

Legend of the Five Rings™

— THE CLAN WARS BEGIN —

CHAPTER ONE

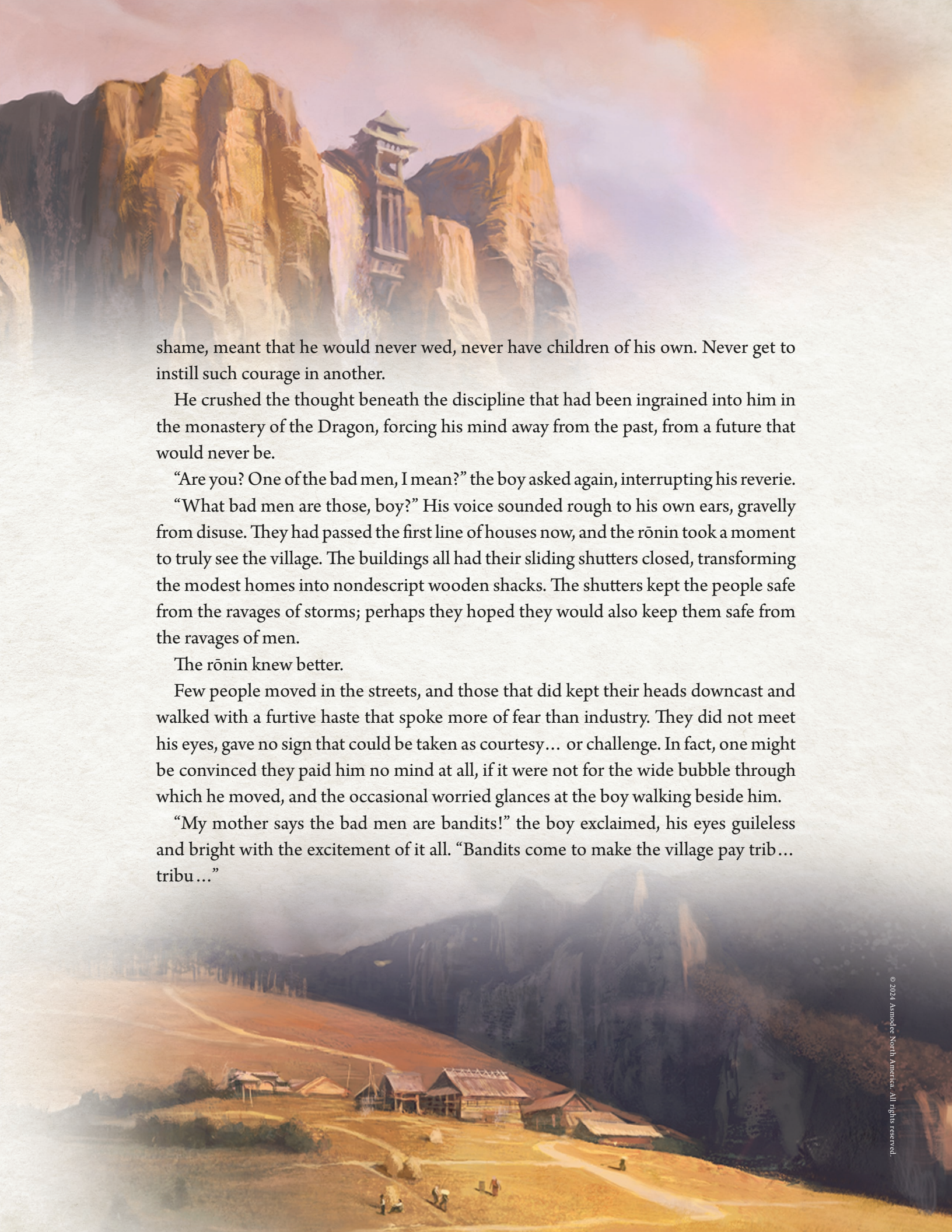
By Julie Kagawa & JT Nicholas

“Are you one of the bad men?”

The rōnin looked down at the boy, who stared back with an expression equal parts wonder, excitement, and fear. The child had emerged from the bean fields at the edge of the village, his tousled black hair waving above the green fronds like a banner. He fell in step with the warrior, taking two strides for each one the rōnin made, their footfalls raising puffs of dust from the packed-earth path that served as the village’s main street. The boy wore simple peasant garb: short, loose-fitting trousers and a sleeveless tunic, both woven of undyed hemp. His arms and legs thrust out of the garments like the spindly limbs of a scarecrow that had lost its stuffing, and the boy himself looked nearly as underfed.

It took courage for a peasant boy to approach anyone carrying the daishō – the paired katana and wakizashi that only the samurai were permitted to wear – even one as tattered and travel-stained as the rōnin. For a moment, as he pondered the warring emotions flicking across the boy’s face, he felt an ache deep in his chest. His failure, his





shame, meant that he would never wed, never have children of his own. Never get to instill such courage in another.

He crushed the thought beneath the discipline that had been ingrained into him in the monastery of the Dragon, forcing his mind away from the past, from a future that would never be.

“Are you? One of the bad men, I mean?” the boy asked again, interrupting his reverie.

“What bad men are those, boy?” His voice sounded rough to his own ears, gravelly from disuse. They had passed the first line of houses now, and the rōnin took a moment to truly see the village. The buildings all had their sliding shutters closed, transforming the modest homes into nondescript wooden shacks. The shutters kept the people safe from the ravages of storms; perhaps they hoped they would also keep them safe from the ravages of men.

The rōnin knew better.

Few people moved in the streets, and those that did kept their heads downcast and walked with a furtive haste that spoke more of fear than industry. They did not meet his eyes, gave no sign that could be taken as courtesy... or challenge. In fact, one might be convinced they paid him no mind at all, if it were not for the wide bubble through which he moved, and the occasional worried glances at the boy walking beside him.

“My mother says the bad men are bandits!” the boy exclaimed, his eyes guileless and bright with the excitement of it all. “Bandits come to make the village pay trib... tribu...”

“Tribute.”

The boy nodded. “What’s tribute?”

“A failure by those tasked with protecting you,” the rōnin muttered. He felt his hands tightening into fists. These lands had been under his protection, once. All the Empire had been under his protection. It was the duty of the samurai to protect the peasants, just as it was the peasants’ duty to work the land, coaxing forth the crops needed to ensure everyone’s survival. That balance, that harmony, handed down from Heaven itself, was fundamental to the structure and well-being of the Emerald Empire. To allow one of the villages under your protection to be tormented by armed thugs was shameful. And in the lands of the Lion? He clenched his jaw. Were he Clan Champion, he would have more than harsh words for whichever samurai claimed this village as their own.

But he was not Clan Champion.

Not anymore.

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