

CHAPTER ONE

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LITTLE
COCKROACHES



“Aye-eee-yah!”

I scissor-kick as high as I can and land on my right foot. I haven't got another one. My name is Niya Moto, and I'm the only one-legged samurai kid in Japan. Usually I miss my foot and land on my backside. Or flat on my face in the dirt.

I'm not good at exercises, but I'm great at standing on one leg. Raising my arms over my head, I pretend I am the White Crane. “Look at me!” the crane screeches across the training ground. “Look at him,” the valley echoes.

But Sensei Ki-Yaga is not looking. My master sits in the sun with his back against the old, stooped cherry tree. He is as ancient as the mountains around our school and as dilapidated as the equipment we use. Most people think he died years ago.

Eyes shut, he's not watching me practice. That lazy old man slept through the only upright landing I've ever made! I lower my right arm, and the White Crane makes a rude gesture with its wing.

Sensei's wrinkled mouth creaks into a smile, but his eyes stay hidden behind closed lids. "A boy who cannot perfectly execute even half a scissor-kick should not waste time finding fault with his teacher. More practice, Little Cockroach." His voice rumbles like thunder.

"Yes, Master." I bow low to show my respect. Even though he is strict, I like Sensei, and I never forget that he was the only teacher not bothered by my missing leg.

"I am not a counter of feet," he told me. "I am a collector of more important parts. And when I buy you socks, they will last twice as long."

When the Cockroach Ryu wrote and offered me a samurai traineeship, Father was impressed.

"Look, Niya. Master Ki-Yaga wielded a sword in the days of legend, when the samurai were great and powerful. They fought in real battles then, not tournament rings like today."

"I thought he was dead," Mother added.

“So did I. He must be extremely old, but not too frail to write and ask for our boy.”

Mother and Father are pushovers for a famous name, even an almost dead one. They looked at me proudly, as if I had done something special. I stood straight and tall on my one leg, and pretended I had. Anything, if they would let me go.

“It’s too far away,” Mother finally said. “The Cockroach Ryu is in the Tateyama Mountains. It’s too cold there.”

In the end the decision made itself. I had no other offers. Even my father’s old school, the Dragon Ryu, would not take me. “We regret to inform you we cannot accept a one-legged boy,” their letter said. Father went to see the Dragon people, to yell they were honor-bound to teach his son, but they wouldn’t even answer him.

“The Dragon Ryu is not good enough for Niya,” Father announced. “Niya will go to Ki-Yaga.”

I wondered why such a great man wanted to teach a crippled boy. Maybe he felt sorry for me. But I didn’t care. I desperately wanted to be a samurai. I would’ve hopped all the way to the mountains if necessary.

“Grandfather!” I called out to my elder who shared

our house. "Grandfather, I am to study with Sensei Ki-Yaga."

"I thought he was dead," Grandfather answered.

Three years have passed since the day of the letter. My town life is long gone. I am fourteen now, and this old school high on the mountain is my home. For another three years I will study here, and when I leave, I'll be a samurai warrior.

"Yah! Yah-ah!"

I punch the air with my foot and land on the other one I haven't got. Sprawled out on the grass, I lift my face to see if Sensei is watching this time. Even though his lids are still closed, the wrinkles at the edge of his face are smiling.

My bamboo crutch lies useless beside him. He won't let me use it when I practice.

"You don't need that," he says. "It will weigh you down."

Now, with my mouth full of dirt, I think I need some extra weight for balance. But I never give up, because in my heart I am the White Crane, proud and defiant.

When I was too young to carry a sword, Father took

me to a lake to fish. A tall, thin bird stood at the water's edge.

Staring at me with shining black eyes, the crane slowly tucked one leg up under its body. One-legged, just like me! My spirit totem flew into my heart. When I look into the mirror, I don't see my reflection; I see the White Crane. If I am afraid, it crouches with me and I'm not alone. When I am happy, it screeches my gladness to the world.

"More practice, Little Cockroach," Sensei growls.

Lifting itself out of the grime, the White Crane shakes the dust from its snowy feathers.

"Eee-yah!" it cries as I begin the move again.

