



Young Samurai: The Way Of The Warrior

By

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Prologue – Masamoto Tenno

Kyoto, Japan, August 1609

The boy snapped awake. He seized his sword.

Tenno hardly dared to breathe. He sensed someone else was in the room. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he searched for signs of movement. But he could see nothing, only shadows within shadows, the moonlight seeping ghostlike through the lucent paper walls. *Perhaps he had been wrong . . .* His samurai training, though, warned him otherwise.

Tenno listened intently for the slightest sound, any indication there might be an intruder. But he heard nothing unusual. The cherry blossom trees in the garden made a faint rustle like the sound of silk as a light breeze passed through. There was the familiar trickle of water as it flowed from the small fountain into the fishpond, and nearby a cricket made its persistent nightly chirp. The rest of the house lay silent.

He was overreacting . . . It was just some bad *kami* spirit disturbing his dreams, he reasoned.

This past month the whole Masamoto household had been on edge with the rumour of war. There was talk of a rebellion and Tenno's father had been called into service to help quell any potential uprising. The peace Japan had enjoyed for the past twelve years was suddenly under threat and the people were afraid they would be plunged back into war. No wonder he was so on edge.

Tenno lowered his guard and settled back to sleep on his *futon*. As he did so, the night cricket chirped a little louder and the boy's hand tightened round the hilt of

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his sword. His father had once said, 'A samurai should always obey his instincts', and his instincts told him something was wrong.

He rose from his bed to investigate.

Suddenly a silver star spun out of the darkness.

Tenno threw himself out of the way but was a second too late.

The *shuriken* sliced through his cheek before burying itself deep into the *futon* where his head had just been. As he continued to roll, he felt a rush of hot blood stream down his face. Then he heard a second *shuriken* thud into the *tatami*-matted floor, and in one fluid movement he sprang to his feet, bringing his sword up to protect himself.

Dressed head-to-toe in black, a figure drifted ghost-like out of the shadows.

Ninja! The Japanese assassin of the night.

With a measured slowness, the ninja unsheathed a vicious-looking blade from his *saya*. Unlike Tenno's large curved *katana* sword, the *tanto* was short, straight and ideal for stabbing.

The ninja took a silent step closer and raised the *tanto*, a human cobra preparing to strike.

Tenno, anticipating the attack, cut down with his sword, slicing across the body of the approaching assassin. But the ninja deftly evaded the boy's sword, spinning round to kick him squarely in the chest.

Thrown backwards, Tenno crashed through the paper-thin *shoji* door of his room and out into the night. He landed heavily in the middle of the inner garden, disorientated and fighting for breath.

The ninja leapt through the torn opening and landed cat-like in front of him.

Tenno attempted to stand and defend himself, but his legs gave way. They had become numb and useless. In a panic, he tried to scream – to call for help – but his throat had swollen shut. It burned like fire and his cries became suffocating stabs for breath.

The ninja shifted in and out of focus before vanishing in a swirl of black smoke.

The boy's vision folded in on itself and he realized the ninja's *shuriken* had been dipped in poison, paralysing him limb by limb. His body quickly succumbed to its lethal powers and he lay there at the mercy of his assassin.

Blinded, Tenno listened for the ninja's approach, but could only hear the *chirp-chirp* of the cricket. He recalled his father once telling him that ninja used the insect's calls to mask the noise of their own movements. *That* was how his assassin had slipped by the guards undetected!

Briefly his eyesight returned and under the pale light of a waning moon, a shrouded face floated towards him. The ninja drew so close that Tenno could smell the assassin's hot breath on his face, sour and stale like cheap *saké*. Through the slit in the hood of his *shinobi shozoko*, the boy could see a single emerald-green eye blazing with hatred.

'This is a message for your father,' hissed the ninja.

Tenno felt the deadly cold tip of the *tanto* on the flesh above his heart.

A single sharp thrust and his whole body flared white-hot with pain . . .

Then nothing . . .

Masamoto Tenno had passed into the Great Void.

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