

SWORDS
OF
SILENCE

SHAUN CURRY

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BOOK ONE
THE SWORDS OF FIRE TRILOGY



INSPIRE



About the Author

Shaun Curry has been fascinated by Japan from an early age. He went on to study and work in Tokyo, where he developed a passion for the country, its culture and history.

His research on feudal Japanese history has informed not only his fiction, but also numerous articles, and has led him to be featured as a guest on BBC Radio. A British and Canadian national, he now lives and writes in London.



Dedication

Between 1614 and 1643, Japan's Shogun and his regime executed almost 5,000 Christian martyrs.

At the broadest level, I would like to dedicate this book and the entire Swords of Fire trilogy to all the courageous martyrs and missionaries of Japan, then and now.

On a more personal level, I would like to dedicate this book to the loving memory of Kimberley Ann Wilshire, who set me on a path of self-discovery and reawakening.



PROLOGUE

June 20, 1626
Nagasaki City, District of Nagasaki, Kyushu

Provincial Francisco Pacheco staggered ahead of a somber procession of prisoners. Behind him, a dozen or so souls, pale and gaunt, their clothes filthy and many worn to rags moved, each step agony. The beatings driving them forward had been hourly. Or was it every few minutes? Pacheco could no longer clearly recall. It had gone on for so long now. A chorus of soft groans accompanied their lurching footsteps along the dusty road through the streets of Nagasaki, but few had the strength or the will left to even plead for mercy had they been able to spit out the rags stuffed in their mouths.

The day was overcast, threatening rain, and a chill, late afternoon breeze brushed against them from behind, rustling the occasional

pennants on the *mochi yari*, the hand spears of the samurai and foot soldiers guarding the condemned. An acrid smell of stale blood, sweat, human evacuation and horses permeated the air.

For Pacheco and his flock it was a death march of broken people, their bodies beaten, bruised, blood-streaked, and covered in ulcerous wounds. When they had been confined in sewer-like prisons, Governor Kawachi had administered multiple beatings prior to their execution.

The prisoners included the most prominent and influential Christians and their aides.

The townspeople, whether secretly Christian or not, lined the streets and watched quietly, the horror of the slowly winding parade too much for some, and they looked away or covered the eyes of the children huddling beside them.

The metallic taste of stale blood persisted in Pacheco's mouth. He was the highest-ranking Catholic in Japan, a Provincial Superior in the Society of Jesus. The authorities had captured and arrested the seventy-year-old Portuguese priest a year earlier in Kuchinotsu at the southern tip of the Shimabara Peninsula. He had been held in Omura Prison ever since, counting the days to his execution.

That hour was now upon him.

* * *

Governor Kawachi was a hard, stocky man who believed in a personal regime of daily icy baths, and rigid obedience from his retainers. He stood amid a group of aides and sneered victoriously as the procession slowly wound past him. He had instructed his officials to shave the prisoners' heads and paint their scalps bright

red to single them out and highlight their impending execution.

One final touch. He had ordered that rags be shoved into their mouths so they could not speak and inspire others during their death march. Christians in particular who witnessed the display had to be warned and paralyzed with fear at the thought of disobeying his orders.

The Governor recalled the last public execution, three years earlier. Most of the Christians had faced their deaths with resolve, even rapturous joy. Not this time. None of these people would be vocal martyrs as they died. As the condemned passed him, Kawachi felt satisfaction at this visceral demonstration of his authority and power.

Ever since his appointment as the new governor, Kawachi had anticipated this day. The death march through the streets of Nagasaki, with Provincial Pacheco at its head, consisted of two European priests, five lay Portuguese prisoners, including a fourteen-year-old boy, and two ships' captains. Their crime: aiding Japanese Christians. The final shaven-headed victims comprised Japanese individuals who had sheltered priests.

The prisoners were tied to each other by a rope around their necks to keep them in line. Officials spat contemptuously in their faces as they dragged them through the streets like animals condemned to an abattoir. Kawachi's soldiers jeered as they brandished their whips and sticks, scolding and hitting the prisoners for unknown infractions whenever they felt inclined. Samurai steel pinched and sliced skin and muscle made tender by the lash. Blood dripped into the dust at their feet. The Governor had insisted his men must show the utmost contempt to the men and the boy as they trudged, humiliated, to their fate through the mostly quiet crowd that lined their route.