On the same day that I arrived at the Cockroach Ryu, three boys and one girl also came to the school's old, empty rooms: Mikko, with his one arm; Yoshi, who is huge and strong, but refuses to fight; Kyoko, who has an extra finger and an extra toe, and is a girl; Taji, blind in both eyes. And me. We're the unwanted. Unwanted everywhere else but here.

"A cracked bowl can hold water. There is nothing

wrong with the bowl. It just needs to be held properly,” Sensei instructs.

“Huh?” says Mikko.

Mikko’s brain doesn’t like to think unless it has to.

“He means we are just as capable as everyone else. Maybe even better, with the right teacher,” says Taji. Taji thinks a lot, because he can’t see. He likes to sit in the sun and meditate. Sensei sits beside Taji with his eyes closed so he can’t see either. Their *oms* drift through the practice ground. Closing my eyes, I think of Taji, who has two legs but has never seen the practice ring.

“Oy. Aye-yah. Oy!” I cry.

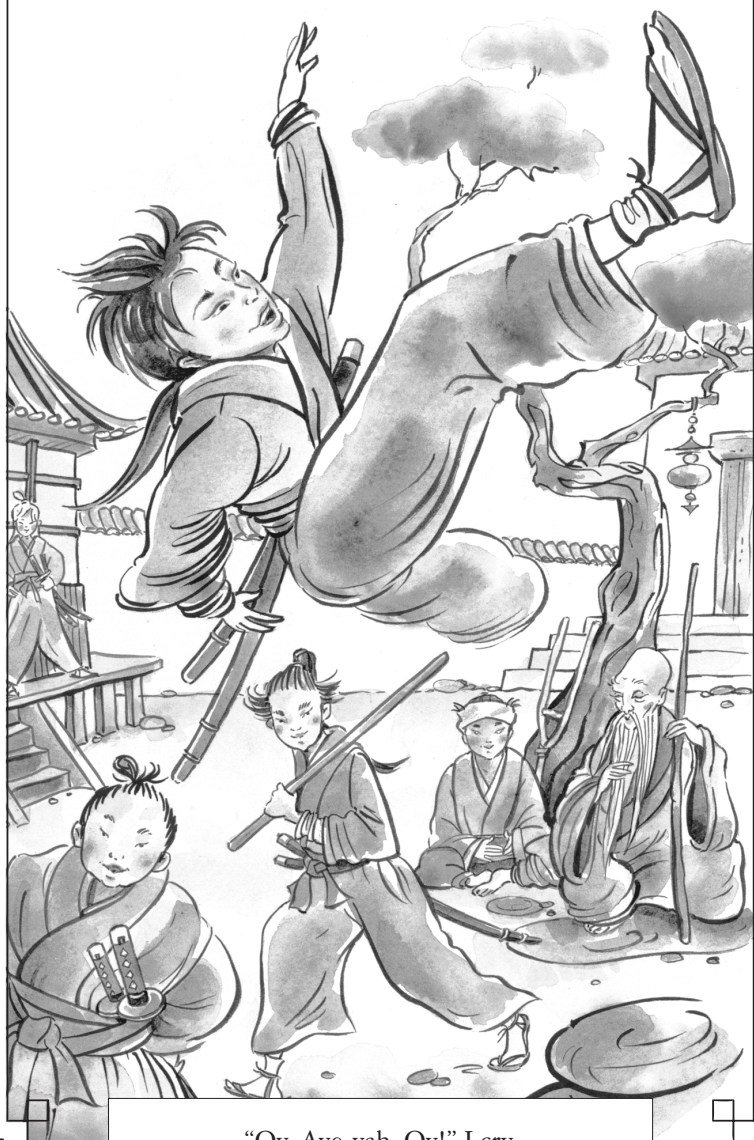
I kick high and land solid on my foot. Perfectly. Hopping around in excitement, the White Crane dances on one leg.

“Well done,” Sensei calls.

Taji joins our teacher in the sun. “Great landing, Ni.”

“How did you know?” I ask Taji later at dinner.

