



TOMODACHI

The Edge of the World

Simon Higgins

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Fiction
Press

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Pulp Fiction Press
GPO Box 297
Brisbane Qld 4001
Australia

Phone +61 7 3236 2750
Fax +61 7 3236 2752

www.pulpfictionpress.com.au/tomodachi



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Chapter One

Beached Among Monsters

Daniel Marlowe rolled onto his back in the shallow tidal pool, spluttering hard. His eyes and nostrils stung with sea salt. A hot sun beat down on his face. Half drowned, Daniel tried to force his exhausted mind to take in his surroundings. But memories hazily tangled with the present like the grey-green kelp strands round his legs.

He saw the deck of the great black-timbered ship, where he had stood target throwing with a pouch of pebbles in one hand, a pork barrel for an enemy at the end of the deck.

Snow white hair flashed in the corner of his eye before he heard his father's voice.

'Playing yeoman archer again?' it said wearily, 'come: a gentleman's battle awaits us both below decks... this day's language practice.'

His father's voice faded into the crash of a wave on the nearby rocks.

Daniel coughed again then curled up to tug the kelp from his limbs. He tried to raise himself into a squat, but faintness gripped him. He lolled back in the pool's warm water.

Out on the glistening sea, another breaker growled and he briefly saw the midnight storm that had struck like a swooping dragon to tear their ship apart. Daniel shuddered. With a determined grunt, he sat up, looking around. Debris littered the tidal pool, a floating web of ropes, sailcloth, broken planks, a cracked barrel bobbing in its centre.

He stared at the mangled echo of the black ship. An accidental raft which had borne him ashore. *Ashore*. Apart from some fleeting stops on the voyage to take on water, salt-dried meat and local fruit – often very strange fruit – this would be his first time on land in two years.

But which land? Was this The Japans, or had the storm swept him even further than their destination, to some kingdom beyond both maps and rumours? He wiped his face on the sleeve of his sopping wet tunic, its rough weave stinging tiny scratches in his cheeks. A breeze from inland brought the scent of damp earth and crushed pine needles to his nose. Drawing it in, Daniel's mind cleared. His thoughts quickly gathered speed.

What if there were monsters here? The kind Shoji their language teacher believed in? His father, Shoji, perhaps the entire Portuguese ship's company too, might be just around that rocky point to the north. He blinked at the headland's arching cliff, topped with twisted trees. They could all be so close. Washed up, like him, on barrels and planks. A lump rose in his dry throat. Or scattered across a thousand miles of islands. Or at the bottom of –

He would not think about that. No. They had come ashore, like him. Just somewhere else. In the distance, he heard a man shout.

Daniel crept on his hands and knees to the edge of the tidal pool. Beyond a jagged line of pockmarked rock, a steep beach of coarse grey sand climbed to a dark pine forest. Many of its trees were gnarled by ocean winds into angular, menacing shapes. Behind them stood low hills which rolled away like petrified waves to meet blue-hazed mountains in the distance. It *was* the kind of place monsters might live. He stood up, glancing round warily.

A sharp hiss came from the forest. Then another. Shading his eyes he peered into the tree line above the empty beach. Daniel craned forward, listening hard. The third time the sound came he recognised it. *Arrows*. He crouched behind the line of dark rock, eyes wide, searching the forest. Now it rumbled with the sound of an approaching horse.

There was movement, something flitting through the shade of the pines. Daniel stared intently, narrowing his gaze. The pounding of hooves grew louder, but instead of a rider, he saw a figure on foot. A woman, in an odd, billowing dress. He watched, mesmerised. She ran closer, the fabric of her skirts snapping noisily as if whipped by a gale. Daniel frowned as the figure drew near.

No. *Not a woman*. A boy, slightly older than himself perhaps, tall and slim. His long hair was tied back into a high-set black tail. Whoever this fellow was, he wore a colourful cloth knapsack, great pleated trousers that resembled skirts, and a gently curved sword through his belt. Oddest of all though, was the way he darted about like a monkey.

The echoing thumps of the approaching horse grew louder still. With a new *hiss* an arrow appeared in a tree trunk beside

the boy's head. He flinched, spun quickly and dashed toward the rock wall. Daniel hunched low, afraid to watch but unable to tear his eyes away.

With great agility the strange boy wove through the last of the gnarled trees and ran onto the edge of the beach. He leapt a rotting log, avoided a dark, wet patch of sandy earth with a sideways bound then caught sight of Daniel peeping from behind his shield.

They exchanged startled, curious stares, until Daniel heard the boy gasp out a word he knew in the tongue of The Japans: 'What?'

The stranger stood panting for a moment, shaking his head at Daniel. Daniel gaped back. Though armed, this runner was definitely not much older than he was.

Twigs crackled, low tree branches snapped behind the stranger. The boy twisted away to face the oncoming threat.

A towering rider burst from the forest onto the edge of the beach. The boy leapt back into a warlike stance, smoothly drawing his weapon. As the curved sword caught the light, what looked like a tiny sunburst glided from its hand guard to its tip. Daniel half grinned with awe. He had never seen such peculiar, shiny metal. The sword had to be magical! Who was this boy? A young Saint George of The Japans, facing a man-dragon?

For the boy's pursuer itself made Daniel tremble. Though its enormous horse seemed normal enough, it was no mounted knight, more like some kind of devil.

The rider was a terrible being, half-man, half-monster, with weird, fish scale skin, shiny horns rising from a huge, plated head,

and a demonic, leering face of leathery, scarred flesh. Its expression of fury and malice did not change, its sunken eyes stared, black and soulless. And it too, was armed.

Even with a magic sword, how could this boy survive such a beast?

The creature forced its horse to a halt. Steam came from the mount's nostrils and Daniel wondered if the same would suddenly issue from the rider. The stallion's sides gleamed with sweat. Rising up in the stirrups, the man-dragon hoisted a huge bow, nocked an arrow then gazed down at the boy.

A puff of breeze came through the forest. Mixed with the aromas of pine needles and mushrooms, Daniel thought he also smelled a hint of cloves. He watched the man-dragon carefully draw the bow string. The boy defiantly set his jaw, gripping his sword tighter. Admiration and pity welled in Daniel. What valour! But at this range, the boy had no chance of dodging that arrow. The beast would pin him to the sand like a butterfly.

Then a mad urge seized Daniel and without thought he obeyed it.

He stood tall. The mounted creature turned at the movement, letting its bow string slacken, cocking its head to one side at the sight of Daniel. Like the boy with the sword, it appeared shocked by what it saw. Its wicked stare bored into Daniel's eyes, as if it might drain the blue colour from them, and then, no doubt, the life from the rest of him.

Daniel's throat began to close so he gave a strangled, nervous cough. He had gone with his impulse, become involved. *Νοσω*

what? He tore his eyes from the man-dragon's bewitching gaze, glanced down to the sand beyond the rock wall. Pebbles, everywhere. A new, even more reckless urge gripped him. It made no sense. He went with it anyway.

With his heart pounding, Daniel leaned over the wall, snatched up the nearest big pebble, then swung it back fast behind his shoulder. At once he felt safer. The rider let out a low snigger. Daniel took a deep breath and hurled the beach pebble as hard as he could. With a *whump* it struck the creature between its soulless eyes.

Reeling off balance in the saddle, the man-dragon lost control of its horse, which whinnied then shied toward the forest. Hands flailing, the rider dropped its bow and snatched at the reins. The boy with the sword darted forward and in one skilful horizontal slice, cut the falling bow in two. Daniel heard it sing *twang-clack* before clattering to the ground. The horse reared, neighing sharply, but the moment its front hooves touched down again, the boy rushed in once more and this time lunged. Daniel saw the gleaming sword accelerate into a lightning flash that pierced the rider's leg.

The man-dragon clutched at the wound and cried out with pain. Distressed, its horse turned a sharp circle, flicking up sand. Snarling, the terrible rider straightened up in the saddle, regained its balance and took control of the panicked animal. Daniel stood frozen to the spot, his heartbeat a drum-roll in his chest. Would he be slain now?

The awful being glared at him, then at the boy with the sword.

It bellowed what sounded like a curse, turned its mount, and rode away hard through the forest.

Daniel fought the urge to be sick. A moment later he was. He doubled up over the rock-wall as an alarming amount of seawater escaped from his stomach. Sagging down the wall into a wrung-out heap, he closed his eyes, groaning.

A shadow fell across his face. Daniel looked up. The boy loomed over him. The stranger was smooth-faced, with high cheek bones and cat-like eyes which reminded him of Shoji. But unlike Shoji, this fellow's eyes were fierce with black fire. Was that because of the pursuer he had just driven off, or directed at Daniel?

They studied each other. Though he had sheathed his sword, the boy kept one hand on its handle, the other on its scabbard, as if he might draw again any time.

Daniel tried to swallow, but instead almost choked on burning, salty bile. He turned his face away and spat before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

The boy with the sword spoke. His voice was surprisingly deep, its tone gruff and pushy. At first, the meaning of his words failed to register. But when the stranger repeated himself, Daniel realised that Shoji the Lost Whaler, with his weird mix of Portuguese and English, had actually been a very fine teacher of his native tongue. Two long years of his sometimes awkward lessons were already proving their great worth. For Daniel could understand the stranger. So this *was* The Japans.

'Who are you?' the boy demanded. His stare flicked up and down Daniel, lingering on his eyes, blond hair and wet tunic.

‘What are you?’

Daniel cleared his throat.

‘Well? What are you?’ the boy shouted, tightening his hold on the sword.

Fighting fear and an aching, parched gullet, Daniel croaked out a single word in the young swordsman’s language.

A word which meant ‘friend.’

The stranger jumped back, eyebrows arching. His mouth fell open.

‘How?’ he hissed, as if addressing himself. Then he grunted a word Daniel did not know. ‘*Obake!*’ His expression hardened. His chest started to heave. He edged forward, eyes moving over Daniel again.

Daniel glanced down. The boy’s hands now gripped the sword with white knuckles. With a grunt, the stranger shuffled closer, his face angry, resolved.

Taking a deep breath, Daniel closed his eyes tightly.



Chapter Two

A Promise to a God

Fourteen year old Otsu cowered behind the hedge of purple wildflowers as the column of horsemen charged by.

The rumble of the horses' hooves surged through the ground until Otsu's small feet pulsed along with it. Once the roar of the two dozen riders ebbed away, she stood up slowly. Tasting dust in her mouth, she glanced down the road in the direction from which the men had come.

Otsu hugged a folded cloth sling to her mud-streaked kimono and looked warily in every direction. Then she tied her conical straw sunhat over one shoulder and continued down the hillside. Now the isolated barn was only a hundred paces away.

True, its sharply angled roof was full of holes, and one wall had caved in, forming a gaping mouth framed with jagged wooden teeth. Of course, there would be fleas too. But it would still give her and Chiyo shelter overnight. Just one more day of walking, hiding, she told herself, and they would cross some ridge to escape the land of their enemy, into a *good* fiefdom where no-one would hunt them. There really were such places. Chiyo had told her so. Chiyo knew these things.

