

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 kid who is blind 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.

The door slides open, and we're caught by the razor swipe of Sensei's steely gaze. Our faces glow red and pink like the setting sun.

"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?

CHAPTER TWO

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BEWARE THE
DRAGON



“I won’t fight.” Yoshi plants his feet like the roots of a giant cherry tree. It would take an enormous wind to shift even one of his sandals.

“You don’t have to.” Sensei’s words blow gently. The tree falls with a thud as Yoshi crumples, relieved, onto the grass.

We understand why our friend doesn’t fight. It’s not about strength or bravery. Yoshi is stronger than the rest of us pulling together. He carries a great weight around every day. When he was only seven, he threw his opponent from the wrestling ring. The boy hit his head on a rock and died.

“The drum is not calling to *us*,” Sensei says. “The Cockroach Ryu isn’t going into battle. We are not bound to any lord. My days of service were completed long ago.”

The other *ryus* belong to a *daimyo*, a lord they defend in times of trouble and war. In return, the *daimyo* looks after his samurai and their students. With its dilapidated buildings and old equipment, it’s obvious our *ryu* has no lord to pay for its upkeep.

We have always been poor. But we are rich in honor. Once Sensei was the Emperor’s personal bodyguard,

teaching swordsmanship to the royal children. The Son of Heaven himself rewarded Ki-Yaga by releasing him from service. Now Sensei answers to no *daimyo*, not even the Emperor.

“I didn’t want to fight either.” Kyoko stretches her slender arms around Yoshi’s broad shoulders. There’s only one thing in the world that feels better than a stomach full of honey pudding, and that’s a hug from Kyoko.

We all pile on top of her and Yoshi, to show our support, and poke and prod each other in the ribs.

“Get your foot out of my mouth,” Mikko mumbles at me.

“What did you say?” I pretend I don’t understand.

Aaargh. Nezume yelps and groans from somewhere underneath.

“If you don’t move your bony elbow out of my ear, I’ll chop it off. Then you won’t have *any* arms,” Taji threatens Mikko.

With a great roar, Yoshi shakes us all apart.

“See how dedicated my students are,” Sensei says to Onaku. “Even now they do wrestling practice.”

“I think they need a lot more.” The Sword Master



We all pile on top of her and Yoshi.

smiles wider than the green tree frog we found swimming in Sensei's *dokudami* wine last week.

Everyone laughs. Except Kyoko. She's not even smiling.

"Someone pulled my hair," she complains, flicking the ice-white strands out of her eyes. "It took me forever to get it rolled into place. Look at this mess."

Samurai kids always wear their hair twisted into a topknot, pinned tight. But now Kyoko's hair swirls in a fall of snow, to hang like mist around her shoulders. "Who did it?" she demands.

I'm not stupid. I keep my mouth shut. Kyoko's hair might be soft and silky, but her fists are hard as rock. And when she kicks, her six toenails scrape like splinters of bamboo. I've already got a scar to prove it.

"One day this samurai girl will do great damage in the hearts of men. More than any of my swords ever did," says Onaku.

Kyoko hides her face in her hands, but I can see her smile shining through.

Ta-thum. Thum. Thump.

The drum doesn't frighten me anymore. It drifts over our heads, through the valley, to the next mountain

peak. In my heart, the White Crane sleeps peacefully. It doesn't even raise its head to listen. I pull my jacket tight around my ears. It's autumn in the mountains, and when the sun moves down into the valley, the air grows cold with the promise of snow.

"Why do we keep training if we're never going to fight?" Mikko brandishes an imaginary weapon, finishing with a lethal thrust through Yoshi's chest.

Grrr. Yoshi growls a warning, and the pretend sword is quickly returned to its scabbard.

"What use are swords if we can't wield them in battle?" grumbles Mikko.

"Would you like to teach my students this lesson?" Sensei bows low to show his respect for Master Onaku.

Some men pay a year's wages for one of Onaku's weapons. They travel for weeks, then wait for days while the Sword Master creates the perfect blade for each hand.

A samurai's sword is his most treasured possession. He wears it on his belt, but it is always close to his heart and it sings into his soul. My sword shines bright

and sings loud enough for Onaku to hear. Even now, when it should be listening politely.

“May I borrow your weapon, Niya?” Onaku asks. “I need to make a point.”

We’re all paying close attention now. *The point of a sword is very sharp*, as Sensei says.

Carefully, I draw the blade and pass it to the Sword Master. I keep the cutting edge inward because if I tip over and fall, Onaku might be killed.

