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Opening Extract from...

Blood Ninja

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PROLOGUE

Near Lord Oda's Castle, Nagoya
1565

THIS WAS NOT a good place to be out at night, all alone.

Unfortunately for the young girl currently walking through the tradesmen's district, it was the middle of the night – and she was very much alone.

She walked with the slightly mincing step of a noble, and carried a delicate folded-up fan. Jewelled rings encrusted her fingers. Her soft indoor tabi slippers were unsuited to running or fighting.

The man in black was glad. Fighting he could handle. But when they ran – that was just annoying.

He glanced down at his young prey, checking to make sure that he had identified the target correctly. Yes, there it was: the distinct form of the Oda *mon* on the girl's kimono, petals within petals.

This was Lord Oda's girl.

The girl seemed blithely oblivious to the fine gold thread on her clothes, and the effect it would likely have on the residents of such an area.

This job is going to be easier than I imagined, the man in black thought.

He leaped, almost casually, to the next rooftop. He landed

without a sound and ran, his lithe body crouching low to avoid detection. The next rooftop was too far to reach in one bound, but he simply somersaulted to the ground, rolled, then jumped nimbly to grab the overhanging eave. He let himself hang there for a split second, enjoying the feel of gravity pulling at his body, then flipped onto the tiles.

A cat that had been sleeping there stood up in an exaggerated arch of irritation and was about to hiss when the ninja raised a blowpipe to his lips. The cat collapsed softly and rolled down the sloping roof. Before it could fall off the edge and hit the ground below, the ninja stretched languorously and pinned its corpse to the bark tile with a dagger.

The ninja moved from rooftop to rooftop until he was in front of the girl. He waited for the right moment, his entire body perfectly still. When the girl passed below him, he jumped, absorbing the impact of the ground with a smooth bend of the legs that turned almost instantly into a vicious kick to the girl's face.

The girl staggered back, and the ninja grinned, pressing his advantage with a flurry of kicks before reaching for his short-sword.

As the ninja's hand moved to his belt, he lowered his eyes for a fraction of a second, and it was then that something smashed into his face, crushing his nose and sending a tsunami of pain and nausea through his body. Through blurred vision he saw the girl pull back her hand, and realized that the fan was not a fan at all – it was a heavy metal bar disguised as an everyday object, a classic ninja trick.

But how—?

The girl struck again with the bar, and the ninja easily blocked, feeling a new surge of confidence as he finally managed

to free his sword and swing it in an upward arc, calculated to shatter the jaw and cut the arteries in the neck and—

The girl somehow turned out of the sword's path, bringing the fan-turned-club down on the ninja's wrist. The man felt his wrist shatter and the sword drop to the ground just as a fistful of sharp jewels destroyed his left eye.

Not rings. A knuckleduster.

His legs gave way, and he sank to the ground. But it wasn't over. It was never over. He would heal, in time. Not his eye, of course, but the rest…

Then the girl stood over him and drew a brutal *wakizashi* from her kimono, the short-sword's blade so sharp it shimmered as if surrounded by heat. She whirled it round her fingers expertly.

And then the ninja knew that it was over.

'Tell Lord Tokugawa that if he continues to send me assassins, I will continue to send him corpses,' she said. 'Let him set the world against me, and I will kill the world. Tell him that. And tell him if he wants me to spare his life, he had better send Taro next time, not some weakling of an ordinary ninja. That boy owes me a death.'

The ninja looked up at her, faint hope in his one working eye. 'You're allowing me to live?'

The girl paused. 'Ah. My mistake.'

The ninja tried to smile.

Then she struck, hard and true, at his heart. 'I'll just have to tell Tokugawa myself.'

Yes, this was not a good place to be out at night, all alone.

Especially if you were a ninja.



CHAPTER 1

Kanto Province, Lord Oda's Prefecture
Six months earlier

Taro straightened up, took a deep breath, and pulled back the string of his bow. There was a familiar twinge from his left shoulder, where a thin silver scar traced a semicircle from chest to back, at intervals punctuated by darker circles suggestive of large tooth marks.

This was not surprising – they were tooth marks.

