

BITTER LEGACY

The Samurai Revival Trilogy (Vol. 3)

Chapters 1 & 2

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Hamon Publishing

Author's Note:

Although broadly accurate geographically, this story is a work of fiction. Any resemblance between people or events and real life is unintended and purely coincidental. Furthermore, use of the Japanese, German and Burmese languages, and historical references, have been simplified to facilitate reading. A glossary and maps, of Japan and Southeast Asia, are included at the back of the book.

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Chapter 1

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Calver Cats revival Thwarts Special Forces

The Calver Cats are back, and with appallingly familiar brutality! Barely ten years after international Security Forces assured us that the original gang had been wiped out, several major criminal organisations in the UK and Japan have ceded control to this reincarnation of the Cats. Why just these two countries? Nobody knows. However, what is clear is that with immense wealth being generated from the drugs and sex trades, this new version of the Calver Cats is bent on expansion, and the Special Forces seem powerless to stop it.

The name “Calver” is derived from the Japanese technique of gutting live fish. Many of those who opposed the gang, including several Peacekeepers, have suffered a similar fate. With the Special Forces being outmanoeuvred at every turn, rumours are rife of high-level moles within the peacekeeping authorities, but only yesterday in Tokyo this was denied vehemently by newly appointed Chief Inspector Yamanouchi...

Global Times

Calver Cats Continue Kidnapping

The Calver Cats gang has just claimed responsibility for yet another prominent abduction. Two days ago, here in Tokyo, Toshie Miyazaki, daughter and only child of Japan’s internationally respected Minister for Homeland Security, was snatched outside a Peacekeeper training school.

Apparently, she was targeted specifically in revenge for Dr Miyazaki’s actions some ten years ago which led to the execution of Hayato Fujiwara at the hands of a UK Peacekeeper.

These kidnappings started six months ago with the New York seizure of Karen Weissman, daughter of Germany’s representative to the United Nations for World Peace. No ransom has ever been requested and nothing was heard of her until yesterday when the Calver Cats released the shocking news that she had disowned her parents and voluntarily entered the sex trade...

Japan News

Chapter 2

Tessa Pennington discarded her newspapers in disgust and settled back in her First Class seat. The Calver Cats situation was clearly continuing to deteriorate. But she still didn't want to be involved with confronting them; not again. Destroying the original gang had been more than enough for her. Yet here she was, about to begin the long overdue fight-back against its latest manifestation which had already threatened a violent end to her life. The strangest thing of all was that she had no idea why the Calver Cats were so intent on ensuring that it was she, and only she, who came after them.

She gazed vacantly through the aircraft window as the lights of London's new Estuary Airport disappeared into the distance, casting her mind back to the pivotal meeting she'd had with Colonel Potter, Head of UK Special Forces.

They had met in his office at the top of the imposing Art Deco-style headquarters building in Vauxhall on the south bank of the Thames. While they talked, the two of them had filled the pauses in their review of the latest Calver Cats atrocities with a gloomy scrutiny of the pleasure boats ferrying tourists along the river below; laughing and clicking away with cameras, they were blissfully unaware of the gravity of the topic being discussed so close at hand.

"...It's definitely a revival of the original Calver Cats," confirmed Potter. "Heaven only knows how or why; it's been ten years. But everything they do bears all the hallmarks of the Calver Cats we've regrettably come to know so well... They've even been leaving calling cards at the scenes of their crimes with the old Calver Cats logo on it."

"Actually, the logo's slightly different," reflected Tessa, glancing at the complex design displaying interlinking ribbons with a tiger's head at the centre. (*Reader: see back cover, lower left corner*).

"It is similar, but the colours have changed and, although the ribbons are all black again, only two of the Cs are in the Fujiwara clan's vermilion now. What's more, the tiger's head is not black and distinct as it used to be, it's grey. Almost as though they don't have an Amafuji sword working on their behalf yet, but expect one soon. And we both know from whom they can get hold of one of those."