On the valley floor perhaps two hundred steps beneath the barn, lay a village in the shape of a horseshoe, its thatched-roof huts flanked by rice paddies. Thin columns of cooking smoke twisted above many of the homes. In the bright sunshine of the fine spring day, the village should have been a welcoming sight. But tiny figures dashed between the little wooden houses, several with loads on their backs, baskets of vegetables or lashed bundles of firewood. Sounds of fearful commotion rose from the small community.

Otsu flinched when she heard a man's voice, crying loud from below, 'Bandits!'

It was the men who had passed her. Heavily armed brigands! While they fell like hawks on the lonely village she ran the last stretch of hillside to the barn. Once inside, between two piles of rotting, empty sacks, Otsu found a spy hole in the wall where she could look downhill.

'Not a sound now, Chiyo,' she whispered, stroking the bundle at her chest. 'In case they start to search around. Besides... they might work for *him*.'

She grimaced at the thought of the man she had fled. There was a part of him she could not hate, could not blame, for after all, he had been so kind at the start. But once illness had taken so much from him, from Otsu too in a way, he transformed. Like a patient uncle before his loss, he steadily turned into a crazed accuser. Lazy, he would growl; clumsy, he would shout at her. In the end, drowning in his grief, he refused to converse with Otsu, demanded that she spoke only to acknowledge his orders. Those sleepless, lonely nights in the bitter heart of winter had made her long for death. Until their

cruel spell was broken by a greater magic. That blood-red dawn, when Chiyo first called to her from the workbench. Her joy had been short lived. For soon after had come that terrible evening when *he* appeared, with mad eyes, swaying in his drunkenness, at the end of her bed roll, muttering his dead wife's name.

A series of sharp cries drove him from her mind. Her eyes swept the village and its lush surrounds, grassy hillsides above the paddies, dotted with new flowers of purple, white, yellow and pink. The world was waking up after the long night of winter. Yes, it should all have been so beautiful. If only she could make it so.

Screaming echoed through the valley. Galloping back and forth across its central clearing, the brigands took control of the village. A handful of farmers, shoulder to shoulder in a circle, bravely tried to defend their homes. Battling the armoured horsemen with what looked like bamboo spears and digging tools, they were quickly cut down one by one. As the last man standing was speared in the back, Otsu sighed with sorrow at their vain courage. The bandits herded the surviving peasants into a terrified huddle. Barking orders and waving their weapons they rode round their victims in ever tighter circles. Otsu studied the predators. Her mouth twisted into a frozen snarl.

Ragged, like a wandering pack of hungry wolves, perhaps they did not work for her owner after all. For they wore an assortment of armour, mixed colours and styles, not one full matching set on any man. Some of them were plainly skilled with spear or sword, while others appeared to be most untalented warriors, scavengers along for the ride. No, more likely they were deserters from defeated

armies, serving only themselves. Roaming the land, criminals in search of opportunity, until the day an undefeated army crossed their path and cut *them* down like summer grass.

She watched them loot the village, hoist sacks of rice, millet and soya beans onto their horses, along with two small drums which probably held *sake*, the rice-wine most villages made for themselves. Horrified, Otsu gulped back a shout when a brigand lifted a young woman onto the back of his horse, ignoring her pleading parents who grovelled in the dust before him.

Otsu turned away, put her back to the wall then carefully unwound the bundle on her chest.

'I can't watch any more, Chiyo,' she said slowly, swallowing hard. 'It's too... too sad.' She flicked the last of the cloth folds aside, exposing a small, simply-made doll. It wore a tiny, neat kimono made of the same fabric as her own, patterned with peonies. The doll's spiky black hair stood up sharply above its round face. It wore a wide, inane grin.

'These are such cruel days, aren't they, Chiyo?' Otsu watched the doll's unmoving eyes intently.

What of your parents? Weren't they cruel too?

Otsu laughed earnestly. 'Oh no, no. You have it all wrong. *Ji-samurai* may be farmers as well as warriors, but we too are proud. When my father's lord was destroyed, he knew he would never again serve in battle to earn a stipend. So we had nothing then, nothing but the crops.'

But they weren't enough, were they?

'No, Chiyo. You know what happened. Two years in a row!

Typhoons as we had never seen, that's what!

And after the disasters... abandonment. Yet you defend them.

She frowned at the doll, wagging a finger in its expressionless face. 'Now, now. We both know the truth, Chiyo. Half our village starved before they were willing... to sell me. They only sold me,' Otsu choked up, 'to save my life. And you know what we heard from the fan-seller: they couldn't save their own, in the end! Famine is a demon!' She wiped her eyes then angrily set her trembling chin. Otsu took a breath and held her head high.

Hooves pounded the grassy hillside just below the ruined barn. Otsu slid down the wall into shadow, tucking Chiyo into her clothes. She tugged hard at one of the piles of sacks until it collapsed over them, stinking of mould and mice. The skin on her neck prickled as fleas immediately made their presence felt. But Otsu remained silent, knowing she could count on Chiyo to do the same. They had been through this before.

Through a chink in her new armour of empty, rotten sacks, Otsu saw the dozen or more scruffy men in real armour stride into the barn through the collapsed wall. One of them limped, a bloodied rag tied round his thigh. Otsu grinned, wishing a terrible fever would spring from the wound to slay him. At least one of the poor farmers had done well then, before he had been hacked down by these fiends. If only the villagers had been Ji-samurai.

'Why wait here? We should move on!' The fellow with the bad leg sounded frustrated. 'We have everything this lot had to offer!'

'Offer?' Another brigand laughed heartily. 'I didn't notice them offering it.'

A tall, solidly built bearded man addressed the limping bandit. A jagged red birthmark marred his right cheek, and he carried a double-sized *No-dachi* sword on his back. He wore all the best quality pieces of armour. His tone, too, suggested he was in charge.

‘You’re new at this; take your lead from me. It’s a good ploy. We sit here, we wait. The rest, I’ve sent right up the hill to keep watch. A little patience and we’ll find out where their *hidden* stores are. All farmers have reserves. You’ll see. Villagers will be scooting off in all directions right now, eager to make sure we didn’t stumble on them, desperate to check how much they’ve got left. We just wait, and spy. Clever, huh?’

‘I suppose,’ the limping one mumbled. He saw the taller man glare at him, so quickly added, ‘Well, of course it is. It’s why you’re the chief, why you’re The Tiger.’

‘No, you hobbling turnip.’ His leader grunted at him. ‘They call me Tora – *The Tiger* – because I’ve lived through a dozen battles, and,’ he added carefully, ‘killed twenty men in single combat. Don’t you forget it.’

‘I won’t... boss.’ The man gave a shallow bow of respect. Otsu decided he did not mean it. ‘Well, when it’s all over here, *then* can we go back to the coast?’

Tora The Tiger grinned and slapped his thigh. ‘You’re not going to get over it, are you? Hah! You shouldn’t have gone off on your own, I told you that. You’re lucky you weren’t captured. You have to be with me for Nakatomi Clan samurai to turn a blind eye to your presence.’ He looked his subordinate up and down then sniggered. ‘Oh, I suppose we can go looking for your boy with a

sword. Worth killing him for another decent blade, I guess. At least we know his is sharp... uh?’

The limping bandit scowled. ‘I told you... it was no ordinary kid. Some kind of sorcerer. A sprite appeared to aid him! Otherwise, I’d have –’

‘Yes, yes,’ Tora yawned. ‘Sprites, hurling magic rocks. Sprites with devil eyes. Whatever. You shouldn’t have left the group.’

‘One sprite, and that was bad enough!’ The brigand eyed his master sideways. ‘Why *does* the young Lord Nakatomi turn a blind eye?’ He hobbled over and sat heavily on the pile of sacking beside Otsu’s hiding place. She stifled a gasp.

‘Partly because he’s just a kid himself,’ Tora sniffed. ‘But mostly because his House gets useful favours out of me, favours that... make his complicated young warlord life easier. When we return to the cliffs I’ll be briefing all of you on the new one. Our most difficult task yet, but it also carries the biggest purse ever. It’s worth the effort...’ he sighed mockingly, ‘unlike getting wounded for chasing kids down a beach.’

The limping bandit looked away, then cleared his throat and spat. Tora bristled. Otsu hoped the insulted thief would lose his temper, spring up and challenge his leader. Then she could listen with satisfaction while one or both of them died for their cruel ways. It would simply be their karma. But the fellow just sat, brooding, until shouts came from somewhere high above on the hillside. The whole group suddenly brightened.

‘Ah! Hear that?’ Tora chuckled. ‘I told you so! Now I’ll ride up there and lead the men, you torch this miserable barn, then

follow us. And try not to fall off your horse.'

'Burn this ruin? Why bother? Look at it! What good does it do the villagers? They don't even use it anymore, you can tell!' The wounded bandit thumped Otsu's pile of sacks. She squeezed Chiyo tightly and bit her bottom lip to stop herself crying out with fear.

'It does them no good at all,' Tora said malevolently. 'But I want to leave them a reminder. My visiting sign is fire. Let them see flames above their homes... my personal war banner over their little world, to remind them what will happen if they resist next time.' He turned on his heel to go. 'Get on with it.'

The limping brigand stood, obediently drawing a flint kit from his belt. Once Tora and the others departed, he spat again. 'Twenty men in single combat... pah! Last time, it was fifteen!' He set about searching the barn for dry kindling. Otsu watched him pass the gap in her pile of sacks, back and forth, her heart in her mouth along with her fist.

After making a little pile of leaves, twigs and broken timbers against the collapsed wall, the brigand knelt painfully and, following a few tries with his flint, lit the pyre.

Otsu silently asked her dead parents to whisper into his mind, trick him into leaving before the fire truly took hold. But he tarried, no doubt afraid of the wrath of The Tiger if he failed. No wonder he had not challenged his leader.

Once the ruined wall's jagged teeth started to burn, the bandit shambled from the barn. Cursing with discomfort, he awkwardly mounted his horse and rode away.

Otsu burst from the pile of sacks into a cloud of smoke and immediately began coughing. The fire spread fast through every tooth of the ruined wall, its flames too high and wide to risk leaping or sliding past, so she threw herself down and started searching for another exit.

On her hands and knees she scurried along the downhill wall, a ceiling of grey smoke growing quickly overhead.

With Chiyo jammed deep inside the front of her kimono, her shoulder probed for a rotten plank that even a small, slender girl could force outwards or break. Otsu thought fast. Her parents had been unable to help her. That was not their fault. The spirit world had rules, though of course no-one this side of the mirror knew them. Of the many gods and spirits, who would help? Things were desperate! This prayer needed flight with the aim of a master archer. Who, who to invoke? Encircling demons of confusion snatched at her thoughts. Then, like the deep hum of a temple bell, Chiyo's voice cut through the chaos.

Turn to a mighty entity. A lord of the unseen world. He will honour our desperate prayers.

'Yes, Hachiman!' Otsu hissed, 'God of War, the monks say you rule this age! Lord Hachiman! I was born samurai! Save Chiyo and me this day! Don't let us become eels on a grill! Give us a way out, and I'll pray to you most of all from now on!' Otsu scrambled around, coughing hard, each board she tried too firm to force or snap.

The crackle of flames behind her grew louder. Suddenly she could feel heat from above, bearing down on her. The roof must

have caught fire. If she did not find a loose board fast it was over. Burning beams would collapse on her and Chiyo. She had only seconds.