The procession drew to a halt and the Governor's men shoved the condemned into a secured area where execution stakes awaited them. As the afternoon light began to fade, a flickering torch flame cast the only light as officials readied the execution posts.

Governor Kawachi had expected more resistance but the prisoners, particularly Pacheco, showed a submissive acceptance that Kawachi found enraging. He had forbidden the public from entering the fenced execution zone. He caressed his wooden clipboard, displaying the names of each of his victims, then moved it away from his expensive navy-blue silk kimono. He drew satisfaction from his choice of execution method. Since the Christian holocaust in his country had begun, officials had learned to calculate the victim's exact distance from the fire to ensure the most drawn-out death by incineration.

Head erect and shoulders back, Provincial Pacheco paid little attention to any of the officials. He took a deep breath and gathered his remaining strength, hobbling as best he could past the Governor and Deputy-Lieutenant Suetsugu without a glance in their direction as he led his fellow prisoners toward the stakes. Stacks of dried wood lay three feet from each execution station which themselves had a small mound of kindling at the base of each.

Both Pacheco and Kawachi knew that just as Soldiers of the Sword were venerated in Japan, so too were Soldiers of the Cross. In the eyes of Japanese Christians, the Ways of the Cross echoed the service and ways of the samurai in honor and discipline. How Pacheco comported himself now would be crucial to rejecting Kawachi's cruel effort to crush their spirit. All eyes would be upon him, and Pacheco struggled to hold on to that thought.

Kawachi grunted with satisfaction as he smelled the scent of the

burning wooden torch. Yet despite all he had achieved, frustration gathered within him. None in the procession had resisted the scourging. The Christians' resolve tore at his satisfaction, and he understood that what he and his men were seeing was true courage – what was now being called “*Bushido*.” He secretly feared it might infect his men in some way and the thought enraged him. He watched his men move forward and scan the condemned for signs of fear. Some wriggled and twisted at their tight bonds, but only the frailest and youngest of the Christians uttered involuntary whimpers through their gags. Even so, they first fixed their eyes on Pacheco, and seeing his stoic resolution then turned to face their tormentors with quiet determination. Kawachi noticed one or two of his men flinch slightly from their gaze, and clenched his fist at his side.

The deputy-lieutenant bellowed an order. The officials bound their victims roughly to the wooden stakes. The Governor's men circled the prisoners and inspected each knot and rope. There would be no mistakes today. No survivors.

Kawachi strode up to Pacheco. The Governor's eyes squinted with hate, and he spat in the priest's face. Pacheco maintained his composure, and appeared to be mumbling to himself. He stared ahead.

Deputy-Lieutenant Suetsugu then approached the Governor. Kawachi took a torch from a soldier near him and handed it to Suetsugu, who bowed and ignited the kindling in front of Father Pacheco.

“You are criminals of the Empire. You will all die with shame!” Suetsugu shouted. He had been a Christian once himself, so it was imperative he showed how much he truly despised the faith now, and protect his coveted position as Nagasaki's Deputy-Lieutenant. He lit the remaining wood piles, grunting with satisfaction as he heard the crackle of flames catch at each execution station.

Governor Kawachi approached the human torches. Above their muffled cries he shouted: "Our lands have been infected with vermin like you since you brought this Christian nonsense to our shores. You have violated the Shogun's laws and this regime will not tolerate your religion. May your deaths be a warning to any who dares embrace this useless faith!"

The flames caught hold, roaring louder as the prisoners' involuntary cries grew louder in response.

Kawachi stared at Pacheco as the flames licked at the priest's waist and he spat on the ground with disgust. The Governor had hoped for begging, pleading, perhaps cries for mercy, but this stubborn defiance was intolerable. He stepped back, shaking his head with annoyance.

Thick and muggy air made the soldiers cough and tug at their armor. The flames spat at the Governor's men, several of whom took a step back. The governor and the deputy-lieutenant also retreated, shielding their faces from the flames' growing fury.

Father Pacheco managed to spit out the rag lodged in his mouth. "Brothers in faith," he shouted in a voice wracked with pain, "the Holy Spirit is with us! Despair not!"

"What's happening?" Kawachi yelled.

His subordinates looked bewildered and shrank back from his temper. He pointed a finger at Father Pacheco. "Imbeciles! How has he lost his gag?"

