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Advanced Dungeons & Dragons®

ADVENTURE **5** GAMEBOOK

TEST OF THE NINJA



By Curtis Smith

CHARACTER STATS CARD

TEST OF THE NINJA



NAME: Kurasai Hidenaga

CHAR. CLASS: Samurai Warrior

AGE: 19

SKILL POINTS:

Physical Prowess: 12 + =

Perception: 14 + =

Kenjutsu: 16 + =

EXPERIENCE POINTS:

HIT POINTS: 30 + =

FACE TO FACE WITH A DEADLY NINJA!

High on an oceanside cliff, you draw your aching body up to the comparative safety of a narrow ledge, breathing a sigh of relief at having escaped from the bandits on the beach far below. Pulling yourself to your feet, you gasp as you see a dark-shrouded figure descending from above. As the figure lands lightly on the ledge and turns to face you, you recognize it as a ninja!

Smaller than your attackers on the beach, the ninja crouches in a low fighting stance. Black clothing covers him completely, except for his piercing eyes. He holds a straight-bladed *katana* out to one side, in a position you've never seen before. You realize you've never heard of anyone surviving a fight with a ninja. You'll need all your skill and experience to survive this encounter.

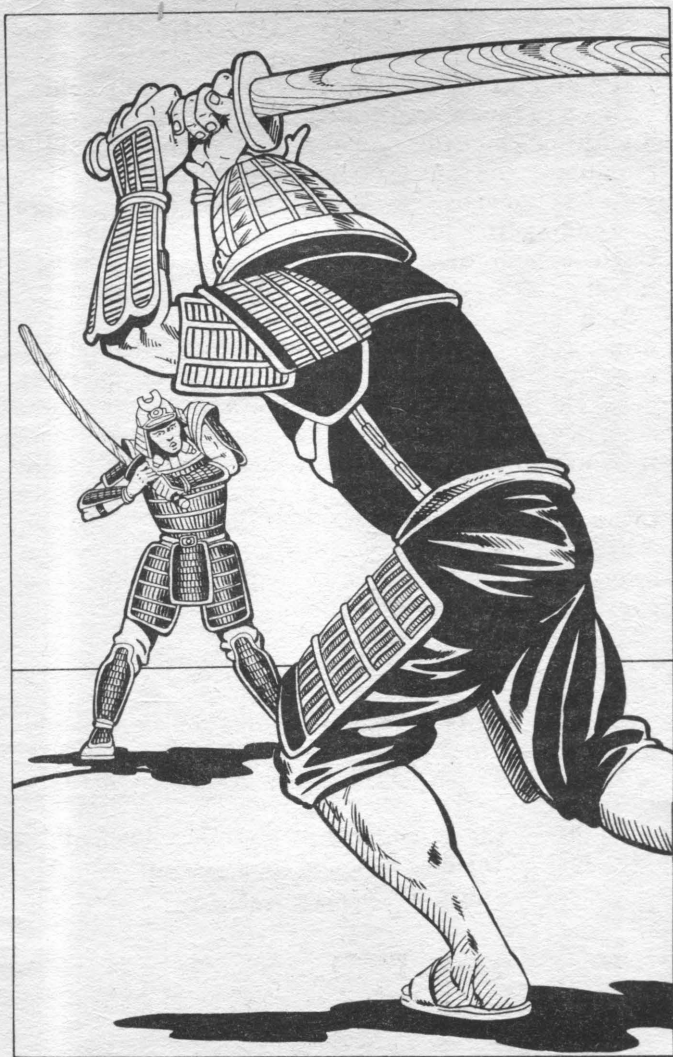
Fighting back panic, you tighten your grip on your sword, *Kurodachi*, determined that the ninja, whoever he is, will not find you an easy victim.

Can you survive against the deadly ninja?

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 23 or more, turn to 211. If it is less, turn to 194.

Whatever the outcome, only your decisions, and the luck of the dice roll, can help you survive the

TEST OF THE NINJA



TEST of the NINJA

BY CURTIS SMITH

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**Thanks to Geoff Valley,
who took the Test with me**

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AN EXCITING NEW EXPERIENCE IN BOOKS!

Welcome, you who are about to face the **TEST OF THE NINJA**, to an exciting, totally new concept in role-playing gamebooks.

Based on the popular **ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®** Game, this adventure requires one standard six-sided die, an ample supply of luck—and, most of all, your skill in making decisions as you play the game. If dice are unavailable, a simple alternative, requiring only paper and pencil, is explained on page 14.

ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® Adventure Gamebooks have been designed to read easily, without complicated rules to slow down the story. Once you have read through the simple rules that follow, you should seldom find it necessary to refer back to them. Your options are repeated clearly in the text at each choice point, with occasional reminders about additional options you may wish to consider to improve your chances. Your adventure reads like a book, plays like a game, and offers a thrill a minute—with **YOU** as the hero!

YOUR CHARACTER

In this book, you are Kurasai Hidenaga, a young man studying to become a samurai warrior in ancient Japan, a land in turmoil. All around you, armies clash in provincial wars, caught up in old feuds and struggles for power. From across the sea, the Mongol Kublai Khan threatens to invade your homeland. And rumors abound of the mysterious and deadly ninja infiltrating every clan and army, even Hakata Castle itself, home of your province's ruler. Only the secretive ninja themselves know their intentions and identities.

Like your father before you, you serve Lord Tomotada, ruler of Hakata Province. Five years ago, your father gave his life defending Hakata Castle. In his honor, you carry his sword, called *Kurodachi*, or "nightsword," by all who see its jet-black blade.

Out of respect for your father, Lord Tomotada gave you a chance to train to become one of the best samurai, the elite, at the finest samurai school known. Accepting the opportunity gratefully, you enrolled at *Chomei Sensei No Dojo*, "the School of the Foremost Warrior."



Now, at nineteen, you are about to graduate—if you succeed in passing the final combat trials. Then you will face the greatest, and perhaps last, challenge of your young life—the TEST OF THE NINJA!

PLAYING THE GAME

ESTABLISHING YOUR CHARACTER

YOUR Kurasai Hidenaga will be different from everyone else's because YOU help to create him!

Carefully tear out the removable **Character Stats Card** at the beginning of this book. This card is your record of what Kurasai is like. It also doubles as a bookmark.

Since we hope you will be playing this adventure many times, it is suggested that you write on the card in pencil only, so that your character stats can be erased easily when you are ready to play again. If you have access to a photocopier, you may wish to make several photocopies of the Character Stats Card before you fill it in. Permission is hereby granted by the publisher to make photocopies of the Character Stats Card *only*. Another alternative is to reproduce the card by writing on a 3"x 5" card or a slip of paper.

You are now ready to round out Kurasai Hidenaga's individual identity by establishing his strengths and weaknesses. Kurasai's name, age, and character class have already been entered for you. Before you fill out the rest of the card, it is necessary for you to understand the game's scoring system.

SCORING

Playing the game requires you to keep track of three things—**hit points**, **skill points**, and **experience points**—on the tear-out **Character Stats Card** located at the front of the book. An explanation of each of these follows.

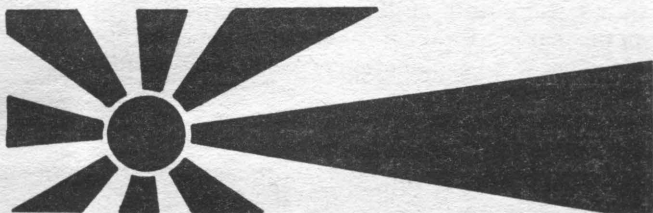
HIT POINTS

Hit points represent your health, or life strength. As a healthy samurai warrior, you start the adventure with many hit points. To determine the exact number of your hit

points, roll one six-sided die and add the result to 30. If you roll a 1, 2, 3, or 4 and want to try again, you may, but you *must* accept the result of the second roll, even if it is less than your first roll. Record this number in the blank space labeled "hit points" on the Character Stats Card.

Whenever you are injured, either in a fight or an accident, such as a fall, you lose hit points. The book will tell you when you lose hit points and how many you lose. Keep track of how many points you have left. If your hit points ever reach zero, you either fall unconscious or you die, depending on the circumstances. If you lose all your hit points during a training exercise, such as in a mock battle using wooden swords, an instructor may revive you and you will eventually recover your strength. But if you lose all your hit points during a life-or-death battle, using real weapons, you will die, and your adventure ends whether the story has finished or not.

There are also opportunities to recover hit points through **healing**, with medicine, treatment by a doctor, or sufficient rest. The text will tell you when you recover hit points and how many you recover. It is important to remember that you can never recover more hit points than you start with. During the game, do not erase your original number of hit points, since you may need to refer to this record when Kurasai "heals."



SKILL POINTS

Your quick, inquisitive mind and years of training have given you many skills. Among them is *kenjutsu*, the deadly art of sword fighting. In this adventure, you will rely on three important skills—**physical prowess**, **perception**, and **kenjutsu**. These skills, and how to use them, are explained below.

A number, called your **skill score**, represents your ability in a given skill. The higher the number, the better your skill. You must help determine what your strengths are. Your base skill scores are already written on your Character Stats Card, but in addition you have 6 more skill points to add to your scores. You may divide up the 6 points any way you wish, as long as you add at least 1 skill point to each of the three skills. There is no right or wrong way to divide up your skill points. Study the skills below before deciding, then fill in your final skill scores on the Character Stats Card. Each time you undertake a new adventure, you can experiment with a different combination.

Physical Prowess

Physical prowess is your general physical ability—your strength, agility, dexterity, and so forth. You use your physical prowess skill when you try to push your body to its limits and do something really difficult. Ordinary tasks such as running aren't difficult for you, so they don't require physical prowess checks. On the other hand, you would have to make a physical prowess check to climb a sheer cliff or keep your balance during a roof-top sword fight.

The book explains when to make a physical prowess check. To make the check, roll one die and add the result to your physical prowess skill score. If the total equals or exceeds the number given in the text, you are successful.

Perception

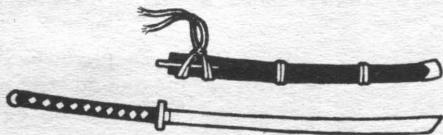
Perception is your ability to notice anything out of the ordinary with any of your senses. It also helps to keep someone else from seeing or hearing you. You are particularly alert and observant, so you are usually aware of what's going on around you. Even so, with the provincial war raging on the borders of the province, stories of the deadly ninja in the area, and rumors of a Mongol invasion, you can never be too cautious.

The book will tell you when to make a perception check. To make the check, roll one die and add the result to your perception skill score. If the total equals or exceeds the number given in the text, you are successful.

Kenjutsu

Over the centuries, dedicated samurai refined their sword fighting in training and combat. These warriors carefully passed on all they learned to their apprentices. Now honed to near perfection, the art of sword fighting, or **kenjutsu**, is a foundation of the samurai code.

While warriors mastered its use, skilled craftsmen perfected the sword through centuries of innovation and patience. Now, combining layers of different metals for strength and flexibility, the swords are fast, balanced, razor sharp, and nearly indestructible. These swords, the prized possessions of every samurai, are called *katana*.



As a symbol of rank, all samurai warriors carry a *daisho*—a pair of the deadly *katana*, one long and one short. As a matter of survival, all samurai learn to use their swords early in their lives. The long *katana* is the primary weapon in combat. The short *katana* is more ceremonial, on rare occasions employed to commit *seppuku*, the ritual suicide used to escape capture or great dishonor.



Though still young, you are already an exceptional swordsman, a master of *kenjutsu*. Efficient and deadly, *kenjutsu* is also a tradition, and you know its ceremonies as well as anyone. Samurai are encouraged to develop their own style, but all must use the same basic techniques. Always the samurai code of honor and bravery governs how a warrior uses his *kenjutsu*.

But you are not satisfied learning only “proper” *kenjutsu*. Instead you experiment constantly with new techniques, developing unusual attacks, parries, and feints. Almost everyone you know, including your instructors and fellow students, frowns on your unorthodox ways, but all must admit that the end result is impressive. You seldom lose a match or miss your target.

However, you have little experience in actual combat. Most of your battles so far have been in school, using wooden swords called *bokken*, an effective weapon but not

deadly like the *katana*. Many of your classmates and instructors claim that without following the strict, formal rules of *kenjutsu*, you won't last long in a life-and-death situation. Naturally you disagree.

In this adventure, you will face opportunities to test your *kenjutsu*, using a wooden *bokken* in class and your sharp-bladed *katana* in actual combat. Once you are in battle, you will have to decide what to do—blocking, ducking, or rolling to avoid your enemy while swinging, thrusting, or slashing to defeat him. At such times, the book will tell you what your options are. When you attempt a difficult or unusual maneuver, you will have to make a *kenjutsu* check to see if you are successful. Occasionally you won't have time to consider options. Instead you'll have to react automatically, relying on your instincts and skill in *kenjutsu*. Again, you must make a *kenjutsu* check.

The book will tell you when you must make a *kenjutsu* check. To make the check, simply roll one die and add the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total equals or exceeds the number given in the text, you are successful.





EXPERIENCE POINTS

As in real life, experience sometimes increases your chance of success because you encountered a similar situation before and understand the possibilities that may occur. Experience points can help turn poor dice rolls into successful ones. You begin this adventure with from 1 to 6 experience points, depending on your roll of one die. You may use your experience points to increase your chance on any dice roll in the book, but each time you must deduct the points you use from the total.

To use your experience points, first decide how many points you will spend *before* you roll the die, then add those points to the result of your die roll. No matter how the roll turns out, the points you used are gone and must be deducted from your total.

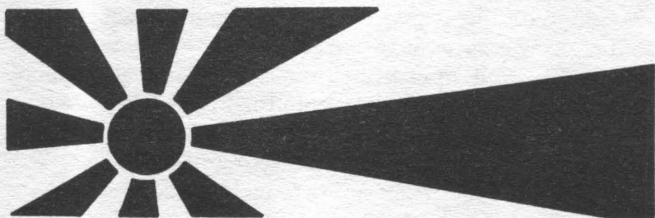
To determine how many experience points you have, roll one die and write the result in the space marked "experience points" on your Character Stats Card. If you roll a 1 through 4 and wish to try to improve your score, you may roll again, but you *must* accept the second roll, even if it is less than the first.

Use your experience points wisely, saving them for what you consider to be crucial situations.

PLAYING WITHOUT DICE

Should you ever wish to play the adventure when dice are unavailable, there is a simple substitute that requires only pencil and paper. Simply write the numbers 1 through 6 on separate slips of paper and mix them up in a container. Then draw one of the slips, note the number, and place it back in the container. Each draw represents one roll of a die. If only one die is called for, draw only one number.

Your character—Kurasai Hidenaga—is now complete, and you are ready to begin your adventure. Turn to page 15—and good luck!



Chomei Sensei No Dojo
"School of the Foremost Warrior"
Hakata Province, Island of Kyushu, Japan

With your eyes closed, you kneel alone in the center of your small room, meditating. The early morning calm helps to relax your muscles and mind, preparing you for your upcoming duel. You feel ready, confident in your skill, but you also feel a little anxious. *I can win as long as I'm not overconfident*, you tell yourself.

You open your eyes slowly, letting them adjust to the gray dawn light filtering through the oiled window paper. Drawing a deep breath of the crisp, cool air, you stand, then straighten your robes. Suddenly the voice of your best friend, Takeshi, calls out, "Kurasai! Kurasai! Hurry, or we'll be late to the dueling ground."

You met Takeshi Ikoma years ago when you enrolled here at the finest samurai *dojo*, or training center, in Japan. You and Takeshi have been friends ever since, and now you share adjoining rooms in one of the many student living quarters at the school.

"Come on, Kurasai!"

"Don't rush me," you answer good-naturedly, lifting your black *yoroi*, or heavy war armor, from its stand. You note with satisfaction the spotless polish on its lacquered finish, then stop to think. *Takeshi isn't usually this impatient. I wonder if he's up to something.* You recall the many pranks you've played on each other—the trip wire he set in your doorway, the lizard you hid in his bed, and numerous others. Lately, however, you've both been too busy for games. Still, with Takeshi you can never be sure. *He's probably just nervous*, you reason. *After all, the*

fights today are our final tests before graduation.

If you think that Takeshi is merely anxious to get started, turn to **29**. If you suspect Takeshi may be planning a surprise for you, turn to **47**.

2

You and Genzo circle warily, watching and testing each other. You concentrate on trying to form a plan. You realize that your strength is in your technique. You can't possibly match Genzo blow for blow because he's much stronger than you.

If I stay on defense, perhaps I can study his ken-jutsu and discover a weakness. Or I could take the offensive, striking faster and more often, and try to beat him at his own game.

If you remain on the defensive, turn to **154**. If you want to take the fight to Genzo, turn to **27**.

3

You wouldn't have even known you blinked, except that Genzo began to charge as soon as your eyes closed for an instant. After two quick steps, he leaps into the air. You have only an instant to react, but judging from the distance, you know he is launching some kind of a kick, probably a front snap kick. Quickly you turn aside, swinging your right arm out to deflect Genzo's foot.

As you block the kick, you suddenly sense that Genzo's attack is really a double snap kick, and you are only prepared to block one of the blows. Without any time to plan your reaction, you must rely on your reflexes.

Make a physical prowess check by rolling one die and adding the result to your physical prowess skill score. If the total is 19 or more, turn to **14**. If it is 18 or less, turn to **38**.

The rock crumbles easily, but your grip and footing are sure, and you're able to climb fast. Soon you're high above the beach. *I've pushed myself hard before, you think, but never this hard.*

Glancing down a second time you see only one figure on the beach. Listening, you hear the others below, climbing after you. The hardest part of the climb still lies ahead. From here to the ledge, the cliff is nearly vertical. You must slow down and pick your way carefully in the darkness.

You reach out for a handhold but hesitate, hearing a strange whirring noise from below. *The sling!* you realize. The noise stops abruptly, and in the next instant, the handhold you were reaching for explodes in a spray of rock fragments.

Realizing that one stone from the sling could knock you off the cliff, you force yourself to climb faster. You concentrate on reaching the ledge that beckons from above.

Turn to 86.



Genzo attacks with a flurry of kicks and punches. While blocking his blows and trying to strike back, you side-step rapidly, preventing him from charging.

I've got to keep circling, you remind yourself. If I back up, he's sure to overtake me!

You're determined not to lose the battle, but your timing and strength are slipping away rapidly. You need all your skill and energy just to avoid Genzo's powerful kicks and punches. Escaping a side snap kick, you dive to the ground, your common sense screaming, *I've got to get out of this fight somehow!* You grow weaker by the second as you dodge, duck, and block, but you refuse to give Genzo the satisfaction of pounding you into the gravel.

Suddenly an unusual idea springs to your mind, a way to put an end to the fight. You know the judges will rule Genzo the victor and may even reprimand you, but that seems preferable to being knocked senseless.

Shouting to summon whatever strength you have left, you leap forward, spinning into a fast back kick. Genzo steps to one side, easily avoiding your foot, then springs to finish you off.

But you are no longer there. After two steps to gain speed, you leap high over one of the startled judges and land clumsily in front of the platform.

Quickly you turn and assume a defensive stance, facing the dueling ground.

Turn to 147.

6

Minutes later, your joy turns to sorrow as Lord Tomotada assigns Takeshi to a different unit. You know as well as Takeshi that you cannot request a different assignment. To do so would insult Lord Tomotada's decision.

Perhaps, you think, those shuriken were clues after all. No special training could be more strenuous or dangerous than ninjitsu, the art of the ninja.

Could that be the special training Lord Tomotada offered earlier? Sadly you realize that you will never know.

7

At nightfall, you and Takeshi barricade yourselves in your room, making sure the door and window are locked. Takeshi volunteers to stand guard first, and he kneels on the floor in the corner of the room with his *katana* lying before him.

"Don't fall asleep and then attack me if I sneeze or something," you caution, only half-kidding.

Takeshi laughs. "Don't worry, Kurasai."

You drift to sleep slowly, wondering what you'd do if a ninja did show up in the night . . .

"Aiieeee!" you scream, waking suddenly, but a hand clamps over your mouth, cutting off your scream. Terrified, you pull back your fist to punch the face leaning over you, but you recognize it as Takeshi. Relieved, you sink back onto your sleeping pad, your heart pounding.

"I'm sorry I frightened you, Kurasai," he apologizes. "I only nudged you to wake you up, but right away you started—"

"That's okay, Takeshi," you interrupt. "I'm just glad it was only you. Is it my turn to stand guard?"

Takeshi nods and drags you off your sleeping pad.

A few minutes later, the only sound you hear in the room is Takeshi's slow, even breathing. Sitting on the floor in the corner of your room, you listen to the many night noises—rustling leaves, swaying branches, the building creaking, an owl hooting. But there are other sounds you don't recognize. Nervously you realize that the night is a different world, unfamiliar to you but probably very familiar to a ninja.

Tense and sleepy, you welcome the first rays of sunlight that creep through the window. Pleased that you survived the night without event, you turn your full attention to your approaching graduation.

Turn to 77.



8

From the way he moves and wields his huge sword, you recognize immediately that Ogawa is a crude but very experienced fighter. You know that a single stroke by either of you could end this fight. Facing Ogawa's long, two-handed sword without armor, you feel very vulnerable indeed. The *no-dachi* is a dangerous weapon in the hands of someone strong enough to wield it, and Ogawa looks as though he could use it with one hand.

Howling, Ogawa attacks, swinging his *no-dachi* in a wide arc. You duck low, deflecting his blade with *Kurodachi*, but Ogawa launches a kick you didn't see coming. His foot strikes your hands, and you almost drop your sword. In the process, you lose 5 hit points.

Immediately you leap aside as Ogawa slices through a sapling where you were standing. Every muscle in your body tenses as you realize another mistake could be your last.

With a deafening cry, the traitor swings once more, aiming to cut you in half.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 23 or more, turn to **76**. If it is 22 or less, turn to **62**.

9

With a loud roar, Genzo swings once more. This time, however, you know you're ready. Snapping your arms out in front of you, you deftly turn his blow aside with your *bokken*. With a grunt of surprise, Genzo lurches forward to regain his balance. This close together, you know you must either attack him right away or jump back to keep him from hitting you.

If you decide to attack, turn to **60**. If you decide to jump back, turn to **46**.

10

Your tall friend slides open the door to the room and pokes his head through, grinning widely. "That, Kurasai, was a secret ninja weapon—a slingshot and a mango seed! I ate the fruit for breakfast, but I saved the seed for you."

You look down. Sure enough, a mango seed lies at your feet. Chuckling, you shake your head. "Only you, Takeshi, would turn your breakfast into a weapon and then blame it on ninjas."

Feigning seriousness, Takeshi explains. "Everyone knows that ninjas are extremely resourceful. Anything can become a weapon in their hands—even food. Right?"

"Right," you grumble, bending down to gather your gear again. "I just hope we don't have to fight each other today."

Hoisting his own armor and weapons, Takeshi holds the outer door open for you. "That's not very likely. Come on," he says.

You pause in the doorway. "That was quite a shot, Takeshi, especially right through a wall. Could you see me?"

"No," he answers simply, "but I could hear you."

As you walk together toward the dueling ground, a nagging thought keeps bothering you. *What if that had been an enemy, and what if it had been an arrow rather than a mango seed? I could have been killed. This is an important lesson.* You resolve to be careful never to let your guard down. Turn to 55.

11

You ride back on the rocky soil between the forest and the cliff's edge. As you guide your horse by the dim light of a rising full moon, a sudden movement in the trees ahead draws your attention. You look more closely and see a shadowy figure emerging from the forest. *Could it be Takeshi? you wonder. If not, perhaps whoever it is has seen him.*

Suddenly your horse rears up as the figure ducks back into the trees. "Hey!" you shout loudly, kicking your heels back. Instead of leaping forward, however, your horse falters, then drops to its knees. Bewildered, you jump off your mount just as the horse falls over on its side.

The animal is unconscious but still breathing. Keeping a wary eye on the trees, you rub your hand over the horse's neck and discover a small dart. *The dart must be drugged or poisoned, you realize. I'll bet it was intended for me!*

Turn to 57.

12

Screaming like an insane man, you leap forward, swinging *Kurodachi* in a wide arc. Startled by your black blade, nearly invisible in the darkness, the

bandits leap back.

Immediately you spin around and sprint to the base of the cliff, sheathing *Kurodachi* as you run. You leap onto the rock face and begin scrambling up. A glance over your shoulder shows you caught the bandits by surprise. They are just now beginning to react. Over their shoulders you see a fourth bandit emerging from the surf, swinging a sling over his head. Seeing him, you're glad you didn't try to run down the beach. Turn to 4.

13

The ninja's *katana* whistles a deadly arc through the air, straight toward your neck. Ducking low under the swing, you charge forward to drive the ninja off the ledge, but the ninja changes the direction of his thrust, and his *katana* stabs deep into your chest. You know the wound is mortal, but somehow you continue on, slamming into the ninja.

The last thing you hear is the ninja's scream as you both plunge off the edge into the darkness below. A moment later, everything goes black.

14

Quickly you lean to the side to avoid the first kick, which misses your head by mere inches. At the same time, you swing your right arm up to try to block the next kick. An instant later, Genzo's armored boot and your arm collide with a bone-jarring thud.

Subtract 3 points of damage from your hit point total. Your only consolation is that you know the damage would have been much worse if the kick had crunched into your chest.

Genzo lands near you, slightly off balance but swinging with one fist. You throw a counterpunch, jamming your knuckles inside your gauntlet as your

fist pounds into the huge samurai's chest. You know you've hurt him, but his blow has hurt you, too. Deduct another 2 hit points of damage as you both jump apart.

If you choose to go on the attack, turn to **67**. If you want to wait to see what Genzo does next, turn to **129**.

15

During the night, you regain 15 hit points from your rest. Remember, you can't regain more hit points than you started with.

The next morning, you awake to find another silver *shuriken* on your pillow.

You practically collide with Takeshi in the hallway, hurrying to tell you that he received one, too. Once more your rooms were locked from the inside.

Turn to **36**.

16

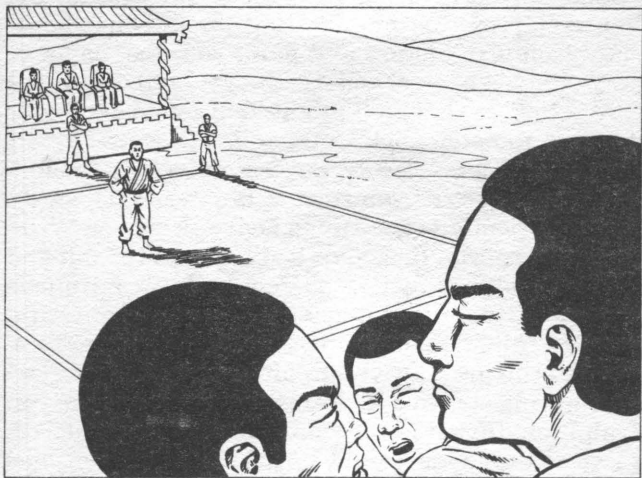
Pulling his huge body to his feet with a loud grunt, Genzo strides quickly to the center of the gravel square and bows low.

He is proud to be chosen first, but is it really an honor? you think wryly. *Certainly the first chicken plucked for dinner doesn't think so.*

Savoring the moment, the gigantic young samurai sweeps his gaze across the bleachers, pondering his choice. You can almost feel anticipation grow among your classmates surrounding you. No one wants to face Genzo. *Neither do I*, you admit to yourself. Not only is Genzo the karate champion of the *dojo* and built like an ox, but he is merciless as well. You notice that Takeshi is holding his breath. He, too, feels nervous.

Finally, to the relief of the others, Genzo plants his

fists at his waist and proclaims, "I choose Kurasai Hidenaga, an adversary as skilled as I in unarmed combat!" Turn to **30**.



17

Spurred by your success, you struggle to keep from becoming overconfident. You know you have hurt Genzo, but the trial isn't over yet, and you know you're nearing the limits of exhaustion. Even so, you figure that you can defeat Genzo if you can launch just one more successful attack.

