

HEART OF THE RONIN

THE RONIN TRILOGY
Volume One

© 2009
TRAVIS HEERMANN

Heart of the Ronin

The Ronin Trilogy: Volume I

A Novel by

Travis Heermann

浪人の心

Heermann/*Heart of the Ronin*

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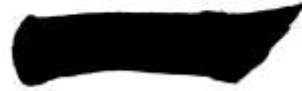
For Cheryl

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The First Scroll

Journey's End

“Be true to the thought of the moment and avoid distraction. Other than continuing to exert yourself, enter into nothing else, but go to the extent of living single thought by single thought.”

—*Hagakure*

Ken’ishi’s extended blade cast a ribbon of morning sunlight onto the ground at his feet. He looked down the curved edge of his upturned blade at the man who wanted to kill him. Takenaga’s eyes narrowed as he studied Ken’ishi’s unusual stance and his unusual blade with its antique-style curvature. Silver Crane’s hilt felt good in his hands, like a part of him. He braced his feet wide apart and dug his worn wooden sandals deeper into the dirt of the road, to ensure they would not slip. His body faced to the side, and he gripped the hilt near his chin, looking over his left shoulder toward his enemy.

The two men stood with their blades extended between them like lethal shards of ice glimmering in the noonday sun. Takenaga’s hateful eyes blazed with cold ferocity, boring into him like awls.

Ken’ishi was accustomed to being shunned. He was a warrior without a master, and thus a person outside normal society, someone to be feared and distrusted, but he still did not understand the vehemence of Takenaga’s enmity toward him.

The older man’s lips tightened. “Coward! You fear death!”

Ken’ishi’s voice was calm, slow and even. “No, I merely wish to leave this village with its constable still alive.”

Takenaga changed to the lower stance, dropping the point of his blade toward Ken’ishi’s feet, testing, looking for a reaction.

Akao stood hunched, a few paces away, his rust-red mane standing on end, his tail down against his legs. A low, uneasy growl emanated from between his bared teeth, and his ears lay flat against his head.

But Ken'ishi was no longer aware of the dog, only his enemy. He did not move, standing still as a crane in a pool of water untouched by the wind. The flaring anger he had felt only moments ago was gone, subsumed by a strange wonder. Would he still live ten heartbeats from now? He had been in danger before, but never fought a real duel against a single, well-trained opponent. He had wiggled his way out of scrapes with clumsy town guards, faced down drunken bullies, and avoided angry innkeepers, but never a situation where someone's death was assured. He must kill this man. Merely wounding him would not be sufficient to protect his own life. He saw in Takenaga's eyes that he would not rest until Ken'ishi was dead. Did he have it within him to kill?

He reached for the nothingness, shifting his awareness to the Now, the instant, forgetting the before and the after. His blade hung motionless in the air before him. His eyes did not move; he was focused on a point several paces behind his opponent, but his awareness encompassed the smallest of Takenaga's movements; the shift of his weight in preparation to strike, his grip on the hilt of his katana, the flex of the muscles in his forearms, and the inevitable explosion of movement.

* * * * *

Earlier that morning, before Ken'ishi even saw the village, the scent of smoke and onions wafting between the trees of the surrounding forest had sent his empty stomach into an uproar. His right hand absently massaged his empty coin pouch. Because he was ronin, he rarely found anyone willing to give him a job as even a common laborer. He was outside of society because he did not have a master, lower in some respects than even a geisha or a merchant. People did not trust ronin. There were no wars these days, not since the Minamoto clan had seized power away from the Emperor fifty years

before. These days, lone warriors often resorted to robbery to support themselves. Ken'ishi could hardly conceive of such a vast gulf of time, of an era when all warriors had masters and respect. He had lived perhaps seventeen years—he did not know for certain—and fifty years was like a dozen lifetimes to him. Besides, he knew practically nothing of politics anyway. His teacher had taught him how to survive and how to use the sword at his hip, and little else about the world of men.

But there was something else his teacher had taught him, something he could do that other men could not.

Akao lifted his nose, taking in the scent, and spoke. "Smells like a village," the dog said. "Give us some food?" A whimper of hunger escaped the dog's throat.

Ken'ishi said, "Or maybe they'll beat us with sticks. Remember the last time?" From the first day they had met, Akao had always thought with this belly.

"Beat me with a stick and we ran away."

"Yes, we were lucky that time. The kami favored us."

"Always hate us."

"That's why we trust only each other."

"Yes, trust," Akao said, his tail wagging, his tongue lolling.

Until he had left his teacher and met his foster parents, Ken'ishi had thought everyone could speak to animals, and he remembered the sudden sensation of alienation when he found they could not, and the suspicion in their eyes when they found that he could.

The path led down the rocky slope straight into the village. Through small gaps in the thick canopy, Ken'ishi saw the terraced patchwork of fields in the valley, with farmers cultivating their spring vegetables. He could not remember the last time he had eaten a hot meal. The earthy taste of the wild roots he had dug up earlier this morning lingered on his tongue, but had done little except fan the fire of his hunger. Akao usually sustained himself with mice and other small creatures. But Ken'ishi could not share those meals.

There was too little meat on them, and he could not bring himself to eat them whole. Once, the dog had been lucky enough to catch a rabbit, and they had shared it that night.

He hoped the peasants would still have some rice, since the winter stores of food were often depleted by this time of year. But this land was new to him, different, warmer than the northern island that raised him. Cherry trees here were already in bloom, earlier than in the north. The last of his coins had purchased his sea crossing a few days ago, and he walked this unfamiliar land with nothing. He had no idea what to expect here; but his feet had no wish to remain still. Hitching up the coarse rope supporting his worn, tattered trousers and adjusting his dusty traveling pack on his shoulders, Ken'ishi rested a hand on his father's sword, Silver Crane, as he resumed his trek down the mountainside.

Then he stopped as a strange tingling shot through his palm, lifting his hand from the silver pommel shaped like the head of a crane. He had never felt such a sensation before. Had he imagined it? He did not think so. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Silver Crane rested quietly in its scabbard. Ken'ishi gripped the hilt lightly, feeling the cool silver fittings and the roughness of the ray-skin grip. A strange thought came to him, the sudden feeling that he would have to use the sword today. While he had never used it to kill, he did not doubt that Silver Crane had been used to kill in the past, many, many times.

He resumed walking again, going more slowly now, wary. As he walked, he listened to two sparrows hidden in the budding branches above. From the tone of the little birds' voices, he knew they were berating each other. Small birds were so ill tempered sometimes. The understanding of their speech danced around his awareness, in sight but out of grasp. The birds spoke a strange, unfamiliar dialect, just like the people of this land, and he found understanding any of them difficult at times.

The village came into view as he strode down the steep mountain path. It was larger than he expected, nestled between two

forested mountainsides and straddling a narrow, rocky stream. He hoped he could find an inn or a teahouse that would offer a bowl of rice to an itinerant warrior. He had no money, but there were other ways a warrior could get a meal. He was loath to resort to intimidation or thievery, even though he was practically starving.

As he drew nearer, Ken'ishi noticed several peasants in the fields had stopped working to watch him. He saw little of their faces under their broad straw hats. The small hairs on the back of his neck rose again. Surely he had little to fear from untrained farmers. The feeling of uneasiness spread down his spine, dredging the words of his teacher from the depths of his memory: *"If your sense of danger alerts you, heed it. This is how the kami speak to us. If the kami favor you, they will help you in the face of harm."* Nevertheless, he thrust the hilt of the Silver Crane a bit further forward and added a bit of swagger to his step. Akao's senses were sharp as well, nearly always sharper than his, and he trusted the dog to warn him of any danger.

The villagers on the main thoroughfare did not appear threatening. They bowed politely, offering greetings as he passed, going about their own business. Everyone appeared to be well fed and adequately clothed. In all, this seemed a prosperous village. He was suddenly conscious of the shabbiness of his own rough-woven, hemp clothes, little more than sackcloth. Most of these villagers wore brightly dyed linen. He smiled to himself, realizing he must be a fearsome sight indeed, unshaven, hair tied into an unruly shock, bow and quiver within easy reach, and the long, curved sword with its well-worn hilt and scabbard hanging from his rope belt. Perhaps he could use that to his advantage.

As he strode into the center of the village, he stopped and looked around.

The nearby villagers slowed their activities to better observe the stranger. A man appeared from the large, central house, shuffling toward Ken'ishi. His face was round and plump, circled by wisps of graying hair. He moved with a peculiar limp, and one shoulder sagged

lower than the other. His clothes were fine and crisp and brightly patterned, as if he had never worn them to do a day's labor.

The man bowed obsequiously. His lips were strangely soft and wet as he spoke. "I am Yohachi, sir, the headman of this village. A lovely morning, sir, isn't it?" His words were borne on a spray of distasteful, whuffling wetness, but at least he spoke in a dialect that the young warrior understood. The headman glanced uneasily at the dog, and the dog returned the stare, eyes narrowed with suspicion.

Ken'ishi bowed in return. "Yes, fine weather today." He drank in the morning air, turning his body so that his sword was clearly visible.

