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The Crutch

Jack's blood pounded in his ears. His heart raced. His lungs burnt for oxygen. But he couldn't stop now.

He tore headlong through the bamboo forest, ducking and weaving between the maze of thick stems that stretched like bony fingers into a vast canopy of olive-green leaves.

'Where's he gone?' came a shout from behind.

Jack didn't stop running, despite his protesting muscles. He would not give up the pursuit.

Ever since Jack's fateful arrival in Japan, when his boat, the *Alexandria*, had been shipwrecked then attacked by ninja, the assassin Dragon Eye had been the bane of his life. The ninja had murdered his father then followed Jack across Japan, hunting him down until finally stealing his father's *rutter*.

Jack was now intent on finding the ninja and getting the logbook back.

'We've lost him!' declared a second voice in disbelief.

Jack slowed his pace and frantically looked around. His friends were right. The man they were chasing had vanished into the thicket.

Yamato and Akiko caught up with Jack. Akiko was forced

to sit down and rest. She still wasn't fully recovered from her recent poisoning and the chase had taken its toll on her. The usual white glow of her complexion had dulled and dark shadows ringed her half-moon eyes.

Jack felt a pang of guilt. Even though Akiko didn't blame him, he was the reason for her condition. In an attempt to protect the *rutter*, Jack had hidden it in the castle of *daimyo* Takatomi, the lord of Kyoto Province. It had seemed the safest place. He now knew different. Dragon Eye had broken in, Akiko had almost died trying to defend Jack, and *daimyo* Takatomi's life had been put in danger.

'How could he have got away?' demanded Yamato, leaning upon his *bō* staff and catching his breath. 'He was crippled!'

'He must have tricked us,' said Jack, turning on the spot, his eyes scouring the forest for any sign of disturbance. 'Or else he's doubled back.'

Jack knew his friend was as determined in his pursuit as he was. Four years ago, Dragon Eye had assassinated Yamato's older brother, Tenno.

'I can't believe he stole Akiko's pearl!' exclaimed Yamato, kicking out in fury at a nearby bamboo. He yowled in pain as his foot collided with its rock-hard stem.

Akiko sighed and rolled her eyes at her cousin's characteristic hotheadedness. 'Don't worry,' she said, tying her hair back, several long black strands having come loose during the pursuit, 'there are plenty more where that came from.'

'That's not the point. He took the pearl, but didn't give us any information in return.'

Jack agreed with Yamato. This had been the whole purpose of their mission into the foothills of the Iga moun-

tains. Shamefully dismissed from samurai school for jeopardizing *daimyo* Takatomi's safety, they'd been sent to Akiko's mother in Toba until a final decision was made as to their fate. On the way, though, their samurai guide, Kuma-san, had dislocated his shoulder in a fall from his horse. They'd been forced to stop over in Kameyama while he recovered. It was during this time they'd learnt from a passing merchant that a crippled man called Orochi had been bragging about knowing the infamous Dragon Eye. The village of Kabuto, where Orochi supposedly lived, was not that far, so the three of them had set off to find him.

Jack hoped that by finding Orochi they might discover where Dragon Eye's lair was. They could then inform Yamato's father, Masamoto Takeshi, of the murdering ninja's location, and maybe retrieve his father's *rutter* too. This, he prayed, would redeem him and his friends in the eyes of the legendary swordsman and they would be allowed back to the *Niten Ichi Ryū* to continue their training as samurai.

Kabuto turned out to be little more than a scattering of farmhouses built on a crossroads, with a decrepit roadside inn that served the few travellers who made their way from the main Tokaido Road to the castle town of Ueno.

It was in the bar that they found Orochi.

As Jack and the others entered, the bar went quiet. Jack's appearance often caused quite a stir, especially outside Kyoto where foreigners were rarely seen. His thick straw-blond hair and sky-blue eyes fascinated the black-haired, dark-eyed Japanese. The problem was, despite being only fourteen years old, Jack's height and strength now exceeded many of the

smaller Japanese men and they tended to react with suspicion or fear, especially since Jack dressed and acted like a samurai warrior.

Jack glanced around. The bar appeared to be more gambling den than rest stop. Low tables, sticky with spilt *saké*, were the subject of several dice and card games. A mix of merchants, wandering samurai and farmers eyed the newcomers warily. When Akiko entered, there was a low murmur of manly approval and Jack noticed that, aside from a small nervous serving girl in one corner, there were no women.

The three of them made their way over to the counter, the eyes of every customer following them.

'Excuse me?' asked Yamato of the proprietor, a compact barrel of a man with meat slabs for hands. 'Do you know where we can find Orochi-san?'

The man grunted and gave a single nod of his head towards the far corner of the bar. In a darkened recess lit by a single candle sat a hunched man, a wooden crutch propped up behind him.

'May we talk with you a moment?' asked Yamato as they approached.

'Depends on who's buying,' wheezed the man, looking them up and down and clearly wondering what a spiky-haired boy of samurai status was doing with a pretty girl and a foreigner in such a disreputable bar.

'I guess we are,' replied Yamato, bowing in acknowledgement.

'Then you're welcome to join me. Even the *gaijin*.'

Jack ignored the insulting term for a foreigner. This man was their only lead and they needed him on their side. Besides,

it could only work to their advantage if Orochi wasn't aware that Jack spoke fluent Japanese.

The man raised a deformed-looking left hand at the proprietor and asked for *saké*. With the drink ordered and Orochi having apparently accepted his three guests, conversation and gaming resumed throughout the bar.

