.
For a moment, the three of them sat in silence.
The answer was still incomplete.
But they had something new.
A number.
A receipt.
A documented agreement.
An actual trail they could follow.
Not a prophecy.
Not a magical inheritance.
Not a mysterious sword choosing its next owner.
A claim.
And claims could be investigated.
Challenged.
Proven.
Or refused.
Luna looked down at her notes.
Then wrote a new question.
WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO ASK FOR THE RECORDS BACK?
She studied it.
Then added one more.
AND WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO SAY NO?
Outside, the security cameras watched an empty street.
Inside, the family sat together beneath the ordinary light of the dining room.
And thousands of miles away, Daichi Kuroda opened a photograph on his phone.
Three people entering a hotel conference room.
A father.
A mother.
A daughter.

He studied the daughter for a long moment.
Then turned to the man sitting across from him.
“They've started asking about the deposit.”
The man nodded.
“Yes.”
Daichi looked toward the window.
The city beyond was unfamiliar.
American.
Bright.
Busy.
He had arrived that morning.
He returned his attention to the photograph.
“Then we have less time than I hoped.”
The other man waited.
“What do you want us to do?”
Daichi considered.
Then answered.
“Nothing.”
The man frowned.
“Nothing?”
“Not yet.”
He enlarged the daughter's face.
“She has to discover what her grandfather left behind.”
“And when she does?”
Daichi's expression remained unreadable.
“Then we'll see whether she makes the same mistake he did.”
He turned off the screen.
And for the first time, the man across from him noticed that Daichi was frightened.
Not of the father.
Not of the police.
Not even of losing the sword.
Of whatever the daughter might find.



Chapter 20

The First Betrayal



Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

The eastern gate was a poor place for an ambush.
Too exposed.
Too well guarded.
Too close to the barracks.
Yasuke had walked its approaches twice before dawn, studying the ground and the narrow paths that led into the surrounding trees.
Whoever had sent the message either knew very little about attacking a man inside Nobunaga's castle—or knew considerably more than Yasuke did.
He suspected the latter.
Aki stood beneath a pine tree some distance from the road.
She wore a plain traveling robe, her hair arranged beneath a modest covering. At a glance, she looked like a woman preparing to visit relatives.
That was precisely what she intended people to think.
Saburō waited farther down the slope.
Two of Nobunaga's trusted guards remained concealed among the trees.
Ren had stayed behind with Hana.
At least, that had been the arrangement.
Yasuke glanced toward Aki.
“You should be farther away.”
She looked at him.
“Good morning to you too.”
“I mean it.”
“So do I.”

He sighed.
“You enjoy making things difficult.”
“No. I enjoy surviving difficult things.”
Yasuke smiled despite himself.
She studied him.
“You're worried.”
“Yes.”
“About me?”
“Yes.”
“That is kind.”
“It was not intended as a compliment.”
“Nevertheless.”
He looked toward the eastern road.
The first light of morning had begun to gather along the horizon.
Somewhere beyond the wall, a bird called.
Then another.
Aki adjusted her sleeve.
“Whoever arranged this expects you to arrive prepared for a fight.”
“Perhaps.”
“And perhaps that is why they chose the gate.”
Yasuke considered.
“To draw me away?”
“Or to make you look in the wrong direction.”
He turned toward her.
“What are you thinking?”
She hesitated.
“I don't know yet.”
Yasuke frowned.
Aki smiled.
“Now you know how I feel when you say it.”
Before he could answer, movement appeared on the road.
A single figure approached.
An elderly man.
Stooped.
Carrying a walking staff.
He moved slowly, pausing once to catch his breath.
Yasuke stepped forward.

Aki remained beneath the tree.
The old man stopped several paces away.
“Yasuke-dono?”
“Yes.”
The man bowed.
“I was instructed to deliver something.”
“By whom?”
“I do not know.”
Yasuke studied him.
The man's sandals were worn. His hands were rough. There was no visible weapon.
“What were you given?”
The messenger reached inside his robe.
Yasuke's hand moved toward his sword.
The old man froze.
“Only a letter, my lord.”
“Slowly.”
The messenger withdrew a folded paper.
Yasuke accepted it.
Inside was a short message.
The girl is no longer where you left her.
Yasuke felt his blood turn cold.
He looked up.
“Who gave you this?”
“A man.”
“What man?”
“I did not know him.”
Yasuke stepped closer.
“Describe him.”
The messenger stammered.
Before he could answer, Aki emerged from the trees.
She had seen Yasuke's expression.
“What?”
He handed her the note.
She read it.
For the briefest instant, the color left her face.
Then she looked toward the castle.

“Go.”
Yasuke turned.
She caught his arm.
“Yasuke. Go now.”
He ran.

Present Day

Daichi Kuroda had chosen a remarkably civilized method of introducing himself.
He sent a lawyer.
The lawyer arrived at ten fifteen in the morning, wearing an expensive gray suit and carrying a leather briefcase.
He was American.
Polite.
And deeply uncomfortable standing on the front porch while Malcolm Hayes studied him through the security camera.
“Good morning,” the lawyer said into the intercom.
Malcolm pressed the button.
“Depends.”
“I'm here on behalf of Mr. Daichi Kuroda.”
“Then it's getting worse.”
The lawyer paused.
“My name is Jonathan Bell. I'd appreciate an opportunity to speak with you.”
“About?”
“A matter concerning historical property.”
Malcolm glanced toward Emiko.
She stood beside him, listening.
Luna was at the dining room table.
Emiko leaned toward the intercom.
“Mr. Bell, are you here to deliver documents or to request a meeting?”
The lawyer looked relieved.
“Both, potentially.”
“Then you may leave your business card and a written explanation of your client's proposal.”

“I was hoping—”
“We will not discuss it at our front door.”
Malcolm smiled.
Emiko continued.
“If your client wishes to communicate, he can do so formally. We will review anything he provides before deciding whether a meeting is appropriate.”
Bell considered.
“Of course.”
He reached into his briefcase.
Malcolm pressed the button again.
“And don't leave any mysterious envelopes.”
The lawyer blinked.
“I'm sorry?”
“Just put your card in the letterbox.”
Luna called from the dining room.
“Dad, he's a lawyer, not a vampire.”
Malcolm considered.
“That's a distinction I'm not prepared to make yet.”
Emiko covered her mouth.
Bell deposited a business card and a sealed document packet.
Then returned to his car.
Malcolm watched him drive away.
Only when the vehicle disappeared around the corner did he turn toward his family.
“Well.”
Luna raised an eyebrow.
“Well?”
“First time one of these people has approached us in daylight and announced who sent him.”
Emiko nodded.
“Progress.”
“Terrifying progress.”
They opened the packet after photographing the exterior.
Inside was a letter from Bell's law firm and a proposed agreement.
Luna read the first page.
Then looked up.

“You have got to be kidding.”
Malcolm leaned over her shoulder.
“What?”
She pointed.
PROPOSED CUSTODIAL APPOINTMENT AND RESEARCH ACCESS AGREEMENT
He stared.
“They actually put it in writing?”
Emiko took the document.
“Of course they did. People who believe they have authority generally prefer to document it.”
The agreement offered access to records maintained by the Kuroda family and its associated custodians.
It included genealogical materials, historical deposit registers, and correspondence concerning the sword.
In return, Luna would acknowledge appointment as a provisional custodian of the collection.
The appointment would grant her access to selected materials.
It would also impose confidentiality restrictions and prevent her from sharing records without written authorization.
Malcolm read that clause twice.
Then a third time.
“Hold on.”
Emiko looked up.
“What?”
“They want her to sign away the right to tell anybody what she finds?”
“Essentially.”
“And they're offering to let her see records they may not have had a right to keep in the first place?”
“That's one of the questions we need answered.”
He looked toward Luna.
She was reading the document with an expression of profound irritation.
“What do you think?”
She closed it.
“I think somebody's confused about who's doing whom a favor.”

Malcolm grinned.
“There she is.”
Emiko did not smile.
She was examining the annex.
“There's something else.”
Malcolm sighed.
“Of course there is.”
She ignored him.
“Daichi is proposing that our daughter become custodian of the combined holdings.”
Luna frowned.
“Combined?”
Emiko nodded.
“He isn't only talking about the Kuroda records.”
She pointed to a paragraph.
“He wants authority over documents associated with both ancestral lines.”
Malcolm stared.
“His documents and ours?”
“Potentially.”
“That's not an appointment. That's a land grab.”
Emiko nodded.
“Possibly a very carefully constructed one.”
Luna looked at the agreement.
Then at her mother.
“What happens if we tell him no?”
Emiko considered.
“Nothing should happen merely because we decline an unsolicited agreement.”
“Should?”
“Yes.”
Luna nodded.
“Then I want to meet him.”
Malcolm immediately shook his head.
“No.”
She looked at him.
“Dad.”

“No. The man has people watching us. He may be connected to threats against you. Now he sends a lawyer with a contract designed to control your life.”
“I know.”
“Then why would you want to sit across from him?”
“Because I want to hear him explain why he thinks any of this belongs to him.”
Malcolm opened his mouth.
Emiko raised a hand.
“Both of you.”
They stopped.
She looked toward Luna.
“A meeting may eventually be useful. But we will not rush into one because he wants us to.”
Luna considered.
Then nodded.
“Okay.”
Emiko turned toward her husband.
“And we won't dismiss her opinion simply because we're frightened.”
He looked at her.
Then at his daughter.
After a moment, he sighed.
“Fair.”
Luna smiled faintly.
He pointed toward her.
“I reserve the right to be terrified.”
“Granted.”
“And irritating.”
“That one appears to be hereditary.”
Emiko laughed.
Malcolm shook his head.
“I live in a hostile environment.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Yasuke reached the quarters with his heart pounding.

The outer guard lay on the ground.
Alive.
A dark swelling had risen beneath his hair.
Yasuke dropped beside him.
“What happened?”
The man struggled to focus.
“Two men.”
“Where?”
“They said they had orders.”
“Whose orders?”
The guard shook his head.
Yasuke rose and entered.
The room was empty.
Hana's bedding had been disturbed.
A lamp lay broken on the floor.
The small writing table had been overturned.
But there was no blood.
Yasuke searched the adjoining chamber.
Nothing.
He returned to the courtyard just as Ren appeared, moving with difficulty and holding a cloth against his forehead.
“Yasuke.”
“Where is she?”
Ren's expression twisted.
“I don't know.”
Yasuke grabbed his shoulders.
“Tell me.”
Ren swallowed.
“Two men came wearing the insignia of the commander's household. They carried written authority to take Hana for questioning.”
“What commander?”
Ren named him.
The same commander whose clerk had been implicated in the transfers.
Yasuke felt something cold settle inside him.
“I refused.”

Ren continued.
“They said Nobunaga had approved the order.”
“Had he?”
“I didn't believe them.”
Yasuke released him.
“What happened?”
“One struck the guard. I tried to stop them.”
He lowered the cloth.
A shallow cut crossed his forehead.
“They took her.”
Yasuke stared.
Then turned toward the courtyard.
Aki arrived moments later.
She took one look at the room and understood.
“Hana?”
Ren shook his head.
Aki closed her eyes.
Only briefly.
Then she approached the overturned table.
She examined the floor.
The bedding.
The broken lamp.
Yasuke watched her.
“What are you doing?”
“Looking.”
“We need men. Horses. We need to find her.”
“Yes.”
“Then—”
She raised her hand.
“Yasuke.”
He stopped.
She looked at him.
“If they wanted her dead, they could have killed her here.”
His jaw tightened.
“That doesn't comfort me.”
“It isn't meant to.”
She knelt.

Near the overturned table lay a small scrap of paper.
Aki picked it up.
Two characters had been written in hurried strokes.
South storehouse.
She turned toward Yasuke.
“Hana left us something.”
They reached Nobunaga's audience chamber before the morning meal.
Yasuke did not wait to be announced.
The guards moved to stop him.
He pushed through.
Nobunaga looked up sharply.
“What is the meaning of this?”
Yasuke dropped to one knee.
“My lord. Hana has been taken.”
The ruler's expression changed.
“By whom?”
“Men claiming your authority.”
Nobunaga stood.
“I gave no such order.”
Ren entered behind Yasuke.
He carried the written authorization the kidnappers had shown him.
They had dropped it during the struggle.
Nobunaga took the paper.
Read it.
Then examined the seal.
His face darkened.
“This was issued from the administration of Lord Takigawa's subordinate office.”
Saburō, who had just entered, stiffened.
Aki noticed.
Nobunaga continued.
“The commander has answered my summons. He is waiting in the western chamber.”
Yasuke looked up.
“Then let me question him.”

Nobunaga studied him.
“You wish to question a senior officer while your anger is fresh.”
“Yes.”
“A poor beginning.”
Yasuke clenched his jaw.
“My lord—”
Nobunaga raised a hand.
“You will have your opportunity.”
He turned toward one of his attendants.
“Bring the commander.”
Aki stepped forward.
“My lord, the girl left a location.”
Nobunaga turned.
“Where?”
“South storehouse.”
The ruler frowned.
“There are several.”
“Then we must discover which one.”
Nobunaga looked toward his guards.
“Send men to each. Quietly. I want the girl alive.”
He turned back toward Yasuke.
“And I want to know how a forged order passed through my household.”
Yasuke bowed.
But his thoughts were already outside the castle.
With Hana.
A girl who had once again been taken by men claiming the right to decide where she belonged.

Present Day

Emiko's response to Daichi Kuroda was three pages long.
She wrote it in English first.
Then in Japanese.
Malcolm watched from the kitchen.
He had been preparing coffee when she began.
He was still holding the empty mug twenty minutes later.

“Sweetheart?”
“Yes?”
“Are you writing a letter or declaring war?”
She continued typing.
“That depends on how he responds.”
He smiled.
“I love you.”
“I know.”
Luna looked over her mother's shoulder.
“Can I see?”
“Of course.”
The letter acknowledged receipt of the proposed agreement.
It declined the custodial appointment.
It requested documentary evidence of the Kuroda family's authority to offer custody of records belonging to other families.
It asked for a complete inventory of the relevant holdings.
And it made clear that any future communication concerning Luna must go through both parents and their designated legal representative until the family agreed otherwise.
Malcolm nodded appreciatively.
“That's beautiful.”
Emiko looked at him.
“You've said that before.”
“I appreciate good work.”
Luna pointed toward the final paragraph.
“Can we add something?”
Emiko nodded.
“What?”
Luna considered.
Then said, “I don't want him thinking I'm refusing because you told me to.”
Malcolm grew quiet.
Emiko watched her.
“What would you like to say?”
Luna sat beside her.
Then dictated slowly.

“I have not agreed to become a custodian, and I do not recognize any person or organization's authority to appoint me. I am willing to learn about my family's history. That willingness must not be confused with consent to control it on anyone else's behalf.”
Emiko looked at her.
Then smiled.
“Good.”
Malcolm stared.
“That's excellent.”
His daughter shrugged.
“I've had practice.”
Emiko typed the paragraph.
Then added Luna's name beneath it.
Luna read the final version.
Nodded.
“Send it.”
Emiko did.
For the next several minutes, the room was unusually peaceful.
Then Malcolm's telephone rang.
He looked at the screen.
Unknown number.
He stared.
Luna saw his expression.
“Don't answer.”
He considered.
Then declined the call.
A message followed almost immediately.
Mr. Kuroda would appreciate an opportunity to explain his proposal personally.
Malcolm laughed.
Emiko looked up.
“What?”
He showed her.
She studied it.
Then reached for her own phone.
A second message had arrived.
This one contained only a time and an address.

A private meeting room at a downtown hotel.
Luna glanced at it.
“Same lawyer?”
Emiko shook her head.
“No identification.”
Malcolm folded his arms.
“Absolutely not.”
Emiko considered.
Then smiled faintly.
“Actually, I think we should respond.”
He stared.
“What?”
“We should thank him for the invitation.”
“And?”
“Tell him that if he wants to meet, he may come to a public place of our choosing, with legal counsel present, at a time we determine.”
Luna nodded.
“Mom.”
“Yes?”
“You're enjoying this.”
Emiko considered.
“A little.”
Malcolm laughed.
“There she is.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

The commander entered Nobunaga's chamber with the confidence of a man accustomed to obedience.
He was not old.
His hair had begun to gray at the temples, but his movements remained precise.
His name was Lord Moritsugu.
A subordinate commander.
A man entrusted with supply routes, household transfers, and administrative matters that rarely attracted the attention of rulers.
He bowed before Nobunaga.

“My lord.”
Nobunaga studied him.
“Do you know why you've been summoned?”
“I understand there are questions concerning certain records.”
“And a girl.”
Moritsugu's expression barely changed.
“Yes.”
“Where is she?”
“I cannot say.”
Yasuke stood beside Aki.
He felt his hands tighten.
Nobunaga continued.
“You cannot say because you do not know?”
Moritsugu hesitated.
“Because the matter is under investigation.”
Nobunaga's gaze hardened.
“By whom?”
“My officials.”
“Under whose authority?”
Moritsugu bowed.
“Mine.”
“And who gave you authority to remove a protected witness from my castle?”
Silence.
Moritsugu lowered his head.
“My lord, I believed the girl's presence presented a danger to the inquiry.”
Nobunaga laughed.
It was not a pleasant sound.
“Then you should have brought that concern to me.”
The commander said nothing.
Nobunaga placed the forged order on the table.
“Did you issue this?”
Moritsugu examined it.
His expression tightened.
“No.”
“Do you recognize the seal?”

“Yes.”
“Whose?”
“My office.”
“And the signature?”
He looked again.
Then shook his head.
“Not mine.”
Nobunaga leaned forward.
“Then someone has used your authority.”
Moritsugu bowed.
“It would appear so.”
Yasuke could no longer remain silent.
“My lord, this is the second time men connected to these records have claimed authority they did not possess.”
Moritsugu turned sharply.
“Your accusations are reckless.”
Yasuke faced him.
“A girl has been taken.”
“The girl is connected to unlawful transfers and missing property.”
“She is a witness.”
“She is a danger.”
The words escaped before Moritsugu could stop them.
The chamber fell silent.
Nobunaga studied him.
“A danger?”
Moritsugu lowered his eyes.
“I meant—”
“To whom?”
The commander hesitated.
Nobunaga rose.
“Answer.”
Moritsugu looked toward Yasuke.
Then Aki.
Finally he said, “There are families whose position depends upon the legitimacy of certain transfers.”
Nobunaga's expression remained cold.
“And if those transfers were unlawful?”

Moritsugu said nothing.
“Then their position should be questioned.”
The commander bowed.
“My lord, you do not understand the extent of the matter.”
Yasuke felt something shift.
Nobunaga noticed it too.
He stepped closer.
“Then enlighten me.”
Moritsugu swallowed.
“There are households whose current inheritance depends upon the absence of certain heirs.”
Aki went still.
Yasuke stared.
Nobunaga's voice became very quiet.
“And Hana?”
The commander looked down.
“She can identify people who were transferred under false names.”
“And the boy?”
Moritsugu's head snapped up.
For the first time, his composure broke.
“What boy?”
Aki watched him.
There it was.
Fear.
Not surprise.
Fear.
She stepped forward.
“The boy entrusted to Hana, wife of Jin. The child removed from Harunobu's household and later returned to Japan.”
Moritsugu stared.
Then looked toward Nobunaga.
“My lord, I have no knowledge—”
“Enough.”
The ruler's voice cut through the chamber.
He turned toward his guards.
“Detain him.”
Moritsugu stepped backward.

Two guards moved forward.
Then the commander did something no one expected.
He drew a short blade from beneath his robe.
Not toward Nobunaga.
Toward himself.
Yasuke moved.
He caught Moritsugu's wrist before the blade reached his throat.
The two men struggled.
Moritsugu was strong.
Desperate.
But Yasuke drove him backward against a pillar.
The blade struck the floor.
A guard seized the commander's other arm.
Another bound his wrists.
Moritsugu collapsed to his knees.
Breathing hard.
Nobunaga watched without moving.
Then said, “You were prepared to die rather than answer.”
Moritsugu stared at the floor.
The ruler approached.
“Which means someone has given you a reason to fear the truth more than death.”
Silence.
Aki looked toward Yasuke.
He had reached the same conclusion.
Moritsugu was not the man at the center of the conspiracy.
He was protecting someone.
Or afraid of someone.
Perhaps both.
Nobunaga turned toward the guards.
“Take him away.”
As they lifted the commander, Aki stepped forward.
“One question.”
Nobunaga looked at her.
She addressed Moritsugu.
“Who told you the boy had returned?”
The commander stopped struggling.

His face changed.
Then he looked directly at Aki.
And whispered a name.
Ren.

Present Day

Daichi Kuroda arrived exactly on time.
The family had selected a meeting room at a public library with reservable space and security cameras.
Their attorney had advised against meeting privately, and they had agreed.
A plainclothes officer familiar with the threats against the family had been informed of the meeting and remained nearby.
No sword.
No original documents.
No private hotel room.
And no daughter sitting alone across from a man whose intentions remained uncertain.
Daichi entered carrying a slim black briefcase.
He was in his forties.
Tall.
Carefully dressed.
His manner was polished without being especially warm.
He bowed slightly.
“Thank you for agreeing to see me.”
Emiko returned the bow.
“Please sit.”
Daichi looked toward Malcolm.
Then Luna.
His gaze lingered on her.
Malcolm noticed.
He deliberately moved his chair closer.
Daichi smiled politely.
“I understand you have reservations about my proposal.”
Malcolm laughed.
“That's one way to put it.”

Their attorney, Ms. Carter, sat beside Emiko.
She opened a notebook.
Daichi glanced toward her.
“I was hoping we might speak as families.”
Emiko answered immediately.
“We are speaking as families. Ms. Carter is here to ensure we understand the legal consequences of anything you propose.”
Daichi inclined his head.
“Of course.”
He placed his briefcase on the table.
Opened it.
Removed a folder.
“I believe there has been some misunderstanding regarding the custodian's role.”
Emiko smiled politely.
“Then explain it.”
Daichi looked toward Luna.
“You are in a unique position.”
She met his gaze.
“Because?”
“Because your family may connect two historical lines that have remained separated for centuries.”
“May?”
“Yes.”
“So you're not certain.”
“Not entirely.”
She nodded.
“Continue.”
Daichi seemed momentarily surprised.
Then smiled.
“The sword is part of a collection of records associated with the protection of displaced families during a period of political upheaval in Japan.”
Emiko interrupted.
“Your family has also possessed records of people forcibly transferred, renamed, or deprived of inheritance.”
Daichi turned.

“Yes.”
“Do you acknowledge those records may document unlawful acts?”
He hesitated.
“Some may.”
“And that affected families may have rights to information contained in them?”
“That is complicated.”
“Only if you intend to keep deciding who may see it.”
Daichi looked at her.
For the first time, his smile faded.
Malcolm watched with quiet satisfaction.
Daichi continued.
“My family has preserved documents that might otherwise have been lost.”
“That may be true,” Emiko said.
“And without careful oversight, releasing them could cause harm.”
“That may also be true.”
Daichi looked slightly relieved.
Then she continued.
“But those are arguments for responsible archival practices, not for hereditary control by your family.”
Silence.
Luna looked down to conceal a smile.
Daichi regarded Emiko more carefully.
“You have thought about this.”
She smiled.
“For considerably longer than you seem to realize.”
Malcolm leaned back.
He was having a wonderful time.
Daichi turned toward him.
“Perhaps you understand the practical difficulties.”
Malcolm raised an eyebrow.
“Do I?”
“A collection spread across generations, involving families in several countries. It requires leadership.”
“Does it?”
“Someone must make decisions.”

Malcolm nodded.
“Sure.”
Daichi continued.
“And the convergence of your family's history with your wife's makes your daughter a natural candidate.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Let me ask you something.”
“Please.”
“If you think our daughter is such a natural candidate, why does your agreement give your organization the right to approve what she does?”
Daichi paused.
Malcolm continued.
“That's not leadership. That's you hiring our child to carry a title while you hold the keys.”
Ms. Carter made a note.
Daichi looked toward her.
Then back at the family.
“The restrictions are intended to protect sensitive information.”
Emiko nodded.
“Then let us examine the information and discuss appropriate safeguards.”
Daichi hesitated.
“That would require an agreement.”
“Not necessarily.”
“It is our customary practice.”
She smiled.
“Custom is not proof of ownership.”
Malcolm almost laughed.
Luna looked at her mother with undisguised admiration.
Daichi sat back.
For a moment, he seemed to be deciding whether the conversation was worth continuing.
Then he changed tactics.
“I can show you something.”
Emiko waited.
Daichi removed a photograph.

It depicted a narrow wooden chest.
Dark wood.
Metal fittings.
On its lid, three curved lines surrounded a circle.
Luna leaned closer.
“The same box from the museum?”
Daichi shook his head.
“No.”
He placed a second photograph beside it.
The museum box.
Similar construction.
Different dimensions.
“Two containers,” Emiko said.
“Yes.”
“Where is the first?”
Daichi studied her.
“In Japan.”
“Who holds it?”
“My family.”
“Under what authority?”
Daichi's jaw tightened.
“You ask that question frequently.”
“Because you have not answered it.”
Malcolm smiled.
Luna leaned forward.
“What's inside?”
Daichi looked at her.
“Records your grandfather tried to recover.”
Malcolm went still.
“Mine?”
“Yes.”
He stared.
“You have my grandfather's records?”
“My family does.”
“And you've been sitting on them?”
Daichi hesitated.
“They have been preserved.”