‘Hachiman, hater of cowards, I beg you!’ Otsu sobbed in between coughs, ‘Open a way. We... We’ll serve you. Seek justice! Go to the coast! Find the sorcerer boy brave enough to fight bandits. Take revenge for this poor village! We swear it!’ Her eyes stung and she was forced to close them. Now she hunted blind. Otsu spluttered hard then, as she gasped, heard Chiyo once more.

Go to where the walls meet! Yes, that way!

Reaching the dank corner, Otsu put her shoulder to the last wide board in the wall that faced downhill. It was damp. Crying and shaking, she gave a stricken cough then leaned hard.



Chapter Three

Enemy of My Enemies

'You know, this morning, I thought you were going to use that on me,' Daniel said slowly. His eyes flicked to the sword on his companion's hip.

The taller boy stopped and turned, staring into his eyes.

They had walked roughly south along the beach for hours. The sand changed from grey to gold, there were no longer tidal pools, and the dense coastal pine forest had gradually petered out. Now rocky, salt-stung hills fronted the lonely beach. Clouds of gulls flew over them regularly. Apart from passing a small wooden shrine on one flat-topped hill, they saw no other signs of the hand of man.

At first, their conversation staggered along, grinding to an awkward halt several times. Despite Shoji's lessons, Daniel made numerous mistakes, some sparking laughter, others stunned silence. Certain things he spoke of as singular, the Japanese boy appeared to take as plural, and the other way round. A few of Daniel's casual, chatty remarks must have meant something utterly different in Japanese, triggering mild alarm on his companion's face. But Daniel kept trying and the boy with the sword also persevered,

correcting Daniel's speech where he could, repeating new words for his vocabulary. As time passed, the pair could talk a little more freely. Daniel was amazed at his rapid progress. Gradually, he started to *think* in Japanese and simply speak his thoughts. Like his new friend, it was all very exciting but a little scary.

'I almost *did* cut you, you know,' the Japanese boy said. 'But even when scared, you didn't disappear. So I knew the truth. You're a foreign devil, not a real devil.' He began to smile, but then abruptly clicked his tongue. 'Wait, wait! This is all wrong. What was I thinking? Since very young, I've heard tales of men from other lands, washed up on our shores. Southern barbarians, all different colours, some say. Well, I don't know how your people live, but in my country, we have manners.' He folded his arms.

'I don't understand,' Daniel shrugged. 'What's wrong?'

The boy looked down at him with a wide grin. 'Something, but we can fix it! *What's wrong?* We have talked, and at length, without introducing ourselves first.' The corners of his mouth turned down hard, his eyebrows knitting together dramatically. 'This is a very bad thing. Only farmers, artisans or outcasts act that way when they meet. Huh! Even merchants have better manners these days.' He flicked his black tail of hair then held his head high, turning away a little, glancing at Daniel sideways.

After an uncomfortable pause, Daniel realised the boy was waiting for him to make the first move. But what move? What would his father do right now?

He put his hand on his chest. 'Daniel. Daniel Marlowe.'

'Ooh. Wait!' The boy frowned earnestly. 'Which is your clan's

name? Which is your own name? They are both hard, so I wish to try only one.'

'Marlowe is my family's name. Call me Daniel.'

The boy tried to say it, but the *l* at the end of 'Daniel' blurred into an *r*. He grunted and tried again with the same result.

'No, Daniel, with an *l* sound,' Daniel prompted.

The boy's nose creased. 'It's too strange. Like your hair, your eyes. We should choose a better name for you. One that normal people can say. It's good to change names!' He held up his chin. 'Let me think.'

Daniel hid his irritation. Normal people? What arrogance. 'My mother sometimes calls me Dan, or even Danny, but you might find that a bit strange too, I think...'

'What's that you say? *Dan-nii*? Ah, yes,' the boy gave a relieved, high pitched giggle. 'Much better.' He repeated the new name and clearly found it easy. 'Good! Mothers can be most wise. So! Now you are Dani-san.'

'No,' Daniel said impatiently, 'I said Danny. It's just *Danny*.'

Shaking his head, the boy let out a long, weary hiss. 'You are hard work! Lucky I owe you! Listen: Dani is your name. *San*, on the end of your name, means... Mister Dani, a way of saying... kind of... umm... *respected* Dani. It means you matter, see? It's how people should talk, if they have any breeding at all.'

'Dani-san?' Daniel watched the boy nod. It could be worse. After all, it was only a kind of nickname. He gave in with a sigh. 'Fine, then. My name is Dani-san.'

'Uhhh! No!' After scowling, the boy rolled his eyes. 'No, no, no!'

Daniel threw up his hands. ‘But you just said –’

‘You don’t say *San* about yourself! People would think you were... a wandering idiot! *You* just say Dani. Everyone else says Dani-san, except outcasts.’

‘What do they call me?’

‘They shouldn’t speak to you or even look at you if you’re with me, unless spoken to first. Ooh, remember too that *lords* don’t have to call inferiors “Mister”. Also, much older people may say Dani-*kun*, because to them, people our age are just kids.’

Daniel blinked. ‘So many rules. It’s all so hard.’

‘Relax,’ the boy said breezily. ‘I’m really smart. I bet you can tell that. I’ll teach you everything.’ He punched Daniel in the arm affectionately, the way one might deal with a little brother. Though delivered in fun, the blow came incredibly fast. It really hurt.

‘Well... thank you,’ Daniel said, rubbing his arm, ignoring his new teacher’s annoying pride. Shoji had not been like this at all. His accent, some of the words he used, and his whole manner with others were quite different.

Despite the instant throbbing in his limb, Daniel smiled to himself. When he saw the whaler next, he would address him as Shoji-*san* and enjoy watching Shoji’s surprise. He glanced down the beach telling himself he would soon find Shoji and his father, then took a brisk step forward.

‘Wait, Dani-san.’ The boy stepped into Daniel’s path. He bowed deeply, hands at his sides, speaking at a measured pace. ‘I am Kenji. It is a great honour to meet you.’

Daniel was stunned at the sincerity and warmth of Kenji’s tone.

How did it fit with the bragging he had just heard? This fellow was most peculiar.

Kenji went on, his head still bowed. ‘Thank you, for helping me with the brigand. I will guard your life as you did mine.’ He straightened up and watched Daniel’s face. ‘We are tied together now, boy from beyond the world. I acknowledge my *giri* to you.’

Daniel shrugged. ‘I don’t know that word either.’

‘It means the burden hardest to bear,’ Kenji nodded. ‘It means obligation.’

‘No, no, you have no *geri* to me!’ Daniel smiled.

‘Not *geri*,’ Kenji groaned and hung his head. ‘That means what happens when you get sick.’ He gestured liquid spraying under pressure from his behind. ‘I said *giri*. I have *giri* to you, Dani-san. For the brigand.’

‘Well, consider it already paid back. Think about it. You’ve taught me new words and phrases, given me water from your gourd, those rice-bun things, too. And you made me feel *so much* better explaining the brigand was a rogue knight, not a monster. No, the way I figure it, you owe me nothing.’

‘So sorry, Dani-san,’ Kenji said firmly, ‘but you are wrong. I owe you protection and, if necessary, my life.’

Daniel gaped. ‘Your life? *Why?*’

Kenji held up his head again, eyes turning dreamy. He whispered, ‘I am samurai.’

While they walked on, Daniel eyed his new bodyguard with fascination. Shoji told him about samurai, the highest caste of their society. Daniel was very interested, because, though samurai

were Japanese noblemen, they apparently trained as archers. How unheard of! Daniel grew up admiring the Welsh for their longbow skills, along with the English yeoman whose volleys of arrows helped defeat the French at Crecy and Agincourt. He read the accounts of those battles in his father's *histories* again and again.

His father had been appalled by this fascination with the bow. 'People of quality will never be required to practice at The Butts,' he would sniff. 'It's for the common folk, my son.' Daniel pointed out that even princes sometimes played at target shooting for amusement. His father remained unmoved. 'Useful craft among peasantry,' he would say, 'but vulgar art, like that rock hurling with which you mimic it'.

Daniel smiled at the twist Shoji delivered aboard ship: in this land, those of high birth *embraced* archery! His father would have to get used to that. If he did, Daniel's rehearsals with rocks could finally give way to the use of a *real* bow.

Shoji's words painted quite a picture of these samurai. He said they ruled the whole empire of The Japans, despite numbering only one person in ten.

Many of them were scholarly, learning history and the wise sayings of Old China. That would impress his father. Some samurai were obsessed with art, writing poems and drawing scenes inspired by nature. Yet at times, these very same men killed social inferiors merely for a rude glance. A *glance*? Daniel could not imagine his father or his English peers doing such a thing. At other times, for failure in battle or even for just showing a loss of nerve, these samurai killed themselves in solemn public rituals. Daniel's father

had called *that* wasteful madness, and Daniel agreed. They had both been shocked to learn that with some regularity, a baron or duke of The Japans would order one or more of his own warriors to die this way. And the men would never flee. No sheriff was needed to fetch them back for execution. No, they would simply obey.

Shoji added that among the ranks of this class were heroes, liars, bullies, lunatics, and every other kind of person, but the *true* samurai, he warned, were warriors to their last breath, their last drop of blood. Through guided study and harsh training, which began in childhood, they were bred to be skilled and fearless. Daniel glanced at Kenji's sword. He had known this youth for less than a day. But already he had seen his warriorhood put to the test. Kenji *was* samurai.

'I have a lot to learn,' Daniel said. 'And somehow, I have to find my father.'

'Me too,' Kenji murmured.

'Really? How did *you* come to be parted from your father?'

Kenji looked at him, his face darkening. 'Let's not speak of that now. There's bigger carp to catch! We have to think of a way to disguise you, or neither of us will get far.'

Daniel stopped walking. 'Disguise me? Why?'

'If we don't hide *this*,' Kenji ran his fingers through Daniel's hair, startling him. He gestured with two fingers at Daniel's eyes, '*and these*, within a day or so some samurai, maybe farmers even, will try to kill you on sight.'

'What? Why would they do that?' Daniel waved his hands in horror. 'I don't even carry a weapon! That's... that's...'

‘Don’t get so upset,’ Kenji said mildly. ‘It’s just that in Japan, the only people with blue eyes and white hair like this... are the dead. Your pale skin doesn’t help much, either! You look like a ghost. It’s why I called you a shape-shifter before. And people are scared of ghosts, right?’

‘I don’t understand! If people think I’m a ghost, why would they try to kill me? It doesn’t make sense! Ghosts are already dead, and –’ Daniel stopped himself. Perhaps he should not speak his mind so freely. In this peculiar, heathen land, so much was clearly upside down. Ghosts you could kill? Preposterous, his father would say.

‘Sure, it sounds stupid. But I almost tried it myself, remember?’ Kenji patted his shoulder. ‘Easy now. Brace up! No one can help how people think.’ He sighed. ‘It’s simple: what people fear, they try to destroy. It’s hardly ever the right thing to do, but they try anyway. So sorry, Dani-san. You will have many enemies. Get used to it! But hey, don’t worry, either. Kenji’s here.’ He caressed his sword, raised his eyebrows and gave a grim smile.

