



A MATTER OF HONOUR

‘Are all your fellow countrymen so quick to anger?’ asked Akiko as they were frogmarched through the city gates to the open space of Moorfields, a knot of curious onlookers trailing in their wake. ‘Everyone we’ve met so far wishes to insult us, rob us or kill us!’

‘Now you know how I felt in Japan!’ Jack muttered irritably.

Akiko winced and fell silent. Jack immediately felt bad. He knew he’d been rude to her and that his tone had been harsh. But the imminent prospect of the duel, which would further delay his reunion with Jess, had combined with his utter dismay at the hostile welcome they’d received so far in England and had made him tetchy. ‘Sorry, Akiko . . .’ he muttered, ‘I’m a little tense at the moment.’

The delicate line of her jaw relaxed and her gaze returned his way. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you, Jack. But we’re here to meet your sister, not the end of a sword! And it seems pointless fighting over something so small.’

‘Well, certain samurai lords would chop off your head if you didn’t bow low enough!’ Jack shot back. He thought of

the old blind tea merchant who'd suffered such a fate on the command of *daimyo* Kamakura – the man who'd become Shogun of Japan and expelled all Christians and foreigners from his domain.

'They are the exception,' defended Akiko. 'Most *daimyo* are fair and just.'

'If you are Japanese,' said Jack bluntly as they were brought to a halt beside an old oak tree in the middle of a meadow. 'Anyway, the same applies here. We've simply been unfortunate to meet such idiots as this man!'

Sir Toby was removing his fur-collared cloak with the affected grace of a royal courtier. Offloading the garment to his round-bellied and fawning friend, he examined the grassy duelling area, appeared satisfied, then began stretching his legs and flexing his arms. His other companion, the lank-haired drunkard, propped himself up against the tree, his eyes half-closed with intoxication. The growing number of spectators now formed a loose circle round them, hemming Jack and his friends in.

Yori, who'd been fearfully quiet all the way to Moorfields, now whispered to Jack, 'Do you *really* have to do this?'

'It looks like it,' he replied, as Sir Toby made a show of parrying and lunging, much to the delight of the crowd.

'But what if you apologize?'

Jack frowned. 'What do I have to apologize for? He's the one who should be apologizing to *us*!'

'I know, but for the sake of avoiding yet *another* fight today, perhaps we can swallow our pride, say sorry and return to the inn in one piece.' Yori looked up at him, eyes round and hopeful.

Jack sighed. Yori was right. He was about to risk everything over a perceived slight. He should just apologize and pray that would be the end of it, that his opponent's posturing was no more than an act of bravado. 'Yes, by all means try,' he said.

Summoning up his courage, Yori approached Sir Toby and bowed low. 'I understand, sir, the importance of honour and respect. I can assure you that my friend Jack did not wish to offend your good nature or imply that you're a liar. This is clearly a misunderstanding. So, rather than fight a duel, please accept our sincere apology.'

Sir Toby looked haughtily down his narrow nose at the submissive little monk. 'Some men are satisfied with words, some content with penance,' he replied, 'and others need to be answered with weapons. I, sir, am of this last opinion.'

With that, Sir Toby drew his rapier with a flourish. The weapon was long, slim and pointed as a needle. The ornate handguard was composed of a complex swirl of silver loops and prongs, and the pommel was large and round, a counterweight to the long blade as well as an effective striking ball. Sir Toby flicked the sword several times, its sharp tip whipping through the air with a high-pitched *swish*. Yori retreated rapidly.

'Well, it was worth asking,' consoled Akiko, as wagers started to be made among the crowd on the outcome of the impending fight.

Jack wasn't put off. Having gained experience of duelling in Japan, he was confident in his own fighting abilities. He was keenly aware that any combat posed the risk of injury, or even death, but he'd been trained in *kenjutsu* by the greatest

swordsman in Japan, Masamoto Takeshi. From him, he'd learnt and mastered the Two Heavens, an almost invincible technique using both the *katana* and *wakizashi*. Furthermore, the samurai sword had by far the most lethal and honed blade in the whole world, and looking at the flimsy rapier in Sir Toby's hand, Jack almost pitied the man's chances.

