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Prologue

News travels fast, carried across the kingdom by farmers, peasants, rich men, and thieves.

'Have you heard about the treachery and terror?' they whisper, gathering together at dusk, on street corners, or by the fireside. 'Have you heard about the bloodshed?'

I draw closer, ears straining, as I listen to tales of the evil *jito*, Lord Steward of the southern part of the Kai Province: an innocent family massacred, burning arrows flickering through the night sky, a people's suffering.

The details change with each retelling, but the story remains the same. The truth cannot be subdued.

It is a story I could never forget—burned into my memory by pain and blood. The *jito* is my uncle. It was my family that was massacred.

And I have carried that truth with me, since the moment my sister Hana and I witnessed our treacherous uncle stab our father in the back.

From that day on, my life was consumed by the mission to bring honour back to the Yamamoto name. The only hope for the future was our little brother, Moriyasu, the rightful *jito* now that Father was dead.

Hana and I clung to that truth lingering in our hearts: one day we would be reunited with what was left of our family.

But what is the truth?

Those stories around the fire? The honour of a family name? The promises of a friend?

I know now that nothing is ever what it seems.



It was shortly after dawn, and my sister Hana and I were in our small room in the servants' quarter of our samurai training school.

A fresh early-morning breeze blew in through an open bamboo screen, bringing with it the scent of cherry blossom petals crushed by the overnight rain. Outside, the sky was slowly lightening, and droplets of water still sparkled on the leaves and flowers in the garden.

Hana and I kneit opposite each other, our hands resting lightly on our thighs. We were dressed in our usual servants' outfits of a short blue jacket, blue breeches, and bare feet. We had been meditating quietly, but now it was time

to face the day ahead. Tonight would be very hard.

'Master Goku's funeral . . . ' Hana murmured. Her voice sounded tight, as if she was close to tears. 'I don't think I can bear it, Kimi.'

I reached out and smoothed her long hair hanging loose over her shoulder like silky black rope. 'We have to bear it,' I said gently. 'Master Goku is dead, and there is nothing we can do to change that.'

'I wish Mother was here,' Hana whispered.

'I wish that, too,' I said.

An image of Mother as I had last seen her blazed across my mind. It was dusk, and she had been sitting with Father and Uncle in the rock garden. As Hana and I had led our brother Moriyasu away to his bedchamber, I'd glanced back over my shoulder and seen Mother smiling at Father. Her face had been so serene and confident, full of strength and wisdom.

My heart twisted at the thought of how happy we had been then. Before my uncle had ripped us apart.

Would I ever see Mother again? My soul lifted with the hope that one day Mother, Moriyasu, Hana, and I could be together for ever. I thought of the bamboo sword hiding in our storage basket,

my little brother's favourite toy, and renewed my vow to return it to him.

I dragged my thoughts back to the present. 'One day at a time,' I said firmly, more to myself than Hana. 'We just need to get through tonight. Mother's letter will soon arrive, telling us where to meet her.'

Before he took his last breath, Master Goku had told us of his cedarwood box full of our mother's letters. A true friend, he had risked everything to arrange for our reunion. Mother had said she would send one more instruction to tell us how to find her.

One final letter. One more precious paper scroll.

'Then we can go to her,' Hana said, 'and be a family again . . . '

The sound of hurrying feet came from the hallway outside.

'Everybody up!' came the deep, rumbling voice of Mister Choji, the head servant. Since Master Goku's death, Choji had taken over the *dojo* and now everyone addressed him more respectfully as Mister Choji.

Hana and I exchanged a horrified glance. If Mister Choji came into our room now, he would see our long hair tumbling over our

shoulders and know in an instant that we were girls.

'We're coming!' I called out as we leaped to our feet, scrambling to twist up our hair into boyish top-knots.

'I need you all, right away.' Mister Choji seemed in a panic. 'The *jito* is coming and he wants the funeral to take place immediately!'

The *jito*? The blood in my veins pulsed furiously. Mister Choji meant Lord Hidehira, our uncle. The man who had murdered our father and brothers. And now he was disrupting the arrangements for the funeral of our murdered Master. The thought made anger fill my heart like black smoke. How dare he? When his own son had been responsible for Master Goku's death!

I paused at the door, and turned back to see Hana's shaking hands quickly secure her hair with a pointed metal hairpin. I raised my eyebrows to ask if she was ready, and when she nodded I slid back the bamboo screen and came face to face with Mister Choji.

He was a gruff, good-natured man, round-faced and stocky, with black hair which he wore pulled into the traditional samurai's oiled tail, tightly folded on the top of his head. On our arrival, Mister Choji had taken Hana and me under his

wing, affectionately calling us 'skinny boys' as he fed us hearty meals of soup and noodles.

