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Opening extract from

The Sword of Kuromori

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EGMONT
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EGMONT

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The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

1 —

Kenny's fingers dug into the armrests of the aeroplane seat so tightly that his knuckles ached. The first time he had flown in a plane it had been an exciting adventure. Now, though, it was more of a chore.

The 747 lurched again and he felt his stomach float upwards before his weight settled back into the seat. It was like being on a slowed-down roller coaster, only a lot less fun.

Relax, Kenny told himself, *it's safer than driving. Try not to think about being strapped into a pressurised metal tube that weighs a thousand tonnes, is eleven kilometres above the ground and travelling at a thousand kilometres an hour. All perfectly safe.*

The airline steward, whose name badge read *Daniel Mayer*, rested on one knee in the aisle beside him and patted the boy's tensed arm. 'Nervous about flying?' he asked, with a practised smile.

Kenny shook his head, which wasn't easy with a stiffened neck. 'No,' he said through clenched teeth. 'Only about crashing. Why is it there's only turbulence

when you serve food? Is that deliberate, to spill everyone's drinks?'

Dan smiled. 'Don't worry. I've flown this Seattle–Tokyo route a hundred times and I'm still here. Besides, we'll be there soon.' His eyes flicked to the empty seat beside Kenny. 'You travelling alone?'

Kenny nodded. 'Yeah, I'm meeting my dad. He works out there. I'm staying for the summer.'

'You don't sound too happy about it.'

Kenny shrugged. 'Well . . . it's complicated.'

Dan patted Kenny's arm again and rose to his feet. 'Is this your first time in Japan?'

The boy nodded.

'You're going to love it. It's an amazing place. Super high-tech on the one hand and super traditional on the other.'

'Kenny Blackwood?' said a female voice.

Kenny and the steward both looked up to see a Japanese flight attendant standing in the aisle, an envelope in her white-gloved hands. Her badge said *Naoko Iwamoto*.

'Seat 57C? Kenny Blackwood? Is that you?' she said again.

Kenny nodded.

'I was asked to give you this, before we land,' Naoko said and handed him the envelope.

Dan raised an eyebrow. 'Since when do we play mailman?' he muttered.

Naoko smiled at him and moved on.

Kenny turned the envelope over in his hands; it was blank, sealed, but he could feel the edges of a folded sheet of paper inside and a small cylindrical object, about the size and shape of a lipstick.

Weird, he thought. *Who'd be sending me a letter on a plane? More to the point, who would even know where to find me?*

He slit open the envelope using the plastic knife from his meal tray and took out a single typed page, which he began to read:

To my dearest grandson, Kenneth,

Yes, I know you hate being called 'Kenneth' but it could have been worse – your grandmother wanted to name you 'Aloysius'.

If all is well, you will be reading this upon an aero plane high above the Pacific Ocean, making your final approach to Japan, where I have arranged for you to spend the summer with your father.

I remember what it was like for me, travelling alone to a strange and unfamiliar place, but, once I adjusted to the local customs, I found it a place of magical wonder. I suspect that you too may be

embarking on a similar journey of self-discovery.

If I have any advice for you, it is this: believe in yourself; trust your feelings; do what is right, especially when it is most difficult; and always carry a cucumber near fresh water.

With all my love,

Your grandfather, Lawrence

Kenny scowled at the paper. His grandfather was in his nineties, a former Professor of Oriental Studies, now retired and living in Buckinghamshire. He was also famously eccentric, but this was bizarre, by anyone's standards.

After turning the paper over, Kenny looked in the envelope again. Inside was a small square of translucent paper, about the size of a large postage stamp, and a small wooden whistle.

He took the paper out first and held it up to the overhead light. Some more writing was on it, which read:

Make a copy of the letter. Use the whistle only in emergencies. Now eat this note.

Kenny had to smile. His grandfather had always

been fond of mysteries, puzzles and codes. In fact, the previous summer, he had insisted Kenny fly out from the States to join him on an elaborate treasure hunt.

This was obviously another sophisticated game he was playing. Kenny shrugged to himself, picked up his phone and took a photograph of the letter. He then nibbled one end of the pearly paper. It dissolved on his tongue like a wafer. *Rice paper*, he thought, before popping the rest into his mouth.

That left the whistle. It was a short length of bamboo, with a slot to blow through, a square hole on the top and a drilled hole at the end. Underneath was a carving:



Kenny poked his nose up over the headrest to check that no one was looking and then gave a gentle blow on the pipe. *Pfft*. No sound came out. Kenny tried again, this time blowing harder. *Pffftt*. As before, all he could hear was his own breath rushing through the tube. Thinking it must be a trick, he gave it one final blow, with all the force his lungs could muster. *Pfffff–*

He stopped, mid-puff, as a furious knocking came from the overhead storage compartment. Kenny froze, the whistle to his lips, and listened. The knocking stopped, to be replaced by a scratching noise from the same place. *That is totally freaky*. He felt goosebumps rising on his arms as he sat there, unsure of what to do.