'Is this your second?' Sir Toby asked him, pointing the tip of his rapier towards Yori. 'Not much of an opponent for Sir Francis here, but I suppose he'll do.'

'Me?' squeaked Yori, aghast. He glanced at the drunk yet towering gentleman leaning against the tree. 'I'm no fighter. I'm a monk. I've taken a vow of peace.'

Sir Toby shrugged away his protest. 'But we fight according to the French custom. The seconds on each side duel too.'

Yori backed away, his gaze darting round the crowd like a mouse seeking a bolt-hole.

'I'll be Jack's second,' said Akiko, stepping up.

Sir Francis's drooping eyes suddenly popped open. 'Zounds! The girl really thinks she is a warrior!'

'You realize this is a man's fight,' said Sir Toby condescendingly.

The corner of Akiko's mouth curled into a faint smile. 'Then I'll be gentle with him.'

Laughter burst from the gathered onlookers and the excitement intensified at the prospect of such an unusual match. More eager bets were placed.

'So be it,' declared Sir Toby. 'Edmund, lend her your rapier.'

His portly friend reluctantly presented his sword. Akiko

weighed it in her hand, adapting her grip to the unfamiliar weapon. 'It's light!' she remarked.

'Of course it is,' said Sir Edmund. 'Italian steel. The finest.'

'Won't save you, though,' said Sir Francis, peeling himself away from the tree.

Jack and Akiko stood side by side, facing their opponents. The crowd fell silent in anticipation.

'*En garde!*' cried Sir Toby, dropping into a long low stance and holding out his rapier.

'I assure you that you don't want to do this,' said Jack, maintaining a calm composure as he and Akiko prepared for battle. 'Put away your swords now and we can forget all about our quarrel.'

'I believe they're scared,' slurred Sir Francis, his rapier tip wavering.

'I'm scared for *you*,' said Jack. 'Your last chance: sheathe your weapons.'

Sir Toby snorted his disdain. 'This is a matter of honour. I *must* draw blood to be satisfied.'

With that, he lunged at Jack. At the same time Sir Francis went for Akiko.

The speed at which Sir Toby moved was astounding. Caught off guard, Jack barely saw the rapier's sharpened tip as it thrust towards his heart. Only a deft, instinctive shift of his body saved him from being skewered. Meanwhile, Akiko was driven back by a series of sharp jabs from Sir Francis.

Recovering quickly, Jack drew his *katana* in one fluid movement and sliced down. The curved blade cut across Sir Toby, threatening to sever the man's sword arm clean off.

But Sir Toby was quick to pull back and the *katana* sliced through thin air, a fraction from the end of his nose.

'Your sword work is too slow,' sneered Sir Toby as if he'd only been testing Jack's reactions with his first attack.

Then the stiffened ruff round his neck parted, fell away and dropped into the dirt.

'Not that slow,' replied Jack with a cunning grin.

Sir Toby's face blanched at this indignity as sniggering spread through the crowd. The laughter caused Sir Francis to pause in his assault on Akiko, who'd been fiercely defending herself.

Sir Edmund waddled over in a panic and examined Sir Toby. 'No blood,' he declared with evident relief and Sir Francis resumed his attack on Akiko.

Although uninjured, Sir Toby was incensed. 'You ruined my ruff! You'll pay for that!'

He came at Jack like a thing possessed, his rapier stabbing for Jack's eyes. Jack deflected the first thrust, dodged the second, but the third caught him across the cheek. Pain flared in a sharp line.

'First blood!' cried an onlooker in delight.

'Sir Toby's won,' Sir Edmund announced with an official air.

Money began to exchange hands as bets were claimed and attention now turned to the ongoing duel between Sir Francis and Akiko. Despite her awkwardness with the rapier, she was putting up a valiant fight, deflecting his attacks and countering with a few well-placed jabs of her own. Sir Francis was forced to up his game when the tip of Akiko's rapier pierced his doublet and almost drew blood.

Sir Toby fought on too – regardless of taking first blood. Rapier and *katana* clashed as Jack warded off the multiple jabs. He was pricked in the arm, then the hand, but still Sir Toby advanced on him.

