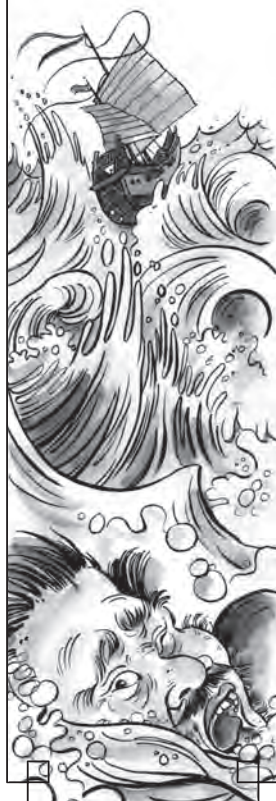


CHAPTER ONE

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INTO THE OCEAN



Yoshi's voice booms across the deck, through the thick gloom and above the waves pounding against the hull. "Man overboard!"

I look around in panic. There are only two men on this boat; the rest are kids. One of the men is Sensei Ki-Yaga, and the other is the ship's master, Captain Oong.

"Mikko, drop the anchor. Kyoko, bring a long rope from the stern," shouts Sensei.

His orders mean that our teacher is safe, but I'm afraid for the captain. Not even a hardened sailor could survive long in this bad-tempered ocean.

"Fetch the lantern from our quarters," Sensei calls to Taji. "Go quickly."

Some people would think it strange to send a kid who is blind to find something, when every moment spent looking could be the difference between life and death. But Taji is more skilled at finding things in the dark than anyone else. It's what he does every day.

People misjudge us all the time. Mikko, with his one arm, and Taji, who is blind. Yoshi, a samurai kid who refuses to fight. Kyoko, with her bright white hair and her extra fingers and toes. And me, with one leg. Other

people think these things make us weak. But we know better: they make us strong.

“I heard a splash here.” Yoshi points. “Then I heard Captain Oong cry out for help.”

Searching for movement, I peer across the angry waters. I am Niya Moto, the White Crane. By day my eyes can pick the flash of a fish scale from miles above the ocean, but now it’s hard to see. The dim moon reveals a landscape of dark shadows. The howling and blustering wind pummels the shadows into grotesque shapes. Monsters rise and fall back into the waves.

Only one shadow isn’t changing form.

“I think I see him!” I yell.

My friends crowd around, hopeful.

Kyoko leans precariously over the edge of the boat and gazes into the storm. “I can’t see anything.”

“Me either,” says Mikko.

Taji returns with the lantern, and Sensei lights the oil wick. The gloom reaches out to swallow the pale beam as quickly as it swallowed our captain, but there is still enough light for the White Crane to be certain of what it saw.

“It is him!” I shriek against the wind.

“I’ll go,” volunteers Yoshi. “I’m the best swimmer.”

No one argues. We’re all good swimmers, but only Yoshi has a hope of making it through the gigantic waves.

He unhooks his sword from his jacket sash and hands it to me. Then his *wakizashi* dagger. *For safekeeping*, his eyes say. *I want you to have them if I don’t return.*

Yoshi is very brave.

“A true samurai doesn’t need a sword,” I tell him.

It’s the first lesson Sensei ever taught us and Yoshi’s favorite. But now, with Yoshi standing swordless before me, I understand what it really means. My friend is a great warrior, about to battle the ocean with his bare hands.

He hurriedly strips off his clothing. Sash, jacket, kimono, trousers, and undershirt. Finally, Yoshi is standing in his loincloth. It makes me shiver to look at him. Not because his skin is already prickled with goose bumps but because I am afraid. The ocean is more than cold. Its belly is rumbling and roaring, hungry for human flesh.

Deftly, Kyoko ties the rope around Yoshi’s waist.

Six fingers on each hand might make some kids laugh, but Kyoko can bind knots even the storm cannot untie. And it's a good thing, too. Yoshi will need all the help he can get.

He bows low to Sensei. It's a mark of great respect. Sensei doesn't bow in return. He takes Yoshi's hands in his and lowers his forehead to them. It's a mark of even greater respect.

"Chi, jin, yu," Sensei murmurs.

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

A spike of lightning splits the ocean in two, and without hesitating, Yoshi dives into the breach.