The cabin address system pinged, making Kenny jump, and the purser said, 'We are now commencing our final approach to Narita International Airport.'

As passengers took this cue to move around, making last visits to the bathroom, stowing bags in the overhead bins and under seats, stretching and yawning, Kenny stood and stared at the door to the locker above his seat. He wanted to open it, to look inside, but he was afraid of what he might find. Instead, he rapped twice on the door. Instantly, a *tap-tap* came in reply. He took a deep breath, opened the door slightly and peered in.

Staring back at him were two round, liquid eyes. Kenny yelled in surprise and fell backwards, landing on an extremely large lady who was munching on a packet of peanuts.

'Watch what you're doing!' the woman said, as peanuts sprayed across the cabin.

'I'm very sorry, ma'am,' Kenny mumbled, backing away from her, but keeping his distance from the half-opened locker.

Dan, the steward, reappeared. 'Can I help anyone?' he said.

Kenny pointed at the overhead bin. 'There's a . . . There's a . . . thing, in there,' he said.

'A thing? What sort of thing? Has something happened to your bag?'

'No, some kind of . . . animal,' Kenny said, his voice small.

‘Isn’t it a bit late for pranks? Listen, I know you’ve had a long flight, but we’re almost there now and you’ll soon be off the plane,’ Dan said.

‘I’m telling the truth,’ Kenny said, his voice shaking. ‘There’s an animal in there. Really. I saw it.’

‘Animals aren’t allowed on flights,’ the peanut lady said. ‘Everyone knows that. I’ve never heard such garbage in my life.’

‘OK, OK,’ Dan said, reaching up for the handle. ‘Let’s have a look in here and see what all the fuss is about.’

Kenny stood behind the steward, peering round him. The door swung upwards and there, sprawled in the wide bay, leaning against Kenny’s backpack with legs crossed, was a fat, furry animal, about the size of a badger. Its face was foxlike, with a long narrow nose, and its thick hair was reddish-brown. Its legs were black and the dark fur ran up its chest and around the snout to circle the eyes.

‘There,’ Dan said, ‘nothing in there, just your bag.’

Kenny’s mouth fell open. ‘Are you . . .? But-but can’t you see . . .?’

The creature, whatever it was, waved a paw at Kenny and placed a finger over its pursed lips. It then yawned and farted. Kenny stared before whipping his head round to see his fellow passengers all watching him.

‘Does . . . does anyone else . . . see *that*?’ he asked, struggling to form the words and pointing at the furry creature.

‘Kid, there’s nothing in there,’ said the peanut lady,

measuring each word.

'Poor thing, he must be really tired if he's hallucinating,' someone said.

'Probably on drugs,' another voice added. 'Kids these days, eh?'

'Oh, come *on*. Is this some kind of joke?' Kenny said, his voice rising and eyes searching face after face. 'Are you really all telling me that you can't see that . . . thing in there?'

Rows of blank faces answered Kenny's question before the passengers lost interest and returned to their pre-landing activities.

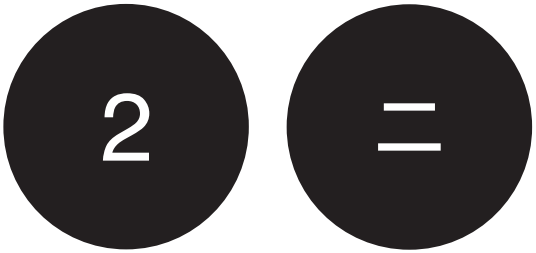
'Look, young man, I think it's time you returned to your seat and got ready for landing,' Dan said, his voice gentle but firm. 'You've had your fun, but now the joke's getting a bit old, OK?'

Kenny nodded, numbly, and took one last look at the furry creature snuggling against his backpack. It blew him a kiss before Dan closed the door on it. He slumped back into his seat, his head spinning, and fastened his seat belt.

Naoko, the Japanese attendant, came along the aisle. She reached over to take his rubbish and said quietly, 'That thing you saw. Was it large and hairy, with black eyes like a raccoon?'

Kenny nodded. 'Yeah, how did you . . .?'

Naoko smiled. 'I didn't see it, either.' She winked at him.



Kenny slumped back in his seat, his arms crossed, and ignored the curious looks directed his way. This was not what he was expecting at all. It was bad enough that his grandfather had sent him to Japan of all places, but to spend the next twelve weeks with his dad was worse. And now, to top it all, some weird animal was stalking him.