If you have 4 or fewer hit points left, turn to **181**. If you still have more than 4 hit points, turn to **66**.

18

You fight as if in a frenzy, straining to make each blow strike harder and faster. Unexpectedly you knock Genzo's arms apart. Immediately you step in, slamming your elbow into his chest plates. Hearing

the breath rush from his lungs, you follow up with a backfist, catching the big samurai's chin with your gauntlet. He drops to the gravel like a sack of rice.

Genzo struggles for a moment to lift himself up, then collapses, his eyes rolling up into his head. Dizzy from exhaustion and pain, you, too, begin to sway. Between clenched teeth, you force out the word, "No!" as though it might help you to keep your balance. You step back to try to brace yourself, but your left knee gives way. Several onlookers, including Midori, gasp as you start to fall over backward.

Automatically your trained body takes over. Without thinking, you tuck your body up into the fall and roll back to your feet in one shaky but continuous move. For a confused moment, you fear that Genzo recovered and is about to attack, but he remains face-down in the gray gravel. Realizing you're crouched in a fighting stance with no opponent facing you, you straighten up and lower your hands to your side.

Two of the judges begin to try to revive Genzo as *Sensei Haraku* steps to the center of the dueling ground. Facing the platform, he pronounces, "This trial is at an end. Kurasai Hidenaga stands the victor!"

Trying desperately not to collapse again, you bow to Haraku and each judge in turn, then to the spectators on the platform. Master Yoshimura, as usual, remains expressionless. Lord Tomotada leans forward, watching you intently. You look at the beautiful Midori, beside him, as you bow, but she glances down, avoiding your gaze. Curious, you wonder what her thoughts are. At least you're pleased that she witnessed your victory.

Shakily you make your way to the bleachers, where a battered Genzo meets you, glowering. "Luck, Kurasai, only luck!" he says. While he lowers

himself to his seat, his left leg goes into a spasm, and he falls back with a thud.

"No, Genzo," you answer, "not luck. Superior technique."

Pleased with your showing, you realize you've gained a small measure of respect from the formidable Genzo. Turn to 151.

19

During the night, you regain 15 hit points from a solid rest. Remember, you cannot regain more hit points than you started with.

The next morning, you awake to find another *shuriken* on your pillow, exactly like the last one. You practically collide with Takeshi in the hallway. He is hurrying to tell you that he received one, too. Again your rooms were both locked from the inside.

Turn to 36.

20

You spin your horse around and start back. A brisk breeze rushes over the cliff edge, carrying the sea's salt smell to your nostrils. A stiff evening breeze begins to blow, and you stop your horse and tie your graduation headband around your head to keep your hair from blowing into your eyes.

Turn to 11.

21

A loud snap in the nearest empty room startles you. You barely have time to glance to the left and see a tiny projectile burst through the thick paper wall. You leap aside, but it's too late. A brown object slaps into your ribs painfully. You clutch your side instinctively, dropping your armor and weapons to the floor. You aren't really hurt, but you're annoyed.

“Takeshi!” you bark, upset that you let him ambush you. “You old goat, you just hit me! What was that, anyway?” You realize if it were anyone besides Takeshi, you’d be a lot angrier. Turn to 10.

22

Screaming like an insane man, you leap forward, swinging *Kurodachi* in a wide arc. Startled by your black blade, nearly invisible in the darkness, the bandits leap back.

Immediately you spin around and sprint to the base of the cliff, sheathing *Kurodachi* as you run. You leap onto the rock face and begin scrambling up. A glance over your shoulder shows you caught the bandits by surprise. They are only now starting to follow you. Turn to 4.

23

Again and again, you and the ninja lunge at each other, then fall back. Often you are forced to halt your attacks to block or avoid a killing stroke from his *katana*. You have trouble seeing him clearly because of his black garb, but his polished *katana* is always in sight. You can tell that sometimes he seems to have difficulty seeing your black blade, but he always manages to duck or block even your most skillful strikes at the last instant. You have never before witnessed such superb *kenjutsu*. You’re amazed at the ninja’s absolute control over his weapon and the economy of motion in his smooth movements.

Seeing him shift his weight, you brace yourself for yet another attack. Turn to 68.

24

Blocking and ducking among the saplings and brush, you make your way to a large tree and pretend

to slip. Howling with glee, Ogawa swings his *nodachi* with both hands. You duck behind the trunk, then sprint away as his blade cuts deep into the wood.

Cursing, Ogawa pulls his sword free and charges after you, but you have a head start now. He screams, "Coward! You're no samurai! You're a baby goat!" Ignoring him as you gasp for breath, you run up the ridge toward Midori's horse. Screaming insults and taunts, Ogawa races after you.

Midori's horse shies away as you approach it at a run, but you quickly grab the reins and pull yourself up into the saddle. Close behind, Ogawa crashes through the underbrush toward you, still screaming insults.

You yank hard on the reins, spinning the horse around, then kick its flanks. Well trained, it hurtles forward, spraying Ogawa with stones and dirt from its flashing hooves. With your heart pounding, you urge the horse up over the crest of the ridge, then head for the *dojo*.

Turn to 33.

25

Sensei Haraku moves to the center of the dueling ground between you and Genzo. Although the *sensei* wears no armor, he wears his *katana* as a symbol of his authority as referee. The other four *sensei* position themselves as judges, one at each corner of the gravel square.

Haraku's instructions are brief: "Strive for precision and strike cleanly. The trial ends at my command."

Together, you and Genzo bow to Haraku, each judge, then each other. The formalities are almost over.

Haraku orders, "Take your positions!"

You slide your right foot back while drawing your *bokken*. With most of your weight on your rear leg, you can turn or strike quickly in any direction without losing your balance. You hold the wooden sword with both hands, held high near your right cheek. Armored gauntlets, layered for flexibility, cover the backs of your hands and fingers.

Through the opening of your helmet, you watch Genzo carefully. Crouched and ready to spring, he holds his *bokken* straight out, pointed right at you. Your eyes meet, and he grins. *No doubt he'll attack immediately*, you predict. Bracing yourself, you await Haraku's command.

"Begin!" he shouts.

At the signal, Genzo charges, howling loudly and swinging a powerful stroke at your head.

You stand your ground, waiting until the last moment, when Genzo won't have time to change his attack. Then you swing.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 21 or more, turn to **75**. If it is less than 21, turn to **35**.

26

Later, you and the others who chose active duty are told to line up to receive your assignments. To the beat of a large drum outside the courtyard, Lord Tomotada marches from the platform, followed by one of his officers, who carries several silk sashes. Lord Tomotada stops directly in front of you. After exchanging bows, he declares, "On the recommendation of Master Yoshimura, I assign you to serve in my most elite force, the Black Owls!"

You let out your breath with excitement. Once led by Master Yoshimura, the Black Owls are respected

throughout Japan as the best samurai force since the Minamoto army a hundred years ago. You couldn't ask for a more prestigious or challenging assignment. Struggling to remain calm, you bow and say sincerely, "Thank you, Lord Tomotada, for this great honor. I will never give you or the Black Owls cause to regret this assignment."

Lord Tomotada steps aside, allowing his officer to step in front of you, holding between his outstretched hands a silk sash imprinted with Lord Tomotada's red and gold emblem and a black owl. You bow until your forehead touches the sash. Then the officer ties it around your head, symbolically binding you to the Black Owls unit in the service of Lord Tomotada.

Turn to 6.

27

You watch as Genzo feints once, jabbing with his *bokken*, before you attack. Suddenly you leap forward, slapping his weapon aside, then follow up with a decapitating stroke. Although he looks startled, Genzo nevertheless is able to block your blade with his left arm. Hearing an armor plate crack, you know that you've hurt him.

Immediately you thrust at his stomach, planning to follow through with a twisting cut at his sword arm. But the giant falls over backward, then rolls to his feet out of your range. You leap forward, hoping to strike before he recovers.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding it to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 21 or less, turn to 65. If it is more than 21, turn to 120.

28

Somehow the bandit barely blocks your thrust, jumping away to keep his footing. You spin to block a chop from the *no-dachi*, but another rock strikes you

in the head. Dazed, you can't hold back the giant blade, and it cuts deep into your side. You lose the rest of your hit points.

Summoning your last ounce of strength, you jab out with both hands, impaling the bandit with *Kurodachi*. At least by taking your slayer with you, you die an honorable death in the true samurai tradition.



29

"Just a minute!" you call, picking up two wooden training swords called *bokken*; your shortsword; and your prized possession, your longsword, *Kurodachi*.

Five years ago, your father gave his life defending Hakata Castle. In his honor, you now carry his sword *Kurodachi*, or "night sword," by all who see its jet-black blade that will not reflect light. Made of many layers of different metals, the sword is perfectly balanced, razor sharp, and nearly indestructible.

With your hands full of these items plus your armor, you slide the wooden-framed paper door open with your foot and step into the dim hallway. The building you stay in has four rooms, but the two rooms on the other side of the hall stand empty. One student dropped out of school several months ago, and the other had his arm broken in karate class by

Genzo Taira, a student nicknamed "The Monster."

You glance down the hall, but you don't see Takeshi anywhere. Closing the door with your foot, you start down the hallway, lugging your gear.

Make a perception check by rolling one die and adding the result to your perception skill score. If the total is 21 or more, turn to **39**. If it is 20 or less, turn to **21**.

30

All eyes turn toward you, waiting for your reaction. Not only did Genzo select you, but he also dared you to choose karate. You rise slowly, trying to appear calm and confident, but inside you tremble, nervous about the challenge you face. You understand why Genzo chose you. Long ago he recognized you as the only person who could challenge him for first place in the class. Following the samurai code, he had to choose his most formidable adversary—you—or appear cowardly. But more important, you know he bears a grudge against you. He views your curiosity and experimentation with new techniques as a weakness, an insult to the samurai way. Consequently, by fighting you, he feels he will be defending the honor of all samurai.

"Kurasai," the Master asks, "do you fight with karate or with *bokken*?"

Thoughts race through your mind. Genzo and you are the *dojo*'s top fighters. His karate is better than yours, just as your *kenjutsu* is better than his. If you choose the *bokken*, you will have an advantage, but you may lose face, appearing fearful of his skill and uncertain of your own. If you accept his challenge to fight with karate, you're less likely to win, but a karate victory over Genzo would bring you much honor.

You remember that the Master and the *sensei* are testing your decision-making as well as your fighting. In a steady voice, you say, "I have decided . . ."

If you choose to meet Genzo's challenge and fight him unarmed, turn to 107. If you choose to fight with the advantage of *bokken*, turn to 70.

31

Hardly moving, you stand watching Genzo. You jab your weapon forward tentatively, testing Genzo's reflexes. He does the same, almost making you jump back. Then, sensing the time is right, you lay your trap.

Suddenly you leap forward, jabbing your *bokken* at Genzo's face. As you knew he must, he lifts his *bokken* to block your attack. Setting the bait, you let Genzo thrust your weapon wide to the side. You hope that, holding his weapon high and seeing you apparently open for attack, he'll try his favorite overhead chop once more. You know that if he does, but he fails to hesitate this time, you won't have time to strike, maybe not even time to block his blow.

With a roar, Genzo launches into an overhead chop, hesitating for a split second, just as you hoped he would. Your cross strike is already in midswing, with all your strength behind it. Genzo's eyes open wide with fear as he futilely tries to bring his *bokken* down in time to block your blow, but he is too late. The wooden shaft slams viciously into his side, under his upraised arm, knocking him sideways. Twice more you hit him before he is able to break away.

Turn to 17.

32

Having momentarily stunned you with his kick, Genzo springs to his feet and faces you. *He appears*

unhurt, you think, but he's got to be acting. Then you add, For my sake, he'd better be!

Shouting to summon your energy, you leap into a simple side thrust kick, making it as fast and hard as you can. Genzo responds slowly, and your boot smashes into his stomach, lifting the giant samurai into the air. He collapses to the gravel like a sack of rice.

Your shout still echoing in your throat, you land in a ready position, your right fist pulled back for yet another strike, but it's unnecessary. Genzo lies sprawled half out of the gravel dueling ground. Unwilling to admit defeat, he manages to lift himself up onto one elbow, moans, then slumps back down, his strength spent.

You open your fists and lower your gauntlets to your sides. Then you join *Sensei* Haraku at the center of the square as two other judges begin to try to revive Genzo. Facing the platform, Haraku pronounces, "This trial is ended. Kurasai Hidenaga stands the victor."

As you bow to Haraku, your eyes meet his for a moment. You see no trace of emotion. You can't even tell if your victory pleases him. As you have done many times before, you question why tradition demands that warriors must conceal their feelings.

Turn to 91.

33

It's dark and late when you return to the *dojo*, where you ride directly to the Master's quarters. He listens to your story without comment as he sips his tea. When you finally finish, he remains silent awhile longer, then asks, "What do you think these traitors helped the Mongol accomplish, riding up and down the coast for two days?"

"The Mongol may be a smuggler searching for a place to land or to hide his boat," you suggest. There is a chance this is true, but you suspect something else.

The Master senses your doubt. "What else, Kurasai?"

"Perhaps the Mongol was checking the coastal defenses around Hakata harbor."

"Yes, but why?" the Master asks.

You hesitate before speaking, aware of the implications of your answer. "The Mongols may be planing to invade us!"

"Invasion . . ." The Master says the word slowly. "That is entirely possible, Kurasai, but let us hope it's only smugglers behind this. Perhaps if you had followed the traitors, we would know more, but you have done well. Wait here while I pass this important information on to Lord Tomotada."

Leaning on a cane, the Master hobbles quickly out to compose his message. As he does, you notice that he really puts very little weight on the cane. *That's odd, you think. I'll have to remember that.*

Turn to 145.

34

Thinking the same thing, you and Takeshi rush to his room to check the roof over his bed. A moment later, standing on your shoulders, Takeshi finds an identical opening.

"We still don't know who it is," you declare, "but at least now we know how. Maybe we can catch this visitor of ours."

Takeshi shakes his head. "If it's a ninja, as we thought, I'm not sure I want to catch him."

"I don't care who it is, but I want to find out what's going on and why he singled me out this time!"

The breakfast gong startles you both. You hurry back to your room to change quickly, vowing to find the answers to these mysterious questions soon. But for now, you don't want to miss breakfast—people tend to pass out in training if they don't eat or drink enough. Turn to 54.



35

The tip of your *bokken* sweeps a short arc through the air before striking Genzo's weapon. To your surprise, you realize that you miscalculated the angle, deflecting his *bokken* only slightly. A split second later, the weapon slams into your left shoulder. Even through the armor and thick padding, you wince with pain.

Roll one die to determine how much damage you received and subtract the result from your hit point total.

Genzo immediately pulls back to strike again. If you decide to try to block his attack, turn to 9. If you choose to counterattack instead, turn to 60.

36

You and Takeshi go to the garden again to discuss developments, but you still can't figure things out.

"These *shuriken* aren't the only strange thing going on around here," Takeshi declares.

"What do you mean?" you ask.

He pauses for a moment before answering. "Maybe it's just a feeling I have, but I think we're being tested as much as taught here. Take archery class last week, for example. The *sensei* were far more interested in finding out who could shoot from horseback than in showing us how."

"I see what you mean," you say slowly, remembering how abruptly that session ended. Then, thinking of another example, you say. "Remember the fight yesterday? The *sensei* didn't really teach us anything, but they clearly observed how we all reacted."

Sounding perplexed, Takeshi asks, "How can we find out what's going on—with the *shuriken* or anything else?"

"I don't know," you reply. "All we can do is stay alert. . . ."

Hearing the breakfast gong, you both head back to join your classmates.

Turn to 50.

37

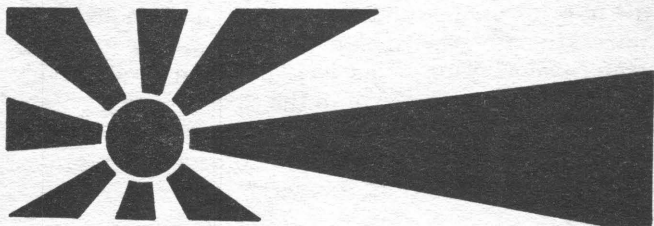
At nightfall, you bid Takeshi good night. Then you barricade yourself in your room, making sure the door and window are locked. Next door, you hear Takeshi doing the same thing. Placing *Kurodachi*, your black *katana*, on the floor beside you, you crawl onto your sleeping pad.

As you try to relax, you can't help but feel nervous. Lying in the darkness, you listen to the night sounds—rustling leaves, swaying branches, the building creaking, an owl hooting. But there are other sounds you don't recognize. Nervously you realize that the night is a different world, unfamiliar

to you but probably very familiar to a ninja. You wonder what you would do if a ninja did show up.

You drift in and out of sleep, waking up frequently at the slightest sound. Finally, tense and tired, you welcome the first rays of sunlight that creep through the window. Pleased that you survived the night without event, you turn your full attention to your approaching graduation.

Turn to 77.



38

Quickly you lean to the side to avoid the first kick, which misses your head by mere inches. At the same time, you swing your right arm up to try to block the second kick, but you aren't fast enough. An instant later, Genzo's armored boot snaps into your chest plates, knocking the wind from your lungs with a whoosh and driving you over backward onto the ground. Deduct 6 points of damage from your hit point total.

Dazed and gasping for air, you watch helplessly as Genzo launches another kick, this time to your left leg. Subtract another 3 hit points of damage.

Grinning, the big samurai raises both hands for a final hammerfist blow. Overconfident of his victory, he takes too long to savor the moment, giving you the precious seconds you need to recover. You lash out with a side thrust kick. To Genzo's surprise, the blow

lands solidly in his belly, driving him back several steps, doubled over in pain. You scramble to your feet, your chest and leg throbbing with pain.

If you elect to attack Genzo immediately, turn to **67**. If you choose to wait to see what Genzo does next, turn to **129**.

39

Spinning at the sound of a loud snap from the empty room to your left, you duck behind your bundle of armor, sensing danger. A tiny brown projectile bursts through the thick paper wall, then bounces off your armor. Your arms jerk backward reflexively, spilling your weapons onto the floor.

"Takeshi!" you roar, realizing if it were anyone else, you'd be even angrier. "You old goat, you almost hit me! What was that, anyway?"

Turn to **10**.

40

In a blur, *Kurodachi* slashes across the bandit's chest plates. He screams and jumps aside, but in the darkness you can't tell how badly you've injured him. You spin and block a chop from the *no-dachi*, bracing your sword with both hands. Another rock flies past your head, and you decide the cliff is your only chance.

Turn to **22**.

41

Wondering what the Master is thinking, you watch him turn his head slowly, surveying his students. Now old and crippled in the legs, he still commands great authority. Years ago, he led the Black Owls, the most elite force of samurai in the land. He could have become a general—he was offered command of an

army more than once—but instead dedicated his life to training young samurai. You respect his knowledge and wisdom and hope to be worthy of such respect someday.

“The combat trial procedure is simple,” the Master says clearly. As usual, he speaks quietly, as though with little effort, yet everyone hears him. You find this ability fascinating. When you first came to the *dojo*, you thought everyone heard his words by paying very close attention to him, but you suspect there is more to it than that.

The Master continues. “Before each trial, I will appoint one of you to fight. That student must choose an opponent from those who have not yet fought. The opponent chooses whether to duel with karate or with *bokken*. Be advised that today we observe not only your fighting skill, but your decisions as well. To protect yourselves and to imitate battle conditions, you are to wear your complete *yoroi* during the trials.” After pausing for emphasis, he adds, “you may use any strike or hold as long as your opponent still stands.”

Once again he surveys the class. After a moment of silence, he calls, “Genzo Taira, choose your opponent!”

Turn to 16.

42

Frustrated by your tactics, Genzo charges forward, launching his favorite attack, a two-handed overhead chop. Recognizing the potential danger of this attack, you don't dare try to dodge out of the way. Instead, you prepare to block it. When he sees you aren't trying to get away, Genzo roars with grim satisfaction, then brings his weapon down with all his strength. Even as you swing your *bokken* up to knock

his weapon aside, you realize you may have found a weakness: Genzo seemed to hesitate just before striking.

Momentarily distracted by your discovery, you almost miss blocking the attack that follows, but your timing is good enough to knock Genzo's blade aside just in time. Now off guard, he quickly steps back. You also step back, trying to decide what to do next.

You want to try to exploit Genzo's weakness of hesitating by laying a trap for him, but you aren't certain that you really have found a weakness. If he doesn't hesitate next time, your trap could backfire.

If you want to go ahead and try to lay your trap for Genzo, turn to 31. If you decide to wait and see if he hesitates a second time, turn to 87. If you decide simply to forget about weaknesses and fancy traps and go on the attack immediately, turn to 104.

43

Early the next morning, you awaken in your room, feeling the chilly dawn air on your face. Your stiff muscles and painful aches and bruises remind you that the battle with Genzo was not a dream. Even so, you feel better than you did yesterday. You regain 15 hit points from your full night's sleep and your trip to the *dojo's* doctor after the fight.

Suddenly you remember the Master's summons to meet with him this morning. He didn't explain why, and you wonder apprehensively if your defeat will keep you from graduating. *At least, you think, I'm pleased that Takeshi won his fight.* Greatly disappointed in yourself, you turn to look at your *yoroi*, now scratched and battered.

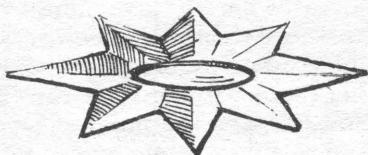
A knock on the door startles you. "Who is it?" you ask tentatively.

"It's me, Takeshi," comes the answer. "It's almost time for your appointment with Master Yoshimura. I thought I'd walk over with you."

"Sure," you say. Then you add ruefully, "You probably came over just to see how black and blue I am."

Takeshi laughs, then says, "Stop by my room when you're ready—if you can manage to hobble that far!"

"All right," you reply, glad that it is Takeshi who offered to accompany you. You're not sure you would want to see anyone else right now. Painfully you drag yourself out of bed. Turn to 92.



44

You leap out of bed, determined to find out how someone got into your room. The door is still locked, just as you left it, and the *bokken* undisturbed. The windows remain tied shut. You scan the walls and rafters, but they, too, seem normal. You draw *Kuro-dachi* from its sheath and start prodding the floorboards, searching for a trapdoor, a secret compartment, a tunnel, any way into the room.

"Hey! What are you doing in there?" Takeshi calls from the next room. "You woke me up."

"I found another *shuriken*," you explain, "and I'm going to find out how it got in here."

You hear Takeshi leap out of bed. To your surprise, he shouts, "I didn't get one this time!"

You think it's strange that this is the first time only one of you received a *shuriken*. "Are you sure?" you ask.

You hear Takeshi rummaging through his belongings. A few minutes later he reports, "There's nothing here. I'll be right over to help you look."

You remove the *bokken* from the groove, unlock your door, and slide it open. Dressed only in your sleeping robes, you and Takeshi begin a thorough search of your room.

Make a perception check by rolling one die and adding the result to your perception skill score. If the total is 20 or more, turn to **49**. If it is less, turn to **69**.

45

You and Takeshi barely have time to finish your preparations before the attack begins. Screaming at the top of their lungs to fortify themselves, all one hundred seventy-nine students charge at once. From where you are lying on the inner slope of the classroom building roof, you are hidden from the view of the attackers, but you have a clear view of the complex and of the grounds that surround it. Behind the mass of golden-garbed warriors, you spot *Sensei Haraku* directing the assault.

Although many of the attacking force circle around the complex to assault the rear courtyard wall, the majority elect to storm the front wall and archway. The waiting defenders have little trouble knocking the first wave from the wall. Somehow Genzo's taunts rise above the clamor.

Then, on direction from *Sensei Haraku*, the attackers completely surround the complex and begin to breach the walls on all sides. The tension you have been feeling immediately vanishes and is replaced by a calm confidence as the battle enfolds. Pulling your head down, you wait patiently, listening for the first climbers to reach the roof of the classroom building. The central courtyard lies below and behind you.

You and Takeshi expect the young samurai to attempt to reach the roof by scaling the gray stone walls. Instead, you hear the first four attackers vault onto the roof's front edge, tossed up by their comrades.

Immediately two of the invaders slip on the tiles you loosened beforehand. The inexperienced students plunge to the ground but five more climb the wall to the edge and begin advancing up the sloping roof, wary of more loose tiles.

Nervously you feel the twelve feet of thick bamboo pole that stretches between you and Takeshi. Tightening your grip on your end of the pole and giving Takeshi your prearranged signal, the two of you leap up from the cover of the roof peak, hefting the heavy pole over your heads. With a shout, you and Takeshi launch the pole at the startled samurai.

Make a physical prowess check by rolling one die and adding the result to your physical prowess skill score. If the total is 18 or more, turn to **121**. If the total is 17 or less, turn to **143**.

46

You leap backward, keeping your arms and *bokken* up to shield yourself. Genzo feints to one side, then jumps back, too. As he does, you wish you'd attacked instead, catching him off balance while he retreated. You force yourself to think ahead, not back.

Turn to **2**.

47

"I'm coming, Takeshi," you call, securing the armor under your left arm. Quickly you stuff your weapons through the bindings—your two wooden training swords, called *bokken*; your shortsword; and *Kurodachi*, your black *katana*. Drawing one of the

bokken, you crouch and move silently to the wooden-framed paper door leading out into the hall. The building you stay in contains four rooms, but the two rooms on the other side of the hall are empty. One student dropped out of the school several months ago, and the other had his arm broken in karate class by Genzo Taira, a student nicknamed “The Monster.”

Standing to one side, you carefully slide the door open with your foot, tense and on guard, but you hear nothing. Slowly you peer into the hallway, letting your eyes adjust to the dim light. The hall is empty. Cautiously you start down the hall, your eyes darting from side to side.

Make a perception check by rolling one die and adding the result to your perception skill score. If the total is 19 or more, turn to **64**. If it is 18 or less, turn to **39**.

48

In a blur, the ninja’s *katana* stabs straight at your stomach. Automatically, you swing *Kurodachi* in a counterstroke, but the ninja changes the direction of his blade and stabs deep into your chest. You lose the rest of your hit points.

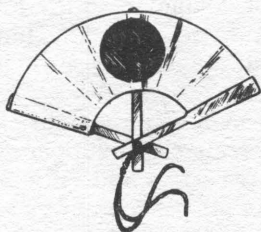
You know the wound is mortal, but you step forward anyway, determined to make one final attack. Your legs refuse to support you, and you stumble to one knee, then both. You jab *Kurodachi* into the ledge and lean on the familiar handle, watching the ninja. As your eyes meet, you see sadness in them. For a moment, you think you’ve seen those eyes before, but your vision and memory are already dimming.

Clenching your teeth against the pain, you gasp, “Who—who are you? And why have you done this?”

The ninja’s voice sounds far away and vaguely familiar. “We have been watching you and testing

you for many months, Kurasai. Tonight you faced your greatest challenge. If you had survived, you could have joined our clan and become a ninja. Unfortunately you have failed the test of the ninja."

You sway, then fall over as unbearable pain surges through you. Then, mercifully, everything goes black.



49

Half an hour later, you and Takeshi have still found nothing. Suddenly Takeshi points at the *shuriken* on your pillow. "Unless that thing has feet and crawled in by itself, I have no idea how it got here."

Discouraged, you walk over and pick up the *shuriken*. "Hey!" you shout in surprise. "My pillow's damp around the edges of the *shuriken*. I bet rain is leaking through a hole in the roof. Boost me up, Takeshi."

Standing on Takeshi's shoulders, you search the ceiling directly above your pillow. Between two rafters, you find a narrow space, just wide enough for the flat *shuriken* to fit through. You can just make out a small flap of leather covering the hole from the outside. "I found it!" you declare, hopping down. "I bet someone's been lowering these *shuriken* down on threads through that hole."

Turn to 34.

When you reach the dining hall, the Master has an announcement. He declares that all of the advanced students will have the day off, free from training and instruction.

Like everyone else, you spend the morning resting from yesterday's fight. In the process, you recover 5 more hit points.

The *dojo's* doctor, Hsiao Taruhito, and his apprentices spend many hours applying herbal remedies and binding and massaging numerous bruises, sprains, and gashes.

