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Opening extract from

Ninja: Death Touch

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For Matthew Ashman, a true ninja reader

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Chapter 1
Life Force

Japan, Year 1580

Pain rages across my chest like fire and I collapse onto the wooden floor of the temple.

An old man with a wrinkled face, pale eyes and a long grey beard stands over me. He is the Grandmaster of my ninja clan. And he's just given me the Death Touch.

“The Death Touch isn’t about power,” the Grandmaster explains to the other ninja students who stand around my shaking body. “As you saw, I hardly even hit Taka.”

A girl with long black hair drops to her knees beside me. She is my best friend, Cho, and her dark brown eyes are full of concern.

“What have you done to him?” Cho asks as I fight for breath.

“I’ve blocked his *chi*,” the Grandmaster replies.

Among the students is Renzo, a boy of 16, with a shaved head and large muscles. He frowns in confusion. The Grandmaster is blind, but he senses the frown and turns to Renzo.

“The student who asks a question is a fool for a minute. The student who does not ask stays a fool forever,” the Grandmaster says.

The rest of the class turn to stare at Renzo too and his face burns red with shame. All the while, I twist in agony on the floor.

After an embarrassed pause, Renzo asks, “What’s … *chi*?”

“It is your life force,” the Grandmaster replies with a smile. “It’s vital to your existence. You can live for three months without food. You can live for three days without water. You can live for three minutes without air. But you can’t live for *one second* without *chi*.”

The Grandmaster holds up one bony finger to stress the single second. Then, with the same finger, he traces twelve lines across Renzo’s body. “*Chi* flows through invisible energy lines in your body,” he explains. “A ninja can use the Death Touch at certain points along these lines. By doing this he can block an opponent’s energy. He can destroy their life force. He can even inject bad *chi* into them.”

As the Death Touch squeezes the life out of me, the Grandmaster's voice becomes distant in my ears. It's as if he's speaking from the back of a cave. The pain spreads to my arms and legs and I can no longer move.

Cho sees the terror in my eyes. "I think Taka's had enough – " she begins.

Renzo interrupts her. "Is Taka dying?"

"If I don't unblock his *chi*, yes he will die," the Grandmaster replies.

Renzo looks down at me and grins. "Oh dear, that would be a pity," he says. It's obvious he's not upset by the idea at all.

I start to panic. I'm 14 years old, too young to die. My chest now feels as if it's being crushed by a huge rock and I can't breathe.

But the Grandmaster doesn't try to save me.

He just goes on with his lesson. "If you're an expert and know which points on the human body to strike, it's very easy to kill someone with the Death Touch," he explains. "The real skill is *not* killing the person."

"So when do *we* learn the Death Touch?" Renzo asks. He flexes his fingers, keen to begin.

The Grandmaster gives Renzo a stern look. "You must learn to walk before you can run," he replies. "First, I'll teach you the points that will stop your enemy's sword arm. But that will be tomorrow's lesson."

The Grandmaster reaches for his wooden staff and hobbles away.

"Grandmaster!" Cho calls. "What about Taka?"

The Grandmaster stops and turns back with a surprised look on his face. "Sorry, I almost

forgot. Old age must be catching up on me," he explains. "Help Taka to stand."

Cho and two other students pick me up. I hang like a broken puppet in their arms.

The Grandmaster presses three nerve points in my back. In an instant the pain disappears. I feel like I've been reborn.

"Are you all right?" Cho asks as I sway on my wobbly legs.

"I am now," I gasp. I hold a hand to my thumping heart. "But remind me never to volunteer to help the Grandmaster show a new move again!"