Taro ignored the old pain and lined up his arrow with the fleeing rabbit. He held his breath, concentrating on making the bow an extension of his own body. From an early age he had taught himself to make firing the bow a kind of meditation, believing in his mind that the arrow was already sunk deep in its target, that the only thing required was to loose the string and let it fly.

He loosed the string.

The arrow arced over brown summer grass and met the rabbit as it jumped over a tussock, driving it to the ground.

Taro walked over to the dead rabbit. He knelt and removed the barbed tip, then wiped the arrowhead on the grass before returning the arrow to his quiver.

Taro dropped the rabbit into his shoulder bag and turned for

home. He wasn't far from Shirahama, the coastal village where he'd grown up: he'd come only as far as the first way marker showing the road to Nagoya. He had kept the sea in view, however, and now as he rounded the headland, he could see Shirahama bay, cradled by tall mountains whose flanks were heavily forested with cedar, chestnut, and pine. The simple dwellings of the village nestled on the side of a hill overlooking the sea. The sun was setting, and already a few plumes of smoke rose from houses. It was warm, but there was always fish to smoke, and seaweed to dry for its precious salt, so the fires were always burning.

The air that Taro breathed as he walked through the trees was scented with pine oil and the salt of the sea. Like most of the other coastal settlements in this part of Japan, Shirahama was entirely dependent on the sea. The men went out on fishing boats, the women were ama divers, and both men and women joined great gatherings of seaweed in the autumn, so that from the slimy, bubbling stuff could be burned salt to sell to the nobles.

Taro was not like them. He loved the earth as much as the sea. He had no desire to grow rice, like the peasants of the interior, but he liked to hunt using his bow. As he walked, he cradled the arc of smooth wood in his hand – it was slender and fine, but filled with taut, latent energy. His father had made it for him when he was too young even to hold it, but since then he had grown fearsomely accurate with it, and often employed it to supplement the family's food stocks with a rabbit or a fat wood pigeon.

The village people didn't like that – well, except for Hiro.

But the others said hunting was only for samurai, and that peasants like him should content themselves with the bounty of

the sea. They said that to kill four-legged creatures angered the *kami* who walked the woods, Shinto god-spirits who were everywhere in these parts, though the Buddha was supposed to have chased them from all of Japan.

People said a lot of things about Taro – jokingly, and otherwise. They said he was half *kami* himself, his delicate features and perpetually pale skin out of place in a simple village where rough faces and sunburn were the norm. They said his skill with the bow was supernatural; they said his parents must have gone into the mountains and swapped him with a god at a shrine somewhere. Taro hated it. It wasn't his fault he didn't look like anyone else, or think the same way.

And anyway, the villagers were hypocrites. Taro didn't see why the Buddha should accept the killing of fish and sea creatures but condemn the murder of a rabbit. There was also, deep within him, a dream he could never have shared with the other villagers, nor even completely admitted to himself.

He dreamed that one day he might actually *be* a samurai; that he might leave this little village to enter the service of the great Lord Oda, fall in love with a beautiful samurai woman, and finally die gloriously with a sword in his hand, refusing all mercy, and tendering no surrender.

There was only one other person in the village who shared Taro's enthusiasm for tales of war and honour and duels, and that was his closest friend, Hiro. So Taro was pleased when he came out of the woods onto the Nagoya road and saw Hiro there.

On the dusty road that led into the village, Hiro was standing, bowlegged, in a posture of defiance. His massive body glistened in the failing sunshine, naked but for a white loincloth. A heavily muscled traveller was stripping off his kimono and squaring up. By the way he carried himself, he had to be one of the wave-men

– *ronin* – who had been left without allegiance after the colossal defeat of Lord Yoshimoto's enormous army by the cunning Lord Oda Nobunaga.

Having been conquered in battle, *ronin* served no lord, followed no code of loyalty, and thus were as the waves – many and masterless, with no purpose and no end. Most of the *ronin* in these parts had served Lord Yoshimoto, once, but their very existence proved they had refused seppuku after Lord Oda's victory, and so had lost themselves the status of samurai.

Taro smiled as he watched Hiro limbering up. His friend loved to challenge passing strongmen to wrestling matches – and despite his apparently fat body, he rarely lost. This particular *ronin* didn't know what Hiro was capable of – and Hiro was relying on it. The man and his companions would have placed heavy bets on the bout, confident of victory over the chubby peasant.

