

Prologue

Edo Castle, Japan
June 1650

From his hiding place behind the large gold-leaf covered screen portraying a glorious scene from a famous battle, the Shinobi spy listened intently. His tanned, middle-aged face was wrinkled with concentration. His eyes were fixed firmly on a spot on the screen, beyond which two men were talking.

Controlling his breathing to slow his heart rate allowed him to hear more clearly the words being spoken by the most powerful man in the country - the Shogun. He was reprimanding a Daimyo, one of the noblemen he allowed to own land. The screen distorted the sounds of the conversation but the listener had been trained from infancy to do this job; he would not fail to obtain some information that his client could use to his advantage.

“With all respect, Shogun, if I leave my lands now, they will be vulnerable to attack.”

This must be the Daimyo talking, the spy surmised. Which one was it though? There were hundreds of land owners. He could not see the man without changing his position, and that would alert the subjects to his presence. He would have to wait until one of them said something that revealed the man’s identity.

“Appoint a retainer to oversee your lands, as the others must do. There can be no exceptions,” was the firm reply. This was the Shogun, who did not appreciate his authority being questioned.

The spy knew what the Shogun looked like; he had seen him several times during his reconnaissance missions, although he had made sure the Shogun had never noticed him. An intimidating sight, the Shogun always dressed in wide black robes, designed to make him look big and powerful. His posture was always upright, also contributing to the air of confidence. The spy almost felt sorry for the pathetic Daimyo with his futile request.

“But I have no-one I can trust with such an important task,” the Daimyo persisted.

This must be true, the spy surmised or he would not continue to argue for what was clearly a lost cause.

The Shogun’s voice was raised now. He was becoming irritated. “All Daimyos must reside at court every other year, and leave a family member here in the alternate years. That is the law now.”

He continued in a voice so loud it reverberated around the large room. “Do as I say or Toba will belong to someone else soon.”

The spy relaxed. He had what he needed. The Lord of Toba would soon be leaving his property in the hands of someone he did not fully trust, while he was hundreds of miles away in Edo, unable to protect his land and people.

The Shinobi smiled silently as he heard the Daimyo walk away from the room, defeated. He would have to wait for the Shogun to leave now, which could take hours, but he had learned great patience over the years. He stood completely still and silent, waiting and listening. Others came and left the room. His legs started to feel heavy.

Gentle curling and uncurling of his toes was necessary to ensure his circulation did not slow any further. His walk must appear natural when he left the room so as not to arouse suspicion. Eventually, he detected the sound of the Shogun’s heavy robes swaying as he stood. There were footsteps and the sound of the door closing.

Ten seconds later, the man walked out of the room carrying a tea tray. He was dressed as a kitchen servant, in a beige jacket which marked him as a member of the Shogun's staff. He had stolen this from the laundry earlier in the week, in readiness for his task. The route he took through the castle was a circuitous one, carefully planned to avoid anyone witnessing his escape. The castle was full of people, from the servants who cooked and cleaned and ensured everything was in its proper place, to the richest Daimyos residing at court, who wafted through the halls in the finest brocade and silk, and kept their most precious possessions locked away in little chests covered in gold leaf.

The Shinobi knew where everyone should be at all times of the day, and had various routes planned so he could leave undetected at any time. He used several hallways, his footsteps quiet on the stone floors. There were many unlocked doors but he couldn't be certain there was no-one in those rooms, so he walked purposefully through the halls until he reached a side door. He placed the tray on an ornate peony motif console table, intricately carved and inlaid with shell, designed to remind visitors of the Shogun's exquisite gardens. Leaving the building, he slid the door closed behind him.

Glancing around casually to ensure he was alone, he walked a few steps to the start of the private garden; a serene combination of water surrounded by irises and a border of fruit trees. He selected a suitable tree and began to climb, crawling along a thick branch until he was close enough to jump across to the inner compound wall. From there, he lowered himself down and dropped onto the path below, running along the edge of the main garden.

This area was often seen by visitors, and had been carefully planned to demonstrate the Shogun's control over nature as well as the people of his country. The borders were planted with shrubs and small trees that had been pruned into neat shapes, and there was a large pond containing ornamental fish. This was where the Shogun came to clear his mind. The swirling flow of the white and gold fish moving around the pond in ever-changing patterns was mesmerising.

The shinobi could not stop to appreciate this. Using the small, sturdy maple trees and dense azalea plants as cover, the spy soon reached a path flanked by pure white peonies, which joined a wider main path. He slowed to a brisk walk and slipped behind a crowd of household staff, also in beige jackets, all making their way to different parts of the castle.