"We are honored to have a powerful man such as you paying a visit to our humble village. Where are you bound for?"

"Don't fear. I won't be staying long. Only long enough to find something to eat."

The man hesitated for only an instant. "Of course, of course! I was being rude! Please excuse me! Come along. Come to my house. My wife will make you something. And we have tea. Good tea!"

Ken'ishi glanced at Akao, and the dog grinned hopefully.

But as the headman turned and led him toward the large house, Ken'ishi thought he spied Yohachi making an almost imperceptible gesture at a boy watching them. The boy backed away between two houses and disappeared.

Uneasiness fluttered in his belly. That boy could be bringing a large village of angry farmers down upon him, but he had already executed his strike and now must follow it through.

Ken'ishi and Akao followed Yohachi through the front gate of his home, past the modest garden, and into the house. As was his custom, Akao sat down outside the door, where he would wait until his friend came out. Akao gave Ken'ishi a glance that said, "Bring me something this time."

Yohachi slid the door closed. "May I take your pack, sir?"

"I'll keep it with me. No need to trouble yourself."

The plump little man bowed again, perhaps a bit too low, then seated him in the main room and disappeared into the kitchen. Ken'ishi shrugged off his pack and untied his sword, placing it beside him on his left. All around him, he sensed small movements and voices throughout the house; hidden whispers and stealthy footsteps. Children? Servants?

Yohachi returned carrying a steaming bowl. Ken'ishi's nostrils flared at the scent. He took the bowl, but not too eagerly, and found it filled with hot, seasoned rice and green onions. His mouth burst with water as he readied the chopsticks and lifted the bowl to his lips. Barely taking the time to blow the steam off, he shoveled rice into his maw.

"If I am not being too rude, may I ask your name, sir?"

Past another huge mouthful of rice, the samurai answered, "Ken'ishi."

Yohachi shifted uncomfortably on the floor. "Where do you come from?"

Ken'ishi did not answer, taking another large mouthful instead. The savory taste of the seasonings and onions were more satisfying than any meal he could remember.

Yohachi nodded past the lack of response. "Where do you travel?"

"Wherever my expertise can be of use."

"Ah, a ronin, then. You have no one to serve."

Ken'ishi said nothing, and Yohachi fidgeted and squirmed even more.

"You have seen anything unusual on the road? We have heard tales of bandits in the area. Rumor says the bandits are led by an oni."

Ken'ishi raised an eyebrow. "An oni?"

"So they say."

"I haven't seen any bandits in these parts."

“Fortunate for you, then. Last month they raided a village in the next province. They stole almost all of the winter stores. The village has no seed rice for this year.”

“That’s unlucky. Has anyone given them food or seed rice?”

“I do not know. The story I heard only told of the demon.” Yohachi licked his lips and looked away for a moment, then back. “An interesting sword you have there.”

“What does a village headman know of swords?”

“Consider it a personal interest. It is of exceptional quality, is it not? And such a fine scabbard! It is very old, yes?”

Ken’ishi looked at the weapon he knew so well. The scabbard was not fine at all. It was battered and stained. The once-beautiful cranes, inlaid in mother-of-pearl flying through silver moonlight, were worn and chipped, and the dark lacquer was cracked, revealing the wood beneath. Some of the silver fittings were tarnished. “It is. It was my father’s.”

“What is your family name?”

Instead of answering, Ken’ishi took another mouthful of rice.

The front door suddenly whisked open, and a large shadow fell over them. Yohachi bowed low, putting his forehead to the floor, and Ken’ishi put down the half-empty bowl. The man shed his sandals and strode into the room, towering over the two men seated on the floor. Ken’ishi sucked bits of rice from his teeth as he appraised the newcomer, noting how he carried his weight. Tall and built like a tree trunk, with thick, callused hands. The sleeves of his kimono were tied back to ensure freedom of movement. The hilt of his sword was well worn and stained with use. A vivid white scar ran across one cheek, over the bridge of his blunt nose, and into his eyebrow, perpetually twisting his features.

The man’s voice was deep and accustomed to command. “I am Nishimuta no Takenaga. This is my village. What is your business here?”

Ken’ishi paused a moment before answering. “I am Ken’ishi,” he said, bowing. “My business is just a bit of food, lord.”

He fixed his gaze in the distance, allowing his awareness to encompass all that lay within his peripheral vision, studying the towering constable without looking directly at him.

“Ronin are not welcome in my town,” Takenaga said, rubbing the scar running across his nose. “I don’t like them, and there are too many rough men around here.”

“I mean to cause no trouble.”

“So you say. But ronin *always* cause trouble.”

Ken’ishi glanced purposefully at Yohachi. The moist smirk on the headman’s lips melted away as he became aware that he sat well within reach of a sword-stroke.

“Get up!”

Ken’ishi kept his anger in check and glanced again at the headman, who trembled at the constable’s words.

“I must bow to Takenaga-sama’s wishes,” Yohachi said, using “sama” in deference to the other man’s superior status.

Ken’ishi clamped back his anger and scrutinized the samurai one more time. Takenaga moved with the surety and grace of a seasoned soldier. Even if Ken’ishi somehow managed to kill Takenaga, he would have to fight his way out of this village. He was still hungry, but its edge had been dulled. Losing his life was not worth half a bowl of rice. He regretted not having anything to give Akao.

He stood, and Takenaga stepped back, hand resting on the hilt of his sword. With deliberate slowness, Ken’ishi picked up his traveling pack with his left hand and his weapon with his right, a gesture meant to allow Takenaga the advantage, since now Ken’ishi could not draw his weapon without changing hands.

“Yohachi, my thanks for the rice. You are a generous man,” he said as he bowed again. Then, he strode past Takenaga toward the door, slipping into his sandals as he stepped outside.

Ken’ishi did not look back as he walked into the street and headed for the edge of the village. Akao fell in beside him, his eyes scanning for threats. No doubt he had heard the entire exchange, but

he did not understand human speech very well. Ken'ishi was aware of Takenaga escorting him ten paces behind, and his anger at the insult built within him like a thundercloud, roiling taller and thicker, like a towering black pillar of lightning. Then a small stone zipped past his shoulder from behind and bounced in the dirt, doubtless thrown by one of the young boys he had seen hiding between two houses. He did not turn, but held his jaw like an iron billet. Akao turned and barked a challenge.

Takenaga said, "You should keep your dog quiet, ronin scum. Or perhaps his skin will make a nice drum."

"He speaks as he chooses," Ken'ishi said, "and save your threats."

When they passed beyond the boundaries of the village and the road lay open before him, Ken'ishi suddenly dropped his pack and spun, switching his sheathed sword to his left hand, loosening the blade with his thumb. The arrogant smile on Takenaga's lips drew into a taut line, and he stopped, hand on his hilt poised to draw.

Takenaga said, "You would be wise to keep walking."

Ken'ishi's anger crackled inside. "You would have been wise to leave us alone. I am too young to be wise. And my honor would still be stained."

"Ronin scum like you know nothing of honor," Takenaga growled. The vivid white scar twisted his features even further into a sneer.

The young man's anger surged, filling his belly with fresh heat. "I am not ronin by choice. My family was slain by treacherous, hateful men, much like you."

The man stiffened, and his arrogant gaze shifted to cold calculation.

Ken'ishi continued, "I have dreamed of my father's murderers, and they look much like you. He would not stand for the treatment you have shown me. No better than a dog!"

"I would have fed a dog."

Ken'ishi whipped Silver Crane free of its scabbard, an action Takenaga followed a split heartbeat later. Ken'ishi tossed the scabbard aside and said, "If you choose, you can watch the sunset today. Your defeat will satisfy me, but your death is not necessary." Silver Crane was warm in his hands. He hardly felt its weight. It was an extension of his body, like a long, lethal limb.

"One fewer ronin will make the sunset brighter, after all. I've killed ten men twice your age, stripling! And three others have no hands, masterless scum wandering the countryside begging for scraps! All better men than you."

Ken'ishi raised his sword, assuming the stance taught him by his old teacher, legs braced apart, body turned sideways, sword blade upturned with the point aiming for his enemy's throat. His teacher had told him this was a master stance, unusable by anyone without the highest degree of skill. And it gave Takenaga pause.

Takenaga's sword was held straight out before him, the point aimed at Ken'ishi's throat.

Ken'ishi waited, allowing his anger to seep away, his jaw loosening, his shoulders relaxing, his muscles motionless. The immediate past melted away as well, leaving him in the present, the moment, the instants of one moment after another. The two men faced each other, and death was in the air.

* * * * *

Takenaga leaped forward, his blade flying up, then slashing downward in a stroke meant to sever at least one of his opponent's hands. Ken'ishi's small movements rippled like the water of a suddenly disturbed pool as the crane struck its prey, allowing the enemy's stroke to pass him by in the timeless instants between heartbeats. Only when Takenaga's missed stroke made a sufficient opening did Ken'ishi move, and Silver Crane flicked outward like the crescent of a crane's beak.

