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# THE ACCIDENTAL YAKUZA

by Wanjoo Alexandre Kim

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In thy faint slumbers I by thee have watch'd,  
And heard thee murmur tales of iron wars;  
Speak terms of manage to thy bounding steed;  
Cry 'Courage! to the field!' And thou hast talk'd  
Of sallies and retires, of trenches, tents,  
Of palisadoes, frontiers, parapets,  
Of basilisks, of cannon, culverin,  
Of prisoners' ransom and of soldiers slain,  
And all the currents of a heady fight.  
Thy spirit within thee hath been so at war  
And thus hath so bestir'd thee in thy sleep...

*Lady Percy, Act II, Scene III, King Henry IV, William Shakespeare*

*Thought to be the first written account of PTSD*

I don't sleep well at night  
For in my dreams I still fight  
And the enemy that I see  
Is a soldier and it is me.

*Anonymous Veteran*

## Prologue

### **The Pacific Island of Guam, 2008**

*Death is the price of life. Whoever came up with that was right.* Screw the platitudes, thought Hiro as he flattened himself against the wall, oblivious to the blitzing mosquitos. He heard chatter. Something about an overturned tanker, then laughter. Hiro felt a cramp in his foot and shifted.

“Hey, what was that?” he heard someone ask.

“Nothing man. Time for dinner. We’re done, let’s get out of here.”

Hiro peered around the corner of the building and saw two men decouple some hoses and in so doing spill a backwash of thick black liquid that oozed down the slope towards where he hid. Cursing, the men spent a minute kicking dirt over the gooey slick, jotted some numbers into a logbook, then stepped into the semi’s cab.

He watched the tanker rumble out of the facility and disappear in a plume of red dust. He retreated quietly to the window where a crack in the typhoon shutters gave in on the man. Except that he was no longer there. Hiro was about to bug out when he heard a toilet flushing and an exhaust fan coming on. He made his way back to the window just as the target returned to sit in front of a monitor. The man seemed to hesitate, then pulled out a glass pipe into which he dropped a pea-sized crystalline substance. He lit the dose, inhaled deeply, and exhaled into the ceiling. He coughed a few times, tapped quickly at the keyboard, pulled a flash drive from the computer, and slipped it into his pocket. The target rose, grabbed his keys, and exited the room.

He was halfway to his car when Hiro latched on to him with a rear-naked chokehold. Gurgling with panic, the man dropped his keys and pulled at Hiro's forearm with all he had. But the jugular flow of deoxygenated blood from the brain down to his heart had already ceased. Now the compression of the carotid arteries stopped the flow of oxygenated blood from the heart up to his brain, so that four terrorized seconds later, the man blacked out. His dead weight brought Hiro down to his knees. Hiro shifted to better his grip, increased the pressure, and held the squeeze. He was suddenly overcome by the smell of the man's hair. As he turned his head away he felt the man's stubble against his cheek. He squeezed harder. Then, slowly, gently, he released his hold and broke away. The man remained upright for a moment that seemed too long and then crumpled forward. He came to rest with an ear to the ground and would have been concerned, had he still been alive, to hear the faint hum of a distant motor.

Hiro picked up the keys, started the car, popped open the trunk, and with some difficulty, loaded the warm body. He was about to get in the car but turned and made his way quickly to some growth where he vomited violently. "You bastard," Hiro muttered. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve, scanned the surroundings, got into the car, and drove out of the compound.

# Part One

## Chapter One

### **Iraq, 2006**

It wasn't much discussed. Whether dumb luck, karma, or whatever else one chose to call it, had anything to do with getting home alive. But it did. More than anyone wanted to admit. Drop something, bend over to pick it up, dodge the sniper's bullet that would have blown a hole in one's head. That was lucky. Remember the candy bar left on the cot, double back to get it just in time for the RPG ripping through the barracks. That was unlucky. Sit in the driver's seat of the Humvee leading a twenty-one fuel-tanker convoy. That was ... karma.

It was in that Humvee that US Marine Lieutenant, Hiro McAllister reached over and tapped Gunnery Sergeant Gomez on the shoulder and signaled him to stop.

"What's up, LT?" asked Gomez.

Hiro pointed to the fuel gauge then got on the radio. "Convoy, all halt. Five-minute refuel. Keep your eyes and ears open. Anderson, Gomez, with me." The men got out. Hiro raised

his binoculars and swept the perimeter, then satisfied that all was clear, moved to the rear of the vehicle where Gomez and Anderson were unstrapping the cans.

“Gunny, you gotta get this ride into the shop. It’s sucking down fuel like there is no tomorrow.”

“Speaking of sucking, you getting any, LT?” asked Anderson, breaking out a broad grin.

Hiro looked at him. Poor kid. Trying desperately to fit in but making a clumsy mess out of things. Hiro was keeping him close because like all combat virgins he needed breaking in but also to keep him out of the men’s hair. Black and blue half-moons did not weigh down Anderson’s eyes. His appetite was excellent, his movements regular, his sleep sound, and masturbation, specifically the inability to engage in the act with any privacy, was not yet an issue. His new, factory oiled sixteen bore no dings or scratches. This itching for action vibe irritated the rest of the unit whose realities didn’t jibe with the *you are part of the meanest fighting machine the world has ever seen* indoctrination super-charging Anderson’s psyche. It didn’t help that he was Dunn's replacement, and that like Dunn, Anderson anointed himself with baptismal doses of Old Spice, and that this redolence triggered memories he could not possibly be responsible for. PFC, Steve Dunn. Found hanging from a rafter, still as the desert sunrise that began what would have been his twenty-third birthday. Not a few days before. Not a few days after. On his birthday. A final act that had wreaked lasting havoc on platoon morale.

“Shut your face, Anderson,” snapped Gomez. “LT, nothing wrong with the Hummer. It’s that three-quarter inch plate I welded to the chassis. Gotta be five hundred extra pounds.” Under-armored Humvees were being pulverized by IEDs, so troops were using whatever they could find, scavenged steel, and even plywood, to upgrade their rides.

“Didn’t think of that.” Hiro wiped the sweat from his brow. “Anderson finish up and get those cans strapped back in. Let’s get moving.” Hiro tossed the binoculars over to Gomez. “Let me get the wheel.”