The pair set off down the beach once more, Kenji striding ahead. Daniel stared at the samurai’s woven straw sandals and the odd split-toed cotton boots they enclosed. Everything here was so weird. And dangerous! Kenji’s words rang in Daniel’s mind. They pealed like a plague bell, as final as an execution order from King Henry himself. *You will have many enemies.* He felt his chin twitch. It was all too much. He was lost and worse still, destined to be hunted. And where was his father?

Kenji glanced back at him. Daniel hid his eyes from his new friend, pretending to shade them from the sun’s glare. So far he

really knew very little of samurai ways, but he was certain no warrior would have much sympathy for his frightened tears.

The young swordsman halted. 'What was that?' He turned in a circle, carefully checked the horizon.

'I hear nothing. Just the waves.' Daniel copied him, squinting into the distance.

Kenji tipped his head to one side. 'I heard a horn. A rallying horn.' He peered to the north. His eyes widened. 'There! Far off! Horsemen on the beach! *I knew it!*' He frowned at Daniel. 'It's true! There's no such thing as *one* brigand!'

'What do we do?' Daniel gaped at the approaching figures.

Kenji spun away, sprinting for the rocky hillside. 'Vanish,' he yelled back, 'or die!'

Daniel scanned the steep incline above them. 'We can't climb this! And there's nowhere to hide!'

'Yes there is!' Kenji shouted. 'In the sun!'

'What?' Daniel put his head down and tore after him.



Chapter Four

Birthday at Black Dragonfly Castle

Young Lord Nakatomi put the last fold in his paper crane. He gripped its neck and tail, working them back and forth until the bird's indigo wings flapped smoothly. Nakatomi gave a proud smile then sat back into his purple cushion, dropping the crane, drumming fingers on one knee.

'What's keeping them?' He frowned. 'Well? Ichi? Do you know, old fool?'

'No, Lord. Sorry, Lord.' Kneeling beside his master's small platform, Ichi gave a nervous shrug.

He looked to the end of the rectangular audience chamber where a guard flanked each of its twin sliding doors. The burly samurai, armed with two swords each, one long, one short, in matching scabbards, stood bolt upright against the dark wood panelling. When Ichi's gaze fell upon them, they shook their heads.

'This is *most* inconvenient,' Lord Nakatomi said. 'How dare an entertainer keep a lord waiting! And on his nineteenth birthday! Perhaps I should have him executed when he gets here.' He fidgeted with his long, elaborately braided hair before snatching up

a lacquered red box from beside his cushion. Grumbling under his breath, Lord Nakatomi inspected the box's contents: brittle sticks of coloured ink, each stamped with an identifying character.

'Lord?' Blinking at his master, Ichi rubbed a large, half-healed scar on his stubbly, balding head.

'What, world's most useless manservant?' Nakatomi put down his box, scowling at him. 'What now?'

'I was thinking, Lord.' Ichi inclined his head earnestly. 'If you kill the entertainer, won't you miss the show?'

The two samurai guards grinned, exchanging glances.

Despite his dark mood, the young lord chuckled. 'Yes, imbecile, a fine piece of thinking. I should make you a general!' He addressed his guards. 'What do you think, men; fancy serving under Ichi-Taisho? He'd get you killed real fast, uh?'

Each of the bodyguards studied their master a moment then gave cautious laughs.

'What's wrong with you?' Nakatomi snatched up a fan from his lap and beat it against his thigh. 'That was funny!'

His bodyguards guffawed.

The young Lord wagged his head from side to side with a self-satisfied grin. 'I could have been an entertainer myself, you know.' He sighed, raising his eyebrows. 'Were it not so far beneath me.'

With a soft hiss the doors of the audience chamber slid open. The guards turned warily but relaxed when they saw the grey-haired house steward standing between the parted door frames. Behind him were two more Nakatomi Clan samurai and a strange duo. The steward bowed, then ushered the group into the long room.

A badly stooped, middle-aged man in a gaudy red and green kimono led a small, wiry monkey by a rope lead tied round the animal's neck. The monkey walked upright, and was dressed as a samurai, complete with a miniature sword on its hip. A golden ribbon, tied in a bow, flared from the tip of its long tail. Nakatomi looked the monkey over then gave an expectant titter.

'Happy birthday, my noble lord!' His steward bowed. 'With pleasure, may I now introduce, for my great lord's amusement and edification –'

'Yes, yes.' Nakatomi waved the fan at him dismissively. 'Announce them and get out.'

The steward bowed again, rolling his eyes. 'Introducing Tenki the Amazing, and his friend Sanjuro, the Miraculous Duelling Monkey!' He turned and strode from the room with a very subtle shake of his head.

When the doorframes clicked together, the samurai escorts glided away from the performers until their backs met the chamber's panelled walls. Each warrior then stood to attention. They watched the monkey trainer's hands intently. Their own hands never left their long swords.

After making a low bow, Tenki the Amazing led his monkey across the sweet-scented reed matting to the centre of the chamber. The escorts shuffled along the walls to stay parallel with him, watching with intent his every move.

'*Tenki...* Mister *weather*. Which kind? *Good weather*, I hope. Cute title. Let's see if you can live up to the best meaning of your name. Can you make me feel like the sun is shining in here?'

The young lord pointed with his fan. 'Begin!'

Tenki tugged on the rope. Immediately, the monkey squeaked then bowed to its one-man audience. Lord Nakatomi grinned, nodding. Tenki grunted a command, and the act commenced.

'Sanjuro, mighty samurai, loved a warlord's wife,' Tenki recited.

The monkey pulled open its kimono and plucked out a large paper flower which it rubbed against its nose. The watching warlord and guards chortled their appreciation.

'But for his bold romancing, Sanjuro risked his life!' the amazing one went on.

His monkey threw down its paper flower, bounded backwards then drew its tiny sword, eyes flicking left and right as if enemies were surrounding it.

Nakatomi laughed hard. His door guards guffawed again, this time with sincere amusement. Ichi cackled excitedly like a stammering crow, eyes flicking between the monkey and his delighted master.

'And though a fearless warrior, he called down deadly strife!'

The monkey sliced and hacked with its sword, turning and meting out lightning cuts as if felling an army of guards assailing it from all directions. Tenki grunted a signal and it froze, letting the sword tumble from its grip. Then the animal peeled back its lips, showing yellowed, pointy teeth. It let out a death rattle. Nakatomi clapped his hands, tears of mirth welling in his eyes. The guards laughed with him, one hand on their long swords, the other on their shaking bellies.

Tenki intoned, *'While making good his death poem, Sanjuro copped*

a knife! He deftly pulled twice on the monkey's leash.

With a garrulous burst of chatter, the creature did a soaring back flip then, on landing, sank to its knees with all the drama of a Noh actor's death scene. Lord Nakatomi gripped his stomach with both hands, laughing hysterically, Ichi accompanying him with increasingly hoarse cawing. The monkey dragged itself pitifully across the matting as if paralysed from the waist down. It closed the long fingers of one hand around the hilt of its sword then let its head sink to the floor.

Wiping his eyes, Nakatomi shouted 'Brilliant, brilliant, all is forgiven! Double his fee! This is the best birthday ever!'

'Sanjuro fought well!' Ichi laughed. 'What a hero! Who would have guessed?'

Hissing sharply, the double doors flew open. The air seemed to become ice.

A woman of at least sixty years in a staid but handsome kimono stood in the gap between the door frames, her wrinkled face stony; her black eyes on the birthday boy. The four samurai in the audience chamber became statues. Their young lord's shoulders fell.

Tenki the Amazing turned slowly and, on seeing the figure in the doorway, his face paled. His monkey sprang to its feet, dragging its sword along the floor as it scurried to hide behind him. For long, tense seconds, nobody spoke or moved.

'Hunchback,' the woman's bitter-looking mouth twisted, 'take your beast and go.'

Tenki nodded quickly, careful not to engage her piercing stare.

He bowed before leading his monkey from the chamber. Even the gregarious animal did not look in her direction. Lord Nakatomi sat silent, licking his lips, watching his birthday entertainment depart.

The woman eyed the nearest samurai. 'See that the peasant is paid.' She glanced at the young lord. 'The basic fee only.' Her cold voice doubled in volume. 'Out: all of you!'

Ichi scrambled past her, close to the ground, exiting like a beaten dog. Bowing low, the four warriors also fled the chamber, their split skirts rustling sharply. The last to escape slid the doors shut behind him, taking care not to slam their frames together.

Lord Nakatomi swallowed hard. 'Mother.' He nodded. 'How are you?' There was a scant tremble in his voice.

'I,' she said coolly, advancing on him, 'am almost sick with worry, thanks to you. Will everything your late, great father built up around us be snatched away, before spring turns to summer? While you do... what? Idle away the hours with clowns?' Lady Nakatomi gripped the tight bun of grey hair on the back of her head. 'An ape, enthralled by an ape.'

'But... Mother,' he held up his palms, 'it *is* my birthday.'

'According to our spies, it may soon be your death day! Your fiefdom is a target, your enemies ruthless, yet how do you occupy your time? By playing with animals and freaks from the town. You *should be* convening a council of war.'

The young lord hung his head. 'I know our neighbours think me weak. I know they cast greedy eyes on this fief now that father's gone - '

She sucked in her breath, glaring at him. 'Brainless radish! You don't know the half of it! You might, if you consulted our advisers as I do, *daily*, instead of clinging to boyish games! You are a warlord, my young fool. Any idea what's coming at you now?'

Her son looked up at her with frightened eyes.

'There's new intelligence?'

'Oh yes,' she said. 'Remember who we spoke about, not three days gone by?'

He blinked, then nodded slowly, colour draining from his cheeks. 'I do.'

'Well, *he* has now been sighted in the domain to our west, and the word is, my son, he comes for you.' She gazed into his blanched face without a hint of maternal tenderness. 'Our neighbours, the spies say, have hired this man to do the dirty work their armies aren't ready for.' Lady Nakatomi turned away, shaking her head. 'They may have hired others, too, but this one we know about, and he is bad enough!'

The young lord rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand, staring down at the crane he had made. Then he snatched it up, screwing the indigo paper into a tight ball.

'Very well.' He forced steel into his voice. 'I... I will convene a council of war. I'll tell my generals,' he glanced sideways at his mother, 'our generals, that I want our men to scour the land in force until they *find him*. And to cut him down... make him drop just like that monkey.'

'*Whelp!* Why did I bother to have you taught the classics? Were you making paper animals during every lesson on The Art of War?'

She folded her arms, staring him down. ‘Use a row of mallets to swat a single mosquito, and great will be the noise! Do it your way, and our foes will instantly know we’re alerted to their plan.’

‘So?’

‘So that would make them reflective, get them wondering how we knew. Suddenly, we’d lose some spies in their fiefdoms over it. Lose our eyes and ears! Meanwhile, what of the threat himself? A man so formidable, experienced, you think he’ll be caught with a loud, cumbersome net? No, we’ll simply be warning him, throwing away the element of surprise. Think, child, think!’

‘I don’t know! Can’t you... give me a clue?’

‘Yes, why not? Let’s make it a game then, if it helps you wise up. You hide a tree among trees, a man amongst men, so to bring this slippery fellow down, what’s the most elegant solution?’