Malcolm leaned forward.
“That's not what I asked.”
Daichi looked toward Ms. Carter.
Then back at him.
“The records were entrusted to my uncle.”
“Temporarily.”
“Yes.”
“And he never returned them.”
Daichi's expression hardened.
“There is disagreement concerning the circumstances.”
Luna spoke.
“Then why not let us see them and decide for ourselves?”
Daichi looked at her.
“Because they concern more than your family.”
“Then let the other families see them too.”
Silence.
Daichi studied her.
“You don't understand what you're asking.”
She sat straighter.
“Then explain.”
His expression changed.
For the first time, something like genuine emotion appeared beneath his careful composure.
“Some of those records could destroy families.”
The room became very quiet.
Emiko watched him.
“Families who benefited from the transfers?”
Daichi did not answer.
She continued.
“Or families whose ancestors suffered them?”
He looked down.
“Both.”
Emiko nodded slowly.
“That is possible.”
Daichi looked up.
She continued.

“But you cannot protect people from their history by deciding they have no right to know it.”
Daichi stared.
Then his gaze moved toward Luna.
“You sound very certain.”
Luna considered.
“I'm certain I don't want you making that decision for me.”
A long silence followed.
Then Daichi closed his folder.
“I had hoped we might reach an understanding.”
Emiko smiled politely.
“So had I.”
He began gathering his papers.
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Before you go.”
Daichi paused.
“Yes?”
“Who sent my daughter the sword?”
The Japanese man looked at him.
“I didn't.”
“That's not what I asked.”
Daichi hesitated.
Then answered.
“I believe I know.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Who?”
Daichi looked toward her.
Then slowly closed his briefcase.
“Someone who has spent a very long time trying to correct a mistake.”
Malcolm shook his head.
“No riddles.”
Daichi stood.
“Then I suggest you speak to Mr. Nakamura.”
Emiko frowned.
“We have.”
“Not about his brother's final letter.”

Silence.
Daichi looked toward her.
“He never showed you?”
Her expression changed.
“What letter?”
Daichi studied her.
Then laughed softly.
It was not a pleasant laugh.
“Of course.”
He stepped toward the door.
Malcolm stood.
“Don't walk out after dropping that.”
Daichi stopped.
Turned.
Then looked at Luna.
“Your great-grandfather was not the last person to demand the records be returned.”
Luna stared.
Daichi continued.
“Your mother's grandmother made the same demand.”
Emiko went still.
“When?”
Daichi's expression became unreadable.
“Shortly before she died.”
Silence.
Then he added, “My uncle refused.”
Malcolm stared.
“Why?”
Daichi looked toward him.
“Because she wanted the records released to the families named within them.”
Emiko felt a chill.
Daichi continued.
“My uncle believed that would destroy the custodial system.”
“And you?” she asked.
He hesitated.
Then answered.

“I believed he was right.”
Luna studied him.
“Believed?”
Daichi looked at her.
Something passed across his face.
Regret.
Or fear.
Then he said, “I'm no longer certain.”
He left.

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Aki did not move.
Ren.
The name seemed impossible.
Her brother.
The man who had helped rescue Hana.
The man who had copied the records.
The man who had stood beside them as the storehouse burned.
Yasuke looked toward her.
“Aki.”
She shook her head.
“No.”
Moritsugu was led away.
Nobunaga watched her carefully.
“You know this man?”
“My brother.”
The ruler's expression hardened.
“Where is he now?”
Aki did not answer immediately.
Then she looked toward Yasuke.
“With the records.”
Silence.
Nobunaga turned toward his guards.
“Find him.”
Yasuke stepped forward.
“My lord, we do not know whether the accusation is true.”

“No,” Nobunaga replied. “We do not.”
He looked toward Aki.
“But if it is, he has access to everything we have recovered.”
Aki nodded slowly.
“Yes.”
Nobunaga continued.
“I want him brought here alive.”
Yasuke bowed.
Aki did not.
She was staring at the floor.
Trying to remember.
Every conversation.
Every decision.
Every time Ren had insisted certain records be moved.
Every moment he'd appeared frightened.
She had assumed he feared the men pursuing them.
What if he feared something else?
Yasuke touched her arm.
“Aki.”
She looked up.
He spoke softly.
“We do not know what happened.”
She swallowed.
“I know.”
“He may have been forced.”
“Yes.”
“He may have been deceived.”
“Yes.”
Yasuke waited.
Then she whispered.
“Or he may have betrayed us.”
He said nothing.
Because that possibility existed too.
They found Ren's chamber empty.
The records were gone.
So was the silver fitting he had agreed to safeguard.
But his bedding remained.

His clothing.
His small collection of books.
The bowl he'd used at supper the previous evening.
Aki stood in the doorway.
She knew her brother.
He was meticulous.
If he intended to flee, he would have taken more.
Yasuke watched her.
“What?”
She crossed the room.
Opened a small wooden chest.
Inside lay an old child's toy.
A carved horse.
Its paint had faded.
She picked it up.
Yasuke waited.
“My grandmother made this for him.”
He nodded.
Aki turned the toy over.
On its underside was a narrow cut.
She pressed it.
A small wooden panel shifted.
Yasuke stared.
“A hidden compartment?”
Aki smiled sadly.
“He was always finding places to hide things.”
Inside lay a folded piece of paper.
She removed it.
Opened it.
Her expression changed.
Yasuke leaned closer.
The message was short.
Written in Ren's hand.
I did not tell them where Hana was.
Aki felt her chest tighten.
She continued reading.
I told them where the records were.

Yasuke went still.
Below it was one final line.
I thought I was saving her.
Aki stared at the paper.
For a long moment, neither spoke.
Then she sat down.
Yasuke knelt beside her.
Her face had gone pale.
“He gave them the storehouse.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Yes.”
“And they attacked us.”
“Yes.”
She closed her eyes.
“My brother helped them.”
Yasuke said nothing.
Aki looked toward the small carved horse.
Then at the paper.
“He thought he was saving Hana.”
She swallowed.
“But he never told us what he was doing.”
Yasuke touched her hand.
She withdrew it.
Not angrily.
Simply because she needed the space.
For a long time, she stared at the note.
Then she stood.
Yasuke rose with her.
“Where are you going?”
“To find him.”
“Aki—”
She turned.
“My brother has endangered everyone we're trying to protect.”
“I know.”
“He may have led those men to Hana.”
“We don't know that.”
She nodded.

“No.”
Her eyes filled.
“But I need to hear him tell me.”
Yasuke studied her.
Then said, “I'll come with you.”
She looked at him.
For a moment, the fierce composure she'd maintained began to crack.
“I trusted him.”
Yasuke stepped closer.
“I know.”
She shook her head.
“I trusted him with everything.”
He said nothing.
Then she looked toward the door.
“We find Hana first.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Yes.”
“Then we find Ren.”
He took her hand.
This time, she let him.

Present Day

The family returned home without speaking much.
Malcolm drove.
Emiko sat beside him.
Luna watched the road through the rear window.
Daichi Kuroda had not threatened them.
He had not demanded the sword.
He had not raised his voice.
Somehow, that made the meeting more unsettling.
He had shown them evidence.
Admitted his family's records were incomplete.
Acknowledged that his uncle had withheld documents.
And revealed that Emiko's grandmother had tried to have those documents returned.

Malcolm glanced toward his wife.
“You okay?”
She considered.
“No.”
He nodded.
“Fair.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Mom?”
“Yes?”
“Do you think Grandma knew this would happen?”
Emiko thought about it.
The old photograph.
The warning.
The letter addressed to a future daughter.
The years of silence.
Then she shook her head.
“I don't think she knew exactly what would happen.”
“Then why leave all those instructions?”
Emiko looked toward the window.
“Because she knew what people were capable of.”
Luna sat back.
For a while, none of them spoke.
Then Malcolm said, “We need to talk to Nakamura.”
Emiko nodded.
“Yes.”
“And this time, if he leaves out something important, I'm going to lose my mind.”
Luna smiled faintly.
“Dad, I think that happened several chapters ago.”
He looked in the rearview mirror.
“Several what?”
She blinked.
“Days.”
He frowned.
“That's what I thought.”
Emiko laughed.
The sound surprised all three of them.

Then Luna began laughing too.
For a moment, the tension eased.
Only for a moment.
But it was enough.
Nakamura answered the telephone on the second ring.
Emiko spoke Japanese.
Her voice was calm.
Precise.
“Nakamura-san, Daichi says your brother left a final letter.”
Silence.
Then the older man answered.
“Yes.”
Her expression hardened.
“Why didn't you tell us?”
A long pause.
“Because it concerns your grandmother.”
“That is precisely why you should have told me.”
He said nothing.
Emiko continued.
“Bring it.”
Another pause.
“I cannot.”
She closed her eyes.
“Why?”
“Because I no longer have it.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
She raised a hand.
“Who does?”
Nakamura hesitated.
Then answered.
“The person who arranged the last delivery.”
Emiko went still.
She looked toward Luna.
“What person?”
The older man took a breath.
“Someone who knew your grandmother far better than I did.”
Emiko felt her pulse quicken.

“Who?”
A silence followed.
Then Nakamura said a name.
Emiko stared.
Malcolm watched her.
“What?”
She didn't answer.
The name belonged to someone she had known all her life.
Someone who had helped raise her.
Someone whose absence had shaped her childhood.
Someone who, according to everything she had been told, had died before she was old enough to understand what death meant.
She looked toward Malcolm.
Then toward Luna.
And whispered:
“My grandmother's sister.”
Malcolm frowned.
“Your great-aunt?”
She nodded.
He stared.
“I thought she was dead.”
“So did I.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

The southern storehouse stood beyond a narrow road lined with cedar trees.
Yasuke approached from the west.
Aki moved behind him.
Saburō and two guards took positions along the rear wall.
No one spoke.
The storehouse doors were closed.
A single horse stood tethered nearby.
Yasuke examined the ground.
Several sets of footprints.
Fresh wagon tracks.
One smaller set, leading toward the rear of the building.

Hana.
He hoped.
Aki touched his arm.
She pointed toward a window.
Movement.
A shadow passed behind the paper screen.
Yasuke nodded.
Then stepped toward the entrance.
He drew his sword.
Not the stolen weapon.
An ordinary blade.
Sharp enough.
He pressed against the door.
Listened.
Voices.
Two men.
One sounded angry.
Then a girl's voice.
Hana.
Yasuke felt relief surge through him.
He looked toward Aki.
She nodded.
He kicked the door open.
The first guard turned.
Yasuke struck him with the flat of his blade before he could draw.
The second lunged.
Yasuke caught his weapon.
Twisted.
Drove him backward.
Aki entered behind him.
Hana stood near the far wall.
Her wrists were bound.
A third man held her by the shoulder.
He drew a short blade.
“Stay back!”
Yasuke stopped.
The man pressed the blade closer to Hana.

“I'll kill her.”
Yasuke lowered his weapon slightly.
Aki stepped forward.
“There's no need.”
The man stared.
“Stay where you are.”
She nodded.
“Very well.”
Hana looked toward her.
Their eyes met.
Aki's expression remained calm.
She shifted her weight.
Almost imperceptibly.
Hana remembered their lessons.
Watch the feet.
The man glanced toward Yasuke.
Then back at Aki.
That was enough.
Hana drove her heel into his foot.
He cried out.
She twisted away.
Aki moved.
Caught the man's wrist.
Turned sharply.
His blade fell.
Yasuke crossed the room in two strides and struck him hard enough to end the fight.
Hana stumbled toward Aki.
The woman caught her.
Held her.
For a moment, neither spoke.
Then Hana whispered, “I remembered.”
Aki smiled through tears.
“Yes.”
Yasuke approached.
“Are you hurt?”
Hana shook her head.

“No.”
He knelt.
Untied her wrists.
Then embraced her.
She held him tightly.
For a moment, he closed his eyes.
Alive.
She was alive.
Then Hana spoke.
“They weren't supposed to take me.”
Yasuke drew back.
“What?”
She looked toward the unconscious man.
“They said they were looking for the records.”
Aki went still.
“Who said that?”
“The man who came first.”
“What man?”
Hana hesitated.
Then answered.
“Ren.”
Silence.
Yasuke looked toward Aki.
Her expression changed.
Hana continued.
“He told them he would give them the records if they promised to leave me alone.”
Aki closed her eyes.
The girl looked frightened.
“He argued with them. He said they'd promised.”
Yasuke felt something settle heavily inside him.
“What happened?”
“They hit him.”
Aki looked up sharply.
“Where is he?”
Hana pointed toward a rear passage.
“They took him away.”

Saburō entered from outside.
“The road is clear.”
Yasuke turned.
“Did you see anyone leaving?”
“Two riders. They went south.”
Aki moved toward the rear passage.
Yasuke caught her arm.
She turned.
“My brother.”
“I know.”
“They have him.”
“Yes.”
“We have to go.”
Yasuke looked toward Hana.
Her wrists were red.
Her face was pale.
She had nearly been taken again.
He looked toward Aki.
Then toward Saburō.
For a moment, the choice seemed impossible.
Pursue Ren.
Protect Hana.
Risk losing both.
Aki understood.
She stepped closer.
“Take Hana back.”
Yasuke shook his head.
“Aki—”
“Take her back to the castle.”
“And you?”
She looked toward the southern road.
“I'll find my brother.”
He stared.
“Alone?”
She smiled without humor.
“Do you really think I intend to do something that foolish?”
Saburō stepped forward.

“I'll go with her.”
Yasuke looked between them.
Then nodded reluctantly.
“Two guards.”
Aki nodded.
“And you will tell Nobunaga what happened.”
“Yes.”
She touched his face.
Briefly.
Tenderly.
Then turned toward the road.
Yasuke watched her leave.
Hana stood beside him.
After a while, the girl whispered, “Ren wasn't trying to hurt me.”
Yasuke looked down.
She continued.
“He was frightened.”
Yasuke considered.
Then nodded.
“Yes.”
“Will Aki find him?”
He looked toward the road.
“I hope so.”
Hana took his hand.
For a long moment, they stood together beside the storehouse.
Then Yasuke turned toward the castle.
Because protection, he was beginning to understand, sometimes meant allowing someone else to go after the person you wanted desperately to save.
And trusting them to do it.

Present Day

Emiko sat at the dining room table.
In front of her lay three photographs.
Her grandmother.
Nakamura.

And a woman she'd believed had died decades earlier.
Her grandmother's younger sister.
The one family members rarely discussed.
The one whose name had appeared only occasionally in old letters.
The one who had supposedly died abroad.
Luna sat beside her.
“Mom?”
Emiko looked up.
“Yes?”
“Are you okay?”
She considered.
Then shook her head.
“Not really.”
Luna nodded.
For once, she had no clever reply.
Malcolm stood by the window.
He was thinking.
Then he turned.
“Why would somebody pretend she was dead?”
Emiko stared at the photographs.
“I don't know.”
He approached.
“Do you remember her?”
“A little.”
“What was she like?”
Emiko smiled faintly.
“Loud.”
Malcolm raised an eyebrow.
“Really?”
“Very.”
He looked toward Luna.
“Excellent. Another one.”
Emiko laughed softly.
Then grew serious.
“She was adventurous. Always traveling. Always getting into arguments with relatives.”
Luna smiled.

“Sounds familiar.”
Emiko nodded.
“She used to tell my grandmother that keeping secrets was a terrible way to preserve a family.”
Malcolm looked toward the photographs.
“Maybe she was right.”
Emiko considered.
Then opened Nakamura's latest message.
He had supplied an address.
Not in Japan.
In the United States.
A small town several hours away.
Emiko stared.
Malcolm leaned closer.
“What?”
She showed him.
His expression changed.
“She lives here?”
“Apparently.”
Luna looked up.
“In America?”
Emiko nodded.
“Yes.”
Malcolm sat down.
For a moment, none of them spoke.
Then he laughed.
Not because anything was funny.
Because the situation had finally become too absurd to process any other way.
“My grandfather went to Japan.”
Emiko nodded.
“Your grandmother knew him.”
“Yes.”
“Her sister apparently came to America.”
“Yes.”
“And now we're supposed to believe she's been quietly arranging sword deliveries?”

Emiko looked at him.
“We don't know that yet.”
He stared.
Then nodded.
“Right.”
He looked toward Luna.
“Baby?”
“Yes?”
“Do me a favor.”
“What?”
“If you ever become involved in a centuries-old secret society, please just tell your parents.”
She smiled.
“I'll put it on the calendar.”
“Thank you.”
Emiko laughed.
Then turned back to the photographs.
The woman who had supposedly died.
The woman who may have sent the final package.
The woman who might finally explain why the sword had been returned so many times.
She looked toward the address.
Then toward her family.
For the first time, she didn't feel merely frightened.
She felt angry.
Not because someone had threatened them.
Not because someone had tried to use her daughter.
But because people she had loved had made decisions about her life without ever giving her the opportunity to understand them.
She stood.
Malcolm looked up.
“What?”
She picked up her phone.
“I'm calling her.”
He blinked.
“Now?”
“Yes.”

“What if she doesn't answer?”
Emiko looked at him.
“Then I'll leave a message.”
“And if she does?”
Her expression hardened.
“Then she can begin explaining herself.”
She dialed.
The telephone rang.
Once.
Twice.
Three times.
Then someone answered.
An elderly woman's voice.
Japanese.
Warm.
Amused.
“It's about time.”
Emiko froze.
The voice continued.
“I wondered how long it would take you to find me.”
Emiko felt tears rise unexpectedly.
For a moment, she couldn't speak.
Then she whispered the woman's name.
The answer came gently.
“Yes, my dear.”
A pause.
Then:
“Tell me. Has the sword finally reached your daughter?”
Emiko closed her eyes.
Across the table, Malcolm stared.
Luna rose slowly.
And the woman on the telephone asked one more question.
A question that made everything they had learned seem suddenly incomplete.
“Before we discuss the sword, I need to know something.”
Emiko swallowed.
“What?”

“Has anyone told you what happened to the first child?”
Silence.
Emiko stared at the photographs.
“What child?”
The woman hesitated.
Then said:
“The one Yasuke helped hide.”
And for the first time, the family understood that someone living might know far more about the sixteenth-century story than any document they had yet recovered.
Not because she had witnessed it.
Not because she possessed supernatural knowledge.
But because someone, long ago, had entrusted a history to another human being.
And that person had passed it on.
Not always faithfully.
Not always completely.
But carefully enough that, centuries later, the truth was still waiting to be told.



Chapter 21

The Things We Buried



Present Day

“Before we discuss the sword, I need to know something.”
The elderly woman's voice carried through the telephone.
“Has anyone told you what happened to the first child?”
Emiko stood motionless beside the dining room table.
“What child?”
“The one Yasuke helped hide.”
Malcolm looked sharply toward her.
Luna straightened.
For several seconds, nobody spoke.
Then Emiko lowered herself into a chair.
“Tell me exactly what you mean.”
A soft sigh came through the telephone.
“Oh, my dear. You sound just like your grandmother.”
“Then you should know I won't accept another mysterious answer.”
The woman laughed.
It was a familiar sound.
Emiko remembered it from childhood, although she had not heard it in decades. She remembered summer evenings, wooden floors, and a woman who wore too much perfume and gave children sweets their parents had forbidden.
She remembered crying when someone told her that woman had died.
And now the woman was laughing into her telephone from somewhere in America.

“Fair enough,” her great-aunt said. “But this is not a conversation for a telephone.”
Malcolm closed his eyes.
He had heard that sentence so many times lately that he was beginning to suspect it was printed on the official stationery of every secretive Japanese family.
His wife saw his expression.
For once, she understood it perfectly.
“No,” she said into the phone. “We're not doing that.”
A pause.
“Doing what?”
“Traveling to another address because someone promises answers and then refuses to give them.”
Malcolm raised a finger in approval.
Luna nodded.
The older woman chuckled.
“You really are her granddaughter.”
“I am also a woman whose daughter has been threatened, whose husband has been followed, and whose family has been lied to repeatedly. If you want us to come to you, start by telling me why everyone believes you are dead.”
Silence.
Malcolm stopped smiling.
When the great-aunt answered, her voice had changed.
“Because I asked them to.”
Emiko stared.
“Why?”
“To protect someone.”
“Who?”
A long pause.
“Not myself.”
Luna leaned toward the telephone.
“Then who?”
The old woman hesitated.
“Is that the girl?”
Emiko looked at her daughter.
“Yes.”

“May I speak to her?”
Luna held out her hand.
Malcolm looked toward Emiko.
She considered, then handed over the telephone.
Luna put it on speaker.
“Hello.”
There was a soft intake of breath.
“Oh,” the woman said. “You sound older than I imagined.”
“I tend to do that.”
Malcolm smiled.
The woman laughed.
“Yes. I suppose you do.”
Luna leaned forward.
“I have a question.”
“Of course.”
“Did you send me the sword?”
Silence.
Then:
“Yes.”
Malcolm stood.
Emiko closed her eyes.
Luna remained very still.
“You did?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Because it was time.”
Luna looked toward her mother.
Then back at the telephone.
“No.”
The woman paused.
“I'm sorry?”
“That's not an answer.”
Malcolm sat down again.
Slowly.
Emiko watched their daughter.
Luna continued.

“You don't get to say it was time. Not after someone photographed my bedroom. Not after my mother was threatened in a grocery store. You knew where I lived. You knew my name. You sent me something dangerous without asking whether I wanted it.”
The woman said nothing.
“And now you want to tell me about a child from five hundred years ago?”
“Four hundred and—”
“Please don't correct my math right now.”
Her father covered his mouth.
Her mother did not smile.
The silence on the telephone lengthened.
Finally, the elderly woman said, “You're right.”
Luna hadn't expected that.
The woman continued.
“I did something I thought necessary. I did not consider what it would mean for you.”
“Why not?”
“Because I was afraid.”
Luna looked down.
“Of what?”
“That if I waited any longer, the records would disappear.”
Emiko leaned toward the phone.
“Then why didn't you send the records to me?”
The answer came quietly.
“Because I don't have them.”
“Then what do you have?”
“A history. A portion of it, at least. And a document your grandmother made me promise to preserve.”
Malcolm spoke for the first time.
“Does it have a name, an address, and a sensible explanation?”
His wife looked at him.
He shrugged.
“Worth asking.”
The great-aunt laughed softly.
“Who is that?”
“My husband.”

“Ah. The tall American.”
He stared.
“Wonderful. Apparently I'm famous.”
“You look very much like your grandfather,” she said.
His expression changed.
“You knew him?”
“Yes.”
“Did he know you were alive?”
“Yes.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Then I'd very much like to hear what the two of you were doing while the rest of us knew nothing.”
The woman took a breath.
“I think you deserve that.”
Another pause.
“Come tomorrow. Bring no sword. Bring no original documents. And bring your daughter only if she wishes to come.”
The family looked at one another.
Then Luna said, “I'll decide.”
The old woman answered without hesitation.
“Good.”
And for the first time, somebody involved in the sword's history seemed pleased by the possibility of refusal.

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Ren had always disliked horses.
They were too large, too unpredictable, and possessed a talent for recognizing his discomfort.
Now he was tied across the back of one, his wrists bound and his ribs aching, while two armed men argued about whether to kill him.
He found his opinion of horses improving.
At least the animal had not threatened him.
The riders had stopped beside a disused charcoal shed in the hills south of Azuchi.
Ren lay on the ground, struggling to draw a full breath.
One of the men stood over him.

“You promised us the records.”
Ren looked up.
“I gave you the location.”
“The storehouse burned.”
“That wasn't my doing.”
“You were supposed to make certain the lists survived.”
Ren stared.
“You attacked the building.”
The man struck him across the face.
Ren tasted blood.
“Mind your words.”
He turned his head and spat.
Then, despite the danger, laughed.
The man frowned.
“What?”
“I was about to give you the same advice.”
The second rider approached.
“Enough.”
He was younger than the first, but carried himself with considerably more authority.
His name was Katsunari.
Ren had met him three months earlier.
At first, the man had presented himself as an agent seeking to expose unlawful transfers. He had known details about missing children, forged property records, and Harunobu's disappearance.
He had told Ren that the documents in the lakeside storehouse could be used to locate survivors.
He had said they needed access before Nobunaga's officials seized everything.
Ren had believed him.
Or, more precisely, Ren had wanted to believe him.
Because the promise had been irresistible.
Give us the records and we will stop pursuing the girl.
Now the storehouse was ash.
Hana had been abducted.
And Ren had finally understood the bargain.
The men had never intended to protect anyone.

They wanted the records.
The girl had merely been leverage.
Katsunari crouched beside him.
“Your sister has the copies.”
Ren said nothing.
“We know she took them.”
Ren stared at the ground.
Katsunari leaned closer.
“Where are they?”
“I don't know.”
The man smiled.
“Your sister tells you everything.”
Ren looked up.
“No,” he said. “She doesn't.”
Katsunari studied him.
For once, the answer appeared to be truthful enough to cause concern.
Ren continued.
“You've made a mistake.”
The man raised an eyebrow.
“Have we?”
“You think my sister keeps records because our grandmother taught her to obey tradition.”
Katsunari waited.
Ren smiled through his split lip.
“She keeps them because our grandmother taught her how to recognize a liar.”
The smile vanished from Katsunari's face.
He stood.
“Put him inside.”
The guards dragged Ren toward the shed.
Ren resisted long enough to earn a blow to the stomach.
Then they threw him onto the floor.
The door slammed.
A wooden bar dropped into place.
Darkness settled.
Ren lay still.

Breathing.
Thinking.
Then he rolled onto his side and examined the knots around his wrists.
His sister had tied knots like these when they were children.
She had always insisted that a knot should be difficult to untie but simple to release if you knew where to pull.
He smiled painfully.
Aki.
Of course.
Even when she wasn't there, his sister had a way of making him feel like an idiot.
And this time, he had earned it.

