



The Great Wave off Kanagawa, also known as The Great Wave, is one of the most famous examples of Japanese art in the world. ... The wave is about to strike the boats as if it were an enormous monster, one which seems to symbolise **the irresistible force of nature and the weakness of human beings.**

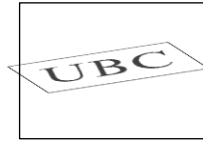
TSUNAMI

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This book is entirely the work of a human author. No artificial intelligence was used in creating its content, narrative, or characters. While AI may have assisted with minor tasks like spell-checking or formatting, the creative and writing processes were exclusively human.

Authors Note

I want to begin by explaining the language used in the book, Japanese philosophy, and the Japanese fear of organized crime in Japan. This will help to give context to this story of my beloved Japan.

Originally, I wrote certain words in Japanese (particularly the dialogue) followed by the English translation, attempting to transport the reader into the world of Japan and explore the fun of two people learning each other's language. The overwhelming feedback was that it interrupted the flow of the story. Instead, any **text written in italics means that it is in Japanese.**

In addition, when Japanese or English characters make mistakes in English or Japanese, this is deliberate as they are not native speakers. I believe this creates the same effect but flows better for the reader.

Interestingly, Japanese has 3 writing systems; the first two (Hiragana and Katakana) spell out 46 sounds in Japanese phonetically, and the last originates from Chinese and is called Kanji (about 2,136 are in common use but the total number is well over 50,000!). The characters are pictographic and over the centuries, Japanese characters (Kanji) and Chinese characters (Hanzi) still share many of the same concepts and meanings but are pronounced differently. Chinese is a tonal language, where the same word can have different meanings depending on how it is said. Chinese also relies solely on Hanzi, while Japanese uses Hiragana and Katakana as well. Chinese characters are more detailed and uniform, while Japanese characters are more open and airier. An educated Chinese person would know about 8,000 characters but would only need about 2-3,000 to be able to read a newspaper. One of the main characters, Noah, is interested in learning Japanese but soon realizes this is a lifelong journey.

Ai tries to explain the concept of ‘Wabi Sabi’ to Noah, another concept he finds difficult to relate to. It is ingrained in Japanese philosophy and culture and can be described as the Japanese Art of Finding Perfection in the Imperfect. On the surface, Japan seems like a nation built on orderly perfection, but the country's long-held philosophy of ‘Wabi-Sabi’ is all about embracing the beauty of the imperfect.

‘Wabi (侘び)’ describes loneliness, as not the negative feeling of isolation from others, but rather a pleasant feeling of being alone in nature, away from society. If ‘Wabi’ were a person, he’d be living a humble life in a mountain shack nestled deep in the mountains, free from the binds of daily life. ‘Sabi (寂び)’ means to be weathered but in an elegant, rustic fashion. For context, the term ‘to rust’ is also pronounced Sabi ‘(錆び).’

I also want to explain just how feared the Yakuza are both in and out of the country. Many Japanese warned me about writing about the Yakuza (*even though this is a work of fiction!*). In the original draft, I named one of the largest groups in Japan and displayed their crest. Such is the fear of the Yakuza by the Japanese people around the globe that they told me it would be most unwise to do this so I have changed the name of the group to a fictional name.

On a personal note, I have found that writing a book is harder than I thought and more rewarding than I could have ever imagined. None of this would have been possible without my family. My wife, Hitomi, is my ‘rock’ in my life. My son, Henry, inspires me to be the best person I can be. Finally, my mother, apart from giving me life, used her vast experience to edit and guide my writing. I remember her sucking in her breath and saying after the first reading; ‘it’s good...but it needs a lot of work....’ Thus, the journey began.

TSUNAMI

CHAPTER 1 — HAPPY NEW YEAR! (*AKEMASHITE OMEDETOU!*)

'Before you seek revenge, you should dig two graves, one for yourself...'

Confucius

Ai Nishihara sat on the floor in the dark of the 19th floor of her high-status Tokyo apartment block, meditating on a Tatami mat. Strapped to her back were two black tubes in place of a sheathed Japanese fighting sword, her 'mission prep' ritual.

Time sped towards the start of her mission.

Her clothes, black silk tightly wrapped around her body from head to toe, only showed her almond-shaped eyes.

While she concentrated on her breathing, her mind's eye took her far away to a place where bare feet traced a narrow path in misty mountains. On her left side, a sheer drop down a cliff face threatened to pitch her into an abyss. If she lost concentration even for the briefest moment, she would lose her footing on the icy path and fall into oblivion.

This ritual was not just about overcoming fear. She had nearly died many times and considered every day a bonus. Instead, it focused her mind. In meditation, she removed all thoughts and

distractions not associated with the mission.

The penthouse suite above her own belonged to the CEO of a petrochemical company. That was only the front, however, for the expansive suites really belonged to a local Yakuza and provided a base for many criminal operations.

Ai's thoughts coalesced, putting her in a place where she could examine the specifics of the mission. The famous Japanese silk hanging scroll by Tomioka Tessai, titled 'Writing a Nostalgic Poem while Viewing the Moon' was at this moment in the penthouse, an ill-gotten gain from one of those very operations.

Not the only thing where it shouldn't be. By day Ai Nishihara was a 35-year-old Japanese detective from Tokyo's prestigious Metropolitan Police Department, specialising in art theft. But tonight, she was the thief.

How dare someone steal a national treasure.

Not even thinking about the scroll's image of a peaceful journey could stop the cold rage in her belly. A police colleague had once remarked that when Ai's eyes fell on her intended victim, she could smell their fear. *'Ai, when you get that look on your face, they are already dead.'*

Ai rose to her feet and went to the bathroom. A specially adapted black ladder leant against the basin. Being careful not to make any noise, she extended the rungs and poked it out of the bathroom window. Her aim was the bathroom window above. The 20th-floor penthouse belongs to the CEO's Yakuza front.

Snow fell lightly in the slight cool breeze. The blinking lights of Tokyo through the snow briefly caught her attention. *Imagine all the parties that must be going on as the new millennium approaches. A Van Gogh Starry Night.*

A repetitive thud came from above. The music was already loud and the party was in full swing. A Japanese-Themed fancy dress party. Ai reached back and touched one of her 'swords'. They were about to get an uninvited Ninja guest.

The ladder clicked into place on the window cell above. She wormed her way out of the bathroom window, out onto the ladder and gingerly scaled it to the floor above. As she poised outside the bathroom window, there came the unmistakable sound of grunting and groaning of two people having sex. The girl whimpered and the man grunted.

Reminds me of that pig farm near Gifu. She patiently waited on the ladder. How ridiculous she must look, dressed in her Ninja costume. The snow gathered upon her shoulders. She started to shiver. After what seemed an eternity, they finished and both howled, like wolves, and laughed raucously.

Finally, she thought.

But as she peered in, the man had arranged 2 lines of cocaine on the bathroom counter, which he and the girl quickly snorted. They 'high-fived' each other and re-joined the party. Ai quickly slid in through the window. Locked the door just as someone tried the handle.

'Just a moment' she said, flushed and exited the toilet into a wall of noise and heat, overcome with the smell of cigarettes and marijuana smoke and alcohol. Quickly forcing herself forward towards her target.

Faced with a wall of people who were drunk or high or both she observed that some people were passed out, some were vomiting into pot plants, and some were trying to dance but couldn't seem to move properly. Everyone was in fancy dress; many were dressed as Geisha, Samurai and the CEO dressed as none other than the emperor, sitting on a golden throne. He had two sexy young girls in lingerie sitting on each knee, giggling no doubt due to whatever they had taken in excess.

Ai noted that he had 4 bodyguards who appeared to be armed and sober. One of the guards had scars on his face which reminded her of a character from a gangster movie. Nobody noticed Ai, not even the bodyguards.

She glanced at her black sports watch; 20 minutes to midnight.

I must move faster, she thought.

Ai grabbed a glass of champagne and drank it in one gulp and picked up another. She'd memorised the floor plan and speedily moved towards the gallery. The locked door required a keypad code. She sprayed the glass surface with a freezing spray which contained a chemical highlighting fingerprints. The CEO's date of birth was highlighted by the spray. '*Stupid idiot!*' she muttered to herself while entering the code.

The door unlocked with a click, opening automatically revealing a long room with the walls lined with famous paintings. As a specialist, she recognised them all but still gasped at the glowing colours, artistic genius and the atmosphere of reverence.

Impressed to see a Monet, a Renoir, and a host of other famous paintings, she wanted to take them all but focused on her mission target; '*Writing a Nostalgic Poem while Viewing the Moon*' hanging at the end of the room she sprinted towards to liberate it.

Spraying a fine chemical spray, it appeared to be protected by a laser matrix. Having seen this many times before, she assembled a device called a laser guard. This clamped to the frame to absorb and reflect the protective laser, quickly and expertly removing the scroll from the Perspex protective frame. After easily extracting it and disassembling the laser guard she rolled the scroll up and gently inserted it into a tube, enjoying the colours painted on silk on the old hanging scroll.

While sprinting for the door, she noticed a Gainsborough, almost pearlescent in the gallery light; ‘A Couple in a Landscape.’ She recalled it was stolen from Dulwich Picture Gallery in London last year and reclaimed that too using the same method, reverently placing it in another tube. Bang! Bang! Loud explosions erupted and her heart rate accelerated like a horse bursting out of a racing track gate. The midnight fireworks had disturbed her thoughts and everyone downstairs (that hadn’t passed out, she mused) yelled ‘*Happy New Year!*’.

Ai stopped for a moment and slowed her breathing, consciously quelling her body against the shot of adrenalin caused by the explosions.

Downstairs, Ai pushed her way through the crowd towards the toilet, being hugged and kissed by random people in their Japanese-themed costumes, all oblivious to what had just happened, except for the scar-faced bodyguard. She had noticed him eyeing her as she came down the stairs from the gallery when stepping over the rope with a sign saying, ‘No entry’.

Entering the crowd, she was pushed against a wall and a young woman dressed as a Japanese monk pinned her to the wall. Smiling at Ai and suddenly kissed her on the mouth. Ai tasted the cherry of her lip gloss and tried in vain to push her away, when the crowd lurched the other way, she escaped through the bathroom.

Climbing down the ladder and pulling it in quickly, the bodyguard spotted her, yelling, ‘Oi!’.

Time to go!

Arriving downstairs, she dusted off a light covering of snow from the love of her life, her black Kawasaki Ninja ZX-6R. An explosive boom from the car next to her caused her to lay flat on the wet ground. Sprayed with glass from the car windows, she concentrated on her breathing to counter the flight response. Gingerly standing up from behind her bike, she found herself looking

at a body face up body on the nearly crushed white sedan, the bodyguard with the scars stared back at her. *'What the hell!'* Ai said.

Looking up, people were shouting from the penthouse but she couldn't make out what they were saying.

Bullets began whizzing past her head as the Yakuza goons poured out of the elevator and began to sprint towards her. Mounting her stead she felt that tonight was her time to die, with bullets flying all around her, shots started to ring out from the other side of the street, sending the goons diving for cover.

While the heat was off her momentarily, thanks to the mysterious shooter, roaring the engine to life the bike sprang forward, even as the tyres struggled to grip the wet, snowy road. Speeding home through the lightly falling snow, she yelled; 'yahoo!', opening the throttle.

She had been irked by this mission.

She was being watched but by whom?

Why did the trusted bodyguard fall onto the car next to her?

Problems for later she thought.

'Ignore and override.' as the US Navy Seals say.

The man in a black car across the street from Ai's bike was parked out of sight. He had tailed her here knowing that she would follow his tip-off about the stolen art. He planned to rescue her if required. *'As if'* he said out loud to himself and snorted derisively.

As he was thinking this, a body fell onto a white sedan, crushing the roof and smashing the windows. Although startled, the man cautiously left the car with his pistol drawn looking about warily until he saw that Ai was unhurt. The gang members piled out of the elevator and ran

towards her, firing their guns as they ran. One bullet ricocheted off her helmet and knocked her head to one side. Her guardian angel kept shooting, pinning them down allowing Ai to escape, careful not to hurt any of them. He watched her speed off into the night and thought she was like a cat but was not sure how many lives she'd used up. Time to do the same he thought and he sped off in the opposite direction.

Ai sped through the empty streets, snow wetting her face pleasantly, thinking she would anonymously send the Japanese art treasure to its rightful home by special courier to the Adachi Museum of Art in Yasugi, Shimane.

What to do about the Gainsborough, she pondered. A problem for another day.

As she sped through the deserted streets, she reminisced about a trip she took to Shimane during her university days. Unlike most Japanese who migrate back to their hometown to spend time with families on their New Year's holidays, Ai had no family to which to return. As she was thinking about her parents, which she particularly did at this time of year, she was surprised that she had already arrived at her apartment building.

While riding the elevator to her top-story apartment on the 12th floor in *Nishi Azabu* (one of the most prestigious neighbourhoods in Tokyo), she thought that was a different time in her life when she was carefree but felt directionless. Now, her mission in life could not be clearer.

Only ever listening to vinyl, she took out 'A night of Jazz at the Blue Note' vinyl and reverently set it on one of the twin turntables. The mellow saxophone started to riff, accompanied by piano and drums, and the sound from her twin wall-set Yamaha speakers engulfed the room. She poured herself a large celebratory New Year and 'mission successful' glass of *Nihonshu*¹. She

¹ Sake or saké, also referred to as Japanese rice wine, is an alcoholic beverage of Japanese origin made by fermenting rice that has been polished to remove the bran.

stared out of the one-way glass living room sliding door at the blinking lights of Tokyo. With the lightly falling snow, she thought about how much she loved Japan. A Japan that she must protect from a greedy, evil element which in her mind is un-Japanese.