"I'm not sure," Suetsugu said. Panic washed over his face.

"Shove it back in. Now!" Kawachi roared over the sound of the fire. The soldiers looked at each other wildly, hoping another would obey the Governor but no one stepped forward.

"It's too late, Governor," Suetsugu yelled.

Kawachi watched an anguished moan of pain escape from the priest as the flames blackened his face. It gave the Governor a moment's satisfaction.

Pacheco cried out to anyone who could still hear him, "Take comfort! These men can do no more harm than God allows. They know not what they do."

Someone cried, "Amen!" Another gave a muffled scream.

"Silence them!" the Governor yelled.

"It's too late. The fire is too strong to approach," Suetsugu said.

Despite coughing and burning, Pacheco cried, "The Lord is with me still," until his voice reduced to unintelligible grunts of pain. Kawachi watched the priest's eyes bulge as his face slowly blistered and melted.

A number of the officials turned away, bent over and vomited at the smell and horror of the moment. Kawachi approached them with a disdainful snort. His hostile glare took them all in, in turn. He pointed to the now silent fires raging behind him. "I want *all* their ashes shoveled into sacks—nothing will remain. Then I want those ashes scattered in the deep sea."

"Yes, Governor."

"Before you return, I want every man to bathe twice, at length, before touching shore."

"Bathe twice, Governor?"

"Not one ash will remain. Nothing from their bodies will endure. Japan will forget this vermin ever existed! Do I make myself clear?"

"*Hai*, Governor!" they replied in unison.

CHAPTER ONE

May 21, 1626. One month earlier
Arima, Shimabara Peninsula, Kyushu

“Shigemasa is coming! Shigemasa is coming!” shouted a farmer. His eyes bulged as he burst into Father Joaquim’s quarters.

Onaga birds squawked and scattered to the skies before the rattle of hardened leather and metal armor, as hundreds of horses approached in the distance down a well-worn path at a steady, military pace.

Had the village’s early warning system—a child on the far edge of the forest, whose waving arms had been seen by another youth at the near edge—given them enough notice?

The villagers had just minutes, so they mobilized quickly as they’d done numerous times before. Several lifted floor planks


exposing secret spaces, some just large enough to hide forbidden items such as bibles and crucifixes, others big enough to conceal bigger secrets, like foreign Christians, including Catechist Miguel, Catechist Tonia, and Father Joaquim. The priest was already in a concealed room cleaning a small basin with which he conducted baptisms. He tossed it to the side, lifted a muddied plank of wood, and hid himself underground. Joaquim closed his eyes, lay quietly, and muttered a fervent prayer. They could not find him here. They *would* not find him here. The Lord would protect his servants and keep them safe. Since Christianity had been officially banned more than a decade before, life had become more dangerous for the faithful.

Father Joaquim thought back to what had brought him to this location. How could he forget that night?

He could still hear the screams of his mother—a woman abandoned by an absent and drunken husband, left her to care for three children under ten, and Joaquim, a mere sixteen year old.

To this day Joaquim questioned how the man had found his way into their house. When the intruder pulled a knife on them, he'd done did what any son would have done. Perhaps he had underestimated his own strength. All that mattered had been keeping his family alive. In a frantic and chaotic struggle, he'd managed to claim the knife from the man and thrust his arm around the man's neck, pulling hard and not letting go until he felt the man fall limp. It only took a few minutes, but to Joaquim it had seemed like hours.



He'd killed him. Strangled him. A man almost twice his weight. Even the authorities had agreed it was self-defense, but the



memory and the guilt had followed him each day like a stray dog. Perhaps that's why it had been easy to enroll, a few months later, in the College of Jesus at the University at Coimbra. Eventually he'd been sent to Japan with the Society of Jesus. And it was here that Father Joaquim had found a symbiotic home in Master Yamaguchi's village, where he proselytized the Word of God and, in return, learned the Way of the Sword.

Arima was located on the Shimabara Peninsula in the old province of Hizen, on the island of Kyushu, Japan's southernmost island. All the villages in Arima feared Lord Shigemasa. But those in this village had a special reason to fear the approaching daimyo and his samurai.