Lord Nakatomi paused. ‘An assassin to kill an assassin?’

His mother exhaled slowly. ‘At last. A shred of wisdom! Yes. We use someone like him; another out of work warrior to do *our* dirty work. That way, it won’t even matter if they kill each other in the process. Saves us paying our lackey for his handiwork, right?’

‘The Tiger?’ The young lord frowned. ‘We give him and his gang *this* problem?’ He scratched the back of his neck. ‘Well... why not, I suppose? They sorted out those villages that whined about over-taxing. Our storehouses are almost full now.’

With a rustle of fine silk, Lady Nakatomi shuffled closer and leaned over him.

Her son flinched and shrank back. ‘Is... is that the right answer then, Mother?’

‘It’s the only answer. That’s why I’ve already seen to it.’ She curled her lip. ‘On your behalf, of course. You do approve, *Lord* Nakatomi?’

He avoided her knife-edged stare. ‘Of course. You know best, Mother.’

‘Good boy.’ Lady Nakatomi straightened up. ‘Happy birthday.’



Chapter Five

To Die in Strange Company

Kenji sprang onto the ledge. He slid the sword along the inside of his belt to the small of his back. One glance down told him how his companion was faring.

Not so well. Dani-san struggled up the sharp rock face a horse's length below him. The poor little barbarian was making heavy weather of it, panting hard, barely reaching the shallow hand-holds in the cliff that Kenji led him to. The samurai pursed his lips. This castaway took too long to catch up.

If only Dani-san was some sort of foreign samurai's kid. But he could not be. For a start, he talked like a fisherman. Blunt words, coastal accent. Anyone of dignified birth would surely be properly trained, know how to climb, how to move, and with confidence. Move from the centre of the body, the *hara*, the deep place in the pit of the stomach where *ki*, the very force of life itself, swirled and flared. Warriors were taught how to harness its power. Without *ki* flowing from the *hara*, people tired easily, lost heart under pressure. Unless they knew how to move while staying aligned with their body's centre, they always lacked true balance. Dani-san was a good example. Kenji watched him hold up his pale hand

for *more* help. The foreigner seemed to have some courage, but it was likely his people were only merchants, or worse, just farmers. Kenji grabbed the boy's wrist and hauled him up. Together they hunched on the ledge, using its wind-carved lip for cover.

While Dani-san panted and coughed, Kenji looked to the beach below. The brigands had stopped firing. From the snatches of angry conversation that rose to his ears, between surges in the breeze, he surmised they were arguing. About what? How best to use their two archers, perhaps.

One of the bowmen was only too familiar: same armour, same horse, but with a bandaged leg and a new bow. He appeared the better shot of the two; he certainly had cause to try harder.

Standing high in the stirrups, a tall long-haired man growled and pointed. The other brigands quickly deferred to him, and he gestured firmly to the centre of the pack. Both shooters moved their horses there at once. So that was their chief. He looked mean. Purposeful.

Things did not look good. Kenji cursed under his breath. He had always thought he would die in battle. But a glorious death, hopefully at his father or uncle's side perhaps, cut down instantly while toppling a huge, armoured foe of great renown.

No plays would be written, however, about a young samurai gradually slain on a lonely cliff ledge. For arrows, even badly aimed arrows, brought the slow misery of death by bleeding. His cousin died that way three years ago. Kenji shook his head. It would be unpleasant. Undignified. Unremembered. In strange company and without the chance to write a moving death poem. He gritted his

teeth. If he did take an arrow, he would try hard not to cry, not to shame himself with a show of weakness. Especially in front of his new alien friend. He stared downhill. No arrows for a while now. Kenji tried to tell himself the brigands had lost heart.

He forced a grin at Dani-san. 'We're most of the way up. Maybe they've quit.'

Gasping for breath, fingers scratched and bloody, the foreigner nodded.

With a long *hiss* another arrow flashed up from the beach. It came from the centre of the knot of horsemen, looming where shadow met sand. The boys huddled as it *zinged* off the lip of their small ledge.

'Move!' Kenji shouted. 'Up, up!'

'It's hopeless!' Dani-san's chest heaved as if he might collapse. 'Why even try?'

Kenji seized his shoulders, locking eyes with him. 'Don't people in your country do Sun Tzu in school? It's basic! Whoever reads nature, employs the terrain, *he wins!* Why do you think they haven't hit us yet?' Dani-san shrugged so Kenji went on. 'Because they can't see us! *Always take the high ground. Always make them look into the sun!* Come on!'

They resumed the hard climb, Kenji leading as before. For each horse's length they advanced, stretching vulnerably between hand and foot-holds, at least two arrows clattered off the rocks around them. Kenji grunted out his tension. The arrow hits were steadily closing in. Those brigands might be firing almost blind, seeing only shadows within a shadow, but their guesswork was improving.

He peered upwards, eyes searching for any possible haven.

Near the top, the rock face flared into two crumbling horns. The cliff had split apart, not long ago, Kenji decided, during a shaking of the earth. Between the horns was a black cleft, a narrow, crooked funnel yawning all the way to the cliff's peak. Filling the bottom of the cleft was a pile of boulders, many the size of a man's head, some chest-sized, a few even bigger. It looked possible to stand on them, wedge oneself into the funnel above, then to climb, limbs braced, up through that split to the top of the cliff. To escape and safety.

Urging his companion to follow faster, Kenji scrambled up the rock face, and with a desperate final burst of speed, launched himself over a spur, onto the pile of boulders. He yelped with alarm when they shifted under his weight, small stones tinkling like clay cups bumping together on a tray. The whole rock pile muttered then settled. He turned around quickly. Dani-san had pushed himself, too. A white hand flailed right below the spur trembling, with spread fingers. Kenji grabbed it.

Just as he pulled the boy to his right on the rock pile, an arrow *whooshed* up from the beach, grazing Kenji's left shoulder. It bounced off a stone behind them, its shaft buckling with a green-twig snapping sound. The rocks they stood on stirred again.

Another arrow whistled by, streaking overhead this time. Dani-san let out a wail of fear. Kenji swore angrily and seized his stinging wound. The arrowhead had sliced open his clothing. The cut beneath it was not deep. Still, the sight of his own blood – even a little – was disturbing. He glanced up at the funnel above

them. The idea of stretching oneself across *that* while the enemy took pot-shots from below became too reckless, too exposing, too... fearful. Yes. Kenji closed his eyes. He grew afraid. Such a shameful thing. What to do?

Rallying himself, he pictured his departed cousin. *I heard you died well, but I don't want to die that way, full of arrows*, Kenji prayed.

Send me courage, send me wisdom now, because I'm not sure I can die as boldly as you, and I do not wish to be a disappointment.

He glanced at the younger boy beside him. Dani-san looked preoccupied, lost in far away thoughts. Great timing! Some help he was. Kenji closed his eyes again.

At least your destiny was to die beside our fearless uncle... I have only this barbarian peasant boy, to whom I am indebted. And as you see, he's a pale salamander, with neither limbs nor wits for battle –

Kenji started then turned. Dani-san was prodding his right arm with an elbow.

'What?' he snapped. 'I was... thinking!'

'So was I,' the foreigner's eyes gleamed, 'I have a plan!'

'Well I don't want to hear it *now*,' Kenji grumbled. 'I'll bet it's stupid!'

'Whoever reads nature, employs the terrain, *he wins!*' Dani-san recited.

Kenji, on the verge of roaring at him to shut up, simply gaped. *Sun Tzu*, and *word perfect*. Amazing! How could his barbaric little mind recall that? Kenji gave a soft grunt, looking his companion up and down with new fascination.

Dani-san seized on the pause to continue. He pointed

downward. ‘*Employ the terrain*, use the land, right? ...these rocks, under and round us! What if we got behind the biggest loose ones, and pushed them with our feet? Rolled them down! Isn’t that the kind of thing Sun Fu meant?’

‘Sun *Tzu*,’ Kenji grinned, wagging his head with delight, ‘Yes! Yes, Dani-san, that’s exactly what Sun Tzu meant!’

Together they found the largest loose boulder atop one corner of the pile, put their backs to the rocky horn behind it, and placed their feet side by side on its nearest bevel. An arrow *hissed* into the black cleft above them. Straining, grunting, they pushed.

The boulder rolled forward, teetered; then plunged over the edge. They heard a sharp cracking sound as it bounced off the rock face, then cries of alarm from the beach. Encouraged, they picked another and repeated the trick. This boulder was rounder in shape so it moved more easily. As it rolled away, it clipped a smaller rock, then another, and another until, forming a mumbling group, at least a dozen rocks tumbled with it down the cliff face. Abruptly the outer edge of the whole pile began to come apart. Kenji felt the rocks beneath them shift.

‘Back, Dani-san!’ he bellowed. ‘Go, go, go! Fast! Into the big crack!’ He whirled round, herding the smaller boy ahead of him.

They barely had time to scramble into the funnel and wedge themselves between its horns. The lumpy rock carpet below their feet rolled away. Its wild clinking grew into a roar. Almost the entire pile of boulders cascaded down the rock face.

Kenji and Dani-san coughed when a cloud of white dust rose to fill the cleft. When the sea breeze cleared it, they saw solid

bedrock exposed below them. Now they could safely stand, maybe rest awhile. Kenji dropped to the new shelf first. As Dani-san followed, the samurai bobbed low and crept to the edge.

Before any more plans were made, he needed to see how the enemy had liked their little surprise. He stretched himself out, warily checking the beach below.

He saw a new rock pile, a fading wisp of dust. There was a lot of angry yelling. A fresh argument was starting, this time about who was to blame. But even as they barked at one another, the brigands were turning away, following their leader to the north.

He stared, his fear drained away. No wonder the foe departed, and in such rage.

Three of the gang, along with their horses, lay on the sand, felled by tumbling rocks. They were undoubtedly dead. One rider and his mount, nearest to the cliff face, were almost covered by boulders. Kenji sighed. Pity about the horses, but that was battle. He turned and looked back at Dani-san, showing both his joy and admiration. But a niggling question remained. Perhaps he should get it over with.

‘They flee, Dani-san, they flee, because you are a *good* student of Sun Tzu!’ Kenji rubbed his shoulder and sat down beside his friend. The graze was tender to the touch, but its bleeding had stopped. ‘Great idea! I am proud of you! You learn *fast*, like me!’ He took a breath. ‘While we get our strength back, tell me something. Your father for whom you search, what is he? Just a merchant?’

‘No, Kenji-san. Although we travelled here with merchants.’ The foreigner’s answer came slowly while he searched for the right

words. Despite faltering through them, he spoke with evident pride. ‘My father is a learned man, and in my country, England, he’s what is called an Earl.’

‘An *Errru*?’ Kenji shook his head. ‘Very hard to say. What does it mean?’

‘That he is a nobleman. My father’s mission is important. He serves our king, King Henry the Eighth, who sent him here to master your language and more. A passage was organised for my father and me through a company of merchants in England, who want to set up trade with your country. Portuguese sailors had rescued Shoji-san, a Japanese whaler barely alive, adrift on the high seas. In time, Shoji-san told the Portuguese and English traders all about The Japans. When those Portuguese traders made ready to send their trading ships here, King Henry saw a great opportunity.’

