

Part Two:
Yakura

Introduction:

*Scholomance Castle, Anstruther, Scotland
Dec. 2nd, 2010*

Mike Cameron sat at his desk, high in a tower of the Scholomance, contemplating the unopened package that had come by post that day. He'd been studying Wicca here, off and on, since learning that he was a sorcerer.

He smiled. *Being a vampire, apparently, isn't enough*, he thought.

He spotted the return address on the package, and it triggered memories. It was from the Tekaga Yoshi, Yagyū Shinkage Ryu in Kyoto, Japan. It reminded him of something Master Tekaga had said. The self-professed *maha-tsukai* or sorcerer, had told him that the fates were preparing him for a special path in life. His precise words had been, 'It is said that when the gods give so much to one person, much is asked of them in return. I see a difficult path before you, and much change in your life.'

Did you see me becoming an assassin for CSIS? he wondered. Did you see me becoming a vampire?

Tulku Anil had insisted that there was something inside Mike that was the basis of his extraordinary abilities — something that had dark origins. *Tony's vampire gene*, Mike now realized, *bequeathed to me by my great-great-great-great grandfather, then reenforced through infusions of his own blood to save my life on at two occasions.*

Kato hopped up on the desk, rubbing against Mike, then rubbing against the box. Mike opened the lid to find, nestled amid layers of bubble wrap — thank God it wasn't those retched styrofoam peanuts that packers

loved so much — a mahogany box, about 9 x 8 x 11 inches. He frowned, perplexed, as he extracted the beautifully varnished container. There was a brass plate imbedded in the top, engraved with two names:

Michael David Cameron

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Tomomatsu Yakura

He smiled as Kato continued to rub his neck against Mike's hand and the mahogany box. He was glad that he'd named the cat after his previous Siamese, whom he'd been forced to euthanize. It somehow eased the guilt from that sad decision.

He undid the simple snap-catch, and opened the box, then removed a molded figurine, fashioned from a moderately hard material, possibly epoxy, and painted in intricate detail. It was a *Bushi*, a Japanese warrior of the feudal period — what was now referred to as a Samurai. From the rich crimson lacquer of the armour and the elaborate helm with its crescent moon mounted on the front, the horns of the crescent pointing skyward, it was a Daimyo — no, the son of a Daimyo. The helm and face mask of a Daimyo would have been more ornate.

The note read: *Dearest Michael-san — I came across this in a small shop, and hoped it might reach you in time to be a Christmas gift. I see my vision of you has come to pass: you are studying the way of the maha-tsukai, or perhaps, as the vernacular of the youth is terming masters of any skill, I might call you a maha-ka. There is power in illusion, Michael-san, but there is also darkness. Beware the darkness.*

Fondest regards,

Tekaga Yoshi

Mike smiled. Then a strange feeling filled him. It was the crimson lacquer of the armour — the colour of

Tomomatsu Yakura's armour — the armour Mike had worn in another life, more than three centuries before.

That life had been a source of mystery for most of Mike's life — just glimpses here and there. It had all started with an attack by a mugger, when Mike was seventeen.

***Lower Water Street, Halifax
June, 1977***

Mike turned down the side street from the theater, headed for the ferry terminal. He had lots of time before the last ferry to Dartmouth and, with the warmth of the night and the clear starry sky above, he was in the mood to walk along the waterfront, just to see what ships might be in port.

As he breathed in the night air, he found himself revelling in a sense of freedom. He'd written his final exam for Physics that day, the only exam he'd had to write. His grades had been high enough to exempt him from the rest of his exams. Now he was done — graduation in a couple of days, then the summer before going to Acadia. He still couldn't believe that the university had given him a scholarship that would pay his tuition for the four years he needed to do an honours degree in Biology.

Rapid movement to his left — A man stepped out of an alley. *Click* — Mike recognized the sound of a switchblade knife. It was his only warning. The knife slashed at his gut. Instinct and training made him skip backward, lean his chest forward, sucking his gut in away from the blade.