In the late afternoon you and your classmates ride out together on horseback for supper at a tavern several miles away. Travelers and villagers move aside and bow deeply as all thirteen of you gallop past, a blur of billowing robes and bright red and gold sashes.

Over the clatter of horses' hooves on the hard-packed dirt, Takeshi shouts, "Who would guess that beneath these robes our bodies are just as colorful—black and blue!"

You yell back, "Don't you feel like a warrior today, Takeshi?"

In reply, he hunches over and dangles his right arm as though crippled. "No, I feel like a lame old man."

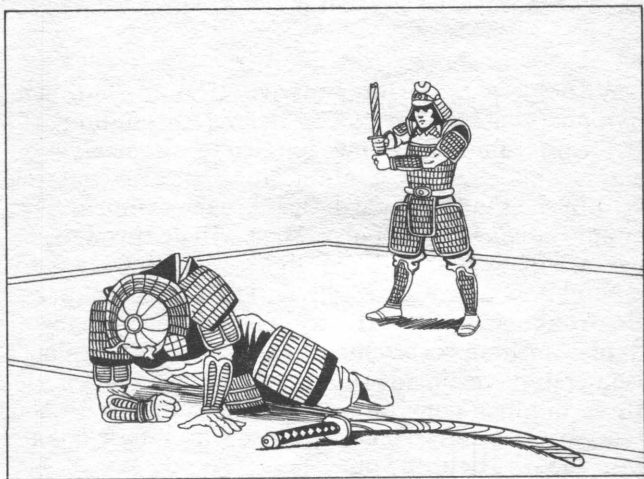
Yuzo, Takeshi's opponent in the trials, laughs uproariously. "I wish you had fought like a lame old man in the dueling ground."

Turn to 71.

Shouting fiercely, you leap and swing at the same time, knowing this strike could end the fight. Still recovering from your last attack, Genzo is slow to respond. Your *bokken* slams into his stomach armor

with a loud crack, lifting the giant samurai into the air in a shower of splinters as the end of your wooden sword shatters.

Your shout still echoing in your throat, you land in a ready position, the stub of your weapon pulled back for another strike. But it's unnecessary. Genzo lies sprawled half out of the gravel square. Unwilling to admit defeat, he manages to lift himself back up onto one elbow, moans softly, then slumps back down, unconscious.



You lower your weapon and join *sensei* Haraku at the center of the square while two other judges begin to revive Genzo. Facing the platform, Haraku officially pronounces the fight over: "This trial has ended. Kurasai Hidenaga is the victor!" As you bow to Haraku, your eyes meet his for a moment. He shows no emotion. You can't even tell if your victory pleases him. You wish you could tell, and like many

times before, you question why tradition dictates that warriors must conceal their feelings.

Turn to 91.

52

You swing *Kurodachi* at the bandit with the *katana*, circling at the same time to keep him between you and the man with the *no-dachi*.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 23 or more, turn to 40. If it is 22 or less, turn to 28.

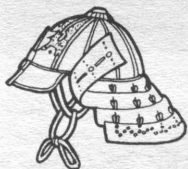
53

Without really forming an overall plan, your companions choose positions to defend throughout the training complex. Some barricade themselves in classrooms, but most stand in a defensive circle within the rear courtyard. Beside each samurai lies a supply of *bokken* and poles. Most will go through several weapons before they fall.

You know many attackers will choose to come over the front courtyard walls rather than face the formidable Genzo in the archway, so you and Takeshi position yourselves inside the courtyard. Takeshi carries three bamboo poles in addition to his *bokken*. You, too, carry a bamboo pole. You also thrust four *bokken* into the dirt behind you.

The attack doesn't begin until late in the afternoon. Then suddenly all one hundred seventy-nine of the younger students charge at once, screaming and yelling to fortify their courage. Somehow Genzo's taunts and insults rise above the clamor. Although many attackers swing around the complex to attack from the sides and behind, the majority assault the front wall.

Turn to 122.



54

In the next few days, you study so much philosophy and history that you hardly have time to think about anything else. You learn nothing more of the *shuriken*, Midori, or the Mongols. During this time, you recover your full complement of hit points.

Soon you long for a break from your classes to absorb what you've studied. One morning the Master gives you such a chance, but in an unexpected way.

Turn to 216.

55

Set at the foot of a small hill, the dueling ground is a perfect square of fine gravel, twenty feet across. The small stones provide excellent footing in all weather and help cushion falls. Stone bleachers on the hill overlook the square and a covered platform on the other side of it. Used only for important contests, never for instruction or practice, the dueling ground is a solemn, intimidating place.

You and Takeshi sit together on the bleachers, waiting patiently for the *sensei*, your instructors, to arrive and begin the combat trials. Your other classmates, about sixty in all, sit in small groups, talking quietly or mentally preparing for the task ahead.

Nodding toward the gravel square, Takeshi murmurs, "This place always seems to make me nervous. I wonder why."

You pause before answering. Takeshi often asks

your opinion and confides in you, and you in him. The samurai code you are taught at the school prohibits showing any weakness, especially fear. Even normal nervousness can brand a man a coward. The way you see it, though, fear is often a valuable ally, warning you when danger is near.

"Perhaps," you begin, "because this is where we must prove ourselves in combat and where many people are injured. Besides, these trials are the most important thing that we have ever faced."

"Yes," your tall friend agrees thoughtfully. "It is acceptable to lose a battle in training, but losing here is a great dishonor. One might not even graduate."

Looking straight into your classmate's eyes, you say evenly, "Unfortunately, half of us are going to lose."

Takeshi grins. "Maybe that's why I'm nervous. The odds aren't very good."

You smile, knowing as well as he that only a few of your classmates could hope to defeat Takeshi.

"Kurasai, what—what if we face each other?" he asks hesitantly.

"We won't," you say with more confidence than you feel. In truth, you'd rather not think about it. You've fought Takeshi before, in training, and usually you've managed to win, but you both ached for days afterward.

Turn to 79.

56

Your maneuver takes Genzo by surprise, but he recovers quickly, jumping back to avoid your swing. You try to adjust your aim but only succeed in striking the tip of his *bokken*. Raising his weapon high over his head, Genzo charges forward with a fierce cry, anticipating victory. Knowing how vulnerable

you are lying on the ground, you kick out with all your strength, hoping to trip your assailant.

You feel your right foot knock Genzo's feet out from under him, but the big samurai decides to follow through with his attack rather than try to regain his balance. You feel his *bokken* slam into your stomach, and you double over in pain as you drop your own weapon. Subtract 6 hit points.

At the same time, Genzo slams chest-first into the gravel, knocking the wind out of him. You both struggle back to your feet.

If you have lost all your hit points, you fall to the gravel, unconscious. Turn to 117. If you still have any hit points remaining, turn to 165.

57

Drawing *Kurodachi*, you quickly roll over the horse and lie on the ground behind it, studying the dark forest. Uneasily you realize that any number of people could be hiding among the dark, shadowy trees and shrubs without your seeing them. Furthermore, with the sky at your back and only one scrawny tree nearby for cover, you know you must be clearly visible to anyone in the forest. You can't make a dash for the trees without leaving yourself open for several clear shots.

Unseen, a dart whistles past your head. *Whoever's out there thinks he has me pinned down here, you think to yourself, but I'm not staying around to give him another free shot.*

Sheathing *Kurodachi*, you grab the coil of rope from the saddle and sprint toward the small tree nearby, dividing the coils in half with your hands as you run.

When you reach the tree, you throw the coils over the cliff edge on opposite sides of the tree, leaving

the middle of the rope looped around the trunk.

Behind the trunk, you gather the two ropes together and wrap them around your arms and legs. Then you lower yourself over the edge of the cliff and start to slide down the ropes. You have some trouble keeping the two ropes together, but you manage to make it down to the ends of the rope, still some twenty feet above the beach.

Gripping one end of the rope firmly, you let go of the other end and let yourself fall.

Turn to 101.

58

In the dark light and shadows, Ogawa fails to see *Kurodachi*'s black blade, but it narrowly misses its target. Immediately you swing again, but Ogawa yanks his blade free and swings backhanded in the same motion. Again you strike Ogawa, but you can't tell if you hurt him. An instant later, his blade cuts into your side, and you drop to your knees.

Hoisting his sword high over his head, Ogawa leaps into the air for his final attack. As he comes down, you thrust out with both hands, impaling him on *Kurodachi*. You know you've killed him, but his heavy sword continues on downward. You try to roll out of the way, but you're too slow! The last thing you hear is Ogawa's eerie death howl. By taking your enemy with you, at least you die honorably by following the samurai code.

59

Raising *Kurodachi* to your shoulder and screaming a fierce battle cry, you charge, slashing viciously at the closest bandit, the one with the *katana*. *Kurodachi*'s black blade is practically invisible in the darkness, yet somehow your opponent deftly dodges

your blow, spinning away at the same time.

Before you can dart through the opening, however, you hear another bandit behind you. You leap high into the air, seeing the sharp tip of his spear pass just inches below your feet. Twisting in the air, you land in time to block a thrust from the first bandit's *katana*. The blow stings your wrists as the two blades lock.

From the corner of your eye, you see the third bandit running to join the fight. *I've got to get away somehow!* your mind screams. Sweeping *Kurodachi* against your opponent's blade, you flick your wrists and send his *katana* flying. Even as you disarm him, you duck low as the spear point stabs through the air past your ear.

You spin completely around, putting all your strength into a vicious crescent slice, which the bandit barely blocks in time. His spear shaft is no match for *Kurodachi*'s edge, and you leave him holding half a spear.

This is your chance!

Turn to 209.

60

Side-stepping to allow room for a full swing, you attack, aiming your *bokken* low, at Genzo's left knee. In a blur, you see him swinging. Bracing yourself against the impact, you concentrate on your own strike, hoping you connect first.

As you hit Genzo's armor at the knee joint, his *bokken* strikes your left side. Stunned by the power of his blow, you topple to the ground. Deduct 5 hit points from your total.

However, Genzo, too, goes down, his leg buckling under him. Immediately you both scramble to your feet. Turn to 2.

61

During the night, you regain 15 hit points from a solid rest. Remember, you cannot regain more hit points than you started with.

The next morning, you awake to find another *shuriken* on your pillow, only this one is gold-colored, like Takeshi's. You bound out of bed and practically collide with Takeshi in the hallway. He is hurrying to tell you he received another golden *shuriken*. Again your rooms were both locked from the inside.

Turn to 36.

62

You swing *Kurodachi* down hard, slamming Ogawa's sword into the dirt at your feet, but *Kurodachi* cuts into the soft forest floor and sticks. While you pull frantically to free your blade, Ogawa yanks his sword back and swings again, this time aiming for your neck.

Pulling *Kurodachi* free, you hurl yourself to the ground, feeling Ogawa's blade cut through your hair. You don't need to look to know he will swing again, so you whip your body into a left roll. Once more the heavy blade barely misses you.

Hacking and lunging like a crazed animal, the traitor charges after you. Ducking and dodging, you scramble through the trees, avoiding the blows while searching for an opening. Ogawa's vicious strokes cut into the brush all around you, sending leaves, moss, and branches into the air with each swing. Finally you get far enough ahead of him to spring to your feet and face him.

He grins at you wickedly. Frustrated, you see he's not even breathing hard. *Maybe I should retreat and try to escape*, you think frantically. *If I die, no one will ever know what I've learned*. But you are reluc-

tant to admit defeat, and you know that if you retreat, the huge traitor will escape and warn the Mongols.

At least he hasn't hit me yet, and I know I'm faster than he is, you tell yourself. If I use the trees to shield myself, I can probably hit him. Maybe his armor isn't any stronger than his companion's was.

If you decide to attack Ogawa, turn to **97**. If you decide to retreat and try and escape, turn to **24**.

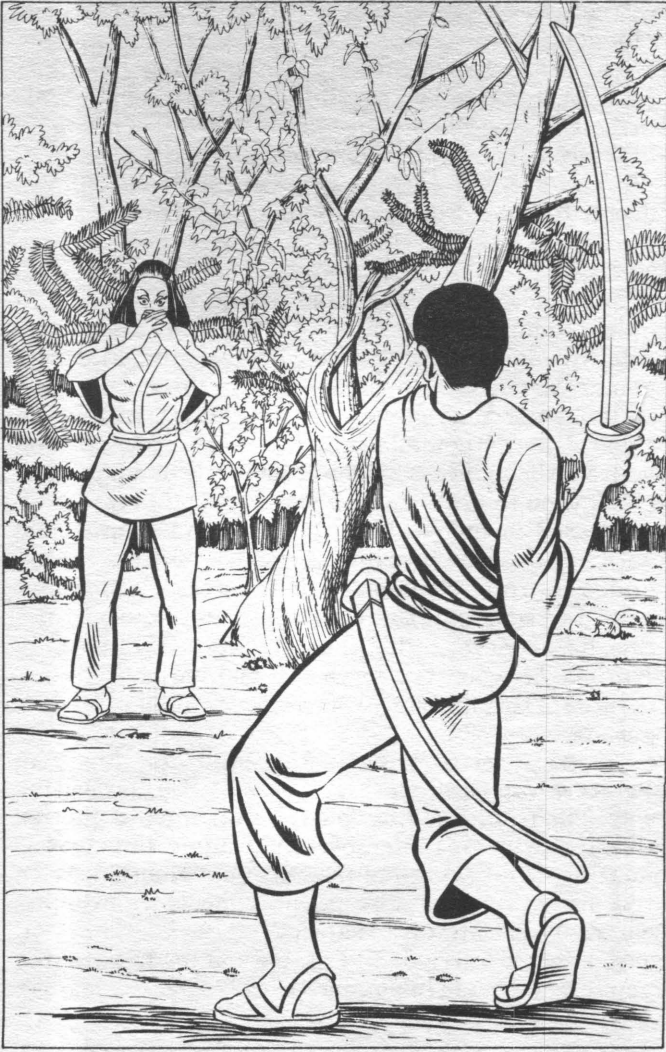
63

You land, your sword held at the ready, but you quickly change your mind about using it. The surprise in your voice is clear as you exclaim, "Midori!" You are astonished to see her here in the woods, especially alone! You realize it must be her horse over the ridge. Then, remembering her lofty position, you address the princess by her proper title and bow your head, though never taking your eyes off her.

Dressed in men's clothing, she stands transfixed, with both hands covering her mouth. She lowers her hands in an obvious attempt to appear less frightened, but somehow there's a falseness to the gesture. She looks more guilty than frightened. Sheathing *Kurodachi*, you step forward, wishing the circumstances of this meeting weren't so confusing and dangerous.

Flustered, or perhaps pretending to be flustered, Princess Midori whispers, "Kurasai! You startled me so!" The tremor in her voice is real. You are pleased that the princess remembers your name, but there is no time now to think of friendly conversation. With two armed *ronin* nearby, possibly more, your duty is clearly to get Midori to safety.

You speak hurriedly. "Forgive me for frightening you, Princess. Have you no escort?"



She shakes her head, whispering, "No, I left them behind. I—I wished to ride by myself."

Something in her eyes tells you she's not telling you the whole truth, but that, too, must wait. Emphasizing each word, you explain, "Two armed outlaws approach even as we speak. We must leave immediately! I will protect you."

Now completely composed, Midori responds calmly, "No, Kurasai, I will ride alone. If there are outlaws on my father's land, he should know who they are and what they are doing here. You stay behind to find out. I will ride alone. Trust me. I am a very good rider."

You start to object, but she stops you. "Kurasai, please do as I say." Her tone tells you it is an order, but she softens it with a smile.

Although you do not agree with Midori's plan, you answer, "As you wish, my princess." If you take time to object, you know the *ronin* will be upon you. Swiftly but gently, you lift her onto your horse and hand her the reins. Her waist is not soft, as you expected, but firm and muscular.

As she turns your horse and gallops away, you dash to the crest of the ridge, *Kurodachi* in hand.

Turn to 157.

64

You spin around as you hear the snap of a sling in the empty room to your left. With a loud cry, you swing the *bokken*, somehow sensing the projectile even before you see it. An instant later, it bursts through the thick paper wall, only to shatter against your heavy *bokken*, showering pieces around you.

Amazed that you were able to block the missile, you shout, "Good shot, Takeshi, you old goat, but not good enough!"

Your tall friend slides open the door and dashes out

into the hall. "You actually hit it?" he exclaims excitedly, shaking his head in amazement. "How did you do it? You couldn't have seen it until it came through the wall!"

You think a minute, uncertain even yourself just how you managed to block the well-placed shot. "I guess I must have heard it coming and struck at the sound." Looking down at the shattered pieces of the projectile on the floor, you ask, "What was that, anyway?"

Takeshi grins. "That, Kurasai, was a secret ninja weapon—a mango seed! I ate the fruit for breakfast, but I saved the seed for you."

You realize that if anyone else had shot at you, you'd probably be angry. Instead, you say, "Only you, Takeshi, would turn your breakfast into a weapon and blame it on the ninjas!"

Feigning seriousness, Takeshi explains, "Everyone knows that ninja are extremely resourceful. Anything and everything can become a weapon in their hands—even food!"

Hoisting his own armor and weapons, Takeshi opens the door leading outside for you.

You pause in the doorway. "That was a good shot, Takeshi, especially straight through a wall. Could you see me?"

"No," Takeshi says, grinning broadly. "I heard you and shot at the sound."

As you walk together toward the dueling ground, nagging thoughts bother you. *What if that had been an enemy? And what if it had been an arrow instead of merely a seed? My reactions were fast enough this time, but only because I was so cautious. This is an important lesson.* You resolve never to let your guard down.

Turn to 55.

Moving with surprising speed, Genzo brings up his *bokken* just in time to block your overhead chop. Lashing out, his foot catches you with a powerful blow to your chest, driving you back again, and you struggle to recover your breath. Deduct 5 hit points from your total.

Seeking to regain the initiative, Genzo charges, using his *bokken* more like a spear than a sword.

Turn to 150.

Watching Genzo carefully for an opening, you circle about the gravel square. You quickly see he is anticipating an attack and waits, ready to strike as soon as you move in. You decide to use Genzo's strategy against him. You dash in, triggering his counter-attack, then drop to the ground, slicing upward at his swinging arms.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 22 or more, turn to 74. If it is less than 22, turn to 56.

You know you can never hope to match Genzo blow for blow. With his tremendous strength, he's sure to outlast you. Consequently, you realize, you must make this and every other attack count. Breathing deeply, you gather strength with every breath, waiting for Genzo to feint again. When he does, a few seconds later, jabbing an arm out to mislead you, you attack.

With two strong, rapid steps, you launch yourself into a flying side kick.

Make a physical prowess check by rolling one die

and adding the result to your physical prowess score. If the total is 20 or more, turn to **80**. If it is 19 or less, turn to **94**. Remember, you may choose to use experience points to improve your chances on any die roll. Just be sure to decide how many points you will spend *before* the die roll and remember that, once spent, experience points are gone, no matter whether the die roll is successful or not.

68

The ninja lunges forward with incredible speed. Weary and dizzy, you can't react fast enough and feel the cold steel plunge into your left arm. You lose another 3 hit points.

With a chill, you realize you aren't going to survive this fight without a miracle of some kind. If you decide to stand and defend yourself, to the end, if necessary, turn to **48**. If you decide to find a way to take this ninja's life with you, even if it means certain death, turn to **13**.

69

Half an hour later, after finding nothing, Takeshi points at the *shuriken* on your pillow. "Unless that thing has feet and crawled in by itself, I have no idea how it got here."

Discouraged, you walk over and pick up the *shuriken*. "I wish I knew who was putting these here."

Takeshi shakes his head. "I wish I knew, too, Kura-sai. I wonder why only you got one this time."

The breakfast gong startles you both. "Is it that late?" you ask. You both hurry to change, vowing to find the answers to these mysteries soon. But for now, you don't want to miss breakfast—people tend to pass out in training if they don't eat or drink enough. Turn to **54**.

Facing the Master squarely, you pronounce, "We fight with *kenjutsu*, the warriors' art," implying that karate is not a warrior's art. With some difficulty, you resist the urge to turn to see Genzo's reaction.

Showing no reaction of his own, the Master nods, then announces, "Lord Tomotada, the ruler of our province, has asked to observe these trials. He arrives shortly with his daughter, Princess Midori. Return here in twenty minutes, in helmet and *yoroi*, armed and prepared to fight."

You and Genzo bow to the Master in unison, then turn and walk back to the bleachers. Under his breath, Genzo sneers, "You'll need more than a stick to defeat me, coward!"

Ignoring him, you make your way back to Takeshi's side.

"What did Genzo say?" your friend asks, hoisting your armor to his shoulder.

"He was just boasting, as usual," you answer. "I'm not afraid of his words—his size, perhaps, but not his words."

Takeshi laughs. "You said yourself that Genzo is too predictable, that you can often tell what he's going to do."

Only half-joking, you reply, "Yes, but will it help to know he's about to hammer-fist the top of my head if I can't get away?" Chuckling ruefully, you and Takeshi head back to lace you into your heavy black *yoroi*.

Turn to 81.

As you approach a busy wooden bridge, your horses fall into single file to cross. Just on the other side of the bridge, the road rounds a bend. A movement in

the forest beside the road behind you draws your attention as your comrades close ranks again. You notice that Yuzo also saw what was emerging from the woods.

You wink at him, then lean toward Genzo with a big grin. "This is your lucky day, Genzo!"

"Huh?" the big samurai asks, suspicious of your friendliness.

Pointing back down the road, you exclaim, "Didn't you see them?"

"See who?" he asks, perplexed.

"Those two beautiful girls who waved to you from the edge of the forest!"

Yuzo adds, "Yes, I saw them run out onto the road after you!"

Shouting, "Oho!" and pulling back hard on his reins, Genzo stops his horse and spins around, only to face two old goats trotting down the road in front of a gnarled farmer. You and Yuzo almost fall off your horses laughing.

Red-faced, Genzo whirls his horse around, slapping its neck to charge at you. Still laughing, you kick both heels back, and your horse leaps forward. The others quickly move their horses to the sides of the road, clearing a path for the two of you. A second later, Takeshi bellows, "I'll bet two silver coins that Kurasai is the first to reach the tavern!"

Genzo accepts the challenge. "You'll buy my breakfast, Takeshi!"

If you decide to race Genzo to the tavern, turn to **152**. If you decide not to race, turn to **95**.

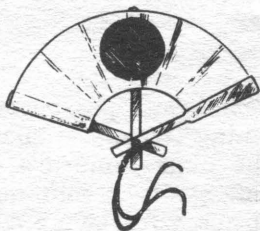
72

Slowly the men advance toward you, their weapons poised to strike. You back up carefully as you try to decide what to do. You see they will soon trap you

against the cliff wall unless you do something. Your first impulse is to charge them, but you realize the odds are against you, especially without armor. These men look like bandits, but their movements suggest skillful and dangerous fighters. For a second, you consider diving into the surf, but you know you would surely drown in the treacherous riptide.

You know you must act now if you are to have any chance of escaping. You feel certain you could hold them off from the ledge halfway up the cliff, if you can only get there. On the other hand, if you charge the two men closest to you, you may surprise them enough to get past and escape along the beach.

If you want to try to escape up the cliffside, turn to **12**. If you decide to try to and escape along the beach, turn to **59**.



73

You smile, feeling very tired. "We'd better get some sleep, Takeshi."

"Right," he agrees. "We have a full day of training tomorrow."

You close and lock the door after Takeshi leaves. Then you secure your room by jamming a stout *bokken* in the floor groove beside the door, so the door can't slide open even if it's unlocked somehow. Finally you pull the two wooden window shutters closed and tie them together with strong cord.

Exhausted, you fall into bed, but you soon find that you can't sleep, thinking about Midori and the traitors. Finally a drizzling rain lulls you to sleep. You regain 10 hit points from your rest. Remember, you can't recover more hit points than you started with.

You wake to the sound of a single bird chirping in the rain outside. Beside you on your pillow lies a gold *shuriken*.

Turn to 44.

74

Your maneuver catches Genzo completely by surprise. He cries out as your blade strikes both his forearms, but somehow he manages to hold on to his weapon and stumbles backward.

Knowing he's injured seriously, you scramble to your feet, ready to put an end to this fight.

Turn to 51.

75

The tip of your *bokken* sweeps a short arc through the air before catching Genzo's weapon at just the right angle. To the huge samurai's surprise, his *bokken* sails harmlessly over your head. Immediately you side-step for a full-swing counterattack, aiming your *bokken* at Genzo's left knee.

A split second later, you connect. Grunting in pain, Genzo stumbles back, warding you off with a powerful swing of his *bokken*. Confidently you raise your weapon once more.

Turn to 2.

76

You swing *Kurodachi* down hard, slamming Oga-wa's sword into the dirt at your feet, where it sticks in the forest floor. While he pulls frantically to free his

blade, you stab *Kurodachi* between the joint of two armor plates on his stomach. Howling like a crazed animal, Ogawa yanks his sword back. You expect him to fall over dead, but instead he swings again, this time aiming for your neck.

Amazed, you throw yourself to the ground, feeling his sword cut through your hair. Hearing the heavy blade starting to swoosh again, you roll away just in time. Hacking and lunging like a crazed animal, the traitor charges after you. Ducking and dodging, you scramble through the trees, somehow managing to avoid the blows while searching for an opening. Ogawa's vicious strokes cut into the brush all around you, sending leaves, moss, and branches into the air with each swing. Finally you get enough lead on him to spring to your feet and face him.

He grins at you wickedly. *I thought I had slain him, you think, but it looks like all I did was make him angry. Perhaps I should retreat. If I die, no one will ever know what I've learned.* But you are reluctant to admit defeat, and you know that if you retreat, the huge traitor will escape and warn the Mongols.

At least he hasn't hit me yet, and I know I'm faster than he is, you tell yourself. If I use the trees to shield myself, I can probably hit him again—if it does any good.

If you decide to attack Ogawa, turn to **97**. If you decide to retreat and try and escape, turn to **24**.

77

The opening graduation ceremonies pass quickly. Usually, you consider such occasions rather boring. However, today you find yourself caught up in the excitement and drama. Nervously you wait for *Sen-sei Haraku*, the head instructor, to announce the graduates, in order of rank.

You fully expect to hear the name of your rival, Genzo Taira, read first. The giant samurai puts winning and honor before all else, and he usually succeeds. More importantly, Genzo is a living example of the ideals of the samurai code. He is fearless and obedient, an accomplished fighter, and completely honor-bound.

You often disagree both with Genzo and with the code. You can't seem to help it. Some of the traditions seem stupid to you. Take Genzo, for example. He never shows fear or retreats from anything no matter what. As a child, Genzo was stepped on by a water buffalo because he refused to move out of its way. He still carries the scar.

Another example comes to mind. Traditionally, warriors are supposed to bow to each other before fighting. To your way of thinking, that's a good way to get your head cut off!

But you don't disagree with all parts of the code. You find strength and purpose in the code's principles of mental and physical discipline and self-control. You know of no better way to relax and clear your thoughts than to go through the ritual tea ceremony, *cha-no-yu*.

Suddenly your thoughts are interrupted by a voice barking, "Kurasai Hidenaga!"

Startled at the sound of your own name, you look up, realizing that *Sensei* Haraku just read your name first!

Turn to 208.

78

Your trick seems to work, making Genzo swing early. Even so, you spin around to face his favorite attack, a two-handed overhead chop. Grunting with the effort, he brings his weapon down with all his

strength. You realize your block isn't perfect, but you don't have time to adjust it, only to tighten your muscles against the impact. Throwing your *bokken* aside with a loud crack, Genzo's chop smashes against your helmet, dropping you to the ground. Deduct 6 hit points from your total.

Dazed and unable to react, you watch Genzo raise his *bokken* once more. Overconfident of his victory, he takes too long, giving you the extra second you need. You lash out with a side thrust kick. To both your surprise and Genzo's, you hit him squarely in the belly, driving him back several steps, doubled over.

You scramble to your feet, your head and neck pounding. Quickly you examine your *bokken*, expecting the worst. With a sigh of relief, you find it undamaged.