Takenaga grunted and stumbled backward, clutching at his throat. Bright, wet crimson pumped between his fingers. His eyes bulged with rage and surprise, and his scar blazed white across his

blunt features. He struck at Ken'ishi again, but his swing was weak and off-target. Deflecting it with ease, Ken'ishi watched as the other man fell backwards on the dirt path, gasping through the blood gushing from his mouth and nose.

Ken'ishi stared at the bright blood as it spurted into the air, spreading across the dirt path, darkening the soil. Takenaga's body fought to breathe, to live, even as the realization dawned in the man's eyes that his life was finished. With a terrible sickness in his belly, Ken'ishi watched the light in the constable's eyes diminish like a starving candle.

Ken'ishi forced himself to look away from the moment of death. He noticed that dozens of villagers had watched the confrontation. They stared at him, their eyes wide in fear and amazement. Some ran for their homes. He wiped the blood from the tip of his weapon, then, with slow deliberation, sheathed it and tied the scabbard to his belt.

Yohachi thrust himself through the crowd. The headman's weak face contorted with rage, and he picked up a large stone and threw it at Ken'ishi. "Get out of here, criminal!" he shrieked.

The stone fell short, but other villagers followed his example, taking up more stones and the cry of, "Criminal! Criminal!"

A fist-sized stone struck Ken'ishi in the chest, shoving him back a step, driving the breath out of him. He gasped with pain and fresh anger. Ducking another hail of stones, he leaped to the fallen corpse, patted for the man's coin purse, snatched it, spun away, grabbed his pack, bow, and quiver, and fled down the road, stones bouncing around him and off his back.

* * * * *

As the ronin disappeared into the forest, Yohachi could only watch him go, feeling a mixture of fear, rage, relief, and wonder. Fear at having seen the cold, brutal face of death so closely. Rage at the loss of the village's protector, and Yohachi's carefully cultivated benefactor. Relief that the strange young ronin had fled. And wonder at how Takenaga had been such a formidable warrior, renowned for

his swordsmanship, yet the young ronin had slain him almost effortlessly. Takenaga was known for his brutality and his hatred of ronin. Perhaps there was also some relief that Yohachi would never again live in fear of one Takenaga's drunken rages. But Takenaga's penchant for violence was only one of the reasons Yohachi had cultivated the samurai's friendship for so long. He was also an influential vassal of Lord Nishimuta no Jiro. Lord Nishimuta had given Takenaga this village to oversee because it was prosperous, to reward Takenaga for his faithful service, but also because it was several days' travel from Lord Nishimuta's estate, keeping Takenaga's rough demeanor at an acceptable distance.

That young bastard! The nerve of that scurrilous vagabond! The ronin must be dealt with! Yohachi knew that his voice was not one to inspire the villagers to righteous fervor, but he had to do something. He cried out, "Everyone, listen to me! We must capture this ronin and punish him!" He looked at the men standing around him and saw the same range of emotions in their faces that he felt. They were afraid, but also angry. "Find Takenaga-sama's deputies and bring them here. They must help us. Everyone, gather your weapons quickly. We must chase this ronin down!" Seeing the fear on their faces, he added, "Don't worry about having to fight him. When he sees all of us, he will turn coward and submit. He will not have the courage to face all of us. Now go! Gather your weapons. We must not lose him!"

The villagers dispersed to gather up whatever makeshift weapons they could find, clubs and pitchforks, even a few rusty spears left over from the wars of fifty years before. The three deputies arrived, Taro, Kei, and Shohei. They carried their jitte, the only weapons Takenaga would allow them to carry, unsharpened parrying weapons about half the size of a sword with a long straight "blade" and a shorter, parallel prong designed to catch and hold a sword or a spear. The deputies approached the lifeless body of their master, and their faces went slack with shock.

The eldest, Taro, stood over the body. He had always been a good boy, Yohachi thought, and now he looked so shocked and

solemn that Yohachi could not imagine what he must be thinking. Takenaga had chosen his deputies from the strongest and most reliable of the village's young men, but he was not a kind man and had often treated them harshly. *What must they be feeling now*, Yohachi wondered. *Shock, anger, sadness, and . . . relief?*

While he waited for everyone to gather, Yohachi approached Takenaga's body, staring at the gleaming blade clenched in the dead man's fist. Swords had always fascinated him and had been a favorite topic of conversation between him and Takenaga. The constable had often boasted about the fine quality of his weapon. It was a gift from Lord Nishimuta, made in the new, heavier katana-style, rather than the antique tachi-style, and had seen more than a few battles against bandit gangs over the years. Takenaga had never let him touch it, and he had always wanted to feel its heft, to experience the power of a true warrior's weapon. Yohachi had never been a strong man. He had been gravely ill as a child, the long sickness leaving his body weak and twisted, unable to work as hard as others, unable to wield a weapon. His inability had fueled his fascination with the tools of the warrior. Now he knelt down, untied the scabbard from Takenaga's sash, and pulled it out. Then he pried the dead man's fingers from around the well-worn hilt of the katana and picked it up. It felt so heavy in his hand. He stared at it in wonder. Then he slid the blade into the scabbard and prepared to thrust the long sword into his sash.

A sudden voice stopped him. "Wait."

Yohachi turned to face the young man standing beside him.

"Are you able to use that, Yohachi?" Taro's voice was heavy with caution. "Takenaga always said that when you put on the swords, you become dead. Are you ready to die?"

Yohachi looked hard into the young man's face. In fact, he had heard Takenaga say those very words, but had never considered their meaning. But he liked the feel of the sleeping steel in his hands. "Takenaga-sama would want someone to use his weapons to avenge his death. This blade will taste that ronin's blood!"

The villagers standing nearby nodded, and a few voiced their agreement. Already Yohachi felt the power of the sword coursing through him. He stood a little straighter. His fingers caressed the silken cord wrappings, the roughness of the ray skin under the cords.

"Wait, Yohachi," Taro said, his voice hardening. "Do you truly know how to use those? Or do you claim them because you are selfish? I am Takenaga-sama's chief deputy. He has no heirs and no immediate family. I am strong and I know how to use them. Give the swords to me, and I will see that Takenaga's death is avenged."

Yohachi snorted. "But I am the headman here!"

"Yes and the village needs you. You must be alive to lead. I ask again, are you ready to die? Because that's what it means to wear those swords. If you are not, Takenaga's shade will know, and he will curse you for a coward."

Yohachi gasped and dropped the sword. It clattered on the ground. He had not thought of that. His greed for the swords had made him forget that Takenaga's spirit was still about, and doubtless angry.

Taro bent to pick it up. "You are a wise man." He thrust the sword into his own sash and tied the cords. The two other deputies stared at him as he bent to retrieve the short sword as well, placing it in his sash alongside the katana.

A mob had gathered around them, but Yohachi could only stare at the face of the heretofore quiet young man. What emotions were churning behind that solemn mask? The determination was evident in his bearing. Taro had meant what he said. He would do everything in his power to find the ronin.

When the crowd looked as if it had grown as large as it could—some forty-odd farmers and villagers and three deputies—Yohachi looked at the faces of his friends and neighbors, people he had known all his life. "That ronin must be punished for what he has done. We will find him and bring him back. Then we will decide what sort of death is best for him!"

Agreement murmured through the mob. "Let us go quickly! He has a head start!" Then Yohachi led them down the road in pursuit of the criminal.

* * * * *

Ken'ishi did not stop running until the village was long out of sight in the forest behind him. The sun-dappled road was deserted in both directions. A breeze brushed the upper branches, but did not reach the forest floor. He stopped beside a small roadside shrine, his breath huffing in and out like a smith's bellows. His ears burned with exertion, and sweat plastered a few loose wisps of hair to the side of his face. He let his pack, bow, and quiver hang loose in his grip, resting one hand on his knee as he tried to catch his breath, the other hand rubbing the painful bruise on his chest inflicted by the hurled stone.

Akao stopped beside him, his tongue lolling. He looked back down the road toward the village. "Coming." His deep brown eyes, slanted like a fox, searched the road behind them, his pointed red ears erect, his nose lifted into the wind.

Ken'ishi nodded. "How far?"

"Go soon."

"I am weak!" he growled. A swirling, leaden sickness in his belly drowned the remnants of his previous hunger. What would his dead father think of his actions just now? Would he be proud that his son had won the duel? Ashamed at the theft of the man's money? Neither? Both? "I am sorry for my weakness, Father!" he said, choking on his shame. He had fought the duel to defend the honor of his family, then he had soiled it himself just as quickly. For that matter, what would his teacher say? What about his foster parents? He could almost hear his foster mother clicking her tongue at him, as she used to do so often when he made some terrible blunder. Then her disapproval would be followed by some great kindness to show him that his errors were forgiven. Tears of shame trickled down his nose. He missed her kindness now. He missed a friendly face amidst a land full of strangers who did not care if he lived or died. He

wanted to throw the money away, but he was so hungry and had been for so long.

His mind reeled as he tried to conceive of some way to atone for his misdeed. Would robbing the dead offend the kami?

"I'm sorry, my friend," he said to Akao. "I couldn't bring you any food."