In a reminiscing mood due to the evening's party, her mind wandered back to a time when she was a young girl. She didn't speak much and had a steely look not befitting a child after her parents had been murdered by the Yakuza. Her sensei² adopted her and introduced her to art. He was a great traditional Japanese-style artist but his love of art was universal. This love and enthusiasm for art spread to Ai and it wasn't long before she could recognize any painting from any style from her sensei's extensive art library. Her sensei once surprised her with a painting trip, as she displayed great talent from a young age. While teaching her to paint a windy river through the misty mountains in Kyoto with the ever-present serious face, he fixed her with a hard stare. His dark brown eyes seemed to drill down deep into her soul, and after an uncomfortable pause said in his quiet, penetrating voice; *'Ai-chan³ before you seek revenge, you should dig two graves, one for yourself....'*

In London, another raid would also 'go down' also at a New Year's Eve party. This raid was against one of the most dangerous men in the UK.

² a Japanese title for a teacher, master, or professional.

³ While '*san*' is the formal suffix added to names (eg 'Mr'), '*chan*' is the familiar form of address.

CHAPTER 2 — AULD LANG SYNE (*DOOZO YOI OTOSHI O!*)

‘...everything happens for a reason, always.’

Aristotle

Twenty minutes to midnight in London on New Year’s Eve, a convoy of unmarked black police SUVs, full of heavily armed police officers dressed in their black tactical gear, sped through the light rain.

Led by Noah in his silver Austin-Healey 3000, his team were on their way to raid the house of a well-known crime boss, Connor Doyle, known as the ‘Silver Fox’.

After a tip-off, they were looking for stolen art, Noah (35) was with the prestigious Metropolitan Police Department, specialising in art theft pushed his Austin or ‘his ol’ lady’ hard.

Dressed in tactical gear with only his piercing green eyes showing, the tight convoy was right behind him. Through the deserted streets towards Knightsbridge, an upscale area of London with grand Victorian homes and leafy garden squares.

Unlike Ai’s method, theirs was simple, smash down the door and neutralise anyone who posed a threat and retrieve the stolen art. Well, not quite, but something like that.

Their informant had told them everything they needed to know but anything could go wrong on these raids. There was no need for stealth as the ‘Fox’s’ New Year’s ‘bash’ was in full swing.

They smashed open the heavy, black-painted door to find a massive living space and a party in full swing. Shouting ‘Armed police!’, entering the crowd but their shouts were lost in the din and largely ignored by the revellers, clearly drunk or high or both.

Connor's bodyguards reached for their pistols but thought better of it when they saw the laser targets painted on them and they all placed their hands behind their heads in unison, begrudgingly surrendering.

The room was full of smoke from cigarettes and 'joints' and packed with guests so 'out of it' they didn't notice anything straight away, continuing to dance and sway to the remixed blaring 70's disco music. One of the police officers turned off the music and turned on the lights and the crowd groaned. Uniformed police entered and started 'processing' the partygoers. One police officer yelled to his colleague, 'At least we can say we made it to one of the biggest bashes in London!' They all laugh.

Midnight suddenly arrived and someone shouted, 'Happy New Year!' and the crowd repeated it over and over. Everyone tried to hug and kiss each other, even the arresting officers. It was pandemonium as the police tried unsuccessfully to break it up, some grinning as they carried out their duties.

While Noah's team secured the downstairs area, he mounted the staircase two steps at a time to the second floor and entered 'The Art Room.' Just as his inside man had said, there wasn't a lock on the door. Just a room, lined with famous paintings. Noah shook his head at the gall of 'Fox' not having any security protecting a fortune in art, relying solely on his reputation for protection. He entered the surprisingly cool, silent room. Rooted to the spot on the thick black wool carpet he stared open-mouthed at the collection of stolen art which included the famous woodblock print known as 'The Great Wave of Kanazawa.' (Hokusai, late 1831).

The print hung on the wall facing him at the end of the room. He stared at it and recalled it had been stolen from a famous Japanese art gallery some months ago. He vowed that, like the other art treasures, it would be returned to its rightful place.

Another piece caught his eye, the ‘Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette’ (van Gogh, 1886), and he wondered whether it could be a clever forgery. He remembered after poring over the acquisition’s listings, that it was on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. It’s what inspired him to get his tattoo ‘Memento mori’ (‘remember that you [too must] die’), written below the skull with the burning cigarette in Gothic style, on his right arm.

He got tattooed after his brother died in a skiing accident. It kept him focused, brave, and honourable although he had to combat corrosive feelings of guilt after his brother's death.

While admiring the painting, he felt that he was not alone. He saw the reflection on the painting’s glass of a stocky blonde man dressed in black, sneaking up behind him with a large hunting knife. Just as he was going to plunge it into Noah’s back, Noah spun around and blocked it with his right arm, bringing the assailant’s knife arm up and under his throat, pushing him back over his extended leg, tripping him. The would-be assassin fell heavily on his back. He tried to get up but Noah kicked him on the right side of his lower torso and stomped on his right wrist, causing him to drop the knife and yell in pain. Noah expertly rolled him over, zipped locked his hands behind his back and tied his legs, shouting; ‘Don’t bloody move!’ Into his mic, he said ‘This is Alpha 1; I’ve got a Tango down in the art room. Require assistance.’ Two members of his team quickly arrived and escorted the assailant downstairs. ‘That was a little too close’ he said.

Surprised at the relative ease with which this operation had been executed, he handed it over to the ‘Scenes of Crime Officer’ (SOCO), Kate Mason. She was ‘of money’ and could be described as a classic English Rose. Noah thought she was tough, street-smart, and good at her job.

‘Congrats to you and the team! I heard you downed a bad guy. You’ve still got it!’ she said, flicking her long blonde hair over her left shoulder. ‘Thanks. He shouldn’t play with knives; his mama should have told him they can be dangerous. And Happy New Year!’ he said, offering a salute.

As she neared him, always standing a bit too close, he smelt the familiar Chanel No 5, the timeless and captivating scent which so suited her, he liked it on her. He was staring into her brilliant lapis lazuli eyes and momentarily got lost in them. She, in turn, admired his lean towering body, piercing green eyes, fashionable stubble, and short brown hair, and thought that he was as handsome as ever.

‘It all went according to the briefing. But there was one surprise. A Japanese print, known as ‘The Great Wave of Kanazawa.’ Thieves stole it about three months ago. I never thought I'd see it in London in a gangster’s art collection.’

‘That’s interesting. I had heard from my friend at Vauxhall Cross⁴ that the ‘Silver Fox’ was getting heavily into bed with the Yakuza. They were interested in him because his gang had stolen some secret NATO military intelligence for the Chinese government via the Triads⁵. Hell of a thank you present. Whatever they stole must've been pretty damn important and hard to get at if the Chinese couldn't get at it. Unless they wanted to keep their hands clean that is...’ she quipped.

He found himself turned on by the spy talk in her quintessential posh English accent. He looked at her for a moment and admired her slim, athletic body slowly being covered by the light, icy rain. At 30, she was the youngest SOCO on the force. He could not help but admire her full

⁴ The Headquarters of the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6

⁵ A triad is a Chinese transnational organized crime syndicate based in Greater China with outposts in various countries having significant Chinese diaspora populations. The Hong Kong triad is distinct from mainland Chinese criminal organizations. In ancient China, the triad was one of three major secret societies.

curvy breasts, highlighted by her tight-fitting black wool sweater. She caught his gaze and smiled a naughty smile. He felt like an embarrassed schoolboy and looked away at the officers attending the crime scene.

Amused by his typical awkwardness around her, she thought that he always dressed well and knew he loved two things in life: art and British sports cars. But why had he never asked her out? She made it obvious that he liked her...she thought distractedly.

‘Well, I’ll see you back at Thames House for the debrief.’ he said without looking at her and knowing that she was staring fixedly at him. As he walked off towards his silver Austin-Healey 3000, he turned back to Kate seeing her eyeing him, and said, ‘There was one last thing darling...’ She smiled eagerly and purred ‘Yes, darling?’

‘The Fox has the ‘Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette’ in his collection, it’s a forgery. Thought I’d mention it.’ She was clearly disappointed he thought he saw a flash of anger fleetingly cross her face and then pouting she said ‘Thank you so much...darling...’

He wondered if the constant flirting between them was just fun and games or whether she was genuinely interested in him. You never can tell with women, he thought. Best to keep work and romance separate he told himself reservedly. Trying hard not to think about her anymore but failing.

‘See you back at Thames House.’ She called after him in a girly voice and a saucy wink and walked off towards the crime scene. All business.

Although they were not MI5, they were operating out of their headquarters, Thames House. Art theft was part of the organised crime unit, and the cross-functional lines of investigation like human trafficking and drug smuggling, which also involved matters of national security. This task force had been set up as part of a global effort to coordinate interagency operations.

International art theft has been on the rise in recent years, involving crime syndicates internationally.

There was only one bitter pill to swallow regarding this raid and that was the tipoff had been from 'Fox's' rival, known simply as 'Taipan.' The gang's disregard for human life caused a wave of unease in his London, like a tsunami indiscriminately smashing everything in its path, equally impossible to stop. They postured over who had the most unearned wealth and who would commit the most unreasonable violence. Their pet names for themselves were laughable. His contempt for them made him a dangerous adversary.

As Noah sped through the cold, wet streets of London, his thoughts turned to the East.

The print. Japan. He'd never been and never thought about going.

The only place he'd visited in Asia was Hong Kong, with his brother when he was alive. They'd had a ball there and he loved the alienness of the place but he would never return, too many memories.

He wondered what kind of country it was and what the people were like. He had seen glimpses of it on TV about Mount Fuji, the Bullet Train, Sumo wrestling, and raw fish (yuk! he thought...bloody primitives) and for some reason, they insisted on eating with sticks. What's that all about?

Maybe I should take a look someday, he mused. Could be an adventure and who knows what he'd discover.

Noah's boss asked him to come to his office after a few days of sorting through the paperwork and processing the arrest of the 'Silver Fox gang.'

At 63, John Smith (no middle name), looked as fit as he was when he was in the Royal Marine. His grey hair and a goatee beard, sleepy eyes with bags under them, and half-shut eyes hid the razor-sharp intelligence of this Yorkshireman. He always smelt of 'Old Spice' aftershave, thought Noah derisively.

He had made the last five years of working for him painful, to say the least. Originating from Yorkshire, John didn't like southerners, particularly if they were posh.

He just wanted to retire and go cruising on cargo ships. He had always loved the sea and that's why he joined up. Rather than cruising on ridiculous floating casinos, he liked getting a nice cabin mingling with the crew and following the trade routes around the globe.

For John, having to deal with this charming, intelligent, elegant, young man of 35 was torture. Everything about him irritated him. But at the same time, he couldn't help but admire his amazing results, enthusiasm, and coolness in a crisis.

'The print you found, of the Fox's haul. The Japanese one. Caused quite a stir. It's attracted the attention of the highest levels of both governments. As such, they've asked for you to personally take it to Tokyo. There'll be no security detail. Don't want to attract attention.' He announced. Noah was stunned and even more so when he continued and said, 'They also asked if you'd be interested in spending a month with the art theft team at the Tokyo Metro Police to share your experience. A request has been forwarded from Tokyo. You will be spending a month with the team. Your position is temporarily...'. He paused, looking down and reading some papers on his desk as though he had forgotten that Noah was there. Not looking at Noah he continued, 'We're going to be working closely with the Japanese going forward and I'm appointing you 'Chief

Liaison Office – Japan Desk.’ as suggested by the Head of the Department.’ He fixed him with an amused stare.

‘I accepted wholeheartedly on your behalf. Your flight leaves Heathrow at 4 pm. My secretary has the details. There's no need to thank me....’ As he turned to leave John looked back down at his papers on his desk and added; ‘And Noah, don’t cock it up. You’ll be representing the country, the department, and most importantly, me. Good day.’

‘Sir’ Noah replied.

He knew why John was smiling, he’d gotten rid of him for a whole month. ‘Cheeky bugger!’ he thought as he chuckled to himself as he went in search of his assistant.

He thought of that old saying and thought how true it was; ‘...*everything happens for a reason, always.*’

Meanwhile, in Tokyo, Ai was going through the growing list of stolen art being trafficked through Japan, dismayed at the growing numbers and audacity of the crimes.

She had no idea her life was about to change forever.

CHAPTER 3 — THE FOREIGNER (*GAIJIN*)

'Eat it raw before all else, then grill it, and boil it last of all.'

Japanese Proverb.

Noah searched the crowd for his Japanese contact in the arrival foyer of Narita Airport. He was startled by a Japanese woman's voice behind him who said 'I hope I didn't surprise you, Mr Davies. I am Ai Nishihara. I've been sent to meet you. Welcome to Japan...' she said in a thick Japanese accent and with a deep bow.

Noah spun around to see Ai for the first time and returned the bow. The words of his boss echoed in his ear 'Don't cock it up!' She was slightly shorter than him with wild black hair, wearing a brightly coloured dress with patches of colour in the style of modern art. She carried a black leather jacket. Her expression was serious with no hint of joviality. Registering the faint smell of apple blossom, he glanced at her long electric blue nails and noted the absence of any jewellery. She noticed his gaze and he managed to stammer, 'Ms. Nishihara, thank you for meeting me. And it is a pleasure to meet you. Please call me Noah.'

The Polo Cologne by Ralph Lauren drifted towards her through the crowd for a long time, even before she got close to him. Why do foreigners wear so much cologne? She wondered. She judged him to be a bit over 180 cm and noticed his piercing blue-green eyes, fashionable stubble, and short light brown hair and she thought he was very handsome. He was muscular but lean, with no hint of a smile.

'Please call me Ai. This way, please. Our car is waiting. I am so pleased you arrived on time. I was 2 minutes early. I was worried I'd kept you waiting.'

‘Thank you but it is ANA that you really should be thanking’ he said with a laugh. She simply smiled. Interesting, he thought. She does have emotions, after all.

‘You are the first Japanese person I've met. If you don't count the ANA staff, that is’ he said.

‘Do not worry. I shall be your guide in Japan.’

‘Thank you, Ai- *san*.’ he said and gave a small bow.

‘*Do you speak Japanese, Noah-san?*’ She asked with a wry smile as if she already knew the answer.

‘*Just a little.*’ He said. ‘I was studying it on the plane from London.’