Present Day

The address led to a small house outside a quiet coastal town.
It was not especially remote.
There were neighbors, a gas station less than a mile away, and a café with a faded sign promising the best breakfast in the county.
Malcolm approved of the café.
He was less enthusiastic about the house.
“I'm just saying,” he told Emiko as they parked across the road, “if somebody who's been dead for thirty years invites us over, a little suspicion seems reasonable.”
Luna looked out the window.
“Technically, she wasn't dead.”
“Thank you.”
“You're welcome.”
Emiko studied the property.
A narrow front garden.
White siding.
A screened porch.
Several potted plants.
Wind chimes hanging near the door.
It looked like the home of an elderly woman who enjoyed gardening.

Which, she reflected, was probably exactly what it was.
Their attorney had been informed of the visit. The police had been updated about the possible connection to the sword's delivery, and the family had agreed on a check-in time with someone they trusted.
They were not going to enter another stranger's house without precautions.
Even if the stranger happened to be family.
Malcolm switched off the engine.
“Everybody still comfortable with this?”
Emiko considered.
“Comfortable? No.”
Luna nodded.
“Ready? Yes.”
He smiled faintly.
“That's about where I am.”
They crossed the road.
Before they reached the steps, the front door opened.
A small Japanese woman stood beneath the porch light.
Her white hair was cut short. She wore dark trousers, comfortable shoes, and a bright red cardigan.
She examined the three of them.
Then smiled.
“Well,” she said in Japanese. “You're all taller than I expected.”
Malcolm looked down at her.
“You must be the aunt.”
She studied him.
“And you must be the man who keeps giving away priceless swords.”
Luna burst out laughing.
Malcolm stared.
For a moment, he looked genuinely wounded.
Then he pointed toward the woman.
“I like you considerably less than I expected.”
The old woman laughed.
A loud, delighted laugh.
Emiko stood motionless at the foot of the steps.

The woman looked toward her.
Her expression softened.
“Oh, my dear.”
Emiko moved forward.
For a moment, she seemed uncertain whether to embrace someone she'd believed dead for most of her life.
Then the woman opened her arms.
And Emiko stepped into them.
Neither spoke.
Luna looked toward her father.
He took her hand.
They waited.
When the women finally separated, the great-aunt wiped her eyes.
Then looked at Luna.
“And there you are.”
Luna smiled cautiously.
“Here I am.”
The woman studied her face.
Then nodded.
“Your grandmother would have adored you.”
Luna's expression softened.
“Thank you.”
The old woman stepped aside.
“Come inside.”
Malcolm looked toward the doorway.
“Any mysterious men hiding in cupboards?”
The great-aunt considered.
“Not today.”
He nodded.
“Excellent. We're making progress.”
The house smelled of tea, old books, and something baking.
Malcolm identified the last smell immediately.
“Is that cake?”
His wife closed her eyes.
“Darling.”
“What? I'm being hospitable.”
The great-aunt smiled.

“Apple.”
He nodded approvingly.
“Now that's how you lure me into a conspiracy.”
Luna laughed.
The woman led them into a sitting room lined with bookshelves.
Japanese novels.
American histories.
Photograph albums.
Travel guides.
A television that looked considerably newer than anything else in the house.
There were no swords on the walls.
No elaborate ceremonial objects.
Only photographs of friends, children, gardens, and unfamiliar places.
Emiko noticed something important.
There were no photographs of the great-aunt's former life in Japan.
Not one.
The woman saw her looking.
“I put most of those away.”
“Why?”
The great-aunt took a seat.
“Because some memories are easier to live with when they aren't looking at you every morning.”
Emiko sat opposite.
Her husband and daughter joined her.
For a moment, nobody spoke.
Then the great-aunt folded her hands.
“My name has been several things over the years,” she began. “But you may call me Sachiko.”
Emiko looked at her.
“That was always your name.”
Sachiko smiled sadly.
“Yes.”
“Then why did everyone tell me you were dead?”
Sachiko considered.

“Because I helped remove documents from a collection that powerful people believed belonged to them.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Stole them?”
Sachiko looked at him.
“Returned them.”
“To whom?”
“Not always to their rightful owners. Sometimes I couldn't find them.”
Emiko studied her.
“What did you do?”
“Copied what I could. Distributed some. Hid others.”
“Why?”
“Because the families controlling the collection had begun destroying documents that contradicted their claims.”
Luna's expression tightened.
“Claims about ancestry?”
“Among other things.”
Sachiko looked toward her.
“Property. Household legitimacy. Inheritance. Sometimes the identities of children who had been moved between families generations earlier.”
Malcolm shook his head.
“And this continued into the twentieth century?”
“Not the original transfers. The concealment of the evidence.”
Emiko nodded slowly.
A crucial distinction.
Sachiko continued.
“People were willing to fight over what the records might establish. Some wanted to make claims. Others wanted to prevent them.”
“And your solution was to disappear?” Emiko asked.
Sachiko looked toward her.
“My disappearance was not the solution. It was the price.”
Silence.
Emiko studied her.
“Who threatened you?”
Sachiko hesitated.

Then answered.
“Nakamura's brother.”
Malcolm's expression hardened.
“Daichi's father.”
“Yes.”
“Did he threaten to kill you?”
Sachiko looked away.
“Not directly.”
“That sounds reassuring.”
“He threatened someone else.”
Emiko leaned forward.
“Who?”
Sachiko looked at her.
“Your grandmother.”
The room became quiet.
The old woman continued.
“He said that if I continued distributing records, he would make certain my sister lost access to every document she had spent her life preserving.”
Emiko frowned.
“So you let the family believe you had died?”
“At first, I simply left Japan. Later, a rumor of my death spread. I chose not to correct it.”
“Even to me?”
Sachiko's face tightened.
“Especially to the younger children. The fewer people who knew, the fewer questions they could answer.”
Emiko looked down.
For a long while, nobody spoke.
Then she said, “You hurt us.”
Sachiko nodded.
“I know.”
“You let us mourn you.”
“Yes.”
Emiko's voice remained quiet.
“That wasn't your decision to make for us.”
Sachiko closed her eyes.

“No.”
A tear moved down her cheek.
“No, it wasn't.”
Malcolm looked toward his wife.
She was not crying.
Not yet.
But he recognized the effort it required.
Luna reached for her mother's hand.
The old woman opened her eyes.
“I am sorry,” she said.
Emiko met her gaze.
“I believe you.”
A pause.
“That doesn't make it right.”
Sachiko nodded.
“I know.”

South of Azuchi, Japan — 1581

Aki found the first sign of Ren beside a narrow stream.
A broken reed.
A disturbed patch of earth.
Then a small scrap of fabric caught on a thorn.
She crouched.
Saburō dismounted.
“What?”
She held up the fabric.
Dark blue.
Ren had worn a robe of that color.
Saburō studied it.
“Could belong to anyone.”
“Yes.”
She examined the mud.
Two horses.
Perhaps three.
One had stopped near the water.
The marks were fresh.

Aki rose.
“They came this way.”
Saburō glanced toward the trees.
“The road divides ahead.”
“Then we'll inspect both paths.”
He frowned.
“We're losing daylight.”
“Yes.”
“And if they have men waiting?”
“Then I would prefer to know before we ride into them.”
Saburō gave a reluctant smile.
“You and Yasuke are becoming very alike.”
Aki mounted her horse.
“That's an insult to one of us.”
“Which one?”
“I haven't decided.”
They rode on.
The charcoal shed came into view less than an hour later.
Aki saw the horse tracks first.
Then the guard standing outside.
She raised a hand.
The group stopped beneath the trees.
Saburō leaned close.
“How many?”
“One visible.”
“Others?”
“Possibly inside.”
He examined the building.
“Shall we attack?”
Aki shook her head.
“No.”
He looked at her.
“We have the advantage.”
“Perhaps.”
“Then why wait?”
“Because we don't know whether Ren is inside. Or whether these men have orders to kill him if they hear fighting.”

Saburō considered.
Then nodded.
“What do you suggest?”
Aki looked toward the road.
A small cart had been abandoned beside a pile of charcoal sacks.
She smiled faintly.
“I think we should make a delivery.”
Ren heard the cart before he saw anything.
Wheels rattling.
A horse snorting.
Then a woman's voice complaining loudly.
“Honestly, if the charcoal isn't ready, my employer will have my head.”
Ren lifted his face from the floor.
He recognized the voice.
Impossible.
The guard outside answered angrily.
“This place is closed.”
“Closed? Since when?”
“Go away.”
“I've ridden all morning.”
“Then ride back.”
The woman sighed theatrically.
“Oh, wonderful. Another man who thinks shouting is a profession.”
Ren smiled.
Aki.
The guard swore.
A second voice joined the argument.
Saburō.
Ren could not make out the words.
Then there was a crash.
A grunt.
Silence.
A moment later, the door opened.
Aki stood in the entrance.
She looked down at her brother.
For a moment, neither moved.

Then she said, “You look terrible.”
Ren laughed painfully.
“You should see the other man.”
“I did. He's unconscious.”
She crossed the room.
Cut the bindings.
Ren struggled to sit.
“Aki—”
She caught his arm.
“Can you walk?”
“Yes.”
“Good.”
“Aki, I need to explain.”
She stopped.
Looked at him.
For the first time, he saw the anger in her eyes.
Not the familiar irritation of a younger sister.
Something deeper.
Something that frightened him more than the men who had beaten him.
“You will,” she said.
“But first we're getting you out of here.”
Ren nodded.
Then whispered, “I thought I could protect her.”
Aki looked at him.
For a moment, her expression softened.
Then she said, “I know.”
He swallowed.
“Do you believe me?”
“Yes.”
He exhaled.
She continued.
“That doesn't mean you didn't betray us.”
Ren closed his eyes.
No answer would have hurt more.
Because she was right.

Present Day

Sachiko placed a wooden box on the sitting room table.
It was small enough to hold in one hand.
Plain cedar.
No metal fittings.
No symbols.
Nothing that suggested centuries of intrigue.
Malcolm looked at it.
“I'm almost disappointed.”
Luna smiled.
“Why?”
“No secret markings. No ancient lock. Not even a little dramatic music.”
Sachiko laughed.
“Your grandfather said much the same thing.”
Malcolm went still.
“You knew him well?”
“Yes.”
“How well?”
Sachiko considered.
“Well enough to know that when he was frightened, he made jokes.”
Emiko glanced toward him.
He looked offended.
“I make jokes when I'm happy too.”
“Yes,” she said. “We know.”
Sachiko opened the box.
Inside were three envelopes and a small photograph.
She removed the photograph first.
It showed a young Japanese woman standing beside a child.
The child's face was partially obscured.
Luna leaned closer.
“Who are they?”
Sachiko looked toward Emiko.
“My sister and her son.”
Emiko frowned.
“Her son?”

Sachiko nodded.
“My nephew.”
Emiko stared.
“My grandmother had a son?”
“Yes.”
“I've never heard of him.”
Sachiko lowered her eyes.
“He died young.”
Emiko studied the photograph.
“When?”
“Before your mother was born.”
Silence.
Malcolm glanced toward his wife.
This was new.
Not another secret organization.
Not another sword.
A missing member of her family.
Emiko took the photograph carefully.
“What happened to him?”
Sachiko's expression tightened.
“He disappeared during the war.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Which war?”
“The Pacific War.”
Sachiko looked toward the photograph.
“He was a teenager. Near the end of the war, he was evacuated from the city with other children.”
Emiko's voice was quiet.
“He never came back?”
“No.”
“Was he killed?”
“We never found proof.”
Luna studied Sachiko.
“Why didn't anybody tell Mom?”
Sachiko looked pained.
“After the war, there was so much loss. Families stopped speaking about certain things. Sometimes because the memories were

unbearable. Sometimes because silence was easier than explaining what they didn't know."
Emiko stared at the boy's face.
"His name?"
Sachiko told her.
Emiko repeated it softly.
A name she had never heard.
A life that had existed before hers.
A boy whose absence had been carried quietly through generations.
Sachiko continued.
"My sister spent years looking for him. When she began researching the old family records, she discovered how many other families had lost children whose names had changed."
Emiko looked up.
"And she became involved with the sword."
Sachiko nodded.
"Yes."
"Because she thought the old records might help find him?"
"At first."
Malcolm considered.
"And later?"
Sachiko looked toward the photograph.
"Later she understood that the problem was larger than her own loss."
Luna leaned forward.
"So when you talk about the first child Yasuke helped hide…"
Sachiko nodded slowly.
"Your grandmother believed his story had been preserved because people feared he would disappear from history."
"Did he?" Luna asked.
Sachiko looked at her.
"That depends on what you mean by disappear."
Luna sighed.
"Please don't."
Sachiko blinked.
"Don't what?"
"Give me another philosophical answer."

Her father laughed.
Sachiko smiled.
“Fair enough.”
She opened the first envelope.
Inside lay several copied pages covered in Japanese handwriting.
“These are not originals from the sixteenth century,” she said. “They are copies of a later family account. My grandmother copied them. Her grandmother had copied an earlier version.”
Emiko examined the pages.
“Can we authenticate the chain?”
“Not completely.”
Luna nodded.
“So it might be wrong.”
“Yes.”
“Or partly invented.”
“Yes.”
Sachiko looked toward her.
“That's why I didn't want to tell you a beautiful story and ask you to believe it merely because it belonged to our family.”
Malcolm nodded approvingly.
“Finally, someone speaking my language.”
Sachiko smiled.
Then pointed to the first paragraph.
Emiko began translating aloud.
The account described a foreign warrior in Nobunaga's service.
A Japanese woman associated with the protection of displaced families.
A child whose name had been concealed.
And a merchant's wife who died helping the child escape.
Luna looked toward her father.
“Yasuke.”
He nodded.
“Sounds like it.”
Emiko continued.
The boy had been returned to Japan by sea and hidden among families living along the coast.
For years, his true parentage remained uncertain.

Some later accounts claimed he was the child of a foreign warrior.
Others described him as a boy merely protected by one.
A few insisted that the ambiguity had been deliberate.
Emiko stopped.
Luna leaned forward.
“Why deliberate?”
Sachiko answered.
“Because people wanted his identity to mean something it might not have meant.”
Malcolm frowned.
“Such as?”
“That he was entitled to an inheritance. Or that he could establish a line of succession. Or that he was living proof a particular household had survived.”
Emiko looked down at the manuscript.
Then continued translating.
The earliest surviving account included a statement attributed to the boy himself.
Not from childhood.
From many years later.
He had reportedly said that the name given to him by the people who raised him was the only name he had known.
And that if others wished to argue over whose son he had been, they could do so without him.
Luna smiled.
“I like him.”
Malcolm nodded.
“Me too.”
Sachiko looked toward them.
“That was the story your grandmother wanted preserved.”
Emiko frowned.
“Not his ancestry?”
“Not primarily.”
“Then why the sword?”
Sachiko considered.
“Because someone later used the sword to support an inheritance claim involving the boy's descendants.”

Silence.
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Someone tried to turn a story about protecting a child into proof that they owned something.”
“Yes.”
“What?”
Sachiko looked toward him.
“Records.”
Luna stared.
“Again?”
The old woman smiled sadly.
“Again.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Ren sat before Aki and Yasuke, his wrists unbound but his posture miserable.
His injuries had been treated.
He had eaten.
He was safe.
That did not make the conversation easier.
Hana sat nearby.
She had insisted on being present.
Aki had agreed.
Yasuke was not entirely pleased with the arrangement, but he understood why the girl had asked.
Ren looked toward Hana.
“I am sorry.”
She studied him.
“For what?”
He swallowed.
“For telling those men where the records were.”
“Did you know they'd burn the storehouse?”
“No.”
“Did you know they'd take me?”
“I thought they would leave you alone.”
Hana looked at him.

“Why?”
Ren closed his eyes.
“Because they promised.”
She considered.
Then asked, “Did you believe them?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
Ren struggled.
He looked toward Aki.
Then Yasuke.
Finally, he turned back to Hana.
“Because they told me something I wanted very badly to hear.”
“What?”
“That if I helped them recover the records, they would stop searching for you.”
Hana sat quietly.
Ren continued.
“They said they only wanted the documents. They said you were in danger because other men believed you carried information.”
The girl considered.
“Was any of that true?”
Ren hesitated.
“Some of it.”
“Then how did you know which part was a lie?”
He lowered his head.
“I didn't.”
Hana nodded slowly.
For a long moment, she said nothing.
Then she asked, “Did you ask me?”
Ren looked up.
“What?”
“Whether I wanted you to give them the records.”
He stared.
“No.”
“Did you ask Aki?”
“No.”
“Yasuke?”

“No.”
She considered.
“Then you decided for all of us.”
Ren's face crumpled.
“Yes.”
Aki looked down.
The accusation was simple.
And devastating.
Ren began to speak, then stopped.
There was no defense.
At last he whispered, “I'm sorry.”
Hana studied him.
Then said, “I believe you.”
Ren looked up.
Her expression remained serious.
“But I'm still angry.”
He nodded.
“You should be.”
She folded her hands.
“And I don't want you deciding things for me anymore.”
Ren swallowed.
“I won't.”
Aki looked toward Yasuke.
He met her eyes.
Neither spoke.
Ren had made his confession.
Now came the harder question.
What should happen to him?
Nobunaga received the account without interruption.
When Ren finished, the ruler remained silent for a long time.
Then he asked, “How much were you paid?”
Ren looked up sharply.
“Nothing, my lord.”
“Were you promised a position?”
“No.”
“Property?”
“No.”

“Protection?”
Ren hesitated.
“For Hana.”
Nobunaga nodded.
“And for yourself?”
“No.”
The ruler studied him.
“You endangered my inquiry. You exposed witnesses. You allowed men using forged authority to destroy evidence.”
Ren bowed until his forehead touched the floor.
“Yes, my lord.”
“Yet you insist you acted to protect a child.”
“Yes.”
Nobunaga looked toward Yasuke.
“Do you believe him?”
Yasuke considered.
“Yes.”
The ruler raised an eyebrow.
“Do you forgive him?”
Yasuke hesitated.
“That is not solely mine to decide.”
Nobunaga glanced toward Hana.
Then Aki.
A faint smile touched his mouth.
“An inconvenient answer.”
“Yes, my lord.”
“Perhaps an honest one.”
Nobunaga stood.
He approached Ren.
“Your intentions do not erase the consequences of your actions.”
Ren remained bowed.
“No, my lord.”
“Nor does your confession.”
“No.”
The ruler considered.
“Then you will help repair what you damaged.”
Ren looked up.

“My lord?”
“You know the men who deceived you. You know how they communicated. You know where they believed the records were kept.”
“Yes.”
“Then you will give that knowledge to my investigators.”
Ren bowed.
“Gladly.”
Nobunaga continued.
“You will not hold the remaining records. You will not make decisions concerning Hana's safety. You will serve under supervision until I am satisfied that your account is complete.”
Ren lowered his head.
“Yes, my lord.”
Nobunaga looked toward Aki.
“Is this acceptable?”
She hesitated.
Then answered carefully.
“It is a beginning.”
The ruler nodded.
“Then let us begin.”

Present Day

Sachiko had prepared lunch.
Malcolm considered this a sign that their circumstances were improving.
He accepted a second helping.
Then, when offered another slice of apple cake, decided the family could probably solve an international historical mystery just as effectively while eating dessert.
Emiko was less relaxed.
She had spent the previous hour reading copied documents and asking questions.
Sachiko answered some readily.
Others required thought.
A few had no answer.

Luna watched the two women together.
They argued in Japanese.
Not angrily.
But intensely.
Occasionally her mother corrected a detail.
Occasionally Sachiko produced another document.
And occasionally both fell silent, recognizing that the family history they'd inherited had been rearranged by people with agendas of their own.
Luna looked toward her father.
“Are you following all this?”
He considered.
“Enough.”
“Really?”
“Yes.”
She raised an eyebrow.
He leaned closer.
“Your mother is conducting a polite interrogation. Your great-aunt is discovering that hiding from family for thirty years does not improve your chances of winning an argument.”
Luna laughed.
He smiled.
“And I'm eating cake.”
“A balanced division of labor.”
“Exactly.”
At the other end of the table, Sachiko opened the second envelope.
Inside was a letter.
English.
The handwriting belonged to Malcolm's grandfather.
He recognized it immediately.
His smile faded.
Sachiko handed it to him.
“I think you should read this yourself.”
He accepted it.
The paper was old but well preserved.
The letter began without ceremony.
Sachiko,

I have spent too many years trying to learn whether our family descended from Yasuke.
Malcolm stopped.
Luna leaned closer.
He continued reading.
I wanted it to be true. I would be lying if I said otherwise. There was something powerful about imagining that a man who crossed oceans and served a Japanese lord might also be part of our family.
His voice softened.
But wanting a thing to be true is not proof.
Emiko reached for his hand.
He continued.
Your sister understands this better than I did. She says the records are not a treasure to be won but a responsibility to the people named in them.
He paused.
Looked toward Sachiko.
She nodded.
He continued.
I have decided not to pursue a claim based on the boy's supposed parentage. The documents are too uncertain, and the people controlling them have made too much of their authority from that uncertainty.
Luna sat very still.
Malcolm read the final paragraph.
I still believe the sword belongs with our family, because it was entrusted to us and because it may help return the records. But I will not ask my children to inherit a story simply because I wished it were ours.
He lowered the paper.
For a long moment, nobody spoke.
Then Luna asked quietly, “He never proved it?”
Her father shook his head.
“No.”
Sachiko spoke.
“He wanted to. Very badly.”
Emiko looked toward her.

“Did he eventually give up?”
Sachiko considered.
“On proving a bloodline, yes.”
“And the records?”
“No.”
She reached for the third envelope.
“That is where the trouble began.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Yasuke found Aki beside the garden wall.
She stood alone beneath the trees, watching the last of the afternoon sunlight move across the stones.
He approached quietly.
For a while, neither spoke.
Then he said, “Ren will recover.”
Aki nodded.
“Yes.”
“Nobunaga has not ordered his death.”
“No.”
“He will have an opportunity to make amends.”
She looked toward him.
“You think that should comfort me.”
Yasuke considered.
“I hoped it might.”
She smiled faintly.
“It does.”
Then the smile faded.
“But I keep thinking about the storehouse.”
He waited.
“About the fire. The records. Hana. All those people who might have found answers if we'd saved more.”
Yasuke nodded.
“And I keep thinking that my brother knew enough to be suspicious.”
“He did.”
“Yet he trusted the men anyway.”

“Yes.”
She looked toward Yasuke.
“Why?”
He considered.
“Because they offered him a way to end his fear.”
Aki looked away.
For a moment, she said nothing.
Then she whispered, “I would have listened too.”
Yasuke frowned.
“What?”
“If someone had come to me and promised that I could protect you, Hana, and Ren merely by handing over a few papers…”
She stopped.
Then shook her head.
“I don't know what I would have done.”
Yasuke stepped beside her.
“Neither do I.”
She turned.
“You?”
He nodded.
“I have served men who offered protection in exchange for obedience. Sometimes that protection was real.”
“And sometimes?”
He looked toward the castle.
“Sometimes the price was greater than anyone admitted.”
Aki studied him.
“Do you regret serving Nobunaga?”
Yasuke considered.
“No.”
She waited.
He continued.
“But I understand that loyalty does not free me from the responsibility to judge my own actions.”
Aki looked toward the trees.
Then smiled.
“You're becoming philosophical.”
“I spend too much time with your family.”

She laughed.
He took her hand.
For a while, they stood together.
Then Aki said, “We still have to find the boy.”
“Yes.”
“And the sword.”
“Yes.”
“And the men who ordered the transfers.”
“Yes.”
She glanced at him.
“Are you tired?”
Yasuke considered.
“Very.”
She smiled.
“Good.”
He looked offended.
“Good?”
“It means you're human.”
He laughed softly.
“I was beginning to suspect otherwise.”
Aki leaned against him.
For the first time in days, neither needed to speak.
Then footsteps sounded behind them.
Saburō approached, carrying a folded message.
“Yasuke.”
He turned.
“What is it?”
“The port records.”
Aki straightened.
Saburō handed him the document.
“The vessel that carried the boy has been identified.”
Yasuke opened it.
A shipping register.
A captain's name.
A departure date.
And an entry listing the child under a false designation.
Aki leaned closer.

Then stopped.
“What?” Yasuke asked.
She pointed toward a second entry.
Another passenger.
A woman.
Japanese.
Traveling under a different name.
The notation beside her entry identified her as the boy's guardian.
Aki studied the characters.
Then whispered, “That name…”
Yasuke looked toward her.
“Do you recognize it?”
She nodded slowly.
“Yes.”
“Who was she?”
Aki looked up.
Her expression was stricken.
“My grandmother's younger sister.”
Silence.
Yasuke stared.
Aki continued.
“She disappeared years ago. We were told she died.”
Saburō looked between them.
“Then the story was false?”
Aki shook her head.
“I don't know.”
Yasuke studied the shipping record.
A boy.
A woman who had supposedly died.
A voyage intended to remove them from the reach of men who wanted to control their identities.
Then he looked toward Aki.
“Perhaps she didn't disappear.”
Aki stared at the paper.
“Perhaps she was protecting him.”

Present Day

Sachiko removed the final letter.
It was not written by Malcolm's grandfather.
Nor by Emiko's grandmother.
It was written in Japanese, in a careful hand that Sachiko recognized.
Nakamura's brother.
Daichi's father.
She placed it on the table.
“This arrived shortly before your grandmother died.”
Emiko examined it.
“Why didn't you show it to me?”
Sachiko looked at her.
“Because I was ashamed.”
Emiko frowned.
“Of what?”
Sachiko took a breath.
“Because I had once helped him.”
Silence.
Malcolm set down his fork.
Luna looked toward Sachiko.
“You worked with the keepers?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Because I believed they were preserving the records.”
Emiko folded her arms.
“And when did you discover otherwise?”
Sachiko looked down.
“When your grandmother asked for the collection to be returned.”
Malcolm considered.
“What happened?”
Sachiko closed her eyes.
“I told Nakamura's brother that my sister intended to distribute copies among the families named in the records.”
Emiko went still.
“You told him?”
“Yes.”