He closed his eyes, picturing his room back in the Oregon International School. His room-mate Chad would be home by now in Boston. He would be off soon to Namibia for a safari with his family, the lucky git. Kenny sighed. How nice it must be to have a family.

The remainder of the flight passed uneventfully and when Kenny went to collect his backpack from the overhead storage, the animal, whatever it was, had gone; he must have imagined it after all.

He made his way down the walkway into the spacious, ultra-modern terminal building and on towards immigration control. He was feeling much happier to be

back on solid ground. His good mood, however, was not to last.

When his turn came, the uniformed immigration officer beckoned Kenny forward and he handed over his passport and landing card. The official swiped the claret-coloured passport through the biometric scanner, stopped, examined the computer screen intently and then swiped the document again. He waved for his supervisor and the two men spoke briefly. Kenny shifted his weight and thrust his hands into his pockets.

The supervisor inspected the passport photo and compared it to Kenny's face.

'What is your name, please?' the officer said.

'It's Kenny, sir. Kenneth Blackwood.'

'How old are you?'

'I'm fifteen.'

'You are travelling alone?'

Kenny nodded, wondering where the questions were leading.

The official tapped a finger on the landing card. 'You have British passport, but this address is in America. Is that right?'

'Yes. I was born in England, but I moved to the States when I was eight. My mum was American, so I have dual nationality. Is that a problem?'

'This address is not a house,' the officer said, reading the card.

Kenny sighed. 'No, it's a boarding school. It's where I live.'

The official raised an eyebrow. 'Boarding school? Like Harry Po–'

'No. Nothing like him. He loves his school.'

The senior officer studied Kenny, as if seeking the source of the boy's sudden anger. 'What is the purpose of your visit to Japan?' he asked.

'My dad's a professor at Tokyo University. I'm spending the summer with him.'

The officer nodded at each answer. 'I'm afraid we have more questions for you,' he said. 'Please, come with me.'

'Is this going to take long?' Kenny couldn't help saying. 'It's just that my dad's waiting for me and –'

'Come. Please.'

The officials ushered Kenny past his gawking fellow passengers, including the peanut lady.

'See? I knew he was on drugs,' she said smugly.

Kenny followed the officials to a small office.

'Please, sit,' the senior official said, gesturing towards one of two hard chairs.

Kenny sat and drummed his fingers on the table while the two men departed. The door opened and another man entered. He wore a dark suit, sunglasses and his raven hair was slicked back.

'Mr Blackwood,' the newcomer said, extending his hand to shake. 'My name is Sato.' He slid a business card

across the table and sat opposite Kenny. 'I am here to help you. You can trust me.'

'My counsellor says I have trust issues.' Kenny chewed his lip. 'What's this all about, Mr Sato? I thought I didn't need a visa to visit Japan.'

'You are Ken Blackwood, yes? Son of Charles Blackwood and grandson of Lawrence Blackwood?'

'Yes, that's right,' Kenny said, unable to hide his surprise. 'How do you . . .?'

'Your grandfather is a great man. A hero to some Japanese people. Did you know that?'

Kenny blinked. 'Uh, no, sir. Not really.'

Sato leaned back and steepled his fingers. 'I am not sure how much of this I should tell you, if any, but I shall try to help you and you will help me, yes?'

From the corner of his eye, Kenny glimpsed a huge shadow looming over the frosted-glass door.

'Your *ojiisan*, your grandfather, came to Japan after World War Two, yes?'

Kenny's eyes flicked back to Sato. 'He did tell me that, yeah.'

'And he told you he was here to help the Japanese people recover, after the war?'

'Something like that.'

Sato smiled. 'Your grandfather, I'm sorry to say, was a liar, as well as a thief.'

Before Kenny could respond, there was a light knock at the door.

'Enter,' Sato said.

The door swung open and in came another official, followed by an enormous figure, who had to stoop to enter the office. Although the thing was wearing a tailored suit, it was easily three metres tall and heavily muscled. This was alarming in itself, but what really troubled Kenny was the brick-red skin, the tusks growing up from the lower jaw and the two horns on its head. He jumped up, grabbed his chair to wield as a weapon and cowered against the wall.

'Taro! *Ike*!' barked Sato, pointing to the door. The ogre-like creature bowed and hurried out.

'Mr Blackwood, please be seated. You are safe,' Sato said, coming over to help Kenny to his feet.

'What . . . was that . . . thing?' Kenny asked, his voice hoarse and shaky.

'Tell me what you saw.'

'Oh, not again! Don't tell me you didn't see it.' Kenny's heart was still thumping against his ribs.

Sato tapped his sunglasses. 'No, I saw it. I just want to be sure you saw the same thing.'

'What, that big red horned thing? Like a cross between Shrek and Hellboy.'

Sato arched an eyebrow. 'So, you have the Gift of Sight? Interesting. I thought *gaijin* cannot see *oni*.'

