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Opening extract from

The Black Lotus

Written by

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IN MEDIEVAL JAPAN, THREE MAGICAL SWORDS – BEARING THE EMBLEMS OF A BUTTERFLY, SNAKE-EYE AND MOON – ARE FORGED FOR POWERFUL SHŌGUN, LORD GODA. CREATED FROM A CURIOUS SKY-METAL, EACH KATANA HAS THE POWER TO CUT THROUGH TIME AND SPACE; UNITED, THEIR POWERS ARE UNIMAGINABLE. THE SWORDS OF SARUMARA ARE NOT LONG MADE WHEN THE MOON SWORD IS STOLEN. IN ITS PLACE, THE THIEF LEAVES A SMALL FLOWER THE COLOUR OF INK: A BLACK LOTUS. THE SYMBOL OF A SHADOWY RESISTANCE GROUP.

BUT WITH THE TWO REMAINING SWORDS LORD GODA CAN STILL BECOME A FORMIDABLE FORCE. WITH HIS WIFE, LADY KIKO, HE BEGINS TO CARVE OUT A MIGHTY SAMURAI EMPIRE, AND BY THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY IT STRETCHES FROM JAPAN TO SOUTH AMERICA.
BUT THE MOON SWORD ELUDES HIM STILL.
THE BLACK LOTUS PROTECTS IT WITH ALL ITS STRENGTH, AND WITHOUT IT GODA WILL NEVER CONQUER THE GREATEST PRIZE OF ALL.

PART ONE:

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.
THE SAMURAI EMPIRE IS AT
THE HEIGHT OF ITS POWER ...



RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

Ghost winced with every step. He *hated* wearing shoes! This was his first pair and, according to his friend Squint, they were handmade and had cost a fortune. If all shoes were this uncomfortable, maybe that was why Empire people always looked so snooty when they walked! Mostly they were sons and daughters of the first samurai settlers who'd arrived decades ago, but they walked as if they'd always owned the place. The only people who disgusted Ghost more were the rich Brazilians who'd started dressing, eating and, indeed, walking like them.

But this morning *he* was supposed to look like one of the Empire people too, and not like some poor Brazilian teenager wearing shoes for the first time.

The plastic bag in his hand didn't exactly go with his new look, he realized, so he knelt and shoved it under a parked car. Hopefully he wouldn't need what was inside. Standing up, he caught a glimpse of himself in the glass and admired the whiteness of his shirt against his dark skin, and his Shiroma suit, all provided by Squint. He stuck his nose in the air and clicked his heels as he made his way out of the side street, trying to ignore his throbbing feet.

Unlike his mates back in the favela, Ghost only did jobs here in downtown Rio. Squint thought he was mad, risking being caught by Kyatapira police – or Kats, as they were known – when there were plenty of gas stations and stores close by. But though the risks were high for doing a job downtown, the rewards were even higher.

Avenida Atlântica was something else, he thought as he walked painfully on – high-rise luxury apartments and hotels with two roads running in opposite directions, divided by palm trees. You could smell the money. Beyond them lay the white sands of Praia de Copacabana. Of course, the Samurai Empire had replaced all signs with Japanese ones, but Ghost and his mates still spoke Portuguese, and Copacabana would always be called Copacabana, whatever President Goda said.

The beach was quiet, but in a few hours the wealthy Empire people would be out sipping cocktails under paper umbrellas. In the Brazilian section, boys would play footvolley to a stereo's samba beat, supervised by the Kats, who made sure the music wasn't

too loud, that players were wearing enough clothes and that all games adhered strictly to the rules and were part of a registered competition. Playing 'just for fun' was a sure way to become acquainted with the fists and boots of Kyatapira.

It was only a matter of time, thought Ghost, before samba and footvolley disappeared altogether, like the giant statue of Jesus that had once looked out over the city. Old people talked about the Rio Carnival that had once been so famous but, like the statue, Ghost had never seen it.

A thunderous roar filled the sky, and Ghost stopped and looked up. Six aircraft screamed overhead, two swords crossed in an X on the underside of each wing clearly identifying them as Empire fighter jets. All week, aircraft had been flying over the city, heading north to the US border. The news reports were filled with the imminent war between the Empire and America, one of the few unoccupied countries left.

But today Ghost had more important things to worry about. He had a job to do. Taking up his position on his favourite bench, he trained his eyes on the electric gates of the Nikkou apartments. He didn't have long to wait. As soon as the gates began to open, he started walking.

As Ghost reached step number thirty-one, the sleek nose of a Lexus LFA eased out of the gate. Just as it did every morning at 9.20 a.m. The driver of the car – and owner of apartment 729 – glanced over the top of his designer sunglasses and then accelerated

into the passing traffic. From his weeks of watching, Ghost knew the man wouldn't return until evening. And Ghost had a key to his apartment.