Taro sat down, ready to enjoy the show.

As Hiro and the *ronin* circled each other, looking for weak points, the *ronin*'s companions stood to one side. Taro watched them, curious. Unlike the usual onlookers, they didn't seem all that interested in their friend's performance, though from their armour and swords they were clearly *ronin* too. Instead, they appeared distracted. Taro scooted over a little closer to where they were standing.

'…two puncture wounds, on the neck,' said one.

'And this was where?' replied the other.

'Minata. Just down the coast. The peasant was drained of all his blood.'

The first traveller whistled. 'A *kyuuketsuki* on Lord Oda's land. It's a bad omen.' Then, suddenly noticing Taro crouching near him, the man glared and turned back to the fight.

Taro turned away from them as if he had not been eaves-

dropping, and watched as the wrestling *ronin* stepped forward and lunged, grabbing Hiro round the neck and waist. But Taro's attention was now elsewhere, and he watched the fight as distractedly as the two *ronin*. A man had been killed, that much was obvious. And the *ronin* suspected a *kyuuketsuki*…

Taro had thought that the bloodsucking demons were only storybook things, meant to scare children into obedience, not real killers that could step out of the shadows and kill peasants only three *ri* from his home.

He felt a shiver run down his spine, and a sense that danger had landed in Shirahama, as large and ponderous and unshiftable as a beached whale. Then he shook away the feeling. No, he was safe there, with his best friend, and there was no such thing as a *kyuuketsuki* – not outside the old folktales, anyway.

Before him, the *ronin* threw his weight forward, trying to pull Hiro off his centre of balance. Hiro fell backwards, and the man gave a roar of triumph, which died in the air as Hiro tucked his legs in, placed his feet on the attacker's chest, and did a rolling kick, sending his opponent flying across the road. Hiro flipped back onto his feet as the traveller came running at him, his humiliation at the hands of a countryside oaf turning into an anger that blinded him to caution.

The traveller leaped into a jumping kick, aimed at the chest, that would floor even the strongest warrior. Hiro sidestepped neatly, grabbed the traveller's foot, and twisted, sending his body spinning to the ground. This time the challenger was much slower to get up, and when he got close enough to try a lock, Hiro pinned him easily to the ground. The man smacked his palm on the ground, indicating surrender.

Taro stood and walked over to the improvised wrestling ring. Hiro grinned and pulled him into a hug, which drove the breath

from Taro's lungs.

'All right, big man,' said Taro. 'No need to kill me.'

Hiro pulled away, but, as always when Taro's shoulders were uncovered, Hiro glanced rapidly at the scar running round the top of Taro's arm, then looked away again, both of them pretending not to have noticed.

Behind his friend's broad back, Taro saw two of the *ronin*'s companions muttering, then heard the unmistakable *hiss* as a sword was drawn. Spinning away from Hiro and round again to face the men, Taro drew an arrow from his quiver and notched it, all in one smooth motion. He aimed the arrow straight at the nearest traveller, who stood with a half-drawn sword and an open-mouthed expression of surprise. 'Go,' Taro ordered. 'And leave your bets here on the ground.' The men frowned sourly but dropped a money purse and walked away, following the road to Amigaya territory.

'Some day,' Taro said, turning to Hiro, 'you're going to pick a fight with the wrong *ronin*.'

'There's no such thing as a right *ronin*,' said Hiro, laughing, his voice deep and sonorous. Both boys were keen admirers of the samurai – noble, upstanding warriors who protected the nation's lords, who were themselves samurai. They had grown up on tales of bravery and honour; tales of samurai victory against heathen and bandit alike. Many times they had spoken of how one day they would take up swords together.

Yet Taro knew that for Hiro this dream of leaving could remain safely that – a dream, passingly entrancing and then gone, like cherry blossoms in summer. Even though Hiro was the son of landlocked refugees, he belonged there, by the sea, fishing and wrestling.

Hiro had come from the interior, where peasants were grown

stockier and heavier than the seaside variety; yet still it was Taro who felt a foreigner in his own land. Hiro entertained a mere fantasy of being one day a samurai. But Taro fervently wished it.