"Yes, but surely you're not the only person in the world with a sword manufactured by the Amafuji family? I know they stopped making weapons ages ago, but there must be others still in circulation."

"I doubt there are that many, but I agree there must be some. So maybe they're after one in particular. If that *is* mine, why on earth would they want it so badly?"

A much longer pause followed.

"I wish we knew what they're really after," continued Tessa. "It's got to be much grander than snatching a sword and perhaps settling some old scores. Don't forget, they targeted me repeatedly."

Potter nodded thoughtfully. Even with the subdued lighting he looked tired and stressed, his bald head glistening with beads of perspiration.

“How many attempts on your life have there been now?”

“Five in the last two months; they’d have got me last time if it hadn’t been for my new Porsche.”

“Don’t remind me, I’m still trying to pacify the Chief of Police concerning that two hundred and eighty m.p.h. chase down the M40... Not to mention the damage their missiles caused! It was a miracle they missed you.”

“Yes, it really was. Either they were extremely unlucky or... And then for them all to die like that. What madness drove them to wear suicide vests? Those haven’t been used for more than twenty years.”

There was another period of silence as they reflected on the brazen brutality of that attack, and how it had been carried out with callous disregard for the lives of the many innocent bystanders who had been unwittingly involved.

“Even so, are you really sure you want to do this?” queried Potter, fingering three wads of paper on the table as though they were covered in something he didn’t want to touch. “I have a feeling they’re trying to drive you to it.”

“I agree, but do I have a choice? Does either of us? Ostensibly we have two new geographically disparate organisations, yet both are operating like the original gang. It’s too much of a coincidence, they must be linked. The longer we leave them to fester the stronger they’ll grow and the further they’ll spread. At the moment, they’re dictating the rules of the game. If we want to stop them, we need to find out who the bosses are and what they’re really trying to achieve. Something big and nasty is brewing out there. Me walking into their trap may be the only way to find out what it is; and by accepting that Mission, I’ll be authorised to deal with it.”

Potter sighed in half-hearted assent.

“OK,” he declared, failing to disguise his misgivings, “you know the drill. If you sign these papers you have *carte blanche* to do whatever needs to be done to close down the Calver Cats, again; whoever they are and wherever they operate worldwide excluding those few countries which still haven’t signed the International Peacekeeper Treaty.”

He pushed the papers over to Tessa; she perused them fleetingly. On the last page of each set was Potter’s signature together with that of Oberst Müller, her UK and German guardians respectively. She took a deep breath and unscrewed the pen which used to belong to her best friend, Penny. It was her murder that had drawn Tessa into fighting the Calver Cats more than ten years ago. Although Penny was long-since dead, Tessa still used her pen to sign any Peacekeeper Mission she accepted. She signed with her Peacekeeper name, *Nariko*, as required in both English and Japanese, and added the date. She slid two copies back to Potter and kept one...

Tessa had always believed that wiping out the original Calver Cats gang would be enough. After all, it had been necessary for her to kill an awful lot of people to do it, and every single life she’d taken was torture to her. She hated violence, yet it seemed to follow her round like a shadow. There was no denying that the personal price had been high. However, very few people knew the whole truth, the number of fatalities involved, or that there had been three figures in charge of the Calver Cats at that time. She was still trying to accept that two of

these had been her own brother and his wife, while the third had turned out to be a Japanese Peacekeeper friend of hers, called Hachiro. It transpired that he was secretly a member of the Fujiwara. This now notorious clan had turned to criminality following its disgrace after fighting against the Emperor during the struggle which had led to the Meiji Restoration of the late-1860s. Indeed, only a handful of people knew that the origin of the Calver Cats gang could be traced back to the battle of Sekigahara in 1600 and a feud between two ancient Japanese clans, the Matsumoto and the Fujiwara.