* * *



Daimyo Matsukura Shigemasa surveyed the village in the distance. He was a large man with a battle-scarred face, and could command obedience with a simple stare. He straightened his helmet that brandished jutting horn-like ornamentations. Like other days when he'd conducted surprise visits, today he'd chosen to wear traditional battle dress, painted in his official colors of black and red. His body armor included a metal breastplate lacquered to give a smooth finish, coupled with layers of protective metal plates.

He passed the rice paddies and arrived at the upper edge of the village. "Where is Yamaguchi-san?" he shouted.

"He's resting, Lord Shigemasa," a peasant replied.

"Find him." Shigemasa glared at the man bowing before him.

Another man darted away and ran down a narrow path.

The daimyo roared at the bowed heads before him, "I have

heard reports of Christians hiding in Arima. Are you hiding any of the vermin here?"

"No, Lord Shigemasa. There are none here," someone answered. "We are a Buddhist community, Lord."

"So you say." Shigemasa scanned the peasants kneeling before him. Several dared to glance up at him. "I will have the pleasure of torturing and killing any Christians found on my lands ... including those who aid or conceal them."

"Yes, Lord, we understand."

"Do you? We will see." Shigemasa motioned for his soldiers to search the village.

Several samurai dismounted from their horses, heaving villagers out of their way as they walked toward the dwellings. They approached the first home and a bulky samurai kicked the door open. The door spun backwards on frail hinges as he charged into the shack. The hut owners, standing near the front door, gasped at the blatant disrespect. Not only did the samurai neglect to bow before entering, as was the custom, they stormed from house to house, their swords raised and ready to be used, treating the villagers like an enemy. Enslaved by fear, the villagers could only watch and submit.

In shack after shack, swords skewered rickety beds, fragile furniture and mounted personal memorabilia. Armored men pitched clothing through windows, rummaged through meager sleeping quarters. Swords slashed through curtains and clattered through pottery, water jugs and overturned cooking pots.

"There's nothing here, my Lord!" called a samurai over his shoulder to Shigemasa.

Shigemasa nodded in satisfaction and turned his attention

toward the village's small Buddhist temple. "Go in there."

Samurai thundered through the temple entrance. Their eyes fell on burned offerings of candles, then flowers and finally Buddhist beads. They scrutinized the incense tables.

"Nothing!" called the head samurai as he exited the temple. "There is no evidence of Christian observance here." He bowed toward Daimyo Shigemasa.

The nearest peasant looked up and ventured to speak again. "As I mentioned, Lord Shigemasa, there are no Christians in this valley." He cast his eyes down, quickly realizing his fault in staring at Shigemasa.

"Grab him and put him in a straw coat! Let him do the *mino odori*—the raincoat dance," shouted Daimyo Shigemasa. Samurai elbowed the peasant to the dust and spun his face away from the warlord. A samurai sword speared his leg. The man screamed in pain as the blade was pulled free. Soldiers tied his hands behind him as blood pulsed from the wound. They wrapped dry straw around his upper body other samurai poured hot lamp oil over his head.

"Mercy, Lord!" cried the peasant's wife, falling to her knees. Shigemasa stared at her with a cruel resolve. She wailed hysterically, then stood to shield her daughters from what was about to happen.

Daimyo Shigemasa held a match above his head and glared at the villagers gathered around him. Master Yamaguchi hurried up, interrupting the daimyo's silent gaze.

"Lord Shigemasa, thank you for visiting. Welcome," Yamaguchi said.

"I doubt I'm welcome," Shigemasa said. "I am here for your taxes."

“But Lord Shigemasa, we paid our taxes two weeks ago ... *and* on time.” Master Yamaguchi raised his chin. “I believe our small community is the most reliable in all your lands.”

“Perhaps *too* reliable,” the daimyo replied. “If you can pay your taxes with no difficulty, I must not be charging you enough.” He turned to look at the rice paddies, now empty of workers. “If you can all be in your huts when I come down the mountain and are not working in the fields, then I have been too lenient with you. Beginning today, I am doubling your taxes.”

“But, Lord Shigemasa, our community already pays more taxes than most! We cannot do it!” a man cried out in anguish.

“The next person—man, woman, or child—who questions me will lose their tongue.” Shigemasa looked around, assuring himself they had heard and understood his edict. “I will return in one month to collect your outstanding amount.” He gazed at the surrounding rice fields with a grin, then continued. “Rice or a cash payment of 500 silver coins. You may choose how to pay.”