'Quickly, boys! We are not prepared for the *jito*,' Mister Choji said. 'I need one of you to ring the bell and wake the students, while the other goes to the kitchens and brings out the ceremonial tea bowls.' He clapped his hands and turned away in a flurry of pale grey kimono robes. 'Hurry!'

'I'll ring the bell,' I said to my sister.

Hana nodded. 'I will prepare the tea bowls and meet you in the kitchens afterwards.'

We dashed after Mister Choji, who was striding along the narrow hallway. He knocked on wooden door frames as he went, calling out to the sleeping occupants. Screen doors slid back, revealing yawning boys in breeches with tousled hair.

'What's happening?' someone asked. 'Are we under attack?'

'Get up! Get dressed!' Mister Choji cried, clapping his hands. 'We've just had word that the *jito* is coming—the funeral will be this morning.'

'The *jito* is coming . . . ' the urgent whisper carried along the hallway, carried from one room to the next. 'This morning?' servants asked in confusion. Master Goku's body was to be moved this evening to the temple, and the funeral wasn't supposed to take place until tonight.

Through an open doorway I caught a glimpse of my friend Ko rubbing his eyes, and then Hana and I were outside, thrusting our feet into our sandals and racing along the covered walkway which led to the gardens. Hana headed for the kitchens, the soles of her sandals flashing as she hurried. I turned and ran along gravel pathways that led through the *dojo* gardens, ducking beneath overhanging branches.

As I reached the bell tower I saw the sun rising, a bright crimson ball painting the sky pink and orange. I ran up the bell tower steps and hauled on the rope to swing the wooden beam against the
 metal. The beam was heavy and it took two strong tugs to get it swinging. At last the deep sonorous sound rang out, echoing across the gardens and reverberating against the far walls of the *dojo*.

I kept pulling, ringing the bell again and again.

From my vantage point I could see the *dojo* laid out beneath me: neatly swept pathways cut through green moss gardens; pools of still water reflected the early-morning sky; curving red rooftops rose up from the foliage like the wings of exotic birds. Trees clung to the hillside behind the *dojo*, interrupted only by the long path that led up to the temple.

This place had become home, a haven from the

man that hunted us. But now with Goku gone, I didn't know if we could still be safe here.

Stilling the rope, I watched as screen doors flew back in the students' quarters. Boys of all ages hurried onto the walkways, some still tying up their hair while they ran to their duties. Others looked as if they had been up for hours, meditating or practising their *kata* movements. Junior masters in black robes quickly joined them.

Everyone was awake now, and the *dojo* took on an air of bustling purpose. As I headed back towards the kitchens, I realized that someone had fallen into step beside me.

'I've heard the news,' a voice said. I glanced up into the concerned face of my friend Tatsuya, the only person other than Master Goku that Hana and I had trusted with our secret. He was dressed formally for the funeral, his short white kimono jacket neatly pressed and the soft fabric of his black *hakama* trousers pooling around his feet. A long curved sword in its scabbard was tucked into his sash.

'Where's Hana?' he asked as he limped slightly with every other step. His ankle was still hurting him after Ken-ichi, Uncle's son, had sabotaged him at the tournament, but it was healing quickly.

'She's in the kitchens,' I replied, 'preparing for the *Kaminari*'s arrival.' *Kaminari*, meaning thunder, was the nickname the people had given to Uncle because he raged through their villages like a storm.

'I won't let anything happen to either of you,' Tatsuya said.

I paused at the end of the walkway and bowed to him. 'Thank you, Tatsuya.' It was good to know we had a friend.

'Do you think Hidehira is coming here to look for Ken-ichi?' Tatsuya asked as we walked on.

'Maybe,' I replied. Then another thought made me shudder. 'Or maybe someone has seen through our disguise and he is coming here to find us.'

Tatsuya shook his head. 'No, he can't have discovered you. Just try to stay out of his way.'

We made our way over a low wooden footbridge and came to a fork in the path. Several students were gathered there, listening to one of the junior masters give them instructions for the rescheduled funeral. Their faces were sombre.

'I should go,' I said. 'Mister Choji will need my help.'

Tatsuya nodded and I hurried away to join Hana in the kitchens. I found her laying out tea

bowls on a lacquered tray. Mister Choji caught sight of me and gestured impatiently. 'Skinny boy, come with me! And bring your brother! It is almost time for me to go to the main courtyard and receive Lord Hidehira. You will attend me!'

My thoughts began to race. Attending Mister Choji meant standing close while he greeted Uncle. Close enough for Uncle to recognize us if he looked closely. We would have to be careful not to draw attention to ourselves. Hana looked anxious. We both knew that if Uncle realized who we were, all would be lost.

'Don't just stand there, skinny boys!' Mister Choji cried, turning and heading for the door in a flurry of grey robes. 'Follow me!'