This was only the beginning of his escape. He had now reached the first of the residential areas; the homes of the most important people were closest to the castle. There were several streets of wooden framed buildings with white panelled walls to pass through. These luxurious dwellings seemed to sneer at the rest of the suburbs, the upturned corners of their slanted roofs snubbing any passers-by. Not that there were many of those.

Edo was not just a castle with a few homes for members of the court within its walls. It was a city, with miles of walls and moats, patrolled by soldiers. All of these measures were designed to keep the people safe, and to make it impossible for anyone to move out of their designated area without attracting attention.

The outer walls were very tall and could not be scaled without the use of a rope and grappling hook, which the spy could not have smuggled into the castle unnoticed. A good swimmer, he could have crossed the moat, but walking around dripping wet would certainly have alerted someone to his nefarious activities, and any dry clothes left near the bank could have been seen by the patrols. He had no choice but to pass through several gates, guarded by armed men, to leave Edo. This did not worry him, though.

He had created the kitchen servant identity specifically for this purpose. A cover

story had been invented; an errand which took him away from the castle to find just the right ingredient for the Shogun's dinner welcoming the new noble family members to Edo. This was a plausible story which the soldiers had no cause to question. It was a much better approach than trying to sneak past them, which would probably have resulted in being shot with a musket.

Clutching a shopping list written on washi paper bearing the Shogun's special mark, stolen from his office the day before, the spy passed through a gate unchallenged and turned into the trade district. This was a warren of shops and stalls, with people everywhere, and items for sale piled up and hung out all around, blocking the view of anyone who might have followed him. He found the bag of clothes he had left there earlier, and changed in an alley.

The kitchen servant had disappeared. He was a ghost.

One – Night Flight to Tokyo

Cameron Barnes is standing in a clear cubicle with no shoes on, legs apart and arms in the air. He's medium height for a thirteen-year-old, slim, with dark brown hair, brown eyes, and skin that tans easily; the sort of person who blends into a crowd. It isn't a problem - he doesn't like to be different. He would rather not be in a security scanner for everyone to see right now, but it is necessary to clear airport security before boarding the plane to Tokyo.

The scanner moves slowly from one side of the cubicle to the other, checking for any dangerous objects he may be hiding. The grey plastic tray holding his shoes and backpack should be passing through the hand luggage x-ray machines now. He cannot see the tray from the scanner cubicle, and can only hope no-one takes anything out of it while he is being searched. His passport is in his backpack, and is - his mum has already told him several times today - the most important thing to keep safe. His boarding pass is fairly essential too, and is stored on his phone, which is also in the grey plastic tray. He is trying not to think about it.

The exit door opens, releasing the impatient teenager. The backpack and phone are collected and shoes put back on in a matter of seconds. Although they have already checked in online, the airline recommended arriving at the airport three hours before the flight was due to depart. Having done this, there is no hurry now, but Cameron is keen to distance himself from the discomfort of the security area. He looks around for his waiting parents.

“Shops or coffee?” he asks.

Mr Barnes looks at his smartwatch and shrugs.

“Both.”

There are plenty of shops in the airport to wander around, but little room in the hand luggage. After 30 minutes, the Barneses find a café and buy tea and pastries, sitting close to an information board so they can check regularly for updates. When the board finally says the gate is open, they head there to join the queue.

Mrs Barnes looks over at her son, her tired blue eyes watching him through her glasses. She has been keeping a close eye on him since they arrived at the airport, even though he thinks that, as a teenager, he is old enough to make sure he gets to the right gate at the right time. It is not that big a place. In fact, it is not much larger than his school, which is at least double the size of both his parents' offices; perhaps *he* should be keeping an eye on *them*. Not that it would be easy to lose his dad, who is taller than average.

The queue of people starts to move forward, and step by step they edge closer to the start of their adventure. Cameron's heart starts to beat a little faster. After looking at his boarding pass for his seat number, and checking, for the fourth time, that his tablet is in his hand luggage, it is his turn to hold his boarding pass on the scanner. Moments later he is on the impressively spacious plane, strapping into a luxuriously large, soft, reclinable seat. A cabin crew lady is stowing his backpack in the overhead locker. Now all that discussion about paying extra for premium economy makes sense - apart from how long it went on for, that is. This decision should have been a no-brainer. The flights will take up two days of the trip so they clearly need to be comfortable.

His parents start to chatter about planning trips and activities. He switches his tablet to flight mode and puts on his headphones. Mr and Mrs Barnes carry on anyway. Odd words are audible, like rail passes and shinkansen, which is the name for the bullet trains

that travel at high speed between the cities, but most of the conversation is blocked out by the headphones. Mrs Barnes says something about Hanami - that's the festival of cherry blossom viewing, which is the reason they are going at this time of year. It's a big thing in Japan. Cameron nods.