'*Oni*? Is that what it's called?'

'I call him Taro, but yes, he is *oni*.'

'And what's a guy-jean?'

‘You. An outsider, a foreigner.’ Sato sat down again. ‘Mr Blackwood, what you have just seen is something that most people never see. You have looked behind the curtain and peeped at the hidden world beyond.’

Kenny rubbed his face with his hands. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘You do not have to. Your grandfather has sent you here to finish his work. Of that, I am sure. I am here to help you.’

‘Finish his work? What work? I’m just here to see my dad. Can’t I just go now?’

‘Empty your pockets, please. Do you have anything from your grandfather? Anything at all?’

‘Wait. You brought that *oni* thing in here. Why?’

‘Call it a test. The fact that you can see Taro tells me everything I need to know. Now, empty your pockets, please.’

‘And what if I don’t?’

‘Then Taro will empty them for you.’ Sato inspected his manicured fingernails. ‘I can wait.’

Swearing under his breath, Kenny placed the contents of his pockets on to the table: a set of keys attached to a Newcastle United key ring, some loose change, a half-empty packet of chewing gum, his phone, a pack of trading cards secured with a rubber band, and the wooden whistle.

‘Is that everything?’ Sato asked, rising to his feet again.

Kenny nodded and then stiffened as Sato approached

him. Something about the man set Kenny's teeth on edge, something not quite right, but he couldn't decide what.

'Stand up, raise your arms,' Sato said and patted Kenny down. Paper rustled as his hand pressed against the boy's ribcage. Sato reached into Kenny's jacket and removed the envelope from the aeroplane. 'Something you forgot?' he said, taking out the letter, his eyes skimming over the writing.

'Hey!' Kenny protested. 'That's private. You can't read other people's –'

Sato's free hand drew a shape in the air and Kenny's voice vanished as suddenly as if an off button had been pressed. Bewildered, Kenny continued to protest; his mouth moved, he felt air pass over his vocal cords, but no sound came out. He tried screaming, but he was like a character in a silent movie.

Sato read the letter a third time and then addressed Kenny, a puzzled frown on his face. 'This is a strange letter. Not very informative. I am going to make a copy of it. Please stay here, for your own safety. Do not try to leave as Taro will be guarding the door.' He smiled, without warmth. 'You can shout for help if you want.'

Sato tossed the envelope on to the table and left the room. The hulking shadow of the *oni* moved in front of the door.

Kenny's mind was racing. None of this made any sense. Barely twelve hours ago, he was a kid looking forward to a trip to the Far East. Now he was stuck in some kind

of waking nightmare, complete with monsters that most people couldn't see.

He reached for his phone and swore silently when he saw that there was no signal. Slipping it back into his pocket, he gathered up the rest of his belongings. The last item he picked up was the envelope and, when he did, something rolled out from underneath it: the whistle.

What was it that Grandad had said? *Use the whistle only in emergencies*. Ridiculous, but then again, if this wasn't an emergency, what was?

Kenny blew on the whistle as hard as he could. As before, no sound came out. He was about to blow again when he heard a scuffling sound overhead. He looked up and saw the corner of a ceiling tile lift up. A snout poked through, followed by two sparkling eyes.

Kenny took an involuntary step back at the sight of the fat, furry creature from the aeroplane. It was real and it was watching him. Kenny stared as it lowered its hindquarters through the gap, dangled by its arms and then plopped awkwardly on to the table. It stood up on its back legs and reached its arms out, as if asking for a hug.

Not knowing what else to do, Kenny picked it up. The creature's quick paws loosened four buttons on his shirt and it slithered under his clothing.

'Hey!' Kenny mouthed silently. He was about to wrestle the thing loose when it shifted and seemed to melt, flowing round his abdomen and flattening out like a pancake. In seconds, it was wrapped round Kenny in

a wide furry band. Hearing footsteps approaching, he quickly redid the buttons, just as Taro stepped aside and Sato came back in.

'There has been a change of plan,' Sato said. 'You are now under arrest and will be taken to Tokyo for further questioning.'

'But I haven't done anything!' Kenny tried to yell, his lips shaping the silent words.

Two policemen entered the room and, moments later, Kenny found himself being escorted through the terminal, handcuffed to an officer.

They stopped outside Narita Airport Terminal One, where two police cars and a pair of motorcycle cops were waiting. Sato climbed into the first car and Kenny was bundled into the second. Sirens wailing, the cars pulled out and headed towards Tokyo, the city lights glittering in the distance.

Kenny looked back at the receding terminal. His father would be in there, waiting for him, not knowing what had happened. This was crazy. He'd only just arrived and already he was Public Enemy Number One. There had to be a simple explanation for this. There had to be.