Yesterday, when the storm clouds rushed in from the horizon and the sea rose up to meet the wind, the captain laughed. "The Dragon grows angry," he said.

"What dragon?" asked Kyoko.

"A mighty dragon lives beneath the sea, but it doesn't usually wake this time of year. Something has disturbed it, and now it tosses and turns, unable to rest."

"We probably disturbed it." Yoshi grinned. "Dragons have always found us annoying."

We laughed together, remembering the master



A spike of lightning splits the ocean in two, and without hesitating, Yoshi dives into the breach.

and the students of the Dragon Ryu. Before sailing for China, we visited Toyozawa Castle. The Dragon Master was trying to convince the Emperor to allow a war in our mountains. But we soon put a stop to that.

Now the Dragon hates us more than ever. Enough to make the sea spit and foam. Enough to devour the captain.

As we watch Yoshi gouge his way through the waves, our laughter is long gone. The ocean pushes and shoves but Yoshi is powerful, with arms like thickly rolled rice mats. Slowly, he barrels closer to the captain.

With a sharp gasp, Kyoko grabs my arm as Yoshi's head disappears beneath a crest of white water. Mikko, hand tightening on the rope, is ready to haul our friend back to safety.

"Not yet." Sensei rests his fingers on Mikko's one arm. Mikko lost his other arm to the Dragon Master's cruelty long ago, but his remaining arm is strong and a single heave would bring Yoshi plowing back toward us.

I wish Sensei would take his hand away and let Mikko pull. Then I could breathe properly again. I keep holding my breath until I feel light-headed and the White Crane struggles to fly out to Yoshi.

“Pull!” Yoshi shouts, his voice grappling the wind.
“I’m coming in.”

I breathe out. Around me I hear a soft sigh as my friends do the same.

Kyoko holds the lantern steady, the beam tracking Yoshi with the captain’s body now firmly tucked under his arm.

“Yoshi has rescued Captain Oong,” I tell Taji, who is standing beside me. “But I can’t see if he is alive or not.”

“I can find out for you,” Taji says.

“How?” I ask. The White Crane has excellent eyes, and Taji has none.

“Is Captain Oong alive?” he bellows across the ocean.

I should have known. Sensei keeps reminding us you don’t need to see to get things done. Like his spirit guide, the Golden Bat, Taji can always find a way through the darkness.

“Yes,” Yoshi calls, his voice drawing even closer. “The captain lives.”

A few minutes and they’ll both be back on board. But sometimes minutes crawl so slowly that even a sea snail could outpace them.

Bending deep into the storm, the mast creaks and groans. Wind roars. Waves peak into huge mountains. Lightning slashes and parries across the sky. But Yoshi is almost broadside. Almost safe.

I'm breathing easily again.

Until Kyoko screams.

CHAPTER TWO

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ALL AT SEA



A wave rears above Yoshi and crashes down suddenly. Thunder claps to mark the moment. Light floods the ocean, and Yoshi is gone.

I stop breathing.

“Can you see him?” Kyoko tugs at my sleeve.

Frantically, I shake my head.

“Do not be afraid,” Sensei says. “I have always taught my students to swim against the tide. We do not need to pull Yoshi back yet.”

“It’s a very strong tide.” Kyoko isn’t reassured at all.

Neither am I.

“Yoshi is strong, too,” Taji reminds us. “The Tiger is an excellent swimmer.”

Unruffled, Taji and Sensei sit in the calm eye of the storm, drawing the rest of us toward them.

Om-om, their chant rises against the gale. “*Om-om*,” I echo. Other voices join in. I feel numb. Disconnected. The White Crane soars above the ocean, searching.

Lightning rips the sky to ribbons, and the rain funnels through. It’s even harder to see now.

“Look!” Mikko yells.

It’s Yoshi. He raises his hand before diving beneath the foam.

Kyoko panics, pulling at my sleeve again. “What’s he doing? Where’s the captain?”

“The sea has taken him,” I say. “The wave tore the captain from Yoshi’s grasp.”

“No one could find the captain now. Not even Yoshi.” Mikko’s voice is strained and anxious.

The ocean surges, shaking its watery fists in triumph.

I sense Yoshi’s frustration. My chest tightens. He’ll never return to us if he can’t bring the captain with him.

