

The Crystal Katana

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Chapter 1

Kenji Suzuki stood in the middle of a small dojo, a training hall made of thin strips of wood and large sheets of paper. A group of students wearing white kimonos sat cross-legged all around him, watching attentively. Kenji held a bokken, a long, wooden sword, in one hand, its kissaki (tip) raised to eye level. Another student, a young man named Nobu Kimura, stood in front of him, and he, too, was armed. The two fourteen-year-old boys circled one another for several long seconds, watching one another's movements carefully, looking for an opportunity to strike. Suddenly, and without any warning whatsoever, Nobu lunged forward, his bokken aimed at Kenji's chest. Kenji deflected the blow to one side, then returned a blow of his own, and another, and another, and he would have won the fight right then and there, but he was forced to pull up abruptly and retreat a step as his bokken snapped unexpectedly in two. He was left standing there with nothing in his hand but the sword's handle and a small portion of its blade. Nobu, seeing he was now at a clear advantage, moved in on Kenji and went immediately for the kill. Kenji dove to the right just in time, narrowly avoiding a blow that had been aimed at his midsection. He rolled to one side and sprang to his feet as Nobu swung at him once again. Kenji jumped over the blow, then deflected the next by using the handle of his broken bokken as a makeshift dagger. In the process, he slid in close enough to grab Nobu by an arm and flip him

forcefully onto his back. Nobu's bokken fell from his hand and bounced along the ground.

Kenji grabbed it and stuck its point triumphantly against Nobu's chest.

Kenji's teacher, a small, graying man wearing a simple, black robe, brought the drill to an end. His name was Osamu Johjima, and everyone referred to him as Sensei Johjima. Kenji's school was called Yagyū Ryū, and it was a large school with many sensei (teachers), but Sensei Johjima was the eldest, and most revered, of the bunch. He was a master of all the samurai arts, but his specialties were what he was teaching the students at that particular moment: kenjutsu, the art of the sword, and taijutsu, the art of the body (or, in other words, hand-to-hand combat).

"Very good," Sensei Johjima said, stepping from the shadows behind the students. He looked at Kenji. "Very good indeed, young man. As always, your fighting skills are most impressive."

Kenji tossed the remnants of his bokken to the floor. There was a disgusted tone in his voice. "I'd fight better, Sensei, if my weapons didn't fail me. When will you let me use a real sword instead of these worthless wooden ones?"

Sensei Johjima smiled. He was clearly amused by Kenji's rantings. "To a true samurai," he said, "the size, shape, and material of a sword are of no importance. All that matters is the sword's spirit. A metal sword will rust; a wooden sword will rot. And both will eventually break. But a sword's spirit, no matter what it is made of, will never die. You continued to use your bokken long after it was broken, and it helped you turn the tide and win the fight. Its spirit was with you even after its material form was gone."

Kenji wasn't completely certain he understood Sensei Johjima's words, but he nodded anyway, then helped Nobu back to his feet. Nobu had been winded by his fall and was still

recovering. They started to take their places amongst the other students, but Sensei Johjima motioned Kenji to stand next to him.

“You can all learn from Kenji’s example,” Sensei Johjima said. “He is one of this ryu’s most successful students because he understands the Way of the Water.”

A puzzled look crossed many of the students’ faces, especially the younger ones.

“A samurai must learn to move as fluidly as water. Water takes the shape of its surroundings, whether it is a river bank, an ocean shore, or a rusty old pail. Stab at water with a sword, and it flows away unhurt. Just as Kenji did.”

A large, arrogant smile formed on Kenji’s lips. He puffed out his chest in an attempt to look cool for the other students, especially the girls. Some of them giggled. An especially attractive girl with pale skin and long, ebony hair winked at him.

“However,” Sensei Johjima said, “there is always much to learn.”

As fast as lightning, he grabbed Kenji by an arm, spun him around, and flipped him onto his back. Kenji landed hard and let out a painful yelp as his breath was knocked from his lungs.

After spending a couple of minutes on the ground trying to recover his wits (and his breath, and his composure), he climbed back to his feet. The other students (including the girl with the long, ebony hair) laughed at him and pointed.

It was at that point Kenji realized there was a small group of men standing just inside the dojo’s main entrance. They were Imperial samurai, and all of them (except their leader) were dressed in traditional Imperial armor, including heavy gloves, leg and chest covers, and helmets with long, curved spikes. Their leader wore nothing but a simple, white kimono and pants.

“We have been sent by the Emperor,” the leader told Sensei Johjima. He was a tall, lean man in his late thirties, with a deep and powerful voice. His name was Takeshi Tsujikawa.