“May I speak, Lord?” Master Yamaguchi beseeched Shigemasa.

“What is it?”

“What if we need more time?”

Shigemasa’s gaze flicked to the women and children in front of him before replying with sufficient volume to reach everyone. “If you fail to make the payment within one month, we will take your women and children as hostages.”

Master Yamaguchi heard a low gasp. The daimyo raised a hand, motioning for his samurai to head off. “Before I take leave,” the daimyo added, “there is one other way for you to pay your taxes.”

“What, Lord?” a villager cried out. “What other way?”

“Find Christians who are hiding and inform me of their whereabouts.”

“But we are Buddhists, Lord. We know nothing of Christians.”

“Then let me motivate you,” the daimyo replied. “The rewards for information leading to their capture are 300 silver coins for priests, 200 coins for brothers, and 100 coins for any other vile Christian!”

Shigemasa turned his horse to face the mountains as his band of samurai attended to their mounts. He spurred his horse into a walk, saying as he rode away, “You would be wise to help us root out any hidden Christians in Arima—and not *just* for the money.”

“What do you mean, Lord?” Master Yamaguchi asked, running alongside the horse.

“There are developments in the regime. The Shogun has appointed Mizuno Kawachi as the new governor of Nagasaki. His first task will be to exterminate all Christian dogs from these lands. He arrives in June.”

“We will cooperate in any way we can, Lord.”

“You would be wise to do so,” the daimyo answered. “I can assure you the new governor and I will hunt down every hidden Christian and annihilate them—all of them!”

He signaled his flag bearers towards the mountain. As he left the village he called back, “One month. Or I will take your women and children, and the man wearing the straw coat will dance and burn on my return.”



CHAPTER TWO



For confidential delivery to Father Andre Palmeiro
Visitor of Jesuit Province of Japan and
Vice-Province of China
Mission of the Society of Jesus, Macao, China
May 22, Year of our Lord 1626

Dear Father Andre,

I pray my letter finds you well.

Please accept my first letter to you in your new role as Visitor. I am delighted to learn of your appointment, and am further encouraged that our Paternity in Rome remains responsive to our fast-changing circumstances in the Japans and the Far East.

I perhaps write more than is necessary now in order to give you a present and necessary history of our circumstances, as communication is

all but impossible between Macao and Japan and you may not have been given intelligence of our circumstances that is up to date.

As I am sure you are aware, the mission in Japan has become increasingly hazardous over recent years, with hundreds of fathers, brothers, and catechists brutally executed.

Since Tokugawa Iemitsu became the Shogun of Japan three years ago, the number and severity of Christian persecutions and torture has multiplied. Without question, it is now the most hostile environment I have ever witnessed for our Society since my arrival in Japan almost twenty-five years ago.

Shogun Iemitsu feels his authority threatened by our teachings and the Word of God, and he has become the most oppressive leader our Society has ever had to contend with. We are constantly hiding from a militarized regime determined to exterminate us and all things foreign.

The aristocracy in Japan pays him homage, but many in the lower classes find ways to disobey him—a development the Shogun finds inconceivable. His answer is to believe that the peasant classes have been seduced and supported by a foreign power intent on displacing him. Alas, he believes the Society is the channel for that foreign-inspired revolution—a suspicion that has led to our persecution and torture. As a result, I believe circumstances will only get worse for us before they get better.

Our mission on the southern island of Kyushu has become even more perilous. Earlier this year, we heard news that Shogun Iemitsu has appointed Mizuno Kawachi as the new governor of Nagasaki to replace Hasegawa Gonroku, who largely resisted our persecution. Under the express orders of the Shogun, Kawachi has resolved to stamp out Christianity by any means necessary.

This adverse development will spell extreme persecution for all Christians on the island of Kyushu, which includes the city of Nagasaki,

our largest Christian foothold, and our nearby community in Arima.

Following months of careful consideration, I will coordinate an exodus of Christians from Arima to Yezo in the north, where I understand Christians can live in less danger of death and persecution.

However, I assure you I will stand steadfast, acting as the anchor for our Mission and our Society in both Nagasaki and Arima. Rest assured, I shall not abandon any Christian while I am alive. As always, I believe we will weather this storm just as we have the many great storms that have battered our faith in the past.

I know that God is with us, and His Word will take foundation in Japan. I believe the great light of our Lord and Father Almighty will shine through the clouds, dispelling the darkness that currently hovers over Japan.