'And anyway,' continued Hiro, 'we'll always be there to protect each other, won't we?' He gave Taro a look so open, so innocent, that Taro was forced to look away. Hiro was unable to imagine a future where they were not friends and protectors to each other, but Taro feared that to make his way in the world, he might one day have to leave the village. His delicate features had, with age, only become more pronounced and noble-looking, setting him apart from everyone else, much as he tried to be friendly. Hiro, with his ruddy complexion and brawny body, was much more the village type.

Taro knew that Hiro would follow him anywhere. The problem was that deep down, Taro wanted to be anywhere but Shirahama.

'Did you hear what the other *ronin* said, about the *kyuuketsuki*?' Taro said finally, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Hiro looked blank. 'A bloodsucking spirit?'

'The *ronin* said that a *kyuuketsuki* had killed a peasant near here.'

'Just a silly rumour, I expect,' said Hiro. '*Kyuuketsuki* don't exist. And anyway, travellers are always telling outlandish tales.' He set off towards the village. 'Earlier, before those *ronin* showed up, there was a merchant passing through. Your mother was here – traded him some pearls for a bag of rice. He told us a story about a family just down the coast who were killed by ninja. A fisherman, his wife, and their teenage son. Claimed the villagers found throwing stars embedded in their bodies.'

Taro hurried to catch up with his friend. '*Ninja?*' he asked, incredulous.

The secretive group of black-clad assassins were, unlike the *kyuuketsuki*, thought to be real. They had been blamed for several assassinations, and it was said that Lord Tokugawa – Lord Oda's strongest ally – used them often for clandestine missions. But the thought that these well-trained and deadly killers might take the trouble to erase from the world a fisherman's family was absurd.

'That's what they said,' Hiro replied. 'Like I told you, travellers are forever coming up with ridiculous stories. We're far into the countryside here – rumours have a lot of space in which to grow and change before they reach our ears.'

Taro grunted assent. But something about this conjunction of claims struck him as peculiar – the idea that, in a single day, there should be talk of both evil spirits and ninja near their quiet little village. 'I don't like it,' he said. 'I have a bad feeling about all of this.'

'Like mother, like son,' said Hiro.

'What do you mean?'

'When the merchant told that story, your mother went pale. Ran off back to the village. She would have forgotten the rice, if I hadn't chased after her.'

Taro frowned. It wasn't like his mother to overlook something like that, especially where food was concerned. She took great care of the flow of goods into and out of the house, always making sure not to pay over the odds for anything.

'You know what I think?' said Hiro. 'I think the *ronin* want to stir up unrest. You spread a few stories about peasants getting killed by imaginary monsters, and pretty soon no one feels safe. They want to make things difficult for Lord Oda.'

'You're probably right,' said Taro. 'A lot of them served his enemies.' The *ronin* were known to despise Lord Oda, and to

blame him for the loss of the their honour, when Oda's troops destroyed the armies belonging to Lord Yoshimoto. That war had affected everyone – even Taro and Hiro. It was fleeing the violence inflicted by Lord Yoshimoto's samurai that had brought Hiro's parents to the village of Shirahama, like so many other peasants of the interior who'd been forced outward to the coast, and a new life of fishing that they had had to learn quickly, or perish.

But Hiro's parents had not learned quickly enough, and that was why they were dead.

Taro felt a little better now. Of *course* the *ronin* were seeking to destabilize Lord Oda. He was the strongest daimyo the Kanto had ever known, and strong samurai always made bitter enemies. His heroism, his extraordinary ability with the blade, and his genius for the tactics of battle had made him a god to his people, and a demon to those he had defeated. It was said that when he was first named a *kensei* – a 'sword saint' – in recognition of his mastery of the *katana*, he barely went a day without being challenged by some samurai desperate to make his name ring out over the land. All of them had died.

And when Lord Oda had lost the use of his right arm in battle, he had simply switched his sword to the other hand, and become once again a *kensei*.

Yes, he was the kind of man who could provoke the weak to make up silly rumours.

Taro shouldered his bow, clapped Hiro on the back, and set off towards the village. He didn't know that later on that night he would get all the adventure he wished for, or that real adventure was not like the feats he had heard of in stories.

Real adventure involved pain, loss, and blood. Sometimes all at once.