Kenji nodded. ‘So your king, through the merchants of your land, commanded these foreign traders of the black ships to bring you here... or be slain! Is that right?’

‘Not exactly.’ Dani-san laughed. ‘Portugal is England’s ally. They weren’t threatened. Our merchants *paid* their merchants to bring us. Our king just gave consent. It’s so my father can be to England, what Marco Polo was to the fiefdom called Venice.’

‘I don’t know this Marco-san.’ Kenji creased his nose. ‘What does it all mean?’

The blond boy frowned with concentration. ‘The Portuguese just seek trade. Same goes for the merchants of my land, England. My father comes to gather information for them, but also in the name of our king, to present a letter of friendship on his behalf!’

Kenji giggled. *An envoy from their king?* This was both surprise and relief. The hand of destiny surely worked here. No wonder Dani-san was smarter than a mere peasant or trader's child. Now it made sense that these foreigners had learned Japanese. Dani-san's rough fisher-folk speech was also explained. But something bothered Kenji: the assignment given to Dani-san's father. *It was impossible.* The samurai scratched his neck. 'Say now... this letter about friendship. He comes to present it... to whom?'

'To your Emperor, of course.' Dani-san began to laugh again, but stopped himself. 'Why? Shoji said a lord ruled his coastal fiefdom, but an emperor ruled your whole empire. That's *true*, isn't it?'

'Kind of,' Kenji heaved a sigh. How to explain this? He would have to keep it simple. 'We have an Emperor. That *is* true. But even though he's the Emperor, and a living god, he can't control the Shogun.'

'Who's the Shogun?'

'He's kind of the real ruler, but sometimes, *only just.*'

'Sometimes? What's that mean? And why do you say "*only just*"?'

Kenji shrugged. 'Well, the Shogun is our greatest general, but he can't always control the lords. There are over two hundred lords – the *daimyo* – all with their own fiefdoms. They squabble. A lot! Some of them even plot to replace the Shogun.'

Dani-san shrugged exactly as Kenji had. 'So... who's in charge of your country right now then? Who should my father look for?'

'Good question.' Kenji rubbed his shoulder. 'From what I last heard, this month there are about five serious contenders. Each

one hopes to kill the other four, and claim their lands within the year. Whoever succeeds, will eventually attack the Shogun, press the Emperor for the Shogun's title, or maybe just do a deal with both of them. It depends.'

The boy's blue eyes moved wearily over the rocky funnel above them. 'Is there *anything* here that's easy, or even easy to understand?'

'Not really,' Kenji said, standing up and stretching. 'But... why would there be?'



Chapter Six

Secrets of the Madman's Twin

Daniel watched Kenji tie a last elaborate knot in the colourful scarf he had taken from his knapsack. Kenji's sword was hidden under a coat of silk, on which a detailed landscape had been painstakingly embroidered: a mountain capped with snow, steep hills below it, and in the foreground, a placid lake bordered by angular trees.

'That's it,' Kenji said, lying back on the grassy hillside. 'The sword is hidden, and you can be disguised at any moment, so we're ready to make for that town.' He sat up and nodded at the signs of settlement on a distant green ridge. Kenji scooped up his concealed weapon then swung it slowly in circles, using its weight to stretch and exercise his right shoulder. 'Once there, we can work out which way leads to my castle.' He slung the sword on his back.

Daniel groaned. 'I'm still not sure about this plan.' He looked back longingly toward the ocean. 'If my father and Shoji-san were washed up anywhere round here, they'll search for me on the beach. So I *shouldn't* leave the coast! I should go back, try and find them!'

'Not again! I told you,' Kenji said firmly, 'you're thinking about this the wrong way.' He leaned forward, narrowing his eyes at

Daniel. ‘Those brigands use the beach to travel up and down the coast quickly. We don’t want to meet them again if we can help it, do we? Also, your people could have landed anywhere. Wherever they *did* land, they’ll need to find water and something to eat apart from sand. That means *they’ll* leave the beach. Your Shoji-san will lead your father to a village so they can ask about sightings of you. We need to do the same thing, and ask about sightings of them!’ He muttered something under his breath. ‘Your nobles don’t grow up learning tactics, neh?’

‘My father’s a scholar of languages,’ Daniel scowled. ‘Not a soldier.’

Kenji flashed him a superior look. ‘*This* becomes obvious.’

Daniel grunted and walked away. While they resumed crossing the lush coastal range, he fidgeted with the other scarf Kenji had tied with intricate cunning, the one knotted round his head.

‘Don’t mess about with that, or your hair will show,’ the young samurai warned him. ‘And only pull down the face-flap when I tell you, just before we hit town. You’ll be able to see through the slits, but nobody will notice your *weird* eyes.’ Daniel clicked his tongue with irritation. So black eyes were normal in this land.

‘And another thing,’ Kenji went on, ‘we’re like shinobi now – *people who spy*, if you don’t know that word – so don’t forget our cover story, or you’ll get us both killed.’

‘Shi-no-bu? I thought that word meant *to put up with something*.’

‘Uhh!’ Kenji snorted impatiently. ‘*Shinobu* means to bear a thing, to put up with it, like the way I have to put up with your

silly ideas and mistakes! *Shinobi* means a spy. Never mind that now. Our cover story, neh?’

‘Yes, yes,’ Daniel muttered, glowering at him. ‘We’re orphans, and entertainers. We make people laugh at festivals. I talk slowly and sound strange because an iron soup kettle fell on my head when I was a baby. It made me half-idiot. I wander off, get lost a lot, so you have to keep me indoors mostly. That’s why my skin’s so pale.’ He groaned. The basic notion of them being clowns was fine. Clever, really, since it instantly explained his alien clothing: a laced tunic, thin-legged knee-pants, stockings and buckled shoes. A performer’s costume, people would swallow that. But couldn’t Kenji have invented a less humiliating tale?

‘And the rest,’ Kenji sniffed. ‘It’s all important, come on!’

It was all *so awful*. Should he refuse to do this? How could he? In this confusing, dangerous new world, he had only one friend. Daniel begrudgingly finished the summary.

‘You’re the smart, handsome one, who does all the talking. I can’t stand bright light. It makes me howl, so we keep my face covered. Our professional name is ‘The Madman’s Twins.’ Daniel shuddered. It suddenly struck him that this name implied comedy. What *was* their act, anyway? He opened his mouth to ask.

Kenji clapped his hands proudly, cutting him off. ‘It’s a *good* plan. We’ve forgotten nothing. So, enough of that now.’

‘Kenji-san?’ Daniel stopped walking. He could wait no longer. They were going among strangers, and lots of them. He was about to place his life in this boy’s hands. Yet serious questions about his companion – his often infuriating companion – remained

unanswered. ‘Exactly who are you? Why are *you* separated from your father?’

A few paces ahead, Kenji stopped, looking back over his shoulder. ‘It’s hard to explain.’ His face darkened. ‘Let’s talk about it another time.’

‘Why?’ Daniel caught up to him. ‘*I’ve* told *you* everything you wanted to know.’

‘Yes,’ Kenji blinked. ‘Do you say I wasn’t really listening? Ha! You’re wrong. Test me on anything, go on. I can recall! You have no brothers. Your father is an *Errru*, with no true castle but a great walled mansion in the happy fiefdom of *Blith-towr* where you were born. Peasants work your lands. If they’re cheeky, or they steal, you don’t simply kill them, a certain official comes to beat or hang them for you. And I said, “far too soft, you should change that, or they’ll revolt one day!”’

Daniel nodded patiently. ‘Yes. Very good. You even remembered Bristol. But I wasn’t testing –’

‘You had a nice tutor, servants and dogs who hunt. You can ride. You liked climbing trees but now desire to shoot. Your father doesn’t agree! Your clan owns a town house in the imperial capital of *Run-dun*. Your mother, a great lady, waits there, training your only sister, who is older than you, so she can go into society and marry some other noble who hasn’t learned tactics and won’t be allowed to shoot –’

‘Kenji-san, stop!’ Daniel held up his hands. ‘I know you were listening. I never doubted it. But now *I* want to listen! Hear all about you! That’s how my people do it.’

The young samurai’s mouth tightened. Briefly, he closed his eyes.

‘Very well,’ he said sharply, waving toward the town. ‘But let’s talk *and* walk. And it’s *not* a happy subject!’

Daniel waited patiently. Kenji glanced sideways at him a few times then began.

‘My father is *daimyo*, meaning a lord. He grew powerful, until his fiefdom was almost equal in wealth and military strength to that of our nearest neighbour, a great lord, and one favoured by the Shogun. To ensure that my father would not launch a surprise attack on our neighbour and seize his lands, our neighbour – supported by the Shogun – demanded that I serve as a hostage.’

‘You mean a prisoner?’

‘Yes. And in a fiefdom far to the north of my father’s. I was ordered to join the household of a lord my father had never met, a loyal blood relation of his neighbour. That’s where I’ve been for almost two years. Living in his castle.’

So Kenji’s secret was about appalling cruelty he had suffered! Daniel shook his head. ‘That’s horrible! To be jailed when you’ve done no wrong, and so far from home. Why couldn’t they just imprison you right next door, so to speak, in this greater lord’s castle? Then at least your family could visit you.’

‘Sure,’ Kenji said coldly, ‘visit me, or rescue me, just before launching an attack.’

‘Well, why couldn’t your father just swear fealty to this greater lord? An oath?’

‘Nobody trusts anybody these days. There are so many betrayals and defections.’

‘I’m very sorry, Kenji-san. No wonder you’d rather not discuss

it. Uh! I can only imagine! Two years in a tiny cell, probably with rats. Did they flog you as well?’

The samurai laughed. ‘No, no, of course not. The hostage routine is not like that at all. I was never in a cell. And there’s not one rat in that whole castle! You’ve got it all wrong. It’s like being adopted, only you’d rather be home. I had a big room all to myself, the use of a nice garden, fine clothes. Like you, I had a tutor, he taught me the classics, plus two maids, a riding coach, a combat instructor, a bodyguard –’

‘A riding coach? You mean they let you leave the castle?’

‘All the time. Day trips for hunting with falcon and bow, overnight stays at inns or in pavilions – with servants, of course, like in your land – so I could observe war games, learn strategy. Fishing, study excursions and field trips to view art, usually in monasteries...’

‘What?’ Daniel grinned with disbelief. Kenji had to be teasing him. ‘In Europe, only a *royal* hostage would be treated so! Yet that’s what going to prison here is like?’

‘No, no, inferiors who break the law, or people like those brigands, they get killed for most things, and if not, they get *the pit*... plenty of rats there. Very nasty kind of jail.’

‘Well,’ sighed Daniel, ‘I’m still glad they let you go at last. But it’s rotten they didn’t give you a horse. How long will the trip home take on foot?’

‘Very hard to calculate,’ Kenji said slowly. ‘It’s a long way. Months, maybe. Might have to go way off-course you see, to avoid places at war or where there’s contagion. Things are pretty ugly right now...’ He cleared his throat, glancing away.

Daniel realised he was truly starting to know Kenji, because he could tell at once his friend was hiding something. ‘Don’t hold back now,’ he said. ‘Come on, we’re in this together. I have to go with you, and you know it! Without your father’s help, I may never find mine, or help him reach the Emperor! So tell me what it is you don’t want to tell me. Like you say, it’s *all* important.’