Jack, Akiko and Yamato sat cross-legged on the opposite side of the low table, while the serving girl delivered a large flask of *saké* and a single small cup. She took payment from Yamato, then left.

'I must apologize for my terrible table manners,' Orochi wheezed genially to Akiko, indicating his dirty right leg resting upon a cushion, the sole of his foot in full view. 'I don't mean to insult you, but I've been crippled from birth, you see.'

'It's not a problem,' she replied, pouring Orochi his drink, as was the custom if a woman was present.

Picking up the cup with his good hand, Orochi knocked it back in one go. Akiko refilled it.

'We'd like some information,' began Akiko, keeping her voice low as Orochi reached for his *saké* again, 'about Dokugan Ryu's whereabouts.'

Orochi's hand faltered at the mention of Dragon Eye's name, but then he took the cup and downed its contents.

'This *saké*'s horrible!' he complained, coughing loudly and thumping his chest. 'To get the stuff *you're* after, though, costs a lot more.'

He gave Yamato a meaningful look, while Akiko poured him another cup. Yamato understood the implication and nodded to Akiko. She removed a large milky-white pearl from

the sleeve of her kimono and placed it on the table before Orochi.

'That should *more* than cover your costs,' Yamato stated.

The man's dark eyes gleamed at the sight of the pearl, then darted around the room to check no one was paying them attention. Satisfied, Orochi's mouth broke into a smile as crooked as his hand.

He reached for the pearl.

Yamato grabbed hold of the man's wrist.

'I usually pay on delivery of an order,' observed Yamato.

'Of course,' agreed Orochi, withdrawing his hand. Then, in a low voice, he whispered, 'If I were you, I'd visit the village of –'

A bell tinkled as the entrance *shoji* slid open and two new customers came in. Orochi stopped speaking and waited for them to be seated at the counter. Jack noticed one of the men had a little finger missing as he beckoned to the proprietor to place his order.

'You were saying?' prompted Yamato.

For a moment Orochi appeared distracted, but his attention quickly returned to the pearl.

'Yes . . . would you excuse me? The call of nature,' he said, reaching for his crutch. 'Takes me a little while to get there, so when I feel the need I have to go. I'm sure you understand.'

As Orochi rose to his feet, he fell against the table, knocking over the *saké* flask and spilling its contents across the surface.

'This weakness in my leg is insufferable,' he mumbled, by way of an apology. 'I'll be back in a moment. Girl, clear this up!'

Bent double, Orochi hobbled over to the back door. The serving girl hurried to their table and began to clear up the mess. As she did so, Jack noticed something was missing.

'Where's the pearl?'

They looked on the floor and then, with a dread realization, stared at one another. Orochi had stolen it!

The three of them ran out of the back door.

Orochi was nowhere to be seen. Then Akiko caught a glimpse of a figure entering the bamboo forest, which backed on to the inn. Surprisingly nimble, Orochi had disappeared into its depths before any of them managed to reach the forest edge. They plunged in after him and gave chase . . . until the thief vanished into the thicket.

'Did you hear that?' said Akiko, interrupting Jack's search for Orochi.

'Hear what?' asked Jack.

'Shhh, listen!'

They all fell silent.

There was the gentle wash of noise, like a wave upon the shore, as the leaves rustled high in the canopy. This peaceful sound was punctuated by the occasional creak of bamboo stems rubbing against one another, but there was nothing out of the ordinary to Jack's ears.

'Can't you hear it?' she insisted, before whispering, 'Hold your breath.'

Mouths closed, they all looked at one another.

Someone could *still* be heard breathing.

The sensitivity training Sensei Kano, their blind *bōjutsu* master at samurai school, had taught them paid off once again.

Jack immediately pinpointed the source of the sound and crept towards it.

Suddenly Orochi exploded from the thicket, barely five paces ahead of Jack. He'd been hiding beside them all along.

'Come back!' shouted Jack, his cry disturbing a bird high up in the canopy.

'Go on!' Akiko urged, too weary to give chase. 'I'll look after the bags.'

Yamato threw down his knapsack and hurried after Jack, who was already racing after Orochi. Then the man ducked down again into the thicket.

Jack kept going. He wouldn't be fooled this time. As he hit the spot where Orochi disappeared, his feet went from under him and he tumbled head over heels down a steep slope.

Rolling back on to his feet at the bottom, he found himself on a forest track. A few moments later, Yamato joined him. Forewarned of the danger by Jack's cry, he'd managed to avoid falling down the slope himself.

'Which way did he go?' asked Yamato.

'I don't know. I was too busy working out which way was up!' Jack replied irritably, brushing dead leaves from his hair.

'Right, you head that way and I'll go in the opposite direction,' Yamato commanded. 'Shout if you find him.'

Yamato sprinted off.

Jack was about to do the same, when he heard the sound of snapping bamboo. He spun round.

'I know you're there,' said Jack.

Orochi got unsteadily to his feet with the help of his crutch and emerged from the undergrowth.

'Ah! You understand Japanese. That's good.'

He gave Jack a pitiful bow and hobbled towards him.

'You wouldn't hurt a cripple, would you?' he pleaded, his misshapen right hand outstretched in surrender.

'You're not lame!' exclaimed Jack, studying the man carefully. 'Wasn't it your left hand that was deformed before?'

Orochi smiled his crooked smile.

'True. But I had you all fooled, didn't I?' he replied as he straightened his leg, stood to his full height and unclasped his twisted hand.

With lightning speed, he pulled apart the shaft of his wooden crutch, revealing a jagged steel spike.

Orochi drove the deadly weapon at Jack's chest.