If you choose to go on the offensive and attack Genzo, turn to 104. If you decide to wait to see what he does next, turn to 84.

79

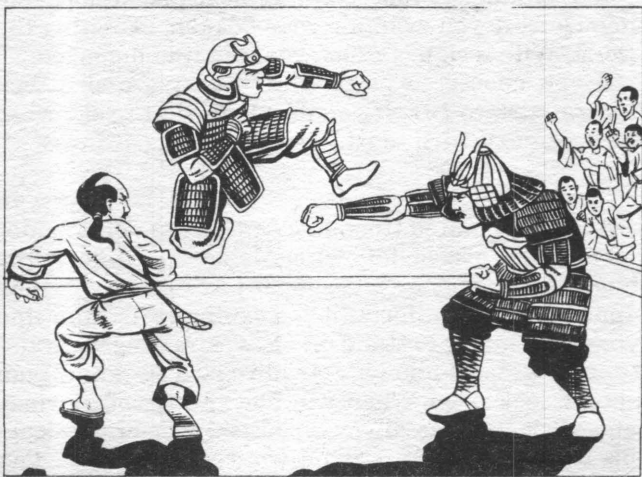
At the appointed time, five *sensei*, the *dojo*'s senior instructors, arrive, following Master Yoshimura, the head of the *dojo*, by a respectful few paces. As they approach the platform, it is customary for you and your classmates to stand and bow, awaiting the order to sit again. Following tradition, you know you should look down when you bow, a sign of courtesy and trust. But, as always, you feel vulnerable looking down and curious about what you can't see. *Perhaps I have too little trust, you muse, and too much curiosity.*

If you decide to bow as you are supposed to, averting your eyes, turn to 89. If you elect to sneak a look as you bow and risk a reprimand for being disrespectful, turn to 118.

80

You hurtle through the air, extending your left leg and arm while keeping your right leg and arm pulled back. Moving with surprising speed, Genzo brings his guard up and crouches to spring away, but he's not fast enough. Your left boot slams into his chest, spinning him to the ground, yowling in pain.

You land cleanly and twist around, intending to bring the fight to a speedy finish, but your confidence quickly fades. Showing no ill effects from your devastating kick, the huge samurai scrambles to his feet. Amazed, you wonder, *Doesn't he ever feel any pain? I'd do more damage hitting boulders!* Turn to 129.



81

Exactly twenty minutes later, you return to the dueling ground. You step onto the gravel square and notice that you are alone. Genzo hasn't returned yet.

Flanked by burly guards, Lord Tomotada now sits

in the center of the platform. Beside him sits Princess Midori, wearing a long kimono of gold and red, the Tomotada clan colors.

You bow, first to Lord Tomotada, then to the Master, and finally to Midori. You sense her eyes following you as you turn back to face the center of the dueling ground. Following the *kenjutsu* practice, you lower your left knee to the ground first, keeping your weapon clear to draw. To prepare yourself, you concentrate on *kokyū*, your body's rhythm of breathing, but your mind wanders, wondering why Midori is here.

You have met Princess Midori only a few times, and then only at official ceremonies, but something about her intrigues you. She always acts pleasant, but you sense that she hides some great secret, though you can't imagine what. She is very clever, but she keeps quiet, observing everything around her with great interest. You hope to impress her today, and sometime to learn more about this mysterious princess.

A moment later, Genzo arrives, dressed in his brilliant scarlet armor. Raising your right knee first, you stand to face him. Turn to 25.

82

You join the younger students as they file into the front courtyard and gather around *Sensei* Haraku. As he congratulates them on their victory, you and Takeshi work your way through the crowd toward Haraku. With every step, you expect to hear warning cries from the classroom courtyard behind, but none come. Soon you stand directly before Haraku, with Takeshi behind him.

A sudden look of disbelief appears on Haraku's face as he recognizes you. You respond with the fastest thrust you can make.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and add-

ing the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 24 or more, turn to **156**. If it is less, turn to **93**.

83

You return in the early evening after making your way through a small wood and across several miles of seemingly endless rice paddies. Genzo greets you at the gates to the *dojo*. It seems that he was first to return. You learn later that he stole a horse from a peasant and rode back. With glee, you discover that Takeshi hasn't returned yet.

One by one, all through the evening, the rest of the samurai straggle in, tired and hungry, except for Yuzo and Takeshi. Even though you have great confidence in your friend, you begin to worry about him. You sleep restlessly all night, waiting for Takeshi, but he doesn't return.

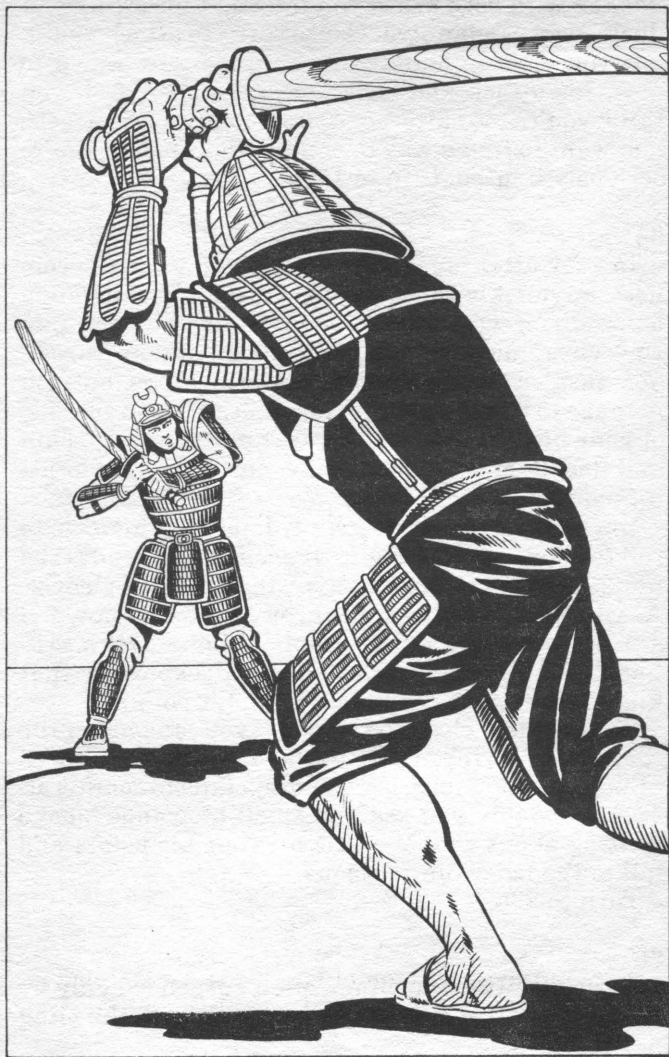
Early the next morning, Yuzo arrives, explaining that he spent the night in a cavern, seeing no reason to travel in the dark. You attend class with the others, but your thoughts are on Takeshi. Finally, at noon, you go to see the Master, and ask permission to search for Takeshi.

The Master frowns when he hears your request. "You must have more faith in your friend, Kurasai." Then he smiles. "But I understand your concern. Take one of the horses and ride along the cliffs on the coast north of here. Takeshi was dropped off just out of sight of the Kagatora Shrine."

You nod, remembering the place. "Thank you, Master." You bow low and back out of his quarters, then turn and hurry to get a horse. Turn to **192**.

84

Screaming at the top of his lungs, Genzo charges once more, his weapon raised high. Bracing your own



bokken with both arms, you intercept his swing and duck away. Undaunted, Genzo turns to attack again.

If you elect to stand your ground, determined to meet his attack and strike back, turn to **96**. If you think you're too battered to stand many more attacks and want to find a way to end the fight before you're seriously injured, turn to **110**.

85

To your utter amazement, your swing fails to connect. So quickly that all you see is a blur, the ninja leaps under your blade, driving his shoulder into your chest and aiming a palm strike at your throat. You gasp as the air bursts from your lungs, but you manage to twist, catching the palm strike on the side of your head rather than your throat. Even so, pain and flashes of light explode in your skull. You lose 3 hit points.

You stagger and fall backward, but you manage to roll to your feet, holding *Kurodachi* at the ready. The ninja leaps back, digging his hands into his sleeves. As you spring to attack, he throws his hands out, and a short crackling sound erupts, followed by a brilliant, blinding flash, then a small explosion that knocks you down. You lose 3 more hit points.

Dangerously close to the edge, you stagger to the rock wall swinging *Kurodachi* back and forth blindly. To your surprise, the ninja fails to counterattack. Suddenly you see and smell a strange smoke drifting about you. You lose all your hit points and fall to the ledge, unconscious.

Turn to **226**.

86

As you continue to climb, often suspended only by the fingertips of one hand, the rocks from the sling

land around you with uncanny accuracy. Each time you hear the whirring sound, you cling to the rock, bracing yourself as best you can until the rock smashes into the cliff, sending rock fragments flying. The fragments soon leave you bleeding from many small cuts. You lose 3 hit points.

Anger builds in you as you sense that the slinger should have hit you by now, if he wanted to. *He seems to be just playing with me*, you think, puzzled.

Finally the ledge is within reach. Using both hands and all your strength, you pull your head and shoulders over the edge.

You hear something land on the ledge as a long, writhing object falls from above. Shocked, you recognize it as a poisonous snake. Immediately it coils, hissing, preparing to strike!

If you try to duck down below the ledge, even though you risk falling, turn to **189**. If you try to grab the snake behind the head to hurl it away from you, even though you might be bitten in the process, turn to **167**.



87

Frustrated by your tactics, Genzo strides forward purposefully, holding his *bokken* like an ax over his right shoulder. Recognizing the potential danger of this attack, you don't dare try to dodge and break away. You know if he hits you this time, you might

not be able to get up again. Hoping to trick Genzo into swinging too soon, you pretend to break away, then turn back, swinging your own *bokken* to block his attack.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 23 or more, turn to 111. If it is less, turn to 78.



88

When you reach the spot below the ledge you found earlier, you slow to a walk, breathing a little easier. Not far ahead, you see two shadows pull away from the cliffside, blocking your path. One holds a *katana*, the other a spear. In the silvery moonlight, you see they wear mismatched armor and torn robes. Like you, they are helmetless, but their heads are wrapped in dark cloth so only their eyes show.

You realize this ambush must be related to the darts shot at you earlier. You promise yourself that if you live through this, you'll never leave the *dojo* without wearing armor again.

In a single fluid movement, you draw *Kurodachi* and crouch in your combat stance. "What do you want of me?" you demand in a loud voice, expecting no answer. The men do not move.

You have confidence in yourself and your blade, but you recognize the risk of any battle in which you're outnumbered two to one. Suddenly you hear footsteps from behind you, and your heart quickens. A glance over your shoulder reveals a third figure, wielding a wicked-looking *no-dachi*. Turn to 72.

89

You bend low at the waist, keeping your arms at your side. Listening carefully as you stare down, you hear the *sensei*, your instructors, climb the steps to the platform and take their places. A moment later, *Sensei Haraku*, the chief instructor, barks the command: "Up!"

You straighten again, then sit quietly. Master Yoshimura, the head of the school, stands at the front of the platform, his arms crossed over his chest. The five *sensei* sit on low benches behind him. All are wearing long, colorful robes, gathered at the waist with sashes. Stuck through the sashes are their *daisho*, the pair of swords worn by all samurai.

Turn to 41.

90

Raising your *bokken* high overhead, you charge toward the crowd, howling a fierce battle cry. At least a dozen bamboo poles are thrust out to meet your charge. A single slash of your *bokken* shatters three of them, creating a hole. You crash through it into the crowd, knocking several samurai off their feet. The throng quickly closes in on you until you can no longer wield your *bokken*. Then you curl up into a protective ball as *bokken* and gauntlet blows strike your armor from all directions. You quickly lose all your hit points. With a final defiant scream, you slump to the ground, unconscious.

If the *shuriken* you found on your pillow was gold-colored, turn to 127. If it was silver, turn to 15.

91

Flushed with your hard-won victory, you bow to each judge, then to the spectators on the platform. Both the Master and Lord Tomotada are leaning forward slightly, watching you carefully. You glance up at Midori as you bow, pleased that she witnessed your victory. As you do, she nods her head and smiles briefly, but her actions are so quick and subtle that you aren't even sure they occurred before she glances downward shyly. Curious, you wonder what she's thinking.

Holding your head high, you walk back to the bleachers, where you see Genzo, supported by two other students. He looks up at you, glowering. He seems about to say something, but apparently he changes his mind and merely nods in grudging approval. You feel like leaping into the air in exultation, but you stifle your elation. Pleased with yourself, you realize that you've gained something you've never seen Genzo show before—a measure of respect.

Takeshi is all smiles as you approach him. Obviously he's as pleased as you are with the fight's outcome.

As you sit slowly beside your friend, you say quietly, "Perhaps now we'll hear less of Genzo's boasting."

Seeing you grimace from your aches and bruises, Takeshi chides, "Genzo may stay silent for a while, Kurasai, but I don't expect you to remain quiet about your injuries for long."

"Say what you will now, Takeshi," you answer. "Your turn is coming soon."

Just then the Master solemnly announces the next

fighter: "Takeshi Ikoma, choose your opponent!"

Startled, Takeshi rises to his feet, muttering in a low voice, "Have you become a mind-reader now?"

You hold back a chuckle, remembering that this is a serious occasion. Besides, it hurts to laugh.

Turn to 113.



92

You take a quick trip to the bathhouse and change into fresh robes before you return to Takeshi's door. Then, together, you head toward the *dojo's* temple, where you're supposed to meet with the Master. You walk silently through the *dojo's* vast gardens, finally pausing on an earth-covered bridge to survey the temple's graceful lines.

White paper lanterns inscribed with black-lettered prayers hang from a wide porch surrounding the temple. Straight, wide timbers, etched by decades of harsh weather, support the porch roof. Three separate stories, each smaller than the one below, rise above the porch. Rolled clay tiles seem about to cascade down the many sloping roofs.

Takeshi speaks first, breaking the silence. "Do you think you'll still graduate, Kurasai?"

"I—I really don't know, Takeshi," you answer

truthfully, knowing your friend's concern. "Until yesterday, I always fought well, and, of course, I've completed all my lessons. Yet it's no secret that I disagree with many of the traditions taught here."

Takeshi nods. "We are alike in that way, and different from everyone else, but I'm not as outspoken as you are about it."

"I can't help it, Takeshi," you say. "Some traditions just seem so stupid! Take bowing, for instance. Traditionally warriors are supposed to bow before fighting. Well, if you ask me, that's a good way to get your head cut off!"

Takeshi laughs. "Try telling that to the Master!"

You laugh, too. "I'm not *that* outspoken." Then, growing serious, you take a deep breath, knowing you must go into the temple alone.

Takeshi understands and steps back silently.

Turn to 141.

93

In a blur of motion, Haraku easily stops your *bokken* with one hand. At the same time, Takeshi gently presses the tip of his *bokken* under *Sensei* Haraku's neck plate, growling, "Yield or die!"

For a brief, frightening moment, you fear for Takeshi's life, as you sense a wave of power about to explode from your head instructor. Then the feeling passes, leaving you and Takeshi shaking. Haraku smiles, showing that he understands your ploy.

A confused silence hangs in the courtyard. You repeat Takeshi's demand loudly, so everyone can hear. "Yield, Gold General, or die!"

Quietly, so only you and Takeshi hear, Haraku says slowly, "You show great ingenuity." Then he loudly addresses the samurai in the courtyard. "Students! Even as we celebrate our victory we are defeated—by

our own carelessness, as well as by Kurasai and Takeshi's deception. Remember this lesson well!"

Turn to 114.

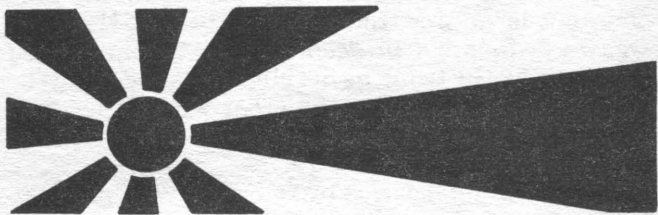
94

You hurtle through the air, extending your left leg and arm while keeping your right leg and arm pulled back. Moving with surprising speed, Genzo brings his guard up and crouches to spring away, but he's not fast enough to avoid the blow completely. Your left boot slams into his left shoulder, spinning him around, yowling in rage.

However, any encouragement you might feel quickly fades as Genzo lashes out with his fist, striking you squarely in the stomach. You lose 4 hit points.

Distracted by the sharp pain in your belly, you land clumsily, twisting around to face Genzo. The big samurai shows no ill effects from your devastating kick. Amazed, you wonder, *Doesn't he ever feel any pain? I'd do more damage hitting boulders!*

Turn to 129.



95

You rein in your horse, shouting, "Whoa!" and wheel around to rejoin your friends, who hiss and boo good-naturedly.

Takeshi says, "Now I owe Genzo his supper!"

"No," you laugh. "You owe Genzo two silver coins, and we all know he can't fill up on less than five!" Your friends burst out laughing as you continue on to the tavern at a leisurely pace.

Turn to 148.

96

You spin to counter Genzo's furious attack, but your right arm gives way under the power of his blow. His blade strikes you in your right shoulder, numbing your whole arm.

Deduct 6 hit points of damage. Without armor, you're sure your shoulder would have been dislocated, possibly even broken, from such a powerful blow.

Despite your injury, you deliver a vicious left-hand chop to Genzo's chin that snaps his head back. You both stumble apart. Then, holding his head with his left hand, Genzo raises his weapon to advance.

Turn to 218.

97

You duck behind saplings and brush, making your way to a large tree, then pretend to slip. Howling, Ogawa swings his *no-dachi* with both hands. You duck behind the trunk as his blade cuts deep into the wood. You reappear on the other side of the tree, swinging *Kurodachi* at Ogawa's side armor fastenings as he pulls his sword free.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 22 or more, turn to 134. If it is 21 or less, turn to 58.

98

Side-stepping to make room for your blow, you launch a low roundhouse kick at Genzo's left knee. In

a blur, you see him swinging his fist at the same time. Trying to shield your body with your arms, you concentrate on your kick, hoping to connect first.

Just as your boot strikes his *yoroi* at the knee joint, his fist lands on your ribs. Genzo topples over, his left leg buckling under him. However, you also fall to the gravel, stunned by the power of his blow. You lose 4 hit points of damage.

Immediately you both scramble to your feet. Turn to 212.

99

To your utter amazement, your swing fails to connect. So quickly that all you see is a blur, the ninja leaps under your blade, driving his shoulder into your chest. You gasp as the air bursts from your lungs, then pain and flashes of light explode inside your skull as the ninja palm-strikes your throat. You lose 3 hit points.

You stagger and fall backward, but you manage to roll to your feet, still holding *Kurodachi*. Then your heart sinks as the ninja draws another, shorter *katana* from under the folds of black cloth on his back.

Turn to 68.

100

You launch a cross strike, surprising your assailants with your speed. During the second they hesitate, you strike again, dispatching one of them with a blow to his helmet. The other three strike back at the same time and you can only block one of the blows. You stagger from the force of hits to your left shoulder and ribs, losing 8 hit points.

Rushing to your rescue, Takeshi knocks one of your attackers off his feet with a well-aimed swing of his bamboo pole. You back away from the other two,

maneuvering for a better position.

Then, with Takeshi at your side, you charge forward, swinging your *bokken*. Your target raises his *bokken* to block your blow just as you reverse the direction of your swing and knock his weapon flying. Then you follow with a strike to the top of his helmet. Both he and Takeshi's foe join their comrades on the courtyard dust.

Turn to 207.

101

As you plummet through the night air, the free end of the rope shoots up toward the tree. As it zips around the tree trunk, the rope slows your fall some, but you still land painfully hard in the sand, losing 5 hit points.

Leaving the now frayed rope behind, you start off at a run down the beach. *If I keep close to the cliff wall, it will be almost impossible for someone above to see me*, you think.

Still on the lookout for any sign of your hidden assailant, you jog in the direction of the *dojo*, wondering if Takeshi, too, was ambushed out here.

Turn to 88.



102

Your foot smashes into the ninja's knee as he twists away from your kick. You start to launch another kick, but another wave of dizziness grips you. You fall back, taking a deep breath to clear your head. You can't tell how much your kick hurt the ninja, if at all.

Turn to **135**.

103

Under cover of the volley of bamboo poles, four attackers reach the roof and rush Takeshi, knocking him down under a flurry of blows from their *bokken*. You leap over your helpless friend and drop one of his attackers with a single stroke, but the others attack you in a group.

You avoid a savage blow from one attacker, but the others attack from behind your back. If they had been using *katana*, the blows would have killed you. As it is, you stagger back from the pain, losing 8 hit points. With great difficulty, you try to maneuver for a better position.

Fortunately Takeshi has had time to recover. A well-aimed swing of his long bamboo pole sweeps one of your assailants to the courtyard below. The other two follow him moments later.

Turn to **168**.

104

Watching Genzo intently for an opening, you circle about the gravel square. You quickly realize that he anticipates an attack and is waiting for you, ready to strike as soon as you move in. Pleased, you decide to use Genzo's eagerness against him. You dash in, triggering his attack, then drop to the ground, slicing upward to catch his swinging arms.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and add-

ing the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 22 or more, turn to 158. If it is 21 or less, turn to 200.

105

You and Takeshi walk together, following a familiar stone path through the *dojo*'s vast gardens. "Was your room locked?" you ask suddenly.

"Yes," Takeshi answers, "from the inside."

"Mine, too," you say.

"Do you think someone is playing a joke on us?" Takeshi asks, sounding hopeful.

"I don't think so," you reply. "We're both light sleepers, and I don't know anyone who can sneak through a locked door." You shake your head, feeling uneasy. "Takeshi, I have a bad feeling about this."

"Me, too," Takeshi says gravely.

You walk a few more steps, then ask, "You know that *shurikens* are ninja weapons, don't you?"

Takeshi nods. "Uh-huh," he says weakly.

"Do you know anybody personally who uses a *shuriken*?" you ask.

"No," Takeshi answers, "but that doesn't mean it had to be a ninja that left them."

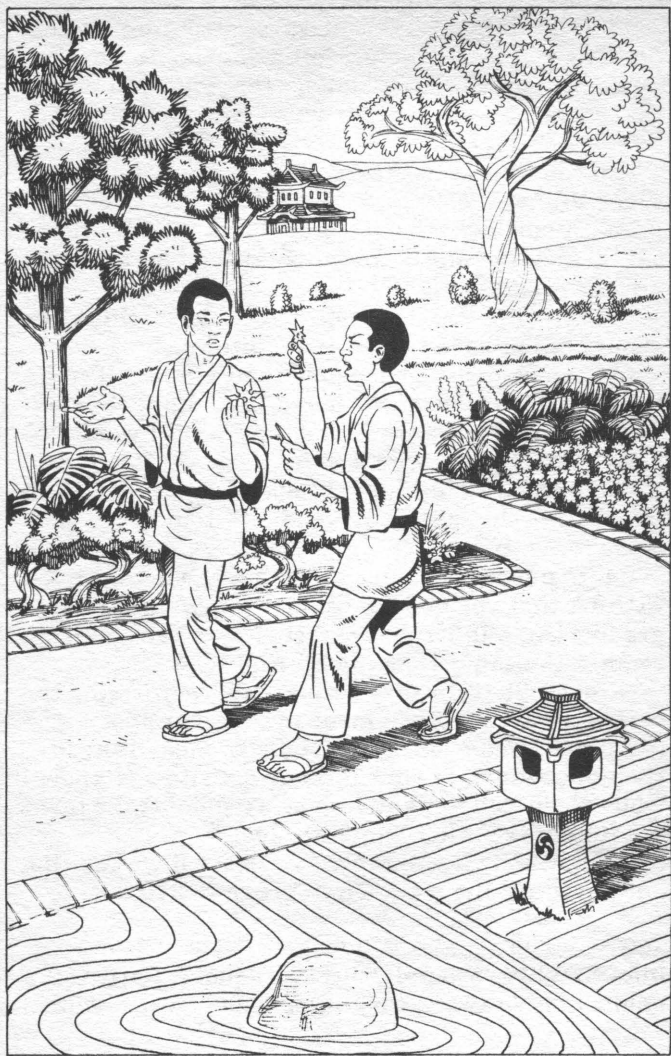
You remain unconvinced. "Who else could have gotten into our rooms without waking us?"

Takeshi stops walking. "What exactly are you saying, Kurasai?"

"I don't like to think it, but unless you have a better explanation, I'd say we were both visited by a ninja last night!"

"But—but why us, Kurasai?" Takeshi demands. "It simply doesn't make any sense."

You shudder as you think of someone, perhaps a ninja, standing over you while you slept. "Well, whoever it was had us at his mercy while we slept. He



could have even killed us!”

“But he didn’t,” Takeshi says, sounding as confused as you feel. “He just left a *shuriken*. Why?”

“Well,” you think out loud, “the *shuriken* proves that someone was there, so whoever it was wanted us to know he was there!”

“Do you think the *shurikens* are some kind of message?” Takeshi asks.

“With our luck, they’re probably a warning,” you say. “Let’s find out if anything strange happened to anyone else last night.”

“Okay,” Takeshi agrees, “but I don’t think we should tell anybody about this quite yet.”

You consider for a moment, then agree. “If we’re the only ones who were visited last night, then our visitor probably wants it that way—and I won’t disagree until I know who it is.”

“At least we only have to spend one more night here,” Takeshi says. “We graduate tomorrow, then leave for active duty.”

You’re happy to change the subject, but you’re sad to think that you and Takeshi may have to part after graduation. “If we have a choice, we’re going to request the same assignment. Right?”

“Right!” Takeshi says with a grin, reaffirming the decision the two of you made over a year ago.

As you head back to your rooms, Takeshi’s thoughts return to your unknown visitor. “I know I won’t sleep well tonight. Maybe we should take turns guarding each other while we sleep.”

“I don’t know,” you reply. “Let’s see if we can find out anything about this first.” Turn to 210.

106

As you circle around the gravel square, you detect a slight limp in Genzo’s right leg as he moves. Watch-

ing carefully, you feint with your arms, making him move again. He keeps his right leg back, as though protecting it, and you suspect he has shifted most of his weight to his front leg. *He seems to be off balance, you calculate. If I can just knock him down, I can win this fight!*

Quickly you consider your options. Your sweep kick is very fast and almost certain to hit Genzo's front leg, but it might not be powerful enough to knock him down. Your body slam would be sure to knock Genzo down if it hits him, but he's more likely to avoid it than the kick. You realize that it's also possible that Genzo is merely pretending to limp to draw you into a trap.

If you suspect a trap and decide to observe Genzo a little longer, turn to **112**. If you decide to try to knock Genzo down in hope of bringing the fight to a speedy conclusion, you must choose how to attack. If you elect to try the sweep kick, turn to **146**. If you want to try a body slam, turn to **161**.

107

Facing the Master squarely, you say, "I accept Genzo's challenge—we will fight with karate." You resist the urge to turn to see Genzo's reaction, certain that he looks smug and confident.

Showing no emotion, the Master nods, then announces, "Lord Tomotada, ruler of our province, has asked to observe these trials. He arrives shortly with his daughter, Princess Midori. Return here in twenty minutes in helmet and *yoroi*, prepared to fight."

You and Genzo bow to the Master in unison, then turn and walk back to the bleachers. Under his breath, Genzo gloats, "Don't worry, Kurasai—I will be quick, but I'm afraid it will be painful for you."

Ignoring his words, you make your way back to Takeshi's side.

"What did he say to you?" your friend asks, hoisting your armor to his shoulder.

"He was just boasting, as usual," you reply. "I'm not afraid of his words—his size, perhaps, but not his words."

Takeshi laughs. "You said yourself that Genzo is too predictable and you can often tell what he's going to do next."

Only half-joking, you reply, "Yes, but will it help to know he's about to hammer-fist the top of my head when I can't get away?"

Chuckling ruefully, you and Takeshi head back to lace you into your heavy black *yoroi*.

Turn to 119.