He'd reacted fast, but not fast enough. Heat and pain assailed his abs, just under the ribs. His hand shot to the spot — wetness — blood welling from a cut. The assailant's knife hand returned, backhand. He

blocked, crane-style, gripping the wrist, twisting, then jerked hard. Rapid follow-up: He pivoted and drove a snap-sidekick into the ribs, pulling on the wrist at the same time, driving his left palm into the elbow. There was a scream — ribs shattered, wrist and elbow made the sickening sounds of breaking. The kicking foot shot back just enough to slam a high roundhouse into the side of the head. Another crack — jaw and skull. The shoulder dislocated just before the wrist was torn from Mike's grip by the impact of his foot. The attacker sagged, beginning a collapse to the pavement. Mike dropped into a squat, following his attacker's fall, two rapid thrust punches to the chest forced any remaining air from the lungs, and drove broken ribs inward. Extending back to his full height, Mike spun, lashing out with a dragon's tail whip-kick. His heel smashed into the side of the attacker's head just before he collapsed on the pavement.

20: Young Samurai

Edo (now Tokyo), 1683

Yakura Tomomatsu was fifteen years old, the son of a daimyo under Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi. They were of an ancient and proud Bushi family, but they had only been Daimyo for a few generations. Yakura's ancestor had been a vassal to Tokugawa Ieyasu, one of his *hatamoto*. In recognition of his loyalty, the new Shogun had elevated him to the rank of Daimyo. They were not rich, but they had a long and proud military history. Others had fought less, yet fattened on the spoils of war, fighting only where they could loot from powerful nobles who had fallen into disfavour. But the Tomomatsu had turned any spoils over to the shoguns — Ieyasu, in the beginning, then as Daimyo under his son Hidetada, his grandson Iemitsu, great-grandson Ietsuna, and now his great-great-grandson Tsunayoshi.

Yakura broadened his stance, relaxing his grip on the katana so that it was mostly between the thumb and first two fingers of his left hand. Master Yagyu, knowing Yakura was ambidextrous, liked to work his left hand as much as his right when practicing the art of kenjutsu.

His aging teacher, a master of the famed Yagyu school and a student of the teachings of the legendary Miyamoto Musashi, bade him relax. Sheathing the katana, Yakura sat cross-legged on the grass, and took up the book once more, reading aloud to his master from *The Wind Scroll*, the fourth of five parts making up Musashi's *Go Rin No Sho*, *The Book of Five Rings*."

A slight rattle in the tree overhead caught the young man's attention, and his speech faltered, causing his master to rebuke his lack of concentration.

"But, Master, there's a girl in the tree behind me," he whispered.

"And she's been there for ten minutes, watching us, watching you, mostly. Now finish the passage."

Yakura focused and finished the remaining page. Master Yagyū, his lesson completed, arose and bowed to Yakura, then left. Almost immediately, Master Chen entered — an elderly Chinese monk dressed in a sleeveless robe of saffron yellow, the badge of the southern Shaolin or Sil-Lum. He carried a bokken — a wooden sword — not being Bushi, it was forbidden for him to handle a katana. With no preamble, he took a prepared stance and gestured for Yakura to draw his katana.

The monk advanced with rapid chopping blows, but Yakura didn't retreat. He responded with a series of parries and counters reminiscent of crane-style Kung Fu, his katana merely an extension of his arm.

"Excellent! Now show me what venerable Yagyū has been teaching you today."

Yakura advanced on him. The priest moved smoothly and easily, countering all of his moves with effortless speed and precision.

Yakura stopped and pondered. "That was like a back-of-the-hand crane-wing block followed by a tiger palm thrust," he says.

The monk nodded. "Let your mind flow and adapt. The sword is just an extension of your arm. All the techniques of the Sil-Lum can be adapted. There are many possibilities. You are already demonstrating adaptations that master Yagyū has yet to explore. With this broader base, few will be able to surprise you with their tricks, yet you will have natural responses that extend far outside the traditional boundaries they have placed upon themselves."

“But master Yagyu’s ancestor knew the great Musashi Miyamoto!”