However, the historical depth to the enmity did not make it any more palatable to Tessa. The struggle so far had cost the lives of far too many of her closest friends, several of whom had died in her arms. After the bloodshed had ceased ten years before, Tessa was desperate to retire from being a Peacekeeper and concentrate on bringing up Nyunt, her adopted Burmese daughter. But that was not to be.

During the final stages of the last gang's defeat, Nyunt had been kidnapped and forced to witness some dreadful violence. She was a young child at the time, and the memories had traumatised her. Tessa had done everything she could to help the girl recover from this, including several bouts of various therapies. But despite Nyunt's eventually saying she had learned to live with her past, she still wouldn't allow Tessa to relinquish her licence to use the sword which had saved both their lives.

Given all this history, it wasn't surprising that Tessa had been under pressure to consider accepting a new Peacekeeper Mission once the Calver Cats started their comeback. Initially, she had been determined to resist. But then Nyunt started flexing her wings, which generated all sorts of new problems for Tessa, and when these were exacerbated by the high level kidnappings of girls just like her daughter, what else could she do but to accept? Tessa hoped that this time it would be easier. But was that likely? Before, her extraordinary speed, strength and intuitive skill with a sword had helped her win the day. But she was ten years older now; and being a sword-wielding Peacekeeper with a licence to kill was not a career renowned for its longevity. She had already outlasted the odds.

But still Tessa wouldn't have accepted the Mission if it hadn't been for her worrying so much about Nyunt. The girl had originally been brought up in Burma by her father Htet, as her birth mother had been killed while she was very young. Htet was head of UK Special Forces in Burma and had been killed in front of Nyunt and Tessa by the Calver Cats, leaving the child orphaned. Tessa had arrived on the scene too late to save Htet; but before he died, he made her promise to look after his daughter. This she had done, and it was generally accepted she had done it very well.

After a bumpy start, Tessa and Nyunt had enjoyed some very happy years together. Having a child was the one thing in the world Tessa had never expected but always wanted. She couldn't bear children of her own due to an accident of birth, and not even the most advanced medicine of the day could enable someone such as her to conceive. Despite this, she had become a proud mother, albeit one who taught her daughter, and others, how to use a Samurai sword. Generally speaking, Nyunt had developed into a well-balanced, bright young woman although there were certain aspects to her character which Tessa found frustrating –

not least that on occasion she could be very headstrong, making decisions quickly, perhaps out of pique, which she seemed reluctant to rescind even if she did subsequently regret them.

At first, Nyunt hadn't been interested in learning to use a Samurai sword, but then she changed her mind and Tessa had patiently tutored her. Although Nyunt didn't possess her mother's remarkable instinctive skill, she was certainly gifted with the weapon. Eventually, Tessa even procured a Kimi Amakuni sword for her.

These were accepted as the best Samurai swords in the world, a reputation earned over several centuries. Manufactured with supreme skill and artistry, not only were they beautiful, they were also imbued with remarkable qualities. When wielded by a competent fighter they were capable of shattering lesser blades, and they would ring when held by their true owner. Kimi Amakuni always regarded the sword she'd made for Tessa as the best she had ever produced. But she had been against making a sword for Nyunt because she was so young and headstrong. She only capitulated once Tessa had assured her that she would keep a watchful eye on the weapon.

On board the plane pensively sipping from her glass of water, Tessa replayed again the events which managed to transform her life so comprehensively from dream to disaster.

There was no denying that Nyunt still had some serious issues to deal with. But she was a young woman now, and determined to assert her independence. This in itself didn't trouble Tessa, who valued her own. So, whether Nyunt was immature or not, Tessa wanted to give her enough space to sort her problems out for herself. When she became interested in boys, Tessa had hoped for a breakthrough. Nyunt's first serious boyfriend had been Seiji in Japan, the eldest of three children brought up by the Hayasaka family. Asao Hayasaka, its head, was the long-time confidant of Matsumoto, Tessa's Sensei. In fact, the Hayasaka family had been in service to the Matsumoto clan for many generations but were now more like close friends to them. They lived just outside the grounds of Matsumoto castle.