‘*It's really good.*’ She said with a lot of praise, which he wasn't sure was genuine.

‘Your English is exceptional. Where did you learn it? Have you been to England?’

‘Thank you. But I know it's terrible. I haven't had much time for travel, we Japanese are always working. Like most Japanese, we learn English at school but most of us never use it. May I ask a favour? If I make a mistake, would you be kind and correct me?’

‘Of course. And in return can you teach me everything about Japan?’ he said a smile, showing his even teeth. She felt embarrassed for staring so long at his mouth.

‘It would be my pleasure Noah-*san*. But even though I am a Japanese, I don't know everything about Japan’ she said.

She gave a small laugh, covering her mouth and Noah joined in.

‘This is going to be a mighty fine trip indeed!’ he thought.

The ride into Tokyo in the black Toyota Crown was a lot longer than he expected. He couldn't believe how everything was so clean and organised. He had the feeling he was on a giant movie set. Ai told him enthusiastically about Japan and the time flew by. He understood now, what she

meant. He'd only been in Japan for about three hours, and he already knew more about Japan than he'd known in his entire life.

They arrived at the Sumida Hokusai Museum located in the Ryogoku district of Tokyo.

Thankfully, there was no press, but a small group of important-looking people were assembled on the steps.

'That is the mayor, the head of the museum, and other important people. They are gathered to thank you for returning our national treasure. You are now a secret national hero, and they respect your cover so only a quick ceremony inside. No press. Then I take you to very best sushi in Tokyo. Everything is paid for during your stay by the Japanese Government.' Ai said.

'Fine' said Noah begrudgingly. He hated this sort of thing but as his boss had pointed out he was the new 'Chief Liaison Officer' and everything was getting paid for. Not that he had a problem with money.

They alighted from the car and were whisked inside the main gallery area, away from the public eye, the doors were firmly closed behind them.

Across the road, unbeknownst to them, their every move was being watched since Noah arrived at the airport. The man was dressed in a dark Armani suit with a white shirt and a thin black tie, he was smoking continuously pausing only occasionally to take shots with a camera with a telephoto lens. He was known simply as 'Mr Black' and was being chauffeured in a black Toyota with dark-tinted windows.

He never spoke to his driver other than to give him instructions. The tip of his left index finger was missing. This was a ritual of the Yakuza to display one's loyalty to the 'boss'. A gruesome

ritual, where one cuts off a section of one's finger and hands it over in a pristine white handkerchief while bowing one's head from a kneeling position so that it touches the floor.

As he waited patiently, he saw a tall white man, looking towards the entrance as if waiting for someone to emerge. Donning a golfing cap and dark sunglasses, hand inside the golf club's bag, his focus appeared unwavering.

Instantly on alert, Mr Black pulled out his pistol with a silencer, he wound down his window an inch, just enough to point the pistol at the man across the street who'd just taken a seat on a public bench.

Once inside, Noah removed the print from its special case and with Ai's direction handed it to the museum curator and everyone bowed very low, as if on cue.

To his surprise, they all said, '*We are deeply grateful.*' There were tears in their eyes. Noah turned to leave when the mayor rushed forward, grabbed his hand and said 'Thank you' repeatedly while bowing deeply. To which Noah replied, 'You are welcome. All in the line of duty. To which he replied that '*He would be in their hearts forever*', which Ai translated for them both. They all bowed very low, and Noah and Ai hastily exited the museum to their waiting car.

Unbeknownst to them, the 'golfing man' pulled out a pistol from his golf club bag as they emerged and aimed to fire. Simultaneously, Mr Black sent two bullets into the man's chest. The man collapsed onto the bench, resting his head on the golf bag, as though asleep. Mr Black closed the window and muttered to his driver to follow them.

Back in the car, Ai and Noah headed off for his first meal in Japan. Oblivious to the assassination attempt, they cruised through the streets of Tokyo, and Noah could not believe his eyes. So many people, so many shops, so many buildings. It was like a scene from the future. As they drove under a railway bridge heading towards Ginza (the most expensive shopping area and the centre of arts like the traditional Noh theatre), a sleek *Shinkansen*⁶ cruised over the bridge like a trotting racehorse being held back, eager to sprint like the wind.

He was like a wide-eyed kid on his first trip to Disneyland. He had expected the traffic to be chaotic like he'd seen on TV in other places in Asia but instead, it was sedate and orderly. Seeing two women in Kimonos, he asked if they were Geisha.

'No, they are just two women going shopping. Wearing traditional clothes is very common in Japan.' Ai replied with a laugh.

'I'd like to see you in traditional clothes one day if I'm not being too forward' Noah said. Ai looked puzzled 'forward?'

'Yes, it means maybe 'not showing enough respect' in this context' Noah said.

'*I see. Thank you, Noah-san,*' and she returned his smile showing off her cute dimples.

'Steady on. You've only just arrived.' he thought to himself. 'Get a grip.'

As these thoughts noisily bounced around his head, he suddenly realised he'd be staring at her for too long.

'*Is everything ok?*' she asked.

'*Everything is fine*' he replied, turning red. Making it worse for him she giggled like a teenage schoolgirl.

⁶ The Shinkansen, colloquially known in English as the bullet train, is a network of high-speed railway lines in Japan.

‘Ah, we’ve arrived!’ Ai announced.

They stopped in front of an old-fashioned building that looked like a large brown traditional Japanese house. It looked out of place, surrounded by low-rise modern Japanese office buildings. As they entered, it was like stepping back in time. The staff were all dressed in Kimono and called out ‘*Welcome!*’

In the entrance was a stone fountain pouring clear water into a bamboo pole on a pivot. When it filled up it tipped over making a pleasant ‘bonk’ sound and emptied the water into a pond filled with *koi*⁷.

‘*This way please*’ the waitress said, opening the rice paper doors which matched the walls of the small room with a low table, and two dark red silk-covered cushions that lay on the Tatami mats. A single Japanese character was framed and hanging on the wall. ‘Well, there's no mistaking which country I’m in’ Noah mused.

‘*After you please*’ Ai said. He entered and there were shrieks from the waitress and Ai said. ‘No, No. You must always take your shoes off!’ ‘Why?’ asked Noah wondering if he had any holes in his socks.

‘It is Japanese custom’ Ai said, embarrassed. ‘*I’m sorry, he’s a foreigner*’ she said to the waitress. ‘*That’s okay because he’s a foreigner*’ she answered while they bowed to each other.

Noah had always assumed that bowing was done in place of a handshake, but these Japanese bowed at the drop of a hat. ‘What a strange custom’ he thought.

⁷ The words "koi" and "nishikigoi" come from the Japanese words 鯉 (carp), and 錦鯉 (brocaded carp), respectively. In Japanese, "koi" is a homophone for 恋 (ai), another word that means "affection" or "love", so koi are symbols of love and friendship in Japan.

They both entered and sat facing each other. Ai sat with her legs tucked under her (as is the Japanese tradition) and Noah sat cross-legged awkwardly thinking it was lucky that he'd put on new socks.

'I'm sorry, Noah-san. I am a bad Japanese teacher. When you enter a place, you always remove your shoes' Ai said.

'What about at Police HQ? Will I need to remove my shoes?' he asked. Ai laughed a lot and said, 'I'm sorry, Noah-san. No, you don't. You are the first foreigner I've met. It's like meeting an alien. All these things we do automatically I never really thought about it. You have much to learn. I try to be better teacher.'

She gazed into his eyes for a little too long and looked down at the menu which was all in Japanese and said, 'Shall I order?'

'*Please*' he replied.

'*Two deluxe sets and two green teas*' Ai said to the waitress.

'After lunch, we'll go HQ, and you can meet the Boss and my Team.' Ai said.

'I'd like that. What are they like?' asked Noah.

'hmmm...strange. For some reason, they call me 'The Ghost' behind my back. I don't know why but I think it's because I work by myself and change police working partners regularly, but I haven't had a working partner for years. This is not Japanese way. My boss, Hiro Suzuki, likes me and lets me do whatever I want. He thinks of me as his daughter. Which I find weird because I lost my father and he lost his daughter and the ages are similar.' Noah found the way the Japanese pronounce the 'r' like an 'l' endearing.

‘That’s not strange. Sounds all normal to me.’ Noah said, sipping his green tea from a small white ceramic cup decorated with blue bamboo drawings. ‘*Delicious!* I’ve never had *green tea* before...’

‘Don’t you get on with anyone in your department?’ Noah asked.

‘One person called Takeshi. He is loud, funny, and always speaks his mind which is not Japanese way’ Ai replied.

Lunch was served and it was the first time for Noah to see a Japanese lunch. Of course, he knew about sushi and sashimi but had never tried it. The Miso soup was served at the same time. Then he spotted the dreaded chopsticks. He thought, of all the utensils to eat rice with how did two sticks win??

‘*Noah-san, can you use chopsticks?*’ Ai asked with a concerned look.

‘*Yes, no problem*’ he lied. After trying to use chopsticks a few times and dropping food all over the table and once in his lap. Ai could contain herself no longer and burst out laughing raising her hand to cover her mouth. This was not the first time he’d noticed this habit. She also did it when she spoke, must be a Japanese custom, thought Noah. At being laughed at he was a little embarrassed at first, then even he could see the funny side and joined in the laugh. It felt good. She was the most fascinating person he’d ever met. One moment she’d look deadly serious and fierce, then the next like a playful child.

‘*Noah-san, you are not good at chopsticks at all, are you?*’ ‘It’s okay to use hands with sushi,’ Ai said, barely containing her mirth.

‘Now, you tell me! You had better teach me after laughing at me so much’ he said.

‘*I’m sorry, let’s do it*’ she said. Thus, his first lesson in Japanese customs began. One small step for Noah, one giant leap for Japan-Anglo relations, he thought. Her soft, doll-like hands held his

hand to show how he should hold the chopsticks. She touched him for the first time and he enjoyed the warmth and silk-like touch.

‘Your hands are like silk...’ he stammered.

‘*Thank you Noah-san...yours are like sandpaper!*’ she said laughing out loud, again covering her mouth.

‘You enjoy laughing at me. I’ve heard that about Japanese laughing at other people’s misfortunes...’

‘This is not so for all peoples?’ she asked rhetorically.

The lunch box was black and red lacquered as was the miso soup bowl. The little compartments were full of brightly coloured fish of all types and rolled sushi. Another section was for Tempura, it was a feast for his eyes.

‘Noah-san, as your Japanese teacher may I teach you two things? I’m sorry but usually, we Japanese don’t speak much while we eat, so we can be grateful for the food and appreciate it. The other one is we don’t usually wear much perfume or cologne because we can’t taste the food.’

‘I understand. Very sensible. I tend to shovel it down like a coal stoker throwing coal into the burner of a steam train.’ Gesturing in a childlike way. ‘And I put cologne on like this, gesturing like he was pouring a bottle over his head. To which Ai laughed hysterically, only partially understanding what he’d said. Again, she covered her mouth as she did so.

‘Anything else I should know?’ Noah asked in a whisper like spies trading secrets.

‘At the beginning of the meal, we say ‘*itadakimasu*’ with our hands together like when you pray, it means ‘I humbly receive.’ At the end of the meal, we say ‘*gochisousamadeshita*’ which means

‘Thank you for the meal.’ But both mean more, like we are expressing a deep appreciation to everyone and everything involved, most of all, to our Mother Earth.’

‘Ai-san, that is beautiful. Is that religious? Buddhist or Shinto?’ he asked.

‘Yes and no. It’s complicated’ she answered indicating it would be a long discussion for another time.

He practised a few times and she clapped and told him how quickly he learnt the Japanese way. After being told he was a great student, he found himself staring into her almond eyes. He was struck by the curious way she seemed like a child, a woman and a wise woman all at once. She could play around, then play with her hair and pout which he found very sexy, then in an instant could display all the wisdom of one who has lived many years.

‘We have lots of time, we don’t need to be at Police HQ until 3 pm. Let’s enjoy our lunch’ she said.

Next was served grilled salmon and a bowl of fish soup.

Ai said, ‘We Japanese say, *‘Eat it raw before all else, then grill it, and boil it last of all.’* This means let no aspect of Japanese cuisine gets overlooked. Consider everything – flavours, textures, colours, overall composition and presentation.’

‘Ah, like our splendid lunch! Does it have a deeper meaning?’ Noah asked.

‘Yes, Noah-san. *Please think about it and I’ll tell you what I think it means later...*’ she teased.

While they were lunching, at HQ the ‘boss’ called a staff meeting with the subject simply of ‘*The foreigner.*’

CHAPTER 4 — THE CREST OF THE KUROHANA GROUP (*KUROHANA-GUMI NO
DAIMON*)⁸

'Fall seven times, get up eight.'

Japanese Proverb.

Hiro Suzuki (Ai's boss) addressed his department about *'the foreigner'* from the podium. At 60 years old, in customary blue police uniform, he looked like he should be retired and tending to his *bonsai*. Those who underestimated his quiet demeanour did so at their peril. He rubbed his salt and pepper beard and addressed his staff known as Alpha Team, 50 policewomen and men. Each had their speciality, including domestic and international art trafficking.

'Thank you for assembling so quickly. I know you're all busy, so I'll be brief. Today a foreigner from the English police joins us for a month. I don't think he speaks Japanese so welcome him, he's Ai-san's charge so all questions should go through her. He is here to learn from you all and to share his knowledge. Questions?' Takeshi-san raised his hand and 'the boss' pointed his finger at him. Takeshi asked with his classic Cheshire cat smile, *'Why have we invited a foreigner on an all-expensive paid trip to eat our food and steal our women?'* Everyone laughed and 'the boss' just rolled his eyes.

Takeshi-san was the only person on the team that Ai spoke with on a social basis. He had a soft spot for her and was attracted to her. But he thought that she thought of him as a big brother, not

⁸ The Black Flower Group

that he minded. They occasionally had lunch or drinks together but hardly ever said anything but she would laugh at his stupid jokes and his endless prattle.

Suzuki heard the discord of his elite team collectively groaning and muttering about why they needed to babysit a foreigner and what could he teach them when he couldn't even speak Japanese and knew nothing about us and so on.