Now more than ever, I place my trust and faith in our Lord and Father.

I remain your most devoted servant,

Father Joaquim Martinez, Society of Jesus

Father Joaquim reread his epistle to the head of the Jesuit Order in Macao, and after a decisive nod, folded up the letter, placed it into an envelope, and used his signet ring to secure it with a wax seal. He paused then drew a Buddhist insignia on the back of the envelope. *A necessity*, he thought. *Our activities must remain covert—at least for now.*

He pondered the information he had conveyed. The situation had been unpredictable for some time, but was even more fragile if reports of Kawachi's brutality were true.

He snapped out of his musings at three short knocks at the door. He glanced around, then shoved the letter under his bed, calling out, "Enter."

Furniture scraped back along bare floorboards, followed by

a low creaking sound, and the soft swish of fabric as a young Portuguese man in his mid-twenties appeared, revealing a secret doorway behind him. Father Joaquim appraised the new arrival. Although clean, the man's traditional Japanese clothes were old and ragged, in contrast to his youthful face.

"Catechist Miguel, good morning."

"And to you, Father." After a moment's hesitation, Miguel said: "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, Miguel. I wanted to let you know I am taking a short trip to Nagasaki tomorrow. I'll leave at sunset."

"Tomorrow evening? That is sudden. I'm not sure I can make all the necessary preparations by then. Can it not wait?"

"No, it cannot," Father Joaquim replied. "I need to visit our good friend Mateus da Costa as soon as possible." Father Joaquim saw an unspoken question on Miguel's face, sighed, then added, "Daimyo Shigemasa has increased our taxes beyond our ability to cope. The village can neither produce enough rice nor gain enough silver to pay his demands on time. I must seek Mateus's help. Our situation is becoming more precarious."

Miguel nodded in agreement but did not look happy. Father Joaquim saw the anxiety on Miguel's face. "Don't worry, Miguel. I will speak with Master Yamaguchi."

"Yes, Father. I will wait to hear from you. Yamaguchi-san informs me he is teaching this morning."

"That's good news," Father Joaquim exclaimed. "I always enjoy Master Yamaguchi's lessons. Shall we walk over together?"

Father Joaquim took a moment to gather his *budo* training gear. In exchange for his Christian ministry, he had been under Master Yamaguchi's tutelage in the Way of the Sword since his arrival in

Japan when he was just 22. He had proved himself a gifted martial artist with great potential, according to Yamaguchi-san. Now, at 47, many in the valley considered the tall, athletic priest to be a master himself.

As Master Yamaguchi had advised, Father Joaquim and the others who trained in the village kept their *budo* lessons a secret. Social classes were clear: peasants were peasants, and samurai were samurai. Given that peasants' only purpose was to produce rice and perform other manual labor for the upper classes, the regime prohibited them from owning weapons. According to the Government, there was no need for them to learn *budo* or receive any kind of martial training. To be caught doing so was to invite severe punishment.

With his training gear in hand, Father Joaquim left the hidden room with Catechist Miguel. They slid the concealed door back into place, rehung the Buddhist linen hanging on the wall, and moved the furniture back to conceal any trace of a secret room before exiting on their way to practice.

Outside the hut, a large, fierce-looking young man greeted them. Legs spread wide, he wore a tattered, gray-colored *gi*, the traditional Japanese martial arts training uniform.

"Good morning, Father." The young man bowed in formal respect.

"Good morning, Yamamoto-san." Father Joaquim bowed in return.

He smiled at the young man before taking a deep breath of fresh air. Mist drifted across the surrounding rice fields. Forested hills and verdant mountains rose at the edge of the paddy fields, on which a light rain fell.


Yamamoto strode off down a path and the two men followed.



CHAPTER THREE



May 22, 1626
Arima, Shimabara Peninsula, Kyushu



The winding path led to a plain, almost dilapidated building made of gray wooden planks, with a simple thatched straw roof, much like other dwellings in the village. At the end of the pathway they arrived at the entrance to the *dojo*, the martial arts training hall. They removed their sandals, bowed low, and entered, ready to begin a practice that might one day save their lives.

Father Joaquim wore his black *gi*. He glanced around the dojo at twenty or so other students, most wearing ragged, off-white *gis*. Several were stretching in preparation for Master Yamaguchi's lesson.