“After she trusted you?”
Sachiko nodded.
Emiko stared.
For a moment, her face seemed to lose all expression.
Sachiko continued.
“I believed he would negotiate. I believed he would explain why certain records needed protection.”
“And instead?”
“He threatened to destroy them.”
Silence.
Luna looked down.
Malcolm watched his wife.
She was sitting very still.
He recognized that stillness.
It meant she was angry enough to be careful.
Emiko spoke quietly.
“You betrayed her.”
Sachiko nodded.
“Yes.”
“And then you disappeared.”
“Yes.”
“And left her to deal with the consequences.”
A tear moved down Sachiko's cheek.
“Yes.”
Emiko stood.
She walked to the window.
Outside, sunlight fell across the little garden.
A bird moved among the flowers.
For a long time, she said nothing.
Malcolm considered following her.
Then decided not to.
She needed the space.
Luna remained seated.
She looked toward Sachiko.
“Did Grandma forgive you?”
Sachiko wiped her face.
“Eventually.”

“How?”
The old woman considered.
“She told me that forgiving me did not mean trusting me with the records again.”
Luna nodded slowly.
“That sounds fair.”
Sachiko smiled sadly.
“Yes.”
Emiko turned from the window.
“What does the letter say?”
Sachiko handed it to her.
Emiko read it.
Her expression changed.
Then she read it again.
Malcolm looked up.
“What?”
She translated.
The letter confirmed that the disputed collection remained in the custody of the Kuroda family.
It acknowledged that certain documents had been deposited temporarily.
And it offered to return selected papers on one condition.
Emiko stopped.
Her husband leaned forward.
“What condition?”
She looked toward Sachiko.
“You know.”
The old woman lowered her eyes.
“Yes.”
Emiko continued.
“In exchange for the records, my grandmother would have to surrender every copy she'd made and agree never to disclose the identities of the families involved.”
Luna stared.
“So he'd give back the originals only if she destroyed the evidence she'd preserved?”
“Yes.”

Malcolm shook his head.
“That's blackmail.”
Sachiko nodded.
Emiko read the final paragraph.
Then stopped.
For a long moment, she stared at the page.
“What?” Malcolm asked.
She looked up.
“The letter says the sword would be returned separately.”
He frowned.
“Returned to whom?”
Emiko studied the handwriting.
Then answered.
“To the American family.”
Her husband went still.
“Mine?”
“Yes.”
Luna leaned forward.
“When?”
Emiko checked the date.
Then looked toward her husband.
“Before your grandfather died.”
Silence.
Malcolm stared.
“Then he knew?”
Sachiko nodded slowly.
“He knew the Kuroda family intended to return the sword.”
“But not the records.”
“Not all of them.”
Luna looked toward the letter.
“Did the sword actually come back then?”
Malcolm considered.
His grandfather's trunk.
The sword.
The years of confusion.
“Yes.”
His voice was quiet.

“It did.”
Emiko looked at him.
Then at the old woman.
“And years later, after he died, my husband kept trying to give it away.”
Sachiko nodded.
“I know.”
Malcolm stared.
“You knew?”
“Yes.”
He stood.
“Then you knew I'd been trying to get rid of it for years?”
“Yes.”
“And you kept sending it back?”
“Not every time.”
He stared.
Sachiko continued.
“I arranged the last delivery. Others returned it before then.”
Malcolm closed his eyes.
“Jesus Christ.”
Luna smiled faintly.
He opened his eyes.
“You could have called.”
Sachiko nodded.
“I should have.”
“You could have sent a letter.”
“Yes.”
“You could have said, 'Hello, I'm your wife's supposedly dead aunt, and there's something you should know about that sword you've been trying to unload.'”
Luna burst out laughing.
Even his wife smiled.
Sachiko looked at him.
Then began laughing too.
Malcolm spread his hands.
“It's not complicated!”
“No,” Sachiko said, wiping her eyes. “It isn't.”

He sat down again.
“Thank you.”
Then his expression grew serious.
“Why did you address it to my daughter?”
The room quieted.
Sachiko looked toward Luna.
“Because your grandmother asked me to ensure the next generation received the history.”
Luna frowned.
“The history or the sword?”
Sachiko hesitated.
Luna's expression hardened.
“There's a difference.”
“Yes.”
“Which one?”
Sachiko lowered her eyes.
“The history.”
Luna stared.
“Then why send the sword?”
For a moment, the old woman could not answer.
Finally, she whispered, “Because I thought it would make you listen.”
Silence.
Luna looked at her.
Then said quietly, “You could have asked.”
Sachiko nodded.
“I know.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Aki sat with the shipping record spread before her.
Her grandmother's younger sister.
A woman named Chiyo.
A woman the family believed had died.
A woman who appeared to have escorted a child across the sea and later returned with him.
Yasuke watched her.

“What do you remember?”
“Almost nothing.”
“Did your grandmother speak of her?”
“Rarely.”
“Why?”
Aki considered.
“She said Chiyo was restless. That she went where other people were afraid to go.”
Yasuke smiled faintly.
“Sounds familiar.”
Aki looked at him.
“Careful.”
He laughed.
Then she grew serious.
“Grandmother said Chiyo disappeared during a journey connected to merchant families.”
“The voyage?”
“Perhaps.”
Aki touched the paper.
“All these years, I believed she had died.”
Yasuke nodded.
“And now?”
“I wonder whether she chose to disappear.”
He considered.
“To protect the boy.”
“Yes.”
Aki looked toward the garden.
“She may have been the only person who knew where he was.”
Yasuke sat beside her.
“Then perhaps the boy survived because someone decided his life mattered more than the records.”
Aki nodded.
For a moment, she smiled.
Then the smile faded.
“Or perhaps someone decided he could never know his own history.”
Yasuke looked toward her.

She continued.
“Even an act of protection can become a prison if it never ends.”
He considered.
Then nodded.
“Yes.”
Aki folded the document.
“We need to find Chiyo.”
Yasuke smiled.
“Another member of your family.”
She looked toward him.
“You're beginning to sound concerned.”
“I am.”
“Why?”
“Every time we find another one, my life becomes more complicated.”
Aki laughed.
Then leaned toward him.
“Perhaps you should have chosen a quieter woman.”
He smiled.
“I had no idea there was a choice.”
She kissed him.
Briefly.
Softly.
Then drew back.
“Come. We have work.”
Yasuke watched her rise.
Then laughed.
“Of course we do.”

Present Day

Malcolm stood on Sachiko's porch with Luna.
Emiko remained inside, speaking privately with the old woman.
The afternoon sun was lowering.
A breeze moved through the trees.
For a while, neither spoke.
Then Luna asked, “Dad?”

“Yeah?”
“Are you disappointed?”
He looked at her.
“About what?”
“That we still don't know whether we're descended from Yasuke.”
He considered.
Then shook his head.
“No.”
She studied him.
“Not even a little?”
He smiled.
“Maybe a little.”
She laughed.
He looked toward the street.
“It would've been something, wouldn't it?”
“Yeah.”
“A real African samurai. Nobunaga. All that history. Imagine being able to say that was your ancestor.”
She nodded.
“Pretty cool.”
He looked toward her.
“But you know what?”
“What?”
“I already had a grandfather worth knowing.”
Her expression softened.
He continued.
“And now I know he traveled to Japan, challenged some powerful people, and refused to turn uncertain history into a claim he couldn't prove.”
He smiled.
“That's not bad.”
“No.”
“And your mother's grandmother tried to give families back their own histories.”
“Also not bad.”
He nodded.

“So even if our family tree never produces a samurai, I think we're doing all right.”
She smiled.
Then leaned against him.
He put an arm around her.
For a moment, they stood in silence.
Then she looked up.
“Dad?”
“Yeah?”
“If we're not descended from Yasuke, does that mean you have to stop calling yourself the Shadow Samurai?”
He looked down.
“I have never called myself that.”
She raised an eyebrow.
“Not out loud.”
He laughed.
“Smartass.”
She grinned.
“Hereditary.”
He kissed the top of her head.
“Unfortunately.”
Inside, Emiko sat across from Sachiko.
The last of the sunlight reached the sitting room floor.
Between them lay the letter.
The photograph.
And the copied account of the boy who had once been hidden.
Emiko studied her great-aunt.
“There's something I still don't understand.”
Sachiko nodded.
“Ask.”
“If the records were never supposed to belong to one family, why did everyone become so obsessed with appointing a custodian?”
Sachiko looked toward the window.
“Because people began confusing responsibility with authority.”
Emiko considered.
“And authority with ownership.”
“Yes.”

She nodded slowly.
“Then perhaps the solution is simpler than everyone thinks.”
Sachiko smiled.
“Your grandmother said the same.”
Emiko looked up.
“What did she propose?”
“Copies. Shared access. Independent archives. No single person deciding who could know the past.”
“And why didn't it happen?”
Sachiko hesitated.
“Because the people holding the records refused.”
Emiko considered.
“Daichi may be changing his mind.”
“Perhaps.”
“Do you know him?”
“Yes.”
“What is he like?”
Sachiko thought for a moment.
“More frightened than he wishes anyone to see.”
“Of what?”
“Discovering that his family protected something terrible.”
Emiko looked down.
“Or discovering that they benefited from it.”
Sachiko nodded.
“Yes.”
For a while, neither spoke.
Then Sachiko reached across the table.
She took her great-niece's hand.
“I cannot undo what I did.”
“No.”
“I cannot give back the years.”
“No.”
“But I can tell you the truth now.”
Emiko studied her.
Then nodded.
“Start with the parts you haven't told us.”
Sachiko smiled sadly.

“You really are her granddaughter.”
Emiko did not smile.
“Sachiko.”
The old woman sighed.
Then reached beneath her chair.
She removed a small leather folder.
Inside was a photograph.
Not old.
Not faded.
Taken within the last year.
It showed a Japanese man standing beside a museum display case.
Emiko recognized him immediately.
Daichi Kuroda.
Beside him stood another man.
American.
Middle-aged.
Wearing glasses and a dark jacket.
Emiko leaned closer.
“Who is that?”
Sachiko's expression hardened.
“Henry Vale's former business partner.”
Emiko frowned.
“Vale is dead.”
“Yes.”
“Then what does his partner have to do with this?”
Sachiko looked toward her.
“Everything.”
She placed a second photograph beside the first.
The same American man.
This time outside a shipping facility.
The photograph showed several wooden crates.
One bore a familiar six-digit reference.
Emiko went still.
“The sword.”
Sachiko nodded.
“The returns.”
Emiko stared.

“Who is he?”
Sachiko answered.
“Daniel Mercer.”
Silence.
Emiko looked toward the photograph.
Then toward Sachiko.
“Mercer?”
The old woman nodded.
Emiko thought of the museum.
The helpful curator.
Dr. Eleanor Mercer.
Her willingness to discuss the box.
Her interest in the old records.
The access she'd offered.
Malcolm had liked her immediately because she answered questions.
Emiko had trusted her because she seemed professional.
And now the same surname appeared beside a man connected to the sword's repeated deliveries.
She looked up.
“Is he related to the museum curator?”
Sachiko nodded.
“Her younger brother.”
Emiko felt her stomach tighten.
“Does she know?”
Sachiko hesitated.
Then answered.
“I don't know.”
Emiko stared at the photographs.
A collector.
A shipping operation.
A museum.
And an American family caught between them.
She looked toward the porch.
Malcolm and Luna stood outside, laughing about something.
For a moment, she watched them.
Then she returned her gaze to Sachiko.

“No more surprises.”
The old woman lowered her eyes.
“I can't promise that.”
Emiko leaned forward.
“Then promise something else.”
“What?”
“From now on, when you know something that could endanger my family, you tell me before it becomes another chapter in this disaster.”
Sachiko looked at her.
Then nodded.
“I promise.”
Emiko stood.
Picked up the photographs.
And walked toward the porch.
Because the sword had never returned by magic alone.
Someone had paid for the shipments.
Someone had handled the packages.
Someone had decided where they would go.
And someone had deliberately placed the final delivery in her daughter's name.
For the first time, the family had a person they could trace through a real business.
A living man.
A name.
A connection.
And that meant the mystery was no longer merely about what had happened centuries ago.
It was about what people were doing right now.
Emiko stepped onto the porch.
Malcolm turned.
“Everything okay?”
She looked at him.
Then at Luna.
“No.”
He sighed.
“Of course not.”

She held up the photograph.
“But I think we've finally found someone who can explain how the sword kept coming back.”
Malcolm examined the image.
Then looked toward her.
“Good.”
His expression changed.
“Because I'd very much like to send that bastard a bill.”
Luna laughed.
And this time, her mother did too.
But Emiko kept hold of the photograph.
Because beneath the humor, something important had changed.
The people who had hidden the past were no longer distant names in old records.
They were living people.
Making decisions.
Breaking promises.
Protecting their own interests.
And beginning, perhaps, to lose control of the story.



Chapter 22

The Reckoning



Present Day

Malcolm Hayes had developed a new rule.
Nobody in his family was allowed to announce that they had discovered another astonishing secret until after breakfast.
He felt this was reasonable.
Emiko disagreed.
Luna considered it an infringement upon freedom of speech.
And both women had already violated the rule twice before nine o'clock.
He stood at the kitchen counter, spreading peanut butter onto toast.
“I'm serious.”
His daughter looked up from her laptop.
“So are we.”
“That's the problem.”
Emiko entered carrying the folder Sachiko had given them.
Malcolm pointed his knife toward her.
“No.”
She stopped.
“What?”
“Whatever's in that folder can wait until I've eaten.”
She glanced at the toast.
“You're already eating.”
“I've only just started.”
She placed the folder on the counter.
He stared at it.
“That's provocative.”
Luna laughed.

Emiko smiled.
“It's only a folder, darling.”
“That's what you said about the last folder. That one contained a dead woman who wasn't dead, an international shipping operation, and evidence that my grandfather had a more interesting social life than I do.”
Luna leaned back.
“Grandpa went to Japan. You went to the hardware store yesterday.”
“Exactly. And nobody tried to appoint me custodian of a secret archive at the hardware store.”
“Did you check?”
He gave her a look.
She grinned.
Emiko opened the folder.
Malcolm closed his eyes.
“Marriage,” he announced, “is a beautiful institution.”
“Come here,” she said.
He sighed and carried his toast across the room.
On the counter lay the photograph of Daniel Mercer.
Beside it was a copy of Henry Vale's old invoice and the six-digit reference that had appeared on the sword's repeated deliveries.
Emiko pointed to a date.
“Daniel was involved in the shipping arrangements at least six years ago.”
He nodded.
“We know that.”
“But the museum acquired the archival box much later.”
“Yes.”
“And his sister is the curator.”
“Yes.”
She looked up.
“What if we ask her directly?”
Malcolm paused.
For once, the answer seemed so obvious that he distrusted it.
“Just ask?”
“Yes.”

“No secret meeting?”
“No.”
“No mysterious note?”
“No.”
“No driving three hours to discover that someone has a previously unmentioned dead relative?”
Luna smiled.
“Preferably not.”
He considered.
Then took another bite of toast.
“I like it.”
Emiko reached for her telephone.
“Good.”
He pointed at her.
“After breakfast.”
She looked at him.
Then deliberately pressed the call button.
Luna began laughing.
Malcolm shook his head.
“I am surrounded by criminals.”

Dr. Eleanor Mercer answered from her museum office.
Behind her, shelves held labeled boxes and several carefully mounted photographs.
Emiko began without accusation.
“Dr. Mercer, we've found a connection between the man who managed several shipments of our sword and your family.”
The curator's expression changed.
“What connection?”
“Daniel Mercer.”
For a moment, the woman said nothing.
Then she removed her glasses.
“My brother.”
“Yes.”
Dr. Mercer looked down.
“I wondered when his name might appear.”
Malcolm leaned forward.

“So you knew he was involved?”
“I knew Daniel had worked with Henry Vale. I did not know whether your sword was among the objects they handled.”
Emiko held her gaze.
“Why didn't you mention the relationship?”
The curator considered.
“Because I didn't know whether it was relevant, and because my brother and I haven't spoken in nearly three years.”
Luna looked up.
“Why not?”
Dr. Mercer hesitated.
Then answered.
“Because he tried to convince me to alter the museum's acquisition records.”
Silence.
Malcolm set down his coffee.
“Now we're getting somewhere.”
Dr. Mercer continued.
“When the Japanese archival box was offered to the museum, Daniel contacted me privately. He asked that certain documents accompanying it be classified as unrelated material.”
Emiko frowned.
“The deposit receipt?”
“Yes.”
“And your grandfather's correspondence?”
Malcolm leaned closer.
Dr. Mercer nodded.
“Some of it.”
“Why?” Luna asked.
“Because the papers raised questions about whether the person selling the box had the right to sell its contents.”
Emiko sat straighter.
“So you retained them.”
“Of course.”
“And cataloged them?”
“Provisionally. I also referred the provenance issue to our collections committee.”

Malcolm looked at her.
“You refused to help your brother hide the paperwork.”
“Yes.”
He nodded.
“Good.”
Dr. Mercer smiled faintly.
“He was less complimentary.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Did he arrange the sword's deliveries?”
The curator considered.
“He operated a private logistics service for collectors. It would have been possible.”
“Can you confirm it?”
“Not from the museum's records.”
Malcolm sighed.
Dr. Mercer continued.
“But I kept something.”
She reached toward a drawer.
Removed a thin folder.
“After the dispute, Daniel sent me a copy of an internal inventory. He wanted me to confirm that the Japanese box was no longer associated with the sword.”
Emiko frowned.
“Was it?”
“I believe both objects carried the same older deposit reference.”
Luna looked toward her parents.
The six digits.
Dr. Mercer held up the inventory.
“Here.”
She read an entry aloud.
“Archival deposit. Six-digit reference. Sword returned to American holder. Document container retained pending ownership review.”
Malcolm went still.
“Returned to American holder?”
“Yes.”
“When was that written?”
“Six years ago.”

He looked toward Emiko.
Then back at the screen.
“So this wasn't a series of mysterious accidents.”
Dr. Mercer shook her head.
“Not if these records are authentic.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Somebody was running a return process.”
“That's one possibility.”
Malcolm nodded slowly.
Then asked the question that had bothered him for years.
“Why didn't Daniel just give me the paperwork?”
Dr. Mercer regarded him sadly.
“Because if you understood that the sword was connected to an unresolved deposit, you might demand the accompanying records.”
The room fell silent.
Emiko looked at her husband.
He stared at the screen.
For six years, he'd believed the sword was an inexplicable burden that kept coming back.
Now he understood another possibility.
Someone had made sure he couldn't permanently relinquish it because doing so would complicate a claim to documents being held elsewhere.
Someone wanted the sword in his possession.
But did not want him to know why.
He leaned back.
“Well.”
Luna looked at him.
“What?”
He shook his head.
“I've been treated like a storage unit.”
Emiko laughed despite herself.
Dr. Mercer smiled.
Malcolm was not finished.
“An extremely handsome storage unit, but still.”
His daughter groaned.
“Dad.”

He looked at the curator.
“Doctor, can we make this official?”
Her smile faded.
“In what sense?”
“The records. The inventory. Everything connecting my grandfather's deposit to the sword. I don't want another family story. I want evidence we can put in front of somebody who has to answer.”
Dr. Mercer nodded.
“Then I'll prepare a formal provenance report and identify which materials can be released as copies. I'll also involve our legal and collections staff.”
Emiko smiled.
“Thank you.”
“There's something I should make clear,” Dr. Mercer added. “The records may establish a custody dispute. They won't automatically establish legal ownership or prove ancestry.”
Malcolm nodded.
“Understood.”
Luna leaned forward.
“And if your brother contacts you?”
The curator considered.
“I'll tell him the museum is reviewing the records through its normal procedures.”
“Will you tell us?”
“If there's information I can lawfully share, yes.”
The call ended.
For a long moment, the family remained quiet.
Then Malcolm looked at his wife.
“No riddles.”
She smiled.
“No riddles.”
“An actual professional.”
“Yes.”
“Paperwork that might mean something.”
“Yes.”
He raised his coffee.

“To boring people who keep accurate records.”
Luna raised her water glass.
Emiko joined them.
It was the strangest family toast they'd ever made.
And perhaps the most hopeful.

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581
Ren was forbidden from entering the archive without supervision.
He accepted this.
He was forbidden from speaking privately with the witnesses.
He accepted that too.
He was forbidden from carrying messages between households.
That wounded his pride considerably.
Aki considered it a healthy development.
He sat beside her in a small chamber, copying names from a damaged register.
His ribs ached.
His face was bruised.
And his younger sister had not spoken to him in nearly an hour.
He found the silence worse than the injuries.
“Aki.”
She continued writing.
“Aki.”
Nothing.
He sighed.
“Are you planning never to speak to me again?”
She looked up.
“No.”
Relief.
Then she continued.
“I am deciding whether anything I say would be useful.”
He lowered his eyes.
“Fair.”
She returned to her work.
A moment later, Ren spoke again.
“The men who deceived me weren't only interested in the records.”
Aki stopped.

She looked toward him.
“Go on.”
“They wanted the boy.”
She set down her brush.
“Why?”
Ren hesitated.
“Katsunari said the child had been placed with a family on the coast. He believed the boy was being moved again.”
“Moved where?”
“I don't know.”
She studied him.
“Ren.”
He closed his eyes.
“I truly don't.”
Aki waited.
Then asked, “Why would Katsunari want him?”
Ren looked toward the copied names.
“Because several households were disputing an inheritance.”
Aki frowned.
“We know that.”
“He said the boy's identity could settle it.”
“How?”
“By establishing that one of the supposedly extinct family lines had survived.”
Aki studied him.
“Whose line?”
Ren shook his head.
“I never saw the supporting documents.”
“Then how could you believe him?”
Ren looked at her.
“Because he showed me a seal and a copied genealogy.”
She stared.
“You believed a genealogy brought by a man who wanted you to surrender the records?”
He lowered his head.
“When you put it that way…”
Aki closed her eyes.

Ren continued.
“He also claimed the boy could be related to Yasuke.”
Her eyes opened.
“What?”
“He said the foreign warrior's household had protected him because the child belonged to someone close to Yasuke.”
Aki considered.
“That doesn't establish parentage.”
“No.”
“Nor does it establish a bloodline.”
“No.”
“Then what did Katsunari hope to prove?”
Ren hesitated.
“I think he wanted someone to believe the boy was Yasuke's.”
Silence.
Aki looked toward the window.
Outside, men were training in the courtyard.
Wooden practice swords struck one another.
The ordinary work of a military household continued.
She turned back.
“Why would that matter to a Japanese inheritance dispute?”
Ren considered.
“I wondered the same thing.”
“And?”
“He told me a child associated with Yasuke could be moved between households without attracting the same attention as the son of a Japanese lord.”
Aki slowly sat straighter.
“A false identity.”
“Perhaps.”
“Something no one could easily verify.”
Ren nodded.
“And if anyone challenged it?”
“The original records had disappeared.”
Aki looked at the papers.
The storehouse fire.
The forged transfers.

The altered names.
Suddenly the child was not merely a hidden survivor.
He was a convenient answer to several different claims.
A boy whose actual history had become less important to powerful men than what they could make others believe.
Aki stood.
Ren watched her.
“Where are you going?”
“To tell Yasuke.”
He nodded.
Then spoke quietly.
“Aki?”
She stopped.
“I know I have no right to ask.”
She waited.
“But please don't let them use the boy the way they used Hana.”
Aki looked at her brother.
For the first time that morning, her expression softened.
“I won't.”
Then she added, “And neither will you.”
Ren bowed his head.
“No.”

Present Day
Daniel Mercer answered his telephone on the fifth attempt.
By then, the family had taken Ms. Carter's advice and stopped calling him themselves.
Their attorney contacted him.
The conversation was short.
Daniel confirmed he had managed shipments involving the sword.
He declined to discuss the identity of his clients.
He insisted the transactions had been lawful.
And he denied knowledge of any threats against the family.
Ms. Carter summarized the call that afternoon.
Malcolm listened without interrupting.
An achievement his wife privately considered worthy of celebration.
“So he admits handling it,” he said.

“Yes.”
“But won't say who paid him.”
“Not voluntarily.”
“And our options?”
“We preserve the evidence, determine what legal claims are actually supportable, and avoid making accusations we can't prove. Depending on the records and jurisdiction, there may be avenues for formal disclosure.”
Malcolm nodded.
“Fine.”
Luna looked surprised.
“Fine?”
He turned toward her.
“What?”
“You're not going to drive over there?”
“No.”
“Or threaten to throw something?”
He considered.
“Not today.”
Emiko smiled.
“I'm impressed.”
He looked at her.
“I can be reasonable.”
Luna opened her mouth.
He pointed at her.
“Don't.”
She closed it.
Smiling.
Ms. Carter continued.
“There is another development.”
Malcolm sighed.
Emiko looked at him.
He raised both hands.
“Didn't say a word.”
The attorney placed a document on the table.
“Daichi Kuroda's counsel has offered a revised proposal.”
Emiko looked up.