'Well, if there are no questions then you can return to work. Thank you.'

He smiled to himself as he returned to his office. That went exactly how he had expected.

At precisely 3 p.m., Ai knocked on Suzuki's office door and entered with Noah in tow. He stood up and hastily ran around the desk and shook Noah's comparatively giant hand vigorously repeatedly saying 'Nice to meet you.' Turning to Ai, he said *'He's huge.'* Ai simply smiled and nodded. 'Please have a seat. I'm sorry my English is bad. Ai- san will translate for me, ok?'

Noah smiled and nodded or was he bowing, he wasn't sure.

'Ai-san, please do it.' She gave a slight bow. *'First of all, welcome to Japan. I hope you learn about our country and our police work so that we might work better with the English law enforcement agencies going forward. This work exchange, in my view, is critical to crushing criminal organisations. On the surface, Japan might look like a peaceful and harmonious society. When the Yakuza started about 400 years ago in Japan, they destroyed many good people and continue to do so. However, it's like a tsunami hit Japan and the water never receded. As in so many countries, they are ingrained and have moved into a lot of legitimate businesses. I don't want to give you a history lesson on the Yakuza, but it has been growing since the end of the second world war. Now just one group makes about \$80 billion US a year and there are many groups. Please read up on them while you are here.'* Ai simultaneously

translated and Noah thought it better to not interrupt him and just smiled and nodded. *'Secondly, I've asked Ai-san to look after you for your entire stay. I hope you'll do the same when you both go to London. Lastly, I must deliver strange and terrible news....'* He paused, Noah wasn't sure if it was for dramatic effect or if he was trying to summon up the courage to speak further.

'Sir, I must ask you to continue, no matter how bad it is.' Noah said sternly, readying himself for the worst.

'When you left the gallery today, a foreigner was killed near where you exited and at the same time.' Ai and Noah were both shocked. They had both dodged a bullet, literally. Suzuki continued, *'It appears someone in a black sedan across the road shot him twice in the chest to protect you. Whoever they were, they were professionals. The really strange thing was the would-be assassin was dressed as a golfer and had weapons in his golfing bag.'*

'A golfing bag?' Noah said.

'Yes, that's right I've contacted London and told them about the situation. They've said that the 'Silver Fox' has put a price on your head of one 1 million British pounds sterling, which means every assassin in the world will be heading to Tokyo to try and kill you. This changes our entire plan for your visit.'

'Sir, what did London advise?' Noah asked.

'After consulting with London, we agreed that you'll operate with Ai-san out of a safe house. You are to continue working with Ai-san. She will show you how we work in Japan but not through the station and we will have no contact other than by secret communication. Ai can then pass on the knowledge she gains from you to the team and hopefully, you can demonstrate how to catch our very own criminals. London thinks that you should be safer in Japan and other assassins will be obvious to our Secret Intelligence Service. A very small group of our elite secret service will

shadow you and will not interfere with your operations. They will be invisible. You'll receive new identities and disguises. From leaving this building you will cease to exist.' Noah's mind went to comical disguises like a clown, as usual, he couldn't take anything in life seriously.

'Thank you, sir. That is most considerate of you. And I apologise for the inconvenience my trip has caused.' Noah said, offering a low bow.

'Not at all, Noah-san. Ai knows what to do. You are in good hands. I will send a note now to the Alpha Team and tell them you have returned to London for personal reasons. Give me all your electronic devices and I will place them in the 'Darkroom' in a GoDark Faraday bag⁹.'

Just as Ai started to hand over the phone, it beeped with a new message. She read it quickly. It was from Mr Black. It simply said his boss would arrange the murder of someone from your Alpha Team to send a message to stop interfering with his business. Ai deleted the message and handed over the phone.

'What is it? Ai-san.' Suzuki asked.

'My confidential informant (CI) message said someone will be murdered from the Alpha Team, as a warning from the Kurohana Group boss to stop interfering with his affairs. He thinks there is a traitor in his group and that someone from the Alpha Team is getting information from the traitor.' Ai translated for Noah.

'I understand. Leave that with me. You won't be able to speak with your CI for a while. Will that be a problem?' Suzuki asked.

'Not at all. Thank you, Suzuki-san.'

⁹ GoDark Faraday Bags are military strength Faraday bags that protect your cell phones, tablets, and other electronics from location tracking, hacking, and damage by blocking all incoming and outgoing EMF signals between 200 MHz and 40 GHz, including GPS, Cell Phone, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth.

With that, they all stood and bowed. They were told to undress down to their underwear. Noah noticed that Ai had a tattoo of the head and claws of a menacing-looking black cat on her left shoulder.

In turn, Ai noticed that Noah had two tattoos; a fierce-looking wolf's head with blotches of blood-red ink forming the background to the head on his left bicep, the other on his right bicep was a tattoo of a human skull with a burning cigarette between its teeth, with the words 'memento mori' in black gothic writing, red drops of blood dripping from the words.

They both looked at each other with questions in their eyes but surrendered themselves to the technician who quickly scanned them and as there was no beep, he nodded to the chief and left the room. They both donned white cleaning uniforms with scarves, white hard hats and dark black safety glasses. They were both now indistinguishable other than Noah's height.

Exiting quickly via the fire stairs, down to the loading dock to a waiting laundry van. Climbing in the back, slamming the door, they lay down on the soft laundry bags. The driver exited HQ and headed for the safe house without looking around at them or speaking. They were gone. And safe for now.

'Oh damn!' Noah said.

Ai looked at him quizzically. 'I forgot to bring my laundry...' They both laughed as quietly as they could.

Ai was thinking about the shooting incident on New Year's Eve and the man in the black sedan, who'd saved their lives at the gallery. She understood it could be only one person, Mr Black. She wondered how much she could tell Noah. They had only just met, but she felt attracted to him,

wondering if she could trust him. He was a foreigner after all...and then she scolded herself for being a racist.

After a comfortable trip, lying on piles of clean laundry bags, they arrived at the safe house. The laundry van pulled into the garage. The garage door closed behind them automatically. The driver stopped the engine and opened the door.

They got out and without a word. He closed the door and left the safe house. The garage door again closed automatically.

Noah noticed a car and a motorbike both covered. Along one side of the garage were stacks of black plastic square cases. They looked distinctly like the cases he'd seen while training with Special Forces. The so-called goodies. Full of munition, arms and all the kinds of 'toys' you'd need on spy and commando raids. *'Thank you very much, Suzikisan'* he thought. Great! Now I'm even thinking in Japanese.

'This way' Ai said, leading them through a door from the garage to the house.

It occurred to Noah that she had been here before. But he said nothing. Upon entering the house. Despite its modern appearance. It had a Western-style kitchen table. But the two rooms with Tatami mats were distinctly Japanese. There was a small kitchen and a small bathroom. All the windows were thick (possibly bulletproof? Thought Noah) and the blinds were down. The house had no character and felt sterile.

'This is our home now. Do you like it?' Ai asked.

'East meets West...' Noah joked. 'Here for a day and I'm already living with you. You are a fast worker.'

‘I don't think my work is fast or slow. Just normal. Noah-san. We are not living together. This is a safe house. And it has two bedrooms. Are we going to have a problem?’ Ai asked with a serious face.

‘Oh no, no, no. I didn't mean that. I was just joking.’ Noah said. He felt like an idiot and was flushed with embarrassment.

‘I will heat our *bento*¹⁰ and make tea. And then we must talk.’ Ai said in a neutral tone.

‘That sounds like a good idea.’ Noah said, feeling like he was about to get a lecture on being professional. He leaned back in his chair and stared at a picture of Mount Fuji. It dawned on him that he had developed feelings for Ai in the short time he had known her.

Since his brother's death, he had treated women as disposable pleasures rather than meaningful pursuits. With Ai, he felt he was being pulled along by a strong tide.

They ate in silence. Noah wasn't sure if this was to observe the Japanese custom of not talking while eating or if she had something momentous to share. At last, she put her chopsticks down neatly pointing to the left. Noah broke the silence by asking, ‘Ai- *san*, why do Japanese always put their chops pointing to the left?’

She looked at him *expressionless* and answered, ‘In Japan, it is considered taboo to place chopsticks vertically, as it is impolite to leave the tip facing the other person and never pass anything from chopsticks to chopsticks, that's for funerals. Traditionally, a bowl of rice is left for the dead with chopsticks stuck upright into the rice. There are other rules, but you are a beginner and a foreigner’ she said like a teacher talking to a small child. They both laughed and the tension was broken. She looked at him sternly and began.

¹⁰ A bento is a single-portion boxed meal usually composed of a carb (usually rice or noodles), a protein (usually meat or fish), and an assortment of pickled or cooked vegetables.

‘Noah-san. There are some things you must know about me. It would be easier for me if you didn't interrupt.’ Continuing she bluntly stated, ‘I steal art.’

‘What!’ Noah could not control himself. This was not what he had been expecting at all. ‘Why?’ he stammered.

‘I have a contact in the Yakuza. He is in love with me. I use him to get information on the illegal art they have, and I steal it and return it to its rightful owner. It was he who saved our lives today, I'm sure of it. I want to tell you the truth about everything. I hope you don't think I'm a bad person...’

‘I don't think you're a bad person at all but I'm very surprised...are you doing all this because of your parents? Is it revenge?’ asked Noah in an understanding tone.

‘Yes. And because it's right’ she shouted her eyes bright with tears.

‘Why not do it through the police?’ asked Noah innocently.

‘Our police force is compromised. In the beginning, I tried that but whenever we raided a place it was empty. My department gradually thought I was incompetent. I told my boss that there must be a traitor and he agreed. An investigation was launched but we never found out who was working for the Yakuza. My popularity went to zero. That is also why we are here. This is not a police-safe house; it belongs to a friend of my boss. That driver is not a police officer, he is Suzuki-san's nephew. No one knows we're here apart from those two. We're off the radar. This is a good thing, no?’ Ai asked, having regained her composure. She was all business now. Noah was silent for a while, and he beamed a big smile at Ai.

‘Oh, one more thing, on my last raid I found a Gainsborough: ‘*A Couple in a Landscape.*’ was stolen from Dulwich Picture Gallery in London last year. I wish to return it anonymously.’

‘You are brave, resourceful and brilliant!’ he shouted happily. ‘I’ll arrange that somehow. We are in the perfect position to strike a blow against our enemies and find your mole. Then after we’ve dealt with your Yakuza friends, we’ll go to London to continue the fight. As you said, ‘because it’s right!’ At that moment, he wanted to hug and kiss her but realised that he should never have a relationship with a colleague.

The charged moment was interrupted by the ringing bell of an old-fashioned telephone. It was the burner phone. For a moment, they both just stared at the black phone on the varnished pine dining table. Suddenly, Ai reached for it and pressed the green button, listening but saying nothing. After listening to the voice at the other end, tears started to tumble down her face and she started shaking. When the voice stopped, she simply said ‘*Yes, I understand*’ and dropped the phone.

She collapsed onto the wooden floor and buried her head into her hands sobbing uncontrollably. Noah comforted her for a long time before she buried her face in his chest, breathing hard. He just held her until she fell silent for what seemed to be an age.

Finally, lifting her head and drying her eyes she looked at Noah, sniffing and said with a croaky voice, ‘The Yakuza killed a colleague in Alpha Team as promised, Takeshis*an*. He was stabbed multiple times by the canal near his home. The Crest of the Kurohana Group was carved into his back!’ After some time, she continued, ‘He was a good, kind person. Always joked and had no respect for authority. People joked that he wasn’t really Japanese and was from a different world. He would reply, ‘Yes, I’m from Osaka where all the best comedians come from and people know how to live. Not like you stuffy, boring Tokyo people! The truth is I can’t stand the way Tokyo people talk and everyone would laugh because it was true.’

‘Lao Tzu said, ‘The flame that burns twice as bright, burns half as long.’ It sounds to me that Takeshi-san was just such a person. I know the shock is raw but I’ve learnt that time heals and it’s helpful to remember the good times you had together and how lucky you were to have met each other...’

‘Yes, that is true. However, we Japanese mostly believe in revenge. I would say it is a part of our culture...but I could be wrong. Maybe it’s just my way. They think they can tame us by keeping us scared, they could not be more wrong. They kill one of us, I will bring destruction to their door.’

‘I understand how you feel. But we are officers of the law. We don’t have a free pass to go around killing.’ Noah said, slowly and quietly.

‘You have your way and I have mine. I tried to use the law but it failed me and got others killed.’

Noah thought for a while, trying to think of ways to dissuade her but realised it was pointless.

‘So, what’s the plan?’ Noah asked, fearing the answer.

‘To sleep. We must sleep. *Goodnight, Noah-san.*’

‘*Goodnight Ai-san.*’ As he turned and headed to his room, Ai secretly pocketed the burner phone and headed for her room. Inside and with the door shut she texted Mr Black and arranged a meeting at 3.30 a.m. at a bar near the safe house.

At 3 a.m., Ai dressed and silently went down to the garage and removed the cover from her bike, which had new plates. She had a pile of plates and would change them regularly. Cursing the noise the garage door made, she silently pushed her bike out and coasted down the hill before firing up the engine. With a whoosh, she sped expertly through the streets and arrived 10 minutes later at the bar.

Walking straight in dressed entirely in black leather she sat down opposite Mr Black and downed the double whisky that he had ordered. She felt the heat and foul smell of the bar darken her already dark mood. Mr Black looked at the barman and without saying a word delivered another whisky and went to the bar door turning the sign over so that it read 'closed.' disappearing upstairs.

Mr Black lit a cigarette and flicked the pack across the dark wooden table to Ai. She lit a cigarette and they stared at each other for a while silently. Mr Black admired Ai's wild hair. She looked like she'd come through a typhoon, he thought. They sat in silence for a while, smoking, staring at each other intently.

Mr Black was the first to speak, *'I am truly sorry about your friend...'*

She simply stared at him taking a sip of her whisky and took a deep drag on her cigarette before saying, *'Who?'*

'Ai-san, this is business, not personal.'