Again and again, Yoshi’s head bobs above the brine.

“Come in!” bellows Mikko.

“Come back!” Taji calls.

“Please,” whispers Kyoko, wiping the rain and tears from her face.

Only the wind answers, a roaring shout of defiance. The Dragon will never be on our side.

“Can we haul him in now, Sensei?” I plead. “The captain is gone, and if we don’t act now, we might lose Yoshi, too.”

“Yes,” our master agrees. “This storm is not content with one body. It is hungry enough to swallow us all. Pull hard, Mikko.”

Straining, Mikko heaves against the rope.

“Nooo!” Yoshi howls.

Mikko doesn’t stop pulling. I add my strength to his. Taji, Kyoko, and even Sensei pull, too. It should be easy to reel Yoshi back. But now he wrestles against the ocean *and* the tug of the rope.

“No!” Yoshi yells. “I am not ready!”

But we are, and we keep pulling until he touches against the boat.

Kyoko drops a rope ladder over the side. Exhausted, Yoshi clings like a limpet to the rungs.

“Come on, Yosh,” I call. “Climb up. You can do it.”

Yoshi leans his head into his arms, sobbing against the rope.

“I’ll get him.” Clambering over the side, Kyoko slides down the wet, slippery ladder. Even the White Crane cannot hear what she whispers, but slowly Yoshi begins to move upward.

Whenever we climb, Yoshi always goes last. Our safety net, waiting to catch us if we fall. But this time Kyoko waits below him. Something has shifted. Something important. The White Crane can feel it in its feathers.

“We need blankets,” Sensei says.

"I'll get them," Taji calls, already halfway to our cabin.

As soon as I can reach down to Yoshi, I take his hand. Mikko helps and together we haul our friend on board.

Not even three blankets can stop his shivering.

"The captain is dead. It's all my fault." Yoshi's great shoulders shake like a bough of cherry blossoms in the wind. The flowers fall, and his heart is stripped as bare as the branch. "I let him go," Yoshi moans.

"You did not," I say. "The storm tore his body from you."

"You tried your best," says Taji. "It is all anyone can do. And it was much more than the rest of us put together."

It's hard to know what to say. Yoshi is our rock. But a river of water can wear even a rock down, and tears are flooding down Yoshi's face.

Kyoko wraps her arms around him and holds tight until his sobbing finally stops. A hug from a samurai girl is warmer than a heap of blankets and more meaningful than a pile of words.

"It made no difference," he mumbles into Kyoko's arms. "Trying doesn't mean anything."

"Yes, it does," I insist. "It means everything. What about the day the earthquake rolled me off the side of our

mountain? If you didn't try to rescue me then, I wouldn't be here today."

Yoshi says nothing. Life is all about balance. Since I have only one leg, I understand that well. When Yoshi was much younger, he accidentally killed a friend in a wrestling match. But then he saved my life, and the balance was restored. Now he believes it is gone again.

"All things happen for a reason," Sensei says. "One day Yoshi will find a reason for this. The captain has gone, and we must travel on alone."

Our teacher usually lectures with silly stories, strange tales, and sometimes a sharp tap from his staff. But never with such serious words. We've lost more than the captain. For the moment Yoshi is not here either. He has returned to that dark place where Sensei first found him.

"What we cannot change we must accept," Sensei says.

Not me. I don't accept it at all. I want to kick against the boat. I wish I had two legs so I could do it twice as hard. Tears stream down my face. You cannot fight against feelings. Not even a samurai blade can do that.

Above us, the mast creaks. *Crick-crack*. Something

snaps in the wind. Sailcloth billows, eerie and murderous in the moonlight. *Whoosh*. The first sail swings forward. Instinctively, we drop to the deck. Back it sweeps, slamming into the roof of the captain's cabin. *Bang!* The bamboo-thatched compartment crushes as easily as an origami box.

"A batten splintered," says Taji. "I heard the tack line fail as well."

The sail is no longer anchored to the block on the deck and, like a swinging sword, cuts its own lethal path above us.

"Stay low," Sensei commands.

We obey without question. It's good advice if you don't want to lose your head.

Sensei surveys the damaged batten. My head stays down, but my eyes train upward. One of the horizontal bamboo poles running across the sail has broken in two.