There was a long silence. The young warrior folded his arms. ‘They didn’t let me go. I ran away.’

‘Why?’ Daniel gasped. Was Kenji genuinely mad? Surely someone – Shogun, Emperor or one of these umpteen lords – would want to kill him for this, or make him kill himself?

‘I had to run away. You see, my combat instructor was a widely respected old samurai, proven in battle. Like your kind tutor maybe. For he truly befriended me, and one day he told me what nobody else would. Despite my clan’s obedience, my father had been betrayed, and attacked. My home was – and I figure, still is – under siege. But it will stand. Our castle is strong, has its own spring, its own produce gardens. Some sieges can last for a year.’

‘So... who is your enemy? Who attacked you?’

‘The very lord I spoke of, the great lord next door, who demanded assurance of *our* good faith!’ Kenji spat. ‘There! In his honour, the treacherous dog! He’s powerful all right, but he doesn’t know my father and uncle. They are men of men. They will hold his forces out. I go to fight beside them, even if it means I die in the fall of my noble house.’

Daniel stole a look sideways. His companion’s eyes filmed with tears.

‘That brave old retainer,’ Kenji stroked the colourful silk package hanging beside his knapsack, ‘gave me his own sword, helped me trick my bodyguard and escape.’

‘Won’t...’ Daniel swallowed, ‘won’t they execute him for that?’

‘We made sure there were no witnesses to either our plotting or our ploy. They will never know of his help, and he was to report that I stole his sword.’ Kenji wiped his eyes. ‘Besides... I know the lord of that castle like a second father. He is a good man, both strong and gentle. He would never order a dying man to speed his own departure.’ He nodded solemnly at Daniel. ‘Yes. My only real friend... before you, was a dying hero. So you’re not allowed to die on me, right?’ He pointed, forced a grin then wiped his nose with the back of his thick forearm.

‘So in a way, you do carry a magic sword.’ Daniel said quietly. ‘Strange, you know. When I saw you draw it to face the brigand, I thought I smelled cloves in the air.’

‘Of course.’ Kenji shrugged. ‘A samurai wipes his sword before and after use with soft, fine cloth dipped in clove-oil. Stops dust – and blood – eating the metal.’ Kenji took a deep breath. ‘We will soon be in town. Let’s go over our story one more –’

Both boys froze on the spot. A bowshot away, a drawn-out line of armoured horsemen rode along the spine of the ridge, heading into the town. Daniel and Kenji dived into the spring grass at their feet, flattening themselves against the gentle hillside. Daniel watched Kenji weave grass into his hair before raising himself up just enough to watch the town.

‘What are you doing?’ he whispered.

'You don't need to whisper. They saw us or they didn't, but either way, they can't hear us this far off.' Kenji narrowed his eyes. 'Yeah, it's them. Twenty one riders... there were twenty four on the beach, until three, as we know...' he sniggered wickedly, 'had an accident.'

'Now what?' Daniel's voice cracked with tension. 'Run back to the coast?'

'No, no. Let them search this place for two people who fit our *old* description. When they move on, we go in. They'll go to the next village, hunting for us there. We'll find a barn or a stable for the night in this one.'

'If they don't move on?'

'We sleep here.' Kenji sighed at him. 'Dani-san, you frighten yourself. I can hear it. We should not expect them to move on. Nor to *not* move on. A warrior learns to hold a peaceful mind. A warrior learns to expect nothing.' He returned to watching the village.

Daniel lay back in the soft, thick grass. It was good to finally rest his bones, but he could not dismiss the nearby threat from his mind. Kenji, and his great advice! It made no sense. How does one expect nothing? Is that not simply expecting something *in a different way*? The peculiar idea nagged at him. Expect nothing. Why? Would not one who expected the worst be better prepared for trouble? Like a riddle, it preoccupied him for nearly an hour. He kept trying to do it, to expect nothing either way. Then the sound of horses' hooves caught his ears. It quickly grew louder.

'Stay down,' Kenji said. 'They're leaving town, coming this way. Now it's time to whisper.'

The ground trembled. Daniel's breathing speeded up. He screwed his eyes shut, his hands over his ears. But the approaching enemy's vibrations could not be shut out so easily. Thick and tall as the grass was, this was going to be close. He opened one eye. Kenji was unwrapping his sword. Not a good sign. What was going to happen? He drew in a long, slow breath. Expect *nothing*, Daniel forced himself to think. Then, for an instant it seemed, he did not think.

Time stood still.

Kenji shook him hard. Heart pounding, he rose up on one elbow.

'They passed by in a big hurry!' Kenji beamed. 'Too fast to spot us! Let's go!'

Scurrying side by side through the grass and laughing with relief, they soon reached the outskirts of the settlement. Daniel pulled down the scarf's finely-sliced curtain over his face. The pair walked into town as The Madman's Twins. Kenji, Daniel noted, immediately assumed a whimsical, exaggerated swagger which he took to be a trademark of entertainers in this land. He copied Kenji to a degree, but mindful of his role as the light-stricken, easily lost, demented little brother, he took care not to overdo it.

Two huge wood piles, shielded from the weather by straw thatching, flanked the main road into town. The place comprised about forty small houses, scattered over three levels of the verdant hillside. Near a spring in the middle of town, budding trees and shrubs ringed the oldest buildings. The triangle-framed huts were steeply pitched with thatched roofs and eaves that almost

met the ground. Pressed earth and unpainted timber held each home together. Daniel noticed that many walls, weathered almost black, were splitting.

There was activity throughout the town, with human traffic concentrated round a small square near the oldest houses; a cleared, swept common area bordered by the spring on one side, a little inn on the other. Elevated bamboo pipes carried water from the spring to a long stone drinking cistern outside the inn, as well as downhill between homes to terraced fields cut into the slopes. The locals were surprisingly relaxed, given their recent visit by bandits. Two men flailing something on a wide tray nodded to the boys, and an elderly woman on her porch stopped her spinning to give them a curious smile.

‘Cheerful, but really poor,’ Kenji said quietly. ‘I bet they just nod and do as they’re told, whether by drifting brigands or their own lord’s men.’ He shook his head, glancing up and down the street. ‘Little signs everywhere. Not much produce on sale for a place this size, many things in disrepair. War makes a land poor.’ Kenji blinked self-consciously, looking at Daniel as he added, ‘Of course, it’s still glorious to win a battle.’

After what they had just been through, Daniel found that notion hard to agree with. He gave Kenji a half-hearted nod and went on studying his first Japanese township.

Could his father and Shoji, the whaler, be here? If so, would they not be in hiding from the brigands? Daniel took heart. Once they emerged, spotting them would be easy. Then it occurred to him that Shoji might also have disguised his father out of concern

for his safety. But what if he hadn't, and someone had already – Daniel tried again to calm his mind. Kenji's advice had value: expecting nothing was healthier than these wild, grim imaginings. He stilled his thoughts as best he could, to focus on the town.

Although barely more than a village, it was a busy place. There were farmers, their families, the odd samurai walking alone. The boys passed a street vendor selling buns from a tiny folding stall, then a travelling hawker of bamboo baskets, his wares dangling from a long pole across his shoulders. Next along came a figure whose appearance startled Daniel. The man wore a cylindrical basket on his head with a lattice visor over his face, white robes under a dark overcoat, and strange trousers that flared at the knees. A bell was tied round his neck, and he thumped the ground as he walked with a long staff, jingling with iron rings. Kenji noticed Daniel staring as the man strutted by.

'Don't worry, he's probably harmless,' Kenji spoke out of the side of his mouth, his eyes constantly scanning for real threats. 'That's a *Komuso*, a priest of what people call *the empty nothing*. They're loners. Many of them are ex-samurai.'

'Let me guess,' Daniel studied the Komuso striding into the distance. 'They teach people how to expect nothing?'

'No, no.' Kenji laughed. 'That's a totally different matter. Komuso are mendicants, holy men. They get hired to cast out devils that make people sick, or put spells on people to solve their problems. Mad people don't scare them, because they're usually mad themselves.'

Daniel chuckled. 'What? They're known to be mad, but people hire them?'

‘Sure.’ His companion shrugged. ‘Why not? Everybody, every thing, has its place and its use. That’s the order of things, whether we see it or not, right? No good without evil, no wisdom without madness. What do *you* learn in school? Besides – ’ Kenji grabbed his shoulder. ‘Here we go. Be still, now. Let me do the talking, remember?’ Daniel turned nervously, following his friend’s gaze.

A big, thickset samurai, a man of perhaps forty years, loped toward them from the door of the inn. He wore one sword in a scratched scabbard. His clothing was old, stained and torn. His eyes moved between Kenji and Daniel. Grunting, he called, ‘Oi! You two!’

‘Who’s he?’ Daniel whispered.

‘*Ronin*. Unemployed warrior,’ Kenji said quickly. ‘And, I’d say, a drunk, too.’

The samurai stopped, towering over them. He swayed slightly. ‘Has to be, you’re the ones!’ He pointed at the boys. ‘Otherwise, it’s some coincidence, neh?’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ Kenji grinned. ‘What *ones*? We’re entertainers. You must have heard of us! The Madman’s Twins? We’re on our way to the Cherry Blossom Festival!’

‘Liar!’ The ronin snarled. ‘You won’t fool me! Bandits or not, I deserve their reward!’ He scratched his stubbled jaw, looking the boys over. ‘Entertainers! Pah!’

Daniel studied the ronin. His eyes were watery, his speech a little slurred. Kenji was right, the fellow *was* drunk. But he was also big, armed and dangerous.

A small crowd quickly began to form around the commotion.

Daniel studied the semi-circle of onlookers, hoping someone might intervene. Was there no sheriff here to keep the peace? Most were farmers or the elderly, but two people caught his eye.

The first, a girl around his age, stood alone at one end of the swelling crowd. She had large, sad eyes. She was unkempt, weary-looking, and she glanced from him to Kenji as if she recognised them. How could she? The girl hugged a bundle of clothes to her chest. Daniel swallowed. She was beautiful.

The second was a man in his early thirties, another samurai, and probably also unemployed. But not at all like their drunken antagonist. That fellow was lean, fit-looking. His clothes, though hardly new, appeared kept in good repair. His beard and moustache were neatly clipped. His eyes, bright and sharp, studied the gathering crowd.

Only one sword hung from his back. A long, thin, single scar angled across his forehead onto his right cheek. He watched both the boys and the drunken ronin carefully. Daniel waited, hoping he would interrupt and help them. But the fellow simply continued to watch.

Daniel shuddered. His mind had drifted. While things grew worse!

‘You don’t want to go? Well we’ll see about that!’ The big ronin pushed Kenji in the chest. ‘I’ll tie you both up like ponies, take you to The Tiger myself, and we’ll see what *he* thinks! If you’re entertainers, I’m the Shogun’s Tea Master!’

Then it happened again: an impulse surged through Daniel and before he had time to challenge it, he was acting on it.

‘Watch me, watch me!’ he yelled in a delirious voice, springing forward. Kenji gasped with alarm. Daniel did a cartwheel, landed smoothly on his feet, pitched forward into a handstand then somersaulted quickly so no-one could focus on his briefly uncovered face.