Now she is saying something about onsen - hot springs heated by volcanoes. He nods again. The name Mount Fuji is mentioned and he can tell by his parents' expressions they are excited about seeing the famous mountain. This warrants another nod, accompanied by a frown. There have been enough interruptions now.

The following stream of suggestions is unheard and answered eventually with, "After this game."

Mr and Mrs Barnes know when their son has reached his limit. They give up and watch TV instead.

A cabin crew lady in a neat little uniform brings round eye masks. Passengers have to sleep on the plane because it is such a long flight. But they have passed through so many time zones that by the time Cameron feels sleepy, it turns out there are only four hours of night left.

Even though the seats recline to about 75 degrees, and there is plenty of room to find a favourable sleeping position, he wakes feeling more tired than he was before he slept. A glance at his parents tells him they feel the same.

They are offered ramen for breakfast, which it turns out is Japanese for noodles. This seems like an unusual breakfast choice to Cameron. He tries to work out what time it is in England but he's too tired to focus. He just knows he should still be asleep. He doesn't like noodles anyway.

The cabin crew lady comes round again, this time with toothbrushes, in case anyone forgot to put theirs in their hand luggage.

Mrs Barnes is talking again. "It's a shame you didn't learn more of the language before the trip."

They had done a Japanese course together but it was very difficult. Many Japanese words are longer than their English equivalents, and sentences are structured differently.

"I'm sure I picked up enough to get by," he says, although now he's almost there, he's also wishing he had learned more of the language.

"Well, at least you learned a bit about the culture so you won't accidentally offend anyone," Mr Barnes chips in.

The course included information about everyday cultural things including when it is appropriate to bow, and that you should use both hands when receiving someone's business card. Cameron does not think it is likely he will need to know any of these things.

They arrive in Tokyo exhausted. This airport seems enormous, but it may be simply that none of them can focus on the task of navigating it whilst avoiding the hundreds of people around them. There is a large sign with a picture of a train which directs them to the station. First they have to find a travel centre and have their rail passes activated. This only takes a few minutes and then they start looking for the train to Osaka. Cameron remembers something about the trains being really cool in Japan but he is too tired to notice their features now. He just focuses on making sure he gets on the same train as his parents.

The countryside whizzes by too quickly to see much. It is just a green blur outside the window. He doesn't care. At this point, he just wants to get to the hotel and sleep for a

really long time.

Two – The Boy at the Pool

After twelve hours of blissful sleep, the world is making a lot more sense, even though it is five o'clock in the morning and everything is in Japanese. Cameron turns on his lamp and flicks through the hotel information booklet, which has a section in English. He reads the whole section, then reaches for his tablet to keep himself occupied until he can go to breakfast, which starts at 6.30.

The time passes quickly and soon everyone is dressed and enjoying a buffet breakfast in the hotel restaurant. It is similar to other hotel breakfasts Cameron has experienced, except there are noodles. Mr and Mrs Barnes are excitedly talking about their first day trip, to an onsen. It's a public bath, a little like a swimming pool, but the water is hot and you can't actually swim in it. And... everyone is naked. Cameron does not want to go.

He decides to try the hotel swimming pool instead. After saying goodbye to his mum and dad in the hotel reception, he looks around for the pool. There are lots of Japanese people in the hotel but it is fairly quiet as everyone is speaking in hushed tones. They are all smartly dressed and remarkably short. He is taller than all of them, even the men. Some Japanese children are staring at him. He is not going to blend into any crowds here. He sees a sign with wavy lines on it that might mean the pool, and leaves the reception area.

Cameron heads downstairs and lets out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding, as he finds the pool. He changes into swim shorts in the spotless changing room. There are lockers for clothes just like at the swimming pools he is used to. The hotel information said pool towels were provided. Seeing no towels in the reception area or changing room, he heads through to the pool area.

The pool is huge, and lined with blue tiles, giving the impression of a lake. A glass wall the length of the pool gives a good view of the immaculately manicured garden. It seems like a very relaxing place.

Just inside the door, there is a tall pile of tiny white towels. They look like the sort of towels people put round their necks in a gym to catch sweat. Having no idea what to do with these miniature towels here, he scans the loungers. They are wooden, topped with thick pads that look very comfortable but there are no towels on any of them. There are no people on them either, with or without towels. He wonders whether the language course mentioned what to do in this situation.

