



THE AMULET

Japan, autumn 1614

For one terrifying moment, Jack remembered *nothing*.

He had no idea where he was, what had happened to him, what he was supposed to be doing. He didn't even know *who* he was. Desperately, like a drowning man, he clung on to any memory he had.

My name is Jack Fletcher . . . from London, England . . . I'm fifteen . . . I have a little sister, Jess . . . I'm a rigging monkey on-board a trading ship, the Alexandria . . . No! I'm a samurai. I trained at a warrior school in Kyoto . . . the Niten Ichi Ryū . . . BUT I'm a ninja too . . . That can't be right – the ninja Dragon Eye killed my father!

Jack's head throbbed and he felt himself blacking out again. He tried to fight the sinking sensation, but didn't have the strength to resist. His fragmented mind was slipping away, dragged back into unconsciousness.

An incessant *drip . . . drip . . . drip* of water brought him round. Through the dense fog clouding his mind, Jack became aware of rain. Heavy rain, pummelling the wet earth and drowning out all other sounds. Forcing his eyes open,

Jack discovered he was lying on a rough bed of straw. Water was seeping through a thatched roof and falling on to his face.

The drip was infuriating. But Jack's body ached so much he struggled to shift himself out of the way. Turning his head to one side, he groaned with pain and came face to face with a cow. Chewing morosely on some cud, the animal stared back at him, clearly begrudging the fact that she had to share her lodgings. As far as Jack could tell, the cow was the only other occupant of the small stable.

Painfully easing himself up on one elbow, the room swimming before his eyes, Jack felt a wave of nausea wash over him. He retched on to the straw-strewn floor, green bile spewing from his mouth. The cow was even less impressed by this undignified display and moved away.

Beside the improvised straw bed, someone had left him a jug of water. Jack sat up and gratefully had a drink, washing his mouth out before taking a large gulp. Swallowing proved difficult. His throat was raw, the acidic contents of his stomach having burnt its way out. He took another sip, more carefully this time, and the pain eased a little.

Jack realized he was a mess. His lower lip was split, his left eye swollen. Dark bruises covered his arms and legs, while his ribs felt sore, though on inspection thankfully not broken.

How did I get like this?

He was dressed in a dirty ragged kimono that certainly wasn't his. The last time he could recall he was wearing the blue robes of a *komuso*, a Monk of Emptiness, as part of a ninja disguise allowing him to pass freely through Japan.

He'd been making his way to the port of Nagasaki in the south, hoping to find a ship bound for England and home to his little sister, Jess.

Panic overwhelmed him. *Where are all my belongings?*

Jack's eyes darted around the stable in search of his swords and pack. But apart from the cow, a pile of straw and a few rusty farm tools, they were nowhere to be seen.

Calm down, he told himself. *Someone has been kind enough to leave me water. That someone might also have my possessions.*

With a trembling hand, Jack took another swig from the jug, hoping the drink would clear his head. But try as he might, he had no memory of the last few days. Jack knew he'd left the ninja village in the mountains and was sure he'd managed to reach the borders of Iga Province unopposed. But beyond that he had no recollection.

Outside through the open doorway, Jack noticed the rain was letting up. He assumed it was morning. Although the sky was so dark with thunderclouds, it could easily have been the evening. He had a choice – he could wait for whoever had given him the water to appear, or he could take action and find his possessions himself.

As Jack sat there, summoning up the energy to stand, he vaguely became aware of something clasped in his left hand. Opening his fingers, he found a green silk pouch embroidered in golden thread with the emblem of a wreath and three *kanji* characters: 東大寺. Inside the little bag was what felt like a rectangular piece of wood. Jack recognized the object, but for a moment its name eluded him . . .

An omamori. That's it! A Buddhist amulet.

Sensei Yamada, his Zen philosophy master at the *Niten*

Ichirō Ryū, had given him before he'd set off on his journey.
It was meant to grant him protection.

But this wasn't his *omamori*. His amulet had a red silk bag.

So whose was this?