‘*Ohhh!*’ The crowd moaned appreciatively.

‘Monkey skills!’ a man laughed.

After landing in a crouch, his features hidden again by the scarf’s curtain, Daniel sprang up and threw his arms out sideways. He let his head loll, locking his body into abrupt stillness as if he had instantly become a scarecrow.

The crowd broke into applause and giggles of delight.

‘Weird! Original!’ An old woman called out. The beautiful girl with the sad eyes gave a wide grin then clapped hard. With a restrained smile, the lean stranger with the long scar nodded to himself, his eyes flicking expectantly to the big ronin.

‘Fine!’ The drunken one pointed. ‘Maybe you’re clowns *and* wanted by Tora! You don’t get out of it! You’re still coming with me!’ He clutched at his sword. ‘Somebody get me rope!’ No-one moved. His gaze flicked round. ‘Better do it now, I’m in a bad mood, mind you!’ Two farmers in the crowd exchanged resigned frowns.

Daniel’s heart pounded as if it would punch through his chest and flee on its own. He looked to Kenji to find his friend already staring back at him.

‘Yes,’ Kenji spluttered. ‘*Run!*’

Author's Comment

The *Tomodachi* stories are fanciful tales set in a slightly romanticised historical Japan. Though they roughly align with past events and include many salient facts – even some truths, hopefully – about Japanese culture, they do not pretend to strictly follow recorded history. Also, being a storyteller rather than a scholar, I was ill-equipped to accurately translate complex words and ideas from both Tudor English *and* a dialect of Sengoku Jidai era Japanese into modern vernacular. So linguistic accuracy had to bow to pace and accessibility. In all cases, I aimed to deliver the essence of an exchange or situation. Despite taking such liberties, I sincerely hope the purists forgive me, and that these stories inspire readers to explore the chronicles and customs of this fascinating nation.

Glossary

Ainu Sometimes called 'Japan's aborigines'. People from Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands, physically unlike their Japanese neighbours. Most likely the descendants of earlier Caucasoid races once widely spread throughout northern Asia. They were steadily pushed northward over the centuries by the developing Japanese nation. Inter-marriage and cultural assimilation have now made traditional Ainu almost extinct. Civil war-era Japanese who had been north could mistake Daniel for a youth of Ainu heritage.

Amida (as in Lord Amida) A Buddha revered by many in feudal Japan.

Arashi Japanese for 'storm'.

Ashigaru Literally meaning 'light feet', it refers to peasants who were recruited to serve as troops in a warlord's service. They often fought with virtually no armour and improvised weaponry until they could loot better equipment from their enemy or from the dead after a battle. In many cases, the 'light feet', being poor, ran into battle in bare feet.

Atami City in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan. A tourist resort since the eighth century, Atami is Japanese for 'hot ocean', referring to the town's famous *onsen* hot springs.

Burials and Coffins Nowadays, most people dying in Japan are cremated, land suitable for burial plots being rare and expensive. But in earlier times Japanese people routinely buried their dead. The coffin was tub or barrel shaped, not the flat box design common today in Japan and the West. The deceased was placed in the coffin in a sitting position before rigor mortis occurred, arms folded and feet crossed, and was buried in the family grave plot, over the remains of his or her ancestors. The wooden coffin soon rotted, being vulnerable to ground moisture, and the body steadily decomposed. It was usually believed that once only white bones remained, the deceased one's spirit had 'matured'. Hence the older remains would be inspected each time a new family member was buried. In some parts of Japan, these bones would then be removed,

washed and reburied, except for the skull, which would be stored with those of the other ancestors, generally in a magnificent, ornate jar.

Daimyo Member of the Japanese aristocracy. A powerful feudal lord, an owner of land. The title literally means ‘great name’.

Geisha Literally, ‘art person’. Women trained from adolescence to be skilled in social conversation, dancing and singing for the entertainment of paying male patrons, generally of the upper classes or, later in history, wealthy merchants. Geisha still exist today.

Giri A strong sense of debt to a person or group in traditional Japanese thinking. An absolute requirement to repay a kindness. Deeply connected to notions of loyalty, it has been translated as ‘obligation’. *Giri* continues to underpin certain gift-giving customs and other unspoken social rules, even in twenty-first-century Japan.

Hachiman (as in Lord Hachiman) Shinto god of war, divine protector of Japan and its people, whose symbolic animal and messenger, ironically, is a dove. According to legend, Emperor Ojin, a mortal, became the divine Hachiman. Both peasants and samurai worshipped Hachiman in medieval times, and to this day there remain over 30,000 shrines to the war god throughout Japan.

Hakama Traditional Japanese item of clothing which covers the body from the waist down and resembles a wide, pleated divided skirt. Actually giant pleated trousers. A traditional samurai garment worn over a kimono, originally only by men.

Haori A thigh- or hip-length kimono-style coat or jacket (formal wear) worn only by men until around the end of the Meiji era (1868–1912).

Hara Literally ‘belly’. In traditional Asian combat arts, the physical centre of gravity and point of origin of the warrior’s internal energy. The samurai ‘acting from the hara’ employs his life-force as well as technique to defeat his opponent. See also *Ki*.

Hokkaido The second largest (and northernmost) island of Japan.

Ima Japanese for ‘now’.

Ji-Samurai Samurai who generally lived in small rural domains and used their own land for intensive farming. Many of their villages were walled, with moats around the ruling family's dwelling. Though in a lot of fiefdoms peasants did all the farming, Ji-Samurai were part of the dominant warrior class, and in fact represented a sizeable portion of it.

Kami The Japanese term for objects of awe or worship in Shintoism, the native religion of Japan. Though sometimes translated as 'deities' or 'gods', this is not strictly accurate, and 'spirits' may be a safer way of describing the Kami, who can be 'beings' but also forces of nature or 'living essences'.

Kan A traditional Japanese unit for measuring weight. One Kan equals about 3.75 kilograms.

Kannon (as in Kannon the Compassionate or Merciful) A spiritual entity epitomising compassion or mercy to both Buddhists and Taoists, Kannon is known throughout Eastern Asia under various names (Kuan Yin in China).

Kappa A water sprite featured in Japanese folklore, sometimes depicted with a turtle-like beak. The Kappa is said to love cucumbers and have a (water-filled) concavity in the crown of its head. Signs warning children to 'beware of the Kappa' are still erected beside many Japanese rivers.

Karma The Buddhist concept that deeds or actions create cycles of 'cause and effect'. Thus, good thinking and good deeds produce good outcomes, now or at some time in the future. Otsu is particularly wary of decisions which may later bring 'bad Karma' her way.

Ki The life force common to all living things. Internal or spiritual energy which, in traditional Asian martial arts, is harnessed to increase a warrior's power and stamina.

Kimono Literally means 'something worn'. T-shaped, ankle-length robes worn by men, women and children of all classes. Recognisably the traditional clothing of the Japanese.

Koga A name associated with a region in which 'shadow clans' trained highly skilled contract assassins whose powers of stealth and disguise became legendary.

Komuso A 'priest of empty nothing'. Wandering holy men, often former samurai, who were hired to cast out demons or give specialized blessings. Regarded by some as beggars and con-men, by others as uniquely empowered (though often eccentric) healers.

-Kun An honorific used by seniors when addressing their male juniors. See also **-San**.

Kurume Flowering plants; colourful azaleas native to Japan.

Kyogen A popular Japanese school of theatre which was established by the fourteenth century. Kyogen plays may be short slapstick-type satires that parody religious rites, or comedy versions of folktales, involving human, animal and 'god' characters.

Mon Heraldic crests worn on samurai clothing or carried into battle on flags and banners.

Naginata A weapon consisting of a long pole fitted with a curved, single-edged blade.

No-Dachi A very heavy long sword. On the battlefield, it was a favourite weapon for hacking at a horse's legs.

Noh (Plays) Classical form of musical drama which had evolved by the fourteenth century. Some Noh plays feature ghosts, demons, monsters, or a warrior's dramatic death scene.

Obake Usually translated as 'ghost', it literally means 'things that change' and hence refers to a class of supernatural beings that can shape shift; spirits that adopt a solid form.

Ronin Literally 'wave men' – unemployed samurai, warriors who had lost their ruling lord through military defeat, death or some other disbandment of his fiefdom. Many roamed the country, duelling or taking work as bodyguards, mercenaries or assassins.

Sake Japanese for ‘alcoholic beverage’, it can refer to alcoholic drinks in general but usually refers to the traditional Japanese drink made by fermenting polished rice. Though often called ‘rice wine’, sake is actually brewed, so is really more like a beer than a wine.

Samurai A member of the ruling warrior class; a warrior in a daimyo’s service.

–*San* An honorific attached to a person’s name to show one is addressing them with respect. It can be taken to mean ‘Mr’, ‘Mrs’, ‘Miss’ or, nowadays, ‘Ms’. Kenji tells Daniel that its use shows ‘breeding’ and that being tagged with –San implies that ‘you matter’.

Satsuma An old Japanese province which during the civil war era was the fief of the powerful Shimazu Clan, which ruled from a castle at Kagoshima, on the southern tip of the southern Japanese island of Kyushu.

Shinobi One adept at spying or covert scouting. Some shinobi were also assassins.

Shogun Abbreviated form of Sei-I-Tai Shogun (‘barbarian-subduing general’). The ultimate commander of the Japanese warrior class, who, prior to 1867, exercised virtually absolute rule under the leadership of the Emperor, who in fact was more of a figurehead. Many daimyos aspired to seize or earn this auspicious rank.

Sunekosuri A particular Yokai (see below), specifically, ‘the sprite who brushes against your legs in the dark’. Sunekosuri is generally depicted as being cat- or dog-like.

Sun Tzu A title meaning ‘Master Sun’, bestowed on the Chinese author Sun Wu, who wrote *The Art of War*, a detailed and influential ancient text on military strategy.

Sutra A Buddhist scripture. Sutras are often chanted or recited.

Taisho The rank of general in a samurai army; a general on the field of battle.

Tenki Japanese for ‘weather’, it can also mean ‘good weather’, hence Lord Nakatomi’s teasing of the monkey handler whose stage-name is ‘Tenki the Amazing’.

Tomodachi Japanese for ‘friend’ or ‘friends’. The Japanese characters for *tomodachi* appear at the top of each chapter and on the cover of this book.

Tora Japanese for ‘tiger’. An animal much admired by the samurai, who wished to emulate many of its qualities: dignity, speed, agility and ferocious courage.

Ute Japanese for ‘fire’, as in ‘fire your weapon’, such as a longbow, crossbow or cannon.

Waka Literally, ‘Japanese poem’. Waka was a genre of traditional poetry. Several styles existed, chiefly ‘tanka’ (short poem) and ‘choka’ (long poem). Their main components were the *unit* and the *phrase*. Some poets (like Lord Nakatomi) wrote humorous Waka.

Yokai Apparitions, spirits, imps and demons of Japanese folklore. They range from terrifying ghostly monsters to cute and humorous pixie-types who want to be friends. Many Yokai are specific to regions, landmarks or particular activities. Often depicted in art, songs, folk festivals and plays. Owing to his blue eyes, blond hair and unusual accent, Daniel is prone to be mistaken for a Yokai by feudal Japanese of all classes.