“Ah, the great innovator. Yes, he developed many new and unorthodox ideas. But there are still ideas that even he never explored. Just as there must be ideas that my masters never pondered in their faraway temples. As you practice and meditate, you will come up with your own innovations. Already I have seen a few, just from how you adapt the Shaolin system to your own body and it’s natural preferences.”

There was a sudden crashing of branches and a young girl of ten dropped to the ground. Yakura rushed to her as she scrambled to her feet in embarrassment, eager to recover before he could assist. Even in her embarrassed and disheveled state, she was a delicate flower of exceptional beauty.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, trying to keep the anxiety from his voice.

“No,” she insisted. He knew that pride her made want to mask her embarrassment with bravado.

“You were in the tree watching my lessons with Master Yagyu, and now with Master Chen.”

Her eyes dropped in the shy modest fashion expected of her, but only for a moment. They snapped back to face him. “Yes,” she confirmed. She braced herself, as if expecting a lecture about the horror of a young lady, daughter of a daimyo, shaming a family related to the Shogun’s, by being in a tree.

“That cherry tree is old,” Yakura said, his eyebrows lifting, his expression imitating the wise and conspiratorial look his grandfather often used with him when advising him on something he knew Yakura’s parents would not approve of. “You must avoid the outer branches and stay closer to the stem. With an old tree whose limbs are becoming dry and more brittle, the outer lengths of the branches will not hold even your delicate weight.”

She smiled at him warmly, giving a slight bow.

“You fight well, better than any I’ve seen.” Her eyes took on a teasing look. “Yet the old grandfather of China still bests you.”

Yakura smiled. “Just as he would best any Bushi. If Master Yagyū were to attack Master Chen with his katana, Master Chen, unarmed, would take the katana away from him.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “And if his humour was greater than his respect, he might spank him with the side of the blade in doing so.”

The girl went wide-eyed.

“Now, Akiko, you must return before your mother finds you missing.”

“You know my name.”

“Just as you know mine,” he said with a smile. Glancing anxiously at the limbs of the tree that leaned over the wall well above her head, anxiety suddenly showed in her face. “But how?”

Gripping her hips from behind, he cautioned, “Keep your back straight and reach up.” He took a slow, deep breath and blew it out through compressed lips as he lifted her off the ground until his arms were straight. As soon as she had a grip on a branch, he shifted his grip to her knees, lifting her higher as she pulled with her arms, until she was securely in the tree. Moments later she started to climb down on her side of the wall.

“Tomorrow, Yakura,” she said with a bold, sweet smile, “I will be watching you.”

“She is a bold girl to defy tradition,” Master Chen commented, finally approaching Yakura. “She has great courage. Who is she?”

“She is daughter to a second or third cousin of the shogun. And someday she is to be my wife. Our parents have arranged it.”

From the shadows of a tree that over-hung the entrance to his home, Yakura watched Toda Yoshihiro as he strutted up and down the street, mostly before Akiko's home. In addition to the katana and wakizashi in his sash, he carried a bokken in his hand, as did his companions. He was a show-off and a bully, but he never walked alone; always his companions followed him. They were sons of warriors who served his father. He liked to frighten younger children and the elderly. He brandished his bokken, but he had no style. He was like a herder waving a stick. Clearly he did not apply himself to his studies — He was too proud. He was a Toda. Though armed with a katana and wakizashi, as tradition required, he could not brandish them in an intimidating manner without drawing the Shogun's ire. Thus, he could only intimidate with his bokken, a curved, rounded length of ash, similar in length to a katana.

His home was on the next street — not his real home — none of these dwellings were the true homes of the Daimyo. By Shogun edict, every noble must maintain a home in Edo, where his wife and children lived as informal hostages to the Tokugawa to insure the loyalty of their fathers.

A grandmother was passing along the street, her arms laden with food for supper. It was servants work, but this woman was a little senile and very stubborn about such things. Her family humoured her.

Yoshihiro stuck out a foot so that she was sent sprawling into the dirt. He and his friends laughed.