During Tessa's frequent visits there Nyunt and Seiji had often played together as children, so both Matsumoto and Tessa were delighted when they started dating – and were equally disappointed when the relationship fell apart. The details of the break-up were still clear in Tessa's mind...

The day had started normally enough. Tessa had spent the morning teaching at South Kensington Samurai while during the afternoon Nyunt had practised with Lee, Matsumoto's brother who ran SKS.

"Hello, darling," Tessa greeted her when Nyunt came home. "You look exhausted."

"Hi, Mum. How does he do it? He's ancient yet he still has me running round like a chicken with its head cut off."

"Well, he's had a long time to perfect his technique," replied Tessa with a wry smile.

"You always beat him."

"Yes, but I'm getting old too. I'm not as fast as I used to be."

"Yeah, yeah. You still move faster than the speed of light," retorted Nyunt.

"What time is Seiji picking you up?"

"Six-thirty. Oh, I need to get cleaned up."

Nyunt quickly put her sword away and rushed upstairs to have a shower. When she came back down she looked wonderful, dressed in a skin-tight red and gold Thai silk cocktail frock with a high neck. She had grown into the spitting image of the woman shown with her as a baby in one of the two treasured photographs which hung in her bedroom. They were the only reminders Nyunt had of her true parents. The pictures had been located and extracted by Curtis, a UK Special Forces operative based in Thailand, months after Tessa had escaped from Burma with Nyunt as a young child.

There was no mistaking the similarity she bore to the woman with the upright poise and fine-boned, striking face under long black hair. Also, Nyunt was strong and agile, and moved with captivating grace. But she had her father's eyes, as was demonstrated in the other photograph, which showed Htet standing alone, smiling into the camera. It was the same glint Tessa saw in Nyunt's deep brown eyes and her generous smile which often melted Tessa's resolve when they argued about anything. But it was a reminder too that the little girl Tessa had saved from a terrible future within Burma was now growing up.

"Darling, you look fantastic," acknowledged Tessa. "I'm sure Seiji will be like putty in your hands."

"You think I look all right?" queried Nyunt, doing a quick twirl.

"You look perfect," replied a smiling Tessa as the doorbell rang.

Nyunt opened the door to her boyfriend.

"Oh, wow!" exclaimed Seiji, prompting her to blush.

He gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek and came in, immediately bowing respectfully when he saw Tessa.

"*Konichiwa*, Nariko-san."

"*Konichiwa*," Tessa greeted him warmly.

Seiji, a recently appointed Peacekeeper like Nyunt, had developed into a fine young man. He was slightly less than six foot tall, lithe and phenomenally fit. He had a friendly weather-beaten face topped by black hair gathered into a neat ponytail at the back of his head. His brown eyes sparkled inquisitively and he had a disarming smile.

"My, what a fine pair of young Peacekeepers you are," observed Tessa affably. "But let's not stand on ceremony. I'm going to go to bed at ten, after which the place is yours. Have a good evening..."

However, it was only 9:30 when they returned and clearly all was not well.

"Why do you always have to be so damn stubborn?" demanded Nyunt as they came in.

Tessa looked up at them in surprise.

"It's not me who's being difficult," retorted Seiji, pointedly.

"Hello, Mum."

"Nariko."

"You're back early," noted Tessa tentatively.

"I got bored with him trying to boss me round," replied Nyunt indignantly.

"I only asked you to do me a favour."

"Yes, to ignore my heritage so I would fit in with your preconceived expectations!"

"That's not..."

“OK. Time out, guys,” interrupted Tessa. “Sit down and stop practising verbal bokken blows.”

In silence they did as ordered, Nyunt selecting the opposite sofa from Tessa and Seiji in the armchair.

“Now will somebody please tell me what the problem is? Guest first, I think, Seiji.”