A senior student clapped his hands three times announcing

the Sensei's arrival. Master Yamaguchi entered through a private doorway at the rear of the dojo, carrying a sword.

The students assembled in rows in a kneeling position—a *seiza*—with the most senior in front and the newest in the back. Master Yamaguchi lay his *katana* in its *saya* or sheath at the front of the room then walked to the center of the dojo and bowed his head to the assembled students. The students returned the respectful greeting.

Yamaguchi turned to Father Joaquim, bowed again, and invited him to the front of the dojo. "*Hajime*," he said. *We shall begin.*

"This morning we will learn about the power of hard and soft." He handed a wooden practice knife to Father Joaquim. Yamaguchi made a gesture specifying the attack he wished the priest to make. Joaquim made no allowance for the frail-looking old man as he attacked. He slashed at Yamaguchi's throat. The sensei stepped back, allowing the knife to sweep past, then in a blur of motion grabbed Joaquim's wrist, twisted and flipped him onto his side. The priest found himself peering up into the crinkled eyes of his teacher. He laughed—no matter how skilled he became the old man still bested him effortlessly. As the priest gathered himself to rise, he felt a sharp stabbing pain in his wrist forcing him to drop the knife. He nodded in admiration as he rubbed his arm. "Impressive."

The other students nodded to themselves and bowed to their master in appreciation as they absorbed the new technique.

"*Yokemenuchi koetegaeshi tanto-dori*," said Master Yamaguchi, naming the technique. He bowed again to the dojo, and invited his students to practice it among themselves.

The students paired off. A short while later, Yamaguchi watched Chiba, one of the younger and more excitable students,

struggle to disarm his partner. After multiple failed attempts he clearly grew frustrated and kned his more powerful training partner in the side in order to force him to give up the knife.

The master clapped his hands and the students lowered themselves into a *seiza* position. “Chiba-san, you seem to be having difficulty disarming Yamamoto-san. Father Joaquim, perhaps you could provide Chiba-san with a demonstration.”

“Yes, Sensei, if you wish.” Joaquim rose to his feet and faced Yamamoto. The priest looked up at the larger man who attacked without warning, stabbing and yelling with great force. Unfazed, Joaquim stepped back and executed the new defensive technique, slamming the heavier man into the tatami and forcing him to drop the knife. The students nodded in approval.

“Solid execution!” Yamaguchi applauded his longtime student. He turned to address the dojo. “As you can see, one way to overcome great strength like that of Yamamoto-san is to execute perfect technique at speed. Father Joaquim has been training in *budo* for twenty years so his technique is very good. But what about those of you who have not trained for twenty years? Must you have even greater strength to overcome strength?”

Yamaguchi shot Chiba a quick glance then paused, allowing his students time to reflect on the question. “Many of us feel the need to fight force with even greater force. But there is another way.”

Chiba looked perplexed as Yamaguchi stared through the window at the rain outside.-

Yamaguchi continued, “Today we are learning how soft can beat hard.” He nodded toward the rain-soaked, clay window ledge. “Water is one of the softest substances in the world, yet it will wear down the hardest rock in time. The key to overcoming great

strength ...” The teacher hunched up, round-shouldered, looking feeble. “... is to use *soft*.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Hard cannot always overcome hard because there is always something harder. Soft is the only sure way to defeat hard. Let me show you.”

Yamaguchi retrieved the sword he had brought to the dojo, and unsheathed it, revealing a magnificent blade. The entire dojo gasped involuntarily at the sight.

“This magnificent *katana* once belonged to my former lord, Daimyo Konishi Yukinaga, before he was executed.” Yamaguchi held the sword up high for the entire dojo to see, then he invited Yamamoto to face him on the mat and handed him the blade. He signaled that the student attack him again—but this time with the sword. Yamamoto hesitated, then with a loud grunt executed a vicious strike from the side. Yamaguchi then did the unexpected and stepped into the attack. He blended his arms with those of Yamamoto and twisted his wrist, swinging Yamamoto high in the air. The younger man hit the tatami hard. He groaned in defeat as Yamaguchi applied pressure to his wrist, engendering the spontaneous release of his student’s handgrip, and removed the sword.