Sensei Johjima approached him and bowed slightly.

“Greetings, Takeshi. It has been awhile since your last visit to my dojo.”

Takeshi bowed deeply, much deeper than Sensei Johjima had bowed. “Much too long, master. My absence is inexcusable, and I apologize profoundly. In my defense, however, the Emperor has kept me busy these past few years.”

Sensei Johjima smiled. “I imagine he has,” he said. “After all, it’s not easy being one of the Emperor’s most trusted warriors. I assume life has treated my former student well?”

Takeshi smiled. “I am grateful for everything I have been given. I owe it all to you, master.” He bowed once again.

“You are most gracious, Takeshi. What brings you to see me, dear friend?”

Takeshi’s face was stern, and his eyes sad. “I bring foreboding news,” he said. “The Emperor has forbidden me to say much, for fear of frightening the peasants. All I can say is a great threat to our land has arisen, and it can only be defeated with the help of a young man from your school. His name is Kenji Suzuki. I am told he is still one of your students.”

“At present,” Sensei Johjima said, “he is my finest student.” He turned and motioned Kenji to step forward.

Takeshi turned to face Kenji. There was a brief smile on his face as he looked him in the eye. “It’s nice to meet you, young man,” he said. “If Sensei Johjima is impressed with your abilities, I’m sure I will be, too. I have orders to take you to the Emperor immediately. He would like to meet you before we begin our voyage.”

“Voyage?” Kenji asked. “What voyage?” He had no idea what Takeshi was talking about, and no idea why the Emperor would want to see him. Like most people, Kenji had never

met the Emperor before, and, to be perfectly honest, he'd only been to Imperial City once in his entire life, when he was very young. It was so long ago he barely remembered.

“Has my student done something wrong?” Sensei Johjima asked.

“Quite the contrary,” Takeshi said. “Actually, Kenji is the key to our continued safety. But I am forbidden from saying anything more. Please permit me to take him, master. I will assure his safety. You have my word as a samurai.”

Sensei Johjima paused briefly, as though he were still trying to digest Takeshi's request. “You carry the Emperor's orders?” he asked.

Takeshi nodded.

“And they contain a better explanation than the one you are currently offering?”

Takeshi smiled. “The Emperor said you would require nothing less. He knows you well, master.”

Sensei Johjima smiled.

Takeshi removed a piece of rolled parchment from his belt and handed it to the old man. Sensei Johjima read it carefully, handed it back, and looked up at Takeshi with a concerned look on his face.

“Is it true?” he asked. “Has it already begun?”

“It has,” Takeshi said. His voice was quiet. And somber.

Sensei Johjima sighed, as though he had been told the end of the world was approaching. “Kenji will accompany you, but I will speak with him first. We will be brief.”

“As you wish,” Takeshi said, bowing deeply. “My men and I will wait outside. As always, thank you for your cooperation, master.”

Kenji watched as Takeshi led the other samurai back outside. When they were gone, he turned to Sensei Johjima. He didn't understand what was happening, nor how he was involved, and his heart was absolutely pounding in his chest.

"What do they want?" he asked. "I'm just a student. I haven't done anything."

"Takeshi means you no harm," Sensei Johjima said. "And he has guaranteed your safety. He said so himself."

"Can he be trusted?"

Sensei Johjima smiled. "Of course he can be trusted," he said. "He was one of my finest students, and now he is one of the most respected samurai in all the land. If he says he will protect you, he will, or he will die in the process. His honor requires it."

"Why must I go?" Kenji asked. "I'm happy here. And my training -- I still have much to learn. You said so yourself."

Sensei Johjima's face grew stern with concentration, as though he were trying to choose his words very carefully. "Your fate is much different than the rest of us, Kenji. Your path leads you to a place much more important than this dojo. As such, you must go with Takeshi. He will explain everything in due time. In the meantime, you must be patient, and you must cooperate with him in every way. Do you understand?"

Kenji was at a complete loss. He really didn't know what to say. He had lived his entire life at Yagyu Ryu, and he didn't want to leave, for any length of time, but he knew he had no choice. As a student, he was bound to obey his teacher's instructions, even if he didn't fully understand or agree with them.

"Gather your belongings," Sensei Johjima said, "and meet Takeshi in the central garden as soon as you can."

“Yes, Sensei,” Kenji said, bowing deeply. He turned to walk away, but Sensei Johjima’s voice stopped him in his tracks.

“The voyage ahead of you is a long and difficult one,” he said. “For the sake of us all, I wish you well.”