108

You decide to explore the woods a bit. Carefully you pick your way along the ridge tops, less than a mile from the sea. Occasionally you catch the salty smell of the ocean in the breeze. As you ride, you study the shadowy forest, searching out the hidden forest creatures with your eyes. You admire the natural ability of animals to hide and move unnoticed. *If only they could speak to teach me!* you think.

Nearing the crest of a ridge, the way becomes steadily more rocky. Releasing the reins, you let your horse choose its way, somehow finding firm footing and avoiding loose stones. Eventually, after a few stones shift beneath its hooves, it stops and twists its neck around to look at you. You could urge it forward, but instead you decide to climb to the crest on foot and have a look around. You tie the reins to a small sapling, selecting a branch the horse can pull and break free if it needs to.

From behind shrubs at the crest, you scan the woods in the shallow ravine below, wondering whether or not to hunt if you should spot a boar, but you see nothing. Then, as you are about to turn back, something catches your attention in a part of the ravine you didn't see before.

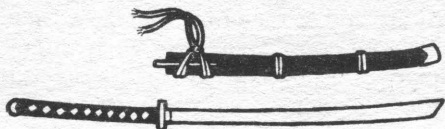
Your head jerks back in surprise. About thirty yards away, halfway down the slope to the ravine, stands a horse, calmly nibbling weeds. *Why didn't I see that horse a moment ago?* you wonder, suddenly uneasy. The horse's saddle bears the crest of members of Lord Tomotada's family and court. While you know this land belongs to Lord Tomotada, you wonder why the horse is alone. *No one of that rank travels without guards*, you think. An obvious explanation is that the horse is stolen—a serious crime in your land, punishable by death—but where is the thief?

Turn to **123**.

109

You flick *Kurodachi* out to distract the ninja, who leans back, out of range. Immediately you lunge forward, throwing a snapping side kick at his nearest knee.

Make a physical prowess check by rolling one die and adding the result to your physical prowess skill score. If the total is 19 or more, turn to **102**. If it is 18 or less, turn to **128**.



110

Yet again Genzo attacks with a flurry of *bokken* strikes, kicks, and punches. Doing your best to defend yourself, you give ground by side-stepping rapidly, preventing him from charging forward. *I must keep circling, you keep reminding yourself. If I back up, he'll overtake me.*

Your timing and strength are nearly gone, however, and you need all your skill and energy just to avoid Genzo's hammering blows. Finally you dive to the ground, barely avoiding a powerful swing, your common sense screaming, *Get out of this fight!* You're growing weaker by the second as you scramble to your feet and continue to dodge, but you refuse to give Genzo the satisfaction of pounding you into the gravel.

Suddenly a bizarre idea springs into your mind, a way to end the fight. You know the judges will rule Genzo the victor and may reprimand you, but that seems far preferable to being knocked senseless.

Shouting loudly, you leap forward, swinging your *bokken* in a wide arc. Genzo steps back, easily avoiding your charge, then springs to finish you off.

But you are no longer there. After two steps to gain speed, you leap into the air, sailing over one of the startled judges. You land clumsily in front of the onlookers' platform, then quickly raise your *bokken* in a defensive stance facing the dueling ground.

Turn to 147.

111

Your trick works, making Genzo swing early. Even so, you spin around to face his favorite attack, a two-handed overhead chop. Grunting with the effort, he brings his weapon down with all his strength. You have no time to check your aim, only to tighten your

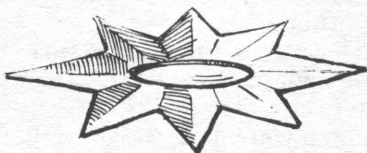
muscles against the impact. In an instant, the two weapons collide with such force that you half expect your *bokken* to break, but it holds, blocking Genzo's chop, and you leap away.

If you think now is the time to attack, turn to **104**. If you decide to wait to see what Genzo does next, turn to **84**.

112

With a fierce scream, Genzo attacks, kicking and punching. Reacting quickly, you block his kick and duck away from the punch.

Undaunted, Genzo turns to attack again. If you elect to stand your ground, determined to meet his attack with a counterattack of your own, turn to **140**. If you think you're too weakened to stand much more damage and want to find a way to end the fight before you're even more seriously injured, turn to **5**.



113

Early the next morning, you awaken in your room, feeling the chilly dawn air on your face. Your stiff muscles remind you that the battle with Genzo was not a dream. Even so, you feel better than you did yesterday, and you regain all your hit points from your full night's sleep.

Still amazed, you recall Takeshi's fight with a chuckle. *He beat Yozo even though most of his armor fell off! I've been telling him for weeks to get it*

repaired. You turn to look at your own *yoroi*, now scratched and battered. As you turn your head, you gasp in surprise when your cheek touches cold metal.

Turn to **220**.

114

In the general confusion that follows, most of the younger students and many of your classmates claim your plan was unfair and violated the rules of the exercise. In spite of their protests, you feel quite pleased with yourself.

When Genzo comes to, he, too, confronts you, complaining that your actions were unfair. But you realize that behind his stern words he grudgingly admires your accomplishment. On your part, you must admit you've never seen a stronger or more fearless warrior than Genzo. The grizzled samurai nods, then stares at you silently. You stare back, knowing that you and Genzo will never understand or agree with each other, but you can accept and respect each other.

Slowly you both grin, then Genzo turns and stomps off, vowing revenge on those who wielded the log that battered him from the archway.

If the *shuriken* you found on your pillow was gold-colored, turn to **19**. Otherwise, turn to **61**.

115

It's dark and late when you return to the *dojo*, where you ride directly to the Master's quarters. He listens to your story without comment as he sips his tea. When you finally finish, he remains silent awhile longer, then says, "You have done well, Kura-sai." Then he asks, "What do you think these traitors helped the Mongol accomplish, riding up and down the coast for two days?"

"The Mongol may be a smuggler searching for a place to land or to hide his boat," you suggest. There is a chance this is true, but you suspect something else.

The Master senses your doubt. "What else, Kurasai?"

"Perhaps the Mongol was checking the coastal defenses around Hakata harbor."

"Yes, but why?" the Master asks.

You hesitate before speaking, aware of the implications of your answer. "The Mongols may be planing to invade us!"

"Invasion . . ." the Master says the word slowly. "That is entirely possible, Kurasai, but let us hope it's only smugglers behind this. Perhaps if you had followed the traitors, we would know more, but that is behind us. Wait here while I pass this important information on to Lord Tomotada."

Leaning on a cane, the Master hobbles quickly out to compose his message. As he does, you notice that he really puts very little weight on the cane. *That's odd, you think. I'll have to remember that.*

Turn to 182.

116

Dropping to your knees, you place your *bokken* on the dirt in front of you. The looks of confusion on the faces of the small cluster of samurai before you change to murmurs of approval as you solemnly grasp the hilt of your wooden sword, pointing the blade at your belly. You pull your hands back sharply, driving the blade against your armor. Then, pretending to die, you topple over silently, remembering that samurai should not cry out from pain.

Overwhelmed by your demonstration of character and adherence to the samurai code, everyone in the

courtyard bursts into cheers. As you stand and brush the dust from your armor, many bow deeply, showing their approval for your symbolic act. To yourself, you think, *In a real battle, I would have climbed the wall and escaped.* Turn to 139.

117

Helped by two *sensei*, you regain consciousness a few minutes later. In the process, you recover 2 hit points.

Both your head and your pride are hurt. You find yourself wishing the *sensei* had left you lying there, unconscious. As they hoist you to your feet, you say tersely, "I can stand by myself," even though you aren't at all sure you can. Tightening your back muscles for control, you bow painfully, first to Haraku and the judges, then to the spectators on the platform. Rising from your bow to the platform, you see the Master and Lord Tomotada conferring, apparently paying no attention to you. Greatly embarrassed, you don't dare to risk a look at Midori.

You walk slowly back to the bleachers, where Takeshi offers his arm to steady you. Annoyed that you appear to need help, you refuse his aid and practically fall into place on the bleachers.

Turn to 43.

118

Keeping your arms pressed to your side, you bend low at the waist, bowing your head slightly while you glance about. Your vantage point on the low hillside gives you a clear view of the platform and dueling ground below. All the *sensei*, your instructors, wear long, colorful robes, gathered at the waist by sashes that hold their *daisho*, the pair of swords worn by all samurai.

You notice *Sensei Haraku*, the head instructor, subtly assist Master Yoshimura as he climbs to the platform. You weren't aware that he needed any help, and you notice that the Master doesn't call attention to it by thanking *Sensei Haraku*. You are saddened to see that the Master, now an old man, needs help even to climb the low steps. At the same time, your respect for *Sensei Haraku* grows. He was alert enough to sense the Master's need, and his quiet assistance helped preserve the Master's dignity. Perhaps you have discovered a special relationship between *Sensei Haraku* and the Master.

Standing at the front of the platform, the Master waits until the *sensei* are seated on low benches behind him. Then they all nod, returning your bows. On a signal from the Master, *Sensei Haraku* barks the command: "Up!"

You straighten up once more, then sit quietly, waiting for the Master to begin.

Turn to 41.



119

Exactly twenty minutes later, you return to the dueling ground wearing your helmet and gleaming black *yoroi*. Beneath the armor, only your face is

exposed. Even your hands are protected by armored gauntlets, layered for flexibility. Beneath the gauntlets, all your fingers, with the exception of your thumbs, are wrapped together with cloth to keep them from separating and breaking. The heavy gauntlets also serve as weapons, changing your hands—and Genzo's—into steel fists.

As you step onto the gravel square, you notice that Genzo has not returned yet. Flanked by burly guards, Lord Tomotada now sits in the center of the platform. Beside him sits Princess Midori, wearing a long kimono of gold and red, the Tomotada clan colors.

You bow first to Lord Tomotada, then to the Master, and finally to Midori. You sense her eyes following you as you turn back to face the center of the dueling ground. Out of habit, you lower your left knee to the ground first, the *kenjutsu* practice of keeping your weapon clear to draw it if necessary. Then you sit back on your legs, placing your hands on your knees. To prepare yourself, you concentrate on *kokyū*, your body's rhythm of breathing, but your mind wanders as you wonder why Midori is here.

You have only met Midori a few times, and then only at official ceremonies and gatherings, but something about her intrigues you. She always acts polite and pleasant, but you sense that she hides some great secret, though you can't imagine what. You know she is very clever, but she keeps quiet, observing everything around her with great interest. You hope to impress her today, and you hope sometime in the future to learn more about this mysterious princess.

A moment later, Genzo arrives, dressed in his brilliant scarlet armor. Raising your right knee first, you stand to face him. Turn to 132.



120

Moving with surprising speed, Genzo brings up his *bokken*, but not in time to block your overhead chop. Your blade smashes into the armor skirt around his neck, sending one of the small plates spinning into the gravel. Howling in rage, Genzo lashes out with his foot. You barely succeed in jumping out of the way, giving him time to leap to his feet. Amazed, you wonder, *Doesn't he ever feel any pain? I'd do more damage hitting boulders!*

Seeking to regain the initiative, Genzo charges, using his *bokken* more like a spear than a sword. Turn to 150.

121

The heavy pole slams into the invading students, knocking them over backward. Three of them tumble down the roof and over the edge, only to be met by loud cries of anguish from below. The other two crash through the tiles and rafters to the classroom floor beneath them, leaving a gaping hole in the roof.

"How are you at repairing roofs, Takeshi?" you shout as you draw your *bokken* to meet the next wave

of attackers.

Chuckling, he replies, "We shall learn tomorrow!"

Make a perception check by rolling one die and adding the result to your perception skill score. If the total is 20 or more, turn to **153**. If it is less, turn to **137**.

122

You and Takeshi expect many of the attackers to climb over the gray stone wall before you. Instead, the first four armored samurai vault over the wall, tossed up by the others. Screaming a deafening battle cry, you jab the closest one in midair with your bamboo pole. The impact sends the hapless man back over the wall, greeted by loud cries from the other side. Takeshi, too, intercepts a second invader with his pole.

The others land safely in the courtyard. Foolishly they ignore you and Takeshi and instead charge Genzo from behind. They fall to blows from your poles before taking two steps.

Turn to **149**.

123

Once more you move your eyes across the darkening ravine. It takes several minutes, but you find what you're looking for. Far down the ravine, not one but two figures are slowly working their way toward you, unaware of your presence. You study them for a few minutes. Between them, they are dragging the large carcass of a boar by its legs. One of the figures carries a bow across his shoulders, while the other appears to carry a sword on his back. The weapons mark them as samurai, but they are certainly not Lord Tomotada's men. They are ragged, unkempt, and sloppy, undoubtedly *ronin*—samurai who serve



no one and are frequently outlaws.

Your duty is clear, and there is no hesitation in your mind. *I must arrest them for poaching and trespassing and bring them to justice. If they try to escape, I will wound them. If they resist, I must kill them.*

Planning to intercept them as they approach the horse, you begin to back down the ridge. Suddenly the sound of footsteps from behind stops you. Like the hare, you remain motionless, listening. *Someone has discovered my horse, you think, and is no doubt wondering who and where I am.* You begin to think you've stumbled into a whole band of thieves. If so, you may be in great danger, especially without armor. You make a quick calculation. If you act swiftly and attack the bandit near your horse, the two *ronin* dragging the boar can't get here for several minutes at least. From beyond the crest of the ridge, they may not even hear anything, unless the lone bandit screams.

Drawing *Kurodachi* from its sheath soundlessly, you stealthily approach the place where you tied your horse, then leap down through the shrubs, hoping no other outlaws lurk nearby. What you see stops you in your tracks as thoroughly as a volley of arrows.

Turn to 63.

124

Silently the ninja springs into the air, kicking and slashing with his *katana* simultaneously. To your surprise, you manage to block both. Immediately you counterattack with a flurry of strikes and stabs, backing the ninja against the cliff. *Perhaps I'll live through this after all, you think.*

You deflect the ninja's next strike, then swing *Kurodachi* in a two-handed cross-strike. At the same

time, the ninja, too, chooses to cross-strike. Your blades crash together, but his fails to hold against *Kurodachi*'s sharp edge and tempered layers, and it snaps in two. Startled, the ninja drops the other half of his sword and presses back against the cliff.

Your eyes meet, and for an instant, you think you've seen those eyes before. Feeling almost regretful, you prepare to swing *Kurodachi* in a death stroke.

Make a perception check by rolling one die and adding the result to your perception skill score. If the total is 22 or more, turn to **85**. If it is 21 or less, turn to **99**.

125

You speak slowly, adding emphasis to your answer. "*Chomei Sensei No Dojo* has prepared me well for the task ahead. I offer my skills and my life in active duty, defending our borders in the service of Lord Tomotada." You finish your brief declaration with a deep bow.

Immediately you sense that Haraku is surprised and displeased by your decision, but you don't understand why. The *dojo*'s old scribe, however, is greatly moved by your words. He carefully re-inks his brush before adding your declaration to his records.

A few minutes later, you hear Genzo announce his decision without hesitation. To your surprise, he chooses additional training. *That's odd*, you think. *Genzo is always so eager to break heads that I thought surely he'd choose active duty. Perhaps there's more to him than I thought.*

Takeshi, too, faces the same decision and takes a painfully long time to make up his mind. To your relief, he follows your lead and chooses active duty.

Turn to **26**.

126

Again and again, like two vipers, you and Genzo strike at each other with lightning speed, then separate, searching for another opening. Soon the big samurai begins to penetrate your defenses through brute strength alone. Despite your superior speed, you can't seem to hurt him enough through his armor. Before long, you're so exhausted that you know your speed advantage is gone.

Frustrated, you wish you had more room to maneuver, that you weren't confined to this small square of gravel. You realize the fight is coming rapidly to an end, but you can't think of any way to prevent it.

Genzo senses the end, too, and intensifies his attacks. *Where does he get all his energy?* you wonder as you duck under a roundhouse kick aimed at your chin. Too late, you see Genzo's foot reverse into a hook kick. You start to roll out of the way, but the steel boot crashes into the top of your helmet.

You cry out as fire shoots through your head, neck, and spine. Your knees buckle and you collapse, face-first, into the gravel. You lose all the rest of your hit points.

Turn to 117.

127

During the night, you regain 15 hit points from your rest. Remember that you cannot regain more hit points than you started with.

The next morning, you awake to find another *shuriken* on your pillow, exactly like the last one except that this one is silver.

You practically collide with Takeshi in the hallway, hurrying to tell you he that received one, too. Once more your rooms were locked from the inside.

Turn to 36.



128

Just when you're certain you're going to hit him, the ninja leaps high into the air, avoiding your attack. You gasp as the ninja grips the face of the cliff, then suddenly vaults over your head. *How can I possibly fight someone like this?* you wonder, spinning to face him.

As you turn, his sword slices through your shirt, grazing your chest with fiery pain. You didn't even see the stroke coming. You lose 3 hit points.

If you have 18 or more hit points left, turn to 135. If you have 17 or less left, turn to 23.

129

Trying to regain the initiative, Genzo charges, holding his steel-covered arms outstretched like battering rams. You leap back from his outstretched arms and stagger him with a chop to the head, but he continues his charge, propelled by his own momentum, and crashes into you, knocking you over backward.

As you fall to the ground, you kick at Genzo's legs, bringing him down, too. To your dismay, however, he lands on top of you with his full weight. You lose 5 hit points.

Acutely aware of his great size advantage, you struggle to get free, jabbing him with your elbows. He flails back at you, punching you twice before you succeed in crawling away.

As you both struggle to your feet, he taunts, "You are obviously hurt, Kurasai. Why don't you yield to the superior fighter?"

In reply, you snap into your fighting stance, concealing how much you do hurt. Exhausted and soaked with sweat within your heavy *yoroi*, you fear you can't last much longer. *I've got to find his weakness soon, you realize, or I won't have any strength left.*

Make a perception check by rolling one die and adding the result to your perception skill score. If the total is 20 or more, turn to **106**. If it is less, turn to **112**.

130

You keep your distance from Genzo while you recover your breath and prepare to attack. Then, sensing an opening in his guard, you attack, swinging your *bokken* with both hands.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 23 or more, turn to **165**. If it is less, turn to **138**.

131

Not wasting a second, you leap to your feet, shouting, "Stand, traitors! Do not move, by order of Lord Tomotada!"

Greatly surprised, the two *ronin* let go of the boar. Hiyashi looks up at you, trembling. The giant, however, after glancing to each side, stares back defiantly. "Who speaks thus to Ogawa, feared samurai of the northern provinces?"

You speak again, with contempt. "I charge you both with treason against the province of Hakata, against Lord Tomotada, and against Nippon itself for aiding the Mongol barbarians. Surrender, or I will deliver your heads to Lord Tomotada!"

Fumbling for his bow, Hiyashi blurts, "He knows!" Ogawa screams a crazed battle cry and draws his *nodachi*. You are already in the air, your knees flexed to absorb the impact of landing. You swing and cut Hiyashi before your feet touch the ground. His stolen armor fails him against *Kurodachi's* keen blade, and he topples over, dead.

Immediately you spin to face Ogawa.

Turn to 8.

132

Sensei Haraku moves to the center of the dueling ground between you and Genzo. Although the *sensei* wears no armor, he does wear his *katana*, the traditional sword serving as a symbol of his authority as referee. The other four *sensei* position themselves as judges, one at each corner of the gravel square.

Haraku's instructions are brief: "Strive for precision and strike cleanly. The trial ends at my command."

Together, you and Genzo bow to Haraku, each judge, then each other. The formalities are almost over.

Stepping back, Haraku orders, "Take your positions!"

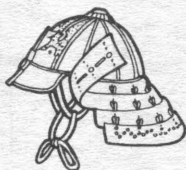
You slide your right foot back, then turn your body sideways, shielding your ribs with your arms. You raise your hands, pulling them into fists. With most of your weight on your rear leg, you can turn, block, or strike quickly in any direction without losing your balance.

Through the opening in your helmet, you watch Genzo carefully. Crouched and ready to spring, he holds his right arm out, bent in a classic knife-hand position. His left hand is pulled back, shielding his chest. Your eyes meet, and he grins confidently. *No doubt, you predict, he'll go on the attack immediately.* Bracing yourself, you await Haraku's command.

"Begin!" you hear the *sensei* shout.

At the signal, Genzo charges, howling fiercely, and strikes at your neck. You hold your ground, waiting until the last instant, when he can't change his attack, before you make your move.

Make a physical prowess check by rolling one die and adding the result to your physical prowess score. If the total is 18 or more, turn to **202**. If the total is 17 or less, turn to **142**.



133

When the tavern comes into sight, you start to pull ahead. Cursing you, his horse, and even the road, Genzo falls still farther behind. You keep the lead all the way to the tavern's courtyard, then jump from your horse before it completely stops and dash up the short flight of stairs to the tavern's porch. You turn and raise your hands in victory, thinking, *I have only to step through the door to win.*

Much to your surprise, however, Genzo rides his horse right up to the stairs, where it skids to a sudden

halt in a shower of dirt and gravel. With a scream, Genzo is thrown from his horse, vaulting over the steps and onto the porch. Unable to stop, he tumbles past you through the open front door and crashes into an empty table.

Shaking your head in amazement, you bound through the door and help him up. While he brushes himself off, the others ride into the courtyard, screaming and yelling like wild men. The tavern's surprised patrons remain motionless, too shocked to move. Turning to the horror-stricken tavern owner, you ask politely, "Your best dinner, please—and a quiet table."

Turn to 148.

134

You shout as the dark-bladed *Kurodachi* chops through Ogawa's side armor fastenings and slices deep into the traitor. In the dark light and shadows, Ogawa never even saw the black blade. With a final, eerie howl, the giant falls to the forest floor, dead, his hands still wrapped around the hilt of his *no-dachi*.

With your heart pounding, you circle the area, wary of other enemies, but you find nothing. Nervously you make your way back to Midori's horse.

Turn to 115.

135

Again and again, you and the ninja clash. Somehow you manage to avoid the lethal strokes of his *katana*. You have trouble seeing him because of his black garb, but his polished *katana* is always clearly visible. You can tell that sometimes he seems to have difficulty seeing your black blade, but he always manages to duck or block even your most skillful strikes at the last instant. You've never before wit-

nessed such superb *kenjutsu*. You're amazed at the ninja's absolute control over his weapon and the economy of motion in his smooth movements.

Seeing him shift his weight, you brace yourself for the coming attack.

If you have received two or more gold *shurikens*, turn to 144. If you have received two or more silver *shurikens*, turn to 124.

136

Hiyashi, the *ronin* with the shrill voice, says, "Bah! Kublai Khan is a myth! If you know so much, Ogawa, then you explain what the Mongol was doing."

Ogawa spits before answering. "He was looking for something . . . I don't know what. I only know that I was paid. Now, come. We can't spend this gold in the forest."

They shoulder their gear noisily. From the sounds of banging pots, you gather they carry everything they own with them. It should be easy to overpower them.

They begin trudging toward the ridge where Midori's horse is still tethered, apparently, from the sound, still dragging the carcass of the boar. Just as they come into view, Ogawa, a giant of a man, stops and grabs his smaller companion by the shoulder.

"What is it?" Hiyashi hisses.

Ogawa points up the ridge. You do not need to see where he points to know he has spotted Midori's horse.

Hiyashi's eyes widen with excitement. "Tonight we ride in style, eh?"

Ogawa silences him with a fierce glance, rasping, "No, you fool. Look at that red and gold crest. That horse belongs to Lord Tomotada. Where there's one of his men, there are always more, and we're on his

land illegally. We've got to go back the way we came."

Quiet and careful now, they head back toward the rocky outcrop where you're hiding. Rapidly you assess your options. If they think there are other samurai nearby, they may surrender if you confront them. If they don't, you should have little difficulty subduing them.

Another thought occurs to you, however. Without armor, any sword fight is dangerous, and these outlaws may be more skilled than you suspect. If you challenge them, they may flee and split up, allowing one to escape and warn the Mongols—but about what? Maybe you should track them to find out. . . . Of course, if you ambush them, they wouldn't have time to fight or run.

If you decide to stand up and confront the traitors, turn to **131**. If you decide to ambush them, turn to **185**. If you decide to wait until they pass, then try to follow them, turn to **188**.



137

"Look out!" Takeshi shouts as the samurai gathered beneath the wall launch a volley of bamboo poles. You manage to duck two of them, but a third strikes you in the middle of the chest. As you gasp in pain, a fourth knocks your right leg out from under you, and you fall to the roof and begin to slide toward

the edge. You lose 6 hit points.

You barely manage to halt your slide by jamming your left gauntlet through a loosened tile. Quickly you scramble to your feet.

Turn to 103.

138

You move in quickly but cautiously, throwing a simple right cross-strike. Genzo brings his *bokken* up, blocking your blow, then twisting his weapon to slam it down on your extended leg. You leap back, but not quickly enough, and the blow catches the armor above your knee. Subtract 4 hit points from your total.

Stunned, you stagger and almost fall, but you manage somehow to stay on your feet. Turn to 218.

139

When Genzo finally comes to, he confronts you, complaining that your act of *seppuku* was insincere. But you realize that behind his stern words, he grudgingly admires your deed. For your part, you know you've never seen a stronger or more fearless warrior than Genzo. The grizzly samurai nods, then stares at you silently. You stare back, knowing that you and he will never understand or agree with each other, but you can now accept and respect each other. Slowly you both grin, then Genzo turns and stomps off, vowing revenge on those who wielded the log that battered him from the archway.

If the *shuriken* you found under your pillow was gold-colored, turn to 127. If it was silver, turn to 15.

140

Bracing yourself, you throw your left arm out to block Genzo's side-arm strike, but your muscles give



way under the power of the blow. Genzo's armored hand chops into your left shoulder, numbing your whole arm. Without your *yoroi*, your shoulder certainly would have been dislocated, possibly even broken. You lose 5 hit points.

Despite your injury, you deliver a vicious right-hand chop to Genzo's chin that snaps his head back. You both stumble apart. Then, holding his head with his left hand, Genzo growls, shaking his fist angrily. You know he'll never quit until one of you slumps to the gravel, unconscious.

Turn to **198**.

141

Alone, you step off the bridge and pass under a massive archway. Joined only by wooden pegs, its ancient beams remain tightly fitted, a symbol of strength through simplicity. Stiff and aching from yesterday's duel, you seek the center of the stairs where the edges are worn down by countless visitors to this place of solemn prayer and reflection. Despite your outer expression of calm, the temple's serenity is not echoed within you this morning. Your thoughts and feelings are in turmoil, frustrated by your defeat and nervous about your uncertain future.

You stand in the temple's doorway, adjusting your eyes to the dim interior, lit only by thin shafts of sunlight coming through windows high in the east wall. After slipping off your sandals in the doorway, you bow to the Master waiting within, then step onto the cold polished stone floor. You cross the large room quietly, approaching the Master. He sits on a rattan mat before a low table, mixing tea from an earthen pot of boiling water.

Despite your best efforts to conceal it, a slight tremor in your voice reveals your apprehension.

“Good morning, Master Yoshimura.”

The Master holds a cup of tea out toward you. “Welcome, Kurasai Hidenaga.” His normally expressionless face is broken by a frown you guess is sorrow at the task before him.

You accept the cup of green tea after kneeling on the mat opposite the old man.

“You are well, Kurasai?” he asks, doubtlessly referring to yesterday’s fight.

“Doctor Tarahito saw me shortly after the trial. I will be stiff and sore for several weeks, but he says my injuries are not serious.”

“Good, good.” Eyes closed, the Master leans back, warming his hands on his hot cup. “Genzo Taira is a worthy opponent, Kurasai. Your defeat alone does not disturb me. However, the severity of your defeat shows a lack of control that is very troubling. Before the end, you had to know the outcome, yet you did nothing.”

Knowing he’s right but feeling the same frustration you felt at the end of the fight yesterday, you blurt out, “But what could I do, in the small confines of the dueling ground?”

“You neither pressed your attack nor retreated. A samurai leader must not allow his opponent to dominate him as Genzo dominated you.” The Master pauses to sip his tea.

The tension within you is almost unbearable. You try to stay calm, aware that your reactions may influence the Master’s decision.

Turn to 180.