“What changed?”
“He no longer requests that your daughter accept an appointment.”
Luna frowned.
“Really?”
“He offers supervised access to certain records, subject to ordinary preservation and privacy conditions.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Why?”
Ms. Carter considered.
“He doesn't say.”
Emiko examined the document.
Then looked toward her daughter.
“Perhaps our refusal made the point.”
Luna shrugged.
“Or maybe he's realized the museum is reviewing his family's claim.”
Malcolm nodded.
“Both would be nice.”
The attorney continued.
“The offer is not enough by itself. We would still need to verify the inventory and determine whether access conditions are fair.”
Emiko looked at her husband.
He nodded.
“Agreed.”
Luna studied the letter.
Then said, “I want something added.”
Ms. Carter looked up.
“What?”
“If those records contain names of families who were separated, the people connected to those histories should be part of the discussion about access.”
The attorney considered.
“That is a broader undertaking than this agreement currently covers.”
“I know.”
Emiko smiled faintly.
Luna continued.

“But if Daichi is actually changing his mind, let's find out how much.”
Malcolm leaned back.
Then laughed softly.
“What?” his wife asked.
He shook his head.
“We spent all this time worrying somebody wanted to appoint our daughter as the next keeper.”
He looked toward Luna.
“And now she's trying to put the whole institution out of business.”
His daughter smiled.
“Reform, Dad.”
“Right. My mistake.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581
Yasuke found Chiyo in a fishing village beside the lake.
She was younger than he expected.
Not much older than Aki.
Her hair was tied back, her clothes plain and practical.
She stood outside a small house mending a fishing net.
When Yasuke approached with Aki, she looked up.
For a moment, her face showed no recognition.
Then she saw Aki.
The net slipped from her hands.
“Aki?”
The younger woman stopped.
“Chiyo?”
They stared at one another.
Then Chiyo crossed the distance between them.
She embraced Aki so fiercely that both nearly fell.
For several moments, neither spoke.
When they separated, Chiyo touched her niece's face.
“You've grown.”
Aki laughed through tears.
“So have you.”
Chiyo smiled.
“Not much, apparently.”

Yasuke watched them.
Aki drew back.
“We thought you were dead.”
Chiyo's smile faded.
“I know.”
“Grandmother mourned you.”
The older woman lowered her eyes.
“I know that too.”
Aki stepped away.
The pain was immediate.
Fresh.
Unexpected.
“You could have told her.”
Chiyo looked toward the lake.
“I tried.”
“Did you?”
“Yes.”
Aki stared.
Chiyo continued.
“Once. Years ago. The message was returned to me.”
“Why?”
“Because the man carrying it was stopped before he reached her.”
Aki looked toward Yasuke.
Then back at Chiyo.
“Who stopped him?”
“The same men searching for the boy.”
Silence.
Chiyo glanced toward Yasuke.
“You serve Nobunaga.”
“Yes.”
“Then perhaps we're finally out of time.”
Aki frowned.
“For what?”
Chiyo looked toward the house.
“Come inside.”
Yasuke hesitated.
“Is the boy here?”

Chiyo studied him.
Then shook her head.
“No.”
Aki's expression changed.
“Where?”
The woman took a breath.
“With the people he chose.”

Inside, the house was simple.
A low table.
A hearth.
Fishing equipment.
A narrow shelf holding a few books.
No treasures.
No elaborate archive.
Only a small wooden box beside the wall.
Chiyo poured tea.
Yasuke remained standing.
“The boy chose where to live?”
Chiyo nodded.
“He's old enough now to tell us what he wants.”
Aki considered.
“How old?”
“Nine.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Tomé believed he was younger.”
“Tomé knew him before the voyage. Children grow.”
Aki smiled faintly.
Then grew serious.
“Does he know his original name?”
Chiyo looked down.
“He knows the name written in the records.”
“And?”
“He doesn't remember anyone calling him that.”
“Does he know who his parents were?”
“No.”
Yasuke sat.

“Then the records may help.”
Chiyo nodded.
“They may.”
“Why haven't you sought them?”
Her expression tightened.
“Because every person who asks after the boy eventually asks about his parentage.”
Aki frowned.
“Why?”
“Because some want an heir.”
She looked toward Yasuke.
“Others want proof that a foreign warrior had a child in Japan.”
Yasuke stared.
“And you?”
Chiyo met his eyes.
“I want the boy to grow up without being hunted.”
A silence followed.
Then Yasuke asked, “Do you believe he is my son?”
Chiyo studied him.
“No.”
The answer came so directly that Yasuke almost laughed.
Aki glanced toward him.
He raised an eyebrow.
Chiyo continued.
“I have seen nothing proving it. Nor any reason to believe it.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Good.”
She looked surprised.
“Good?”
“Yes.”
Chiyo considered.
“You're not disappointed?”
Yasuke smiled faintly.
“Should I be?”
She studied him.
Then shook her head.
“No.”

Aki reached toward the wooden box.
“What's inside?”
Chiyo considered.
Then opened it.
Several folded papers.
A strip of blue cloth.
And a small silver fitting.
Three curved lines surrounded a circle.
The lines pointed outward.
Aki touched the edge.
“The missing fitting.”
Chiyo nodded.
“Hana gave it to me before she died.”
Yasuke frowned.
“Jin's wife?”
“Yes.”
“Then you knew her.”
“Very well.”
Aki looked between them.
Chiyo continued.
“She told me the sword would eventually be entrusted to someone capable of keeping its hidden records safe.”
Yasuke shook his head.
“Nobunaga gave it to me.”
“I know.”
“How?”
“Because Jin arranged for the sword to be brought before him.”
Yasuke went still.
Aki leaned forward.
“You mean Jin planned the gift?”
Chiyo shook her head.
“He arranged for Nobunaga to see the sword. He could not command what Nobunaga would do.”
Yasuke sat back.
For months, the weapon had seemed to be the center of events he barely understood.
Now he saw the work of people.

Jin.
Hana.
Chiyo.
Men and women making choices.
Some clever.
Some reckless.
Some with consequences they could never have predicted.
No prophecy.
No sword that knew the future.
Only a plan that had grown beyond the control of those who began it.
He looked toward Chiyo.
“What was hidden inside?”
She hesitated.
“Evidence that the records belonged to the people named in them.”
Aki frowned.
“How can a document establish that?”
Chiyo removed a folded sheet.
The writing was careful.
Formal.
It described the deposit of family histories, custody records, and names entrusted for safekeeping.
At the bottom were marks left by several households.
Beside them was a short declaration.
Aki read it.
Then stopped.
Yasuke leaned closer.
“What?”
She translated.
“The one who keeps the names does not possess the lives.”
Silence.
Chiyo nodded.
“That was the agreement.”
Yasuke studied the paper.
“And the keepers violated it.”
“Some did.”
“And others?”

“Some died trying to honor it.”
Aki looked toward the silver fitting.
“Then what is this?”
Chiyo smiled sadly.
“A key to the box that held the agreement.”
Yasuke frowned.
“The sword's hidden chamber?”
“Partly.”
“Partly?”
“The sword was never intended to hold everything. It was one means of moving a copy beyond the reach of the households controlling the archives.”
Aki nodded slowly.
“The records were divided.”
“Yes.”
“Among different families.”
“Yes.”
“So no single household could destroy all the evidence.”
Chiyo smiled.
“Exactly.”
Yasuke considered.
“And the boy?”
Chiyo looked toward the window.
“He was not the reason the system existed.”
“Then why do the men want him?”
“Because years later, people found it easier to fight over a child than to honor an agreement.”
Aki studied her.
“What do you mean?”
Chiyo took a breath.
“The boy may carry a history that the records can clarify. But instead of asking what he wishes to know, men are trying to decide what they can claim through him.”
Yasuke looked down.
The same mistake.
Again and again.

People turning another person's life into a key for their own ambitions.
He looked toward Chiyo.
“Will you let us meet him?”
She considered.
Then shook her head.
“Not today.”
Aki straightened.
“Why?”
“Because he has not agreed.”
Yasuke studied her.
Then nodded.
“Fair.”
Chiyo smiled.
“You understand?”
“Yes.”
Aki looked toward him.
He continued.
“I am learning.”

Present Day
Daichi Kuroda requested a second meeting.
This time, the family declined.
Not forever.
Simply until the museum completed its provenance review and the attorney had examined the revised agreement.
Malcolm found this enormously satisfying.
“You know,” he said over dinner, “it's remarkable how much less stressful this becomes when we stop running every time somebody snaps their fingers.”
Emiko smiled.
“Careful. You might become patient.”
“Let's not get carried away.”
Luna had spent the afternoon building a timeline.
Not of Yasuke.
Not of the sword's supposed supernatural properties.
A straightforward chronology of documented modern events.

Her great-grandfather's visit to Japan.
The deposit agreement.
The refusal to return the records.
The sword's arrival in America.
The later attempts to relinquish it.
The repeated shipping references.
The final package addressed to her.
And the recent demands concerning custodianship.
She turned her laptop toward her parents.
“Look.”
Malcolm leaned closer.
“What?”
She highlighted three dates.
“Every time the sword came back after Dad tried to get rid of it, there was some kind of activity involving the records.”
Emiko studied the entries.
“Can we prove the connection?”
“Not in every case.”
Luna nodded toward the first date.
“But here, Henry Vale contacted Dad after a dispute over the box.”
She pointed to another.
“And here, Daniel Mercer shipped the sword after another inquiry about the deposit.”
“And the final delivery?” her father asked.
Luna looked toward her mother.
“Sachiko sent it because she thought we needed to know the history.”
Emiko nodded.
“Yes.”
Luna sat back.
“So there's no evidence the sword magically returned.”
Malcolm regarded the wooden case.
For a moment, he almost looked disappointed.
“Seven times,” he said.
His daughter smiled.
“Seven times people brought it back.”
He considered.

“Which is significantly less exciting.”
Emiko raised an eyebrow.
“Is it?”
He looked at her.
She continued.
“People have spent generations hiding records, crossing oceans, protecting children, betraying one another, and trying to control a sword they believed represented authority.”
Malcolm considered.
Then nodded.
“Fair point.”
Luna looked toward the case.
“Maybe the sword was never mysterious because it came back.”
Emiko turned.
“What do you mean?”
“Maybe the mystery was why so many people cared where it ended up.”
Malcolm smiled.
“That I can live with.”
For the first time in months, he looked at the sword without feeling that it was waiting for him.
It was an object.
Beautiful.
Old.
Dangerous in the ordinary way a blade could be dangerous.
And burdened with a history that men and women had carried into the present.
He could live with that.
What he could not live with was anyone threatening his daughter over it.
He looked toward his wife.
“We're not finished.”
“No.”
“But we're closer.”
She smiled.
“Yes.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581
Nobunaga listened to Yasuke's report in silence.
The recovered agreement lay before him.
Chiyo had allowed them to copy it.
She had retained the original.
Yasuke had accepted that condition.
Nobunaga examined the wording.
Then looked up.
“This document does not prove every transfer was unlawful.”
“No, my lord.”
“Nor does it establish the parentage of the child.”
“No.”
“Nor does it identify everyone who participated in the theft of the records.”
“No.”
Nobunaga smiled faintly.
“Then what does it establish?”
Yasuke considered.
“That the records were entrusted for protection, not surrendered as property.”
The ruler studied him.
“And you believe that matters?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Because men have used possession of the records to claim authority over the people named in them.”
Nobunaga looked toward Aki.
“And you?”
She bowed.
“I believe the agreement gives us a way to challenge that authority.”
“Through whom?”
“Through those who made the deposits, or their families, where they can be identified.”
The ruler considered.
“An inconvenient undertaking.”
“Yes, my lord.”
“One that may unsettle households whose support I require.”

“Yes.”
Nobunaga studied the documents.
Then rose.
“Do you know what I admire about people who bring me unpleasant truths?”
Yasuke hesitated.
“No, my lord.”
“They force me to decide whether I wish to be a ruler or merely a beneficiary of other men's lies.”
Silence.
He turned toward the open window.
Below, the castle courtyard bustled with servants and soldiers.
Beyond its walls lay a country still divided by war.
Nobunaga had enemies enough without inventing new ones inside his own administration.
Yet the stolen children and altered records were not inventions.
Nor was Harunobu's disappearance.
Nor the burned storehouse.
Nor the men who had carried forged orders into the castle and taken Hana.
He turned back.
“Moritsugu will be held pending further inquiry. The men involved in the abduction are to be questioned. The families named in the surviving records will be examined discreetly.”
Yasuke bowed.
“My lord.”
Nobunaga raised a hand.
“I will not promise that every wrong can be corrected.”
Aki lowered her eyes.
“I understand.”
“Nor will I allow this inquiry to become an excuse for men to invent new claims.”
“Yes, my lord.”
The ruler looked toward Yasuke.
“And the boy?”
Yasuke considered.
“He is alive.”

“Where?”
“With people he trusts.”
Nobunaga studied him.
“You know the location?”
“No.”
The ruler raised an eyebrow.
“Your answer appears remarkably convenient.”
Yasuke smiled faintly.
“Yes, my lord.”
Nobunaga laughed.
Then his expression softened.
“Perhaps the boy should remain where he is until someone can prove a lawful reason to disturb him.”
Yasuke bowed.
“Thank you.”
Nobunaga turned toward the sword stand.
It remained empty.
The stolen weapon had not been recovered.
For a moment, he regarded the space where his gift had once rested.
Then he said, “When the sword is found, return it to me.”
Yasuke looked up.
“My lord?”
“I gave it to you. I would like to examine what I gave.”
Yasuke hesitated.
Then bowed.
“Yes, my lord.”
Nobunaga studied him.
“Do not look so troubled. I have no intention of keeping it merely because I can.”
Yasuke smiled.
“I am relieved.”
The ruler laughed.
“Go. Before I change my mind.”

Present Day
The official notice arrived two days later.

Dr. Mercer's museum had begun a formal review of the Japanese archival box and its associated documents.
The review would examine provenance, prior custody agreements, and competing claims.
Until it was complete, the museum would not transfer the box or its contents.
Malcolm read the letter twice.
Then handed it to Emiko.
“That's it?”
She looked at him.
“What?”
“No ominous warning? No secret family oath? No demand that we surrender our firstborn?”
Luna glanced up.
“I'm still here, Dad.”
“Thank God.”
Emiko read the letter.
Then smiled.
“This is good.”
Malcolm nodded.
“Yes.”
Luna leaned closer.
“Does it mean we can see the records?”
“Not automatically,” her mother said. “But it means there is an independent review.”
“And Daichi can't just take the box?”
“Not without going through the museum's process.”
Luna considered.
“That's something.”
Her father smiled.
“It's a hell of a something.”
Then he picked up the sword case.
Emiko looked toward him.
“What are you doing?”
He considered.
“Moving it.”
“Where?”

“To a secure location we've arranged through counsel.”
She nodded.
“Good.”
He looked at the case.
For years, he'd tried to get rid of the sword because he wanted the problem to disappear.
Now he understood that handing away the object had never been enough.
The problem was the claim.
The people.
The unresolved promise.
And the families whose records had been held by others.
He ran a hand along the wood.
Then looked toward his daughter.
“You know something?”
“What?”
“I think Grandpa would approve.”
She smiled.
“Of what?”
“Making people follow the rules instead of letting them make up rules for us.”
Emiko laughed.
Luna nodded.
“I think he would.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581
Aki found Hana in the garden at dusk.
The girl sat beside a low stone wall, writing in her notebook.
Aki approached.
“What are you doing?”
Hana looked up.
“Making a list.”
“Of what?”
“Things I want to know.”
Aki smiled.
“That sounds familiar.”
The girl held up the page.

At the top she'd written her father's name.
Below it were several questions.
Where had he gone?
Who had taken him?
Was he alive when she was removed from the household?
Had he known she survived?
Aki sat beside her.
For a while, neither spoke.
Then Hana asked, “Will we find out?”
Aki considered.
“Some of it.”
“All of it?”
“I don't know.”
Hana looked down.
“I hate that answer.”
Aki nodded.
“So do I.”
The girl continued writing.
After a while, she said, “Ren came to see me.”
Aki looked up.
“He did?”
“Yes.”
“What did he say?”
“That he was sorry.”
Aki waited.
Hana continued.
“He asked whether I wanted him to help with the records.”
“And?”
“I told him yes.”
Aki frowned slightly.
“Why?”
“Because he knows things we need.”
She nodded.
“That is true.”
“But I told him he doesn't get to decide what happens to my name.”
Aki smiled.
“And what did he say?”

“He said he understood.”
Hana looked toward her.
“Do you think he does?”
Aki considered.
“I think he's beginning to.”
The girl nodded.
Then returned to her writing.
Aki watched her.
The girl had been taken.
Renamed.
Hidden.
Threatened.
And nearly taken again.
Yet she sat beneath the evening sky making a list of questions she intended to pursue.
Not waiting for a lord.
Not waiting for a warrior.
Not waiting for someone to appoint her to a role.
Choosing her own direction.
Aki felt something warm and painful move through her.
She touched Hana's shoulder.
The girl looked up.
“What?”
Aki smiled.
“Nothing.”
Hana raised an eyebrow.
“That means something.”
Aki laughed.
“Yes.”
“What?”
She considered.
Then answered.
“I'm proud of you.”
Hana looked down.
For a moment, she seemed embarrassed.
Then she smiled.
“Good.”

Aki laughed again.
They sat together until the light faded.

Present Day
Luna had begun keeping two notebooks.
One contained the family history.
Documents.
Dates.
Names.
Questions about Yasuke and Aki.
The uncertain story of the boy who had survived.
Her father's grandfather.
Her mother's grandmother.
Sachiko.
The sword.
The archive.
The other notebook contained something different.
Ideas.
Plans.
Questions about what should happen to the records if the families ever recovered them.
Who should be allowed to read them?
Who should decide what remained private?
How could information be preserved without creating another group that claimed to own it?
She showed the second notebook to Emiko.
Her mother read several pages.
Then looked up.
“You've been busy.”
Luna shrugged.
“I've been thinking.”
Emiko smiled.
“Dangerous habit.”
Luna laughed.
Then grew serious.
“Mom?”
“Yes?”

“If we recover the records, I don't want them to end up in another private collection.”
Emiko considered.
“Neither do I.”
“But I don't think we should just put everything online either.”
“Why?”
“Because some of the names belong to people who might have living descendants. And some of the information could be wrong.”
Her mother nodded.
“Yes.”
“So maybe we need historians. Archivists. People who know how to handle sensitive records.”
“And representatives of the families involved, where they can be identified.”
Luna smiled.
“Exactly.”
Emiko studied her.
Then said, “That sounds like a very big undertaking.”
Luna nodded.
“It is.”
“Are you volunteering?”
Luna hesitated.
For a moment, she looked toward the sword case.
Then back at her mother.
“I don't know.”
Emiko smiled.
“Good.”
Luna frowned.
“Good?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Because you don't have to decide your entire future merely because someone sent you a package.”
Luna looked down.
Then smiled.
“Thanks, Mom.”
Her mother took her hand.

“Whatever happens, you're allowed to change your mind.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581
The message arrived after nightfall.
Yasuke had just returned from the courtyard.
A servant waited outside his quarters with a folded paper.
The seal belonged to Nobunaga.
Yasuke opened it.
The summons was brief.
He was to attend his lord at first light.
No explanation.
No mention of the sword.
No reference to the inquiry.
Aki watched him read.
“What is it?”
“Nobunaga wishes to see me.”
“When?”
“Tomorrow.”
She nodded.
“Perhaps he's found the thief.”
“Perhaps.”
Yasuke folded the paper.
Then looked toward her.
For a moment, neither spoke.
Outside, a wind moved through the castle gardens.
Somewhere in the distance, soldiers called to one another.
The country beyond Azuchi remained unsettled.
Nobunaga's ambitions reached farther every year.
So did the number of men who wished to stop him.
Yasuke knew that his own place in this world depended upon a ruler whose power seemed immense.
But no man's power was without limits.
Not even Nobunaga's.
Aki approached.
“You're troubled.”
He smiled faintly.
“A little.”

“About the summons?”
“About everything.”
She laughed softly.
“An excellent answer.”
He took her hand.
For a while, they stood together.
Then Yasuke looked toward the empty space where his sword had once rested.
“I thought serving Nobunaga would give my life a direction.”
Aki studied him.
“Hasn't it?”
“Yes.”
“Then what's wrong?”
He considered.
“I thought direction meant knowing where I was going.”
She smiled.
“And now?”
“Now I understand that sometimes it means knowing what I will not do.”
Aki nodded.
“What won't you do?”
He looked toward her.
“I will not allow a child to become a prize.”
She smiled.
“Good.”
“I will not pretend a document proves more than it does.”
“Very good.”
“And I will not let anyone tell me that loyalty requires blindness.”
Her expression softened.
“Then perhaps you know exactly where you're going.”
Yasuke drew her close.
For a long moment, they remained together in the quiet room.
Outside, the castle settled into darkness.

Present Day
Malcolm finally placed the sword into secured storage.
He completed the inventory.

Signed the receipt.
Photographed the condition of the case.
And kept a copy of every document.
Emiko watched from beside him.
Luna stood nearby.
When the process was finished, the attendant closed the compartment.
Malcolm stared at the door.
For a moment, nobody spoke.
Then his daughter asked, “Well?”
He considered.
“Well what?”
“How do you feel?”
He looked toward the closed compartment.
Then toward his wife.
Then his daughter.
Finally, he smiled.
“Hungry.”
Luna burst out laughing.
Emiko shook her head.
“Of course.”
He spread his hands.
“What? We've been doing historical detective work for weeks. I'm starving.”
Luna took his arm.
“Come on, Dad.”
He looked toward the compartment one last time.
The sword was no longer in his hands.
And for once, he wasn't waiting for it to come back.
Not because the mystery was solved.
It wasn't.
The museum still held disputed documents.
Daichi Kuroda still controlled records the family had not seen.
The question of Yasuke's descendants remained open.
And the full history of the sword's passage across generations was far from certain.

But the family had stopped allowing the weapon to dictate their choices.
They had evidence.
Professional help.
A path forward.
And the freedom to decide what they wished to do with what they learned.
Malcolm looked toward his daughter.
She smiled at him.
He smiled back.
Then they walked into the evening together.
Behind them, the sword remained where they'd placed it.
For the first time in years, nothing followed.
And that, Malcolm thought, was a very good beginning.



Chapter 23

What Remains



Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

The sword was found in a stable.
Not an armory.
Not a guarded chamber.
Not beneath the floor of some important man's residence.
A stable.
Wrapped in a horse blanket, beneath a mound of straw, less than a morning's ride from Azuchi.
Yasuke regarded this information with a mixture of relief and profound irritation.
Nobunaga watched him from across the chamber.
“You appear disappointed.”
“My lord?”
“You wanted a more impressive discovery?”
Yasuke considered.
“I had expected something other than a stable.”
Nobunaga laughed.
“A sword is still a sword, wherever a fool chooses to hide it.”
The weapon lay on a low table between them.
It had been cleaned.
The blade remained undamaged.
Its distinctive fittings were intact, though one silver piece was missing.
Yasuke recognized every mark.
He had carried the sword through battle and ceremony. He had watched Nobunaga place it in his hands. He had come to regard its disappearance as a personal failure.

Now it lay before him as though nothing had happened.
Nobunaga pointed toward it.
“Take it.”
Yasuke hesitated.
“My lord?”
“I gave it to you.”
“Yes.”
“Has that changed?”
“No.”
“Then take it.”
Yasuke approached.
Lifted the weapon.
It was heavier than he remembered.
Not in weight.
In meaning.
Nobunaga studied him.
“The man who stole it is dead. The men who helped conceal it are being questioned. Moritsugu remains in custody.”
Yasuke nodded.
“And the remaining records?”
“Those recovered will be examined.”
“By whom?”
Nobunaga smiled faintly.
“Men who understand the difference between reading a document and inventing one.”
Yasuke bowed his head.
“Thank you, my lord.”
The ruler's expression grew serious.
“I have learned something unpleasant from this affair.”
Yasuke waited.
“Men serving me have used my authority to enrich themselves and protect their allies.”
“Yes.”
“They believed the magnitude of my ambitions would prevent me from noticing their smaller crimes.”
He glanced toward the sword.
“Perhaps they were right for longer than I care to admit.”

Yasuke remained silent.
Nobunaga approached the open window.
Beyond the walls, the castle grounds stretched toward the lake.
“The country will not be governed by good intentions alone.”
“No, my lord.”
“Nor by perfect justice.”
Yasuke said nothing.
Nobunaga turned.
“But neither should a ruler mistake convenience for necessity.”
For a moment, the room was quiet.
Then he pointed toward the sword.
“You have carried that thing long enough to understand that it cannot settle a question simply by being drawn.”
Yasuke smiled.
“I am beginning to.”
“Good.”
Nobunaga returned to his seat.
“Then stop letting the men who fear its contents decide what it represents.”
Yasuke bowed.
And left with the weapon.
For the first time since receiving it, he was uncertain whether carrying the sword was an honor or an inconvenience.
He suspected it could be both.

Present Day

Luna Hayes had a problem.
A good problem.
Which was unusual enough that she immediately suspected it would become a bad one.
Dr. Mercer had sent the first installment of the museum's digitized documents.
Not the complete archive.
Not the materials still under ownership review.
But enough to begin constructing a verified record of what the family actually knew.

Emiko sat beside her at the dining room table.
Malcolm was in the kitchen.
He had announced that his role in the afternoon's research would be “executive catering.”
Luna had translated this as making sandwiches.
He had not objected.
On her laptop, she had created three folders.
DOCUMENTED
UNVERIFIED
FAMILY ACCOUNTS
Emiko examined the screen.
“Very good.”
Luna smiled.
“I've learned something from this experience.”
“What?”
“Never put a family legend in the same folder as an invoice.”
Her mother laughed.
“Excellent advice.”
Luna opened the first folder.
“Grandpa's deposit receipt. Verified.”
“Yes.”
“The museum inventory. Verified as a museum record, although some statements inside it still need checking.”
“Yes.”
“The shipping references. Daniel Mercer confirms handling the deliveries.”
“Some of them.”
“Right.”
She moved to the next folder.
“Yasuke's supposed descendants.”
Her mother leaned closer.
“Unverified.”
“Very.”
“The Chiyo account?”
“Family account. We don't know how closely the surviving copies match the original.”
“Exactly.”