"Should we drop the sails?" I ask.

Sensei shakes his head. "First, we must secure the line," he decides. "Mikko, do you still have the rope?"

"I can get it," he answers, voice shaking. "I left it near the ladder."

Face almost flat against the deck, Mikko crawls away

from us. Beneath the hull, the ocean rises and swells. The Striped Gecko scrabbles against the pitch of the deck, but it's too slippery. Mikko slides with a hard thump into the side of the boat.

"Are you all right?" I call.

"I've got the rope," he says. "I landed on top of it."

I'm not even tempted to make a joke. Not tonight. Tonight I am reminded how brave he can be.

"We will also need some strong twine to lash the batten pieces together," says Sensei.

The sail careens toward us again, and the hull rolls to the left. Even our boat has lost its balance. If we don't repair the damage quickly, we'll all be tipped into the sea. Lightning flares to reveal the ocean's great mouth, open in anticipation.

Gripping my arm, Kyoko digs her fingernails deep into my skin. I don't complain, not even when the salt water stings the wound. I know how she feels, because I'm scared, too.

But fear also makes us desperate. And desperation gives us courage.

"I'll find the twine." Taji scrambles across the deck toward the stern.

That leaves four of us to catch the sail and tie it back. Maybe three. Yoshi's head is tucked in his arms, and he hasn't even looked up to see what is happening.

Whoosh. Whoosh. The sail swoops like owl wings, only a thousand times noisier. I feel like a mouse waiting for the owl to strike, only a thousand times more frightened.

Sensei says a samurai must know more than the sword and the bow. Luckily, our teacher is also a skilled shipmaster. In the days before Sensei came to the mountains to build the Cockroach Ryu, he spent many years sailing with Captain Oong's father.

"Throw the end loop around the boom," Sensei says, passing the rope to Kyoko.

Kyoko can throw a *shuriken* star to wedge in the center of a thin bamboo pole, but lassoing this target won't be that easy. The light from the lantern struggles to find its way through the driving rain, and Mikko fights hard to hold the beam steady so Kyoko can see. His arm is strong, but the powerful wind has the storm on its side.

How can three kids and an old man triumph against this gale? Will Yoshi stay huddled into the side of the boat or stir to help us?

“This is not the first time we have fought a Dragon. And we will win again,” Sensei promises.

Threading the rope through the block, Sensei knots it tight. He hands the slack to Kyoko.

“You can do this with your eyes closed,” I encourage her.

She nods but says nothing. She’s not sure. I hold my breath as the rope curls out toward the boom.

And falls with a sodden thud against the deck.

“I missed,” Kyoko whispers.

Sensei coils the rope again and hands it to her.

Arm raised, Kyoko hesitates. “What if I miss again?”

“If you miss, it is just practice, and all practice is good,” our teacher counsels. “You should take Niya’s advice. Close your eyes.”

“Like you did when you threw the rope across the chasm in the Tateyama Mountain tunnel,” Mikko reminds her.

“Like when you threw the grappling hook across to the Emperor’s sleeping quarters,” I add.

This time the rope flies like an arrow toward its target. Her confidence is restored; Kyoko doesn’t need any more practice.

But we're not safe yet. *Whoosh*. The rope is still too long to hold the sail in place. Using the slack, it continues to sweep back and forth.

Captain Oong would know what to do. The sea was in his blood. But now salt water fills his mouth and the waves flick sand in his ears. I won't let the storm win. It's a matter of honor. The captain's honor.

I'll think of something.

"I know!" I shout triumphantly. "If we loop the slack around the block each time the boom draws closer, we can gradually shorten the rope to secure the sail."

"That'll work," Mikko agrees.

"It's a good idea, Niya," Sensei says.

Yoshi says nothing. He's still crumpled against the side of the deck. He's lost inside himself, but we'll have to wait to bring him back.

Working quickly, we loop and pull each new knot tight.

By the time Taji returns, we have the sail tied almost as securely as before. Taji hands Kyoko the twine. I look up to where she will climb, and my stomach lurches. Not even the White Crane would build its nest that far up.

Kyoko isn't worried. With the twine in her teeth, she scales the rigging like a snow monkey. The mast bends and sways in the wind, but it can't shake her free.