Twenty-one more paces should take him to the gates just as they closed – he'd practised it enough times. The bit he hadn't practised was what happened when he stepped inside.

Just as the gates closed, he slipped in and casually continued walking on to the apartments – he was a resident after all, he told himself.

If that didn't work, plan B was to say he was lost.

Plan C involved the plastic bag under the car. But he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

As on all the other mornings, the security guard was asleep in his bulletproof booth after a long night. Ghost hurried past, catching a glimpse of a semi-automatic pistol in the guard's holster. Private security guards were worse than Kats. Bored and underpaid, they shot first and asked questions later.

Ghost pushed open the doors to the apartment building and stepped on to plush green carpet. He hit the lift button and watched the Japanese numbers count down. The lift doors pinged open, and he stepped inside. He pressed button number seven and straightened his tie in the mirror. It was all about attention to detail – that's what had got him this far.

A few seconds later the lift doors pinged open again, and Ghost peered out on to the seventh floor. From the safety of the lift, he figured out which way the door numbers ran. He needed to look like he knew where he was going. Just before the doors closed, he

stepped out into the corridor and turned left.

Bosta! An Empire woman with narrow eyes, bright lipstick and a floral kimono was walking towards him. He continued on, hoping his surprise and panic hadn't shown on his face. He smiled and nodded at her as he passed, but he could have sworn he caught a glimpse of suspicion in her eyes. He also thought her footsteps had suddenly stopped behind him. Was she watching him? Every instinct screamed at him to turn around and check.

Stay calm and look like you know where you're going.

In his panic he had walked past two doors. If one of them was number 729, he was in trouble. Without moving his head he quickly looked left and right until he found the correct door. He took out his key and pushed it into the lock, praying that Squint's preparations had been as meticulous as always. From the corner of his eye he could see the woman standing at the lift. Whether she was watching him or not, he couldn't tell. He twisted the key and hoped there wouldn't be an alarm or room-mate inside.

There wasn't. He stepped inside and closed the door, holding his breath as he waited for a knock. None came, and relief hissed out of him like air from a balloon.

Stupid woman! If he hadn't met her, he could have stayed in the apartment for a while: enjoyed it, eaten some posh food, had a soda from the fridge, watched TV. But there was no time for that now. He needed to grab what he could and run.

The apartment was classy, like something he'd seen on TV, with white leather sofas and a view of the ocean. He peeped down over the balcony and saw the Empire woman talking to the security guard, who was now awake and reaching for the phone. *Bosta!*

Ghost raced through the place, rifling through drawers, searching cupboards and upturning mattresses. He found some cash, the owner's passport, a designer watch and some gold jewellery. He was stuffing these into his pockets when there was a loud rap on the door, followed by a shout in Japanese: 'Keibiin da. Akero!'

Security! Ghost's heart stopped. Plan B was definitely not going to work – no one would believe he was lost in someone's apartment. He was trapped. The only other way out was the balcony, but that was seven floors above ground.

Time for plan C.

He took off his jacket and spread it out on the floor, then ripped off his tie and shirt and placed these on top. Next, he added his shoes, socks and trousers. He looked down at his briefs, then at the apartment door. He whipped them off and added them to the pile. Using the sleeves of the jacket, he tied up the bundle and stepped out on to the balcony.

His first thought was to throw the bundle down to the ground and collect it later. He cursed when he saw the flashing lights of a Kyatapira squad car coming through the electric gates. In a few minutes, the door of the apartment would come crashing down and they'd be upon him, guns blazing. He had to get

rid of the bundle a different way. Another balcony lay directly beneath his.

He leant over the stainless-steel rail and swung the bundle on to the balcony below, just as the squad car pulled up at the front door of the block. Two armed Kats with padded shoulders and wide trousers jumped out and ran, swishing into the building in a blur of black.

Ghost stepped back into the apartment, trying not to panic. He only had minutes left. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

If ever he had needed the Bleaching to work fast, it was now.

Shutting out the noises around him, he allowed his mind to relax, become blank. His heartbeat slowed, and he released the connection to his body. He breathed out until he had no breath left. He fought the impulse to inhale and, just as the reflex kicked in, he pushed. He pushed into the imaginary wall in front of him and felt the chill that signalled the Bleaching was working. It was like passing through an ice-cold liquid curtain.

Sucking in a badly-needed breath, he opened his eyes. Arms stretched out in front of him, he studied his dark skin. It was paling slightly, but too slowly. *Come on!*

'Kyatapira da!' came a shout from the other side of the door. 'Akero!'

Through his skin, his bones appeared, and through them, the carpet. He looked down at his legs, which were also fading.