The students watched Yamaguchi in awe. “As a warrior, you must learn to recognize hard so you can counter with soft. This applies to any weapon and any situation. This is not just a *budo* principle but a life principle. When you grasp that, you will be well on your way to a mastery not just of the way of harmonious spirit, but of life.



“Our true strength comes from the universe. When you understand that, then you will understand that a drop of water can become as powerful as an ocean.”

He looked at Father Joaquim and gave him a short nod and a small, private smile.



CHAPTER FOUR

May 22, 1626



In the warmth of the early afternoon, a dozen children giggled and shouted to each other as they played with small wooden toys near their disguised church building while Catechist Tonia watched over them. The older children, meanwhile, were in the rice paddies, working alongside the adults, trying to produce enough rice to meet Lord Shigemasa's demands.

Tonia was tall and slim, a pretty, dark-haired woman in her early twenties dressed in old, worn farm clothes.

"Who was that scary man on the big horse, Tonia-san?" a child asked her.

"Daimyo Matsukura Shigemasa," Catechist Tonia answered. "He is warlord of these lands."

“I don’t like him. He frightens me.”

“You’re right to be wary of him. Lord Shigemasa is a cruel man. I don’t like him either,” Tonia said softly. “But you need not fear him, for God is with us.”

Tonia had been born in Lagos, in Portugal’s Algarve Peninsula. After her mother died of a respiratory ailment, her father, a Portuguese merchant, had brought her with him to the Far East. Soon after their arrival in Macao, however, her father took ill and died as well. There were those who believed he had been poisoned by jealous Dutch merchants resentful of the Portuguese control over trade. Whatever the reason, the orphaned teenager, alone in the world and unprotected, chose to dedicate her life to missionary work.

Disguised as a Portuguese merchant’s wife, she had made her way to Nagasaki where she met Father Joaquim, who had taken her under his wing and sheltered her in this small village, some 40 miles outside Nagasaki.

Tonia knew her mere presence in the Japans was unusual and risky, especially as a young, unmarried Christian woman. She did not even have the slim protection of being a businessman’s wife. She was fortunate that her long black hair and olive skin coloring helped her, from a distance at least, blend in with the Japanese.

“Remember, Haruko-chan,” Tonia said to the child, “no matter how frightening the daimyo may seem, God is much, much stronger.”

“Okay,” the child said as she hugged Tonia.

“Tonia-san?”

Tonia turned to a little boy who was tugging on her cloth shirt. His name was Shiro, maybe six years old. He lived with his uncle in Master Yamaguchi’s village because life was too impoverished

in his native village. Life had become hard in all the villages, as warlords throughout the country escalated their demands on peasants who had no one to appeal to and no way to defend themselves.

Shiro asked, "Why is Daimyo Shigemasa raising our taxes? My uncle says it is impossible to make more rice."

"Daimyo Shigemasa needs the extra rice to feed his new samurai," Tonia said. She reached out a hand and placed it over one of the boy's. "The daimyo also needs extra taxes to build a large castle."

"Why does the daimyo need so many warriors? Won't they just hunt Christian families like us?"

Tonia turned away, unsure what to say to the boy. The truth? It was too dangerous to try and hide it from him, and yet too harsh to tell him the real answer to his question. She said, finally, "The adults have disguised our village well, Shiro-kun, so this is not something you need to worry about."

"My uncle says I have to hide that I'm a Christian because if the daimyo finds out, he will kill us!"


"Your uncle should not say such things to you, Shiro-kun," said Tonia, feeling more and more uncomfortable with the conversation.

"He told me one Christian woman on the daimyo's lands had her hands cut off for praying."

"Try not to worry about such things, Shiro-kun. God will protect us."

"Are you sure, Tonia-san?"

"Yes. We are His children and He will look after us. I promise." Tonia realized the noise of children playing had died down, and



turned to see the other children listening to their conversation. Her heart sank as she considered their fears. Children should not be afraid for their safety. But that was not the world they lived in.

“Do you believe this, Shiro-kun?” she asked.

“Yes. I pray for His protection every night.”

“Good. Believing is the first step to receiving the Lord’s help and blessings. And prayer is the best way to speak to Him.”

Shiro nodded in agreement, narrowing his eyes and biting his lower lip. For a young boy, Shiro had a sharp mind, and perhaps a too-attentive ear.

“Come, let us all say a short prayer together,” Catechist Tonia said. She motioned for the children to gather around.