“I’ve been invited to a dinner at Tokyo University. It’s a very important event and everyone who’s anyone will be there. I wanted Nyunt to come with me...”

“You wanted!” she shrieked. “You mean I’m not even invited on my own account! How nice is that?”

“Nyunt darling, calm down. I’m sure he didn’t mean it that way. Carry on, Seiji.”

“No, I didn’t. Anyway, it’s a formal evening, very formal, so I asked Nyunt to go in a kimono. That’s all.”

“All right, darling,” beckoned Tessa, nodding to her, “your turn.”

“I’m Burmese, not Japanese. I want to go in Burmese national dress. What’s wrong with that?” she replied, glaring at Tessa.

“Hey, I just happen to be here, don’t try and put me on the spot! But technically, you’re British; you just happened to have been born in Burma.”

“So you want me to go in a nice, safe Caroline Charles evening dress?”

“Darling, you’re doing it again,” said Tessa, exasperated. “Honestly, you two, this is trivial. Are you really not able to sort it out on your own?” The stony silence which followed, prompted her to continue. “OK. Well, in case you’re interested, I think you’re both right and both wrong, and resolving issues such as this is what a relationship is all about. It’s not the good times which define us, it is how we handle the bad ones. I’m going to bed now, but I really think it should be possible for you to find a mutually acceptable compromise; probably safest if you leave it until tomorrow, though. So, I recommend you sleep on it and meet up again when you’ve both calmed down...”

They did follow Tessa’s advice, but a compromise had not been forthcoming. Both Tessa and Matsumoto had tried hard to convince them that this was not important enough to fall out over, but their advice had only been perceived as ill-informed interference. The rhetoric escalated, positions hardened, and finally the young couple had parted, vowing never to speak to one another again.

In Tessa’s eyes the situation was then exacerbated by Nyunt’s starting to date a young man called Paul. He had a well-paid job in the City, working at the London headquarters of Beijing New York International Bank. He was tall, intelligent and handsome in an oriental way with straight black hair, dark skin and brown eyes. But apparently he had no knowledge of his true ethnic background as he had been brought up in America as an orphan.

Ostensibly he was everything Tessa should have wanted for Nyunt. However, for some reason she took an instant dislike to him. She wasn’t sure why since he certainly didn’t behave badly; quite the opposite, in fact. He was always well dressed, extremely courteous and very considerate towards Nyunt. Nevertheless, Tessa decided to use her contacts to have him checked out. She knew it wasn’t a particularly pleasant thing for her to do but she was

still a Peacekeeper and as such had a right to security and anonymity for herself and her family.

Fortunately, Potter hadn't needed much persuading. But his background checks didn't uncover anything other than what Paul had already told her. So, there was little more Tessa could do. She did share her misgivings with Nyunt, but not forcibly since she felt, and said, that her daughter was old enough to reach her own conclusions. Tessa just hoped the relationship would peter out and that would be the end of it.

But then, out of the blue, Nyunt announced she was going to Burma in an attempt to trace her relatives there. That seriously concerned Tessa. Nyunt's asylum in the United Kingdom had been resented by Burma which, despite some faltering moves towards democracy, continued to be run by a military Junta largely accepted as short-sighted, cruel and corrupt. Nevertheless, despite all that, Tessa would still have gone with her daughter had not Burma been the one country in the world where Nariko was definitely not welcome. Not only had Burma still not signed up to the International Peacekeeper Treaty, but many years earlier Tessa had been forced to assassinate General Soe Gyi there, the then second in command of the military Junta. She had gone to Kalaw in Burma intending only to kidnap or kill Bill Chalmers, a key member of the Calver Cats gang and close associate of her brother, Beauchamp. However, the General had interrupted her and in the struggle that followed she had killed him. The majority opinion was that the action was brave and justified, although as Tessa was a Peacekeeper with guaranteed anonymity, hardly anyone knew who had carried it out. But, technically both killings had been illegal, since Peacekeepers were only permitted to impose capital punishment in countries which had signed up to the Treaty. Furthermore, although Bill Chalmers, prior to escaping from custody in London, had been tried and officially sentenced to death, General Soe Gyi had never been brought before a court of law for his crimes.

