



PROLOGUE

GHOST SHIP

Hole Haven, England, autumn 1616

The galleon ship slid through the sea mist, a phantom in the darkness, her sails rippling like shrouds. Entering the Thames Estuary, the vessel maintained her steady silent course. From the shoreline, keen eyes followed her progress.

‘Smugglers?’ grunted the nightwatchman, a gaunt-faced fellow with a pinched nose underlined by a pencil-thin moustache. He pulled his cloak tightly round his skinny frame to ward off the night’s chill.

The customs officer, a portly gentleman with reddened cheeks, lowered his spyglass. ‘I don’t see any boats waitin’ to greet her. She looks to be a trading vessel, though: the *Salamander*, ’cording to her bow. Yet she’s sailin’ far too close to shore to be headed for London.’

A bearded, heavyset constable stood beside them on the sandbank, his cudgel tapping lightly against his leg. As the three-masted ship loomed out of the mist towards them, his deep-set eyes widened slightly. ‘*Fie!* If the captain don’t change tack soon, she’s going to run aground!’

The three men watched the galleon glide past, eerie and ominous as a monster of the deep. A little further along the shore – just as the constable had predicted – the boat's keel ploughed into the soft silt of the estuary's bank and the ship shuddered to a halt. The three men exchanged an uneasy look, then took off down the beach. Their feet squelching in the sodden sand, they approached the galleon. The vessel lay still and bloated as a beached whale.

'Ahoy there!' cried the customs officer, craning his neck towards the upper deck.

But there was no reply, only the creak of timbers, the loose flap of a sail and the lapping of water against the hull.

The watchman swallowed uneasily. 'Shouldn't we call for the militia?'

The customs officer sneered. 'And incur the wrath of Sir Francis for waking him at this ungodly hour? No, we investigate further before disturbing the Lord Lieutenant from his bed.' He gestured towards a loose rigging rope dangling over the side of the ship. 'Go and look, constable.'

Hooking his cudgel to his belt, the constable waded through the water, then hauled himself up the barnacled planking and over the gunwale. All remained ominously silent. The watchman pulled the collar of his cloak even tighter, the chill in his bones not from the sea mist but from the galleon's sinister arrival. As they waited for the constable's return, the customs officer's feet began to sink into the silt.

'What's keeping him?' he muttered, tugging a leather boot free and irritably kicking off the sludge.

Another minute or so passed. Then the constable's bearded

face appeared. 'All clear,' he called, and dropped down a rope ladder for them.

Splashing through the frigid sea, they caught hold of the ladder and clambered aboard. The upper deck was deserted. No lanterns were lit. Not a soul in sight.

The customs officer glanced sidelong at the constable. 'Where's her crew, then?'

The constable shrugged. 'Below decks maybe.'

Cautiously the men approached the main hatch. The customs officer silently beckoned to the constable to open it. With a squeal of hinges, the hatch was heaved back. A set of wooden steps led down into the ship's black belly.

'Light,' ordered the customs officer.

The watchman lit a lantern and passed it to him. The gloom fled the flames, and the customs officer gasped as the lower deck revealed itself. A sailor lay slumped against a wall, his head bent forward as if in sleep. But it was the sleep of the dead. A large black rat that had been gnawing on the man's fingers scuttled away as soon as the lamplight hit it.

The watchman's sunken cheeks became even more hollow. 'You think she's a *plague* ship?'

Taking a handkerchief from his pocket, the customs officer covered his mouth and descended the steps to inspect the corpse. He set aside the lantern, its orange flame warping the sailor's waxen face.

'No sign of black spots on him.' The customs officer drew his dagger from its sheath and prodded the body with the tip of the blade. The sailor's head lolled unnaturally to one side.

'Looks like his neck is broken,' said the constable, tightening his grip on the cudgel.

'Perhaps he fell down the stairs?' the watchman suggested hopefully.

'Perhaps,' murmured the customs officer, sheathing his dagger and picking up the lantern. 'Let's see if we can find the rest of the crew.'