“It is bad manners to face the blade outward,” Sensei taught us. “It is even worse manners to slice a friend in two.”

Onaku holds my weapon flat across both his palms. “My swords are not forged to carve sinew and muscle. They are not kitchen knives. See? A samurai sword is an object of beauty and honor, not a butcher’s tool.”

With the cutting edge facing his stomach, he returns the sword to me. “May blood never touch this blade.”

I agree. Especially if it’s my blood. I cautiously place my sword back in its scabbard.

“Look with your ears and you will see the blade sing,” Sensei reminds us.

“That’s not hard,” says Taji. “Niya’s sword is almost as noisy as he is.”

“I’ve got a lot to say,” I protest, poking out my tongue. “Mikko’s loud, too. Sometimes I have to yell over the top of him.”

Now Mikko pokes out his tongue. “But when you yell, Niya, even the trees tremble. You’re noisy *and* dangerous.”

I grin at the compliment. If an enemy hears me coming, he’ll just run away.

Our life has always had a pattern of comfortable sameness. Breakfast and practice. Lunch and study. And after dinner, “More practice!” Sensei calls every hour until bed.

Only very old men can remember wartime. And only even older men, like Sensei, know what it was like to fight.

“What about Sensei’s sword?” Nezume asks. “He carried it into many battles. It must have been covered with blood.”

“People say he wielded the fastest sword in all of Japan. Sometimes his opponent could not even see the blade,” Taji adds.

Onaku grins and winks. "Perhaps they could not see it because it was not there."

That can't be true. Not even Ki-Yaga would go into battle without a sword.

But Sensei is grinning, too. "Sometimes I think my students are deaf. Or they have memories like fishing nets. What is the most important thing I have taught you?" he asks us.

It's an easy question, and we don't have to think about the answer. It was one of the first lessons we learned.

"A true samurai doesn't need a sword," says Yoshi.

Sensei nods. "I am a good swordsman, but I am an even better teacher. I can teach men who are deaf to hear and men who are forgetful to tie knots in their nets."

Could it be true? Did Sensei fight swordless? The villagers say he is a wizard. They say some nights he turns into a *tengu* mountain goblin and they see his black crow shadow fly across the moon. My friends don't believe a word of it, but sometimes Sensei speaks inside my head, so I'm not as sure.

"What's that smell?" Onaku asks, wrinkling his nose.

It's hard to imagine any odor offending the Sword

Master. When he swigs Sensei's fishy wine, he doesn't even hold his nostrils closed. But Taji is the expert when it comes to smells. Without eyes, he finds other ways to see. And his nose never misses a sniff.

"It's Niya's slipper," he says with a laugh. "He trod in horse dung when he fed Uma this morning."

Mikko pulls my slipper off my foot and waves it in Kyoko's face.

"Yuck," she squeals.

"I washed it. Give it back." If I had another one, I'd throw it at him.

Sensei takes off one of his own slippers and hands it to me. He tucks his other foot behind him and smiles.

I am like you, the wizard whispers inside my head. I do not care if I have only one slipper.

The game is over, and Sensei is still looking at me, his bright eyes drilling deep. He has another lesson for me to find.

Ta-thum. Ta-thum. Thump.

The drum leads me to it. We're not out of danger yet. The Dragon Master is looking forward to fighting us, and for him, the war is a convenient excuse. He has a score to settle.

“The Dragon Master won’t like it when he finds out we’re not going to war,” I say miserably.

Sensei nods. “I do not believe blood must be spilled to solve a problem, but the Dragon Master thinks differently.”

Taji shakes his head, confused. “Why would a teacher want to lead his students into war?”

“Why would he choose to risk their lives?” Kyoko is puzzled, too.

But Nezume understands the Dragon Master. “He doesn’t care who he hurts. He sees glory in any victory, and he’ll do whatever it takes for his side to win. Especially if he is given the chance to fight against us.”

No one argues with that. Nezume would know. He studied at the Dragon Ryu for two years, and the Dragon Master’s cruelty is written in the scars across his back.

“Dishonor and stupidity go together,” Sensei says sadly. “The Dragon Master’s brain is as empty as Niya’s other slipper.”

He means the one I haven’t got.

“We have to do something. We can’t stand back just because we don’t have to fight. No one should have to. Not even the Dragons,” insists Yoshi.

Sensei nods in agreement. "All war is about nothing important. When something is nothing, it is not worth fighting about."