'IT FUCKING IS TO ME!' Ai shouted at him, startling him. *'WHO?.'* she demanded banging her fist on the table so hard that the glasses jumped.

'Taro. Boss asked me but I suggested my young lieutenant do it went in search of you to warn you but you were nowhere and I was too late...'

'Address.' he told her knowing that he could no more stop the wind than Ai's fury.

She downed the rest of her whisky and left without saying a word. Speeding towards the place where Takeshi-san would be avenged, she thought grimly that it would not bring him back but it would give her satisfaction.

Ai arrived at Taro's six-story apartment 10 minutes after leaving the bar. She stood outside the apartment block, looking up at it. She was thinking about the best way to get to his third-floor apartment and decided to climb up using the balconies.

Like Mr Black, Taro had joined criminal gangs when he was a child. When the opportunity came to join the Yakuza at age 14, he grabbed it. He spent years doing menial tasks for his brothers in the gang and then moved on to the usual; drug dealing, money laundering, prostitution, kidnapping, and extortion. Before finally moving on to enforcer. He had tortured and killed many people over the years in various ways. Usually, as his Boss (known as '*Kuma*' meaning 'Bear') instructed. When he was free to kill in his way, he'd cut the carotid artery which made for spectacular viewing as the blood sprayed everywhere. None of this bothered him at all. He had been beaten and traumatised since birth and was desensitised.

Kuma had told him to kill Takeshi. To stab him to death next to the canal when he was on his walk home and carve the Crest of the Kurohana Group into his back so there could be no mistake that his threats were very real.

Ai had easily scaled the balconies and was standing outside the sliding door into Taro's apartment. Surprisingly, it was slightly ajar, and the flyscreen was closed. She slipped back the doors and entered the living room. Standing in the living room in her black leather bike gear, she removed a dagger from the sheath tied to her calf, her leather creaked, and she quietly moved towards his bedroom.

There was a circle of metal pressing into her neck and she shivered. A man said, '*Turn around slowly and drop the dagger.*' She did as she was instructed. '*You!*' he exclaimed. She said, '*You are already dead.*' Like lightning, she snapped the pistol out of his hand, gave a short, sharp punch to his throat and he stumbled backwards, cracking a glass coffee table. She picked up the

dagger and launched herself at him, falling on top of him. She said, *'This is for Takeshisan'* slitting his throat from ear to ear.

She watched his head getting soaked in his dark brown blood. Fleeting satisfaction.

I must get back to the safe house before Noah awoke, she thought. Exiting the same way, she came in. She mounted her bike, and the engine roared to life, releasing the clutch she was catapulted down the dark narrow street toward the safe house. Her mood was dark as she knew that she had merely killed the henchman, Kuma was her real target. His time was coming...

Ai looked at her watch and saw that it was 5 a.m. as she entered the safe house. Stepping inside the dark living room she went straight toward the bedroom. Suddenly, the lamp light came on and she saw the silhouette of Noah sitting in a comfortable black leather chair. He was in his dressing gown, staring at her with an expressionless face.

Being a loner, she was not used to this situation and was not sure what to say and froze on the spot. After a long silence, she looked at Noah with a searching expression and announced she'd take a shower. But Noah stood up and said 'Now that you have avenged Takeshisan, I want to tell you my plan to bring down the whole Kurohana Group. Tonight, you killed one man because you have given up. In English, we have an expression, 'If at first you don't succeed, try and try again.' Your problem is that because you have given up taking down the Yakuza, thinking it's impossible, you only do small attacks but we need to think bigger. I tell you; it is possible!'

'We have a similar saying *'Fall seven times, get up eight'* (which she translated for him). 'Noah-san, I will never give up! Tell me your plan.' She whispered.

CHAPTER 5 — LOVE (AI)

'Love is like the wind — you can't see it, but you can feel it.'

Japanese Proverb.

Noah awoke the next morning to a rising sun. Quietly slid back the rice paper door, dressed in a Japanese dressing gown and wearing Japanese slippers, he saw Ai dressed in a black Karate jacket and trousers tied with a black belt. She was sitting cross-legged on a crimson silk flat cushion in the middle of the room on the Tatami mat, her feet pink and bare. Her eyes were closed, she was a picture of serenity. He entered silently, and sat similarly in front of her, closing his eyes. For about 15 minutes he attempted to clear his mind and concentrate on his breathing.

'Good morning, Noah-san' Ai says, bowing.

'Good morning, Ai-san.' Noah replies, returning the bow.

'I've prepared a traditional Japanese breakfast. Grilled fish, rice, and egg with green tea. We'll eat and then we'll discuss your plan.' Noah bowed slightly in reply.

Once they discussed the plan in detail, they contacted Suzuki and he said that he'd come this morning to be briefed.

Noah took this opportunity to explore the 'toys' in the garage with Ai. The first thing he wanted to see was what car he had been supplied. Being one of his passions in life, he pulled back the cover and let out a low whistle. Ai could see the delight on his face like a boy getting his first train set. It was the NSX Type S Acura's flagship model. A sports car with a hybrid powertrain to offer blistering acceleration and a quiet electric vehicle when needed. It was brand new and charcoal grey.

'Does it have special features?' asked Noah like he was going to explode with joy.

‘Noah- *san*, you are not James Bond and this is not a movie. Please take this work seriously.’ Ai reprimanded.

Pretending to be hurt, he said ‘I do take my work seriously.’ Then added, ‘But as it happens, I take great pleasure in it.’ Ai smiled at him and winked, understanding exactly what he meant. He went to the black Kevlar boxes and opened them one at a time. He saw pistols, night vision goggles, machine guns, grenades, tear gas, body armour and more, saying, ‘Wow. You could start World War Three with this lot.’ She replied, ‘I think the idea is that we stop that from happening...’

After briefing Suzuki on the plan, he left and returned in the evening with dinner and confirmation that they could proceed. Noah couldn’t help but notice that the takeaway Chinese food could have been like that of any major city in the world.

Over dinner, they discussed the plan further and went into the details. Suzuki told them that Noah’s colleague, Kate Mason, would be joining them tomorrow and had been briefed. Noah thought that odd and looking at Ai felt troubled.

Why her?

He produced a folder from his briefcase containing aliases and fake IDs. Ai said that she’d meet Mr Black at a bar at 1 a.m. to set the bait for the trap.

‘Right. Everything is set for this Saturday at midnight. That gives you four days to prep. Ai-san, once you have confirmation from Mr Black, text me with a message saying ‘Sorry, I’ll be late’ from the burner phone and then destroy it.’ Suzuki said. ‘Good luck to us all!’

The following afternoon, the garage door opened and the same laundry van that Ai and Noah had used entered. Out jumped an athletic woman in a white cleaning uniform.

‘Noah!’ Kate Mason yelled and ran and jumped into his arms. Ai looked on with curiosity, was this Noah’s girlfriend or colleague, she wondered.

‘Steady on Kate! It’s nice to see you too.’ he said coolly. ‘Kate, this is Ai. Our Japanese colleague.’

Kate put out her hand, but Ai chose to bow saying ‘Nice to meet you, *Katesan*. I am Ai Nishihara.’

‘Hi, Ai’ replied Kate. Not returning the bow. ‘Do you mind if I steal Noah for a bit, we’ve so much to catch up on?’ she gushed.

Before she could reply, Noah said ‘There’s no time for chit-chat. The 3 of us need to go over the plan in detail until we all know it by heart. Our lives depend on it.’ Kate looked oddly at Noah and Ai, suspecting that something was going on and she instinctively didn’t like it.

Kate changed and sat down to drink the green tea that Ai poured for her. She grimaced and said to Ai, ‘Do you have any proper tea? Milk and sugar. If possible?’

Noah looked at her and felt nettled at her lack of cultural tact. He wondered why she was being rude to Ai. He was going to remind her that she was in Tokyo, not London.

‘I’m afraid not, *Katesan*. We only have Japanese tea.’ She smiled.

‘Well, first, the good news. The Silver Fox has decided to withdraw his bounty on you. As part of the deal to pretend to buy the art that the Yakuza are about to steal, his sentence has been reduced. He’s cooperating with our team. Secondly, the Japanese Secret Service have said there

are no new assassins in Japan of which they were aware. Apart from the Yakuza, you are free to move around using your fake ID.'

Noah jumped in the air and let out a 'Yahoo!'

Sitting back down he said, 'Now I've only one of Japan's most powerful organised crime syndicates to worry about. Piece of cake.'

Ai said, 'Sorry, Noah- *san* but we don't have any cake.'

'He means it'll be easy. He's being sarcastic.' Kate said derisively, slowly and loudly, as if talking to a child with hearing problems. Ai said to Kate. 'Thank you, *Katesan*. Any English you can teach me is greatly appreciated.' Pretending not to notice her sarcasm.

'I would, but I might be a little bit busy trying to stop international art theft. But I'll see if I can fit in a lesson in between catching bad guys.' Kate replied laughing. Noah laughed too. He pretended to give an English lesson while shooting at imaginary bad guys.

Ai suddenly got up from the table and stormed off. Noah got up to follow her but Kate tried to stop him, she knew she must or she would lose him forever. All those years of pursuing him and no one else would be lost. She would lose everything she had worked for, dreamed about, and believed to be rightfully hers.

However, he forced himself away from her embrace, roughly pushed her back into her seat mumbling 'Let me go!' and ran out into the cold, rainy night.

Ai was already running across a deserted, red-curved wooden bridge. He sprinted and caught up to her. She was crying, holding onto the bannister.

'*I'm sorry!*' he kept on saying.

They were both sodden from the rain and it mixed with her tears.

To his surprise, she said, '*Do you love Katesan?*'

He laughed and said, *'You idiot, I love you!'*

Surprising himself and Ai. It was a first for them both.

They embraced, and she felt warm and surprisingly muscular. She always smelt like apple blossom which he loved. He pulled her away and looked into her beautiful almond eyes for the briefest of moments before passionately kissing her. Her lips were soft and moist, her tongue sweet. It intertwined with his, it was a long kiss like nothing he'd experienced before.

He said, 'Come on, I'll walk you to our beautiful home.' not caring about the weather as they strolled along the canal like teenagers, hand in hand. Forgetting about the mission and feeling carefree and being completely 'in the moment', he heard Ai singing and was taken aback by her silky voice.

Ai sang a beautiful Japanese folk song as they walked. He asked her what it was about. She said, 'It's called *'Tōryanse.'* It's a children's song, I don't know why but it just popped into my head.' She told him again about how the Yakuza had killed her parents by burning down their shop with them in it because they wouldn't pay 'protection money' and that's why she got burnt, trying to save them when she was six. She showed her scars. Both arms showed burn marks.

'The longer you stay in Japan, the more will be revealed to you.' she said.

They both laughed.

'We all have our secrets...' he said, and went on to tell her how his younger brother died in a skiing accident and how he feels like it was his fault. They were very competitive growing up and it was while racing down a ski run that they entered a whiteout. His brother hit a tree at high speed and died in Noah's arms.

The rain stopped.

Tōryanse started playing at the pedestrian crossing, meaning it was safe to cross. They walk across hand in hand, humming the tune. Enjoying the smell of the rain-sodden gardens. The evening was cool but they didn't notice it.

The next morning, he woke early in his bed and called out to Kate. No answer.

He opened her bedroom door and there was a note with a hotel address saying that she'd be staying there and to meet there tonight at 7 pm.

He went back to bed and reflected that he had not been this happy since before his brother died.

Since meeting Ai, it was like the void inside had been filled by something bright and beautiful.

He found himself humming 'I can see now the rain has gone...'

The door slid open, and Noah pretended to be asleep when a warm body pressed against his and an arm wrapped around him and she whispered in his ear, *'Love is like the wind — you can't see it, but you can feel it.'*

He'd seen Ai meditating each morning and had asked her about it as he'd never tried it. She said practised *Zazen* (坐禪), which was a form of seated meditation that is central to the Zen practice.

It involves sitting in a specific posture and focusing on the breath, sometimes with a *koan* (a paradoxical anecdote or riddle, used in Zen Buddhism to demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning and to provoke enlightenment). She warned that the core goal of achieving a state of inner peace and mindfulness can be terrifying to a beginner as it can take you to the darkest place in your mind, to the place you fear the most. Noah thought about this and thought that sounded interesting too and resolved to try it regardless of the outcome.

Perhaps he should of heed the wise words of Ai, occasionally...

CHAPTER 6 — PATRONUS¹¹ (パトローナス)

‘There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so...’

Shakespeare

Ai and Noah sped through Tokyo’s bustling streets towards a hotel overlooking Tokyo’s central park where Kate was staying. She rested her hand on Noah’s thigh, gazing at Noah’s unshaven face marveling at every feature of his profile. Her hand wandered up to his ear as she played with the curls of his light brown hair.

‘Hey, we’re going to crash if you keep doing that!’ They chuckled together. He thought to himself that his gratitude list was full today.

Driving the Acura, which handled precisely to his touch while enjoying the new car smell and the 600 horsepower 3.5-litre twin-turbocharged V6, he was in heaven.

All too soon, they arrived at the hotel. He reluctantly handed over the keys to the valet. Entered the restaurant, and Kate was nowhere to be seen. It was unlike her to be late. Ai ordered drinks and they waited for 10 minutes.

Ai said, ‘We should go upstairs and see if Kate is OK.’

Arriving moments later at her 19th-floor hotel room, they knocked and waited.

Silence.

Ai pulled out a card and inserted it into the digital key lock and the door opened.

Inside, Kate was lying naked face down on the double bed. Noah rolled her over gently and she stared at him with an empty blank stare. Motionless.

He noticed the bruising and lesions on her neck and concluded that she had been strangled.

¹¹ Patronus is a fully-shaped spirit animal, one’s protector.

But by whom?

He started to cry and held her in his arms, saying her name repeatedly.

Ai watched on also in shock, knowing all too well the helpless feeling of holding a loved one who had passed. After some moments of mourning her, he laid her gently back onto the bed. He took in a deep breath to steady himself and then without speaking looked around and found nothing had been taken.