Reluctantly the watchman followed the constable down the steps. He kept close to the pool of lamplight as his eyes flitted towards every nook and cranny of the lower deck. Shapes took form, then melted back into the shadows: wooden barrels stacked five high . . . piles of cotton cloth . . . rolls of expensive silk . . . hessian sacks of grain . . . a pair of gleaming black eyes –

The watchman let out a startled cry, causing the customs officer to turn sharply. '*What?*' he snapped.

'Someone's there!' the watchman whispered, pointing a trembling finger into the inky darkness.

The customs officer directed his lantern at a gap between two barrels. 'I see no one.'

'I tell ye, a pair of eyes was watching us.'

Raising his cudgel, the constable stalked forward to investigate. As he approached the barrels, there was a *hiss* and a black shape bolted from the shadows. The constable brought his cudgel down but stopped short as a furred creature shot between his legs.

'It's just the ship's cat!' the constable snorted, lowering his cudgel.

The customs officer scowled at the watchman, then turned away with a shake of the head and resumed the search.

'It *wasn't* the ship's cat,' the watchman insisted. 'The eyes were human . . . or else demon!'

'Pull yourself together, man,' muttered the constable as he shouldered past.

Ignoring the watchman's protests, they headed deeper below deck where they discovered the galleon to be laden with exotic spices from the Far East: clove, nutmeg and mace. A king's ransom in cargo, destined for the London docks. But still no sign of the crew. The ship groaned as the hull shifted with the incoming tide.

'Strange,' remarked the customs officer, completing their sweep of the lowest deck. 'Her crew must be *somewhere* aboard.'

'Let's try the hold,' suggested the constable.

As the three men headed towards the ladder that descended into the ship's bowels, a flicker of movement caught the watchman's eye. 'Over there!'

The customs officer swivelled round, the lantern light casting a yellow wave through the darkness. But there was no one to be seen.

'Call yourself a watchman?' sneered the customs officer. 'You're jumping at shadows!'

'B-believe me, I saw a shadow *move*,' replied the watchman, his breathing now panicky and shallow. 'This is a ghost ship! We should leave. *Right now*.'

The customs officer raised a bushy eyebrow. 'A *ghost* ship? I didn't take you to be such a superstitious fellow. Get a grip of yourself! There's no —'

His rebuke was cut short by a clatter as the constable's cudgel rolled across the wooden planks and stopped at his feet. The two men glanced down at the weapon before peering nervously into the gloom for its owner.

The watchman's eyes were as round as two full moons.
'Where's the constable gone?'

The customs officer held up his lantern, pivoting slowly to reveal yet more barrels, grain sacks and piles of cloth . . . but no constable. 'Samuel?' he called. 'You playin' games?'

Then the lamplight fell upon an open hatch. Through it, the customs officer could see body upon body piled like ballast in the hold. Their cold dead eyes stared blankly at him. The missing crew!

The customs officer stumbled away. His heart hammering in his chest, he spun back towards the watchman – only to see a black limb reach out and drag his companion away. The darkness appeared to swallow him whole, not even giving him a chance to scream. Dropping the lantern in horror, the customs officer fumbled for his dagger. But his sheath was empty. A moment later, the missing blade was pressed against his neck, the razor-sharp steel cutting into his skin and drawing a bead of blood. A shadow materialized in front of him, silhouetted against the guttering flame of the discarded lantern. Only a pair of demon-black eyes were visible.

'Is this England?' hissed the shadow, its accent strange and sinister.

The customs officer nodded, terror taking his tongue. The shadow held a piece of paper before his face. Upon it was a hand-drawn portrait of a young man with straggly straw-blond hair and ocean-blue eyes.

'You know him?' asked the shadow.

The customs officer shook his head. 'W-w-who is he?'

'Jack Fletcher, the *gaijin* samurai.'

The customs officer frowned. 'I never heard of him.'

'Pity.'

The dagger was drawn sharply across the customs officer's throat and he collapsed in a spluttering heap. As his blood spilled over the wooden deck and flowed into the hold, three more shadows emerged from the darkness. On their leader's command, they swiftly and silently made their way to the galleon's upper deck. Then, vaulting over the side and down the ladder, all four ninjas disappeared into the night.