“You sure about that, LT?”

Hiro nodded. “You kick back for a while.”

“You the boss, LT.”

Hiro was about to shift the vehicle into gear when Gomez spoke.

“Yo, LT, one o’clock,” said Gomez, pointing through the windshield. He raised the binoculars. “A man and a couple of kids. He’s waving to us.”

“Want me to get on the fifty, Lieutenant?” asked Anderson.

“Negative. Stay put, Anderson.”

“Gomez, with me.”

Hiro got out and walked towards the man. Gomez took a position behind the Humvee’s fender. Thirty yards out Hiro raised a hand and motioned for the man to stop. The man had an infant in his arms. A five or six-year-old boy with crusty nostrils and dirty hair clung to his pants.

“You speak English?”

“Sick, sick,” the man said, offering up the infant whose exposed tummy floated loosely in dirty diapers. Hiro stepped forward for a closer look.

“What’s wrong with the little guy?”

“Hot. Sick,” said the man.

Hiro pulled off his glove and put two fingers on the baby’s forehead. He turned back to Gomez. “Gunny. Medic.”



A ratty looking dog that appeared out nowhere began sniffing at the little boy who wrapped himself around the man's leg and began to whimper. Hiro kicked the dog away. The air shifted and he caught a nose full of the man's sweat and the soiled diapers.

"Not sure, boss. Could be many things," said the medic after a quick examination of the infant. The medic pinched the child's arm. "She's dehydrated, guaranteed. And she got a fever, but we don't carry no acetaminophen in infant doses. I could try to start her up on an IV—"

"We can't do that."

"Her diaper's full."

"Round up a six-pack of bottled water, some MREs, and give the kid a candy bar or something," Hiro said, ruffling the hair on the boy's head. "We've got a schedule to keep." Hiro pulled out a ten-dollar bill from his wallet, gave it to the man and said, "Doctor, you go Doctor."

The soldiers got back into their rides and the convoy lurched forward. Hiro watched the man disappear in his rearview mirror. Where was the mother in this story? He squeezed at the steering wheel. What kind of future awaited those kids? *Don't go soft now*, he thought, as their image began to churn jaggedly in his mind, like shards of glass being folded into cake-batter.

"Hey, LT. Question."

"Yes, Gunny."

Gomez was a talker and sometimes this got under Hiro's skin. But Gomez was bright, informed, very squared away—military parlance for having his shit together—and routinely kicked his ass in chess. Gomez had a knack for weapons and took his job seriously. He asserted his rank sparingly but effectively and was liked and respected in a way that Hiro even envied. He was a big dollop of cohesion glue, and Hiro was thankful to have him on his team.

Gomez had signed up right out of high school. He was college material, but following his parent's cues, he'd fathered his first at seventeen and a second before he turned twenty. It didn't take the recruitment officers much to persuade a young man buckling under the weight of newly born responsibilities that enlistment, laced with a six thousand dollar signing bonus and medical benefits, was the right call. Though it was hard to picture Gomez as the father of two, he was very much the family man and seemed to have no regrets about the cards he had played. This devotion, endearing as it was, had no relevance to the mission. That he still had all his marbles did.

"What's your take on the Sandy thing?"

Anderson piped in. "What Sandy thing?"

"Who the fuck knows, Gunny. Maybe something happened back home. Maybe that's just the way he is."

"What Sandy thing?" Anderson asked again, leaning forward.

"Truth be told," Gomez said, "I think he's slipped over to the other side. I'd be lying if I said I'm not a little freaked."

Statistically, upwards of thirty percent of the platoon might be suffering from a combat-induced mental disorder. Rand McCord, the platoon's laconic sniper, seemed to be waltzing dangerously close to this line. Like many in this *one shot, one kill* line of work, he was a quirky introvert, and like all snipers, he used a small bag of sand upon which he rested the barrel of his weapon for his shots. Rand had fashioned his from a green, army issue sock, and crafted a realistic-looking Marine's cap that fit the bag so well, that Sandy—so named—looked like a Marine Mr. Potato head.

This much was cute. Rand's emotionally charged attachment to Sandy, not as much. Things had almost ended violently a week ago when Rand found Sandy propping open the swing door to the latrines. The thing was that in a weird jealous rage, Rand had placed the blame squarely on Sandy for the incident. And since then, Sandy never left Rand's side. She, or he, now accompanied him to the mess hall, shower stalls, and at Rand's insistence, was even present and accounted for at formation. This bugged Hiro. But as his crew seemed to get a kick out of it and as Rand was still hitting his marks, Hiro let it slide. He was certain this "Sandy thing" was a sign of something gone wrong but consoled himself with the thought that given the rest of the shit hitting the fan, this was but a benign blip on the screen.

The circulating pics and vids also bothered Hiro. Nothing *Abu Grahibesque*, but disturbing, nonetheless. Death was extreme, and nothing made one feel more alive than standing next to a corpse. But ear-to-ear grins and two thumbs up? A relief valve ... like the lancing of a boil. Maybe that was it. Click of the mouse. That was all it would take to spew the war porn. Might be for the better. America was not at war. The US Marine Corps was at war. America was at the mall. There were rules, of course. But he was no longer sure he cared if lines were being crossed, wherever in the sand they might have been drawn.

"Hey LT, what you got lined up when you get back home?"

"Home, Gomez? I don't think about home too much. I focus on the job."

"I'm going to get into air-conditioning or plumbing. You can earn a damn good living doing the unsexy stuff. That or a daycare center. That's Maria's idea. Keeps telling me how hard it's been with the kids and how there is a big market for decent daycare. Find a need and fill it." Gomez was silent for a few seconds. "Jesus, I miss my girls. I see kids like the ones back there

and I thank God mine have the lives they have.” He dug out the gold crucifix he wore around his neck, kissed it, stuffed it back into his tee, and crossed himself. “You should have kids, LT.”

“Great advice, Gomez. In the meantime, you’d better hope your ass ain’t stop-lossed back into this fantasy wonderland.”

Now, only forty clicks from their destination, the worst seemed behind them, and the easing of the tension was palpable. The men began to break radio silence with jabs about each other’s mothers, sex, and food.

