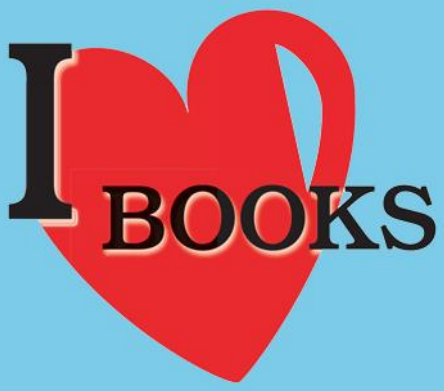


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1. Black Belt Test

Japan, Year 1580

I wait under the floorboards.

I've been hidden here for over an hour, lying still as a stone.

My name is Taka. This is my first mission as a ninja and I must not fail.

I hear a door slide open and look through the crack in the floorboards. I watch as a man



crosses the room. His feet pass close to my face. He wears a gold silk robe with the crest of a black eagle on his back. He carries two samurai swords on his hip. Across his right cheek is a long red scar.

It's Lord Oda – the samurai warrior I've been waiting for.

The warlord doesn't know I'm here. He can't see me under the floor. He sits down on his bed. In his hand, he holds a scroll of paper. He begins to read it.

"I never dreamed such things were possible," he mutters to himself.



After a few minutes, he puts the scroll into a wooden

box by his pillow. He lays his swords beside his bed, blows out the candle and goes to sleep.

Outside, a full moon has risen over the castle. Its pale light shines through a small window and onto the cruel face of Lord Oda. Lord Oda is the sworn enemy of the ninja. My task is to stop him destroying our clan.

Now is the time.

I push softly at the loose floorboard above me and climb out of my hiding place. Using my ninja stealth skills, I cross the room without a sound. In the darkness I'm almost invisible. My black clothes and my hood turn me into a shadow. Only my eyes show.

As I draw close to the samurai lord, I see my hands are shaking.

‘Can I really do this?’ I ask myself.

I’ve been training to be a spy and an assassin all my life. But I’m still only fourteen. Have I learned all the skills I need for this mission? Perhaps I should have waited for Cho.



Can I save our ninja clan all on my own?

I have to prove myself. Tonight.

I'm now so close to Lord Oda, I can hear him breathe. As I reach out, my arm blocks the moonlight shining onto his face.

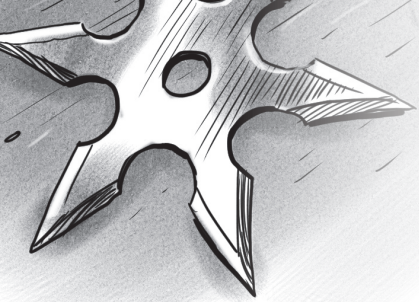
A small but fatal mistake.

Lord Oda's eyes snap open. For a moment, we stare at each other in shock.

Then he screams, "GUARDS!"

The Day Before ...

Holding the silver *shuriken* in my right hand, I take aim and flick the throwing star at the target. It flashes through the air like a mini bolt of lightning.



I've been practising with this weapon every day, but even I can't believe it when the *shuriken* strikes the tree trunk dead centre.

"Very impressive," says Sensei Shima as he walks over to me in the forest. "That's five out of five."

I bow to my teacher and kneel back in line with the other ninja students in the forest. A girl with long black hair smiles at me – Cho. She's a year older than me, and her acrobatic skills are the best in the clan.

"Well done, you even beat Renzo!" she whispers, looking over at a large sixteen-year-old boy with strong arms and a shaven head.

Renzo is glaring at me. He never comes second and he doesn't like it.

"It doesn't count," he grunts.

"Why not?" I protest.

"You're not a real ninja. You haven't gone on a mission yet."

Renzo loves to tell me this fact, and all my joy at mastering the Five Blades *shuriken* throw vanishes.

"You're just jealous," says Cho.

"Taka was lucky, that's all," snorts Renzo. "The *real* test is if he can do it under the pressure of a mission."

Sensei Shima claps for attention. "Time for unarmed combat practice," he calls. "Find a partner."

I look to Cho, but Renzo's already at my side, towering over me.

"I pick you," he snarls.

Before I can react, he grabs me by both arms. I try to shake off his grip, but he's too strong. Renzo throws me to the ground. I fight to get back up, but he drops on top of me and pins my arm down with his knee. I groan in pain as he presses with all his weight.

"Just as I thought." He grins and twists my arm so that the pain is almost too much to bear. "You wouldn't survive long in a real fight."

I'm forced to submit. I tap the floor.

"Change opponents!" orders Sensei Shima.

As I get up, I rub my hurt arm. It throbs.



Cho comes over to partner me. “Are you all right?” she asks.

I nod. My arm’s fine – it’s my pride that’s been hurt. I’ll never gain the respect of the others until I’ve completed my first mission.