He immediately thought guiltily about the last time they'd spoken, and a feeling of regret washed over him. The wet towels and the shower still running gave a clue as to how the killer had surprised her.

He closed her eyes and now she looked like she was sleeping. He pulled a blanket over her.

Suddenly snapping back to reality. They had to go immediately, he thought.

Wiping off their prints, leaving quietly they left and sped back to their house, taking every turn to throw off anybody following them. But nobody was.

Ai called Suzuki and told him about their shocking discovery. He said he would take care of the situation, sounding emotional. Ai reflected on how hard it was for him to be losing people all around him and knowing Kuma was responsible.

Before setting off for the new house Suzuki-san had given, they scanned the car for tracking devices and disposed of their mobile phones. It was essential to keep using new burner phones as the Yakuza were good at using phones for tracking.

The whole time Noah wondered how Kate could have been identified and killed. She was experienced but not trained as a spy, neither was he. Both could handle themselves in the field.

It was a mystery, yet he was privately entertaining several theories and none of them were good.

Ai kept on glancing at him, concerned at his stern face, lost in thoughts. He had hardly spoken and she yearned to hold him close and console him. She knew the pain he suffering all too well.

They arrived at their second safehouse. It was about an hour out of Tokyo in an expensive, leafy suburb. It was chilly and featureless. How he would love to have a fire to gaze at.

Ai made them tea in the modern Western kitchen.

Questions hung in the air but neither of them spoke.

Their mission was secret and yet somehow the Yakuza group had found out about her.

Kate had only just decided on that hotel and used a pseudonym.

Noah was in shock, thinking about how she was such an incredibly nice person and all the good laughs they had together. He began to cry and cry. He shivered and couldn't stop. Ai wrapped a blanket around him, rubbing his shoulders.

Ai did not cry. It was at times like this that she became like Titanium and would spar with her Karate sensei.

Later that evening, Suzuki arrived with Thai takeaway food which they ate in silence.

After some words of comfort, he got down to business. Suzuki-*san* was looking at Noah's ashen face and thought that maybe he couldn't complete his mission.

Suzuki-*san* said that at this time the Japanese Secret Service and British Intelligence were working closely together. But they had no leads. London had a few theories about Kate's murder. The first theory was that the Yakuza had been following her all along and had traced her to that hotel. She wasn't in disguise and could have been recognised.

The second was that they had staked out every hotel looking for an English woman.

What also was possible was that there was a leak at the British or Japanese end and the killing had been done by the Yakuza. This would explain how the Yakuza even knew to look for an English woman and that she was working with the Japanese police.

None of these theories were palatable, especially given the small circle of people who knew of the plan.

With two days left to go before they would bring down Japan's second-largest organised crime group, they were in a quandary. London was to advise tomorrow.

At the same time, a discussion was taking place, on the 30th floor of an office building in Tokyo's business area, Mr Black was talking to his boss.

'Is it a trap?' The boss asked.

'Sir, I don't think so. We have confirmation from the Silver Fox that the art will be transported to London for an exhibition. In addition, my source in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department also confirmed that the art will be moved this Saturday night.' Mr Black answered.

'I don't know who your source is other than she is a woman. But why do you trust her?' The boss asked.

'I saved her life on more than one occasion, Sir. She owes me. She would not lie.' Mr Black answered.

'Very well then. We will proceed. With caution. But we will succeed in stealing the art. It will go to London and be sold. No one will ever know who took it!' The boss said while laughing and 'chugging' on a whiskey.

Suzuki came back to the house where Ai and Noah were staying the next evening, with more takeaway food and supplies. He told them that London had advised that they had no further updates and that their mission was still 'a go.' It was to take place the following evening at midnight.

The next morning, Noah was still upset about Kate and had been very quiet. Ai had comforted him and told them that they should meditate before getting ready for the mission.

At the back of the house was a traditional Japanese tea house. It looked over a teak-coloured pond about the size of an average suburban swimming pool. It was surrounded by grey granite stones of different shapes and sizes. It was a wintery, still, cool morning and although the sun was shining it offered no warmth. Everything was still and quiet. The air was crisp and smelt faintly of fish from the carp in the pond.

They sat cross-legged on the Tatami mats on the crimson cushions, closed their eyes, and enjoyed the silence.

Ai went on her usual icy path in the mountains with sheer drops down to an abyss. The mountain wind howled and played with her, pushing her in different directions, seemingly hoping that she would fall to her death. She accounted for the constant changes in direction maintaining perfect balance. She took the path up the top of the mountain to a platform which was her place of meditation. A place that was silent and still.

There, her mind contemplated a paradoxical anecdote or wandered through the teachings of Chinese philosophers. Although her teacher had taught her the works of philosophers from all over the world she gravitated towards Confucius, Sun Tzu, Lao Tzu, Zhuangzi and Mencius. She would hold long discussions with them while sitting on a cloud in a place where time didn't

exist. In the real world that would take a nano-second. In the mind, time and space held no meaning. This was a testament to her skill in the art of meditation.

Her favourite saying was 'To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, subtract things every day...' capsulising the teachings of Lao Tzu.

Noah's meditation was that of his Patronus, a grey-white wolf with mesmerising ice-blue eyes. It was his spirit animal. Known for its power, loyalty, guardianship, and teamwork. He felt like he was extremely intuitive with almost supernatural instincts and could detect dangerous situations.

Through green pine trees in the mountains, he could smell his prey.

Even without his pack, he was confident of victory. He sensed his quarry was nearby. It had disappeared into a cave, so dark it was as if light was forbidden.

He entered that cave without fear and stopped. It was still and silent apart from the gentle sound of falling white snow.

He could smell a foul stench coming from the cave. It was of rotting flesh.

Suddenly, right in front of his face, a thing appeared with angry red eyes, jagged uneven teeth glowing green. The creature roared a sound as if straight from hell which hit him like a gale-force wind.

He growled and pounced. Jaws ripping into fur and flesh. As he bit into the creature's hairy throat it hit him with such force it sent him flying out of the mouth of the cave.

He got up off the soft snow, his fur dripping with blood and headed back to the cave entrance.

His strength was in his mind, not his body. He heard the howl of several wolves behind him which gathered in a semicircle.

Looking at each in their eyes in turn, he let an almighty howl. A howl that tore through the still night. Together they entered the cave at a sprint...

He felt a hand on his shoulder which startled him out of his meditation. Opening his eyes, he was back in the tea house looking at the green pond and then at Ai, staring at him with a look of concern. He was breathing hard, and his heart was racing.

‘Noah-san, I think you have much to learn about meditation. You control your mind and your body. Not the other way around’ she said, brushing back her wild black hair over one ear. Noah studied her with new admiration. By comparison, he felt like a caveman.

‘Don’t talk. Sit still. Drink your *green tea*. Control your breathing’ she said in a calm, even voice.

Walking towards the kitchen, she added ‘Clear your mind. Do not study the trauma you just put yourself through. Breath.’

Her advice worked, and he felt calm and clear-minded. He was ready for the mission.

Mourning Kate properly would come after the mission. This mission was for her.

He now understood Ai’s need for revenge. Knowing full well that it was the wrong path. He could not resist fantasising about strangling her killer.

The traitor who betrayed her would not get off so lightly.

He had had to kill people in his line of work. Sometimes it had been kill or be killed.

However, revenge was different. As an officer of the law, it was his duty to bring criminals to justice.

Kate’s murder was different, or was it? He realised he had loved her and was now filled with guilt and rage. He felt that he was becoming like Ai, consumed with rage. Not wanting to be out

of control he would concentrate on the mission for now and think about it later. Sipping his tea, a Shakespeare quote surfaced in his mind, *'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so....'*

The wolf was about to go hunting. There would be no mercy...

CHAPTER 7 — THE MISSION (*SHIMEI*)

'What flows easily, does not last long.'

Japanese Proverb.

Time: 23:30

Location: The Sumida Hokusai Museum, Tokyo.

Lying under a black all-weather blanket, on a hilltop park, Noah and Ai were silently observing the museum car park through the lightly falling snow.

Through powerful military issue day/night vision binoculars, they could see three lorries, loaded with Hokusai masterpieces bound for London.

There were about a dozen police cars and a police bus parked around the museum, lights flashing creating a carnival-like effect. Police in their smart blue uniforms were shadowed by heavily armed tactical police who'd formed a perimeter around the museum.

Noah was thinking that the Kurohana Group would only have a few spotters surveying the museum and importantly, probably deciding which truck to follow knowing that two were decoys.

At 23:55 the lorries started their engines and lined up at the exit.

The snow had stopped falling, there was no wind. The only sound was that of vehicles.

At 24:00 exactly, the three convoys left the museum heading in different directions. Noah and Ai observed from the observation post the first two convoys had significantly more protection than the last which only had one car in front and one following the rear. They also observed three motorcyclists in black set off after each of the three convoys.

‘Ha! Subtle’ Noah remarked to Ai.

‘*Let’s go!*’ she replied packing the blanket neatly into its travel bag. All in black they set off in the Acura after the convoy which had the least protection.

‘God, I love this job!’ Noah said with a wolfish grin. Ai glared at him with her best admonishing look, rolled her eyes and let out a sigh.

This was the real bait that would bring down the Kurohana Group. All three convoys were given indirect routes to Narita Airport, Tokyo’s main airport. The Kurohana Group would ambush one or all three of the convoys most likely in the countryside. The Specialist Assault Teams were in the air awaiting orders to strike.

Ai and Noah followed about 1 km behind the convoy. Occasionally, they would catch a glimpse of the trailing motorbike ahead. The rider was also following a satnav tracker of the convoy, approximately 500m ahead.

Restricted by the speed limit, they were all moving through the deserted streets at about 70 km/h. On this route, it would take about 90 minutes to get to Narita Airport.

As the road narrowed into a two-way windy street, the scenery changed from suburbia began to a small deserted industrial landscape and Noah said, ‘Hold on, it’s going to happen around here....’ Ai nodded in agreement, cocking her pistol.

No sooner had Noah uttered those words, than two black vans pulled in between the bike and the convoy.

‘Ringmaster, Alpha 1. We’ve got company, two black vans behind the convoy,’ Noah said into his mic.

‘Alpha 1, Ringmaster. Tango’s sighted’ a quiet man’s voice said into Noah’s earpiece, betraying a Japanese accent.

Noah slowed the Acura right down, giving them plenty of distance.

‘Ringmaster, Alpha 1. Any signs of Tango’s on the other convoys?’ Noah asked.

‘Alpha 1, Ringmaster. Tangos not sighted. Guess they got lucky with their first hit.’ The same voice replied.

‘Ringmaster, Alpha 1. Guess they had a one in three chance.’ Noah quipped.

The Specialist Assault Teams watched the scene from the air. Two UH-60 Black Hawks, equipped with noise dampeners followed from above.

Captain Tanaka with 10 years’ experience, with his bird’s eye view from the helicopter saw something that he'd never seen before, a truck that intercepted the convoy from a side street blasting the lead police car into a shop window. Blocking the convoy, bringing the vehicles to a screeching halt.

The lead black van accelerated, deliberately slamming into the following police car, ramming it into the breaking truck. The other van pulled up alongside, stopping dead. Out jumped a dozen masked men dressed in black tactical gear and surrounded the truck full of precious art.

MP5K machine guns at the ready, the police were either severely injured or dead.

The masked men opened the truck cabin and were surprised to see it empty.

The man on the motorcycle that had been following the convoy pulled up next to the leader, they nodded to each other and set a detonator on the truck.

One of the men then jumped into the driver's seat of the truck putting it into gear and manoeuvred it into the side street. Another truck backed up so that the trucks were back-to-back. The men laid planks forming a bridge between the trucks and transferred the contents. The heist took less than 5 minutes.

The fully loaded truck sped off. The rider followed letting his back wheel spin on the wet road and the engine roared. Pushing a button on his phone, the truck exploded.

Watching the entire scene from a couple of hundred meters up the road, Noah said to Ai, 'Bait taken. Hook, line, and sinker.' She looked at him confused but said nothing.

Time: 00:45

Location: Near Kurohana Group's warehouse. 20 km west of Narita Airport, Tokyo.

'We did it! We did it! Mr Black! Unbelievable' chortled a young Yakuza man driving a truck full of stolen priceless art. His black singlet showed his Cobra tattooed glistening biceps. He pulled hard on the cigarette dangling from his lips, dropping ash on the steering wheel and his ripped jeans. Running a hand through his greasy black hair he then slapped the side of the door in joy and stole a look at Mr Black riding next to him.

*'Oi! Cool it. Are you high? You punk! Shut the f*ck up and keep your eyes ahead!'* Mr Black yelled at the kid.

'Yes, Mr Black. I'm sorry.' the kid said, bowing his head continuously as did as he obeyed.

A voice came over Mr Black's radio, *'Tiger, this is Cobra. ETA?'*

'Cobra, Tiger here. 5 minutes. All clear.' Mr Black replied.

As they rounded the corner, the acres of warehouses and containers used by shipping companies stretched out into the distance. The area was well-lit and was busy with freight trucks, forklifts and cranes moving cargo. They were within a sea of flashing lights on the vehicles. Mr Black turned on the trucks' orange flashing lights and they became indistinguishable in the mass of activity.

By contrast, the Acura was eyed by every worker and trucker driver as it purred along the boulevard. Noah was surprised to see how many women were driving the trucks hauling containers from every part of the world. He was particularly amused to see a huge pink crane truck driven by a young Japanese woman in pink overalls with a pink hair band. Noah couldn't resist when he caught her eye to give her a smile and a wave. She giggled, putting one hand over her mouth, and waved back manoeuvring the giant vehicle, that looked like it belonged in a Thunderbirds' episode, around a roundabout and exiting towards a container terminal.

'Hey! You!' Ai admonished him, seeing the whole flirting scene in disbelief, playfully punching him in the arm.

There was a truck rest spot 200m ahead on the left, they pulled in and concealed the car between two container trucks, awaiting orders.

