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The *Gaijin* Samurai

**Japan, summer 1614**

‘Hey, stranger, you’re in my seat!’ snarled the samurai warrior.

Jack stopped slurping his noodles. Even though there were plenty of empty benches in the dilapidated inn at Shono, a post station that served those travelling along the Tokaido Road, Jack didn’t dare question the samurai. Without looking up from beneath his straw hat, he slid himself across to the next table. Then he returned his attention to the steaming bowl and took another mouthful.

‘I said, you’re in *my* seat,’ repeated the man, his hand now resting upon the hilt of his samurai sword in a clear threat. Behind him, two other pairs of sandalled feet appeared.

Jack tried to remain calm. So far on his journey, he’d managed to avoid any serious confrontations. He hoped to keep it that way.

But with Japan in upheaval, he knew it would be difficult. Following *daimyo* Kamakura’s victory in the civil war, the samurai lord had declared himself Shogun, the supreme ruler of Japan. Many of the samurai who served him were belligerent because of this. Drunk on victory, *saké* and newly acquired power, they bullied the local people and any person of lower status.

At first glance, Jack appeared to be no more than a farmer or a wandering pilgrim. He wore an unassuming plain blue kimono, a pair of sandals and a conical straw hat typical of a rice farmer or Buddhist monk. Its wide brim hid his foreign face.

Without protest, Jack moved to another table.

‘*That’s* my friend’s seat.’

There was a snigger of laughter from the other two soldiers. Jack realized he was in a no-win situation. He would have to leave. If they discovered his true identity, he would be in *real* trouble. As a foreigner, a *gaijin*, he was a target for persecution. The Shogun’s first act in office had been to issue a countrywide edict banishing all foreigners and Christians from his land. They were to leave immediately – or face punishment. For some zealous samurai, the foreigners weren’t departing quickly enough. Even in his short journey from Toba to the Tokaido Road, Jack had already passed one unfortunate Christian priest, his mutilated body hanging from a tree and left to rot in the sun.

‘I’ll be finished soon and on my way,’ replied Jack in perfect Japanese.

Too hungry to leave any behind, he hurriedly gulped down more noodles with his chopsticks. This was the first hot meal he’d had since saying goodbye to his friends four days ago.

‘NO! You’ll finish now!’ ordered the samurai, slamming his fist upon the table.

The bowl clattered to the ground, spilling its contents across the hard-packed earth. A stunned silence filled the little inn. Its few customers began to edge towards the door. A serving girl cowered behind the counter with her father.

Forced to confront his assailant, Jack looked up for the first time.

The samurai, a burly man with a rat of a moustache and bushy black eyebrows, stared in astonishment at Jack’s blue eyes and blond hair.

‘A *gaijin*!’ he gasped.

Jack stood up. Though only fifteen, he was taller than many Japanese men. ‘As I said, I’m leaving.’

The samurai, quickly regaining his wits, barred Jack's way. 'You're not going anywhere,' he said. 'You're a fugitive and enemy of Japan.'

The other two soldiers closed rank. One was thin with a narrow pinched nose and close-set eyes; the other short and fat like a toad. Each of them carried a pair of samurai swords – a standard *katana* and a shorter *wakizashi*.

'I don't want to cause any trouble,' Jack insisted, his hand grasping his pack in readiness to make a run for it. 'I'm just passing through, on my way to Nagasaki. I'm leaving as ordered by the Shogun.'

'You should *never* have arrived in the first place,' sneered the thin samurai, spitting at Jack's feet. 'You're under arrest –'

Jack tossed his chopsticks into the man's face, momentarily distracting him, and bolted for the door.

'Seize him!' ordered their leader.

The toad-like soldier grabbed Jack's wrist. All of a sudden, the man was on his knees and crying out in pain as Jack executed *nikkyō* on him. This wristlock was the first *taijutsu* move Jack had ever been taught at the *Niten Ichi Ryū*, the samurai school in Kyoto where he'd trained for the past three years.

'Help!' whimpered the man.

The leader, unsheathing his sword, now charged forward.

Jack released the lock just short of breaking the man's arm and threw him into the path of the attacking samurai. At the same time, he reached for the *katana* strapped to his pack. As the samurai's lethal blade arced towards his neck, his own steel sword flashed from its *saya*.

The two *katana* collided in mid-air. For a brief second, no one moved.

'A *gaijin* samurai!' exclaimed the leader, his eyes wide as saucers.

'This is *the one*!' The toad-like warrior squealed as he scrambled to his feet. 'The *gaijin* our Shogun is seeking!'

'And there's a price on his head,' added the thin samurai, drawing his sword too.

All three surrounded Jack, blocking any hope of escape.

He had no choice. He'd have to fight his way out.