The dog smiled, then padded closer and nudged Ken'ishi's knee with his nose. "Not hungry now."

Then a new voice piped up, small and high-pitched. "Who's talking down there?"

Ken'ishi looked around. Where had the voice come from? As his breath slowed, he wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve, and his gaze stopped on the nearby shrine.

"Who's there?" he said.

No reply.

He looked at the shrine. Inside was a little statue of one the Seven Bodhisattvas. Had the small stone god spoken to him? He wondered what the shrine's significance might be, why people sometimes built these small structures filled with gods and offerings in the most unusual or out-of-the-way places. There was also a wooden placard inside with some writing on it, but he recognized only a few of the characters.

Then he noticed a sparrow sitting on the roof of the shrine, watching him with its small black eyes. Ken'ishi studied the bird for a moment.

"Did you speak to us?" Ken'ishi asked. Perhaps the bird could help him. Sparrows were good fortune.

"I did. You surprised me."

Ken'ishi said, straightening and bowing. "Good day, Mr. Sparrow. I am sorry to have startled you."

It smoothed its ruffled, pale breast feathers and said with some surprise, "Good day to you, big hairy man. How is it that you can speak my tongue?"

"I learned from my teacher."

“I have never heard of a man who could understand birds. Or dogs, for that matter. Do you have any seeds? I am hungry.”

It was so difficult to speak to such small birds. Their minds flitted back and forth as if thoughts were branches. “I am sorry,” Ken’ishi said. “I don’t have any seeds.”

“Do you have any stiff grass? I am building a nest for my wife.”

“Again, my apologies. I have none.” Then he thought for a moment. Perhaps he could offer the sparrow something, not only to atone for his earlier misdeed, but also because he could certainly use a bit of good fortune. His hair, tied into ponytail, symbolized his nature as a warrior. “Perhaps I could offer you some of my hair.”

“What an excellent idea! An auspicious gift! You are very helpful.”

Ken’ishi drew his knife, sliced away a generous lock of hair from his ponytail, and laid it at the sparrow’s feet.

The sparrow bowed and said, “Thank you, strange big hairy man. I am in your debt. For your kindness, I think I will repay you with a bit of good fortune.”

“Thank you, good bird, but there is no need to repay me. You have helped me to avoid my own despair.”

“Too late. The good fortune has already been granted. You will meet it very soon. I hope you use it wisely. Why were you running? Is something chasing you?”

“No,” Ken’ishi said, “I run from myself.”

“What a silly thing to say! If you run from yourself, you are caught before you raise a wing! Have you any seeds?”

“No, kind bird. I’m sorry. What lies further down this road?”

“My nest is here! What lies down there does not matter to me!”

“Forgive me, I am being rude.”

“If you have no seeds for me to eat, then be gone! You have wasted enough of my time, and I am hungry. I do not live as long as you!”

“Thank you, Mr. Sparrow. I’ll move on.” He had not remembered how fast the demeanor of the small birds could shift. They forgot kindnesses so quickly and remembered wrongs for so long. In that respect, they were much like people. Ken’ishi shrugged his belongings onto his back and prepared to continue down the road, then he paused. He pulled out Takenaga’s coin pouch and plucked out the largest, shiniest gold coin. Then he placed it at the feet of the small stone god and clapped his hands twice, as he had seen others do to get the attention of the spirit of the shrine, bowed, and asked the shrine god for forgiveness for his deed. He received no response. With a heavy sigh, he moved on.

The smells of the forest, vibrant with life, helped to soothe the pain in his belly for a while, but as he walked, the constable’s silken coin purse bumped into him with each step, driving him deeper and deeper into despair. His ears burned with the cries of “Criminal! Criminal!”

He did not feel like a criminal for killing the constable. That had been a duel of honor, and he had offered a chance to decide the duel without death. His teacher had prepared him for battle, but not for the reality—the finality—of it. In his mind, he saw Takenaga’s pale face again, haloed by the expanding pool of blood, gasping, staring at him. Ken’ishi shuddered. He knew the memory of the duel would be burned into his mind until the moment he died, and perhaps carry into his next life. His anger at Takenaga’s insults was gone, drawn away with the departure of the man’s life. But he was thankful to the kami for his own life.

He looked at Takenaga’s coin purse in his hand, with his belly a cauldron of emotions. He cocked his arm back to throw the purse into the forest, then stopped. Guilt churned in his belly. In his weakness, he had stooped to thievery, and that made him a criminal.

But now he could buy food for himself and Akao, for a little while, and in that time, perhaps he could find someone willing to employ him. Perhaps he could find a way to atone for his misdeed, but to do that, he had to live. Starving to death would serve no one.

Samurai could also kill themselves to cleanse the stain of dishonor from their souls, but. . . Suddenly he wanted to weep for shame, and a lump formed in his throat.

If another constable captured him, he would be tortured and executed. Would an honorable warrior steal from a dead man? Samurai aspired to be the epitome of strength and honor, but sometimes they were simply evil men who enjoyed bloodletting for its own sake. Like the incident in the capital a few weeks before, where he had seen both the best and the worst of what a samurai could be.

Standing on the road, with Akao beside him, he hefted Takenaga's coin purse. He guessed it contained enough money to feed him for a long time. It was easy to see why some ronin stooped to banditry to fill their bellies. Should he give the money to someone he might meet on the road, perhaps a priest or a peasant? But then the thought of eating grubs and roots again tightened his grip on the heavy silken pouch. He looked at it for a long time, until Akao nudged his leg.

"Go now. Whine later," Akao said.

Ken'ishi sighed, then put the purse inside his shirt and resumed his way down the path. Was this the weakness his sensei had told him all men possess? The darkness, the demons inside their spirits that make them greedy and cruel. Was this the weakness that his teacher had taught him how to conquer? Had he failed so quickly? Was this kind of evil the reason for his family's murder?

As he walked, Ken'ishi heard the sound of a stream gurgling over rocks. Perhaps what he needed now was to sit beside it for a while. As a boy, when his teacher had been harsh with him, he had often sat beside the stream that passed the foot of the mountain where he had been raised. The burbling sound had always calmed him, washing away whatever terrible feelings had filled him. Fear, anger, shame, all could be carried away by the smooth, serene sound of water sliding over the rocks.

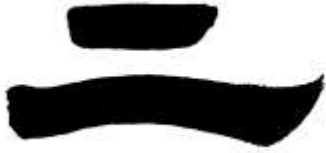
He found the stream and climbed down the rocky bank to sit beside it. This was a pleasant spot. He noticed that Akao was gone, but he did not worry. The dog was stealthy when he chose to be, and had doubtless gone off in search of a meal. Bright green moss covered the moist rocks, and the abundance of bushes and bamboo along the banks gave him a feeling of seclusion. The stream was no more than ten paces across, and the water was clear. Suddenly a fierce thirst struck him, and he knelt to thrust his face into the cool, gentle torrent, sucking down a great draught. Wiping his face, he stood up. The smell of the moist earth, the gentle gurgle of the water, the whisper of the breeze through the bamboo leaves, the song of a bird singing to its mate, all worked together to dispel some of the shame he felt. The place where he sat was invisible from the road. He would be safe here for a while. When he was calm, his hunger would return. Languid fish slid through the stream, and his stomach rumbled at the sight. The day was far from over, but he no longer felt like traveling. He would camp here for the night.

Soon, however, the sounds of a group of people preceded them coming up the road. His relaxation evaporated in an instant. The sound came from the direction of the village; the angry mob searching for him. He crept up the bank of the stream toward the road, darting from brush to tree. The voices and footsteps grew louder. He stopped behind a thicket, where he was just able to see the nearby patch of road.

Before long, the mob came in sight. There was Yohachi, the distasteful village headman, three deputies, one of them carrying the dead constable's swords, and many more villagers with clubs and spears. Ken'ishi's chest clenched. He had angered them, like a nest of hornets struck with a stick. There were too many to fight, and he had no more stomach for killing today. Ducking behind his thicket, he waited until they passed, knowing he was fortunate that his presence had not been discovered. Were they following his tracks? Would they see where he had left the road? It was difficult for a group of people to remain vigilant for long periods, especially when traveling. After

they had passed, he stole out to the road and studied the earth. The passage of the villagers had obscured any tracks he had left. He was safe, for now, but he could not stay here.

But now he had to be even more vigilant. These villagers would spread the word in the surrounding communities about what had happened. He would become a wanted man. It was no longer safe for him to travel. Everyone in the province would soon be on the lookout for him. What would he do? Avoiding every village would be difficult, especially when he needed food. Perhaps after a while, the fervor would die down and the villagers would sink back into complacency, after they thought that the criminal had left the area. The only thing he was certain of was that he had to get far away from here as soon as possible.



“Warfare is the greatest affair of state, the basis of life and death, the Way to survival or extinction.”