“Gentlemen, shut the fuck up. We are not yet home,” barked Hiro into his headset. But he too felt the lifting of the weight of it all and allowed himself a smile just as a calloused finger, nail thick, cracked, and black with grime, depressed the “SEND” button on a Finnish cell phone, assembled in Malaysia, bought in a Kuwaiti bazaar, powered by Chinese batteries, fitted with a SIM card roaming on a German wireless network, that connected to a second phone wired to detonators of Pakistani origin, fused in series to unexploded ordinance manufactured in North Carolina, and that in this totality made up the buried IED that would, God willing, detonate with a vehicle directly over it.

Hiro felt the explosion and then saw the road burst open, or was it that he saw the road burst open and then heard the explosion? Was there even any sound? Had he really seen anything? What he was sure of was that blue flames and heat tailing a big wind had rushed in. That his chin slammed into his chest as his stomach sank to his knees. That acid rushed up his throat as the Humvee was catapulted twenty feet into the air, pirouetting silently, in slow motion through parabolic swirls of sand and asphalt, beautifully, one might even say, were it not for the horror, before it came down crashing on its side.

He was unaware that three of his ribs had snapped when his Kevlar encased torso rammed into the vehicle's center console or that the explosion's compressive waves had accelerated through his brain's density, ripping synapses apart, permanently deleting a random selection of long-term memories. He did not know that two more IEDs had gone off.

His first thought, formed in the timeless gap it took him to understand what had occurred, was that the rain of sand on the vehicle sounded like a soggy downpour on a hot summer day. And then the rain stopped, and everything was eerily quiet. Hiro turned towards Gunnery Sargent Gomez.

"Gomez! Gomez!"

Though he looked intact, his organs and the blank look on his face told another story. Hiro shook him by the collar. He checked him for a pulse. Gomez was gone, the life blown out of him. Hiro punched in a frequency on the radio and called for support. Unsure if he'd been heard, he turned to the back of the cab. Where was Anderson? He dislodged his weapon, pocketed all the clips he could find, grabbed his two-way, leaned back and kicked through the shattered window. He pulled himself through and dropped to the ground. He couldn't see a thing. He pulled his goggles over his eyes and heard his heart pounding to the rhythm of the headache ringing brightly in his ears.

A sudden, massive updraft of flames purged the air of dust and revealed in slivers the scale of the assault. Hiro scrambled to the top of an embankment. Three huge craters pockmarked the road. Four tankers were engulfed in flames. The rest of the convoy, spread out about a kilometer back, had ground to a halt. *Got to get those tankers moving again.* A blob of motion began to converge on the rear of the convoy. Confused, Hiro watched until he saw the

blot fan out like the veins on a leaf. Dirt bikes. RPG's streaked towards a pair of tankers. Black mushrooms blossomed from bouquets of orange flames. Hiro dropped to the ground and began firing. One of the bikes wobbled, then flipped over wildly. A man got up and began running back to where he had come from. Hiro saw the man fall, then heard the faint but distinctive crack of Rand's rifle. The rest were gone.

"Listen up. Get on a radio, call in the grid, request air support and medevac. Get the tankers around that mess. Eastside is too sandy. Come up on the west-side. A Squad, make it happen. B Squad get to the front, establish a perimeter and an HLZ (helicopter landing zone). Make your way to the front of the convoy. Roll call in thirty. If your rig is dead, dump the fuel. Leave no one behind. Retrieve all night goggles, weapons, and ammo. McCoy and Philips, you bring up the rear and check for casualties. Expedite the injured to the front. Medic, get your ass up here and prepare for triage. Bring as many first aid kits as you can with you. Engage anything that fucking moves." Where the fuck was Anderson?

About fifty yards from where he stood, thick black smoke curled out of the cab of a truck. The tanker attached to it was intact. An arm hung out of the window. Hiro approached but blinded by smoke had to wait for the wind to shift before he could reach the door where a *Halliburton* logo bubbled in a drippy mess. The door handle was burning hot. He heard screaming. This puzzled him. He grabbed the arm by the wrist and pulled. The metallic, coppery scent of burning blood and fat washed over him. He pulled with all he had but his grip slipped, and he stumbled backward. It was then that he saw Anderson crouched against a boulder, intact, but pants soaking wet.

Forty-five minutes later, with the tankers on the move again and the wounded and body

bags evacuated, two Humvees and six men remained behind. Hiro surveyed the area with binoculars.

“Janson, let’s take a quick ride up and down this mess and make sure we didn’t leave anything behind. The rest of you, post up and maintain the perimeter.”

“Can’t fucking believe Gomez is gone,” said Janson, slamming his hands on the steering wheel.

Hiro wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words. As they made a U-turn at the end of the line, Hiro saw two bodies about fifty yards out.

“That way,” he said, pointing.

“Lieutenant. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“Need to confirm the kills.”

Ten yards out, Hiro ordered Janson to stop. He got out of the Humvee, pulled back the bolt on his sidearm, and circled the bodies until he felt the warmth of the sun on the back of his neck. The first man was dead and already buzzing with patches of teal-green flies. The second man was lying face down. He approached slowly and knelt to turn him over. He heard a gurgle. Hiro stood up and stepped back. The man was breathing. Except it wasn’t a man. Fifteen ... sixteen? Peach fuzz mustache, sideburns that curled down from a head of thick, wavy, dark brown hair, and the longest eyelashes ever. He wore a coarsely woven off-white vest over a ratty woolen sweater and a bloodied and tangled keffiyeh. Blood had pooled in gooey clumps from a mangled exit wound in his midsection. The boy moaned.

“Lieutenant!”

Hiro picked up the skinny, textured vinyl billfold lying next to the boy and dusted it off.

In it, he found three crumpled dinars, a faded ID card, and a laminated color headshot of Michael Jackson glistening with shine and a diagonal inscription that read, *Michael Loves You!* There was a sudden movement to his right. Hiro raised his pistol and spun, but it was only a small goat, tan with spotty white markings, peering from behind some bramble. Stubby little horns sprouted from its head. The goat bleated. The goat bleated again. Hiro fired off a single round that knocked the goat a yard back, dead.

“What the fuck, Lieutenant!”