Ki-Yaga is a Zen master. They're experts at Nothing. And I'm good at Zen, too. I think about nothing all the time.

Ta-thum. Thump. The drum dares us to make it stop.

"Only the Emperor or the Shogun can silence a war drum," Taji says.

"The Shogun is away in the far north, but the Emperor is in winter residence at Toyozawa Castle. We will go there and ask the Emperor, the Son of Heaven, to help. But we must be careful." Sensei frowns, his brow wrinkling like rice paper. "Not everyone will want to see this war end before the first sword stroke. The mountain lords will insist on the right to settle their differences with the sword."

"And the Dragon Master will do all he can to make certain the bloodshed begins," says Onaku. "He will see Ki-Yaga's peacemaking as an attempt to deprive the Dragon Ryu of its chance to win great honor and distinction."

We understand that. Beware the Dragon. But we're also excited to be going on a journey.

I can't wait to see the castle again. Many years ago, when I was too young for school, my father and mother took me to see the Emperor honor the great samurai warrior Mitsuka Manuyoto. Now Mitsuka lives as a hermit beside the ocean, but when he was a boy, he studied at the Cockroach Ryu and slept in my bed. His name is scratched into the wood above my pillow. I carved my name beneath it. His writing was as poor as mine.

I remember the castle. Food, singing, dancing, and music.

But the only music now is the drum.

Ta-thum. Thum. Thum.

Ten days to war.

"We leave at once, before the Dragon Master realizes what we are trying to do," Sensei announces. "We must ask the Emperor to move quickly."

But it might not be possible for him to move quickly. Our Emperor is even bigger and rounder than Onaku. Maybe he could sit on the Dragon Master. Imagining the Dragon Master squashed flat, I smile wider than the drunken tree frog.

Sensei's brilliant eyes search my face. *Is the wizard reading my mind?* I practice Zen thoughts and think

of nothing. But it doesn't help. Sensei doesn't stop at nothing.

"Taji and Kyoko will pack food for the journey," Sensei instructs. "Yoshi, Mikko, and Nezume will gather clothes and weapons."

"I'll help with that," Onaku volunteers.

"Niya will go and catch Uma."

Once we would have drawn bamboo straws to see who had to go near his snarling teeth. That was before I discovered he liked honey rice pudding as much as I do. Now we're the best of friends. But we can't load our goods on his back, we'll have to carry everything ourselves. Uma is a proud warrior horse. He'll let us ride, but he won't cart raincoats and rice cakes. Not for all the pudding in Japan.



By the time the sun sinks low into the valley, we're packed and ready to leave. Sensei goes first, leading Uma through the dusk, down the path to the village. When

Yoshi and I walked this way alone, I saw shapes shifting in the darkness. Wolves. *Tanuki* dogs. But here with my friends and our ferocious horse, there is nothing to fear. Not even Grandfather's ghost stories could frighten me now.

Our spirits shine bright in the deepening gloom. Yoshi, the Tiger; Taji, the Golden Bat, who doesn't need eyes to see; Mikko, the Striped Gecko; Kyoko, the mischievous Snow Monkey; Nezume, the Long-Tailed Rat; and me. I am the White Crane, spreading my wings over them all, a cloak against the thump of the drum.

Night turns the trees gray and spectral. It's a four-hour journey to the village, but it will take longer traveling with Uma. The ground is uneven where last year's earthquake has refolded the path, and it's easy for a horse to stumble if we move too quickly.

I walk second from the end. Not because I'm slow—even with one leg I can travel as fast as the others—but because Onaku brings up the rear and I like to talk to him. I like to hear about the adventures he and Sensei had together.

"The Emperor will be pleased to see Ki-Yaga," I say.

“Maybe there will be a welcoming parade when the Son of Heaven hears we are coming.”

Onaku lifts one eyebrow, then the other.

“The Emperor was so pleased with Sensei’s service that he rewarded our teacher with his freedom,” I continue. “He was the only royal bodyguard ever to receive such a great honor. Maybe there’ll be fireworks.”

Onaku grins, and his belly begins to jiggle as the laugh works its way to his face. “Is that what Sensei told you?”

“Well, not exactly. But I thought . . .”

Onaku’s laugh erupts over my words. “I remember it a little differently. The Emperor yelled so loud that his words are still stamped inside my ear. His face went purple, and his eyes bulged bigger than a bubble-faced goldfish. ‘If I ever see you around here again, Ki-Yaga, I’ll chop off your head’ was what he said. As I recall, Ki-Yaga and I left very quickly.”