Presumably Nyunt had expected Tessa to feel reassured that Paul was going as well, but it only made her more anxious. She tried everything she could to dissuade her daughter, but without success.

At first Nyunt sent frequent emails, saying where she was, what she was doing and whom she had met. But suddenly all communication ceased and the silence lasted for two weeks. Tessa was beside herself with worry and asked Potter if he could get Curtis in Thailand to mount some discreet enquiries. She had met Curtis several times, including the occasion he had flown a helicopter into Burma to rescue her and Nyunt after Htet was killed.

However, a few days after Tessa's request, Nyunt suddenly let herself into the London house. Tessa was overjoyed to see her, although also furious that her daughter had not been in touch. She doubted she would ever be able to forget the exchange that followed...

"Well, you could have let me know you were all right," she had complained, once she'd got over the shock of Nyunt's reappearance.

"How could I? You know what it's like out there – the Junta still makes it difficult to send emails and there's no mobile coverage. Besides, I had to have an emergency appendectomy. It was lucky Paul was with me. He bribed lots of people to get me admitted to the government hospital in Naypyidaw."

Tessa was horrified; she stared at her in disbelief.

“You allowed someone to cut you open in Burma?” she blurted. “Nyunt, you are *my* daughter, do you think they didn’t know that?”

“The facility was perfectly clean and super-modern. They looked after me really well.”

“You should have gone back to Bangkok! You must have an examination... I’ll make you an appointment. In fact, I’ll take you myself now.”

“I don’t want one. There’s no need. I’m perfectly all right!”

“Please,” Tessa implored her, “just let someone check you over. As a favour to me, if you like? An X-ray and a quick prod. It won’t take long. Please darling?”

“No,” insisted Nyunt, clearly determined. “Besides, we have more important things to discuss.”

“Darling, there’s nothing more important to me than your health and well-being. You know that.”

“How about the death of my father?”

“What...? Why are you so keen to change the subject?”

“Because we’re done as far as the other is concerned. So?”

“Nyunt, please... Your father died at the hill station near Kengtung where you lived for the first few years of your life.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Of course he did. We were both there. We saw what happened to him,” replied Tessa, frustrated and confused.

“*We* were indeed there, but *my father* wasn’t. Everyone wanted you to believe Htet was my father, and you fell for it, hook, line and sinker. We can discuss why in a moment, if you like. But General Soe Gyi was my real father and *you* murdered him in Kalaw! Didn’t you?”

For a moment Tessa was dumbfounded, it was all utterly wrong.

“But that’s nonsense! It can’t be true. What makes you think Htet wasn’t your father?”

“Paul and I traced some of my relatives in old Pagan and they told me how Htet murdered my mother and kidnapped me.”

“Ridiculous... And what relatives? The Special Forces were never able to trace anyone related to you, let alone in Pagan, and you know I tried too.”

“You obviously didn’t try hard enough.”

“Don’t be silly. Why wouldn’t I be interested in tracing your relatives?”

“Because you wanted to keep me for yourself, since you can’t have children of your own.”

By now Tessa’s initial wonder at all these incredible revelations was turning to anger.

“How can you say such terrible things?”

“Because I believe it’s the truth. I’m my own person now and free to do whatever I like. And I’m *not* going to tell you where to find my relatives because you might send your Special Forces friends to have a quiet word with them.”

“Nyunt, that’s disgusting! I would never do anything to keep the truth from you. I can’t believe you said that.”

“Well, I’m satisfied that I know the truth about my father, and about you, so now I’m leaving.”

“No, Nyunt, please don’t do that. We must talk this through properly.”