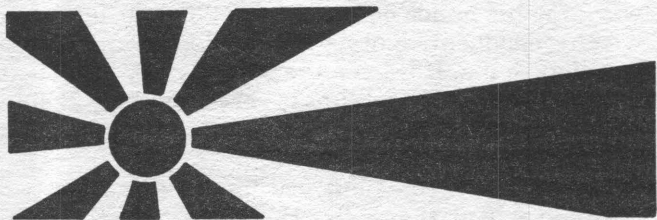
142

At the last possible instant, you snap your left arm up to block Genzo’s knife-hand strike. To your surprise, however, you discover that you have miscalcu-

lated the timing. You've failed to get your hand up soon enough!

Even as you realize your mistake, Genzo's steel gauntlet slams into your left shoulder. You wince with pain, despite your armor and the thick padding you wear under it. Only years of training kept your neck out of range—you automatically leaned away while you attempted to block the blow. Even so, you lose 5 points from your hit point total.

Genzo immediately prepares to strike again. If you try to block this attack, turn to **162**. If you decide to counterattack instead, turn to **98**.



143

Just as you let go of the pole, you feel yourself slip and drop your end down onto the roof tiles. As the pole rolls down the sloping roof, the two samurai nearest you manage to leap over it. The other three, however, are swept backward by the pole and tumble down the roof and over the edge, met by loud shouts of surprise from below.

Immediately you draw your *bokken* to swing at the samurai nearest you, but he manages to connect first. You wince in pain as his *bokken* strikes you across the ribs, and you lose 4 hit points. The other samurai begins to close in on you.

"Hang on, Kurasai!" yells Takeshi, rushing to your assistance.

Operating as a smooth unit, you each side-kick one of the advancing samurai, knocking them over backward. They land together and crash through the tiles and rafters to the classroom floor below, leaving a gaping hole in the roof.

"How are you at repairing roofs, Takeshi?" you shout, watching out of the corner of your eye for the next attack.

Chuckling, he replies, "I'm sure we will learn tomorrow!"

Make a perception check by rolling one die and adding the result to your perception skill score. If the total is 20 or more, turn to **153**. If it is less, turn to **137**.

144

Silently the ninja springs into the air, kicking and slashing with his *katana* simultaneously. To your surprise, you manage to block both. Immediately you counterattack with a flurry of strikes and stabs, backing the ninja against the cliff. *Perhaps I'll live through this after all*, you think.

You deflect the ninja's next strike, then swing *Kurodachi* in a two-handed cross-strike. At the same time, the ninja, too, chooses a cross-strike. Your blades crash together, but his fails to hold against *Kurodachi's* sharp edge and tempered layers, and it snaps in two.

Startled, the ninja drops the other half of his sword and presses back against the cliff.

Your eyes meet, and for an instant you think you've seen those eyes before. Feeling almost regretful, you prepare to swing *Kurodachi* in a death stroke.

Make a perception check by rolling one die and add the result to your perception skill score. If the total is 17 or more, turn to **85**. If it is 16 or less, turn to **99**.

145

Sitting alone in the Master's immaculate garden, you wait nervously. Finally the Master returns and sits slowly. He says, "You look troubled, Kurasai."

Your thoughts return to Ogawa. You speak hesitantly, unsure of what the Master will say. "Today I fought, but then I ran away from the fight. I had reasons to do both, but the samurai code teaches that a samurai—and I am a samurai—should never run from battle. Was it cowardly to run?"

The Master smiles and leans back. "It is said that only brave men and fools stand to fight, while wise men and cowards run away. What type of man, then, both fights and runs away? Consider the fact that you are alive as you ponder this question."

You nod, not entirely sure of the Master's meaning. Turn to **225**.

146

Now that you have formed your plan, you move without hesitation. You leap forward, feinting a high left-hand punch to draw Genzo's attention from your feet. As he begins to react, you swing your right leg out with all your strength, pivoting on your left leg.

Make a physical prowess check by rolling one die and adding the result to your physical prowess skill score. If the total is 18 or more, turn to **206**. If it is 17 or less, turn to **172**.

147

Genzo stands in the center of the gravel square, a confused look of disbelief on his face. For a moment, you fear he's going to charge out of the dueling ground after you. Totally exhausted, you don't find the prospect of being chased appealing.

Before Genzo can decide what to do, *sensei* Haraku

steps forward and places a restraining hand on his armored shoulder. "This trial is over," he declares. "Kurasai Hidenaga forfeits the duel. Genzo Taira is the victor!"

Genzo bows proudly to Haraku and each of the judges in turn, then to the Master and Lord Tomotada. Finally, with a flourish, he bows to Princess Midori.

Gasping for breath, you walk slowly back onto the gravel square as Genzo strides off. In his burning eyes, you see the word he does not speak: "Coward." Inside, you know he is angry because you did not let him defeat you in a conventional manner. *At least, you tell yourself, I'm not lying in the gravel, battered to a pulp.*

You make your bows with difficulty as your vision blurs. For the briefest moment, you think you see Midori nod approvingly to you. *Strange, you think. Why does she approve of what surely must have appeared to be cowardly?* Then, uncertain you saw correctly, you wonder, *Or am I imagining too much? Perhaps she didn't nod at all. . . .*

Takeshi grins as you sit slowly beside him in the bleachers. "I thought for a while there that I was going to have to carry you home today," he says.

Mustering a rueful chuckle, you reply, "So did I."

"Just between us, I think you did the right thing," Takeshi whispers.

"Thanks, Takeshi," you answer, "but I regret my fighting was so bad I was forced to run like a frightened rabbit."

Turn to 151.

148

After you all indulge in one of the tavern's famous meals, Genzo and a few of your classmates decide to

stay there, swapping stories, drinking rice wine, and snacking until the tavern closes. Bidding them farewell, you and the others rise from the table. After paying your bill and thanking the tavern owner, you walk out to your horses in the courtyard.

You swing up into your saddle and ask if anyone else wants to ride back through the woods, but no one accepts your invitation. Takeshi explains, "As sore and full as I am, I think I prefer to ride on the road."

You laugh and guide your horse out onto the road behind him. "Well, I'll ride halfway on the road and halfway in the forest!"

Enjoying the wind on your face, you gallop your horse back down the highway. Tossing its braided black mane, the creature seems as happy to run as you are to ride. Soon you slow the horse to a trot, then to a walk, and turn off into the forest, waving goodbye to the others trailing behind you.

Turn to 108.

149

A second wave of six samurai pull themselves over the courtyard wall. Again, you and Takeshi succeed in throwing two of them back before they reach the courtyard. Showing more intelligence than the first four, these four all attack you, hoping to quickly overpower you.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 23 or more, turn to 100. If the total is 22 or less, turn to 171.

150

You turn aside Genzo's attack easily, at the same time staggering him with a blow to his head. But he continues forward, propelled by his own momentum,

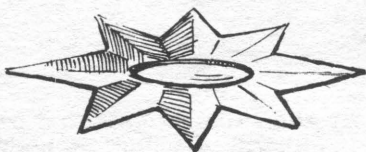
and crashes into you, knocking you off balance. As you fall back, you kick out at his legs, bringing him down also. You cry out as he lands with his full weight on your sword arm.

Roll one die for damage and subtract the result from your hit point total.

Knowing that Genzo will have a great size advantage wrestling on the ground, you quickly crawl away, pulling your injured arm out from under him but still clutching your *bokken*. As you both struggle to your feet, he taunts, "You are obviously hurt, Kurasai. Why don't you yield to the superior fighter?"

Concealing how much your right arm does hurt, you raise your *bokken* in reply.

Although Genzo doesn't show it, you know you've hurt him, too. If you choose to attack again, turn to 104. If you decide your offensive plan isn't working and want to go on the defensive, turn to 154. If you want to wait and see what Genzo does next, turn to 84.



151

Early the next morning, you awaken in your room, feeling the chilly dawn air on your face. Your stiff muscles, aches, and bruises remind you that the battle with Genzo was not a dream. Even so, you feel better than you did yesterday. You regain 10 hit points from your full night's sleep. Remember, however,

that you cannot recover more hit points than you started with.

Still amazed, you recall Takeshi's fight with a chuckle. *He beat Yozo even though most of his armor fell off! I've been telling him for weeks to get it repaired.* You turn to look at your own *yoroi*, now scratched and battered. As you turn your head, you gasp in surprise as your cheek touches cold metal.

Turn to 169.

152

Shouting, "I'll race you, Genzo, if you think you can stay on top of your horse!" You dash past your classmates. Behind you, you hear them making bets and crying, "A race, a race!"

With Genzo close behind, you lean close to your horse's neck, urging it on faster. Slowly the big samurai draws even with you, whipping his horse with the ends of his reins.

Together you thunder down the road, scattering a flock of chickens and sending travelers scurrying to safety off the road. Not far behind ride your classmates, shouting encouragement and raising a cloud of dust.

Turn to 133.

153

Unexpectedly the samurai gathered beneath the wall begin to unleash a volley of bamboo poles. Shouting, "Watch out, Takeshi!" you smash two of them from the air and duck the others. Takeshi takes a direct hit on his chest armor and falls to the roof. He barely manages to keep from sliding off the roof by jamming his left gauntlet through a tile, then quickly scrambles to his feet.

Turn to 103.



154

Genzo feints, jabbing with his *bokken* once before attacking from another direction. You block his attack, then step aside swiftly, waiting for him to make his next move. Concentrating as hard as you can, you study Genzo's every movement, searching for some weakness to exploit, but so far you detect nothing.

The giant samurai moves in again, swinging left and right, trying to force you to strike back. Instead, you dodge the blows and roll to the side, refusing to go on the attack. Genzo presses forward, hammering at you again and again, shouting, "I see your game, Kurasai! You're trying to tire me out, but you'll weaken long before I do!"

Even though he misinterprets your plan, you begin to fear he is right as the fury of his attacks increases until each blow shakes your entire body. *He must make a mistake soon, you realize, or he will surely overpower me.*

Make a perception check by rolling one die and adding the result to your perception skill score. If the total is 20 or more, turn to 42. If it is less than 20, turn to 87.

155

You feel the tip of your blade slice through the ninja's clothing as he twists away, but you can't tell if you injured him or not. You step forward to swing again, but another wave of dizziness sweeps over you. You fall back, taking a deep breath to clear your head. Turn to 135.

156

In a blur of motion, Haraku is barely able to stop your *bokken* with one hand. At the same time, Takeshi

gently presses the tip of his *bokken* under Sensei Haraku's neck plate, growling, "Yield or die!"

For a brief, frightening moment, you fear for Takeshi's life as you sense a wave of power about to explode from your head instructor. Then the feeling passes, leaving you and Takeshi shaking. Haraku smiles, showing that he understands your ploy.

A confused silence hangs in the courtyard. You repeat Takeshi's demand loudly, so everyone can hear. "Yield, Gold General, or die!"

Quietly, so only you and Takeshi hear, Haraku says slowly, "You show great ingenuity." Then he loudly addresses the samurai in the courtyard. "Students! Even as we celebrate our victory we are defeated—by our own carelessness, as well as by Kurasai and Takeshi's deception. Remember this lesson well!"

Turn to 114.

157

A few moments later, you spot the *ronin* squatting beneath a rocky outcrop, resting and talking intently and seemingly oblivious of their surroundings. Both men wear mismatched armor, stolen, no doubt, from fallen samurai on a battlefield. You move closer, using the outcrop to shield you from sight. A rustling wind helps cover the little noise you make.

Before long, you are lying among the boulders several yards above them, back from the edge of the outcrop. Although you can't see either of them now, their voices are loud enough to hear with some difficulty.

"There," says a gruff voice, "that's all of it—seventeen gold coins apiece."

You hear both men scooping up coins, then a shrill voice laughs. "Ha! That foreigner was a fool! Imagine so much money for two days' riding in a boat up and

down the coast!"

The gruff voice responds, "No, Hiyashi, the Mongols are not fools. After all, under Kublai Khan they've conquered all of Manchuria and Korea."

Mongols! These men are traitors! you realize. They're working for the barbarians who are, even now, overrunning China and threaten to invade Nippon itself! Your hands tighten in anger. How can anyone betray his homeland? Have these ronin no honor? You can barely restrain yourself from hurling yourself over the ledge to dispatch them, but you must learn about what they did for the Mongols.

You decide to crawl to the edge so you can see the men again. *I should discover how they're armed. Also I must be able to describe them if one somehow escapes me.* But before you move closer you caution yourself, *If I move, they may hear me, and then I will learn nothing. I could wait. . .*

If you decide to move closer so you can see the traitors, turn to **173**. If you decide to stay hidden where you are and keep listening, turn to **136**.

158

Your maneuver catches Genzo completely by surprise. He cries out as your blade strikes both his forearms, but somehow he manages not to drop his weapon and stumbles backward.

Knowing he's injured, you scramble to your feet, ready to put an end to the fight.

Turn to **165**.

159

"This has all been a test?" you ask in shocked disbelief. "I—I don't understand."

The Master smiles narrowly. "Come and sit with me, Kurasai. We have much to discuss."

Years of obedience and trust overcome the apprehension you feel. You walk beside the Master to several large boulders, all the while keeping an eye on the ninja.

"Sit," the Master says gently, "and open your mind, Kurasai."

You do as he asks, feeling nervous excitement build within you as you sense you are about to learn some great secret.

The Master begins, "As you know, Kurasai, throughout your samurai training, your *sensei* have tested your skills relentlessly. You have done well, and advanced far. However, for many months now, ninjas have also been testing you—secretly. Each time you completed a major test, they left you a *shuriken*—gold if you passed, silver if you did not pass. Each gold *shuriken* also made the next test—except for the last—easier."

"So it was a ninja who left those *shuriken*!" you exclaim.

The Master nods mysteriously. "Yes, and it was ninjas who drugged your horse earlier, ambushed you on the beach, and fought you on the cliff ledge."

Turn to 174.

160

Without a word, you bound off the rocky outcrop and dive into the cover of thick underbrush, glancing over your shoulder to see if the *ronin* are following. A short arrow whizzes past you into the brush, far off the mark. *They're trying to flush me out*, you think. Then you see Ogawa, his huge *no-dachi* upraised, working his way toward you. Your confidence disappears as you realize, *They may have less training than I, but they're very experienced. Ogawa will find me soon. And if I attack him, I present a target to*

Hiyashi. After another moment's contemplation, you think you have found a solution.

Scurrying deeper into the underbrush, you back out of Ogawa's sight, then circle around to ambush Hiyashi. It isn't difficult to close in on him, so intent is he on covering Ogawa with his bow. Unfortunately he stands in a fairly open area, so you will have to charge the last few yards without cover. If he hears you, he'll have a clear shot at you.

Resisting the urge to focus your energy with a battle cry, you break from the cover, crouching low and using short strides for balance. From ahead in the forest, Ogawa sees you and shouts a warning to Hiyashi, who turns, but it's too late. *Kurodachi's* keen blade slices through his stolen armor. He fires his last arrow into the dirt and falls without ever seeing you.

You whirl around to face Ogawa, already crashing back through the underbrush, howling a torrent of insults and threats.

Turn to 8.

161

Now that you have formed your plan, you move without hesitation. You leap forward, feinting a high right-hand chop to distract the big samurai. As Genzo begins to react, you charge forward, kicking up gravel with each step.

Make a physical prowess check by rolling one die and adding the result to your physical prowess skill score. If the total is 18 or more, turn to **231**. If it is 17 or less, turn to **172**.

162

With a loud cry, Genzo lunges forward, bringing a heavy fist down from high over his head. Recognizing

his favorite hammerfist attack, you snap your arms up, neatly catching his forearm between your crossed wrists.

Face to face with the gigantic Genzo, you know you must attack him right away or leap back to keep him from striking you. If you decide to attack, turn to **98**. If you elect to jump back, turn to **170**.



163

The instant your *bokken* shatters, you jump forward and body slam your opponent. He doesn't react fast enough and topples over, with you on top of him.

Hearing a nearby scream, you turn in time to see Takeshi fall, knocked out by a bamboo staff someone hurled. At the same time, out of the corner of your eye, you notice a samurai leap off the inner wall toward you. Rolling clear, you kick out at his legs as he sails over you. He flips over in midair, dropping his *bokken* and crashing into the samurai you knocked down a moment earlier.

Grabbing the *bokken*, you leap up and spin around in a wild frenzy. Astonished, the younger samurai fall back, unsure of how to attack you. While they hesitate, you fall back to the corner where Takeshi lies, barely conscious.

Sudden loud shouts draw your attention to a swarm of samurai throwing themselves at Genzo, still chained in the middle of the archway. Battered and dazed but still on his feet, he somehow holds

them back, swinging, kicking, and punching like a wild man. All at once, his attackers leap aside, leaving him standing alone in the archway.

Confused, Genzo looks about, then shouts in surprise and pulls frantically at his chains. Six samurai are charging straight at him, carrying a tree trunk like a battering ram. Unable to get free of his chains, Genzo recovers his courage and plants his feet firmly, then raises his *bokken*, determined to go down swinging. An instant later, his weapon bounces off the trunk, just before the trunk slams into his belly armor, throwing him back into the courtyard, chainlinks flying. Howling in pain, Genzo collapses in the dust. He does not get up. Turn to 183.

164

Your voice is steady as you say carefully, "Master, I choose to become a ninja!"

The Master's face breaks into a broad grin. "Your decision pleases me greatly, Kurasai. Welcome."

You bow low to the Master, then ask, "To ensure secrecy and loyalty, is it not true that ninjas pass their knowledge on only to family members?"

The Master nods. "Yes, many do, but this clan will accept anyone who qualifies. As you know, however, the entrance test is very rigorous." The Master's face becomes even more serious before he continues. "Now that you have joined our ninja clan, Kurasai, I can finally tell you that your father before you was a ninja, one of the best in this clan. You now carry his sword. Someday you may learn the powers it holds!"

Turn to 186.

165

You move in quickly but cautiously, throwing a simple right cross strike. Genzo brings his *bokken* up

to try to defend himself, but he can't hold on to it. You knock the weapon aside just before striking his shoulder. You immediately follow up, stepping in to slam your *bokken* hilt into his chest plates. The big samurai drops to the gravel like a sack of rice.

For a long moment, Genzo struggles to lift himself up, then collapses. *A wise decision*, you think.

Dizzy from exhaustion and pain, you begin to sway on your feet. Between clenched teeth, you force the word "No!" from your lips, as though it might help you to keep your balance. Then you step back purposefully to brace yourself, but your left knee gives way. Several onlookers, including Midori, gasp as you start to fall over backward.

Automatically your body takes over, tucking into a fall and rolling you back to your feet in one shaky but continuous move. For a confused moment, you fear that Genzo has recovered and is about to attack again, but he remains facedown in the gray gravel. Realizing you're crouched in a fighting stance with no opponent facing you, you force yourself to straighten up, lowering your *bokken* to your side.

Two of the judges begin to try to revive Genzo as Haraku steps to the center of the dueling ground. Facing the platform, he officially pronounces an end to the fight. "This trial is over. Kurasai Hidenaga is the victor!"

Struggling desperately not to fall, you bow to Haraku and each judge in turn, then to the others on the platform. The Master, as usual, remains expressionless. You notice that Lord Tomotada leans forward, watching you intently. Beside him sits Princess Midori. You glance at her eyes as you bow, but she turns her gaze downward, avoiding them. Curious, you wonder what she's thinking, but at any rate, you're pleased that she witnessed your victory.

Shakily you walk to the bleachers, stumbling several times along the way. A battered Genzo, now revived, meets you there, glowering. "Luck, Kurasai, only luck," he says bitterly. As he lowers himself to his seat, his left leg gives out, and he falls back with a thud.

"No, Genzo," you reply. "Superior technique." Pleased with yourself, you realize you've gained a small measure of respect from Genzo.

Turn to 113.

166

You seem to be fighting automatically, somehow moving and reacting faster than you can consciously think. Close in, you trade twisting punches, knife-hand strikes, and knee slams. Farther apart, you both try to launch deadly kicks, then spin back out of range. Yet neither of you is able to gain an advantage. Finally, after several minutes of savage fighting, you both connect, one after the other. You lose 5 hit points.

Turn to 198.

167

As the snake's head darts forward, you shoot your right hand out to grab it while holding yourself up with your left hand. Amazingly, you succeed in grabbing the snake just behind the head. It writhes and coils around your arm, struggling to sink its fangs into you.

Surprised by the snake's strength, you tighten your grip, then slam the snake against the cliff to stun it. When its coils loosen, you fling it out into space behind you.

Remembering the danger below, you heave yourself onto the ledge and lie flat on your stomach as you

catch your breath. Suddenly sharp pains shoot through you as something stabs into your back from above. You lose 4 hit points. You reach back and withdraw a small dart. Certain that you've been drugged or poisoned, you whirl around to see a black figure falling toward you out of the darkness.

Turn to 204.



168

You and Takeshi race back and forth, jabbing with your staves to dislodge climbers as they reach the roof. With furious strikes of your *bokken* and spinning kicks, you dispatch the few that make it past your brave friend. With each skirmish, though, you feel more battered and fatigued.

Long minutes later, you hear determined shouts from the front of the building. Looking down, you see a swarm of samurai hurl themselves at Genzo, who still stands chained in the archway. Dazed but still battling gamely, he continues to hold them back with superhuman effort. Then, all at once, his attackers leap aside, leaving him standing alone in the archway.

Confused, Genzo looks around, then shouts in surprise and pulls frantically at his chains. From your

high vantage point, you see six burly samurai charge at Genzo, holding a stout pole like a battering ram. Unable to free himself from his chains, Genzo plants his feet firmly and raises his *bokken* defiantly, determined to go down fighting.

An instant later, Genzo's *bokken* bounces off the huge pole just before it slams into his belly, knocking him back into the courtyard. Genzo hits the dust and collapses. He doesn't get up.

Turn to 199.

169

Fully awake now, you sit up. There on your pillow lies a flat, eight-pointed metal throwing star—a *shuriken*, a favorite, and deadly, ninja weapon. You see that the *shuriken*'s eight points are razor-sharp. When thrown, it is a deadly missile.

You feel uneasy and a little excited thinking about ninjas. Widely believed to be the best warriors and assassins in the world, they are known even more for their secretiveness and mysteriousness. Some people even claim ninjas possess magical or supernatural abilities. Recently you've heard rumors of ninjas infiltrating every clan, every village, even the army and Hakata Castle. The *shuriken* reminds you of your childhood dreams of joining a ninja clan, but it also raises new fears of actually meeting up with a real, live ninja.

On your guard now, you sweep your eyes across your room, full of shadows in the dim morning light. You see nothing out of the ordinary. Your mind races with questions. Who put the *shuriken* on your pillow? Takeshi? Someone else, perhaps a ninja? How did he do it without waking you? And why? At first you think Takeshi must have sneaked into your room and placed the missile on your pillow, but a glance



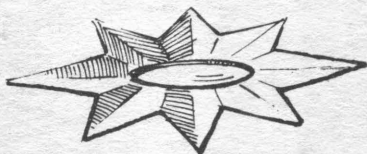
shows that your door and window are still locked from the inside. Now quite nervous, you stand and examine your room more carefully, but everything appears to be normal.

Curious, you carefully pick up the *shuriken*. The two-inch-wide disc feels extremely light in your hand. Its silver surface is so smooth and polished that your reflection is quite clear, even in the dim light.

Perplexed and a little frightened, you lay the *shuriken* down on your desk. A sudden knock on your door spins you around. "Who is it?" you demand nervously.

"It's me, Takeshi," comes the answer. "Open up! I've got to talk to you!"

Turn to 197.



170

You leap back and to one side, keeping your arms up to shield yourself. Genzo feints a blow, then leaps back also. Seeing this, you wish you had attacked instead, catching him by surprise as he retreated. However, you force yourself to think ahead, not back at what you might have done.

Turn to 212.

171

You launch a cross strike, surprising your attackers with your speed, but they press forward, all swinging at once. You only manage to block one of

their blows and stagger back from painful hits to both shoulders and across your ribs, losing 12 hit points.

Hurrying to your rescue, Takeshi knocks one samurai down with a well-aimed swing of his bamboo pole, but two more attackers immediately turn on Takeshi. You back away from the other, maneuvering for a better position.

Suddenly he charges. Bracing yourself, you duck low under his weapon and slam your shoulder into his chest. The young samurai drops his *bokken*, then falls to the ground, the wind knocked from his lungs.

You turn to help Takeshi, but see that he has already driven off the other two foes.

Turn to 207.

172

Just before you connect, Genzo leaps into the air and launches a spinning hook kick, dangerously close to your head. Ducking under his foot, you back-fist his right knee, but the blow doesn't seem to have any effect on him. Frustrated, you decide, *He doesn't know the meaning of pain!*

Genzo follows through with a double hammerfist. You block one fist, but the other one slams into your left collarbone. You lose 3 hit points.

You step back to recover your balance, then aim a side-thrust kick at Genzo's abdomen. Rather than blocking it, he leaps into the kick, using his armor and strength to absorb the impact. The combined force of your kick and his charge slams you backward, and you collapse onto the gravel. You lose 4 more hit points.

Impatient for victory, Genzo hurls himself at you. Rolling over in a daze, you launch a roundhouse kick at his face. He sees it just in time to dodge out of the

way and sprawls onto the gravel beside you.

Watching each other warily, you slowly pull yourselves back to your feet. You aren't sure if Genzo set a trap for you or if he just reacted well, but in either case, you know your plan hurt you more than him.

Turn to 198.

173

Crawling forward, moving only an inch at a time, you reach the outcrop's edge without alerting the two *ronin*. One is a giant of a man, carrying a *no-dachi*, an oversized *katana*, on his back. Although he is unkempt and soiled, the *no-dachi* appears well cared for. *And he probably knows how to use it*, you think ruefully.

The giant's smaller companion, equally rugged-looking, carries a small bow and a quiver of short arrows. "Bah!" he squeaks in a shrill voice. "Kublai Khan is a myth! If you know so much, Ogawa, then explain what that Mongol was doing."

Ogawa spits toward the outcrop before answering. "He was searching for something . . . I don't know what. We weren't paid to ask questions, were we, Hiyashi. Now, come on. We wouldn't want to be robbed in this forest, would we?"

Laughing, they begin shouldering their gear. They appear to carry everything they own with them, even pots and pans. It should be easy to subdue them.

Not wanting to stretch your luck, you move back slowly, exactly as you crawled up, but your movement triggers a sudden loud screech from behind you. You roll over instantly, thrusting *Kurodachi* out for protection, and almost skewer a raven, more startled than you. Silent now, it flaps up over the trees quickly, then disappears.

Below, Hiyashi hisses, "What was that?"

Ogawa doesn't answer immediately. *He's probably wondering if someone's up here, you think. I've lost the element of surprise and have all the information I'm likely to get. I can dash back to Midori's horse and carry the news back, or I can try to arrest these scoundrels.*

Ogawa says softly, "I think there's someone up there."

If you decide to stand up and confront the traitors, turn to 131. If you decide to dash back to Midori's horse so you can relay what you've learned, turn to 160.



174

Stunned, you ask in disbelief, "You mean this was all a test?" Then you exclaim angrily, "I could have been killed a dozen times!"

The Master nods understandingly. "Yes, Kurasai. The test is extremely difficult. In fact, few live through it. The ninjas are quite thorough."

Although you are upset by what you hear, you also feel proud, and a little lucky, that you survived. But you still don't know why.

The Master answers your question before you ask. "Tonight, Kurasai, you have earned the opportunity

to become a ninja, to join the strongest such clan in Japan!"

You gasp in astonishment. You realize that in order to make such an offer, the Master must be a ninja himself! Your mind races. "The old, crippled *sensei* is just a disguise, seen by hundreds of students every year, but he has never been discovered!" You look at the Master's face and see that he has read your expression and what you are thinking.

Slowly he says, "You are correct in what you are thinking, Kurasai, but can you tell me why I continue at the *dojo*?"

Things begin to fall into place as you say rapidly, "At the *dojo*, you can study the most skilled samurai in the province, observing their strengths and weaknesses. Then you can test those whom you think have potential to become ninjas." Thinking about the *dojo*, you suspect *Sensei* Haraku may also be a ninja, but you don't say so. Instead, you ask, "Why did you select me for the test, Master?" Turn to 219.