“There is nothing wrong with my ears,” he retorts. “I am used to the sounds of you hitting the dirt. Face-first: *Splat!* Butt-first: *Pblat!* This was a new sound.



"Oy. Aye-yah. Oy!" I cry.

One I've never heard before." He laughs at me, but it doesn't hurt the way it does when others laugh.

"Attention!" Sensei bangs the big drum beside his table. It means put down your chopsticks and listen. Put them down fast or he'll crack you over the knuckles.

"The Annual Samurai Trainee Games begin soon. This year, we will again contest the team event. We must work hard." Sensei bangs the drum to indicate that we can resume eating.

My appetite is gone.

"I hate the Games," I say.

"I'm sick of coming last," moans Kyoko.

Mikko bashes his one fist on the table. "I'm tired of being laughed at by the Dragons."

"And the Eagles. And everyone else," I add. I can still hear the taunts: 'Look at the frog hop.' I'd like to see them fight with one leg bound up or one arm tied behind their back.

"Why do we have to be the Cockroach Ryu? Why must we have such a wretched name?" Yoshi is big, and his voice booms even when he whispers.

“Cockroach is a strong, powerful name,” says Sensei.

Kyoko laughs out loud. She can get away with it because she is a girl and has Sensei wrapped around her extra finger. The rest of us are laughing inside. But Sensei knows; he knows everything inside or out.

“I will tell you a story. Bring your dessert bowls to the mat and you may eat while I talk,” he says.

Sensei’s tales are magical. Our eyes shine with the expectation of honey rice pudding and a story.

Sensei tucks his feet underneath his body. Now he is less than me. No legs. Looking at me, he smiles. Then he tucks both arms behind his back and closes his eyes. He is one of us.

“Ever since the beginning, the cockroach has been mightier than the dragon. If a dragon stands between a boy and his honey pudding, the boy will challenge the dragon. The boy will fight, and sometimes he will win. Sometimes he will die. He doesn’t care. A samurai boy will take great risks and fight hard for pudding.”

We all nod. It’s true. There’s no finer food in the whole of Japan.

“The cockroach is mightier than the dragon.” Sensei

raises his arms dramatically and shakes his long sleeves toward us. Cockroaches pour into our plates.

“Yuck!” screams Kyoko.

Looking at my pudding in dismay, I see one cockroach swimming laps and another waving its bottom in my face.

“Eat up,” says Sensei, lifting his bowl.

Taji shakes his head.

“See?” Ki-Yaga laughs. “The cockroach is mightier than the dragon. A boy will throw out his pudding if a cockroach has stepped in it. He will not even try to fight.”

Sensei stands up and walks back to the table. There is nothing wrong with his dessert. Slurping honey pudding, he studies our faces to see if we understand. Then he folds his long white beard under his kimono sash and closes his eyes to sleep.

My friends and I take our bowls outside. We’ve learned the lesson, all right. Next time Sensei tells a story, cover up your food.

“One, two, three,” Yoshi counts.

We swish our bowls skyward. Cockroaches and honey pudding rain over the grass.

CHAPTER TWO

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BAD BREATH
AND BIG FEET



One of the best things about being a samurai kid is that you get a sword. A really sharp one. When I was five, Father gave me my first blade.

“Come here, Niya,” he called, his voice gruff and shaking. I thought he was crying and ran quickly because I didn’t want him to be sad.

But he wasn’t sad. He was smiling. On his lap was a long bundle of red silk tied with string.

“This was mine, and now it’s yours,” he said, unwrapping the sword to show me the White Crane carved on its handle. Nicks and scratches flecked the shiny blade, but I didn’t care. I loved it as soon as I saw it.

My heart swelled, and the White Crane spread its new wings. My one leg didn’t matter when the crane flew high above the ground.

“I am proud of you.” Blowing his nose and dabbing

at his eyes with his handkerchief, Father tucked his old sword in my sash belt.

“Don’t chase your sister with it,” he said.

I am much older now, but I still carry the sword with me every day. A samurai’s sword is part of his body. I named the blade Izuru, and it is my best friend. Along with Mikko, Taji, Yoshi, and Kyoko.