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

The tall, waspish man dabbed at his sweating forehead with a soft cloth held in a thin hand, frowning at the hot, humid air. The tavern keeper kept his establishment far too warm for Yasutoki’s liking. The hubbub of the common room was only slightly muffled by the rice-paper walls of the private room where Yasutoki sat, sipping his sake. Window shutters kept out the chill spring night. The sounds of gulls had subsided with the fall of darkness, but the ceaseless rumble of the surf remained. A little fresh air would do him good. And since the man he was waiting for was late, he opened his mouth to request that a servant open the small window.

The door slid open suddenly, and the smells of the sea wafted in with the man who entered. The stranger gazed down at Yasutoki with hard, slitted eyes. Then he spoke in his own barbarian tongue, without politeness or preamble. “You are the one called ‘Green Tiger?’” His voice was rough and uncultured.

Yasutoki’s nose wrinkled. This man was more uncouth than a common fisherman, and worse, he was a foreigner. Yasutoki answered him in the barbarian tongue, “I am Green Tiger. Come in and shut the door.”

The man snorted with a wolfish smile of skepticism, but he slid the door shut behind him. “I was expecting someone a bit more . . . a bit bigger, perhaps.”

Yasutoki studied the man’s strange, blunt features, and his long, thin mustache. His clothes were rough and simple, but not ragged. At his belt, he wore a short, broad-bladed sword, or perhaps a long knife, in a leather scabbard. He stank of sweat and the sea, and somehow of horses. Even after a sea voyage, he still smelled of the horses for which the Mongol people were infamous.

The man’s gaze scanned the room, flicking here and there. Finally, he settled himself on the other side of the table. Yasutoki allowed a measure of quivering into his hand as he poured warm sake into the bowl in front of the stranger, until he steadied himself with his other hand. A bit of weakness would put the barbarian at ease. He felt the stranger’s taut power even across the table, like a drawn bowstring.

The man took the bowl of sake and downed it in one gulp. He grimaced. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to this stuff,” he grunted. “Perhaps when the Great Khan is in charge, you people will learn to drink real liquor! Those Koryu dogs had better than this on the boat!”

Yasutoki ignored the man’s uncouth words and sat back, smoothing his fine silk robes. “I trust your journey was a safe one.”

“The most miserable experience of my life! I dread the day I have to return. I would rather stay in hell than ride a boat back to heaven!”

“This is a bad season for sea travel.”

“Between bouts of vomiting I thought I would drown,” the man grumbled.

Yasutoki frowned in sympathetic sorrow. “What a terrible experience.”

The man grunted and held out his bowl.

Yasutoki poured again. “The Great Khan has sent messages to the Imperial court, has he not?”

The man's face grew sober. "Yes. The Golden Horde's lands extend so far to the west that our empire cannot easily be crossed. We have reached the lands where the sun sets. The Khan now looks toward the rising sun, to the sea. The Khan has ordered your Emperor to submit to his rule, or face invasion."

"Our lord is direct, as always," said Yasutoki. "I suspected that was his intention. Has the Great Khan sent me a message as well?"

The Mongol withdrew a bamboo tube from his tunic and placed it on the table between them.

Yasutoki took the tube, pulled the waxed stopper from one end and dumped a small scroll into his hand. He carefully unrolled the paper and read it. Allowing the Mongol to see no hint of his reaction to its contents, he rolled up the scroll again and placed it back in the tube, secreting the container within his robes. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "The Emperor and his courtiers are weak and soft. The mere thought of war with the Khan would fill them with fear. They might well consider his request. The Shogunate, on the other hand, is a different story. The Hojo clan will never agree to such a demand."

"But is not the Emperor in charge?"

Yasutoki shook his head. "My uncouth friend, you are ignorant of Japanese politics." The Mongol stiffened, as Yasutoki had intended. "The Emperor is our divine ruler, descended from the gods, but he has little real power. He and his court live in splendor and opulence, heedless of the lives and suffering of the people outside the palace. The Emperor relies on tradition and prestige to see his will done." He laughed harshly. "He is not even in charge of his own court! He is the impotent clown leading a parade of fools! Even the feeble power of the court lies in the hands of the Emperor's predecessor, the *retired* Emperor, who guides all decisions of importance in the capital from his sequestered chambers. But the *real* power does not lie in the capital. It resides in the Shogun."

"The Great General," said the Mongol. He had been listening intently, absorbing what he had heard with a sharp intelligence that Yasutoki had overlooked. He reminded himself not to underestimate this barbarian. His manners were rough, but his mind was as sharp as a katana.

"Yes! You understand military power, don't you, my horse-loving friend?"

"The only true power is military power. There can be no political power without it," said the Mongol. "When the Great Khan's grandsire, Genghis, united all the clans of the steppes, those soft Yuan emperors and their minions learned what real power was. The power of the horse and the bow and the steel thews of the men who use them!" His eyes flashed fiercely, and he clenched his fist.

"Yes, the power of the horse and the bow. The same is true here, but it wears a different face. We pay obeisance to the cloistered Emperor while the Shogun runs roughshod over our backs." A wry, contemptuous smile twisted Yasutoki's lips. "But even the Shogun is weak. It seems that every stronghold of power in my land is merely a façade. The true power of the Shogun does not lie in the hands of the Shogun anymore. It is in the hands of the Hojo clan, the Shogun's regents. The Shogun is a mere boy, a puppet, like the Emperor. The Hojo sometimes allow him to believe he is in control—and sometimes, perhaps, he truly is—but they make all the real decisions. And their spies are everywhere." Yasutoki realized that his voice had lost its careful neutrality, had grown fierce. He took a deep breath and composed himself, looking at the table. "A change is coming."

The Mongol laughed again. "Yes, a change is coming, and it rides on the backs of Mongol horses!"

Yasutoki nodded. "With regards to the Khan's demands, I am sure that nothing will happen quickly. The debate in the court and the Shogunate about how to reply could take months, perhaps even years. I would welcome the Khan's rule and be done with weak, corrupt officials. It would be better for the country."

The Mongol barked a laugh. “You’re a fine one to call others ‘corrupt!’ I can hardly imagine someone more treacherous than one who betrays his own people.”

Yasutoki pushed down a stab of anger. “Only the most corrupt can easily recognize corruption.”

“I am certain the promise of riches beyond counting makes you all the more convinced of what is good for your country,” said the Mongol. The contempt in his voice was plain.

Yasutoki tried to ignore the Mongol’s jibe and kept his voice steady. “My reasons are my own. They do not concern a barbarian such as you, much less one who reeks of horseshit.”

The Mongol laughed again, a deep, booming sound. “So the limp-wristed bureaucrat has a spine after all!” Then his voice grew grim, and his hand rested on the hilt of his sword. “You should not forget who your master is.”

“I do not forget. I serve the great Khubilai Khan, *not* his unwashed, uncouth messenger boy.”

The Mongol’s eyes flashed with anger, and his grip tightened around the hilt of his sword.

Yasutoki kept his voice calm, slipping his hands into the sleeves of his robes. “Kill me, and you will displease the Great Khan. There are few men willing or able to provide the information I possess. I can provide the Great Khan with the knowledge of troop strength and movements, suitable landing sites, fortifications. I can give him Hakata Bay, and with Hakata Bay as a landing point and a foothold, conquering the rest will be easy.”

The Mongol snarled, “The Great Khan could take this measly island and the entire country without your help!”

“Perhaps he could. But the capital is far from here, and you must take not only the Imperial palace, but the headquarters of the Shogun. It is a dangerous gamble, but with my help, the gamble will be less risky. Of course, a lowly horse-shagger like you would not understand such things.”

“Why you sniveling—!” The Mongol’s sword jumped halfway out of its scabbard.

Yasutoki’s right hand flicked out of his sleeve, and something silver flashed through the air, quicker than sight. The Mongol flinched and stiffened. A small needle now protruded from his throat. His eyes bulged, and a great vein emerged on his reddening forehead. He froze in mid-movement. Yasutoki stood up, a calm smirk on his thin lips. With his toe, he pushed the paralyzed man onto his back, then leaned down and plucked the needle from his throat.

He leaned down and spoke into the Mongol’s frozen face. “The Great Khan is powerful, and he does not remain so by being foolish. Fear not, barbarian dog, the poison is not fatal. You will be able to move again in a few hours. That is, after your bowels have emptied themselves into your trousers. Take this message back to Khubilai Khan. He should not underestimate me or my people. Not all of us are as weak as the Imperial court. I serve him by my own choosing. You may tell him that his offer is acceptable. He shall have what he desires from me. You understand, do you not, horse-shagger? I can see from your eyes that you do.”

Then he straightened and smoothed his robes. “Well then, I have spent enough time in your distasteful company, and in this dismal place.” He gathered his robes and turned toward the door, picking up his large basket-hat and dark coat. The hat was a fine thing for moving about discreetly; it concealed his face, and the dark coat would help him blend into the night.

After he had put on the hat and coat, he turned to the paralyzed man lying quivering in the middle of the floor. “My people feel that manners are important. Perhaps you should learn some. Good evening.”

As Yasutoki faded into the darkness of the city of Hakata, plans were already forming in his mind. The half-moon gleamed on the bay, broken up by the dark shapes of ships and a tangle of masts around the docks. He would send out messages and put the first parts into motion. Tomorrow he would travel over the mountains to

Dazaifu, ancient seat of this island's government, and meet an old kinsman and "friend."