175

Six weeks into the training, the Master announces an unusual exercise. "There may come a time when you must defend against overwhelming odds with only a few comrades. As samurai leaders, you must face such a battle with fierce resolve if you are to die with honor. In a few minutes, all one hundred and seventy-nine middle-rank samurai will leave the *dojo*. The thirteen samurai who have been chosen for special instruction must prepare to defend the training complex. Sometime after the noon hour, the students will return and attack the training buildings. Everyone must wear *yoroi* for protection and use only *bokken* and bamboo poles. You will wear red tunics over your armor, while the attackers will wear

gold. *Sensei Haraku* will direct the attack, serving as the gold general."

You know the training complex well. It consists of two square stone classroom buildings, each surrounding an open court. Two large, walled-in courtyards connect the classroom buildings. A main archway opens into the front courtyard, with doors leading from the classrooms to the courtyards. A short wooden door stands in the wall between the front and rear courtyards. Other than the front archway, the only entrance to the complex is a small door in the rear courtyard.

You and your classmates gather at the training complex to discuss the upcoming battle. Excitedly you face the others and say, "If we work together, we might actually win this battle. Certainly they outnumber us, but we can reduce that advantage by setting traps—pits, trip-ropes, oiled floors. Maybe we can ambush them in the forest before they even reach the buildings."

Turn to 205.

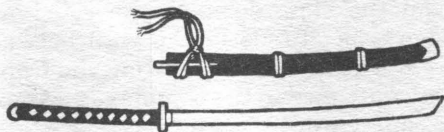
176

Startled, you almost drop the dark-bladed *katana*. Then, curious, you draw the blade completely out of its sheath, and the hum dies down, leaving only a faint, continuous murmur. Rising beneath the arch, you tie your graduation headband around your forehead and begin a *kata*, a ritualized series of strikes and blocking maneuvers. Never before have you felt such power and grace in *Kurodachi*, or in your ability to wield the weapon. The sensation gives you unbelievable confidence in the blade. Your tension melts away as though severed from you by *Kurodachi's* clean slices through the air. Excitement and curiosity replace your agitation. *What power could cause a*

sword to sing? you wonder.

With a sigh, you realize that the sun has set. You sheath *Kurodachi* and start back to your horse, wishing you could ask your father about this strange sword you inherited from him.

Turn to 11.



177

Smaller than his companions on the beach, the ninja crouches in a low fighting stance. Black clothing covers his face completely, except for his piercing eyes. He holds a straight-bladed *katana* out to one side, in a position you've never seen before. You realize you've never heard of anyone surviving a fight with a ninja. You'll need all your skill and experience to survive this encounter.

Fighting back both fear and dizziness, you shout, "Who are you? And why are you attacking me? We have no quarrel." The ninja answers by gliding forward, swinging his *katana*.

You tighten your grip on *Kurodachi*, determined that this ninja, whoever he is, will not find you an easy victim.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 23 or more, turn to 211. If it is less, turn to 194.

178

When you return to your room, you find Takeshi waiting for you. "What happened, Kurasai?" he

asks, obviously quite worried. "You look as if you just wrestled a tiger!"

You groan as you sit down, saying, "I wish it had been only a tiger!" As you begin to tell your story, you realize you must decide whether or not to include the part about Midori. For now, you decide to leave it out, concentrating on the traitors and the possibility of invasion.

Takeshi listens excitedly to every detail, saying over and over as you relate it, "I only wish I'd been with you!"

When you finish, you feel frustrated. "Maybe what I learned isn't much to go on, but the Master didn't seem very concerned about the Mongols. If there's even a slight possibility of invasion, shouldn't Lord Tomotada move at least one army to the coast?"

Takeshi appears thoughtful. "Yes, unless those *ronin* really came here to trick Lord Tomotada into moving one of his armies."

"Why would they do that?" you ask, confused.

"One of the provinces we are at war with may be trying to weaken Lord Tomotada's defenses."

"So if we move an army to the coast, we may fall to another province. But if we don't, we'll fall to the Mongols if they invade!" you say, frustrated.

"It certainly doesn't make me feel secure," Takeshi says.

Feeling exhausted and a little depressed, you say, "I wish there was something we could do."

"Me, too," Takeshi agrees, rising to leave. "I find this whole situation very strange."

You suspect that Takeshi senses there is more to your story, but he doesn't pry. If you decide to tell your friend about meeting Midori, turn to **222**. If you decide to obey the Master and not reveal anything about Midori, turn to **73**.

179

The instant your *bokken* falls, you leap onto your assailant, gripping the cords of his armor in both hands. Before he can react, you roll from the roof, pulling him with you to break your fall.

The fall knocks him out and leaves you stunned. You lose 10 hit points.

Recovering quickly, you jump up and remove your helmet and your red tunic, exposing a gold one beneath. Takeshi has done the same and is already putting his red tunic on a fallen opponent. After securing a new helmet on your head, you only have time to drape your red tunic over the unconscious samurai at your feet before six of his comrades burst through the door from the front courtyard. Seconds later, others appear on the rooftop, gazing down into the courtyard below.

You and Takeshi raise your hands over your heads, shouting, "The enemy is defeated! The gold army is victorious!" Caught up in the excitement of the battle, the gold-uniformed warriors don't examine you and Takeshi very carefully. Instead they join your victory cheer.

Turn to 82.

180

Perhaps sensing your anguish, the Master finishes quickly. "You are a master swordsman and shrewd tactician, Kurasai, ready for active duty. Further training here will only frustrate your desire to experiment. Present yourself to General Kosuge in the Kurume garrison within four days."

With those brief words, you're dismissed from the school, and only one day before your graduation! Although you knew it might happen, you're still surprised and shocked. You desperately want to explain

that Genzo couldn't have dominated you in a more realistic setting than the dueling ground, but tradition holds you back. It's not your place to question the Master's decision.

Instead, you bow, saying sincerely, "I am honored by the instruction I have received here and will conduct myself to honor the *dojo* and its *sensei*."

The Master bows in return, then waves his hand in a gesture of dismissal. You bow again, rise, and walk to the sunlit doorway. The challenge of active duty excites you, but you cannot erase your shame at being dismissed from the school nor your sadness at leaving your friend Takeshi behind.

181

Again and again, like two vipers, you and Genzo strike at each other with lightning speed, then separate, searching for another opening. The big samurai is beginning to slam through your defenses by brute strength alone. You are usually faster than he is, but you can't seem to hurt him enough through his armor. Soon, from exhaustion, you realize that your advantage of speed is slipping away. Frustrated, you wish you had more room to maneuver, that you weren't confined to this small square of gravel. You know the fight is nearing its end, but you can't think of any way to prevent it.

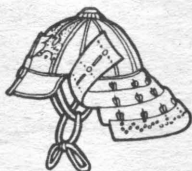
Genzo senses the end is near, too, and intensifies his attacks. *Where does he get his energy?* you wonder, bracing your *bokken* against a right cross strike. Suddenly the blade changes direction in midswing, a move you should have anticipated.

You straighten your arms as quickly as you can, moving your *bokken* up to block his. Too late, you realize your blade is turned sideways. In a shower of splinters, Genzo's *bokken* crashes through your blade

onto your helmet.

You cry out as fire shoots down through your head, neck, and spine. Your knees buckle and you collapse, falling facefirst into the gravel. In the process, you lose the rest of your hit points.

Turn to 117.



182

Sitting alone in the Master's well-groomed garden, you wait nervously, considering what an invasion might mean for your homeland. You know full well that most of Japan's armies are inland, fighting each other in provincial wars.

When the Master returns, he sits slowly, then says, "You look troubled, Kurasai."

You speak frankly. "Our country is ripe for invasion, Master. We must prepare for such a crisis, but how will all the provinces put aside their differences?"

The Master lifts his hand to interrupt you and smiles mysteriously. "Nothing unites a quarreling family more than a troublesome stranger, Kurasai. Leave such concerns to Lord Tomotada. Your responsibility is to your training."

You nod out of respect, but you're not sure you either understand or agree with the Master.

Turn to 225.

The courtyard quickly fills with attackers. There are so many of them you suspect many were injured early in the fight but have since recovered. Before long, they all stand facing you, the sole defender still on his feet. Unmoving, they wait to see what you will do.

You can think of two choices. First, you could charge them and take as many of them as possible down with you—a brave and honorable “death” in the samurai tradition. Second, you could symbolically commit *seppuku*, the warrior’s ritual suicide. In samurai tradition, *seppuku* is regarded as preferable to the humiliation of capture or defeat at the hands of one’s enemies.

If you decide to charge the crowd of warriors, turn to **90**. If you decide to act out the ritual suicide, turn to **116**.

You keep a safe distance from Genzo while you watch for an opening and conserve your strength. Then, at the same instant, you both charge, clashing in a flurry of kicks and punches.

Make a physical prowess check by rolling one die and adding the result to your physical prowess skill score. If the total is 19 or more, turn to **18**. If it is 18 or less, turn to **166**.

Pulling yourself onto your hands and knees, you wait until the traitors pass the outcrop. Then, without a word, you leap down to the ground behind them. You land with flexed knees to absorb the impact, but with a loud crack, you snap one of the dry branches that litter the ground.



So tense are the *ronin* that both jump up and cry out at the sound, letting go of the boar. You had intended to kill them both immediately, beheading them before they could react, but you can't, not without giving them a chance to surrender. You shout at the surprised *ronin* before they can turn around. "Traitors! Halt and surrender!"

Without even looking back, the smaller one falls to his knees, trembling, and cries shrilly, "I yield! I yield!"

Ogawa, however, spins around, pulling a huge *no-dachi*, an oversize *katana*, from a sheath strapped to his back. Seeing you standing there, the giant warrior grins a toothless grin and growls, "Insolent calf!"

You start toward Ogawa, holding *Kurodachi* ready, but you see Hiyashi was lying when he yielded and now faces you, drawing back an arrow in a small bow.

A slight twist of your wrist brings *Kurodachi*'s tip through the bowstring before he can let the arrow fly. You swing again, striking Hiyashi in the side. His stolen armor fails him, and he topples over, dead. Hearing rather than seeing Ogawa's lunge, you sidestep, whirling *Kurodachi* into an overhead block that barely stops the giant traitor's blade. You leap back out of his range and spin to face him.

Turn to 8.

186

You sink back, overwhelmed by emotion. "I—I never knew," you say, almost disbelieving. You remember countless things your father taught you while he was still alive. You recognize that he taught you many of his values, and in that way he led you, without your knowing, to become a ninja. Slowly you draw *Kurodachi* and study its black blade. *So this is*

why my father's sword reflects no light—it is a weapon of the ninja, masters of the night. You straighten. "Thank you for telling me, Master," you say aloud. "I only regret that my father is not here to help teach me."

The Master nods, understanding. "I share your regret, Kurasai." Then, waving to the south, he adds, "Come. We must return to the *dojo* before dawn."

You stand to leave, then turn, remembering the ninja you fought. Startled, you see he now stands just a few feet behind you, though you didn't hear him approach. "Who are you, anyway?" you ask, but you receive no answer. You turn to the Master, but he only shakes his head.

He explains, "We only learn the identity of other ninjas when we must know. We all disguise ourselves to the outside world, for the slightest breach in our secrecy could endanger many lives. This tactic of maintaining two identities is called *yomogami nojitsu*. It is difficult but necessary, and it will become a part of your daily life. I have worked with some ninjas for thirty years without ever finding out who they are!"

You look back to the black-garbed ninja and stare at his eyes, certain that you have seen them before. Suddenly you realize you have never heard him speak, and a shocking thought springs into your mind.

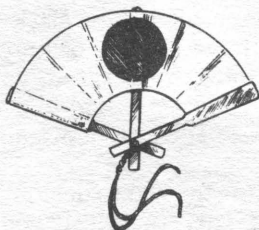
"Midori!" you exclaim, recalling her eyes, her size, her surprisingly athletic body.

The Master shakes his head. "You are only guessing, Kurasai. Come. We must depart."

The ninja turns and jogs into the darkness in the opposite direction. Reluctantly you follow the Master into the forest. You can't be absolutely certain, but

you have a very strong suspicion that the ninja you fought was Princess Midori!

Turn to 193.



187

Once again your name is the first one to be read. You feel honored to be chosen, for it shows your *sensei* and the Master have great confidence in you. You expect the Master to read the other names before you must decide whether or not to accept, but once again you are surprised.

Sensei Haraku marches briskly to a position directly before you, followed at a respectful distance by the *dojo*'s old scribe, Osama Kitojima. "Kurasai Hidenaga," Haraku begins, "do you accept the honor and challenge of special training, or do you choose the challenges and responsibility of serving in active duty?"

Your immediate reaction is to accept the special training, but you heed the Master's warning and consider your options. You don't know what this training will be like, but you're certain it will be severe. Lord Tomotada said some may not even live through it. *Of course, you realize, active duty in the army will be dangerous, too.*

You know if you choose to stay you will have to endure three more years of training under the samurai code. Although you enjoy learning, you have

spent your entire life under formal instruction and are anxious to put your skills into action. Yet you recognize there is still much you can learn from the *sensei* and the Master.

You think of your pledge to stick together with Takeshi, but you have no way of knowing if he will have the same choice. Frustrated, you wish all the names were read before you had to decide.

"Kurasai?" *Sensei* Haraku demands, interrupting your thoughts.

The time has come for you to decide. If you agree to continue training, turn to **196**. If you choose active duty, turn to **125**.

188

The *ronin* pass the outcrop that conceals you, heading west. Hiyashi, you see, carries a small bow and a short quiver. Strapped to Ogawa's back is a *no-dachi*, an oversized *katana* and a dangerous weapon in the hands of someone strong enough to wield it properly. Ogawa certainly looks strong enough, but not very fast. Although the two bandits are quieter now, they are by no means stealthful. After watching their progress for a minute, you know that unless you make a major blunder you should be able to track them unnoticed.

When they leave your sight, you rise to a crouch, then shinny down a gnarled tree growing beside the outcrop, keeping the trunk between you and the traitors. A few steps later, you again have them in your sight as they make their way over a rough path toward the sea. Even though it makes it more difficult to travel, you keep to the underbrush a few yards from the path. *If I was on the path, you think, they could see me as easily as I see them.*

Wind-rustled leaves continue to mask the occa-

sional sounds you make, but the breeze is intermittent, unexpectedly giving way to silence at unpredictable intervals. *Unfortunate indeed, you fret. I can't follow near enough to hear what they say. I must content myself, for now, to just see where they go.*

Every few minutes, Ogawa tenses, hunching his shoulders, then spins around to look back. You only have a split second to react and conceal yourself when he turns.

Before long, as you near the coast, the woods begin to thin and the traitors' pace quickens. You fear they have spotted or heard you. When the beach comes into sight both men dash into a thicket at the edge of the sandy beach. You also dive for cover, certain that you were detected.

Turn to **201**.

189

Instantly you duck down, leaving only your fingertips exposed on the ledge. The snake misses with its strike and flies off the ledge. To your horror, you feel the serpent's tail fall across your shoulder and quickly coil around your left arm. An instant later, the snake's sharp fangs sink painfully into your neck.

You lose 4 hit points.

You flinch from the fiery wound but reach back and grab the snake with a shudder. You feel it tense its body to strike again, but you tear it off your back and fling it out into space before it can strike.

Remembering the danger from below, you heave yourself up onto the ledge and roll back from the edge. At that moment, above you, you see a black figure falling toward you out of the darkness.

Turn to **204**.

Instantly you drop to the roof and tear loose one of the clay tiles. Twisting around, you fling it at your assailant. Startled, he ducks as you leap for your weapon, which is now starting to slide down the roof. As your right hand wraps around its handle, you hear Takeshi's warning cry from below: "Watch out, Kurasai!"

As you begin to roll, the full weight of the leaping samurai slams into your back, knocking the wind from your lungs. You both crash through the tiles, snapping the rafters of the roof with a loud crack. Like a cat, you manage to flip around over your attacker in midair so he crashes into the floor first. Nevertheless, your helmet smashes hard into a desk corner. You lose all your remaining hit points.

The last thing you hear before passing out is Takeshi's final cry as he is overpowered outside. If the *shuriken* you found on your pillow is gold-colored, turn to 127. If it is silver, turn to 15.

191

It's dark when you finally arrive back at the *dojo*. You ride directly to the Master's quarters. He listens to your story, including the part about Midori's mysterious behavior, without comment while he finishes sipping his tea. When you finish, he remains silent awhile longer, then asks, "The boat headed north toward Hakata?"

You nod. "Yes, Master Yoshimura."

"What do you think the *ronin* and the Mongol were doing by the coastline, Kurasai?"

"Perhaps they were checking the coastal defenses around Hakata harbor."

"And the knotted rope and bamboo pole?"

You hesitate before speaking, aware of the implica-

tions of your answer. "They were designed to measure depths. The pole could quickly measure depths near shore, while the anchor rope could measure deeper water." Anticipating the master's next question, you continue. "The Mongol is searching for safe boat landings away from our Hakata harbor defenses. Such a landing would be needed only by smugglers and invaders. I suspect the Mongols plan to invade near here."

"Invaders . . ." The Master says the word slowly. "A strong possibility, Kurasai. You've done well today. You showed great wisdom and skill by tracking the traitors. Wait here while I send this information to Lord Tomotada." He requests you to stay, then excuses himself to dispatch the message to Lord Tomotada.

Leaning on a cane, the Master hurries out to send his message. You notice that he puts very little weight on the cane, however. *That's odd, you think. I'll have to remember that.*

Turn to 182.

192

Carrying a jug of water, a coil of rope, and your black blade, *Kurodachi*, you search along the cliffs all afternoon for your friend. Frequently you call out his name or dismount and walk to the edge of the cliffs to scan the beach and rocks a hundred feet below. In most places, the cliffs are too steep to climb, but you search several spots where Takeshi could have climbed down. One place in particular draws your attention, a small ledge halfway down the cliff, mostly hidden from view by a rock outcrop. By lying flat on your stomach and leaning far out over the edge, you can see that the ledge below is bare.

Dusk finds you near the Kagatora Shrine, feeling

discouraged. You have seen no one all afternoon. "Takeshi is probably back at the *dojo* eating dinner," you tell yourself, but you don't really believe it. As the sky begins to darken quickly, you realize you won't be able to search any more tonight.

You consider riding on to the shrine to watch the sun set and try to relax, but you also know you have a long ride back. If you decide to ride back to the *dojo* right away, turn to **20**. If you choose to ride to the Kagatora Shrine first, turn to **224**.

193

Moonlight filters through the forest canopy, casting a dim, mottled glow over the forest floor below. The Master walks swiftly ahead of you, appearing almost to glide over the ground. You are accustomed to the image of an old, crippled teacher and find it difficult to get used to this startling new appearance. Just before dawn, you reach the hill that overlooks the *dojo*. Together you halt and survey the buildings below.

A sudden thought sends a chill through your heart. "What happened to Takeshi, Master?" you ask. "Was he tested, too, or was he merely used to lure me out alone?"

"Your friend also faced the test of the ninja," the Master answers.

Aghast, you realize that Takeshi may be dead, if his test was anything like yours. You hardly dare ask, "Did—did he survive his test?"

The Master claps his hands and says, "Let him answer that for himself!" Turn to **233**.

194

You leap into a wide stance, knees bent, and swing *Kurodachi* to block the ninja's blade. Your arms

recoil with the force of the impact, but you stop the blade. The ninja, however, is already kicking at your arms, as if he planned your block!

You pull back, but the ninja's black-wrapped foot slams into your forearms like a piece of steel. You lose 5 hit points. You cry out in pain, but somehow you manage to hang on to *Kurodachi*.

You know you must strike back or risk being driven off the edge. If you decide to attack with *Kurodachi*, relying on its nearly invisible blade, turn to 227. If you decide to kick back, giving your sore arms a moment to recover, turn to 109.

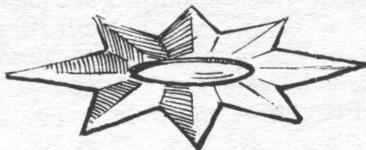
195

You close and lock the door after Takeshi leaves. Then you secure your room by jamming a stout *bokken* in the floor groove beside the door, so the door can't slide open even if it's unlocked somehow. Finally you pull the two wooden window shutters closed and tie them together with strong cord.

Exhausted, you fall into bed, but you soon find that you can't sleep, thinking about Midori and the traitors. Finally a drizzling rain lulls you to sleep. You regain 10 hit points from your rest. Remember, you can't recover more hit points than you started with.

You wake to the sound of a single bird chirping in the rain outside. Beside you on your pillow lies a silver *shuriken*.

Turn to 44.



Although you are not entirely sure of your decision, you must appear certain. You answer in a voice so steady it surprises even you. "*Chomei Sensei No Dojo* is one of the few *dojos* that achieve greatness and can hope to attain perfection within their walls. I am honored to continue learning here and will contribute to the other students by my example of discipline and wholehearted dedication." You finish your declaration with a deep bow.

Immediately you sense that *Sensei Haraku* expected your answer and is pleased by it, though you don't understand why. The *dojo's* old scribe also seems greatly moved by your words. He carefully reinks his brush before adding your declaration to his records.

A few minutes later, you hear Genzo announce his decision. You are convinced he will choose active duty in the army because he seems to enjoy breaking heads so much. To your surprise, he elects additional training. *I'm not sure if I can stand another three years of him*, you think.

You wait anxiously, hoping the Master will also offer Takeshi the advanced training. You grin when you hear his name called, but you quickly become nervous as Takeshi takes a painfully long time to make up his mind. Finally, to your relief, he follows your lead and decides to remain at the school.

Turn to **223**.

"Just a second," you say, pulling a robe over your sleeping clothes. Quickly you unlock the door. Although you don't know how Takeshi could have done it, you hope he's the one who placed the *shuri-ken* on your pillow. If he didn't, you know you won't

sleep easily until you find out who did.

Takeshi slips through the door, pulling it closed behind him. He looks as if he, too, just woke up. You speak first, trying to make him confess. "I don't know how you got in here last night, Takeshi, but you certainly surprised me with that *shuriken*."

"What?" your friend asks, sounding genuinely surprised.

"The *shuriken*," you say, pointing at the missile on your desk.

Takeshi's face turns pale. Without a word, he reaches into his robe and withdraws a *shuriken* exactly like yours, except gold in color. Leaning close to you, Takeshi whispers, "I was going to ask *you* how you got this into *my* room!"

In his eyes, you see that your friend speaks the truth. Feeling as though someone might be spying on you, you suggest, "Takeshi, let's talk somewhere else."

Takeshi nods in agreement. Grabbing the *shuriken*, you slip on a pair of sandals and leave your room and the building. Turn to 105.

198

If you have lost all your hit points, you fall to the gravel, unconscious. Turn to 117. If you have 6 or fewer hit points remaining, turn to 126. If you still have 7 or more hit points, you may attack Genzo again or try to escape. If you want to attack, turn to 184. If you think you're too battered to stand much more damage and want to try to find a way to escape from the fight, turn to 5.

199

A sea of gold-colored tunics immediately swarms through the archway to surround your comrades in

the front courtyard. A quick glance over your shoulder reveals that the rear courtyard is also about to fall. Knowing the end is near, you signal to Takeshi to clear the roof. You know your timing must be perfect. A few seconds too soon or too late, and your plan will fail.

Two gold-clad samurai leap off the roof to avoid a vicious stroke from Takeshi, who promptly dashes over to the other side of the roof and leaps down into the courtyard. Already the attackers are battering the barricaded door to the front courtyard. With only seconds left, you spin around to dispose of the only remaining attacker on the roof.

Ducking a strong cross-stroke, you stumble as a clay tile breaks under your foot. Off balance, you barely have time to shield yourself against the next blow. The force of the impact knocks your *bokken* down onto the roof.

Instantly you must decide whether to dive for your weapon or fight this foe unarmed. Within moments, other samurai will reach the courtyard below and begin clambering onto the roof. If they do, you won't be able to join Takeshi in the courtyard below to carry out your plan.

If you decide to try to recover your *bokken*, turn to 190. If you elect to fight unarmed, turn to 179.

200

Your maneuver catches Genzo by surprise, but he recovers quickly, jumping back to avoid your swing. You adjust your aim but only strike the tip of his *bokken*. Raising his weapon high over his head, Genzo charges with a loud cry, anticipating victory. Knowing you're extremely vulnerable lying on the ground, you kick out with all your strength, hoping to trip your assailant.

You feel your right foot kick Genzo's feet out from under him, but the huge samurai decides to follow through with his attack rather than try to catch his balance. His *bokken* slams heavily into your stomach, and you scream out and double over in pain, dropping your weapon. Deduct 6 points of damage from your hit point total.

A split second later, Genzo slams chest-first into the gravel, knocking the wind out of himself. You both struggle back to your feet. Turn to 218.



201

Moments later, the two *ronin* emerge from the thicket, dragging a large wooden fishing boat out onto the beach.

Curious, you crawl to some low shrubs at the edge of the sand, watching them haul the fishing boat toward the water. Hiyashi pushes from behind while Ogawa pulls on the anchor rope tied to the bow. You notice that the rope is knotted at regular intervals, unlike any anchor chain or cord you've ever seen.

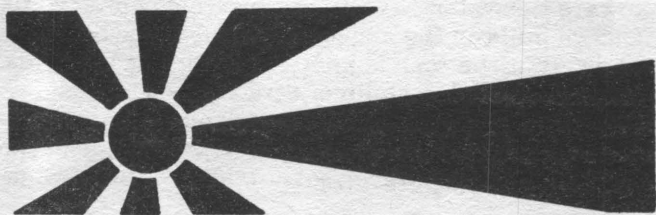
While they wrestle the boat into the water, you consider charging out to attack them. You decide not to reveal yourself, however, so the traitors and the Mon-

gols will never know they were discovered and won't change their plans—whatever they are.

Chest-high in the waves, they load the boar into the boat and leap inside from the same side, almost capsizing it. *They're certainly not experienced sailors*, you think. The boat is probably stolen. As Hiyashi raises a small sail, Ogawa holds the boat against the waves with a long bamboo pole that is oddly marked at equal lengths by rings of black paint.

The sail quickly catches the breeze, pushing the boat out to sea, aided by Ogawa's pole until it no longer reaches the bottom. Both men begin stripping off their armor, and within minutes, they have the appearance of ordinary fishermen. You watch until the boat disappears from sight around the headland to the north. Emerging from cover, you cross to the thicket where their boat was hidden. Searching the area, you find that they left nothing behind.

Sheathing *Kurodachi*, you start back, this time on the path, considering what you've seen. You wonder why Midori was in the forest and if she notified anyone to come to your aid. Somehow you doubt it—to do so she would have to explain why she was out alone in the woods. But more important than that, you remind yourself, is the question of just what the Mongols are doing. The mysteries perplex you all the way back to Midori's horse. Turn to 191.



At the last possible instant, you snap your left arm up to block Genzo's knife-hand strike. To the big samurai's surprise, your forearm deflects his heavy gauntlet harmlessly up and over your head. Immediately you lunge forward, throwing your weight behind a powerful right-hand punch.

You feel your blow connect solidly, forcing a gasp from Genzo. Once more you swing, but your foe stumbles aside, out of range. Confidently you resume your starting position.

Turn to 212.

Your voice is steady as you say, "I am honored by this offer, Master, but I cannot join you. I couldn't give the clan the loyalty you demand because I am bound in service to Lord Tomotada. For generations, my ancestors have distinguished themselves as samurai. Now it is my turn."

"An honorable pursuit, Kurasai," the Master declares solemnly. "I must admit, however, that I am disappointed and somewhat surprised. The clan will be weaker without you."

A wave of guilt and regret sweeps over you, and you open your mouth, thinking of changing your answer, but you say nothing. You think, *I made my decision and must live with it. My reasons are sound.* You take a deep breath and ask the Master, "What will become of me now?"