When we practice sword fighting, we use wooden sticks. We’re not allowed to use real swords. In the Dragon Ryu, they fight with real swords, but with no honor. They even cheat against each other. That’s how Mikko lost his arm, when he was a student there.

Sensei says that a true swordsman doesn’t need a blade.

“The point of the sword is . . .” Sensei pauses mid-sentence to make sure we are all paying attention.

I know this one. The point of the sword is to defend with dignity.

“The point of the sword is very sharp,” Sensei says.

That’s true, too.

This morning my opponent is Mikko. You’d think it would be easy to fight a one-armed kid. It’s not. Mikko is an ace swordsman who could fight with no arms and

a blade between his teeth. Those Dragon kids would never have beaten him if it wasn't three against one.

"Hey, you've got to tie your arm behind your back," Mikko says.

It's the rules. Sensei says you have to be able to fight on your opponent's terms.

I fold an arm behind my back.

"Not that one. The other one. Same as me."

"Come on, Mikko," I complain. "I'm right-handed. It's not fair to make me fight left-handed."

He grins. "I fight left-handed."

"You were *born* left-handed."

"It's the rules." He won't give in.

"You have to tie your leg up then," I insist.

Snoring under the cherry tree, Sensei listens in his sleep. Sensei teaches us Bushido. It's the samurai code, all about rules. Lots of rules. Do what is right. Be honorable. Be polite. Duty first.

"And always obey your teacher," Sensei's voice cuts through my thoughts. Sometimes I think Ki-Yaga is a wizard, not a warrior master. With blue demon eyes, he reaches inside our heads when we are not looking.

Learning Bushido is not difficult. All we have to do is listen, and Sensei is a wonderful storyteller. Calligraphy, our next lesson, is hard work. Such a waste of time! Hours of boring brushwork and smudged ink. No one can ever read anything I write anyway.

I much prefer the practice field. But it's not enough to be good with a sword; a samurai has to have neat handwriting, too. There's even a calligraphy event at the Samurai Trainee Games.

"I hate calligraphy class," I groan.

"You shouldn't whine," complains Mikko. "It's hard with one hand."

"You don't need two hands to write."

"I do. You should try it with just one hand," he says.

"What about me?" Kyoko grins. "The brush is too short for my extra finger."

"That's nothing. What about me? I can't even see the page." Blind Taji laughs at himself, and everyone chimes in. Yoshi's deep guffaws wake our snoring teacher.

"More practice, Little Cockroaches," Sensei interrupts. "I do not have all day to spend sleeping in the sun. *Chi! Jin! Yu!*"

Wisdom, benevolence, and courage. The code of the samurai.

"Chi!" I yell and wave my wooden stick.

"Jin!" Mikko brandishes his in return.

"Yu!"

We charge toward each other. Mikko, the expert swordsman, forgets he has one leg tied up and falls flat on his face.

"Ni wins," Kyoko announces as I help Mikko to his feet.

"The Striped Gecko will get you next time," Mikko taunts me with his spirit totem.

I wave my pole and do a victory hopping dance. "I'm not scared. The White Crane is not afraid of little lizards. I eat geckos for breakfast."

Later we sit in origami class.

"Watch this," Kyoko says.

With fingers twisting and twirling, she spins a light brown square of paper until it becomes an old man with scrawny arms and weedy legs. Sometimes it helps to have an extra finger.

"It's Sensei," she says, giggling.

Kyoko is not like my sister. My sister wears cherry blossom kimonos and smells like flowers. Kyoko is one of us. She smells like sweat and kicks hard. Her hair is rice white, and her eyes are pale pink.

“Freak girl,” the kids from the other *ryu* jeer.

I don’t think she’s a freak. When she laughs and shakes her head, I think of falling snow.

“What’s this?” Sensei appears beside me.

Ki-Yaga looks like a fragile paper man. Tall and gaunt, old skin stretched over ancient bones. But those skinny arms are strong and the bones unbreakable. I saw him pick Taji up one-handed when Taji tripped during training, and once he placed his finger against my neck and I couldn’t move a muscle.