Hiro lowered his pistol and turned back to the boy, cocking his head to get a better look at the face. The boy’s left hand clawed at the ground. Hiro reached for it and held it. He felt the fingers tighten around his, then release. He tossed the wallet to the ground. He took a few steps back to the Humvee, stopped, turned, raised his pistol, and fired a shot into the boy’s chest.

Janson was white-knuckle gripping the wheel and staring blankly into the distance. Hiro patted Janson on the shoulder.

“Let’s go.”

“That wasn’t right, LT,” Janson said, his voice trembling.

“The kid was a goner. I just put him out of his misery. “Let’s go.”

Midway up the line, Hiro grabbed Janson’s arm. “Stop. Kill your engine.” The rolling rumble of fire filled the silence. “Did you hear that? Get on the fifty and cover me.” Janson slid up into the gunner’s sling. Hiro stepped out of the Humvee and jogged towards an overturned tractor-trailer. The cab was badly crushed. Hiro knelt and pushed his head through what had once been a windshield. He saw movement. Hiro pushed some equipment aside and crawled in between a seat and mangled mess.



“Booker? You okay?”

“What ... took you ... guys so long?”

How had he slipped through roll call? “Singing karaoke. How bad are you hurt?”

“Bad. Can’t move. Hard to breathe. Bill, the driver, I think he’s dead. His leg ... pressing ... against me.”

Hiro could make out Booker’s ash white face pinned against the ankle of a booted foot pointing towards the back of his head. The ankle was blue. The boot was a US Army issue Hot Weather Tan ACU Combat boot, but this detail did not register.

“Hang tight.” Hiro pushed against the seat, but nothing moved. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

Fuel was pouring out of a tanker about fifty feet away. Hiro heard the popping of the fifty-caliber on the Humvee and saw that Janson was engaging something or someone. He made for one of the less damaged vehicles, extracted a heavy-duty jack and first aid kit, and returned to Booker. He wedged the jack between the seat and the mess of metal. Booker was crying.

“Tell mom, dad, and my sister that I love them.”

“Tell them yourself. Now shut up so that I can get you out of here.”

“What’s going on out there?”

“Cowboys and Indians. Janson got our butts covered.”

Hiro heard the comforting buzz of a chopper as it flew by low and slow. The smell of fuel was stronger now. Hiro began to jack up the tangle. Booker’s arm came free. Hiro jabbed him with a dose of morphine and then did the same to himself. “Okay, Booker, I’m going pull, but you got to help me with this.” Booker blinked. Hiro grabbed Booker under the armpits and

pulled. Booker began to slide out, but so did the foot and leg sandwiched against his chest. Hiro tried to push it away, but Booker screamed. It was only after he managed to pull Booker out about a foot that all became clear. “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” cried Booker, understanding that it was his own leg that had snapped back a hundred and eighty degrees. A final jerk and Booker was free.

“You look like a god damn cheerleader Booker. Or a frigging cancan girl from the Moolan Rouge ... you ever hear of the Moolan Rouge, Booker?” Hiro grabbed Booker’s leg, and in one fell swoop, rotated it back into position. Booker screamed and then passed out. “You’re going to be okay,” Hiro said, just as the cab whooshed up in flames, blanketing the men with the acrid tang and stink of burning JP8. “You’re going to be okay.”

By the time Booker had been evacuated a people had gathered by the side of the road. Hiro slid up into the gunner’s turret. “What the fuck are you mother fuckers looking at?” he screamed. “You want a piece of this?” He jacked the first round into the weapon, leaned back and fired a burst above the crowd. Everybody scattered except for a father holding the hands of his two young boys. One of his sons was crying. Hiro’s eyes locked with his. He saw no fear. Just hatred.

#

Hiro limped across Camp Al Sharaf towards the Colonel’s tent from where he’d been summoned. He stopped and raised his good arm to his eyes as a pair of choppers dropped in from above, buffeting the camp with sand and scaly flakes of toxic ash blowing in from the smoldering burn pit down the road. Hiro felt the pulse of the rotors knocking at his broken ribs as he watched stretchers being disgorged from the rear of the machines. He suppressed a retch and

continued to the CO's tent.

A sentry saluted and pulled open the door, releasing a sixty-nine-degree blast of air-conditioned comfort. Hiro spent a few minutes cooling from dripping hot to shivering cold before an aide-de-camp escorted him into the Colonel's office.

"At ease, Lieutenant," said the Colonel, preempting Hiro's salute with a wave of his hand. "Take a load off your feet." He gestured to a chair. Hiro seated himself then turned to the TV. The Colonel swiveled.

"You a Redskin's man, Lieutenant? I got fifty bucks on the Skins, but if they keep fumbling, I'm going to get burned." The Colonel swiveled back. He glanced at Hiro's bandaged arm and remembering that he had suffered second-degree burns, stewed for a few seconds in his words. Then, upbeat, he said, "I heard you lived up to your name, Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

"Well, son, my understanding is that your actions went beyond the call of duty." Muted cheers erupted from the game on TV. "It took some big cojones to pull those men out of those burning tankers." The Colonel paused to light up a cigar. "Any relation to the late, great, General John McAllister?"

"McAllister comes from my mother's side."

"Oh, I see. She from a military family?"

"No, Sir, not that I know of."

"Your father a military man?"

"Can't say for sure, Sir."

The Colonel raised an eyebrow, took a few puffs from his cigar then continued.

“Well, I know he’d be damn proud of you. There’s talk of a Silver Star. That makes you,” the Colonel said, “a Hiro in my book.” The Colonel smiled.

“Hiro is short for Hiroshi. It’s a Japanese name.”

“Your mom is Japanese?”

“No, Sir.”

“Ah. Well. I see.” The Colonel leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up on the desk. “Well, son, I want to congratulate you on a job well done.”

“I lost men out there—”

“Lieutenant, someone smarter than me once said, whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. By the way, how did Anderson handle himself?”

Hiro was silent for a moment. “Fine, Sir. He’s a little green, but he’ll come around.”

“That’s good to hear. His father and I went to the Academy together. I promised I’d keep an eye out on him.”

“I understand, Sir.”