"I wish she'd hurry up and come down," I mutter. "Maybe we should just reef the sails."

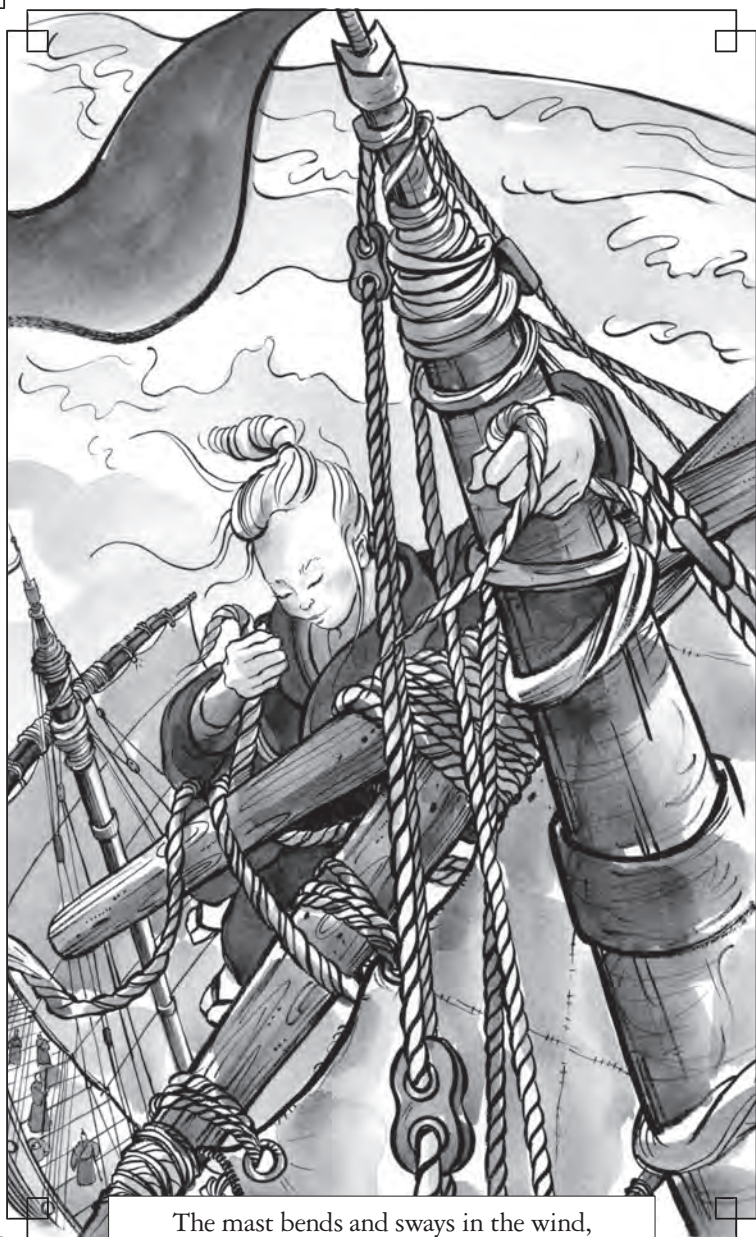
"We must keep the boat moving toward our destination," Sensei says. "We have no time to stand still. But don't worry: the wind will weaken soon."

"How do you know?" asks Taji.

Our teacher laughs—a deep belly rumble that rolls with the thunder. "No dragon can bluster and blow forever. And one that tries to swallow Yoshi will certainly get a stomachache and need to rest."

Thump. Kyoko drops from the mast and lands on the deck beside me. For the moment we are all safe. Free to mourn the captain and help Yoshi heal. I turn to tell Yoshi that we can carry him to bed now. But Yoshi is already snoring, exhausted beyond even the blackest memory.





The mast bends and sways in the wind,
but it can't shake her free.

By daybreak the sea slaps at the hull, but sunrise has chased the storm away.

Our boat is a small Chinese junk. Two large cloth sails catch the wind to carry us forward. Yesterday there were three raised compartments in the middle of the boat: one for the captain, one for Sensei, and the other for us. This morning the captain's cabin sprawls, crushed and flattened, but that doesn't matter. It's empty now. I pull my jacket up around my ears and I wish I was inside our warm cabin. The storm's anger is gone, but the wind still bullies our sails with powerful gusts. The Dragon might be sleeping, but it tosses and turns.