Mr Black's driver pulled the non-descript lorry into the warehouse and massive electric doors closed behind them. The warehouse lights were turned on, transforming the large space into an artificial day. There were numerous black limousines, cars and bikes parked in rows at one end of the warehouse. It seemed like the entire group had turned out to see for themselves the biggest haul ever. The truck drew to a stop in front of the Kurohana Group boss.

He was puffing on a cigar, dressed in a black mink coat wearing gold Gucci shades. He looked like a bad actor in a 'B' grade gangster movie, clapping and laughing with all the senior members of the group. They watched on as the haul was unloaded and the pieces hung on a specially constructed wall. Each work was hung by the gang members and admired in turn by Kuma and his loyal commanders.

*'It's unbelievable! Un-f*cking-believable! The Hokusai collection is mine!'* Kuma uttered through tears.

'Are you alright?' One of his commanders asked in a concerned voice.

*'Alright? Of course, I'm f*cking alright! Sh*t for brains! I've come up the ranks from nothing to being the head of the Kurohana Group! I now have the Hokusai collection! I am the greatest! I am the greatest!'*

'You are the greatest!' his men throughout the warehouse repeated. First, it was taken up by the 30 or so men around me (his senior men) then the chorus was repeated to about 15 soldiers, spread out through the warehouse (all dressed) in black commando gear, brandishing their MP5K machine guns.

Suddenly, it was pitch black and the chanting stopped. Kuma pushed the button on the phone which operated the trapdoor they were standing on and as he was falling, he thought *'What flows easily, does not last long.'*

Ai and Noah were outside the warehouse, waiting for the commandoes to seal off the area when a lone commando walked towards them with his MP5K (equipped with a silencer) pointing directly at them...

CHAPTER 8 — NEVER SURRENDER (*KESSHITE KŌFUKU SHINAI DE*)

'Nine deaths, one life'

Japanese proverb

The trapdoor opened under the Boss and his two bodyguards dropped three metres onto an air cushion. They had been deliberately standing on it in case they needed a quick exit. Kuma prided himself on always having multiple exits. That and using a double was the reason he'd lasted so long. Not even his group knew he used a double, except for his inner circle.

One of the bodyguards hit the lights and they hurried along the concrete tunnel, about 200 metres long. They climbed the ladder bolted into the concrete, and opened a trap door between a white van and a warehouse. Climbing into the van, one of the bodyguards started the engine. They drove to Narita airport, into a hangar to an awaiting Learjet, its engines running. He entered the luxurious aircraft and bellowed 'Never surrender!' to no one in particular and poured himself a large whiskey.

Mr Black walked past Ai and Noah, leaving them confused. Dressed as a commando with his MP5K machine gun drawn he deliberately gave them the impression he was going to shoot them but then slightly adjusted his aim to open the warehouse doors. He nodded to them, entered the warehouse, and crouched inside the door, pretending to scan for 'tangoes' and nodded, giving the 'All clear' signal. They entered and crouched in a firing position just next to him. He stood up and pulled out two spray cans. They turned to look at what he was doing, just as he sprayed them both in the face. Instantly, the gas took effect and Ai and Noah collapsed.

A short while later, a black police SUV pulled up next to the Learjet and Mr Black got out and went to the back of the SUV. Opening it and hoisted a bound and gagged Ai onto his shoulder. Her head was covered with a black hood. Once onboard he threw her onto a sofa. The bodyguard closed the jet's passenger door and gave a thumbs-up to the pilots and they began to taxi.

Just after take-off, Ai came too. Shaking off the aftereffects of the 'knock-out' gas. She began to struggle; Mr Black removed her hood. She immediately understood her situation. Slowing her breathing and regaining her composure she sat still and quietened her body.

Mr Black leaned over and ripped the duct tape off her mouth. The pain was like a burn across her face, but she showed no reaction.

Instead, she smiled at Mr Black and said, *'Thank you for rescuing me. It would certainly look convincing to the pigs.'* She turned to Kuma and said, *'I am very grateful for all you have done for me.'*

He looked at Mr Black and back to her and back to him confused. *'What is she talking about?'*

Mr Black opened his mouth to speak but she quickly replied, *'He is my boyfriend. We've been lovers for many years.'*

'Liar! You really are something!' Mr Black shouted at her.

'Darling, why are you yelling at me? I did everything you asked me to. I'm sorry Mr Boss but Mr Black told me to tell the police where you were going with the art treasure. He wants to be head of your group and said I would be his queen. It is clear to me now, that we have both been betrayed. I am sorry.'

The Boss blinked at her story for a minute and let out the biggest laugh of his life, which ended in a coughing fit. On the ground, he was pounding the plane's floor, coughing, and laughing at the same time.

Eventually, it subsided, and he sat on the Learjets' off-white leather swivel chair and took a big swig of whiskey. Then silence ensued until finally, he said, *'You are right, Mr Black, she is good...I can see why you like her'*.

Turning to Ai he said, *'Little girl, there aren't many things in life of that I am certain, but Mr Black's loyalty is one of them.'*

She turned and looked at Mr Black, he was smiling an evil grin.

He said, *'I haven't been entirely honest with you. Yes, I do love you and have from the moment we met. I also know that love will not be returned. For a while, I was so besotted by you that I would betray my oath to my group. But luckily it wore off. So, I fed you enough information to keep you interested but none that would really hurt our organisation. I saved your life on more occasions than I can remember. On two recent occasions; the New Year's Eve. Remember? The party you attended and stole paintings? It was I who allowed you to escape. I also reluctantly saved you and your boyfriend from Silver Fox's golfer assassin. It pained me to watch you grow close to him, so I strangled his English girlfriend to send him a message... he's too dumb to understand it. The lovely Kate was surprised when her room service turned out to be her death service.'*

Ai had so many questions. *'How did you know where Kate was?'*

'Easy. Our European friends have people everywhere. The English secret services are anything but secret.' Mr Black said with a derisive laugh.

Then she remembered the body falling onto a white sedan, crushing the roof, and smashing the windows and asking him *'The bodyguard? At the New Year's party? The one that crushed the car, who was that?'*

'That was one of the Boss's bodyguards. He allowed you to escape with two of his favourite paintings and so he had his men throw him off the roof for his failure!'

Ai stared at him in shock. She had wondered about all these things and could not understand why they had happened. Only now, did it all make sense. Her arrogance had been her downfall.

'I'm confused,' she said, *'You say you have feelings for me, and you saved me on multiple occasions, and you killed an innocent woman just to hurt my boyfriend? Who's not my boyfriend, by the way...'* After a pause, she added *'Why am I here? Why did you rescue me? Why leave Noah alive?'*

There was a long pause, and he stared out the window. Then turned to face her and demanded *'Why don't you love me? I did everything I knew how to please you. Have I not treated you well?'*

His face was red and contorted and there was spittle on his mouth. She could see the exasperation on his face. She replied,

'You are a victim of your circumstances. I don't know if you were born bad or became evil from the hand that life dealt you. Having the Boss as a father figure is like being raised by Satan.'

He could stand no more. He gave a signal of a raised clenched fist, and they all raised masks to their mouths and Ai received a quick spray of gas which instantly knocked her out.

The pilot announced that they were flying into a typhoon¹², and everyone was to remain seated, buckled up for the remaining 30 minutes of the flight to Okinawa. Everyone complied and Kuma turned to Mr Black and said, *'I see your dilemma, you have fallen in love with a fascinating, beautiful woman who is in love with another. A tragedy which has been told since time began. It is up to you, but it would be better if she died. You mourn her. Then find someone else...after all, the world is full of interesting women. But I have known you your whole life and I know you won't give up, so I'll say no more about the matter.'*

'Thank you' Mr Black said quietly and looked out the window and the ominous dark clouds as the Learjet was being thrown around the sky.

After a pause, Kuma began speaking to Mr Black in a serious tone.

*'We lost a lot today. Money, people, and support from the Groups around the country. I spoke to our brothers while I was waiting for you, and they all turned their back on us saying 'that you're f*cked!'* That may appear to be the truth. While we were 'getting' our treasure, the government raided our businesses all over Japan and seized our assets for tax fraud and money laundering.'

He gulped down a tumbler of whiskey, sloshing a lot of it down his front due to the turbulence and he continued. Somewhat drunk now.

'I have money stashed all over the world, but we'll need to call in favours from both the Koreans and the Chinese to build the greatest empire ever. I can't trust the Japanese right now. So, we'll lay low in Okinawa for a bit then go to Busan. We are not out of the game yet. It's like the old saying; 'Nine deaths, one life'.

¹² 'Typhoon' in Japanese is 'Taifu'. Whereas 'kamikaze' in Japanese translates to 'divine wind'. There were two winds or storms that are said to have saved Japan from two Mongol fleets under Kublai Khan. These fleets attacked Japan in 1274 and again in 1281. The Japanese believed that these typhoons were sent by the gods to protect them from their enemies.

As he said that he reached for the crystal decanter and there was an almighty bang, a blinding light, and the deafening scream of roaring of jet engines at max power.

'Maybe I spoke too soon...' Kuma thought as the oxygen mask dropped from above and he felt the pull of his body against the seat belt. Everything that wasn't stowed was now pressed firmly against the plane's ceiling...

CHAPTER 9 — THE TEMPEST (テンペスト)

'When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what the storm's all about.'

Haruki Murakami

Kuma was ready to die. As the Learjet tumbled around the sky, it reminded him of body surfing in Bondi (Australia), when a large crashing wave pulled him in all directions at once before dumping him hard on the sandbank.

Strangely, after a lifetime of dealing in drugs, prostitution, and everything other criminal enterprise he pictured himself as an art lover. However, it was not enough for him to visit a gallery, he had to own the painting. It was the possession of it as much as admiring it that gave him great pleasure. He didn't care about denying the world its beauty.

These would have been his dying thoughts but the pilot managed to gain control of the Learjet and as Kuma stared out the window, he didn't realise that they were so close to the ground.

Gasping involuntarily, he thought he was an express elevator to hell when he heard the thud of the undercarriage go down and noticed that the flaps on the wings were extending.

Seconds later he saw the perimeter fence of the airport and felt the hard touchdown at Okinawa Airport. Even through the thickly cushioned armchair, the jolt ran painfully up his spine. He thanked the gods for being alive and then remembered he didn't believe in all that crap.

They taxied through torrential rain into a brightly lit hangar being buffered by the howling wind and rain. Kuma could see that inside the hangar were black SUVs and a lot of heavily armed men dressed in black tactical gear.

He unbuckled his seat belt and stood up. He saw that both his bodyguards appeared to have suffered massive head injuries and were dead. He pointed a finger at each and said laughing, *'You are both fired for being dead on the job!'* Then he began slapping Mr Black in the face until his eyes opened and he sat up.

*'We made it! We f*cking made it!'* Kuma yelled and did a little dance until the plane stopped suddenly inside a hangar and he fell over laughing. The cabin was a mess. Mr Black got up quickly and went to Ai's chair. She wasn't moving...

The huge C-17 Globemaster was approaching the typhoon. The turbulence was severe. All other aircraft at Okinawa airport were grounded and the airport was closed. Except for this priority military aircraft, which was advised not to land, the pilots replied that they had landed in worse conditions.

The plane began a steep military descent, the pilots choosing an approach path that minimised exposure to the strongest winds and turbulence from the typhoon.

Noah was strapped in the cargo hold with the assault team, no one spoke and even the toughest amongst them were muttering prayers.

The plane would drop like an elevator with a broken cable and then rise like a rocket going into space. Most of the commandos were throwing up but not Noah, he had turned into something he'd never experienced. It was a cold, clear-minded state, focused on rescuing Ai at all costs and smashing the enemy. To that end, he welcomed the storm, it matched his mood. *'Bring it on!'* he thought.

The pilot had begun his near-vertical descent and they were all buffered horizontally and Noah's ears experienced a burning, pressured sensation as they struggled to cope with the decompression.

Suddenly he was pinned against his seat and felt like an elephant was sitting on him, as the giant plane began the sudden move from the vertical to the horizontal flight path. It was moments after the plane had straightened out then it continued to decelerate and descend that he heard the thud of the undercarriage going down and locking, followed shortly by the hydraulic whirling sound of the flaps extending.

'Crew. Brace for a hard deck landing.' The captain said over the Tannoy.

As the wind buffered the plane, Noah saw through blurred vision everyone being rattled and jarred like they were in an old bus going over a stony road.

The plane slapped down onto the runway so hard that it physically hurt Noah's body. His head felt like it was going to fall off and his back ached as the four jet engines screamed in full reverse thrust. At the same time, the pilot hit the brakes gradually bringing the huge aircraft to a slower speed before immediately veering off the runway onto a high-speed exit.

Everyone on board burst into applause and screams of joy, Noah included. The ordeal was over, they were somehow safe and alive.

The plane taxied through a flooded apron towards a hanger. Once inside, the engines shut down and the crew stood ready to disembark and get into action.

The huge door at the back of the aircraft slowly lowered and the commando teams disembarked. Immediately after the last commando was on deck inside the hanger then three black Humvees were driven off this remarkable aircraft.

Noah remembered this jet could carry an Abrams tank, 10 armoured Humvees, two tractor-trailer trucks, or 100 paratroopers and all their gear.

The assault teams set off at a pace towards the oncoming typhoon through deserted streets, only a few hours behind their quarry. The convoy of back Humvees looked menacing. Noah was in the lead vehicle. Silent. He was concentrating on his breathing as Ai had taught him. Calming his mind and body, preparing for the battle ahead.

Kuma's convoy of three black SUVs raced through the mountain roads. The drivers were barely able to see through the torrential rain and flying debris. They were heading to his mansion about three hours south of Okinawa airport.

He had a small, backup army of 50 mercenaries in the convoy and at the mansion. All ex-military, all well paid. They were a force of elite soldiers.

Ai was tied up and gagged. Lying on her side in the back of Mr Black's SUV. When she awoke, she was being thrown about as the convoy sped towards Kuma's lair. She had no idea where she was and what was going to happen to her. But she remembered her training and decided to meditate. There was nothing she could do now but ready herself for when the first opportunity arose to escape. But before escaping, she'd kill them all, she thought coolly.