Luna studied the screen.
Then opened the records relating to the boy whose identity had been disputed in sixteenth-century Japan.
Several names appeared.
Different spellings.
Different family associations.
Later annotations that contradicted one another.
She frowned.
“Mom?”
“Yes?”
“What if we're trying to answer the wrong question?”
Her mother looked at her.
“Which question?”
“Who the boy's parents were.”
Emiko considered.
“That's important.”
“Maybe. But look.”
Luna highlighted a later entry.
“Someone used his supposed ancestry to argue that certain records belonged to a particular family.”
Her mother nodded.
“Yes.”
“Then somebody else disputed it.”
“Yes.”
“And hundreds of years later, people are still fighting over whether that bloodline gives them authority.”
Emiko looked toward the screen.
Luna continued.
“What if we stop trying to find the correct heir and start by identifying which records were actually deposited?”
Her mother sat back.
“That would change the question.”
“Exactly.”
“To whether they were ever lawfully transferred.”
“Yes.”
“And whether the present holders can establish ownership.”
Luna nodded.

“Which is what the museum is already investigating.”
Her mother smiled.
“So what do you want to do?”
Luna considered.
“Help them without pretending we're the experts.”
“How?”
“Build a source guide. Show where every piece of information came from, and which claims are uncertain. Then qualified researchers can examine it.”
Emiko studied her.
“That will take time.”
“I know.”
“And some records may be private.”
“I know.”
“And we cannot publish materials we don't have permission to distribute.”
Luna nodded.
“I know that too.”
Her mother smiled.
“Then I think you're onto something.”
From the kitchen, Malcolm called, “How many sandwiches does an international archival revolution require?”
His daughter looked toward the doorway.
“Three.”
“Excellent. Very economical revolution.”
Her mother laughed.
Then Luna looked back at the screen.
For the first time, she wasn't searching for evidence that she had inherited something extraordinary.
She was trying to make the evidence useful.
It felt considerably better.

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Ren saw the sword when Yasuke entered the archive.
His expression changed immediately.
“You found it.”

Yasuke nodded.
“Yes.”
“Where?”
“A stable.”
Ren blinked.
“A stable?”
“Yes.”
He considered.
Then laughed.
It hurt his ribs.
He winced.
Aki looked up from her writing.
“Serves you right.”
Ren smiled painfully.
“Probably.”
Yasuke placed the sword on a low stand.
Aki examined it.
Then approached.
“The missing fitting.”
“Yes.”
“Chiyo has it.”
“I know.”
She looked toward him.
“Have you told Nobunaga?”
“Yes.”
“And?”
“He did not ask me to recover it immediately.”
Aki raised an eyebrow.
“Interesting.”
Yasuke smiled.
“Very.”
Ren watched them.
Then looked toward the pile of documents.
“There's something I need to tell you.”
Aki sighed.
Her brother winced.
“I know.”

“Do you?”
“Yes.”
She set down her brush.
“Then please make it something useful.”
Ren nodded.
“Katsunari told me why the keepers had begun collecting every surviving copy of Harunobu's records.”
Yasuke approached.
“Why?”
“Because the documents contradicted one another.”
Aki frowned.
“That is hardly unusual after so many transfers.”
“No. But the contradictions were deliberate.”
He pointed toward a register.
“Some people were recorded under more than one name. In certain cases, different households claimed custody of the same child.”
Yasuke looked toward him.
“Because the records were falsified.”
“Yes.”
Ren took a breath.
“And later, those falsified records were used as proof of legitimate inheritance.”
Aki studied him.
“So the men involved needed every surviving copy.”
“To decide which version people would be allowed to see.”
Silence.
Yasuke looked toward the sword.
It was beginning to make a terrible kind of sense.
The original wrong had been the disappearance of people.
The second wrong was the alteration of their identities.
And the third was the attempt to turn those alterations into permanent truth.
Aki reached for a particular document.
“Hana's father understood.”
Ren nodded.
“He tried to preserve the original entries.”
“And that's why he disappeared.”

“Possibly.”
Yasuke looked toward Ren.
“Do you know where Harunobu was taken?”
Ren shook his head.
“No.”
Aki studied her brother.
For a moment, disappointment flashed across her face.
Then Ren continued.
“But I know who signed the order moving him.”
Yasuke straightened.
“Moritsugu?”
Ren shook his head.
“No.”
He reached for a document.
A copied administrative order.
The signature at its bottom was faint.
But legible.
Aki read it.
Then went still.
Yasuke looked toward her.
“What?”
She handed him the paper.
He examined the name.
It belonged to a man serving in a household allied with Nobunaga.
A man they had seen at court.
A man whose status placed him beyond the reach of an ordinary inquiry.
Yasuke looked up.
“Are you certain?”
Ren nodded.
“I found the original reference in the seal register.”
Aki looked toward her brother.
“Why didn't you tell us sooner?”
Ren swallowed.
“Because I only confirmed it this morning.”
She studied him.
Then nodded.

“Good.”
He looked surprised.
“Good?”
“Yes.”
She returned to her work.
“Try doing that more often.”
Yasuke smiled.
Ren sighed.
His sister had forgiven him enough to resume insulting him.
It was, he supposed, progress.

Present Day

Daniel Mercer had agreed to provide a written statement.
Not because Malcolm had threatened him.
Not because Daichi had suddenly become cooperative.
Because the shipping records had begun attracting formal scrutiny.
The statement was not especially dramatic.
Daniel admitted that the sword had been repeatedly shipped under instructions from several clients or intermediaries.
He acknowledged the repeated use of the old deposit reference.
He said the number helped identify objects associated with a disputed historical collection.
He denied knowledge of any supernatural properties.
Malcolm considered that last point a personal insult.
“Did we ask whether it was supernatural?”
Emiko looked up.
“No.”
“Then why put that in?”
“Perhaps because someone mentioned the unusual returns.”
He shook his head.
“I'm going to sue him for making me sound ridiculous.”
Luna smiled.
“Dad, you did tell people the sword wouldn't stay gone.”
“Because it wouldn't.”
She raised an eyebrow.
He sighed.

“Fine.”
Emiko continued reading.
Then stopped.
“What?”
Malcolm leaned closer.
She pointed to the final paragraph.
Daniel said that one of the later returns had been arranged after a disagreement among the people controlling the collection.
The instruction had been explicit.
The sword was not to be sold to a private buyer.
It was to remain with the American family until the deposit issue was resolved.
Malcolm frowned.
“Who gave the instruction?”
“Daniel doesn't identify the client.”
Luna leaned forward.
“Does he say why?”
Emiko nodded slowly.
“Because the family might be able to establish a claim to the documents.”
Malcolm stared.
“Then somebody was trying to help us.”
“Possibly.”
“Without telling us.”
“Yes.”
He shook his head.
“Everybody in this story has terrible communication skills.”
His daughter looked at him.
“Some worse than others.”
He smiled.
“Thank you.”
Emiko studied the statement.
Then said, “What's important is that the returns were deliberate.”
Malcolm nodded.
“And apparently paid for.”
“Yes.”
“And now we know how they happened.”

“Mostly.”
He considered.
Then looked toward the empty place where the sword case had once stood.
It felt strange.
For years, he'd believed he was dealing with something impossible.
Now the explanation was ordinary.
Couriers.
Shipping accounts.
Collectors.
People making decisions.
There was something almost disappointing about that.
Until he remembered the threats.
The photographs.
The man who had grabbed his wife in a grocery store.
The people who believed his daughter could be appointed to a role without her agreement.
The ordinary explanation did not make the danger less real.
It made the people responsible more accountable.
He liked that considerably better.

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Nobunaga received the copied order in the early evening.
Yasuke and Aki waited while he examined it.
The ruler said nothing for a long time.
Then he placed the paper on the table.
“I know this signature.”
Yasuke bowed.
“Yes, my lord.”
“And you understand whose household it represents?”
“Yes.”
Nobunaga looked toward Aki.
“Your family has uncovered something politically inconvenient.”
She bowed.
“I am beginning to understand that, my lord.”
He studied her.

“Are you frightened?”
She considered.
“Yes.”
“Good.”
Aki looked up.
Nobunaga continued.
“A person who discovers wrongdoing among powerful men and feels no fear is either a fool or one of the powerful men.”
Yasuke smiled faintly.
The ruler did not.
He picked up the document.
“This cannot be treated as proof of guilt by itself. The signature may have been forged. The seal may have been misused.”
Aki nodded.
“We understand.”
“But the order was recorded. And Harunobu disappeared.”
“Yes.”
Nobunaga looked toward Yasuke.
“I will summon the officer named here.”
Yasuke bowed.
“Thank you.”
The ruler raised a hand.
“Do not thank me yet.”
He turned toward the window.
Beyond the castle, the lake reflected the darkening sky.
“There are men who would gladly use this inquiry to weaken my allies. Others would use it to settle old grievances.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Yes.”
“And some would destroy evidence rather than risk dishonor.”
Aki thought of the burning storehouse.
“Yes, my lord.”
Nobunaga looked back.
“Which is why the surviving records must no longer remain together.”
Silence.
Yasuke glanced toward Aki.

She looked equally surprised.
Nobunaga continued.
“Copies will be made. One collection will remain under my authority. Another will be entrusted to a household beyond the reach of those implicated. A third will be held by someone whose loyalty is to the people named.”
Aki stepped forward.
“My lord?”
Nobunaga looked at her.
“You have argued for this since the beginning.”
“Yes.”
“Then you will help arrange it.”
She bowed deeply.
“Thank you.”
He studied her.
“Do not thank me either.”
For a moment, the ruler's expression softened.
“You have made my government considerably more troublesome.”
Aki looked up.
Then smiled.
“My grandmother would be pleased.”
Nobunaga laughed.
“I have no doubt.”

Present Day

The museum's provenance review attracted attention from an unexpected direction.
A university historian in Japan contacted Dr. Mercer after learning that the institution was examining a group of documents associated with disputed early modern custody records.
She specialized in family archives, documentary transmission, and the ways later generations used historical records to support inheritance claims.
Her name was Professor Ayako Fujimori.
Emiko read the introduction carefully.
Then smiled.

“Finally.”
Malcolm looked up.
“What?”
“Someone who can tell us what the documents actually establish.”
He nodded.
“I thought that's what we've been trying to do.”
“Yes. But we're not historians.”
He looked offended.
“I've watched documentaries.”
Luna laughed.
Her mother smiled.
“That makes you dangerous.”
“Apparently.”
Professor Fujimori joined them on a video call two days later.
She was courteous.
Precise.
And unimpressed by romantic family legends.
Malcolm liked her almost immediately.
She began with Yasuke.
“Yes,” she said, “Yasuke is a documented historical person. His association with Oda Nobunaga is supported by surviving contemporary sources.”
Luna leaned forward.
“And descendants?”
The professor shook her head.
“We do not have reliable evidence establishing a line of descendants from Yasuke to your family.”
Malcolm nodded.
“That's what we expected.”
Professor Fujimori continued.
“The private documents you've described may be worth examining. But a story copied through generations is not the same as contemporary evidence.”
Emiko smiled.
“We agree.”
The professor looked toward the sword photographs.
“And the weapon?”

“We're hoping to establish its age and history,” Luna said.
“That will require specialist examination. The present fittings may not all date to the same period. A family tradition concerning Nobunaga's gift cannot be accepted without corroboration.”
Malcolm considered.
“So the sword might not even be the one Yasuke carried.”
“Correct.”
His daughter looked toward him.
He nodded.
“Fair enough.”
Professor Fujimori continued.
“But the modern deposit documents are potentially significant in their own right. They may show how historical objects and family papers moved between private collections.”
Emiko leaned forward.
“Would you be willing to examine copies?”
“Yes, if the museum can provide access under appropriate terms.”
“And the family accounts?”
“I would be happy to assess their language, likely period of composition, and possible sources. But I would distinguish those findings from proof that the events described occurred.”
Luna smiled.
“That's exactly what we want.”
The professor nodded.
“Then I think we can work together.”
After the call, Malcolm sat quietly for a while.
His wife noticed.
“What?”
He looked up.
“Nothing.”
She waited.
He smiled.
“It's just interesting.”
“What?”
“We started with a sword that kept coming back.”
“Yes.”

“And now we're talking to an actual historian who might tell us that half the story was made up.”
Luna considered.
“Would that bother you?”
He thought about it.
Then shook his head.
“No.”
“Really?”
“Yes.”
He smiled.
“Because if somebody invented a beautiful story about my family, I'd like to know which part was beautiful and which part was true.”
Emiko looked at him.
For a moment, she seemed surprised.
Then she smiled.
“That's a good answer.”
He nodded.
“I have them occasionally.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

The first copy was completed before midnight.
Aki examined every line.
Ren checked the names against the surviving register.
Hana reviewed the entries concerning her father's household.
Yasuke sat beside the doorway, watching the work.
It was not glorious.
No battles.
No speeches.
No dramatic confrontation with armed men.
Only ink.
Paper.
Careful hands.
And the steady effort of preserving what others had tried to destroy.
Hana looked up.
“There's a mistake.”
Ren leaned closer.

“Where?”
She pointed.
“A woman's name.”
He examined the character.
Then nodded.
“You're right.”
He corrected it.
Hana watched him.
“Be careful.”
Ren smiled.
“I am.”
She raised an eyebrow.
He sighed.
“I am now.”
Aki laughed softly.
Yasuke smiled.
The room felt different.
Not safe.
The dangers remained.
Men had died.
Others were imprisoned.
Powerful households still had reasons to fear the records.
But something had shifted.
For the first time, the work did not depend upon one person holding everything.
Nor upon a sword.
Nor upon a lord's favor alone.
Several people knew the truth.
Several copies would survive.
And the girl whose name had been stolen was helping ensure that other names were preserved correctly.
Yasuke approached her.
“Are you tired?”
Hana nodded.
“Yes.”
“Then rest.”
She shook her head.

“After this page.”
He smiled.
“You sound like Aki.”
The girl looked toward the woman.
“Thank you.”
Aki laughed.
Yasuke raised his hands.
“I see I'm outnumbered.”
Ren looked up.
“Completely.”
Yasuke sighed.
“An unfortunate household.”
The laughter was brief.
But genuine.
Then Hana returned to her writing.
And somewhere outside the castle, beyond the reach of its walls, people lived under names the records might one day help restore.

Present Day

Luna sat alone at the dining room table late that evening.
Malcolm had gone to bed.
Emiko was finishing a call with relatives in Japan.
The house was quiet.
Her laptop remained open.
Three folders.
Documents.
Questions.
A growing collection of evidence.
She opened the earliest photograph of the sword.
Then the picture of Yasuke's supposed historical record.
Then the shipping invoice.
For months, she'd imagined that somewhere inside these materials lay a single answer.
A revelation that would explain everything.
Who she was.
Why the sword had come to her.

What her family was meant to do.
Now she wasn't so certain there was one answer.
Perhaps there were many.
Some verifiable.
Some uncertain.
Some lost forever.
The thought no longer frightened her.
She opened a fresh document.
At the top, she typed:
THE NAMES PROJECT
Then she paused.
It sounded grand.
Perhaps too grand.
She considered something smaller.
More practical.
A working archive.
A shared research effort.
A way to preserve sources and make responsible access possible without asking anyone to accept a hereditary appointment.
She typed a description.
An independent research initiative to identify, preserve, and responsibly share records concerning displaced families, altered identities, and historical custody disputes.
She read it.
Changed two words.
Then added:
No claim of descent or ownership will be treated as established without supporting evidence.
She smiled.
That felt right.
She saved the document.
Then opened another page.
This one contained questions for Professor Fujimori.
Questions for Dr. Mercer.
Questions for Sachiko.
Questions for Daichi.
Not demands.

Not accusations.
Questions that might produce answers.
And, importantly, records of who had answered them.
She worked for another hour.
Then heard footsteps.
Malcolm entered the room wearing an old T-shirt and the expression of a man who had come downstairs for water and discovered a meeting in progress.
“What are you doing?”
She looked up.
“Working.”
He glanced at the screen.
“The Names Project?”
She nodded.
“Just an idea.”
He read the description.
Then sat beside her.
For a while, he said nothing.
Luna waited.
Finally, he smiled.
“I like it.”
She looked surprised.
“Really?”
“Yes.”
“Even though it's not about the sword?”
He looked toward the empty sideboard.
“Especially because it's not about the sword.”
She smiled.
He leaned back.
“But I do have one suggestion.”
She raised an eyebrow.
“What?”
“Don't appoint yourself president for life.”
She burst out laughing.
He grinned.
“Apparently that's how we got into this mess.”
She shook her head.

“Noted.”
He leaned over and kissed her forehead.
“Good night, baby.”
“Night, Dad.”
He stood.
Then paused.
“Hey.”
She looked up.
“What?”
“Whatever we find out about Yasuke…”
He considered.
“Yeah?”
She waited.
He smiled.
“Don't let anybody make you feel like you're less important than the story.”
Her expression softened.
“I won't.”
He nodded.
Then headed upstairs.
Luna watched him go.
After a moment, she looked back at the screen.
The cursor blinked beneath the title.
She began typing again.

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1581

Yasuke woke before dawn.
The castle was quiet.
Aki slept beside him.
Beyond the window, the first light touched the rooftops.
For a moment, he remained still.
He thought of the sword.
Of Nobunaga.
Of the rescued girl.
Of the boy he had not met.
Of Jin and Hana.

Of Chiyo and the families who had carried records through danger.
He thought of the people whose names had been stolen.
And of the copies now being prepared to preserve them.
Then he looked toward Aki.
She stirred.
Opened one eye.
“What?”
He smiled.
“Nothing.”
She studied him.
“That usually means something.”
He laughed softly.
“Yes.”
“What?”
He considered.
“I was thinking that one day, none of us will be here.”
Aki opened both eyes.
“A cheerful beginning to the morning.”
He smiled.
“Forgive me.”
She sat up slightly.
“What were you really thinking?”
He looked toward the window.
“That the records may survive us.”
Aki nodded.
“Yes.”
“And perhaps the sword.”
“Perhaps.”
“And the stories people tell about what happened.”
She considered.
“Those will change.”
“Yes.”
“Some will be wrong.”
“Yes.”
“Some will make you taller and more handsome.”
Yasuke looked at her.
“More handsome?”

She smiled.
“A difficult task.”
He laughed.
Then grew quiet.
“And some will forget us entirely.”
Aki studied him.
“Perhaps.”
He looked toward her.
“Doesn't that trouble you?”
She considered.
Then shook her head.
“Not as much as it once might have.”
“Why?”
She touched his face.
“Because Hana knows her name.”
Yasuke was silent.
“Because the boy is alive.”
“Yes.”
“Because Ren is trying to repair what he damaged.”
“Yes.”
“And because somewhere beyond these walls, people who thought their histories were lost may one day learn that someone remembered them.”
Yasuke watched her.
She smiled.
“That seems enough.”
For a long moment, he said nothing.
Then he drew her close.
Outside, the castle began to wake.
Servants moved along the corridors.
Guards changed watch.
The ordinary machinery of a powerful household resumed its work.
Neither Yasuke nor Aki knew what the coming year would bring.
They did not know how quickly Nobunaga's world would change.
They did not know which records would survive.
Or whether their own names would be remembered together.
But for that morning, they had something real.

A life they were choosing.
People they intended to protect.
And work that mattered whether anyone ever told their story.
Aki closed her eyes.
Yasuke held her.
And the sword rested quietly across the room.

Present Day

Luna completed the first version of her project outline just after midnight.
She saved it.
Closed the laptop.
Then sat for a moment in the darkness.
The house was still.
Her parents were upstairs.
The sword remained in secure storage.
No courier waited outside.
No mysterious message had arrived.
For once, the mystery seemed content to leave them alone.
She stood.
Carried her notebook toward the stairs.
Then stopped beside the empty sideboard.
For months, the sword had occupied that space.
It had seemed almost alive.
Demanding attention.
Pulling the family toward answers.
Now the wood was bare.
She touched the surface.
Then smiled faintly.
The sword had brought them into the story.
But it wasn't going to decide how the story ended.
She turned off the light.
And went upstairs.

Chapter 24

The Last Keeper



Present Day

Malcolm Hayes had discovered that peace and quiet were deeply suspicious.
For three days, nobody had delivered a sword.
Nobody had photographed his daughter's bedroom.
Nobody had appeared at the front door claiming to represent a secretive Japanese family.
And nobody had announced that a relative was alive after several decades of being dead.
He found the situation unsettling.
Emiko found it delightful.
Luna found it useful.
She had spent those three days working with Professor Fujimori and Dr. Mercer on the preliminary outline for the Names Project.
Malcolm had spent considerably less time being productive.
He had fixed the lawnmower.
Almost.
He had repaired a loose kitchen cabinet.
Successfully.
And he had made the unfortunate discovery that his wife knew how to change the oil in her own car.
That one bothered him.
“You're telling me you could've been doing that all these years?”
She looked up from her tea.
“Yes.”
“And you let me take it to the garage?”
“Yes.”

He stared.
“Why?”
“Because you seemed to enjoy being useful.”
Luna nearly fell off her chair laughing.
Malcolm pointed toward his wife.
“I'm starting to think this marriage has been built on deception.”
She smiled.
“Darling, you've had a very happy marriage.”
“That's exactly what makes it suspicious.”
Then the telephone rang.
Luna checked the screen.
“Professor Fujimori.”
Malcolm looked toward the ceiling.
“Of course.”
Emiko laughed.
“Answer it.”
Luna did.
And the peace ended.
Professor Fujimori appeared on the laptop looking troubled.
“I've received a message from Japan,” she said.
Emiko leaned closer.
“Concerning the records?”
“Yes. The Kuroda family has agreed in principle to an independent archival review.”
Luna sat straighter.
“That's good.”
“It is.”
The professor hesitated.
“But there's a complication.”
Malcolm sighed.
There it was.
The universe correcting itself.
Professor Fujimori continued.
“Someone accessed one of the private storage rooms yesterday.”
Emiko frowned.
“Without authorization?”
“Apparently.”

“Was anything taken?”
“Several document cases have been moved. The family is conducting an inventory.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Who went in?”
“They don't know.”
“Security cameras?”
“The building is old. The storage rooms do not have comprehensive coverage.”
Luna studied the professor.
“Could it have been Daichi?”
“He was reportedly outside Japan at the time.”
“That doesn't rule out someone acting for him,” Emiko said.
“No.”
Professor Fujimori looked down.
“There's something more important.”
Luna waited.
“One of the cases contains the earliest surviving copies of the account concerning the child protected by Yasuke's associates.”
The room went quiet.
Malcolm looked toward his daughter.
She was already reaching for her notebook.
The professor continued.
“The case has not yet been confirmed missing. But the seal on its storage shelf was broken.”
Emiko considered.
“Who has access?”
“Several members of the Kuroda household and two employees. A full audit is underway.”
Luna frowned.
“Why would someone take those particular records now?”
Malcolm folded his arms.
“Because we're finally asking questions somebody doesn't like.”
Emiko nodded.
“Perhaps.”
Professor Fujimori continued.

“I've advised the family to preserve the scene, document every discrepancy, and avoid moving further materials until the inventory is complete.”
Emiko considered.
“Can the museum assist?”
“Dr. Mercer is coordinating with the Japanese custodians. There are also questions about whether some documents have been copied or photographed recently.”
Luna leaned closer.
“Copies?”
“Yes.”
She thought for a moment.
Then opened her project outline.
“What if we stop thinking of the originals as the only things worth protecting?”
The professor regarded her.
“Go on.”
“If people already made copies, even imperfect ones, we could compare them against the missing or damaged documents.”
Emiko nodded.
“And establish which portions were present before the security breach.”
“Exactly.”
Professor Fujimori considered.
“That is sensible.”
Luna continued.
“Sachiko has copies. Nakamura has documents. The museum has some. Our family has photographs.”
Her father nodded.
“And Daichi's family has whatever they're currently arguing about.”
Professor Fujimori smiled faintly.
“Yes.”
Luna leaned forward.
“So why not ask everyone who claims to want the records preserved to submit copies to the review?”
The professor considered.

“Subject to appropriate permissions and security, that could be valuable.”
Emiko looked toward her daughter.
A small smile appeared.
Malcolm noticed.
“What?”
His wife shook her head.
“Nothing.”
He frowned.
“That means something.”
She smiled.
“Our daughter may have just found a way to make the missing records less useful to whoever took them.”
He considered.
Then grinned.
“Excellent.”
Luna looked up.
“Excellent?”
“Yes.”
He smiled.
“Nothing annoys a thief more than discovering he stole something everybody else already has.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — Late 1581

The first attempt to destroy the copies came at night.
A servant entered the eastern archive carrying a tray of oil lamps.
Nothing unusual.
He had performed the same duty for months.
He passed the guard.
Placed the tray beside the writing table.
Then stumbled.
An accident, apparently.
One lamp fell.
Oil spread across the floor.
The flame caught the edge of a paper screen.
The servant cried out.

By the time the guard reached him, the fire had begun climbing the wall.
Yasuke was in the adjoining courtyard.
He smelled smoke before he heard the shouting.
He ran.
Aki was already inside.
She had been working late with Hana.
When the lamp fell, she'd grabbed the nearest stack of papers and dragged the girl toward the door.
Now smoke filled the passage.
The outer screen was burning.
Yasuke stepped through the doorway.
“Aki!”
“Here!”
He saw her near the far wall.
Hana crouched behind her, clutching a bundle of documents.
The guard struggled with a bucket.
Flames raced across a hanging screen.
Yasuke seized the cloth and ripped it from its frame.
The burning fabric struck the floor.
He stamped on it.
“Out!”
Aki pushed Hana toward the doorway.
“Take the papers!”
The girl obeyed.
Then stopped.
“Ren!”
Yasuke turned.
The older man was still inside.
At the rear table.
Gathering documents.
Of course he was.
Yasuke swore.
“Ren!”
The man looked up.
“Just these!”
“The building is burning!”