“Not to borrow the strength of another, nor to rely on one’s own strength; to cut off past and future thoughts, and not to live within the everyday mind . . . then the Great Way is right before one’s eyes.”
—*Hagakure*

Ken’ishi lay under a rock outcropping on the forested hillside, wrapped in his meager blanket. The spring night was cool and quiet, and he was well concealed. He felt Akao’s warmth through the blanket as he lay beside him and smelled the warm, earthy scent of the dog’s fur as the animal slept. He looked up through the bamboo leaves at the great black inverted bowl dusted with silver that was the night sky above him. He waited for sleep to come to him, and he thought back on the day’s events.

How could some people be so cruel and others be so kind? He had done nothing to provoke the response he had received in that village. Never before had a village constable reacted with such hatred toward him. It had been a humiliating experience. That humiliation had angered him, led him to provoke the duel. As he thought about the duel itself, he realized that it had been easy. His training had taken over, and his actions had been effortless. He knew now that his victory had never been in question. At that, he felt a surge of pride. Takenaga had been a good swordsman, but not a great one. Ken’ishi’s teacher had been great. His sensei had extolled his own

prowess many times, saying that he was superior to nearly any swordsman walking the land, so Ken'ishi had learned from the best. The perfection of the movements and the finality of the act held a certain kind of beauty, almost like the majesty of nature. But he did not like the act of killing another man. It was ugly. His pride at winning now fought with remorse for taking the man's life. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized he could have done nothing else. Takenaga's arrogance and hatred had been his undoing. Martial prowess could lead one down the path of arrogance, and ultimately death, like the incident in the capital. There is always someone in the world that is stronger than you, and you must recognize that person when you meet him, his teacher had told him.

* * * * *

All roads in the province seemed to have led Ken'ishi to this thriving, ancient city called Kyoto. He had been in the capital for two days, trying to find his way through the endless warrens of streets, palaces, and tenements. The spectacle was more than he could fathom. The avenues and alleys swarmed with richly dressed courtiers and nobles riding in palanquins, gruff samurai bristling with weapons and pride, merchants and artisans in their shops, commoners hurrying about their work, and beggars sitting in doorways with thin hands raised in supplication. He had never seen anything like it. He had never imagined that so many people existed in the world. Akao had been the braver one, fascinated by the vast array of smells wafting on the breeze and in the wake of every passerby.

At first, it had been frightening, incomprehensible. He had seen scores of shops with placards outside that he could not read, because he had had no formal education. He had seen hundreds of people going about business he did not understand, because he had never encountered a city before. He was hungry, but he did not know how to get food, thirsty, but he did not know where to drink, weary, but he did not know where to sleep. He knew not a soul in the entire world. There was no one who could help them.

And the women. The women were so beautiful and delicate, with their dark, sparkling eyes, full lips, and lovely throats. Many of them smelled so wonderful, like goddesses. He could only stare after them in helpless amazement. They were so much more beautiful than Haru. But why, then, did he still think of her so often? Even after what she had done to him? And it had been so many months since he had seen her. When he saw her face in his memory, her pretty eyes glinting with deceit, he felt such a strange mixture of emotions. Desire, regret, longing, shame. Ken'ishi pushed thoughts of her aside as he passed a trio of lovely girls who had caught him staring at them. They giggled at him, covering their mouths with their hands as he moved away, blushing with embarrassment.

He had never seen so many women before. Something in him wanted to touch them, but he did not know what else to do. More than once, his loins stirred with an aching need he could not describe. So many women around him should make it easier for him to forget Haru, but somehow it did not.

One night, Ken'ishi walked the dark streets. Akao walked close to him, brushing against his legs to control his nervousness. The dog's hair stood straight across his neck, and his tail was tucked against his back leg. They passed windows and heard the musical sounds of women's laughter, and the deep laughter of men too. They sounded like they were having fun. He knew that he wanted to know women, to laugh with them, but he could not. He did not know how. Once he tried to enter a shop where he heard the sounds of merriment, but a huge man by the door grabbed him and threw him back out into the street. For a moment, anger flared in him, but the man slammed the door in his face before he could get up off the ground. He had been taught to recognize his own frustration and conquer it immediately. So he shrugged it off, picked himself up out of the dirt, and readjusted his ragged accoutrements.

He moved on down the street, passing darkened shops wherein through the thin walls he heard strange, gasping cries, or low, mumbled words. He found himself stopping to stare at the dark

shapes silhouetted on paper screens, hidden from the eyes of the world. The streets here were dark and narrow, and some of the men he saw looked dangerous. They looked scruffy and unwashed with prominent scars and hungry, treacherous looks. He saw one man who looked as if his nose had been sliced off years ago. Some wore fine clothes and large basket hats to conceal their features. He gave them a wide berth, but he did not fear them. His teacher had made certain of that. But in an unfamiliar place, it was best to be cautious.

As he walked, he noticed a rough-looking man coming down the street toward him. He wore a fine silken kimono, trousers, and a wide-shouldered jacket emblazoned with some family crest. But he had only one sword, a short sword, at his hip. Ken'ishi thought this was strange, as many samurai he had seen—particularly ones who looked as wealthy as this one—wore two swords. He often wished that he had two swords like them, a mate for Silver Crane. The man's hair was immaculately styled in the traditional topknot, but his eyes were bloodshot, and his cheeks were flushed. He ignored Ken'ishi as he shouldered past him into a nearby shop.

A sign above the shop door read, *Souls of Samurai Polished Here*. In his limited education, Ken'ishi had most quickly learned the characters that applied to him, and he felt a moment of pride at being able to read the sign.

Standing in the invisible air of the man's passing breath, Ken'ishi caught the smell of sake. Peering around Ken'ishi's legs, Akao stood hunched and staring, emitting a low growl that only he could hear.

"Can you spare some coin, sir, for an old man?" came a voice from the shadows under the eave of a nearby house.

Ken'ishi looked over to see an old man squatting there, with a small wooden cup in one raised hand. His skin was wrinkled and leathery, stretched across his skull, with prominent brows and cheekbones protruding from starvation. Pale white whiskers dusted his spotted jaw, and his mouth had collapsed into itself with the absence of teeth. Ken'ishi kept his distance, but as he looked at him,

he felt a mixture of revulsion at his ugliness and compassion for his plight.

"I was once a ronin like you, boy," the beggar said. "Until I lost my arm and my eye in battle." He raised the stump of his right arm, severed at the elbow, and lifted his face out of the shadows to reveal an empty, puckered eye socket. To make his appearance even more unpleasant, he had a large, purplish bulb in the center of his forehead that looked like a cluster of rotten plums stuck to his flesh and oozing down onto his brow.

"I am sorry," Ken'ishi said. "I have no money."

"Some food then?"

"I'm sorry. I'm hungry, too. I have no food and no money to offer you."

"That's too bad to see one as young and strong as you with such troubles. Good luck to you, young man." The old man bowed his head to him.

Ken'ishi bowed in return and moved on down the street.

After he had gone about ten steps, a door opened and a loud voice emerged behind him. "Ah, what fine craftsmanship! It looks better than the day it was first polished!"

Ken'ishi turned and saw the rough-looking samurai standing in the street outside the shop he had entered.

The samurai held aloft a katana that glimmered in the light of the street lanterns. "Outstanding!"

The sword polisher, a man of approaching late years, stood in the doorway of his shop, bowing deeply. "You are too kind to a man with skills as poor as mine."

"Nonsense, Masamoto! You do outstanding work!"

At that moment, the old beggar nearby said, "Can a fine, strong gentleman such as you spare some coin for an old warrior?"

The samurai turned toward the old man, noticing him for the first time. Ken'ishi saw a look of disgust appear on the samurai's face, then his expression furrowed with dark, cruel lines.

He stepped closer to the old man and, with a lightning quick motion, slashed sideways. The old man's head tumbled off his shoulders, bobbling across the dirt.

Ken'ishi stared in horrified fascination at the warrior's cold cruelty.

The samurai glared imperiously as the old man's body slipped and fell sideways, dribbling dark red blood from the stump of his neck. His voice was thick with derision as he said, "Thank you, old warrior, for allowing me to test my newly polished blade. You should have died on the battlefield like a true samurai and spared the world a helpless beggar." He turned to the sword polisher, who stood frozen with a look of queasy surprise and fear. "Again, Masamoto, I must say you do outstanding work. I hardly felt the resistance of the spine."

Trembling, the sword polisher offered him a cloth. "To remove the blood, sir."

The samurai took it and wiped away the little bit of wetness that clung to the gleaming steel. Then with movements like liquid, the samurai sheathed his blade and thrust the scabbard into his obi. Suddenly he turned toward Ken'ishi, his eyes glinting like red lanterns in the darkness. "What are you staring at, boy?"

Ken'ishi stiffened for a moment, then his master's training took over and he relaxed, prepared for battle.

"What, have you no tongue?" The samurai's voice grew angry. "You do not approve of me testing my freshly polished blade?"