The convoy arrived at the three-storey traditional Japanese house with white walls, red Pagoda roofs and a Japanese garden overlooking the sea. Surrounded by a tall dark stone wall, perched on a cliff, it was like a fortress.

When the convoy went through the only gate to the whole property, the electric heavy iron gate closed behind them and locked. Men in black combat gear were patrolling the property. Armed with MP5K machine guns, trying to act like they were oblivious to the typhoon, but were being

'hammered' by the torrential rain and high winds. The convoy braked hard, skidding on the pebbled driveway at the entrance to the manor house.

Pelting rain like bullets and a wind that was almost impossible to stand up against, hit Kuma and Mr Black as they got out. The soldier carrying Ai over his shoulder in a fireman's carry somehow battled the short distance to the house. Upon entering, the roar of winds and pelting rain subsided.

However, the typhoon mercilessly buffeted the boarded-up windows and due to the sound of the howling wind, they couldn't hear what the elderly Japanese woman, who had just entered, was saying to them. Ai could just about make out what she was saying, *'Welcome. I have fresh clothes for you. And have hot food ready.'* Two maids and a guard took Ai to the bedroom and changed her very carefully. Knowing full well of what she was capable of. Once she was dried and changed, they took her to the living room.

Mr Black handcuffed her to a ring next to the fireplace and removed the tape that covered her mouth. He offered her a bottle of water from which she drank thirstily. He said to her, *'You will eat something'*. She gave a slight nod.

She would obey their commands, not cause any trouble, and lure them into a false sense of security. Then, when they dropped their guard, she would strike. That is if they weren't all killed by Mother Nature.

After a journey that Noah would not soon forget, they arrived at about half a kilometre from Kuma's 'fortress'. The convoy had found relative shelter from the typhoon on the leeward side of a rise of the small mountain into which the road had been cut.

The young captain addressed Mr Suzuki and Noah, looking at the weather radar on the centre panel of the Humvee, 'Sirs, it appears that the eye of the typhoon is heading directly towards us and will make landfall in about four hours.'

'We should make our attack immediately. We are exposed here and will not survive the typhoon. Our best hope is to blow the property gate, then blow the front door and stop the Humvees bumper to bumper in a semi-circle as close as possible to the front door. Get into a defensive position and let them come to us. Make entry from the front of the house. Clean sweep it, room by room. I'm thinking most of the tangoes will be outside to repel us from getting near the house,' suggested Noah, before continuing, 'Once the enemy is destroyed, hopefully, the house has a cellar that we can all hide in and ride out the storm in there. As I see it, that's our only chance. The entire headland will be blown flat by the typhoon.'

'I agree, Noah-san' Mr Suzuki said, 'But, what about Ai- san, she will be in great danger.'

The captain said, 'Sir, the hostage is in great danger anyway. We don't even know if she is alive. Also, we don't know how many tangoes we'll be up against. I'm guessing about 50 well-trained mercenaries. I bet they'll be paid well if they defeat us, so they'll be well-motivated. They will also think they have the advantage in their defensive position, but we'll turn the tables on them.'

'Right, then we are agreed. Captain, give the team 15 minutes to be briefed, eat, and get ready. Then we roll in with full force.'

After Ai, Kuma and Mr Black relaxed in the main room of the mansion to enjoy whisky and smoke, Kuma said 'I've been in touch with our Korean friends, and they'll send a plane in 2 days, and we'll fly directly to Busan. Our first step in recreating my empire. This time, it'll be 10 times greater. The clans will bow before me. I will be more ruthless than ever. Japan will be

mine and the puppet government will do whatever I command. That is, whoever can pay the highest price. I may need to move into the Emperor's Palace.' He finished, laughing hard which ended in a coughing fit.

Ai was reminded of a book she'd read about the last days in Hitler's bunker, where Hitler on a drug-infused rant had declared that Germany was invincible and made plans to retake Europe. Well, Kuma could be on drugs and was certainly drunk and his rants were that of a madman.

'Sir' said a dripping-wet captain who'd entered with two of his guards, all wearing their muddy boots, much to the housekeeper's chagrin.

'We've spotted 3 black Humvees coming up the mountain road. They'll be here in minutes!'

'What the hell! How did they find us? It's your damn boyfriend and his pals!' Kuma yelled, pointing at Ai. She merely looked at the floor meekly, like a poor beaten, weak woman. Inside, a volcano had erupted. This was the moment she'd been waiting for and a cool, deadly calm settled on her. Mr Black was watching and was not deceived by her act. He knew her power and was scared and he never was scared.

'Captain, prepare for attack. Full defensive positions. You have command.' Kuma said.

'Yes, sir!' said the captain. Turning crisply and giving orders into his mic.

Mr Suzuki checked the GPS, they were 500m away from the mansion. He said, 'Captain, you have full tactical command.'

'Yes, Sir!' the captain said.

Noah rechecked his MP5K submachine gun, taking solace that it was one of the most precise silenced submachine guns in its class. The wind shouldn't be a problem for the accuracy of the

weapon, but it will be for the shooter. They had no intel but were guessing a force of about 50 well-trained and heavily armed soldiers.

They had the advantage as they no doubt knew they were coming, all they had to do was bunker down and defend. Noah thought grimly that there would be casualties that day but was determined not to be one of them. He was pumped for battle and had the blood lust that soldiers had entering a 'do or die' situation.

Speeding towards the front gate, the lead Humvee pulled up 100m from it stopping at a 90-degree angle. Three commandoes dropped from the vehicle on the lee side and fired two RPGs at the gate which exploded off its hinges and one at the front door which disappeared in smoke and flames. The following two Humvees raced into the compound seconds later and were peppered with bullets.

Ai, Kuma and Mr Black could just about hear the explosions and gunfire over the sound of the roar of the wind. They had built a bunker in the corner of the main room with a cache of weapons, ammunition, and hand grenades, wearing bulletproof vests. Ai was tied up, lying on her side in the corner with her back to the room. Kuma said to Mr Black while holding an RPG on his shoulder, 'My men are the best that money could buy. If we survive, they get US\$1m each, so plenty of motivation' while chugging on a bottle of whiskey. Mr Black simply nodded and watched him with disgust, he would have killed him now but was thinking even a drunk who could shoot was better than nothing. Then he smiled to himself and thought, that becoming the most powerful man in Japan was actually his plan.

He wanted to possess Ai and by giving the order that all art was to be returned to its rightful place and that all illegal art dealing to cease, her eyes would sparkle when she looked at him. He

would reward her with anything she wanted (within reason) and he would melt her icy heart. She was a wild cat that needed taming, he thought. Japan also needed taming and once he had control it would prosper once again. His first act would be to rid Japan of foreigners, he would start with Noah.

The Humvees had managed to form a tight semi-circle very close to the front door, as planned. Most of the tactical group were facing out from the house and were taking constant heavy fire. The others were forming a Roman-style phalanx with Kevlar shields to enter the house. They had moments to get inside. Machine guns fired blasting them from all directions. Noah was in the middle of the nine-man phalanx. Other members threw a constant stream of grenades through the front door until the phalanx began to march.

There was a terrific explosion behind them, then another, and another. RPGs were raining mercilessly down on the defensive semi-circle of Humvees. At the same time, about 30 mercenaries were moving forward towards the tactical group firing a myriad of different weapons, including Kalashnikov's.

Both sides had deployed smoke, which added to the smoke from the raging fire at the front of the house. However, the wind from the typhoon made a mockery of the smoke leaving both sides in clear full fight at close quarters.

The tactical group had the advantage as they could lie low away from the burning Humvees in various tactical defensive positions along the front of the burning house. About 20 mercenaries lay dead on the perfectly manicured lawn. Their lifeless bodies like mannequins laid out for a movie, all fully dressed in black commando gear.

About 15 of the tactical squad lay burnt and some dismembered next to the burning Humvees and along the patio. Many of the surviving members of the group had taken hits but were still able to fight, partly thanks to their state-of-the-art body armour. Especially the helmets which were made of Kevlar. They could withstand a pistol shot at about 15m and could deflect a machine gun bullet. The Kevlar vest offered both sides protection to the chest and abdomen. But no armour is seamless. Even a full suit has points of vulnerability. Most armour neglects to cover arm or leg joints. Some armour leaves the neck or wrists open. Both sides knew these vulnerabilities, and this is where they aimed. After the battle, it would be revealed that on both sides the neck shots accounted for most of the deaths.

The advancing mercenaries understood that their position was hopeless. Five more had dropped dead to the ground. The wind started blowing the dead bodies along the lawn towards the back wall.

The mercenaries all but abandoned the fight, the force of the wind made it impossible, and they all sought shelter. As they retreated, a huge Japanese Black Pine tree was ripped from the ground by the ferocious wind and crashed down, crushing a small group.

Five of the tactical group remained in cover and the others entered the house. The phalanx breached the entrance and dispersed. Keeping the shields against the walls as bullets could easily penetrate them.

In the small entrance, the walls behind them were on fire. The heat was intense. In front of them were maybe five tangos which were taking turns at spraying bullets into the entrance. A grenade was thrown into the entrance but luckily it bounced out the front and exploded harmlessly next to the burning Humvee.

In the entrance, one of the commandoes lay on his stomach. When the next mercenary went to throw a grenade, he shot him through the neck. The grenade dropped to the ground, blowing up the mercenary and another standing next to him. That was the moment that they all rushed forward into the living room and took cover wherever they could: One behind a column. One on the floor, Noah and one other hid behind a shrine.

At close quarters, the tactical squad and the mercenaries were firing at each other at very close range. Unlike the commandos, the mercenaries had no cover. They were easily cut down.

In the left corner of the room, an RPG was pointing at them on the shoulder of Kuma. Noah yelled 'RPG! Get down!' Just as Kuma fired the rocket. Two of the commandos to the right were instantly blown up. Noah was left with one commando and Suzuki.

Mr Black opened fire with a heavy calibre machine gun (m60, thought Noah?), killing Suzuki and the remaining commando was cut down.

The instant Kuma fired, Noah aimed at his head and with two shots killed him.

Noah, Ai and Mr Black were the only ones left alive.

Mr Black snarled 'Stop! I'll kill Ai!'

He stood up with a pistol pointing at her head. Her hands bound in front of her.

Noah involuntarily inhaled. To see her left him in shock. He was so glad and relieved that she was alive.

Noah's voice was commanding, 'Give us the girl and you can go free.'

Mr Black laughed and said, 'Leave the house and I'll let you live.'

'Not going to happen.'

'I'm not afraid to die. If I can't have Ai, you certainly won't!' yelled Mr Black.

Noah said, 'Take a look around. Everybody's dead. There's nowhere to run. The typhoon's coming. Unless we go to the cellar now, we're all gonna die anyway!'

Mr Black started inching Ai towards the patio at the back of the house facing the sea down a high cliff. Moving slowly, being followed by Noah's submachine gun.

Mr Black skilfully hides behind Ai moving towards the patio and into the wind.

The commando Noah thought had been killed but was severely wounded, stood up to fire but Mr Black took one shot which hit the neck of the commando and killed him.

Noah thought, somewhat coldly that Mr Black was a very good shot. The commando fell heavily onto Suzuki's lifeless body.

As Mr Black and Ai disappeared onto the patio and were backing towards the cliff, Noah remembered Mr Black's words; 'If I can't have Ai, you certainly won't!'

Suddenly he realised that they were heading towards the cliff so that they would fall together in some pathetic romantic gesture. The wind had other ideas. It forced them back against the wall.

Just then Noah rushed him. Raising his gun to shoot Mr Black but Noah was shot in the right wrist. Causing him to drop his gun. Ai slammed back into Mr Black and knocked the gun out of his hand.

A flying branch hit Ai and knocked her over. She rolled along the lawn, driven by the screaming wind and lay slumped against the wall, still bound.

Noah clutching his wrist, moved forward towards Mr Black. He, in turn, backed towards the cliff as Noah advanced. The wind was so strong, that they were both now flat on the ground, crawling like lizards. Every inch took all their strength to cling to the earth to avoid being flung out to sea.

As Noah went forward, it caused him pain like electric shocks bolting through his body. Down his wrist, down his arm now covered in blood.

Only barely functional. Mr Black, similarly, clung to the earth, fighting against the wind but he was hurtling along the ground. As they neared the cliff, the wind changed suddenly, and Noah was blown back against the wall, pinned there next to Ai.

Mr Black was thrown against the cliff-facing wall which was lower and older. Noah and Mr Black were saved by the wall from being thrown off the cliff as the typhoon approached its full strength.

Where Mr Black had hit the wall, it was at the oldest and weakest point and he inadvertently dislodged the keystone. As the wind grew stronger, and with his weight against it, the keystone flew out and disappeared into the sea.

With the keystone gone, the other rocks disappeared similarly. Mr Black dug his hands into rain-sodden earth like a mole. It was futile. Noah could see his mouth open like he was screaming but could hear nothing above the roar of the gale. The wind, like a giant invisible hand, picked him up and hurled him out to sea.

Noah fought against the wind towards Ai, which felt like crawling along the seabed in violent surf. Somehow, he reached her, covering her body, as they were both pinned against the old grey stone wall. She was either unconscious or dead, he prayed for the former. There was nothing anyone could do until the tempest passed.

‘Ai, Ai, I love you!’ he shouted in the wind. His words were whipped away by the violence of the wind. He closed his eyes, held her tight against the wind and passed out.

EPILOGUE

At Ai's apartment, Noah was finishing off an email, when Ai leaned over his shoulder, fresh from the shower and smelling delightfully of apple blossom and read the email.

'Resignation? Noah-san, what will you do now?' she asked, eyes wide like a surprised child.

'Well, you did say, the longer I stay in Japan the more will be revealed to me...' he said as he pulled off her towel and she giggled. He leaned over and pressed 'Send' on the laptop, scooped her up and headed for the bedroom.

Meanwhile, in a wet cave sat a cut and bruised Mr Black. Staring catatonically at the sea saying,

'Wherever you go, no matter what, I'll see to it that every happiness you have is extinguished.'

THE END