“I can see that!”
Yasuke crossed the room.
Seized Ren by the back of his robe.
And dragged him toward the door.
Ren protested.
“I had them!”
“You also had a perfectly good opportunity to die!”
Aki reached the courtyard with Hana.
Yasuke followed, hauling Ren behind him.
The guards brought water.
Other servants arrived.
The fire was contained before it spread beyond the archive.
But several shelves were badly damaged.
The outer wall was blackened.
And a number of papers had been destroyed.
Yasuke stood in the courtyard, coughing.
Aki approached.
“Are you hurt?”
He shook his head.
“Only my patience.”
She looked toward Ren.
He sat on a stone step, clutching a rescued bundle of documents.
Aki folded her arms.
“You went back for the papers?”
Ren nodded.
“Yes.”
“After what happened at the lake?”
He looked up.
“I wasn't going to lose another collection.”
Her expression changed.
For a moment, she seemed uncertain whether to embrace him or strike him.
Then she said, “You fool.”
Ren smiled weakly.
“Yes.”
She knelt beside him.
Touched his face.

Then embraced him.
He closed his eyes.
For the first time since his confession, he allowed himself to believe she might eventually forgive him.
Behind them, Yasuke watched.
Then looked toward the damaged archive.
The fire had been too convenient.
A servant had stumbled.
A lamp had fallen.
And the shelves nearest the door had contained the copied documents.
He turned toward Saburō.
“Find the servant.”
The young warrior frowned.
“He's being treated for burns.”
“Then guard him.”
Saburō considered.
“You think it wasn't an accident.”
Yasuke looked toward the smoke.
“No.”

Present Day

Daichi Kuroda called Emiko directly.
She nearly declined.
Then answered.
“Daichi-san.”
“Thank you for taking my call.”
She looked toward her husband.
He mouthed, Speaker.
She nodded and activated it.
“My family is listening.”
A pause.
“Of course.”
His voice sounded different from their first meeting.
Less polished.
More strained.

“I understand you've been informed about the storage incident.”
“Yes.”
“I wanted you to hear something from me.”
Malcolm folded his arms.
“That would be refreshing.”
Daichi ignored him.
“My uncle's collection was never as secure as we pretended.”
Emiko frowned.
“Explain.”
“Over the years, documents were borrowed, moved, copied, or exchanged without adequate records.”
Professor Fujimori's concerns, the family realized, were not merely theoretical.
Emiko leaned forward.
“And the missing cases?”
“We're still determining what happened.”
“Have you reported the incident?”
“Yes. The property manager and local authorities are involved.”
She nodded.
“Good.”
Daichi continued.
“I have also reviewed the agreement my uncle used when your husband's grandfather deposited his records.”
Malcolm straightened.
“And?”
A pause.
“Your grandfather was entitled to request their return.”
Silence.
Emiko studied the telephone.
“Was his request received?”
“Yes.”
Malcolm's expression hardened.
“Then why weren't they returned?”
Daichi hesitated.
“Because my uncle believed the records included information that could damage several households.”
Malcolm leaned forward.

“Your uncle didn't own them.”
“No.”
The answer came quietly.
So quietly that everyone noticed.
Luna looked up.
Daichi continued.
“My uncle believed possession gave him a duty to control what could be disclosed.”
Emiko shook her head.
“That is precisely the problem.”
“I know.”
Silence.
For a moment, nobody spoke.
Then Daichi said something unexpected.
“I've instructed our legal advisers to begin identifying which materials may be returned to the rightful depositors or their successors.”
Malcolm stared.
“Really?”
“Yes.”
“And the rest?”
“Those with disputed provenance will need independent review.”
Emiko nodded.
“That is reasonable.”
Daichi hesitated.
“There is something I would like to ask.”
Luna leaned forward.
“What?”
“Would you consider participating in an advisory group concerning the records?”
Her father closed his eyes.
“Oh, here we go.”
Daichi continued quickly.
“Not as a custodian. Not as an heir. As one participant among researchers, archivists, and representatives of affected families.”
Luna looked toward her mother.
Then considered.

“What authority would the group have?”
“Initially, to recommend procedures for preservation and access.”
“Would your family have veto power?”
Daichi hesitated.
Luna waited.
Finally, he answered.
“Not over independently deposited materials once their lawful status has been established.”
Emiko leaned forward.
“And over disputed materials?”
“Those would remain subject to the relevant legal processes.”
Luna nodded slowly.
“Send us the proposal.”
Daichi sounded almost surprised.
“You'll consider it?”
“I'll read it.”
A pause.
“That is all I ask.”
Malcolm raised an eyebrow.
For the first time, Daichi had asked for something that sounded like an invitation rather than a command.
Emiko noticed too.
But she did not mistake it for redemption.
A man could begin correcting a wrong without undoing the years he had benefited from it.
“Daichi-san,” she said.
“Yes?”
“Cooperation will not erase the conduct of your family or anyone associated with the threats against mine.”
“I understand.”
“And we will not agree to silence concerning wrongdoing merely to obtain access.”
Another pause.
“I understand.”
Emiko considered.
“Then perhaps we can begin.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — Late 1581

The servant confessed before dawn.
Not immediately.
Not willingly.
But when Nobunaga's investigators confronted him with the lamp's altered wick and the oil deliberately poured beneath the archive shelves, his explanation collapsed.
He had been paid.
Not much.
Enough to settle a debt.
He had been told the fire would destroy unimportant papers and appear accidental.
He had not been told Hana would be inside.
That detail seemed to trouble him.
Yasuke found little comfort in it.
Nobunaga questioned the man personally.
“Who paid you?”
The servant named a merchant.
The merchant, investigators discovered, had already fled.
“Who instructed him?” Nobunaga asked.
The servant shook his head.
“I don't know, my lord.”
Nobunaga studied him.
“You set fire to my archive without knowing whose interests you served?”
The servant trembled.
“Yes, my lord.”
The ruler leaned back.
For a long moment, he said nothing.
Then he looked toward Yasuke.
“How many copies survived?”
“Most of those prepared outside the eastern archive.”
“And the originals?”
“Several are elsewhere.”
Nobunaga nodded slowly.
“Then the arrangement worked.”

Yasuke bowed.
“Yes, my lord.”
The ruler smiled without humor.
“Men who wish to destroy a truth rarely expect to discover that others have already carried it away.”
He turned toward his attendant.
“Inform the households holding the remaining copies. They are to secure them separately.”
Yasuke nodded.
Then hesitated.
“My lord?”
Nobunaga looked up.
“Yes?”
“There is another matter.”
“Speak.”
“The boy.”
The ruler regarded him.
“What of him?”
“He remains hidden.”
“Yes.”
“And those searching for him may attempt to use the surviving records to establish a false claim.”
Nobunaga considered.
“What do you propose?”
Yasuke took a breath.
“That his whereabouts not be recorded in any document held by those conducting the inquiry.”
The ruler raised an eyebrow.
“You ask me to conduct an investigation while deliberately withholding information?”
“Yes, my lord.”
“An interesting request.”
Yasuke bowed his head.
“The child has committed no wrong.”
“No.”
“Yet every man seeking him believes his identity can serve a purpose.”

Nobunaga considered.
“And you would deny them the opportunity.”
“Until the boy is old enough to decide whether he wishes to be known.”
The ruler studied him.
Then nodded.
“Very well.”
Yasuke looked up.
Nobunaga continued.
“His existence may be acknowledged in the records. His location will not be entered.”
Yasuke bowed deeply.
“Thank you.”
The ruler smiled faintly.
“You are becoming troublesome.”
“Yes, my lord.”
“Fortunately, I've grown accustomed to it.”

Present Day

Luna's proposal grew from two pages to eleven.
Then sixteen.
Then twenty-three.
Her father began referring to it as the world's longest homework assignment.
She ignored him.
Mostly.
The Names Project would not own the disputed records.
That was important.
It would begin as a research and documentation effort, subject to cooperation from institutions and lawful custodians.
It would distinguish verified documents from later copies and family accounts.
It would identify gaps.
It would avoid publishing sensitive personal information without appropriate review.

And it would invite participation from historians, archivists, and families connected to the records.
Luna was particularly proud of one paragraph.
Emiko read it twice.
Then looked up.
“Where did this come from?”
Luna shrugged.
“Everything we've been through.”
The paragraph proposed that no individual could claim leadership of the project merely through ancestry.
Participation would depend on expertise, contribution, and the consent of the people and institutions involved.
Emiko smiled.
“I like that.”
Malcolm approached with a sandwich.
He read the paragraph.
Then nodded.
“Excellent.”
Luna looked suspicious.
“You actually read it?”
“Yes.”
“All of it?”
He considered.
“Most of it.”
“Dad.”
“Enough to know that you've made it impossible for somebody to appoint themselves Supreme Emperor of Old Paper.”
She burst out laughing.
Her mother shook her head.
Malcolm sat.
Then grew serious.
“There's something I want to say.”
Both women turned.
He looked toward the project outline.
“I don't want us to lose sight of why we started.”
Luna frowned.
“What do you mean?”

“We started because somebody sent you a sword and then frightened the hell out of us.”
“Yes.”
“And now we're talking about archives, historians, international committees, and all this other stuff.”
Emiko nodded.
“Yes.”
He looked toward his daughter.
“I think it's good. I really do.”
She waited.
“But I don't want you feeling like you have to finish what every generation before you failed to do.”
Luna considered.
“I don't.”
He studied her.
“Promise?”
She smiled faintly.
“Dad, I can't promise how I'll feel in ten years.”
He nodded.
“Fair.”
“But I can tell you how I feel now.”
He waited.
“I want to see whether we can help make the records accessible.”
“Yes.”
“And if it turns out to be too big?”
“Then?”
“Then other people can carry it forward.”
Her father smiled.
“Good.”
She leaned toward him.
“And maybe I'll go to college, travel, fall in love, or do a thousand things that have nothing to do with ancient swords.”
He laughed.
“Excellent.”
Her mother smiled.
“That's what I want for you.”
Luna looked between them.

Then grinned.
“Although I might keep the sword.”
Malcolm froze.
His wife burst out laughing.
Luna continued.
“Just to annoy Dad.”
He stared.
“After all I've been through?”
She laughed.
He shook his head.
“I'm changing the locks.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — Early 1582

The sword lay before Yasuke.
Beside it were three copied documents, the silver fitting recovered from Chiyo, and a narrow wooden box.
Aki stood nearby.
Hana sat at the table.
Ren and Saburō waited beside the door.
They had gathered privately because the arrangement required more than the authority of one man.
Yasuke lifted the silver fitting.
Examined the curved lines.
Then placed it beside the sword.
Aki watched.
“Are you certain?”
“No.”
She smiled.
“A refreshing answer.”
He looked toward her.
“Would you prefer false confidence?”
“Occasionally. It makes conversations shorter.”
Hana laughed.
Yasuke turned toward the girl.
“Are you ready?”
She nodded.

“Yes.”
He opened the wooden box.
Inside lay a folded copy of the original deposit agreement.
A list of names.
And a second page describing the division of the surviving records.
Hana had helped write it.
So had Aki.
Ren had checked the names.
Saburō had witnessed the preparation.
Yasuke placed the papers beside the sword.
Then looked toward them.
“No single household will hold every surviving copy.”
Aki nodded.
“One remains under Nobunaga's authority.”
Ren continued.
“One travels to Chiyo's network.”
Saburō looked toward the documents.
“And another will be carried beyond the households implicated in the transfers.”
Hana raised her hand.
The others looked toward her.
“I have a question.”
Yasuke smiled.
“Of course.”
“If the records are divided, how will people know where to ask?”
Aki considered.
“That's why each copy contains a list of the other custodians.”
Hana frowned.
“But what if those people die?”
Silence.
Ren looked toward Aki.
She looked toward Yasuke.
The girl continued.
“Or what if their children decide not to keep the papers?”
Yasuke considered.
“Then the records must be passed to someone willing.”
Hana nodded.

“Who decides?”
Nobody answered immediately.
It was the same question again.
One they had encountered in different forms for months.
Finally, Aki spoke.
“The people who possess the records must explain what they are responsible for. And the next person must agree.”
Hana considered.
“And if nobody agrees?”
Aki looked down.
Then answered.
“Then they must find another way to preserve them.”
Hana nodded slowly.
“That seems fair.”
Yasuke smiled.
“Does it?”
“Yes.”
She looked toward the sword.
“But what about that?”
He followed her gaze.
The weapon rested on its stand.
The blade that Nobunaga had given him.
The object that had become entangled in their efforts to preserve the records.
Yasuke considered.
“What about it?”
“Who gets it?”
He looked toward Aki.
She looked back.
Then Yasuke smiled.
“For now, I do.”
Hana nodded.
“And after you?”
The room quieted.
Yasuke looked toward the blade.
He could not know where it would travel.

He could not know whether it would be treasured, stolen, sold, or forgotten.
He could not know whether the people who carried it would understand the papers once hidden within it.
He could only decide what to do while it remained in his hands.
Finally, he said, “That will be a question for another day.”
Hana considered.
Then smiled.
“Good.”
Ren raised an eyebrow.
“Good?”
“Yes.”
She looked toward Yasuke.
“Because we have enough questions today.”
Aki laughed.
Yasuke smiled.
For once, he agreed completely.

Present Day

The first public meeting concerning the Names Project took place online.
There were seven participants.
The family.
Professor Fujimori.
Dr. Mercer.
An independent archivist.
And a representative of a historical research organization in Japan.
Daichi Kuroda did not attend.
He had been invited to submit relevant materials through the formal process.
He had agreed.
Malcolm considered this a remarkable development.
“No mysterious envelopes. No threats. No sword.”
His wife looked at him.
“Try not to jinx it.”
He smiled.

The meeting was practical.
Almost boring.
They discussed provenance.
Document handling.
Translation standards.
Privacy.
Funding.
The need for legal guidance across jurisdictions.
And the danger of presenting family traditions as established history.
For the first time, Luna heard people disagree without treating disagreement as betrayal.
Dr. Mercer challenged an assumption.
Professor Fujimori suggested another interpretation.
The archivist recommended a different procedure.
Nobody reached for a sword.
Nobody threatened to destroy the records.
And nobody claimed an ancient bloodline gave them the right to decide.
Malcolm found the experience unexpectedly moving.
When the meeting ended, Luna closed her laptop.
Then looked toward her parents.
“Well?”
Emiko smiled.
“Well what?”
“How did I do?”
Malcolm considered.
“Terrible.”
She stared.
“What?”
He shook his head.
“Absolutely dreadful.”
His wife laughed.
Luna folded her arms.
“Dad.”

“You failed to intimidate anyone. You didn't demand obedience. You didn't even threaten to appoint yourself keeper of the universe.”
She began laughing.
He smiled.
“I don't know what we're going to do with you.”
Emiko put an arm around her.
“I think we'll manage.”

Azuchi Castle, Japan — 1582

The summons came before dawn.
Yasuke was preparing to depart with Nobunaga's attendants.
Aki stood beside him.
The sword was secured at his side.
Their separation was meant to be temporary.
Several days, perhaps longer.
Nobunaga had business beyond Azuchi.
The political struggle that had shaped Japan for years continued to demand his attention.
Yasuke had grown accustomed to sudden departures.
That did not make them easier.
Aki adjusted the fastening of his robe.
“You've packed?”
“Yes.”
“Properly?”
He smiled.
“I believe so.”
She examined the small bag.
Then removed a folded garment.
“This should be on top.”
He sighed.
“You don't trust me.”
“I trust you with swords.”
“That sounds promising.”
“Clothing is another matter.”
He laughed.

Then grew quiet.
Aki noticed.
“What?”
He looked toward her.
“I dislike leaving you with so much unfinished.”
She smiled faintly.
“Then come back.”
He nodded.
“That is my intention.”
She touched his face.
“Good.”
For a moment, they stood together.
Then she looked toward the sword.
“Have you decided what to do with it?”
Yasuke considered.
“Not entirely.”
“Then don't rush.”
He smiled.
“You're giving me permission to delay a decision?”
“A rare honor.”
He laughed.
Aki continued.
“Whatever happens, the copies are separated. Hana knows her name. Chiyo is protecting the boy. Ren understands what he must repair.”
Yasuke nodded.
“Yes.”
“We have done something.”
He looked toward the castle.
“Yes.”
She stepped closer.
“And there is more to do when you return.”
He smiled.
“I look forward to it.”
They embraced.
Not ceremonially.
Not as a warrior bidding farewell to a noble lady.

Simply as two people reluctant to part.
When they separated, Aki kissed him.
Then stepped back.
“Go.”
Yasuke smiled.
“Are you dismissing me?”
“Yes.”
“So little respect.”
“None at all.”
He laughed.
Then turned toward the waiting horses.
Aki watched him mount.
For a moment, the morning seemed ordinary.
A man leaving on his lord's business.
A woman watching him go.
The promise of another meeting.
The assumption of more time.
Neither knew what the coming months would bring.
Neither knew how abruptly Nobunaga's world would change.
And neither understood that the next time the sword passed between them, the meaning of their farewell would be entirely different.

Present Day

Malcolm stood outside the storage facility with Emiko.
Luna was at home, finishing a school assignment.
An actual school assignment.
He considered this a triumph.
The sword remained secured inside.
He had come to check the paperwork and confirm that the storage arrangement could continue while the provenance review progressed.
Nothing mysterious had happened.
The sword had not returned to his front porch.
No courier had appeared.
No anonymous message had arrived.

For the first time, he felt almost foolish about how much he'd feared the object itself.
Emiko took his arm.
“What are you thinking?”
He considered.
“That I've spent years trying to get rid of something that was never the real problem.”
She nodded.
“Yes.”
He looked toward her.
“And that I've spent most of my life thinking I had to protect the family by standing in front of everybody.”
She smiled.
“You have stood in front of us many times.”
“Yes.”
“And sometimes it helped.”
He nodded.
“Sometimes.”
She continued.
“But sometimes you needed to stand beside us.”
He looked at her.
Then smiled.
“I'm learning.”
She leaned against him.
“Good.”
They walked toward the car.
For a while, neither spoke.
Then he glanced at her.
“By the way.”
“Yes?”
“I'm still processing the fact that you can throw a grown man across a grocery aisle.”
She laughed.
“It was hardly across the aisle.”
“It felt like across the entire supermarket.”
“You weren't the one being thrown.”
He considered.

“Fair.”
She smiled.
“Besides, you married me.”
He nodded.
“Apparently without reading the full specifications.”
She burst out laughing.
He took her hand.
And together they headed home.

Japan — Spring 1582

The boy had grown accustomed to the sound of the sea.
He lived in a small village where fishing boats returned before dawn and children chased one another along the shore.
His name was the one his foster family had given him.
He knew another name existed.
He had seen it written.
He knew that adults argued over where he had come from.
He knew that a woman named Hana had died protecting him.
And he remembered a man who had once carved wooden boats.
Sometimes he wondered whether that man was still searching for him.
One afternoon, Chiyo arrived.
She found the boy repairing a small fishing net beside his foster father.
He looked up.
“Have you brought news?”
Chiyo smiled.
“Yes.”
“About the man?”
“Yes.”
The boy stood.
“Is he alive?”
“Yes.”
He considered.
“Does he still make boats?”
Chiyo laughed softly.

“I believe he does.”
The boy looked toward the sea.
For a long moment, he said nothing.
Then he turned back.
“Does he want to see me?”
“Yes.”
The boy considered.
“Will he make me go with him?”
“No.”
“Will he tell me who my parents were?”
“He may not know.”
The boy nodded.
For a moment, he looked disappointed.
Then he asked, “Can I meet him here?”
Chiyo smiled.
“Yes.”
The boy looked toward his foster father.
The man nodded.
“If you wish.”
The boy considered.
Then smiled.
“I think I would.”
Chiyo reached for his hand.
“Good.”
They stood together beside the shore.
Beyond them, the sea stretched toward places the boy had never seen.
His history remained uncertain.
His original name remained a question.
But he knew where he lived.
He knew who cared for him.
And now he had decided to meet someone from his past.
Not because an official ordered it.
Not because a document assigned him to a household.
Because he wanted to.
Chiyo watched him return to the fishing net.
Then looked toward the horizon.

For years, she'd feared that telling the boy the truth would place him in danger.
Now she understood something she had resisted.
Protecting him had never required keeping every answer to herself.
It required helping him reach a day when the answers could belong to him.

Present Day

That evening, Luna completed the first approved outline for the Names Project.
Not a full archive.
Not a public announcement.
A working plan.
She sent it to the participants for review.
Then closed her laptop.
Her parents were in the kitchen.
Malcolm was cooking.
Emiko was supervising.
From the sound of their conversation, this arrangement had become contentious.
“You're cutting them too large,” she said.
“They're potatoes.”
“They still need to cook evenly.”
“Sweetheart, I've been cooking potatoes since before you met me.”
“And yet there's still room for improvement.”
Luna smiled.
She walked into the kitchen.
“What's for dinner?”
Malcolm turned.
“Potatoes.”
She looked into the pan.
“Obviously.”
“And something else.”
“What?”
He considered.
“Depends how the potatoes go.”

Emiko laughed.
Luna leaned against the counter.
For a moment, she watched them.
Her parents.
Ordinary.
Funny.
Sometimes irritating.
Sometimes frightened.
Always unmistakably themselves.
They had crossed a considerable distance without leaving home.
They had learned things about their families that might never have emerged without the sword.
Some painful.
Some wonderful.
Some still uncertain.
But the most important discovery was not that a legendary warrior might be part of their ancestry.
It was that they had the ability to decide what to do with the history they'd inherited.
Luna looked toward her father.
“Dad?”
“Yeah?”
“Do you think we'll actually go to Japan?”
He considered.
Then looked toward his wife.
She smiled.
“Yes,” he said.
His daughter brightened.
“Really?”
“Absolutely.”
“When?”
He glanced toward Emiko.
She nodded.
He smiled.
“Soon.”
Luna laughed.
“That's not a date.”

“No.”
“But it's a promise?”
He looked at her.
Then nodded.
“Yes.”
Her smile softened.
“Good.”
He returned to the potatoes.
Then paused.
“Although I have one condition.”
She raised an eyebrow.
“What?”
“No swords in the luggage.”
Emiko burst out laughing.
Luna grinned.
“Deal.”
For a moment, everything felt wonderfully ordinary.
Then Malcolm added, “And if any mysterious relatives turn out to be alive when we get there, I'd appreciate a little advance notice.”
His daughter laughed.
His wife shook her head.
And the three of them returned to preparing dinner.

Japan — 1582

Yasuke rode beneath a pale morning sky.
The sword rested at his side.
Ahead, Nobunaga's procession moved along the road.
Behind them lay Azuchi.
Aki.
Hana.
Ren.
The records they had copied.
The people whose histories might yet be restored.
Yasuke looked toward the horizon.
He had traveled farther than he'd once imagined possible.
He had crossed oceans.

Served powerful men.
Witnessed war.
Found friendship.
Found love.
And become part of a struggle whose importance had little to do with the blade he carried.
For a moment, he thought of the boy beside the sea.
A child whose future had been treated as a prize.
A child who now had the opportunity to decide something for himself.
Yasuke smiled.
Then urged his horse forward.
He did not know what awaited him.
But he knew what he intended to carry into it.
Not merely his sword.
His choices.
His loyalty.
And the memory of people who had refused to disappear.



Chapter 25

The Fire at Honnō-ji



Kyoto, Japan — June 1582

Yasuke woke to the sound of a bell.
Not the measured ringing that called monks to prayer.
This bell was frantic.
He opened his eyes.
Beyond the thin walls of the room, men were shouting.
Then came another sound.
A sharp crack.
A scream.
The unmistakable clash of steel.
Yasuke was on his feet before he fully understood what was happening.
He reached for his sword.
The weapon stood beside his bedding, its familiar silver fittings catching the faint light of the oil lamp.
He drew it.
Outside, another bell began ringing.
The night was breaking apart.
A young attendant stumbled into the room.
“Yasuke-dono!”
“What is it?”
“Armed men!”
“Whose?”
The attendant shook his head.
“They've surrounded the temple!”
Yasuke pushed past him.

The corridor was crowded with servants and guards struggling to fasten armor.
Smoke already hung in the air.
Beyond the courtyard, flames moved along a wooden gallery.
Yasuke seized the arm of a passing soldier.
“Where is Nobunaga?”
“The inner quarters!”
“And the attackers?”
The man looked toward the outer gate.
Then answered.
“Akechi.”
Yasuke went still.
“Akechi Mitsuhide?”
The soldier nodded.
The name struck with the force of a blow.
Mitsuhide was not an enemy warlord attacking from distant territory.
He was one of Nobunaga's own commanders.
A man who had served him.
A man entrusted with troops.
A man who knew exactly how vulnerable Nobunaga could be when traveling with a small retinue.
For one impossible moment, Yasuke thought the soldier must be mistaken.
Then an arrow struck the wooden post beside them.
The soldier dropped.
Yasuke moved.
He caught the falling man and dragged him behind the wall.
Another arrow passed through the corridor.
There was no time for disbelief.
Nobunaga was under attack.
And the men attacking him knew precisely where to find him.

Present Day

The email arrived at 8:12 in the morning.
Luna was eating cereal.