I keep expecting to hear the captain's voice roar across the deck, distributing the day's work, telling a joke, or challenging us to speak to him in Chinese. Sensei teaches us many languages with lots of lessons about grammar and pronunciation. But Captain Oong taught us words that weren't in any of Sensei's classes.

"I wish the captain was here," Kyoko whispers.

We all do.

"Tomorrow we will hold a ceremony for Captain Oong," announces Sensei. "It is time to let him go. There

are new challenges ahead of us, and our captain would not want us looking back.”

I glance at Yoshi; his lips are pressed together. There’s a new hardness etched across his face. But I’m not fooled. It’s a fragile mask.

Sensei notices, too, but he doesn’t pause. “Now that we have almost reached our destination, we will speak only in Chinese,” he says.

Mikko groans, but the captain would have approved.

Leaning over the bow, I look out into the endless ocean. Our travels began with trepidation and excitement, but those feelings are gone now. I wish we had stayed at home.

“Why did we come here?” I ask.

“I am broadening your horizons,” Sensei answers.

At home the horizon rises and falls with mountain peaks. Here, it stretches forever, from one side of my world to the other. It’s never been so broad. But why did the captain have to die? And why did Yoshi have to suffer all over again? Inside my head, I scream at Sensei, *Why? Why?*

“Suffering makes us strong,” murmurs Sensei.

I turn to snap in anger. I don't want to be strong. But when I look into the wizard's bright-blue eyes, I see his great strength and all the suffering that made him wise.

Instead of yelling, I bury my head against my master's chest.

Sensei lifts my chin to look into my eyes. "It is time for me to tell a story."

Sitting down, he claps his hands. Quickly, we form a half circle around him, tucking our feet beneath us. There's only one thing better than honey rice pudding, and that's a good story. Of course, it's better to have both, but Yoshi still looks a little green and I wouldn't wave a bowl under his nose yet.

"For me, this journey began before you were born. I voyaged across the ocean with Captain Oong's father and traveled to the Imperial Jade Palace to study."

It's the first story Sensei has ever told us in Chinese. He stops to see if we understand.

"Go on," I want to say, but Sensei teaches us to be patient.

"I visited the White Tiger Temple, where the Shaolin monks are skilled fighters and healers." He pauses to scratch his nose.

Sometimes it is really hard to be patient.

“I stayed for five years. When I left, I promised the abbot I would return if the temple needed my help. And that I would bring with me the best students I could find.”

We smile, thinking we are the best. But Sensei hasn’t finished his story.

“When we were at Toyozawa Castle, I received a message that the temple has lost its imperial protection and is under threat from jealous military factions. The abbot needs our help as soon as possible. But getting there will be far more perilous than traveling across the ocean. There is a man standing in my way.”

It’s hard to imagine one man causing Sensei a problem.

“Who?” Kyoko asks.

“His name is Qing-Shen. Once he was my student, just like you. He recently sent me a message.” Sensei takes a piece of silk from his pocket and unfolds it to reveal a calligraphy character. It’s harder to read Chinese than to speak it, but I recognize the word right away. *Eagle.*

“What does that mean?” asks Taji, puzzled.

“He wants to soar like the Eagle, to rise above all other men. But the Eagle is not his spirit guide, and you cannot force what you must wait to find.”

Yoshi nods. He waited much longer than the rest of us to find his spirit guide, but eventually the Tiger tracked him down.

Our master looks sad and closes his eyes, remembering something. “Qing-Shen thinks I deceived him long ago, and now he wants revenge. I expect he would like to see me dead.”

That’s nothing new, I think.

“When the Emperor of Japan wanted to chop off your head, he soon found out it couldn’t be done,” Yoshi says.

Mikko nods. “If the Emperor failed, then Qing-Shen doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Our emperor has a good heart,” Sensei says. “But there is nothing good in the dark heart of China’s Warrior.”

“Is he dangerous?” Kyoko asks.

“He was the most skilled soldier in the Middle Kingdom.” Our teacher sighs. “And then I taught him everything I knew.”

Could there be anyone more dangerous than that?