The Colonel cleared his throat. “I’m afraid I have some not so great news too. We’ve received word from CENTCOM that your mother was in a car accident. We are getting your papers ready for a trip back to the homeland.”

“What did they say about my mother?”

“No details except that she’s at Saint Mary’s in Pasadena ... lemme see ... room 629. They tried to reach you on your phone.”

“Lost it in the fight.”

“Ah. My staff out front can assist you with a call. Now, if you are feeling up to it, we can

get you on a C-130 out to Frankfurt at 0630. That's a little less than," the Colonel looked at his watch, "twenty hours from now. Take some time off. Take care of your mom and yourself. Don't you worry ... this shit hole will be here when you get back. Speaking of, I understand that your ADSO (active-duty service obligation) is almost up. I'm counting on you to hang tight. We need guys like you on the team." Someone knocked on the Colonel's door, walked in with a tray of food, and set it down in front of the Colonel.

"I'll take you up on that flight, Sir."

The Colonel put his cigar down, popped the tab on his can of Diet Dr. Pepper, took a long swig and said, "Good for you, Lieutenant. Care to join me for lunch?"

Hiro stood. "No, Sir."

"Dismissed, Lieutenant. We look forward to having you back."

Hiro saluted the Colonel and exited his office.

"Goddamn T-bone is overcooked again," was the last thing he heard the Colonel say.

## Chapter Two

Fifty-six hours after lifting off from Baghdad International Airport's only operational runway, Hiro found himself in front of the nurse's station on the sixth floor of St. Mary's Hospital.

"With you in a minute," said the nurse who didn't look up.

"I'm here for my mother, Ms. McAllister."

"Oh." The nurse took off his glasses and rounded the counter. "Please. Come this way," he said, and led Hiro to a small room, shiny with vinyl-covered armchairs and reeking of disinfectant. "I'll go get the Doctor." Hiro felt the rush of a cold sweat. He sat. A few minutes later, a priest walked into the room.

"I am Father McKenzie." The priest took Hiro's hand. "I am very sorry to say that your mother has passed away."

Hiro lowered his head.

"She was in a coma after the accident. But she woke just before she died. She spoke of you. And your brother. Proudly and lovingly. I administered her last rites." The father handed

Hiro a large envelope. “These were hers. There is a chapel on the first floor. We can pray there if you like.”

Hiro shook his head.

“I understand. May God bless you, my son, and thank you for defending our freedoms. You are doing God’s work.”

Hiro opened the envelope and emptied a purse, bracelets, earrings, a ring of keys, and a pair of sunglasses. Was this happening? He sank into the armchair. On the opposite wall, a painting of a family gathered around a bed in which a loved one lay, hung slightly to the side. Hiro got up and straightened the frame. He stepped back and looked at Jesus, resplendent in his white robe and golden fronds, hovering over the scene, his holy radiance scumbling across the grieving family.

Where was *He* when that Iraqi boy got in the way of the round that blew open his chest? When mothers screamed, fathers fainted, and body parts disintegrated. And where the hell was *He* when his squad, manning Check Point Charlie, engaged with all they had, that tan Corolla coming at them fast, not stopping, why had it not stopped, until riddled with holes it creaked to a steamy rest and surrendered the pulped remains of a man and his very pregnant passenger.

“You were following the rules of engagement,” his command had assured him. “You done nothing wrong. I know this is hard on you, Lieutenant. Life is tough but you need to be tougher ... best forget this and move on.”

The sadness of his mom dying alone, about Gomez and the others lost, rose through him. But though on the verge of tears, he could not cry.

He left the hospital in a cab driven by a short man with hairy arms and a thick droopy mustache, who peeked at him in the rearview mirror. Hiro turned to the window as the familiarity of his neighborhood began to scroll by. The convenience store on the corner, the Walgreen's where they turned onto Maple that took them past his high school and the football field. Further down, past two games of half-court, the community center, Saint Joseph's Church, the public library, and then finally the left onto Mulberry that forked right into Thomas Street. Hiro pointed to a house half a block away.

"On the right there, the small Victorian with the purple trim."

He crossed the lawn to the porch and looked up at the narrow width of the home, at the flaky paint, sagging gutters, and missing shingles. When had he been here last? He felt the sun on his back. He stepped onto the deck, startling a napping cat. Hiro walked into the house and dropped his duffle bag. His arm hurt. He stood for a moment between the beams of light filtering through the drapes. The house smelled ... lived in. Everything where she had left it last. A plate of unfinished toast, a towel draped over a chair. In the kitchen, mold was growing in a few lipstick rimmed coffee cups. Hiro turned on the tap and coaxed a dead roach down the drain. He opened the pantry and was spooked by the familiarity of the scent. He grabbed a bag of cookies and made for the living room.

It was all there. The shrine-like consecration to his trophies and awards. Frame after frame of pictures that dominated an entire side of the room. The fifty-five-inch flat-screen. The bazaar-like display of Franklin Mint and other glass entombed collectibles. All filling a space that nonetheless had always felt empty.

He picked up the remote from the coffee table and turned on the TV. QVC chatter broke



the silence. Only three minutes left to order genuine faux pearl earrings. He took the stairs up to the second floor, peeked into his mom's room, but did not enter. It smelled sweet of cigarettes and mildew. Further down the hall, he stepped into his room. Warm, musty. Comic books, model airplanes, board games, surfboards, his Forty-Niners comforter tucked in tight. He ran a finger across the dust on his desk then turned to the movie poster of *The One-Armed Swordsman*, his childhood favorite martial arts hero, sword raised, charging defiantly despite the blood spurting from his stump. Hiro grabbed the print, ripped it off the wall, then walked back down to the living room.

He sank into the sofa, lit a cigarette, and watched as a bikini-clad woman with large breasts demonstrated how to sear one's initials on a steak with personalized branding irons. What was he doing here? He finished the cigarette, took a cold shower, then stepped out to the porch. Nothing had changed yet everything was different. This deep thought was interrupted by the blur of a tricked out metallic green Mustang convertible screeching to a stop. *Asshole*, thought Hiro, just as the driver in the convertible turned.

"Yo Hiro!"

Walter? Hiro walked over to the car.