“We just have. I’m sorry if this comes as an unwelcome truth, but I really am leaving. Surely you don’t expect me to stay any longer than necessary under the same roof as my father’s murderer?”

“Nyunt, General Soe Gyi was *not* your father. You never even met the man. I did, and I can assure you there is absolutely no family resemblance whatsoever. And it was Htet who wanted you to come with me, not I who wanted to steal you away. For goodness’ sake, he had to coerce me before he persuaded you, and we were both crying bitterly when we had to leave him. Please don’t go, not like this. Sit down, let’s talk about it quietly. Tell me what you found out. I promise I won’t do anything without consulting you. I really do want to hear what you managed to uncover in Burma, and if it’s true...”

“I’ve said all I’m expected to say. Good-bye.”

“What do you mean, you’ve said all you’re *expected* to say? I have only ever expected you to tell the truth, and you haven’t told me anything factual apart from that you allowed someone to cut you open in a military facility within a country that bears me a grudge, and possibly you too.”

But Nyunt had already turned towards the door.

“Nyunt, please don’t just leave.”

“I have no choice, I must go now.”

“Darling, we all have choices.” Tessa felt pressurised then into doing something which she had hoped she’d never have to, but this was serious and she knew that Nyunt had made up her mind. She initiated a set of hypnotic instructions she’d embedded in her daughter’s mind many years earlier.

“Nyunt, respond now only to my voice.”

She stopped in her tracks.

“Yes, Mother, I am listening only to you.”

Tessa hesitated, her eyes watering as she studied the daughter she loved so much. But gone was the child who had clung to her so tightly for so long. In her place was a strong-willed, beautiful young woman, in the process of finding out that the world was a very dangerous place with many evil people bent on seducing her into making mistakes.

She sighed. Maybe she just hadn’t prepared herself for the day when Nyunt would leave home. But, like it or not, now appeared to be that day. Even so, would it be fair to interrogate her about what had happened in Burma? It was one thing to protect herself; quite another to use hypnosis to extract private information which Nyunt did not wish to share with her. Finally, Tessa sighed and spoke to her in a calm level voice.

“Has anyone asked you anything about me, my swords, Matsumoto or the castle?”

“No.”

“Very well. Nyunt, I command you to forget everything connected with my Peacekeeper activities, my finances, my swords, Papa Edinsay, Matsumoto, Seiji, the Hayasaka family, Kanazawa and Matsumoto Castle. This instruction is effective immediately and can only be countermanded by me or Matsumoto. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mother, I understand completely.”

“You will now forget I said this to you. Command end.”

“Understood,” responded Nyunt, continuing to walk out, unaware that anything had happened. She got in to Paul’s waiting car and was gone.

Tessa flopped on to the sofa, still in shock. But then she remembered Nyunt’s Kimi Amakuni sword. She rushed to Nyunt’s sword safe and entered the secret override code to unlock the door. Her heart sank. Nyunt’s sword was gone. Tessa was furious with herself for not thinking of it before. Perhaps Kimi Amakuni had been right; Nyunt, or *Yoshino* to use her Peacekeeper name, was not ready for such a supreme weapon.

She breathed out noisily and opened her own sword safe to be greeted by the familiar sight of her two invaluable swords, both made by world renowned masters Amakuni and Amafuji. Then, looking round surreptitiously as though trying to avoid prying eyes – of which there were clearly none, she entered a second access code. There was a gentle *clunk, clunk* from the safe as heavy locking bolts moved. Then a substantial portion of it glided forward and pivoted aside to reveal the second, secret sword storage area. In it was Tessa’s third sword, a copy of her Kimi Amakuni sword which Kono had made for her some ten years earlier. It was an extremely convincing replica, indistinguishable from the original to all but the most expert eye, however it did not possess the same powers. No one apart from Kono and Lee knew she had it, although she suspected Potter realised it existed after she had given it to him to examine in place of her real sword after the original Rippleside conflict.