We leaped to obey, following Mister Choji out of the kitchens and along the walkways. The last few students were streaming towards the archway leading to the main courtyard, their black *hakama* trousers fluttering as they ran.

As we passed one of the moss gardens, Master Choji slowed his step to allow Hana and me to catch up. 'You seem surprised that I have chosen you to attend me this morning,' he said as we walked beside him. 'Master Goku thought highly of you, so it is fitting for you both to stand behind me as I greet His Lordship formally in the

courtyard. Afterwards we will proceed to the pavilion in the moss garden for the *cho na yoriai* tea ceremony. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Mister Choji,' we murmured. A memory flashed in my mind. The last time I had been in that pavilion, I had almost assassinated my uncle. Master Goku had stopped me and taught me the only honourable way to avenge my father was to challenge Uncle openly.

Running footsteps crunched the gravel on the pathway behind us and we quickly moved aside to let two of the younger students past.

'Hurry now,' Mister Choji called to them. 'Don't be late.'

'Yes, Mister Choji!' the boys said, bowing quickly before they raced on towards the main courtyard.

Mister Choji watched them go, and then turned back to Hana and me.

'Today will be a difficult day for the students,' he said. 'It's almost unbearable to think that we will be saying goodbye to Master Goku for the last time.'

I bowed my head, suddenly so full of grief that I could not trust myself to speak.

'This situation will be awkward for Lord Hidehira, too,' Mister Choji went on. I thought I

caught a note of disapproval in his voice when he said Uncle's name. 'Long ago, Lord Hidehira attended this school. With Ken-ichi responsible for Goku's death, the Lord Steward will feel the pain of Goku's death twice over—the loss of his Master, and the disgrace of his son.'

'Yes, Mister Choji,' I said again. But privately I did not think Uncle was the sort of man to feel pain or loss. He had killed his own brother! He had no feelings. Nothing but his desire for power mattered to him.

We came to the wooden archway which led into the main sandy courtyard. Two guards in leather armour stood either side of the main gate, their iron helmets gleaming.

Mister Choji paused for a moment, closing his eyes and stilling himself. Then he gave Hana and me a nod as we stepped through the archway.

Before us were row upon row of seated students.

There were about a hundred students and teachers gathered altogether. Although they were trying to be quiet and respectful as they awaited the arrival of the *jito*, the wide open space seemed to pulse with their energy and anticipation. The tallest students stood at the back against the rear wall of the courtyard, their black belts showing

their seniority. The younger ones kneit in the formal *seiza* position at the front, their hands resting lightly on their knees.

Mister Choji made his way to the centre of the courtyard ready to welcome our important visitor. Hana and I hurried to stand behind him, our heads bowed. A hush descended. The only sounds were the breeze whispering through the pine trees surrounding the dojo and the gentle splash of a waterfall in one of the gardens nearby.

A conch-shell horn sounded, signalling the approach of the *jito*. As the sound faded away, the muffled thunder of horses' hooves rose in the still morning air.

I glanced at Hana. Her face was composed but pale. I tried taking a deep breath to calm myself, but inside I was in turmoil at the thought of seeing Uncle Hidehira once more.

The thundering horses' hooves came closer. I opened my eyes as more than ten mounted samurai galloped in through the open gates, their red silk *mon* badges gleaming at their shoulders. Glittering swords were strapped to their waists and quivers of arrows bristled at their backs.

The samurai's horses churned up the carefully swept sand as they wheeled and spread out to line the walls either side of the courtyard. Through the

gates behind them came an ornate black lacquered palanquin carried on the shoulders of four bearers in scarlet livery, its white silk curtains rippling in the breeze.

The sight of this palanquin used to thrill me with anticipation of my father's appearance, but now, knowing the evil man that would emerge, all I felt was disgust.

The palanquin came to a halt in the centre of the courtyard just as more samurai on horseback came cantering in through the gates. Their captain gave a curt order and the two guards hurried to close the gates behind them.

The bearers set the palanquin down and my body tensed. Beside me, Hana stood as still as a marble statue, her gaze fixed to the ground in front of her.

A large, powerful hand appeared at the curtains, crushing the fragile silk. The curtains were roughly pulled aside and Uncle Hidehira appeared. His thin-lipped smile didn't reach his dark eyes. Loathing filled my soul.

Mister Choji made a gesture and, as one, the school bowed. Hana and I placed our hands on our thighs and bent low.

As we rose again, Uncle Hidehira stepped down from the palanquin. He straightened up, hands on

hips, his broad shoulders dwarfing the guards who stood on either side. He surveyed the assembled school. His gaze seemed to penetrate deep into the soul of each person he looked at.