"Holy crap! What Never in a million years did I expect to see you." Walter got out and shook Hiro's hand. "When did you get back?" Before Hiro could answer, Walter turned to the redhead in the car. "Where the hell are my manners? Hiro, Tammy. Tammy, Hiro." Tammy raised a hand and wiggled her fingers. "Man, it's good to see you. How long you back for? This guy ... hey, are you listening?" he said, turning to Tammy, who was hunched over her phone. "Hiro QB'd us to the state semis. How many years has it been?"

“Too many to matter anymore.” Hiro forced a smile.

“What are you talking about? This dude,” Walter said, slapping Hiro on the back, “was a natural. Shit, my old man used to bend my ear about you. That Hiro has he got an arm. He’s strong but he is also a thinker. I bet he puts a lot of work into his game. Blah, blah blah, blah blah. Dang, that got on my nerves.” Walter chuckled. “But to give props where props are due, Hiro never let any of that get to his head.”

Tammy looked up for all of two-seconds, blew a gum bubble, then turned back to her phone with a pop.

“Hiro landed a full scholarship then pulled a Pat Tillman on us.”

“You graduate?” asked Hiro.

“Seems like ages ago. Accounting, just like we planned. I’m working in my dad’s office. Honestly? It’s boring as all hell. Could be making more somewhere else but hey, it’s not all about money. Keeps the old man happy. What you got going on? You hurt bad?” Walter said, pointing to his arm.

“Naw. Not too bad. Just back home to ... for some R&R.”

“Right on, right on.”

“Trying to figure things out.”

“That’s cool. Very cool. Hey, how is Tomo?”

“He’s okay.”

“Man, I’ve been wondering about you.”

“Waaalllter,” Tammy called, tapping at the imaginary watch on her wrist.

Hiro visualized reaching over to yank the earphones out of her ears and skip her phone

across the pavement.

“Okay. My brother, those look like rain clouds. Great to see you. Call me. Let’s get out there and catch some waves.”

“Sure, let’s do that. Nice meeting you, Tammy,” Hiro said. Walter turned to Hiro, rolled his eyes, shrugged, and with a toot of the horn peeled away.

One of your better friends, mom had always said of Walter. He wondered why he’d held back the news of her death. Perhaps it was still too fresh. No, that wasn’t it. It just didn’t feel right, especially with her sitting there. He turned back towards the house. And then it clicked. Resoundingly. His destiny. There it was. Right smack in front of him. Sure, the place needed work, but it had to be worth something. A hundred fifty grand? Easy. He’d joined the Marines two semesters shy of his BA in accounting. If he sold the house and played his cards right, he’d have enough to graduate and finance his MBA. Maybe everything did happen for a reason. Mom had mentioned a few years ago that she’d drafted a will. What was the attorney’s name? Peterson. No. Emerson. Nope. Gunderson. Top of the list. Call Attorney Gunderson. He stepped back into the house in pain but excited. He popped an OxyContin, then hit the sofa and let the warmth roll in, the nerves dull, and the streaming congeal. He was deep asleep when the doorbell rang several hours later.

“Mrs. Robinson.”

“Oh, Hiro, I’m sorry, did I wake you?” She placed a hand gingerly upon his bandages.

“Honey, what happened to you?”

“Got a bit burned. It’s nothing.”

“Oh, sweetheart, that is awful,” said Mrs. Robinson. “Hiro, let me be the first to say that I

am *so* sorry about your mother. We miss her so. I hope she did not suffer. I'm sure she is in a better place now."

"Thank you, Mrs. Robinson."

"Anywayzzzz ... I've been picking up her mail." She handed a stack to Hiro. "And here, I thought you could do with a little food," she said, pointing to a pot she had set on the banister.

"Tuna casserole still your favorite? Straight out of the oven. Don't burn yourself."

"Thanks, Mrs. Robinson." She had aged. When had he seen her last?

"Sasha is working in LA. She stops in every now and then. I told her you're in town. She's so very sorry about your mother. She's gonna call you."

"How is Sasha?"

"Oh, doing great. Just bought herself some big old fancy new BMW though I wish she would hurry up and make me some grans ... still single ... at least that what she tells me." Mrs. Robinson chuckled. Then more seriously, "So, when is the funeral?"

"I still have to take care of all of that."

"Of course, well, you be sure to let me know. You are tired and need some rest. You call me if you need anything ... anything at all. The number is the same. And thank you. Thank you for everything ... everything you are doing for our country. We could not be prouder of you."

*We could not be prouder of you.* Well-intentioned, no doubt. But supremely irritating, that effervescent cheering from the sidelines of sheltered lives. *Let it go.* It was what it was. After forking in a couple of mouthfuls, he put the food into the fridge and began sifting through the mail. Junk, junk, bills, bills, bills, a Victoria's Secrets catalog (that he tossed to the side), an *Open Immediately* letter from the Bank of America, and one from The Oakwood Center

stamped *Overdue* in red that revealed an invoice for over twenty-thousand dollars. He called Oakwood and was shocked to learn that months ago Tomo had been transferred to a state psychiatric facility and that they'd be happy to work out a payment plan for the outstanding balance due. Why hadn't his mom mentioned this, he wondered, as he dialed the state facility. Twenty rings later, he hung up. He would have to stop in first thing in the morning.

Feeling claustrophobic, he caught a bus down to the bay to walk the beach he'd surfed so many times. It occurred to him that it would always be there, no matter where he was. No matter what happened to him ... the waves would just keep rolling in. He smirked at the sappy platitude then bizarrely was confused by the realization that he could not remember the sound of his mother's laughter. To be sure, she hadn't had much reason to laugh. Raising a pair of boys solo. That must have been tough. Dealing with the accident and the aftermath, even tougher. And yet she'd always managed to provide. It struck him now that the crown jewel of all that she'd given him was that she'd never blamed him for Tomo. Not that it was really his fault, but still, that could have swung either way.

How was Tomo going to process the news? Should he tell him? Tomo had followed Hiro off the cliff into the quarry lake to rescue a drowning teen. It was only when Hiro was halfway back to shore with the boy in tow that he'd realized Tomo was missing. The panic, the screams echoing off the rocky facades. The kid in his grip. What could he have done differently? Release the kid? Heed the *Danger No Entry* signs into the quarry? The lake was so cold and clear that Tomo was found within seconds. It was only after he began breathing again that they noticed the gruesome concavity in his head. The parents of the kid he'd rescued pledged to cover Tomo's care for life. What had happened to that?