Standing alone at the entrance to the pool wearing only his shark print swim shorts feels a little embarrassing. Putting aside the towel issue for now, he jumps into the pool and swims a length. When he reaches the other end, there is a boy standing on the poolside watching him; a small, neat-looking person with pale golden brown skin, dark hair and brown eyes, wearing neon green swim shorts.

"Konnichiwa. Are you English?" the boy asks, with a heavy Japanese accent.

He is the first person Cameron has seen since they arrived who looks around the same age as himself, and the first person who doesn't work for the hotel who has spoken any English.

"Konnichiwa. Yes, I'm English. My name's Cameron."

Now he can tell his parents he has spoken Japanese today, even if it was only to say hello. The boy smiles; He has a warm, friendly smile.

"It's nice to meet you. I am called Hayato. I am 14. I come from Matsuyama in Shikoku."

He bows at this point. This was covered in the course but Cameron can't remember whether he is supposed to bow back.

Hayato doesn't notice his discomfort and continues, "I am here for Hanami."

"I'm here for Hanami too."

"I would like to talk to you, to practice my English. Not many people speak English here. The Japanese language has ... smaller sounds?"

Cameron ponders this statement for a moment.

"Fewer sounds."

"Yes? Learning other languages is hard for Japanese people. Do you speak Japanese?"

"A little," Cameron replies, although he has actually only picked up a few phrases. He changes the subject in case Hayato tries to talk to him in Japanese. "I thought there were cherry trees all over Japan. Why have you come to Osaka for Hanami?"

"There are cherry trees in the towns and cities of Honshu – this island. Shikoku is a different island."

"Oh, right." Cameron starts to regret not paying more attention to the map that came with the guidebook, but Hayato seems happy just to have someone to talk to.

"We have forests of big trees. We are best known for the..." Hayato's face shows a great deal of concentration as he works out how to say the next part, "Eighty-eight temples."

Cameron vaguely recollects his mum saying something about eighty-eight temples and a pilgrimage route, but it hadn't seemed that interesting at the time. He nods sagely.

"Where are your parents?" Hayato asks.

"They've gone to an onsen. It isn't my sort of thing."

Hayato laughs. "I think you don't like to be..." he gestures to his body, not knowing the word.

"Naked?"

"Yes, naked - with strangers."

Cameron shakes his head. "Strangers are all right. Being naked with my mum and dad is something else."

Hayato laughs again. He seems like a nice kid. "So we will be friends today. I tell you about Japan and you help me with English."

"OK," Cameron says, lifting himself onto the side of the pool. "Tell me something interesting about Japan."

Hayato sits next to him and thinks for a moment.

"Almost everybody in Japan lives in a city. Only ten... in 100..." he looks at Cameron for help.

"Ten percent?"

"Yes? Ten percent of people live in the countryside. There used to be lots of farmers

and fishermen, but now people work in the cities. The cities are very busy and the countryside is very quiet.”

“That is interesting. What else?”

Hayato is keen to get some use out of his new word. “80 percent of Japanese people have one of only ten family names. This is because Japanese family names only began in 1868. Everyone in Japan was counted and somebody wrote down everyone’s name,” Hayato explained.

“There was a census?” Cameron checks his understanding.

“Census,” Hayato repeats. “Only important families had a family name and everyone else had to get a name quickly. Most people took a word that means where they came from or where they worked. Lots of people are called Kobayashi, which means forest, or Tanaka, which means rice field. Some people could have a name that told everyone which family they worked for, if the family said it was OK.”

“I wouldn’t mind changing my name to Cameron Mountbatten-Windsor and being mistaken for British royalty,” Cameron jokes. “I’m starting to understand why my parents want me to experience the mystery of Japanese culture.”

Hayato’s face lights up with excitement. “If you are interested in mysteries, I have a real one!”

Uncertain how to respond to this, Cameron takes his lead from Hayato, who clearly thinks this is good news.

“Sounds cool. Let me swim a few more lengths and we can get dry and talk about it.” He hopes Hayato knows how to get dry.

Hayato jumps in the pool and shoots off towards the other end at a lightning pace. Cameron follows as fast as he can. Before he reaches the end of the pool, Hayato passes him coming back.

A few lengths later, the boys get out of the pool. The moment of the towels looms ahead. Hayato steps onto a wooden board and shakes the water from his body. Taking a little towel from the pile, he carefully rubs the water from his hair before discarding that towel in the laundry bin. He takes another towel and gently pats the top half of his body dry, then begins again with a new towel for his bottom half. It is cold now they are not in the pool and Cameron shivers, sending much of the water from his skin flying off in all directions. He grabs a little towel and starts rubbing his hair vigorously.

He hopes his parents don’t have the same towels at the onsen. That really would be embarrassing.