‘It’s first blood, Sir Toby,’ called out his friend. ‘Victory is yours.’

‘My honour is yet to be satisfied,’ he snapped, lunging again and again.

Each strike was like a bee sting to Jack. Despite his own sword skills, Jack found himself unable to match Sir Toby for speed and reach. More and more puncture wounds dotted his limbs and body. As he desperately fended off the flurry of attacks, Akiko continued to battle Sir Francis. Drunk as the man was, he proved to be a capable swordsman and Akiko was struggling to hold her own with an unfamiliar weapon and against such a vastly different sword style. But she seemed to be faring far better than Jack, who was fast becoming a bleeding pincushion.

Realizing he’d dangerously underestimated his opponent, Jack drew his *wakizashi* and took up a Two Heavens stance.

‘You’ll need more than two swords to beat me!’ Sir Toby scoffed and thrust for Jack’s chest.

Jack blocked the attack with his *wakizashi*, then brought his *katana* down hard on to the rapier. The steel of his blade being stronger than the rapier’s, the clash of swords broke the tip clean off Sir Toby’s weapon.

That should reduce his reach, thought Jack with a grin.

Sir Toby stared at his docked rapier in disbelief. Then flew into a rage. He stabbed, thrust and lunged repeatedly. But armed now with two swords and no longer at a disadvantage

in terms of range, Jack had less trouble deflecting and countering the onslaught. A sudden yelp of pain caused him to turn. Akiko was backed up against the oak tree, her shoulder run through with Sir Francis's rapier, its slender blade pinning her to the trunk.

Distracted by her plight, Jack was caught off guard by a vicious slash from Sir Toby. The broken blade whipped across the back of his left hand, leaving a welt and forcing him to drop his *wakizashi*. Retreating awkwardly, Jack stumbled over a tree root and landed on his back. With a gleeful grin, Sir Toby saw his opportunity and prepared to plunge his broken rapier into Jack's exposed chest . . .

'CONSTABLES!' came a cry from the crowd.

A unit of armed men barged on to the scene and Sir Toby was denied his killing strike.

'Arrest these men!' ordered the chief constable as the spectators quickly dispersed. Then, somewhat taken aback at Akiko's involvement, he added, 'And the girl.'

The constables swiftly intervened, seizing the duellists and confiscating their weapons. Jack was forced to relinquish both his *katana* and *wakizashi*. Even Yori was made to give up his *shakujō* staff.

'Unhand me!' roared Sir Toby as he was being bound. 'Don't you know who I am?'

The chief constable, an officious man with a thrusting jaw and deep-set eyes, looked him up and down before replying, 'No.'

Sir Toby's face flushed with outrage. 'I am *Sir* Toby Nashe, second cousin of Sir William Harrington, who is friend to His Majesty the King.'

While the connection seemed pretty tenuous to Jack, it had the desired effect on the chief constable and Sir Toby and his friends were immediately released. But Jack, Akiko and Yori remained in custody.

'My apologies, Sir Toby,' said the chief constable, his tone polite but without any real effort at deference. 'Now will you explain what is going on here?'

'These *foreigners* tried to rob me,' Sir Toby declared, his two faithful companions nodding in vigorous agreement.

'That's a lie!' cried Jack.

'And besmirch my reputation,' added Sir Toby haughtily, holding his nose high.

'Please, honourable constable,' said Yori, managing a half bow despite being pinned by the arms. 'These three men insulted us, then challenged my friend Jack to a duel. We are innocent of these accusations.'

The chief constable eyed Yori's religious robes, then glanced at Akiko's wounded shoulder, the blood blooming on her silk kimono. For a moment it seemed he might be willing to believe them. Then his stubbled jaw hardened. 'You're the ones who caused that disturbance at Cheapside market – I heard that three travellers in strange clothes had escaped capture.' Puffing out his barrel chest, he announced, 'I arrest you in the name of the King for brawling, robbery and disturbing the peace.'

Jack opened his mouth to protest, but was cut off by the constable's order: 'Take them away!'