

CHAPTER ONE

真

DRUMBEAT



“Someone’s coming!” Taji yells.

I reach Taji first. Not because I’m the fastest. I’m good at many things, but running isn’t one of them. It’s hard to sprint with just one leg. I get there fast because I’m practicing sword thrusts only a hop away.

I peer into the valley and see a short, stocky figure making his way up the mountain path.

“Who is it?” Kyoko flops onto the grass.

Mikko, Nezume, and Yoshi arrive, pushing and shoving one another out of the way. Like an upended bowl of rice noodles, they land in a tangled mess beside me.

I’ve got really good eyes because in my heart I am the White Crane, able to spot a beetle on the ground from the air. My sight takes wing, soaring deep into the valley. But I don’t know how Taji does it. How can a blind kid see at all? When I asked him, he laughed at me. “You have to listen, Niya. You are much too noisy to see with your ears.”

It’s true. I like to laugh and jump and yell. *Aeeeyagh!* *Aeeeyagh!* When I am practicing, the White Crane screeches out across the *ryu*. Even when I’m sleeping, Mikko has to poke me in the ribs because I snore louder than a pondful of frogs.

“It’s Master Onaku,” I announce.

“Why is the swordsmith coming?” Yoshi voices the question we all want to ask.

Master Onaku is Sensei Ki-Yaga’s oldest friend, and it’s always a special occasion when he visits. We usually spend days preparing the food. Sensei says a samurai kid must be able to wield his sword on the battlefield and a sharp knife in the kitchen. But we don’t fall for that. The cooking isn’t really about training. It’s about Onaku’s big, round stomach. The Sword Master loves to eat.

Last time, we prepared fish soup, three-egg omelette, and honey rice pudding, the finest dessert in all of Japan. My nose follows the imaginary smell as it curls into a smoke ring and drifts skyward.

“We should tell Sensei,” says Nezume.

*Puff.* The smell disappears, but my mouth is still watering.

“I’ll go,” I volunteer. Maybe our teacher is in the kitchen.

But I can’t even get up onto my foot before Sensei’s voice meets me. “Tell Master Onaku I am waiting in the tearoom.”

Sensei always handles important business there. My friends and I don’t like the tea ceremony. Too many rules.

Most days, Ki-Yaga slurps his pudding and sucks the splatters from his long white beard, but during the tea ceremony, he doesn't make a sound and he doesn't spill a drop.

By the time Onaku is almost to the top of the mountain, we have made up many stories to explain his visit.

"He's bringing us extra swords," suggests Mikko.

Not likely. Last year, at our Coming-of-Age Ceremony, we were given new swords—the long *katana* and the short *wakizashi*, dual weapons of the warrior samurai. Onaku is a master craftsman. One of his swords would last two lifetimes, so it can't be that.

Kyoko looks concerned. "Maybe Mrs. Onaku is sick." Sensei is a great healer, and Onaku wouldn't trust anyone else to care for his wife. We hope that's not the reason.

"Perhaps he has run out of wine," says Yoshi.

It's the most likely explanation of all. Sensei's *dokudami* wine smells like rotten fish, but Onaku would walk up the mountain and back at the promise of a bottle.

"Hello, young Cockroaches," he calls as he draws closer. "How goes the studying and the practicing? And how is Niya's nose?"

It's an old joke. When I first came to the Cockroach

Ryu, I fell over many times during training. Twice I broke my nose. Then twice more Taji caught me unaware with the flat blade of his wooden practice sword and broke it for me.

“Our master is waiting in the tearoom,” says Yoshi.

Onaku nods and hurries off to find Sensei. Something is wrong. Usually, the Sword Master will chat and joke for hours, telling us stories of the days when he was a boy listening at Ki-Yaga’s feet. Sensei was old, even then.

Across the valley, a drumbeat echoes. *Thum. Thum.*

“What’s that?” Nezume asks.

*Ta-thum. Ta-thum. Thum.*

Yoshi shakes his head. We all do. No one knows what it means, but we don’t like it. It kicks hard against my chest and makes me nervous.

Yoshi puts his finger to his lips and gestures for us to follow. Yoshi is our leader, and I’d follow him anywhere. He has the spirit of a tiger—big and strong. When an earthquake rolled me off the mountain, he climbed through the darkness to my rescue.

Yoshi pads noiselessly to the tearoom. Crouching low behind Sensei’s row of potted bonsai trees, he places his ear against the wall. We copy him, one by

one. The wall is made of thin rice paper, so it's easy to hear every word.

"You were right, Ki-Yaga," Onaku says with a sigh. "It has happened just as you said it would."

I can see his blurred shadow, head bowed and shoulders slumped. Onaku looks old and beaten. The Sword Master is strong, and his spirit is tougher than twice-folded steel. What could make him clutch his head in his hands?

"Yes. Sometimes I really wish to be wrong." Sensei sounds sad. He places his arm around his friend.

Uneasiness surrounds us all. Things that were once solid are now wavering, hard to grasp. It's worse than when the mountain trembles, but that same air of foreboding hangs low over our heads.

I look at Yoshi, who shrugs. Yoshi looks at Kyoko, and she looks at Taji and Nezume. Mikko shakes his head. We haven't got a clue what's happening, but I know in my stomach that it's not good. Misery binds our worried faces together.

Even when a samurai is unhappy, he should never lower his guard. He'll be even more miserable if he's surprised by an enemy sword.



The door slides open, and we're caught by the razor swipe of Sensei's steely gaze.

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"Your walls have many ears, Ki-Yaga," Onaku says.

Sensei's face is like my calligraphy homework: impossible to read. "What have you heard?" he asks.

"Everything," Yoshi mumbles.

We look at the ground, hiding our sunset faces.

Yoshi scuffs his sandals in the dirt. "It was my idea. I'm responsible."

"Excellent." Sensei claps his hands. "A samurai must be a good listener. It gives him an edge even sharper than his sword. Now, Niya, how should a samurai listen?"

Our teacher always asks me the hardest questions. He says my brain needs more exercise than my leg. But I know this one because Taji taught me earlier.

"A samurai should listen with his eyes and see with his ears."

Sensei grins. First at me, then Taji. Finally, his smile collects us all. He's pleased because we are working together.

Last year, our team won the Samurai Trainee Games.



Before that, everyone laughed at us. Mikko with his one arm; blind Taji; Yoshi, who refused to fight. Me with my one leg and Nezume, who ran away from the cruel Dragon Master to live like an animal in the forest. They laughed at Kyoko most of all. “Freak girl,” they jeered, pointing at her white hair, pink eyes, and six fingers and toes.

They stopped laughing when we won. We were no longer the students no other school wanted; we were the samurai kids everyone wanted to be. We made a lot of new friends. Except from the Dragon Ryu. It’s hard to shake hands with your opponents when they have already gone home.

“What’s happening?” asks Kyoko. “What does the drum mean?”

“Things I hoped you would never hear, Little Cockroaches,” Sensei says. “For ten days, the drum will call the mountain *ryus* to war. When it stops, the fifty-year peace will be over. The *ryus* must pledge their allegiance to the Lord of the North or the Lord of the South. In times of war, a samurai must serve with his sword.”

My stomach hurts, and the White Crane frantically batters its wings against my heart. The *ryus* will fight on different sides.

I think of the Eagle Ryu. And the Rabbit. And all the others we competed against at the Samurai Trainee Games. The Games are real now.

*Thum. Thum. Ta-thum.*

The drum kicks even harder into my chest, and it hurts to breathe.

Will friends now be forced to fight as enemies?