One piece of good news was that that Nyunt’s shoulder harness was still with Kono in east London, being adjusted. The shoulder harness was a unique device which Tessa had invented to allow a full-size Samurai sword to be drawn quickly over the shoulder. It had proved extremely effective and continued to provide her with a competitive advantage. So far no one had been able to replicate it and Tessa remained keen to protect its design. Nyunt’s harness held only one sword whereas Tessa’s held two.

Kono, who made both harnesses for Tessa, owned a workshop in east London where he maintained swords and supplied all sorts of weapons, spares and accessories that might be required by Peacekeepers. Officially he had retired, but his son now carried on the business under the watchful eye of his father.

Tessa’s two best swords had vastly differing pedigrees with history extending back beyond the end of the brutal civil war which culminated in the restoration of Emperor Meiji in 1868. The Amakuni had made weapons for the ultimately victorious Satsuma-Chōshū Alliance, the core fighting element of which had been marshalled by the Matsumoto clan. However, the Amafuji made weapons for the losing side. It was led by the Fujiwara clan which had earned a reputation for callous cruelty throughout all the lands they controlled during the 250-year-long Edo period. In 1600 they had risen to power by changing sides during the battle of Sekigahara, virtually guaranteeing Tokugawa Ieyasu’s victory and subsequently profiting by doing the bidding of the successive Shōguns. So they were willing to go to great lengths in order to maintain the status quo.

For this the Fujiwara and Amafuji clans were eventually disgraced. They lost all their wealth, and their landholdings were sequestered; those who survived purges against them had turned to a life of crime. It was the Fujiwara who masterminded and managed the infamous

criminal gangs called the Yakusa, many of whom were armed by the Amafuji, whose swords were generally accepted to be almost as good as those forged by the Amakuni. However, for their loyalty to the Emperor, the Matsumoto and Amakuni clans had both been rewarded generously.

Because of the contrasting histories of the Amakuni and Amafuji families, it was unheard of for any one person to have an Amakuni and an Amafuji sword, not least since both were so rare. Tessa's Amafuji sword was one of the last pair ever made by the Amafuji clan, who had now died out. It had been bequeathed to her by Bryani, one of the original Calver Cats gang in London. Tessa had fought with and beaten her, but did not kill her as she wanted her to be interrogated by the UK Special Forces. However, one of the Calver Cats had shot Bryani to stop her talking and it was her dying wish that Tessa should take her sword.

For several days after Nyunt walked out, Tessa was not sure what to do. She hardly dared leave the house in case her daughter returned. But finally she was forced to accept this wasn't going to happen. She couldn't even talk to her either as her *cbc* remained switched off. Nevertheless, Tessa simply could not accept Nyunt's awful accusations. She resolved to go to Burma and unearth the truth for herself. The visit was going to be extremely dangerous, but Nyunt meant everything to her and it was possible that she was in serious trouble and either didn't know or simply couldn't do anything about it.

However, because of her deep-rooted suspicions concerning the whole affair, not to mention the danger she would be in while inside Burma, Tessa took great pains to plan her trip meticulously. Selling her two businesses many years ago had left her exceedingly rich, so her preparations included a wide variety of safety measures many of which were intricate and expensive. These included the changing of the alarm system and locking codes on her properties in London and Orkney, together with additional safeguards on her bank accounts. However, she also had Kono install a new sword safe in her house on Papa Edinsay, even driving up to Orkney herself to inspect his work. When she was finally satisfied that all the precautions she could possibly take were in place, she went to see Potter again.

She had told him of her plan to visit Burma. As she'd expected, he was vehemently opposed to her going. But he knew her well enough to accept that there was little he could do to stop her, so unenthusiastically he agreed to support her. Tessa finished the meeting by giving him a sealed envelope, to be opened only in certain circumstances.

It was three weeks to the day since Nyunt had walked out.

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