I kept my head bowed, but peeked at Uncle from beneath my eyelashes, studying him carefully. Father always said, *Know your opponent as well as you know yourself because that is how you will discover his weakness.*

Usually Uncle wore robes of glossy red silk to signify his important role as *jito* but now he was dressed traditionally in white for the funeral. The many layers of his luxurious kimono moved heavily as he walked across the courtyard towards Mister Choji. His black hair had been shaved at the front, then oiled and folded in an ornate ceremonial style. Two swords—one long, one slightly shorter—were stuck into his stiffened *obi* sash.

Uncle returned Mister Choji's respectful bow with a slight bow of his own, and I guessed that he felt it was beneath him to show a mere head servant too much honour.

The two men greeted each other formally in low voices. I could see tension on my uncle's face. His confident air was betrayed by the new lines on his forehead. Perhaps it was us, the surviving

witnesses of his treachery, that weighed on his mind. I hoped it was.

A sharp thought filled my mind: I had an advantage over Uncle. Despite all his power, I knew something he didn't. My mother and brother were alive and safe—and soon we would be together again. I was sure of it.

Hana shifted beside me and I reached out to her, touching her fingers in our secret signal of kinship.

Mister Choji bowed to Uncle Hidehira once more, robes rippling. 'Will you do me the honour of accepting a bowl of tea in our pavilion, Lord Hidehira?'

Uncle Hidehira gazed at him for a moment, his eyes as black and expressionless as a lizard's. 'No tea, thank you.'

My heart began to pump harder. By refusing tea, Uncle was dishonouring Mister Choji in front of the whole school!

A few of the students exchanged shocked glances and I saw that the back of Mister Choji's neck had flushed red.

'I think a tour of the school would be more appropriate,' Uncle Hidehira said at last. 'If it is your intention to take over here as Master, then I want to see what your plans are,

and how you intend to expand and improve this *dojo*.'

Mister Choji bowed low. 'Of course, Lord Steward,' he said. 'Please follow me.'

As he turned, he nodded at Hana and me to show that we should follow, and together the men walked across the sunny courtyard, gravel crunching underfoot. Hana and I fell into step behind them. At a signal from Uncle Hidehira two of his personal guard, samurai with fearsome horned helmets and hard leather armour, walked behind us.

'The servant has become Master,' Uncle Hidehira said as soon as we were away from the main courtyard.

Mister Choji inclined his head slightly. 'Your Lordship knows that I did not seek this honour,' he said gruffly. 'It was the wish of the junior masters and students. They wanted someone who knew Goku's work, and would carry on in the same tradition.'

'Goku's work was good,' Uncle Hidehira agreed with a nod. 'He was wise and skilled. I was counting on him to train the captains of my army.' He cast a sharp sideways glance at Choji. 'May I count on you in the same way, Choji?'

'Of course, Your Lordship. I will serve you just the same way as Goku did.'

I smiled to myself at this. My uncle did not know how Goku refused to serve Uncle, how he had kept us concealed. And I felt sure that Mister Choji *would* do the same.

Uncle Hidehira looked satisfied. 'Good,' he said, as they followed the curving path. 'Because I have great plans for my estates. Great plans!'

The sound of hurrying feet came along the pathway behind us, and I turned my head to see the hands of the two samurai guards going instantly to the hilts of their swords, but then they relaxed as a messenger came trotting around the curve in the path, his clothes and armour dusty from the road. I realized that the guards' reaction meant that Uncle was constantly on guard for a threat to his power.

He should be, I thought.

The messenger bowed low. 'Forgive the intrusion, Mister Choji, but I have brought a message.'

Mister Choji nodded and beckoned. 'Please come forward.'

My blood began to race when I caught a glimpse of the tightly rolled paper scroll in the messenger's hand. This could be the letter from Mother!

I glanced at Hana and saw that her gaze was fixed on the messenger.

Mister Choji held out his hand to take the scroll, but Uncle Hidehira stopped him and my breath caught in my throat.

'You should not forget your place, Choji,' he said sharply. 'A servant does not assume all the authority of Master overnight. The appointment of Master of this *dojo* comes from the *jito* himself.'

I held my breath, stunned by Uncle's tone. As Mister Choji bowed I could see the flash of anger in his eyes, and I knew he was holding himself tightly in check.

Uncle Hidehira seized the scroll from the messenger, half crushing the fragile paper. This was the worst possible situation. I now prayed that this would be the vegetable accounts or a *dojo* application—anything other than the letter that we had been waiting for, the letter that would expose everything!

As the messenger bowed and hurried away, Uncle slit the wax seal with his thumbnail and tore away the scarlet ribbon that bound it. Slowly, he unrolled the curling paper.

From where I was standing I had a clear view of the thick black brush strokes which covered the letter from top to bottom. The graceful, sweeping

kanji reminded me of rivers and willow trees and the curving necks of swans. There was only one person who formed their characters so elegantly.

My mother.

I knew instantly that this was the message Hana and I had been waiting for . . .

And now it was in the hands of our enemy.