“Beautiful work, Kyoko,” Sensei says. “Such a skinny old man. He looks like my grandfather. Now, my Little Cockroaches, make something from your heart.”

I make the White Crane. It’s an easy exercise, even for my clumsy fingers. Soon the White Crane, the Snow Monkey, the Striped Gecko, and the Golden Bat stand together on the table. Our spirit totems are always with us. Even in origami lessons.

Only Yoshi doesn't make anything, because he hasn't found his totem yet. It must be hard not to have one. I can't remember a time when the White Crane wasn't part of me.

"What about you, Yoshi?" Taji asks. Even without eyes, he knows we are one spirit short.

Yoshi shakes his head. "I don't feel like it."

"Is that why you don't fight?" asks Kyoko.

"Yes," he whispers. "I don't feel like it."

It's suddenly quiet. We wait for Yoshi to keep talking, to tell us why. But he doesn't. He looks at Sensei, who says nothing, too.

Our team would be much stronger if Yoshi wrestled and swung his sword for us. He's twice as big as me and as strong as a bear.

Pop! Kyoko squashes a paper box of air to break the silence.

"I bet the Dragons aren't wasting time playing with paper," mutters Mikko.

Kyoko's fingers fly again, and a dragon breathes along the tabletop.

"Whoosh." She blows hard, and our origami animals

topple over. The White Crane lies on its back, legs in the air.

Sensei takes his place at the head of the table. “The Dragon’s breath is nothing but hot air. And it smells like dead goldfish,” he says.

“I’m more worried about the Dragon’s feet,” admits Taji. “Cockroaches can get stomped.”

Closing his eyes, Sensei rocks from side to side.

A story is coming. The White Crane folds its wings to listen.

“This is the last Dragon story I will tell you. Listen and you will never be afraid again. Many years ago, in the early mists of the mountain, the dragon Ryujin went walking. A dragon has scales of steel, but its feet are soft. It trod on a thorn. The great creature roared in pain. Huge claws could not remove something so small.

“Wind carried Ryujin’s cries deep into the earth, but the other animals closed their ears. No one wanted to help the cruel, boastful dragon. Only Gokiburi, the cockroach, came to help. The cockroach was kind and wise.

“I will help you because no creature is so great it stands alone. Even a proud dragon must sometimes bend before a cockroach,’ it said.

“The dragon bowed, and the cockroach removed the thorn. So you see, Little Cockroaches, when the time comes, you will find power over the dragon. Bad breath and big feet are not to be feared.”

Taking the last square of paper, Sensei folds a cockroach. It’s very difficult. Even Kyoko can’t do it.

“More practice! Train hard!” Sensei strides from the room.

Taji grins. “I bet they don’t tell that story at the Dragon Ryu.”

“I’d love to beat them, just once,” says Yoshi. “Even if it was only at calligraphy. Or origami.”

“We can do it at sword fighting! I know we can. Let’s go practice.” Mikko waves his weapon in the air.

I’m not so sure we can win, but I’m going to try harder than ever.

In the training ring, it’s Taji’s turn to fight me. Taji bends his leg up. Yoshi places a blindfold over my eyes.



I leap forward. I can't find Taji anywhere.

All I can see is blue silk. All I can hear is my friends' playful laughter.

Around and around we circle, poking and stabbing at air. I leap forward. I can't find Taji anywhere. Taji's skilled ears have no trouble tracking my clumsy moves, but it doesn't matter if he knows where I am or not. He can't reach me from where he has fallen rump first in the dirt.

"No one wins," announces Kyoko.

The ground shakes. *Thump! Thump! Thump!* We all land in the dust. The Tateyama are fire-breathing mountains.

"The dragon laughs at us," says Mikko, looking up as if he expects fire and ash to rain down.

I sneak a look, too. Just in case he's right.

"No. The dragon is afraid," Sensei instructs from under the cherry tree. "When I was first old, the mountain erupted with fire. Many people thought I was dead."

They still do, I think with a smile.

Sensei looks at me, and his too-bright blue eyes sparkle in the sun. "Cockroaches are small, but they are very hard to kill," he says.