"You should send a servant to market, old one," Yoshihiro laughed.

His disrespect was so unacceptable, especially calling her 'old one.' The one spectator, just emerging out of his gate, might have been infuriated, but Master Chen had long-since taught Yakura the futility of unchanneled anger.

The grandmother was just getting to her feet, gathering her groceries. One of Yoshihiro's bully friends raised his bokken, as if to strike her, possibly to just miss, intimidating her into running. From Yakura's position, it looked more like he would hit her.

He moved fast, interposing himself. His hand caught the wrist, levering the bully backward, off balance, while a foot kicked the bully's feet out from under him, dumping him into the dirt.

Yoshihiro took a step toward Yakura, a hand on his katana.

Yakura met Yoshihiro with an even gaze. "The Shogun frowns upon private duels, Toda," he said, "but he might make an exception. I could explain that I was merely giving you a demonstration of Yagyu-sensei's latest lesson, hoping to improve your skills and make you more valuable to the Tokugawa. He might even approve."

All the while he kept his eyes fixed upon Yoshihiro Toda's, making sure he showed nothing but fearless confidence.

Yoshihiro sneered.

"My father, however, would not approve of me associating with one of a lesser station," he announced, "even in combat. Consider yourself fortunate, Tomomatsu."

"You're just a bully, Toda," Yakura said, frowning. "You try to incite fear, hoping it will distract people from your own fears."

Toda paled, then let out a laugh. "And what have I, a Toda, to be afraid of, *Tomomatsu*?" He uttered Yakura's family name in a jeering tone, seeming to set great store in his own family name.

"Perhaps not living up to your ancestors' expectations," he offered. "You make a lot of noise, but you've put little effort into learning to be a warrior. You take shortcuts. You'd rather be famous than achieve anything to earn fame. You live on the name of

your ancestors, on other people's glory, hoping their glory will somehow become your own."

Yoshihiro did a great deal of blustering, then swung a downward blow with his bokken, a blow that might have cracked Yakura's skull had it landed.

Yakura skipped to one side, his left hand coming down on Toda's forearm. His right struck Toda's shoulder, doubling him over. He rotated, spinning Toda about, sending him sprawling into the dirt. Toda's bokken was now in Yakura's hand.

Yakura sent the wooden sword spinning into the air. Then, using Iai, the art of the quick draw, his katana flashed from its sheath, sliced through the bokken, severing it in two, then return to its sheath, all in two lightning movements.

"What goes on here?" The demand came from two warriors whose kimonos showed the spoked wheel pattern of the Tokugawa Shogun. They were warriors — Bushi — not the sai-carrying policemen that the Shogun also used.

Yakura bowed to them. "I was demonstrating my study of the art of Iai to Toda Yoshihiro," he said calmly.

"It looked like conflict," one of the warriors countered. "Such behaviour is not approved in the city."

Yakura smiled. "There is no conflict," he insisted, "just a harmless demonstration. I am sure that Toda Yoshihiro would not knowingly seek conflict."

One of the warriors hid a smile. "Not unless his foe were half his size or greatly outnumbered," the warrior muttered.

"You are the son of Tomomatsu-Daimyo," the other said. "I know of you. The Shogun says you have great skill with a blade. He also says that we are not to admire your blade too closely." He added the latter with a frown.

Yakura made a quick move with a silk handkerchief from his sash, draping it over the *tsuba* and hilt of his katana. The blade was a Muramasa: a legendary blade by a legendary swordmaster. It was suggested that the blades were cursed to kill whomever they were drawn against — that the owner could not draw the blade without drawing blood, even if it meant drawing his own.

Yakura spread his arms, displaying his hands.

“There is no blood here,” he assured them. “You have heard a story, nothing more.”

“Then you should both be on your way,” the other insisted.

Yakura gave a brief bow — more of a nod — and walked back toward his house. As he was about the enter, he discretely pulled his katana, *Yama Kazi* — *Mountain Wind*, just enough to nick his thumb and draw a drop of blood before pushing it back into the *saya*.