### Chapter Three

The miasmatic blend of antiseptic and urine and the flickering, buzzing light fixtures, foretold what Hiro already knew. Tomo's care had suffered a serious downgrade. He felt the pressure of guilt and responsibility building through him as he was led down the pale olive-green hall, wild with song, the occasional cry, and moaning.

"Tomo, you got a visitor," the staffer announced as quickly as he disappeared when Hiro stepped into the room. Tomo was sitting on his bed, kicking lightly at a tray table.

Hiro turned down the volume on the TV. "Hey, Tomo," Hiro said, dropping to his knees in front of Tomo. "It's me." He was unshaven, and the gown hanging loosely over his frame was stained down the center of his chest. Tomo turned to Hiro, head cocked to one side to favor his good eye and ear. He smiled through a grimace.

"Where is mom?" Tomo asked.

"Mom is gone," Hiro whispered.

"I can't hear you."

“I’m sorry. Mom is gone,” Hiro said, louder this time.

“Gone where?”

Hiro placed a hand on Tomo’s shoulder. “She had a bad accident, Tomo. Mom passed away.”

“Okay,” Tomo said, shaking off Hiro’s hand.

Hiro looked at Tomo for signs of understanding. His face had tightened, but it remained expressionless. As if breakers had tripped over the information surge. What was he feeling? This thought was cut short by the rising smell of excreta. Hiro flagged a passing staffer.

“Since when has my brother been wearing diapers?” he whispered.

“Since ever since as far as I know. Tomo’s your brother?” The staffer looked at Tomo, then at Hiro, then back at Tomo. “Hey, you kinda look the same. You guys ... twins?”

“It’s been years since he’s needed diapers.”

“People regress. Happens all the time.”

Hiro nudged the staffer back into the hall. “I want to speak to his therapist.”

“Comes in once a week. And that was yesterday.”

“He gets therapy only once a week?”

“Whatever Medicaid covers.”

“Look, don’t take this personally, but it doesn’t look like my brother is getting the care he needs.”

“With all due respect, there is a long waiting list of people trying to get in here. He’s lucky to have a slot. And he seems to be doing fine. You know, it’s hard to tell how people with his condition are feeling.”

“His condition? What do you know about his condition?”

“He’s on the autism spectrum—”

“It’s way beyond that,” Hiro interrupted. “He’s amazing with numbers. The injury to his head, acquired savant syndrome.”

“I don’t mean no disrespect but him a savant?”

“You know what day of the week you were born?”

“Yes.”

“When were you born?”

“Why?”

“Just tell me.”

“July 2, 1958.”

Hiro poked his head back into the room. “Tomo, what day of the week was July 2, 1958?”

Tomo looked up at the ceiling for a second or two, then said, “Wednesday.”

“Hey ... that’s a pretty good trick,” said the staffer.

“It’s not a trick. Tomo does numbers. He needs daily therapy. And a computer.”

“Computer? For what?”

“To keep him active. There are programs out there for people like him.”

“Well, that’s way above my pay grade. You’re going to have to bring that up with my supervisor, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up too high.”

“I’ll do that. In the meantime, my brother needs changing.”

“Honey. Two staffers called in sick, so I got this whole ward to myself. It’s not like I



don't care, but I got other fires to put out. I'll be back as soon as I can," he said.

"Fuck this," Hiro muttered, stepping back into the room. He patted his pockets for his pills, but he'd left home without them. "Okay, let's get you cleaned up." By the time Hiro managed to shower Tomo, get him shaved, and into a fresh pair of diapers, his arm was throbbing. He borrowed a pair of clippers and cut Tomo's finger and toenails. He tidied up the room as best as he could then, hugging Tomo, he spoke into his ear. "You hang tight." Hiro brushed Tomo's hair out of his eyes. "I promise I will get you out of here. Just give me a little time."

"I'm doing good," said Tomo. "So, mom is gone?"

"Yes, she is. But don't you worry, I'm going to take care of you. In the meantime, I want you to get some meat on your bones. Eat, Tomo, you got to eat."

Screw his MBA. He needed to sell the house and get Tomo the care he needed.

#

**HIRO MCALLISTER (26)**, is a US Marine Lieutenant nearing the end of his second tour of duty in Iraq and is commanding a fuel convoy when it is attacked. Hiro suffers burns, and his right-hand man, Gomez, is killed along with others. In the immediate aftermath, Hiro shoots an injured Iraqi boy (to put him out of his misery) and courageously pulls a fellow soldier from a burning truck. In the post-carnage debriefing, his Commanding Officer breaks the news that his mother has been hospitalized. He is sent home but arrives just after she dies from injuries suffered drunk at the wheel.

Hiro decides he will sell his mother's house to reboot the education he gave up when he joined the Marines after 911. Hiro visits his brother, Tomo, who suffered brain damage in a

childhood accident, and needs specialized care. Tomo had followed Hiro into a quarry lake after Hiro jumped in to save a drowning kid. Hiro finds Tomo in a second-rate state hospital because bills for the private facility were not paid. Hiro's education will have to wait. Proceeds from the sale of the house will go to Tomo's care. Unfortunately, the house is to be foreclosed.

Hiro's estranged aunt, Carrie, turns up to pay her respects and suggests she could move in with him—she's a struggling single parent. Hiro shoots down the idea. Miffed, Carrie reveals that his mom “wasn't no executive secretary” in Japan, but a hostess in a Tokyo gentleman's club. And, she was pregnant when she returned. Hiro knows that his mother spent time in Japan years ago but little else about her life there. Before being shown the door, Carrie further alleges that despite what his mother swore, his father, **HITOSHI TANAKA (65)**, did not die before his birth and is surely still alive.

When emptying his mom's house, Hiro discovers mementos from a Tokyo club called the *Purple Lady*. He is moved by a torn photograph of his mom and slips it into his wallet. He also finds her old passport with the exit stamp from Japan. He does the math. His mom must have conceived after leaving Tokyo. So much for Carrie's bullshit.