Ken'ishi's chin rose in defiance, but he said nothing.

"You have a sword, I see. Where did a whelp like you find a sword like that? Whom did you steal it from?"

Ken'ishi stiffened, and Akao's growl grew louder.

A cruel leer split the man's face. "Do you know how to use that weapon, or do you just carry it around for show?"

Ken'ishi glanced down at the old man's head, lying on the dirt street, dribbling a thin trail of blood behind it, the body twitching as

it lay crumpled on the ground. Such a senseless death. To have lived for so long and died so badly, so meaninglessly, at the hands of one so crass and cruel. The old man had deserved better.

"You have the look of a young cock ready for his first fight," said the samurai, squaring his body toward Ken'ishi with bloodlust in his eyes. "Perhaps you should be taught your place."

Ken'ishi thrust the hilt of his sword forward. He would not back down from a man such as this. Akao snarled and bared his teeth.

"Oho! A young cock you are then! A cock and a dog. But which is which? Perhaps you are both dogs." The samurai's words were jovial, but his tone was not. "Perhaps you're one head too tall as well."

Ken'ishi said nothing, but concentrated on the samurai's growing anger. The other man was accustomed to his harsh words causing others to back down from him. But Ken'ishi was not backing down. He planted his feet and tested his footing.

The samurai started forward and snarled, "Why you little turd, I'll—!"

Then another voice roared down the street, echoing between the shops and houses like the rumble of thunder. "Goemon! What the hell are you doing!"

The samurai stopped in mid-step. He turned.

Another figure approached. As the newcomer came into the light, Ken'ishi saw he was also a samurai. He was dressed in robes that were rich, but not opulent, and carried himself with the bearing of a man accustomed to command. He had strong, handsome features and sharp eyes. His gaze seemed to drill into Goemon, puncture him. The hostility bottled within Goemon began to seep away.

Goemon said, "Captain Mishima. I was just about to teach this rude young cock a lesson in manners."

Captain Mishima stopped about two paces away from Goemon. "You were doing no such thing. He neither said nor did anything to provoke you. I saw the whole thing."

Goemon stiffened as if struck.

Captain Mishima continued, his voice steady and controlled. "You are a disgrace. You're nothing but a drunken bully, and you bring shame to our master. We are retainers to a noble house, some of the highest ranked bushi in the capital! We live to a far higher standard than this! Your disgraceful behavior brings dishonor upon our master, and that I cannot allow!"

"But—!"

"Shut up. I have been looking for you since nightfall. You have gone too far. The owner of a certain sake house sent word of your . . . behavior tonight to my office. You debauch yourself with sake, opium, and whores, and then spend the rest of the night proving your superiority to boys and old men." He turned his penetrating gaze for an instant on the corpse sprawled in the dirt, and Ken'ishi saw a look of pity and sadness flicker through his eyes, quickly washed away by a controlled rush of anger. "Madame Matsuko has powerful friends, and you have angered her with your ill-mannered treatment of her girls. You are a disgrace. I swear on my oath to our master that you will answer for this."

Goemon's chin fell further and further toward his chest, his shoulders slumping at the verbal barrage.

Captain Mishima continued, "I would enjoy the chance to cut you down myself, but you are not mine to kill."

Goemon's head rose at those words, and his body tensed again as he placed a hand on the hilt of his sword.

Captain Mishima was unfazed, and his voice turned cold and deadly. "Do you think you can fight me? You are drunk and I can smell the opium on your clothes. Your death would be no better than his." He pointed toward the old man's corpse. "Come with me now and you may be allowed to regain your honor with seppuku. It is not my decision to make, however. If it were, I would cut you down like

the dog you are. Disobey me and you will be hunted and executed like a criminal." He raised his arm and pointed back down the street in the direction he had come. "Now, go."

Goemon released his sword hilt, lowered his head, and trudged down the street.

Captain Mishima then turned to the sword polisher, who stood with his eyes downcast, embarrassed and frightened. "Please accept my apologies, Masamoto. You will have no more trouble from Goemon. My master is grateful for your skilled service."

The sword polisher bowed. "Your master is too kind to someone with such poor skill as I have."

Then Captain Mishima looked at Ken'ishi and gave him an appraising glance. Ken'ishi saw the calm intelligence in his eyes and a flash of respect. He blushed at the scrutiny. "You are a brave young man," Captain Mishima said. "Please accept my humble apologies for the behavior of my underling." Then he offered a quick bow.

Ken'ishi was nonplussed. No one of such rank had ever spoken to him before with such courtesy. Nevertheless, he had the presence of mind to return the honor with a low bow of his own.

Then Captain Mishima turned, thought for a moment, and said to the sword polisher, "Masamoto, please polish this young man's weapon. My master would consider it a favor."

The sword polisher almost hid his surprise, then he bowed deeply. "Of course, Mishima-sama. It would be my pleasure."

Then the samurai captain followed Goemon down the street.

After he had gone, the sword polisher turned to Ken'ishi and bowed with a feeble smile. "Please," he said, "allow me to polish your weapon."

Unsure of what else to say, Ken'ishi said, "Very well. Please do me this favor." He walked toward the sword polisher, untying his scabbard, then offered it up to the artisan with both hands. The sword polisher bowed low and received it with both hands.

"May I inspect it?" Masamoto asked.

"Of course."

The sword polisher drew the blade half out of its scabbard and inspected the steel in the lamplight. He gasped and let out a long slow breath. “Exquisite! What a fantastic blade!”

Ken’ishi’s ears flushed with pride. “It is called Silver Crane.”

“Did you say—? Ah, but it cannot be. It must be another sword of the same name, but . . . look at the temper line along the cutting edge! It looks like feathers! What technique!”

Ken’ishi could not help smiling.

The sword polisher bowed again, deeper this time. “It is my privilege to polish such a weapon! I will have it finished for you in ten days. Please return then. Until then”—he stepped into his shop with Ken’ishi’s weapon and returned with another weapon, a katana, in its scabbard—“please take this sword to carry until you return. It is hardly more than a piece of trash compared to yours, but a warrior should not be weaponless.” He bowed and offered the weapon with both hands.

Ken’ishi bowed low and took it. “Thank you for your kindness. I will return in ten days’ time.” He tried to ignore the headless corpse lying a few paces away as he slipped the loaner katana into his sash.

He turned to go, but the sword polisher stopped him.

“Please, wait a moment. Excuse me, but, are you ronin?”

“I have no master.”

“When did you last eat?”

“Earlier today,” Ken’ishi lied.

The sword polisher nodded. He pointed down the street.

“Down that way is a small temple. The chief priest there . . . well, you should speak to him. He might give you a place to stay, for a time, until the sword is finished. Tell him I sent you.”

Ken’ishi bowed again. “Thank you, again.”

“It is nothing,” the sword polisher said.

As Ken’ishi walked away, Akao followed some distance behind him, busily inspecting the corner of every building and small piles of garbage or litter on the dusty street. Ken’ishi thought about

Captain Mishima again. He could not remember his father, but he wished that he were like the captain. Strong, confident, honorable, noble, with the skill and conviction to back up his words.

He had spent the next ten days waiting. Polishing a sword was a long and exacting process, just as important as the forging of the weapon. He felt both honored and honor-bound to have Silver Crane polished, therefore he could not have refused the offer. Besides, ronin could rarely afford to have their weapons polished by craftsmen as renowned as Masamoto, unless they were successful criminals.

Akao and he stayed at the temple, and the priest there gave each of them two rice balls every day. Ken’ishi accepted his with great discomfort, and Akao with great enthusiasm. He had done nothing to deserve this kindness, and the way the priest looked at him made him nervous. It would only be a matter of time before something bad happened and he would be turned out. People who were kind to him always turned him out, eventually. One of the few times the priest spoke to him, he said only, “I was a ronin once, until I entered the path of peace. You have a good heart. I can see that.” But he did what he could to help the priest without being asked. He swept the walks clean of dust. He picked up fallen leaves and sticks and bits of detritus that drifted in with the wind. And he gave a portion of his rice ball every day to the jovial stone god of the central shrine. The priest told him that the god was Hotei, the Laughing Buddha. Ken’ishi thought the god looked like a kind, jolly old man.

When ten days had passed, he returned to the sword polisher’s shop. Masamoto gave him back his sword, bowing deeply and offering it with both hands, an expression of profound solemnity on his face.

The sword polisher said, “It has been my great honor to polish this weapon for you, sir. May I ask, where did you get it?”

“It was my father’s weapon.”

“Truly? Who was your father?”

Ken'ishi did not answer. He looked away, took a deep breath, then said, "A great man."

Masamoto looked at him for a long time, his searching gaze so intent that a prickle of uneasiness crept up the back of Ken'ishi's neck. The sword polisher said, "Yes, a great man, indeed. Please, young man, hear me now. One such as I well knows that some swords are . . . special. Their smiths, their histories, their lineages, their masters, these things sometimes. . . . Well, I don't know all the secrets of Silver Crane, but I do know this. Wield it well, and it will honor you."