Malcolm was attempting to repair the kitchen toaster.
Emiko was watching both activities with different degrees of concern.
“Dad,” Luna said, “that thing is unplugged, right?”
“Yes.”
“Because you're putting a screwdriver inside it.”
“I'm aware.”
Emiko glanced toward him.
“Perhaps we should simply replace it.”
He looked offended.
“It's a toaster, sweetheart. Not a spacecraft.”
“Then why has it taken you forty minutes?”
He considered.
“Complex engineering.”
Luna smiled.
Then her laptop chimed.
She glanced at the screen.
Stopped chewing.
And leaned closer.
Emiko noticed immediately.
“What?”
Luna swallowed.
“It's from Daichi.”
Malcolm set down the screwdriver.
“Please tell me he's finally sending the instruction manual for our lives.”
His wife reached for her glasses.
The email was addressed to all three members of the family, their attorney, Professor Fujimori, and Dr. Mercer.
Attached was a signed statement.
And an inventory.
Luna opened the first document.
Read it.
Then looked at her parents.
“He's releasing the records.”
Malcolm frowned.
“What?”

“Not everything. But he's authorizing an independent examination of the collection and transferring copies of the deposit records to the review team.”
Emiko moved closer.
She read the document carefully.
Daichi had agreed to suspend his family's claim to exclusive custodial authority while the provenance review proceeded.
He had also agreed to submit the documents relating to the American family deposit.
There were conditions.
Privacy protections.
Authentication procedures.
Restrictions on publishing unverified personal information.
But there was no demand that Luna accept a hereditary appointment.
No requirement to endorse the Kuroda family's interpretation of the records.
And no attempt to grant Daichi permanent control over the research.
Malcolm sat down.
“Well, I'll be damned.”
Emiko continued reading.
Then stopped.
“What?” he asked.
She pointed to the final section.
Daichi had included a personal statement.
My family preserved records that did not always belong to us. At times, we treated possession as permission to decide what others could know.
Emiko read silently for a moment.
Then continued aloud.
The actions of my predecessors cannot be undone. I can, however, stop repeating them.
Luna stared at the screen.
“Wow.”
Malcolm leaned forward.
“Does he mean it?”

Emiko considered.
“I don't know.”
Luna nodded.
“Neither do I.”
She looked at the attached inventory.
“But this is something we can verify.”
Her father smiled.
“That's my kind of answer.”
Emiko looked toward her daughter.
“What do you want to do?”
Luna considered.
Then closed the personal statement and opened the inventory.
“Check his work.”
Malcolm burst out laughing.
“Beautiful.”

Honnō-ji, Kyoto — June 1582

The outer defense was collapsing.
Yasuke crossed the courtyard as arrows struck the wooden buildings.
A guard stumbled beside him, clutching his shoulder.
Another fell beneath the gate.
The attackers pressed forward in numbers the temple's defenders could not match.
Yasuke struck the first man who reached him.
The blade met armor.
He twisted.
Drove the attacker backward.
A second man lunged.
Yasuke turned the point aside and struck.
There was no elegance.
No ceremonial beauty.
Only the desperate work of staying alive while the world narrowed to steel, smoke, and the cries of wounded men.
He fought toward the inner quarters.
Nobunaga stood near the entrance.

His clothing was disordered.
A bow lay at his feet.
He had already been wounded.
Blood darkened one sleeve.
Yasuke stopped.
“My lord!”
Nobunaga turned.
For a moment, his expression was almost amused.
“You're late.”
Yasuke stared.
“Come. We can still find a way out.”
Nobunaga looked toward the courtyard.
Smoke rolled across the stones.
Beyond the temple wall came the roar of men advancing.
He understood the situation better than Yasuke wanted to admit.
“There is no road out,” Nobunaga said.
“We can fight through.”
“With how many men?”
Yasuke looked toward the remaining guards.
Too few.
Far too few.
Nobunaga followed his gaze.
Then smiled grimly.
“You see.”
Yasuke stepped closer.
“My lord, I did not come this far to abandon you.”
Nobunaga studied him.
Then looked toward the sword in his hand.
For a moment, neither spoke.
Finally, Nobunaga said, “You remember when I gave you that weapon?”
“Yes.”
“You looked at me as though I had asked you to carry the moon.”
Despite everything, Yasuke almost smiled.
“I was trying not to appear ungrateful.”
“You failed.”
A burning beam collapsed somewhere behind them.

Sparks scattered across the courtyard.
Nobunaga's expression hardened.
“Listen carefully.”
Yasuke straightened.
“My lord.”
“You are not to die here merely to prove your loyalty.”
Yasuke stared.
“I cannot leave you.”
“You can obey me.”
The words struck harder than the fighting outside.
Nobunaga continued.
“Find Nobutada if you can. Carry word of what has happened.”
Yasuke shook his head.
“My lord—”
“That is my command.”
For a moment, the ruler's voice carried the same authority Yasuke had heard on battlefields and within the halls of Azuchi.
Then it softened.
“You have a life beyond my service.”
Yasuke looked at him.
Aki.
Hana.
Ren.
The records.
The work that remained unfinished.
Nobunaga seemed to read something in his face.
“Good,” he said.
Yasuke swallowed.
“My lord…”
Nobunaga took a step backward.
The building behind him was filling with smoke.
“Go.”
Yasuke did not move.
Then Nobunaga spoke again.
“Live long enough to decide what your loyalty means.”
The words remained between them.
Yasuke bowed.

Not ceremonially.
Not perfectly.
He bowed as a man bidding farewell to someone who had changed his life.
When he straightened, Nobunaga was already turning toward the inner chamber.
Yasuke watched him disappear.
He would never see him again.

Present Day

Luna's proposal came during the second meeting of the review group.
Daichi attended this time.
So did Sachiko.
Nakamura.
Dr. Mercer.
Professor Fujimori.
The family's attorney.
And two representatives of Japanese institutions interested in the disputed records.
It was the most complicated gathering Malcolm had ever attended without somebody serving alcohol.
He considered this a serious organizational oversight.
Emiko noticed him looking at the refreshments.
“Behave.”
“I'm behaving.”
“You're glaring at the coffee.”
“It's decaffeinated.”
She smiled.
“A tragedy.”
He leaned closer.
“A genuine one.”
Luna cleared her throat.
The room quieted.
She stood beside a screen displaying the preliminary inventory.
“I want to propose something.”

Daichi leaned forward.
Professor Fujimori smiled encouragingly.
Luna took a breath.
“We've spent months talking about who should hold the collection.”
She looked around the table.
“Who inherited it. Who deposited it. Who had permission to keep it. Who might be related to whom.”
She paused.
“But we're still missing a basic piece.”
Dr. Mercer nodded.
“Which is?”
“A reliable list of what's actually there.”
She changed the display.
Several entries appeared.
Documents held by the Kuroda family.
The museum's archival box.
Copies preserved by Sachiko.
Photographs taken by her great-grandfather.
Materials attributed to Yasuke's associates but not yet authenticated.
And numerous references to documents nobody had located.
Luna continued.
“I don't think we should make a public claim about what the collection proves until we know what survives and how reliable it is.”
Professor Fujimori nodded.
“A sound principle.”
Luna looked toward Daichi.
“And I don't think the Kuroda family should have to surrender every document to us just because we say our family history is involved.”
Her father raised an eyebrow.
That was not quite what he'd expected.
Daichi looked surprised too.
Luna continued.
“But I also don't think your family gets to control the investigation just because you've held the documents for a long time.”

Daichi lowered his eyes.
“No.”
She took a breath.
“So I propose that the first stage be an independently supervised inventory, with secure preservation copies and clear records of provenance.”
Dr. Mercer leaned forward.
“And access?”
“Reviewed document by document. Some material may be ready for research. Some may need privacy review. Some may have unresolved ownership claims.”
The professor nodded.
“And family participation?”
“Where the records identify affected families, researchers should attempt to involve them appropriately. Not assume any one descendant speaks for everyone.”
Malcolm watched his daughter.
She had prepared for this.
Not with grand speeches.
Not with a heroic promise to save history.
With a plan.
Luna looked toward the room.
“And I want to make one thing clear.”
She paused.
“I'm not volunteering to be the permanent leader.”
Her father smiled faintly.
Daichi looked up.
She continued.
“I'll help organize the first stage. I'll work with the historians and archivists. But once there's a proper structure, I want to step back and let the people qualified to run it do their jobs.”
Emiko studied her.
There it was.
The choice.
Not refusal out of fear.
Not acceptance out of duty.
Something harder.

Giving up the extraordinary title everyone seemed determined to place upon her.
The supposed heir.
The next keeper.
The child of two historical lines.
She was choosing to become a participant instead.
One voice among many.
The room remained quiet.
Then Daichi spoke.
“I support the proposal.”
Malcolm looked toward him.
“You do?”
Daichi nodded.
“Yes.”
“Entirely?”
“Subject to legal and archival review.”
Malcolm considered.
“Fair.”
Sachiko smiled.
Nakamura lowered his head.
Professor Fujimori began discussing practical steps.
The meeting moved on.
But Luna remained still for a moment.
She had expected relief.
Instead, she felt something more complicated.
A small sense of loss.
She had imagined, sometimes, that the sword might mean she was special in some enormous historical way.
That her family had been waiting for her.
That she had a place in a story stretching across centuries.
Now she had stood before everyone and declined the central role.
For a moment, it hurt.
Then her mother reached beneath the table.
Took her hand.
And squeezed it.
Luna looked toward her.
Emiko smiled.

Not because she'd made the right decision.
Because she'd made her own.

Nijō, Kyoto — June 1582

Yasuke reached Nobutada's position through streets filled with terror.
Men ran past him carrying weapons.
Servants fled with bundles.
Smoke rose above the rooftops.
The city seemed to be tearing itself apart.
Yasuke had fought in battles before.
He knew the confusion that followed a broken line.
But this was different.
There had been no long siege.
No slow approach of a known enemy.
A trusted commander had turned his army against his lord.
And within hours, the political order of Japan was changing.
He reached the area where Nobutada's defenders had gathered.
The fighting was already fierce.
Yasuke joined them.
There was little time for explanation.
Little time for grief.
He fought because men were dying around him and because Nobunaga's son still resisted.
An attacker struck his shoulder.
Pain flashed down his arm.
Yasuke staggered.
Recovered.
Drove the man back.
Then another came.
And another.
The sun rose through smoke.
At some point, Yasuke realized the defenders could not hold.
The attackers were too numerous.
Their advance continued.
Buildings burned.

Men fell.
The world that had given Yasuke a name, a place, and a sword was coming apart in a single morning.
He remembered Nobunaga's command.
Live.
But living had become a difficult instruction to obey.
He fought until he could no longer tell how much time had passed.
Then a soldier beside him collapsed.
Yasuke turned.
And saw that the way behind them was closing.

Present Day

Malcolm found his daughter outside after the meeting.
She sat on a low wall overlooking the parking lot.
Her laptop bag rested beside her.
He approached carrying two bottles of water.
“Mind if I join you?”
She looked up.
“Sure.”
He sat.
Handed her a bottle.
For a while, neither spoke.
Then he said, “That was quite a performance.”
She smiled faintly.
“Thanks.”
“You had everybody listening.”
“Mostly.”
“Even Daichi.”
She looked toward the road.
“Yeah.”
Malcolm studied her.
“You okay?”
She nodded.
Then hesitated.
“Can I tell you something?”
“Always.”

She looked down.
“Part of me wanted it.”
He waited.
“The whole keeper thing.”
He nodded slowly.
She continued.
“Not the people controlling me. Not the secrecy. But the idea that there was this huge story and somehow I had a special place in it.”
Her voice tightened.
“Like maybe everything had been leading to me.”
Malcolm said nothing.
She looked toward him.
“Does that sound stupid?”
“No.”
“Really?”
He shook his head.
“Baby, people have been telling stories about destiny since somebody first looked at the stars and decided they were personally important.”
She laughed.
He smiled.
“Of course it felt good.”
She nodded.
“But it wasn't real.”
He considered.
“Some of it may be real. We still don't know everything about the family history.”
“Yeah.”
“But that special title they wanted to hand you?”
He shook his head.
“That was somebody else's idea.”
She looked down.
“I know.”
He leaned closer.
“You gave up something that sounded extraordinary because it came with conditions you didn't believe were right.”
She nodded.

“That doesn't mean it was easy.”
“No.”
He smiled.
“Which is why I'm proud of you.”
Her eyes filled.
She looked away.
He put an arm around her.
For a while, she leaned against him.
Then she whispered, “I still want to know about Yasuke.”
He smiled.
“So do I.”
“And the boy.”
“Yes.”
“And Aki.”
“Especially Aki.”
She laughed.
He looked toward her.
“But I want to know them as people. Not because we need them to prove we're important.”
She nodded.
“Me too.”
He kissed the top of her head.
Then considered.
“Although if it turns out I'm descended from a legendary warrior, I reserve the right to become completely unbearable.”
She laughed.
“Dad, you've got a head start.”
He nodded.
“True.”

Kyoto — June 1582

Yasuke was captured after the fighting.
He remembered little of the final moments.
A blow.
His injured shoulder giving way.
The sword slipping from his hand.

Then the pressure of men forcing him to the ground.
When he opened his eyes again, his wrists were bound.
He was kneeling in a courtyard.
Several armed soldiers stood nearby.
One watched him with undisguised curiosity.
Another with hostility.
A third looked almost uncertain what to make of him.
Yasuke kept his head raised.
He had no reason to expect mercy.
Nobunaga was dead.
Nobutada's resistance had failed.
Yasuke had served them both.
Now he was in the hands of their enemies.
A commander approached.
He studied Yasuke for a long moment.
Then spoke to one of his men.
The soldier asked Yasuke questions.
Where had he come from?
Whom had he served?
What was his rank?
Where were Nobunaga's surviving attendants?
Yasuke answered little.
He knew some answers would endanger people who had already lost everything.
The soldier struck him.
Yasuke lowered his head.
Not in submission.
To keep himself from responding.
The commander continued speaking.
Yasuke understood enough to recognize that the men were debating his fate.
Whether he should be killed.
Whether he was a soldier.
Whether he should be treated differently because he was foreign.
He looked toward the courtyard wall.
The morning sunlight fell across its pale surface.
A bird landed briefly on the roof.

Then flew away.
He thought of Aki.
He had promised to return.
He thought of Hana.
He had promised that no one would decide her future without listening to her.
He thought of the boy.
Of the records.
Of Chiyo.
Of Ren.
And of the sword he'd lost again.
The thought nearly made him laugh.
After everything, the damned weapon had escaped him at the worst possible moment.
A soldier stepped closer.
Yasuke looked up.
Then the commander issued an order.
The bindings were loosened.
Yasuke stared.
The soldier gestured for him to stand.
He rose slowly.
Pain traveled through his injured shoulder.
He was alive.
For the moment.
The soldiers escorted him from the courtyard.
No one explained what would happen next.
And the world beyond the gate remained uncertain.

Present Day

Daichi approached Emiko after the meeting.
Malcolm was across the room speaking with Professor Fujimori.
Luna had gone outside.
For a moment, Daichi stood beside her without speaking.
Then he bowed.
“I owe you an apology.”
Emiko studied him.

“Yes.”
He looked almost surprised.
She continued.
“Several, actually.”
Daichi lowered his eyes.
“I know.”
She waited.
“My family treated your grandmother as an enemy when she asked us to return the records.”
“Yes.”
“We treated her requests as a threat to our responsibility.”
“Your authority,” Emiko corrected.
He nodded.
“Our authority.”
She studied him.
Daichi continued.
“I grew up believing my father had protected the collection from people who wished to exploit it.”
“And now?”
“Now I know that sometimes he protected it from people who had every right to ask questions.”
Emiko looked toward the conference room.
“And the threats against my family?”
Daichi's expression tightened.
“I have provided investigators with information about the individuals who contacted people associated with the sword. I cannot speak for the outcome of that investigation.”
She nodded.
“That matters.”
“Yes.”
“But it does not make everything right.”
“No.”
He hesitated.
Then said, “Your daughter has more courage than I expected.”
Emiko looked toward the doorway.
“She does.”
“I thought she would want the title.”

Her expression hardened.
“You thought she would want what you wanted.”
Daichi considered.
Then nodded.
“Yes.”
Emiko turned toward him.
“There's your mistake.”
He lowered his head.
She continued.
“You looked at her and saw a solution to a problem your family created.”
He said nothing.
“I looked at her and saw my daughter.”
Daichi swallowed.
Then bowed.
Deeply.
When he straightened, Emiko spoke again.
“Daichi-san.”
“Yes?”
“If you truly wish to correct what happened, don't do it because my daughter impressed you.”
He looked at her.
“Do it because the people named in those records deserve better.”
For a moment, he could not answer.
Then he nodded.
“I will try.”
She studied him.
It wasn't forgiveness.
It wasn't trust.
But it was something she could measure against his future actions.
“Good,” she said.
Then she turned away.

Japan — June 1582

Aki learned of Nobunaga's death from a messenger who could scarcely speak.

The man arrived at the house where she had taken refuge with Hana and Ren.
His horse was exhausted.
His clothes were stained with dirt.
He had ridden hard.
Aki listened as he described the attack at Honnō-ji.
Mitsuhide's betrayal.
The burning temple.
Nobunaga's death.
The fighting around Nobutada.
Then the messenger stopped.
Aki stared.
“And Yasuke?”
The man lowered his eyes.
“I don't know.”
Her throat tightened.
“Did you see him?”
“No.”
“Did anyone?”
The messenger hesitated.
“Some say he fought at Honnō-ji. Others say he reached Nobutada's position.”
Aki gripped the edge of the table.
“And afterward?”
The man shook his head.
“No reliable word.”
Silence.
Hana stood beside her.
Ren looked toward the doorway.
For a moment, Aki could not move.
Then she straightened.
“Where are the records?”
Ren answered immediately.
“Secured.”
“The copies?”
“Separate.”
“The names?”

“Preserved.”
She nodded.
Then looked toward Hana.
“Pack what you need.”
The girl stared.
“Where are we going?”
“Somewhere safer.”
“And Yasuke?”
Aki paused.
For a moment, the room seemed to tilt beneath her.
Then she took a breath.
“We're going to find out.”
Ren stepped forward.
“Aki, the roads are dangerous.”
“I know.”
“Soldiers are changing allegiance. Nobody knows who controls Kyoto.”
“I know.”
“We cannot simply ride into—”
She turned toward him.
“Then we won't.”
Ren stopped.
Aki continued.
“We'll send word through Chiyo's people. Through the merchants. Through anyone who might have seen him.”
Hana approached.
“What can I do?”
Aki looked at her.
For a moment, the girl's face blurred.
Then she knelt.
“Help Ren prepare the copies. Make certain nothing is left where the wrong people can find it.”
Hana nodded.
“And you?”
Aki took her hands.
“I'll find a way to learn whether he's alive.”
The girl studied her.

Then whispered, “You love him.”
Aki closed her eyes.
There was no reason to deny it.
“Yes.”
Hana embraced her.
For a long moment, Aki held the girl.
Then she stood.
Outside, the country was changing.
Nobunaga was dead.
His allies were scattered.
The sword was missing again.
The ruler who had offered them protection could protect them no longer.
But the people they'd helped were alive.
The records had been divided.
And Yasuke—
Aki stopped herself.
She would not turn uncertainty into death merely because she feared the answer.
He might be alive.
She would act accordingly.

Present Day

The sword returned to the house on a Saturday.
This time, Malcolm brought it himself.
He had completed the storage paperwork and arranged for the weapon to be examined by qualified specialists as part of the ongoing provenance work.
Afterward, he took it home temporarily to photograph the case and review the condition report with Emiko.
He carried it through the front door.
Luna looked up.
Then burst out laughing.
“Oh, come on!”
Malcolm stared.
“What?”

“It's back!”
He considered.
Then smiled.
“Yeah.”
“Again!”
“Yes.”
She shook her head.
“You spent years trying to get rid of this thing, and now you're bringing it home voluntarily.”
He looked toward his wife.
She was laughing too.
He sighed.
“Apparently the sword has won.”
Luna grinned.
“Or you've finally stopped fighting it.”
He considered.
Then nodded.
“Maybe.”
He placed the case on the dining room table.
Opened it.
The blade lay inside.
Quiet.
Worn.
Ordinary in the ways that mattered.
Extraordinary in the story people had attached to it.
Emiko approached.
She studied the specialist's notes.
Certain fittings appeared to have been replaced or altered over time.
The weapon's precise date remained under examination.
There was no conclusive evidence linking it personally to Yasuke or Nobunaga.
Malcolm accepted this without complaint.
He looked toward his daughter.
“Want to see it?”
She approached.
Not as someone receiving an inheritance.
Not as the next keeper.

Simply as a young woman examining an object that had changed her family's life.
She looked at the blade.
Then toward her parents.
“You know what I think?”
Her father smiled.
“I'm sure you're about to tell us.”
She laughed.
“I think we should keep working on the history.”
Emiko nodded.
“Yes.”
“And let the historians decide what the evidence supports.”
“Yes.”
“And when that's finished, maybe the sword belongs somewhere people can actually learn from it.”
Malcolm considered.
“A museum?”
“Possibly.”
“Or a family collection?”
“Possibly.”
She smiled.
“But not until we know what it is and who has the right to decide.”
He nodded.
“Fair enough.”
Emiko looked toward the sword.
Then toward her husband.
For a moment, the three stood together.
The object that had once caused so much fear now rested openly before them.
No mysterious delivery.
No anonymous demand.
No invisible force pulling it back.
Only their own decision to bring it home.
Malcolm closed the case.
Then looked toward his daughter.
“Well.”
She smiled.

“Well?”
“You're not opening any more mysterious packages.”
She laughed.
“Dad.”
“I'm serious.”
“What if it's a birthday present?”
“Especially then.”
Emiko burst out laughing.
He pointed toward both of them.
“I'm laying down the law.”
Luna grinned.
“Good luck with that.”

Japan — Summer 1582

The first credible news of Yasuke arrived weeks after the attack.
A merchant came to Aki carrying a message from a contact in Kyoto.
He had heard that a foreign warrior captured after Nobunaga's fall had been spared.
No name.
No confirmed destination.
No certainty.
But enough to keep hope alive.
Aki listened.
Then asked every question she could think of.
Where had the man been seen?
Who had held him?
Where had he been taken?
The merchant answered what he could.
Then admitted that he knew no more.
Aki thanked him.
When he left, she sat alone for a long time.
The message lay before her.
It proved little.
But it was the first account suggesting Yasuke had survived.
She closed her eyes.

Then smiled through tears.
Somewhere beyond her reach, he might still be alive.
And somewhere within Japan, the child Chiyo had protected was preparing to meet Jin.
Hana continued helping restore names to the records.
Ren worked to repair the damage he'd caused.
The surviving documents remained scattered beyond the control of any single household.
The world had changed.
Nobunaga's death had shattered the order that had sheltered them.
But not everything had been lost.
Aki rose.
Walked to the window.
And looked toward the distant hills.
She did not know whether she would ever see Yasuke again.
She did not know what future awaited them.
But she knew what she intended to do.
Keep searching.
Keep living.
And never allow the uncertainty of history to become an excuse for surrendering the present.

Present Day

Luna finished her final notes late that evening.
At the top of the page, she had written:
THE SHADOW SAMURAI
Beneath it, she began a short introduction.
Not a claim that Yasuke was her ancestor.
Not an announcement that she'd inherited a legendary sword.
A story.
About a man who traveled across oceans and served Oda Nobunaga.
About a woman who refused to let names disappear.
About a child whose history had been turned into a prize.
About families who preserved documents at great personal cost.

And about a modern family trying to learn the difference between what had been recorded, what had been remembered, and what others wanted to believe.
She read the opening again.
Then stopped.
There was something missing.
She considered.
Deleted the first paragraph.
And started over.
My father spent years trying to get rid of a sword.
She smiled.
That was better.
It kept coming back.
She paused.
Then typed:
For a long time, we thought the mystery was the sword.
She looked toward the dining room.
Her parents were talking quietly.
Her father was laughing about something.
Her mother answered.
He laughed harder.
Luna smiled.
Then returned to the page.
We were wrong.
She saved the document.
Closed the laptop.
And went to join them.

Japan — 1582

Aki placed the last copied document into a wooden chest.
Beside it lay a small silver fitting.
Three curved lines.
A circle.
A mark whose meaning had changed depending upon the hands that held it.
She closed the lid.

Then turned toward Hana.
“Ready?”
The girl nodded.
“Yes.”
Ren waited at the doorway.
Chiyo stood beside him.
Outside, a wagon was prepared.
The records would travel separately.
Some to a family near the coast.
Others to a temple.
Still others to people whose names appeared within them.
Aki took one last look around the room.
So much had happened.
So much remained unfinished.
Then she lifted her traveling bag.
As she stepped toward the doorway, Hana caught her hand.
“Aki?”
“Yes?”
“Do you think we'll ever know everything?”
Aki considered.
Then shook her head.
“No.”
Hana frowned.
“Does that bother you?”
Aki smiled.
“Sometimes.”
The girl thought about it.
Then nodded.
“Me too.”
They stepped outside.
The morning sun touched the road.
Horses shifted in their harnesses.
The ordinary sounds of a village waking filled the air.
Aki looked toward the east.
Somewhere beyond the hills, the man she loved might still be alive.
She had no promise of his return.
No document confirming his fate.

No story that could make the uncertainty disappear.
Only hope.
And work.
And the people beside her.
She turned toward Hana.
“Come.”
The girl smiled.
Together, they climbed into the wagon.
Ren took his place beside the driver.
Chiyo checked the bindings on the chest.
Then the wagon began to move.
Slowly at first.
Then steadily.
Carrying names.
Carrying questions.
Carrying histories that had survived fire, betrayal, and war.
And leaving behind the belief that any one person could own them.



THE END