Dave Bradford, aka Apple, finds out that Hiro is in town. Apple, who served under Hiro in Iraq, reaches out because he needs help processing his PTSD disability claim with the VA. Apple lives on and off the streets and is but a shadow of his former self. Hiro helps him with some cash, and when Apple asks if he's got anything for pain, Hiro gives him his stash of OxyContin.

Hiro resigns himself to the reality that a third tour in Iraq is the only way to guarantee Tomo's care. Just before reenlisting, a detective shows up with news that Apple has overdosed.

The cop wants to know why Hiro's name is on the pill bottle found by Apple's side. Hiro explains that Apple must have pocketed the pills when he visited.

Hiro is dating the reenlistment paperwork when he remembers that in some countries the day is written before the month. Hiro reverses the exit stamp numbers in his mother's passport and realizes his mom was pregnant before leaving Japan. Hiro bails on reenlistment to search for Tanaka in Japan.

In Tokyo, Hiro tracks down a retired journalist who wrote about the *Purple Lady* after it was shuttered because of a gunfight. The club was run by a Yakuza gang that still exists called the Kumigami-kai. A certain, Hitoshi Tanaka heads the syndicate. Hiro finds the Kumigami-kai's headquarters and cases the building. Hiro approaches Tanaka but his entourage treat him as a threat and slam him to the ground. After Hiro shouts out his mother's name, Tanaka agrees to meet. Tanaka admits to a relationship with his mom but denies paternity and scoffs at the suggestion of a DNA test. He advises Hiro to return to the US.

Depressed by the anti-climactic reunion, Hiro seeks solace in a *buy me drinkie* bar. His troubles rise exponentially when he refuses to pay the outrageous tab. In the ensuing drunken brawl with some bouncers he causes extensive property damage and is beaten badly. He saves his skin by claiming he is Tanaka's son. Tanaka is contacted and takes custody of Hiro.

Hiro is thankful for Tanaka's intervention, but his troubles are not over. Tanaka insists that Hiro must pay for the damage or be handed back to the bar's owners. Hiro escapes the Kumigami-kai building as he is being led to the basement to be confined.

Hiro plans to return home but decides he will not leave without knowing whether Tanaka is his father. For this, he needs a DNA sample. And for a DNA sample, he needs close

quarter access. In a bid to impress Tanaka, he performs *yubitsume* by severing the tip of his finger and presenting the bit as an apology to Tanaka. Tanaka calls another meeting. Hiro learns more about his mother's and Tanaka's past. Oddly, Tanaka questions Hiro about the Pacific island of Guam. Hiro explains that he's been there for training and that a US Marine base is to be relocated there. In a change of heart that seems inspired by some ulterior motive, Tanaka suggests that Hiro can pay off his debt by working for the Kumigami-kai. Short on options, Hiro agrees.

The yakuza brand of business is cathartic to Hiro. He knows he's stepped over the line and that his addiction to the lawlessness is self-destructive. Hiro is a natural and Tanaka inducts Hiro into the gang as his "son." This validation is deflated by surreptitious DNA testing proving Tanaka is not related. Now that he's worked off his debt and squirreled away enough money to cover his brother, Hiro wants out to reboot the search for his father. Unfortunately, his oath to the Kumigami-kai prohibits this.

Hiro is assaulted in a bathhouse by a rival gang member who expires after the brawl. With the law closing in, Tanaka fast-tracks Hiro's departure to Guam. The Kumigami-kai own an unfinished hotel, and Hiro is to complete the project. The catch: he must eliminate, **GEORGE TYLER (59)**, a manager at petroleum plant, who long-ago wronged the Kumigami-kai. Desperate to leave Japan and distance himself from the gang, Hiro agrees.

In Guam, Hiro deals with Tyler but is severely conflicted and stressed. The hotel development is mired in red tape, and he must resort to bribing local officials to get permits approved. Meanwhile, a general election is pitting Governor St. Augustine against a grassroots Senator, Jesus Esperanza. Around these two hover other characters. Eddie Wright, who is close

to the Governor, runs a financially distressed car dealership. John Castro, a newly arrived journalist, is looking to make his name. And **CARLA PEREDO (28)**, the Governor's Press Secretary, is beginning to question her loyalty to the Governor. Tyler's disappearance has also brought dogged **DETECTIVE SAN NICHOLAS (46)** to the scene.

KK, Tanaka's brute of a right-hand man, pays a surprise visit to check on Hiro's progress. He also orders Hiro to figure out how to ship meth from China to Japan using Guam as a conduit. Hiro wants no part of this but has no choice, so he approaches Eddie Wright. Hiro offers to help him secure a much-needed bridge-loan if Eddie is willing to transship a meth laden car. Eddie agrees.

Rumors of corruption in the Governor's office abound. Carla, young, ambitious, and good at her job, keeps the bad-talk in check. Hiro and Carla meet and the two hit it off. Hiro fears his backstory will endanger Carla. They keep the relationship quiet. Carla stumbles on suspicious offshore bank statements in the Governor's office, makes copies, and confides in Hiro. Shortly thereafter, she disappears. Hiro believes her indiscretion is tied to her unexplained absence. Pairing the bank statements with the accounting data he discovers in the flash drive he pulled off Tyler, Hiro uncovers a fuel scam and evidence to implicate the Governor in Carla's abduction.

In love and remorseful, Hiro commits an act of self-sacrifice and atonement by sharing his analysis with San Nicholas—thereby revealing his nexus to Tyler's disappearance. San Nicholas doesn't buy it but wants to know why Hiro has data belonging to a company with a missing employee. Hiro knows his theory is full of holes and that he's up against dangerous and corrupt players. Despite grave risks, Hiro acts alone. His gamble pays off, and he rescues Carla.

The full scale of the fuel scam and abduction is revealed. San Nicholas calls Hiro in to apologize for not having believed him. He reveals that Tyler (who is still missing) was in witness protection and was previously a Yakuza gangster with a murderous past. Hiro notices an evidence bag of items collected from Tyler's apartment. In it, there is an intact copy of the torn picture in his wallet. In a cruel twist of fate, Hiro understands that Tyler was his father.

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