Ken'ishi could only stare at the sword polisher, puzzled, with a hundred questions on the tip of his tongue. But he did not dare to betray his own ignorance. Something in the man's eyes told him there was danger in the secrets he implied. Instead, he bowed and said, "I thank you. You have been good to me." Then he took the sword and hurried away.

Now that his sword was finished, Ken'ishi knew he could not stay with the kindly priest, so he left the temple. He was able to sell a few of his arrows for enough money to feed Akao and himself, but he could not keep that up for long. If he had been in the countryside, he could have fished or hunted or foraged, but here in the city there were no wild roots, no game, and no clean streams. The next day they moved on into the countryside, where he and Akao could find their own food.

* * * * *

Ken'ishi had thought about Captain Mishima often since then, wondering how much like his father he was. Seeing such nobility and quiet strength filled him with an admiration he could not describe. Ken'ishi aspired to become a man like him, one who lived with such integrity and power. Those like Goemon and Takenaga were to be reviled and destroyed. Someday, Ken'ishi would find a master, and he would prove himself worthy to that master with every fiber of his muscles, every drop of his blood, every bit of his strength. He wished

his teacher had told him more about his father, so he would have more than his imagination and a few vague impressions.

While he had been lost in his memories, the stars had disappeared behind thick dark clouds, and silence had fallen like a blanket, as if in anticipation. The darkness would be a perfect time for him to move on without danger of being spotted.

Akao seemed to have sensed his wakefulness. "Move now?"

"Yes, let's go now. No one will see us in the dark." He sat up and began to roll up his blanket.

Akao stretched and yawned, then sniffed the air. "Rain."

Ken'ishi nodded. The clouds boded rain today, which would also help conceal them and obliterate their tracks. Those villagers would be less likely to be out searching in bad weather, more likely to be huddling indoors.

The road lay below them, about the distance of a long bowshot, and they threaded their way down through groves of bamboo and trees, then resumed their trek in the early morning darkness.

The day dawned gray and dismal, and the rain came with the daylight. It grew heavier and heavier, and before long, he was soaked, along with everything he carried. Akao looked like a bedraggled, rust-colored rat, with his bony ribs sticking out and water dripping from his drooping ears. Ken'ishi told him as much, the dog responded with an insult that only dogs used.

He had never seen such a rain. It poured out of the sky in bucketfuls, a thick, pelting gray mass that chilled him to the bone. As always, he was hungry too, and that did little to improve his foul mood. The cold mud of the road had almost numbed his feet, squishing between his toes in spite of the platform wooden sandals he was wearing. As he walked, they made sucking, slurping noises when they pulled from the muck. They passed by a lone farmhouse with a warm orange light glowing within, and he felt a pang of envy. The rain beat on his bare head, each drop like a tiny mallet, striking a rhythm that said, *You have no home! You have no roof to shed the rain!*

“Hate rain,” Akao said. “Can’t smell. Only water and mud.”

A voice called out from somewhere nearby. “Hey!”

Ken’ishi stopped and listened. The voice had been faint, coming from off the road.

“Over here!”

He turned and looked. Several dozen paces off the path was a small, roofed shrine. Huddled under the roof, standing next to a stone statue of the shrine’s god, was a soaked, disheveled woman. Her mud-spattered clothes clung to her like wet rice paper.

“Jizo will protect us!” she said. “You should get out of the rain!”

Ken’ishi saw no reason not to, so he joined her under the shrine’s roof. He had to stoop, and there was hardly enough room for both of them, Akao, and the stone god, but the pattering against his skull had ceased. For that, he was grateful.

Akao slunk in between them, shouldering a space around Ken’ishi’s feet. He looked up at the woman, his tongue lolling in a smile. “Thank you,” he said, but she did not understand him. She edged away from him.

The shrine god was in the shape of a youthful monk carrying a pilgrim’s staff with six metal rings on the end. The air under the low roof was redolent with the scent of incense from the bowl of ashes at the stone god’s feet. Beside the bowl was a cup full of sake and a rice cake on a small earthen plate.

He said to the woman, “This god is Jizo?”

She nodded. “Yes.” She looked as if she was a few years older than Ken’ishi. Her clothes were so sodden and soiled that he could not judge their quality. Her face had been powdered and her lips rouged, and the rain had caused her makeup to streak and run, giving her a strange, warped appearance. Strings of hair clung to her face and hung in disarray around her shoulders. She clutched her hands in front of her chest, shivering. He had no blanket to give her that was not soaked through.

He said, “My foster father told me about Jizo.”

“He is everywhere. He sometimes watches over travelers.”

“He helps those who are mired in unhappiness and despair, yes? He told me about other gods too, like Kannon, the Mother of Compassion.”

As the rain pounded on the wooden roof, echoing strangely in the small, peaked cavity above his head, Ken’ishi remembered how his foster father had described Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. On a day like today, he began to understand why people called upon the gods and Buddhas for aid. His foster father had made them sound like wonderful, caring beings that helped the weak and the downtrodden. They sounded like the ideal that people should aspire to become. Precious little true kindness had come his way since he had left his foster parents in that little village far to the north. Since they had turned him out.

He said, “You’re shivering. I have a blanket, but it is surely soaked through. I’ve been walking for a while.”

She smiled and bowed. “No need to trouble yourself. Thank you for thinking of my welfare. The sun will come out soon enough.”

They stood for a while in silence, listening to the slow, rhythmic surge of the rain’s intensity.

Then she said, “Are you hungry?”

He looked at her, unsure how to answer. He was ravenous.

“Would you like a rice ball?” She pulled a large one from somewhere inside her clothes.

He looked at it. It was soggy from the rain, but his stomach roared. He could not take food from someone so poor. “No.”

“Please, take it. I have two. See?” She pulled out another. “Please.”

“Very well. Thank you.” He took it, and he tried to resist devouring it in a single bite, like Akao would. He broke the rice ball in half and handed one part to the dog, who, as expected, devoured it in a single bite. Together they ate their rice balls in silence. She smiled at him.

He said, “Are you traveling somewhere?”

“No. This village is my home.”

He looked at her, puzzled. “Then why don’t you go to your home? Why are you standing in the rain?”

“My house burned down not long ago. I have nowhere else to go.”

“What about your husband?”

“I don’t have a husband.”

“Then how do you live?”

She looked away, and a look of sadness and shame welled out of her features, like blood from a puncture wound. Her lip began to quiver. She bit her finger, stifling a sob. “You are a boy. Are you so young you cannot see what I am? Otherwise I would think you cruel.”

“I didn’t want to be cruel!” he protested.

Some of her despair drained away, replaced by a weak smile. “Then perhaps I can tell you, and you will not think poorly of me. I lie down with men for money.”

Ken’ishi did not understand, but he nodded sagely. “People do what they must to eat.”

Her smile broadened, mixed with a look of relief.

He said, “Perhaps Jizo and Kannon look over you because you do not have a house.”

“You are kind to say so. But I fear I am doomed to live a hundred lifetimes as an unclean woman, or worse.”

“You are kind to give me your food. Perhaps the kami and the gods will reward you for your kindness.”

“Are you a pious man?” she asked.

Ken’ishi blinked, then shrugged. “I don’t know what that means. I know that I trust the kami to guide me, to protect me. If they grow angry with me, they will forsake me. That I do know.”

“I can see that you are poor, a ronin. And you have not starved either. I can see that you are not a bandit. You do not have the wolfish look of a bandit, and I have . . . seen many.”

“I am glad you don’t think I’m a bandit.” It was all he could think of to say.

They stood in silence again, waiting for the rain to end. He watched her, as much as he could without being rude, to see how her face remained calm and warm, in spite of her shivering, and on a good day, she might have been pretty. He thought about the kindness and nobility in her manner and bearing. He could only conclude that such virtues could exist in every layer of the world, from the most powerful samurai to the lowliest whore. So strange. But what were those qualities that made them to be admired? He could not put words to them; he just knew he respected them. He knew them when he saw them, but that was all.

Finally, after about an hour, the rain diminished. Then he pulled out his heavy coin purse, and dumped half of the contents into his hand. The woman’s eyes bulged with surprise, but he saw not a trace of avarice in them. He stuffed the handful of coins into his own pouch, then wrapped up the rest and held it out to her.

“Please,” he said.

She shook her head and cringed away from him. “No, I couldn’t.”

“Please take it. You will be doing me an honor if you do. I have much to atone for. And you don’t have to lie down with me.”

She refused again, but when he insisted a third time, she relented and gingerly took the coin purse. She bowed low, thanking him profusely. He bowed in return, and then they went their separate ways. He never saw her again, and he never learned her name.

Invitation from the Author

I have put together this excerpt from my novel especially for you, the reader, so that you can have a taste of the story before you buy. The book is now available in deluxe library-edition hardcover from [Five Star Publishing](#) and [Amazon.com](#). If you enjoyed this excerpt or know someone else who might, feel free to make a copy of this document and send it along. You can also listen to the story via free audio podcast, available at www.travisheermann.com/podcast/.

Please feel free to e-mail me with your comments. I welcome your feedback: travis@travisheermann.com.