The Master replies gravely and without hesitation, "You must forget all that you have seen and heard tonight and continue your life as though none of it occurred. It will be very difficult, of course, but if you do so, you can complete your training at the *dojo*." He pauses, and his face goes grim. "However, if you

reveal any of what you've learned to anyone, you will die."

You expected no less. Suddenly a horrifying thought sends a chill through your heart. You hardly dare ask, "What happened to Takeshi?"

Turn to 230.

204

A thin cord trails from the figure, and you realize that yet another bandit is rappeling down to the ledge. *These attacks can't be happening by chance, you tell yourself, your mind racing. They are too carefully planned—but why? Did the Mongols hire these assassins to murder me for uncovering their plot?*

Frustrated, you haul yourself to your feet and draw *Kurodachi*. As you stand, a wave of dizziness sweeps over you. Then your limbs stiffen and your vision blurs. The poison is taking effect. You lose another 2 hit points.

Hearing the bandit land at the other end of the narrow ledge, you shake your head to clear your eyesight and start forward. Then, seeing your opponent, you freeze. From his appearance, you know you are face to face with a ninja!

Turn to 177.

205

From the looks on the faces around you, it's obvious the others are surprised by your suggestion. Genzo seems to speak for the rest. "Winning is not our task here, Kurasai. Today, we learn how to die. We must demonstrate that we are able to fall honorably, as warriors should."

You try to conceal your frustration with this blind concern for honor as you reply. "I am as prepared as you to fight until the end with honor, Genzo, but not

until there is no other choice."

Impatiently Genzo declares, "Unlike Kurasai, I know my duty and approach it without fear." He strides across the courtyard to stand in the center of the open archway. "I will position myself here," he says solemnly, "and defend the main entryway to the complex alone." He stretches out his long arms to both sides, but even Genzo's long arms can't quite span the gap. Then he grins and proclaims, "To be sure that no one can get around me, I will chain myself here, in the center of the archway."

Genzo is obviously very pleased with his idea and explains it in more detail. "I will tie a long chain around my waist, then attach each end of the chain to opposite sides of the arch. That way, anyone trying to get past me must either jump over or crawl under the chain—making them extremely vulnerable!"

Nodding excitedly, your classmates proclaim their approval of Genzo's daring plan. Turning to Takeshi, you whisper, "Genzo's fate is sealed. I will never understand this need to practice one's own death."

Takeshi agrees. "I, too, find little value in it."

You know you're getting quite a reputation for not following samurai traditions very closely. You worry that the *sensei* and Lord Tomotada will begin to question your fitness for continued training. With that thought in mind, you consider whether you should join your comrades in a standard defense of the training complex. The fight should, after all, be exhilarating. Yet the challenge of somehow pulling off a victory is extremely appealing.

If you decide to join the others to prove that your courage and honor are equal to theirs, turn to **53**. If you want to try to prepare a surprise plan of your own, even if you risk humiliation if it fails, turn to **215**.



206

Completely taken by surprise, Genzo starts to fall as his leg flies out from under him. He tries to tuck into a roll, but he crashes awkwardly onto the gravel. Before he can move, you kick once more, catching him squarely in the belly. You are sure he felt that blow as he flops over, scrambling frantically to get away.

Not wanting to lose momentum, you close in again, but Genzo musters enough strength to kick back with both feet, grunting with the effort. You block the kick just in time, but you bruise both your arms on his armored boots and lose 2 hit points.

If you have 20 or more hit points remaining, turn to **32**. If you have 19 or fewer hit points, turn to **217**.

207

You both rush toward the wall, Takeshi in the lead. Takeshi uses his pole to drive climbers off the wall as they come over the edge. With furious *bokken* strikes and spinning kicks, you dispatch those that make it past him, but you know that your wounds and increasing fatigue are taking their toll on you.

After almost fifteen minutes of furious hand-to-hand combat, you hear a chorus of yells and cheers

from beyond the rear wall. Knowing the end is near, you shout to Takeshi and Genzo. "We're the only ones left! They've taken the rear courtyard from the other side!"

With only moments left before the attackers flood the courtyard from all sides, one of your blows misses, shattering your *bokken* against the stone wall. Your adversary hesitates, almost as startled as you. You must decide instantly whether to continue fighting unarmed or to dive for one of the numerous *bokkens* strewn about the courtyard from fallen samurai.

If you decide to dive for a weapon, turn to **221**. If you decide to fight unarmed, turn to **163**.

208

Proudly you rise and step forward from the line of kneeling samurai. With your classmates behind you, you bow to *Sensei* Haraku, then face Lord Tomotada and Master Yoshimura. The hot sun is directly overhead, and beads of perspiration roll down your back, under your shirt and heavy *yoroi*.

Haraku recites your lineage from memory. "Kura-sai Hidenaga, nineteen years of age, the firstborn of Uesigi Hidenaga, who defeated twelve mounted Kosumi rebels before he was trampled to death in defense of Hakata Castle; son of General Si-Shoni Hidenaga, the Slayer, victor of the Obaku campaign; from the honorable family line of . . ."

Without moving your head, you scan the courtyard before you. Lord Tomotada and Master Yoshimura sit comfortably on a stained wooden platform along the courtyard's long side wall. In the bright light, the blazing reds and golds of Lord Tomotada's lacquered armor contrast with the Master's crisp white robes.

Ten of Lord Tomotada's personal guards stand

motionless behind the platform. Each holds a long polished spear, topped by a sharp double-edged blade. Two officers sit crossed-legged on the hard-packed gravel to each side of the platform, their sheathed *katana* placed in front of them. Banners flutter from slender bamboo poles affixed to the back of the guards' armor. Lord Tomotada's family emblem, a brilliant red crane in a gold circle, decorates each banner.

Every samurai, by law, serves a master, who in turn serves another samurai, all the way to the shogun and the emperor. You, and all of your classmates, serve the *sensei*, your instructors, who serve Master Yoshimura. Ultimately, you and they, like everyone in Hakata province, serve Lord Tomotada.

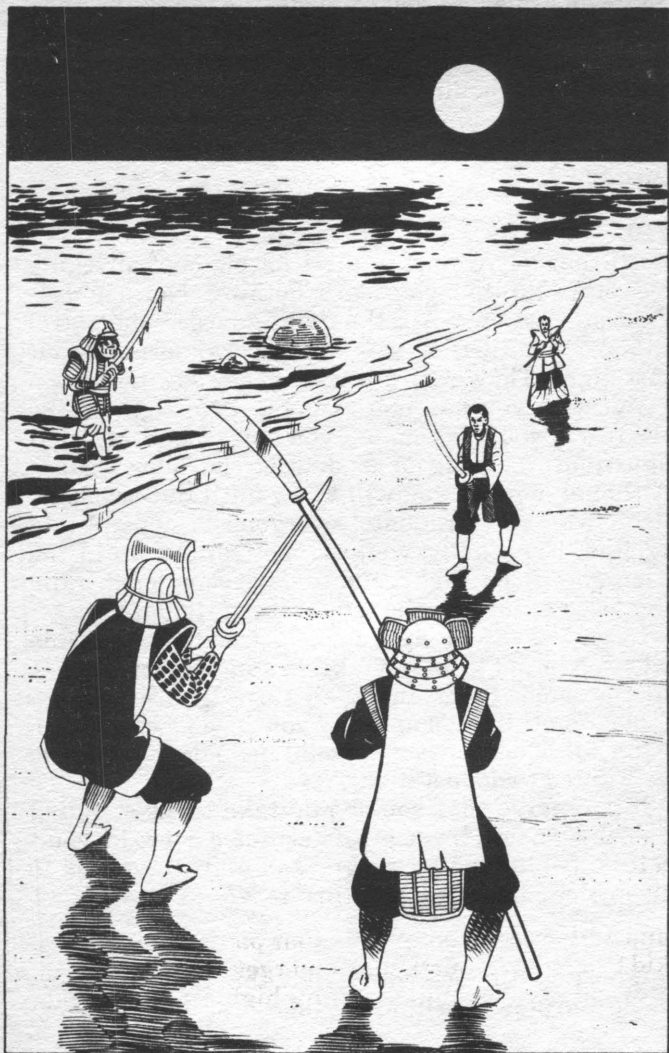
You are especially proud to stand before Lord Tomotada today, for it was he who gave you the chance to train here after your father died. Now the first-ranking graduate of the finest *dojo* in the province, you know you are one of the most skilled samurai in Japan, like your father before you. You only wish he could have witnessed your achievement. Trying to dismiss such thoughts from your mind, you return your attention to *Sensei Haraku*.

When he finishes announcing your successful completion of training, you bow low to Lord Tomotada and the Master, who nod in return. Then you step back into line as Haraku reads the next name: "Genzo Taira!"

Turn to 214.

209

With a bound, you dash from the melee, spraying sand with every step. Within four paces, though, you skid to a halt. A fourth man emerges from the surf to intercept you, swinging a sling high over his head.



You leap aside, but you can't see the projectile.

The next instant, a rock slams painfully into your chest, and you lose 5 hit points. You spin to face the other bandits behind you.

If you decide to stand and fight, turn to **52**. If you choose to run for the cliff and try to climb to the ledge, turn to **22**.

210

All that day, you stay alert for signs of anything else unusual, but you learn nothing. Neither does Takeshi. You even ask the *dojo*'s guards, who patrol the grounds, if they saw anyone wandering about last night. They assure you that they saw nothing.

You wish you had more time to investigate. Like the rest of your classmates, you must spend considerable time preparing for graduation the following day. Although none of you will know until the ceremony itself who will graduate, everyone is hopeful and excited. Eventually, you, too, get caught up in the excitement. You feel proud to have completed training at what may be the toughest *dojo* in Japan.

Later, as dusk approaches, you must decide whether or not to follow Takeshi's suggestion to sleep in the same room and take turns guarding each other. You think it's unlikely you'll be visited again. After all, whoever it was could have done anything he wanted to do last night.

If you agree that you should take turns standing guard, turn to **7**. If you are determined not to let yourself be frightened by a *shuriken* and you decide to sleep alone in your room, turn to **37**.

211

Ignoring finesse, you strike the ninja's *katana* aside and plow into him, shoulder first. He falls back,

off balance, dangerously near the edge. Before you can press the attack, however, the ninja twists and leaps back toward the center of the ledge like a cat.

Encouraged, you launch your next attack before he lands. If you decide to strike with *Kurodachi*, relying on its nearly invisible blade, turn to **227**. If you try to surprise the ninja with a fast kick, turn to **109**.

212

You and Genzo circle each other warily, each of you testing your opponent. While searching for an opening in Genzo's defense, you try not to allow him a chance to attack. Already you are beginning to feel the weight of the heavy *yoroi* and the heat from your exertions. Ready to spring, you continue to circle, feeling the tension mount within you. You know that before long, one of you will attack—the only question is who.

You concentrate, trying to decide what to do next. You know if you wait until Genzo attacks, you can decide how to react after he commits to an action. On the other hand, if you strike first, you may just surprise him.

If you elect to attack first, turn to **67**. If you decide to wait until Genzo commits himself first, turn to **3**.

213

Moonlight filters through the forest canopy, casting a dim glow over the forest floor below. The Master walks swiftly ahead of you, appearing almost to glide over the ground. You are accustomed to the image of an old, crippled teacher and find it difficult to get used to this startling new appearance. Just before dawn, you reach the hill that overlooks the *dojo*. Together you halt and survey the buildings below.

Neither of you move or speak. In the still silence,

you sense a bond of understanding and respect between you.

Slowly the Master reaches into a small bush and draws out his cane. When he turns around, he is bent over, leaning on the cane for support. Even his face seems more wrinkled. Once again he appears old, and you realize that no one would ever believe you even if you did reveal that he is a ninja.

You can't suppress a grin at his transformation. He responds instantly with a warning: "That is the only mistake you are allowed. The next is your last!"

Your grin vanishes immediately. The Master smiles, but he made his point.

In the soft, penetrating voice you remember, the Master asks, "Shall we return to the *dojo*, Kurasai?" and begins to hobble down the path.

"Yes, Master," you reply, hurrying ahead to lead the way for the "crippled" old *sensei*.

214

The graduation ceremony continues for some time with nothing out of the ordinary occurring. Takeshi graduates right after Genzo. Eventually *Sensei* Haraku reads the names of thirty-five graduates out of over sixty in your class. All the students, including those who failed to graduate, will go on to active duty in the provincial armies, but the graduates will receive more important and more difficult assignments and will also enjoy higher rank and greater privileges.

Lord Tomotada stands and clears his throat. You expect him to announce the active duty assignments, but he surprises you.

"Today," he begins, speaking in his deep voice, full of authority, "we will offer three years of advanced training to a few select samurai. This training will be

strenuous and difficult. Indeed, some may not live through it. However, those who do will become examples and inspiration for all samurai to follow. From them, I may choose my generals, counselors, and special agents."

Curious and excited about this plan, you wonder if you will be offered this special training. You sense anticipation swelling in your classmates around you.

Lord Tomotada continues. "In a moment, I will offer this training to some of you, but I do not command that you accept it. You may choose active duty instead. Master Yoshimura will announce the candidates." Lord Tomotada sits down as the Master rises slowly.

The Master's voice is so quiet it's almost a whisper, yet, as always, everyone can hear him clearly. How he makes his voice carry, directing the sound to where he wants it, is a mystery to you.

His speech is short and contains a warning. "Many attempt but fail. Some never try. Only a few achieve greatness. None hold perfection for more than an instant. Now some of you will face an opportunity to train and strive for perfection. Beware, those of you who would accept! To refuse this opportunity is a loss of honor, but your honor will suffer more if you accept the challenge and fail. If there is any doubt within you, let it speak now, lest it kill you in the year to come." He unrolls a scroll, then looks up to announce the chosen.

Turn to 187.

215

You and Takeshi spend the rest of the morning wandering in the *dojo's* garden, working on developing a plan. One point is clear from the beginning. "We can't possibly defeat so many by standard methods of

fighting," you state, "no matter how good our plan is."

Takeshi agrees with you, but he adds, "It would be another matter if I could use my bow."

As you sit together, trying to envision the coming battle, a scheme slowly grows in your mind until you see all the details. Rapidly you outline the plan to Takeshi.

When you have finally finished explaining it, Takeshi grins with delight. "An excellent plan, Kurasai! Risky, but so unexpected that it might just work."

After gathering a few necessary supplies, you both return to the training complex. Without an overall plan, each of your companions is choosing his own defensive position within the complex. You and Takeshi suggest that the two of you defend one of the classroom buildings. The others agree, then announce their own choices.

As planned, Genzo chains himself in the front archway. Four advanced students place themselves in the front courtyard behind him, while five others form a defensive circle in the rear courtyard. The last two elect to barricade themselves in the other classroom building. A good supply of *bokken* and bamboo poles lies beside each man. Most of your comrades expect to go through several weapons before they fall.

Turn to 45.

216

You stand with your classmates at dawn, listening to the Master explain an unusual exercise. "This exercise will sharpen your stamina and sense of direction. A *sensei* will blindfold each of you and lead you on horseback into the forest. Then the *sensei* will remove your blindfold and ride back, bringing your

horse with him. You must each find your own way back."

At first mumbling in disapproval, your classmates soon change their minds about the exercise until they seem actually eager to take part. You, too, feel excited by the challenge, but you're suspicious, too. You whisper to Takeshi, "Of course we can learn from this experience, but once more they seem to be testing us rather than teaching us."

Takeshi nods in agreement, then adds, "Be that as it may, Kurasai, I bet I return before you do."

You smile slowly. "You're on!"

A few minutes later, *Sensei* Haraku ties your graduation scarf around your head, covering your eyes.

Turn to 83.

217

Having stopped you for a second with his kick, Genzo springs to his feet and growls. *He appears unhurt, you think, but he's got to be acting. For my sake, he'd better be!*

Once again you face your foe, circling in the gravel square. You know either one of you could fall at any moment.

Turn to 198.

218

If you have lost all your hit points, you slump to the gravel, unconscious. Turn to 117. If you have 4 or fewer hit points remaining, turn to 181. If you still have 5 or more hit points remaining, you may attack Genzo again or try to escape. If you choose to attack, turn to 130. If you think you're too battered to stand much more damage and want to find a way to escape from the fight before you are even more seriously injured, turn to 110.

Slowly the Master leans forward. "Think for yourself, Kurasai. You are satisfied with neither style nor tradition. You demand technique and purpose. You even go so far as to question the samurai code itself, unwilling to follow it blindly. Furthermore, you are clever. In all these ways, you are like a ninja."

The Master sits up straight, placing his hands on his knees. "I invite you, Kurasai Hidenaga, to follow the ways of *ninjitsu*, the art of the ninja. The training and discipline will be more rigorous and difficult than any you have known, but you will learn skills, techniques, and abilities you cannot imagine! Your strength, speed, and power will increase many times over, and you will know a self-confidence few men share."

The Master's words excite you, but you have reservations. "How will I be asked to use these new and deadly abilities?" you ask. "Isn't it true that many ninjas are assassins, spies, and criminals?"

The Master's brow furrows. "You ask wise questions for one so young, Kurasai. Every ninja clan follows its own creed. Many train solely for assassination, while others seek to advance themselves politically. No one knows the true goals of many clans, not even their own members.

"Individually, the members of my clan strive to fully understand and utilize their minds and bodies. Together, we strive to strengthen Japan. We serve no lord, and thus we are free to act regardless of political boundaries. Thus, when the Mongols invade Japan, as they are certain to do, we will be the first to meet them. We will sink their ships at harbor, ambush their scouts, assassinate their generals, and burn their camps, giving our country's provinces time to unite their armies and repel the invaders."

Hearing the Master's confident tone, you almost pity any Mongol foolish enough to try to invade.

The Master continues. "If you choose to join our clan, Kurasai, you will keep your present identity and continue training at the *dojo* for the time being. You will, of course, receive extra training in addition to your present schedule.

"Think carefully, Kurasai. Your decision is final, our secrecy and discipline absolute. If you choose not to join, you must wipe the memory of this meeting from your mind—or it will be done for you. You may have a few minutes to consider your decision."

Concentrating on all you've heard, you think to yourself, *If I do join, I will become an outcast, never able to lower my guard or reveal my true identity.* Then a horrifying thought occurs to you. "What if this is all a monstrous lie, and what is happening is really part of my samurai training, designed to test my honor and loyalty to Lord Tomotada?"

"Kurasai . . ." You turn at the sound of the Master's voice. "The decision will only grow more complex if you dwell on it. Make your choice!"

If you decide to join the ninja clan, turn to **164**. If you decide not to join, turn to **203**.



Fully awake now, you sit up. There on your pillow lies a flat, eight-pointed gold metal throwing star—a *shuriken*, a favorite, and deadly, ninja weapon. You see that the *shuriken*'s eight points are razor-sharp. When thrown, it is a deadly missile.

You feel uneasy and a little excited thinking about ninjas. Widely believed to be the best warriors and assassins in the world, they are known even more for their secretiveness and mysteriousness. Some people even claim ninjas possess magical or supernatural abilities. Recently you've heard rumors of ninjas infiltrating every clan, every village, even the army and Hakata castle. The *shuriken* reminds you of your childhood dreams of joining a ninja clan, but it also raises new fears of actually meeting up with a real, live ninja.

On your guard now, you sweep your eyes across your room, full of shadows in the dim morning light. You see nothing out of the ordinary. Your mind races with questions. Who put the *shuriken* on your pillow? Takeshi? Someone else, perhaps a ninja? How did he do it without waking you? And why? At first you think Takeshi must have sneaked into your room and placed the missile on your pillow, but a glance shows that your door and window are still locked from the inside. Becoming increasingly nervous, you stand and examine your room more carefully, but everything appears to be normal.

Curious, you carefully pick up the *shuriken*. The two-inch-wide disc feels light in your hand. Its gold surface is so smooth and polished that your reflection is quite clear, even in the dim light.

Perplexed and frightened, you lay the *shuriken* down on your desk. A sudden knock on your door spins you around. "Who is it?" you demand nervously.

"It's me, Takeshi," comes the answer. "Open up! I've got to talk to you!"

Turn to **229**.

221

Seeing the *bokken* shattered in your hand, you drop it and lash out with a roundhouse kick. The move startles your adversary, giving you time to dive past him toward a nearby *bokken*, but a heavy boot stomps down onto the *bokken*'s handle as you reach for it. You grab the leg, pulling the young samurai to the ground. Out of the corner of your eye, you see a samurai leap off the inner wall toward you. Rolling violently to one side, you avoid him, and he lands instead on his samurai comrade.

Seconds later, someone smashes into you from above, stunning you. Before you can react, another samurai crashes into you, pinning your legs. You try to lash out with your gauntlets, but you realize it's no use as your arms are pinned to the ground.

Sudden loud shouts draw your attention to a swarm of samurai throwing themselves at Genzo, still chained in the middle of the archway. Battered and dazed but still on his feet, he somehow holds them back, swinging, kicking, and punching in a frenzy. All at once, his attackers leap aside, leaving him standing alone in the archway.

Confused, Genzo looks about, then shouts in surprise and pulls frantically at his chains. Six samurai are charging straight at him, carrying a tree trunk like a battering ram. Unable to get free of his chains, Genzo plants his feet firmly and raises his *bokken* defiantly, determined to go down swinging. An instant later, Genzo's *bokken* bounces off the trunk just before the trunk slams into his belly armor, throwing him back into the courtyard, chainlinks

flying. Howling in pain, Genzo collapses in the dust. He does not get up.

A second later, a heavy blow lands on your head. You lose the rest of your hit points and pass out.

If the *shuriken* you found on your pillow was silver-colored, turn to 15. If it was a different color, turn to 127.

222

In a low voice, you continue, "Something even stranger happened, Takeshi." Curious, your friend leans close. Quickly you outline everything that happened with Midori and the Master's order not to tell a soul about it.

"Wow!" exclaims Takeshi. "I wonder what she was doing. . . . It almost seems as though the Master knows, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does," you agree, "but I can't understand why he's being so secretive. What frustrates me is that I may never find out. I'm not even supposed to talk about it."

Takeshi nods sympathetically. "You can trust me, Kurasai. I won't say anything about this—I'll think about it, but I won't say anything."

"Thanks, Takeshi." You smile, feeling very tired. "We'd better get some sleep. We've got a full day of training tomorrow." Turn to 195.

223

In the end, only twelve others choose to meet the challenge of the unknown training. To the beat of a large drum outside the courtyard, one of Lord Tomotada's officers marches from the platform, carrying several silk headbands. He stops in front of you, holding between his outstretched hands one of the silk headbands imprinted with Lord Tomotada's red and

gold emblem. You bow until your forehead touches the silk. Then the officer ties the headband around your head, symbolically binding you to complete your training or die trying.

After the ceremony, you ask Takeshi why he took so long deciding whether or not to stay. He answers with a grin. "I wanted to appear very thoughtful, and I also wanted to make you worry that I'd make you face the *shuriken* mystery alone!" Turn to 228.

224

Before long, the shrine comes into view. Built many generations ago, it stands atop a narrow, rocky island that rises straight up from the sea. It can be reached only by a narrow rope bridge suspended high above the waves below. A gravel path leads from the bridge across the top of the rock to a small, circular clearing under a single stone arch. The arch stands as a symbol of calmness and endurance on this storm-battered coast. The small amount of soil on the island supports only a few dwarf shrubs and trees.

You tether your horse and make your way across the swaying bridge. When you reach the shrine, you sit on a moss-covered rock under the arch, listening to the surf crash against the rocks below. A brisk breeze carries the sea's salt smell to your nostrils. Watching the red and orange sunset reflected on the horizon against the ocean, you begin to relax. Then you remember that the Mongols live just across that body of water.

Absentmindedly you pull *Kurodachi* a few inches from its sheath. Suddenly you sense a humming sound, the tone so low you can't tell if you hear it or feel it. Then, with fear and excitement, you realize that the hum is coming from *Kurodachi*!

Turn to 176.

After thinking for a long time with his eyes closed, the Master asks, "Who else knows of what you told me?"

"None, Master Yoshimura, except, as I explained, Princess Midori. I came here immediately."

The Master furrows his brows, then speaks slowly, with great emphasis. "You must never tell anyone the princess was there. Never." He pauses to take a deep breath. "I will arrange to return your horse and Midori's to each of you. The rest of the incident you may tell at your own discretion."

This is odd, you think, sensing that the order to be silent about Midori is not open to question.

"Do not ask, Kurasai," the Master says sadly. "I cannot explain why."

For the second time today, you know you aren't hearing the whole truth, but there is nothing you can do about it. You can't even ask Midori about it, because you don't know when—or if—you'll see her again.

Turn to 178.

You wake up on the ledge, fearful and confused, and recover 5 hit points. Thankfully, your eyes are no longer blinded. You can't tell how much time has passed, but the night sky is still dark. Holding *Kuro-dachi* at the ready, you search the ledge and the cliff face above and below you, but you see no sign of the ninja or his companions.

Gradually you relax a little. Despite your wounds and aching muscles, you begin to feel better. *I fought a ninja and survived*, you marvel. But your mind fills with questions. *Who was the ninja? Why was I attacked? And why did he leave me here? Does*

Takeshi's disappearance have anything to do with this? These are questions you cannot answer, and you force yourself to think about returning to the *dojo*.

Then you notice the cord the ninja used to descend the cliff face still hanging against the side of the cliff. You test it, and it seems to be attached firmly, but you don't dare to use it. You have heard too many stories about traps laid by ninjas. You back off several feet, then painfully begin climbing the cliff to the top.

Turn to **232**.

227

You whip *Kurodachi* in an X-strike, not trying to hit the ninja but to make him lose track of your blade. The ninja backs away a few steps, and you lunge forward, swinging *Kurodachi* in a fast cross-strike.

Make a *kenjutsu* check by rolling one die and adding the result to your *kenjutsu* skill score. If the total is 23 or more, turn to **155**. If it is 22 or less, turn to **128**.

228

The weeks that follow are filled with the most difficult instruction of your life. You are already quite proficient in samurai skills such as *kenjutsu*, archery, and horseback riding, but *Sensei* Haraku and the other instructors push you toward perfection, demanding eleven or twelve hours of practice and training every day. Much of the training emphasizes strategy and leadership. The *sensei* teach that you must inspire your men with strong character and command their respect by example and skill.

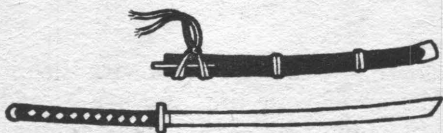
You spend several days marching scores of younger students through the forests and plains near Hakata in mock battles against armies led by your class-

mates. Lord Tomotada and his staff of generals and advisors observe many of these exercises. No doubt they are searching for potential future generals.

Your lessons involve much more than combat skills. As a samurai officer, you must also negotiate, correspond, and conduct the intricacies of diplomacy. To prepare for these duties, you spend hours studying the writings of ancient and modern philosophers and diplomats.

Few days go by, however, without several hours of strenuous combat practice. As before, you usually drill and spar with wooden *bokken*, but more and more, you use your *katana* in class. Using these deadly swords requires complete control and absolute concentration. A *katana* can kill with a single stroke. But you enjoy using *Kurodachi*, your black-bladed *katana*. The sword is perfectly balanced for you and seems to flow with your every movement, almost like an extension of your arm.

Turn to 175.



229

“Just one second,” you say, pulling a robe on over your sleeping clothes. Quickly you unlock the door. Although you don’t know how Takeshi could have done it, you hope he’s the one who placed the *shuriken* on your pillow. If he didn’t, you know you won’t sleep easily until you find out who did.

Takeshi slips through the door, pulling it closed behind him. He looks as if he, too, just woke up. You

Speak first, trying to make him confess. "I don't know how you got in here last night, Takeshi, but you certainly surprised me with that *shuriken*."

"What?" your friend asks, sounding genuinely surprised.

"The *shuriken*," you say, pointing at the missile on your desk.

Takeshi's face turns pale. Without a word, he reaches into his robe and withdraws a *shuriken*, exactly like yours. Leaning close to you, Takeshi whispers, "I was going to ask *you* how you got this into *my* room!"

In his eyes, you see that your friend speaks the truth. Feeling as though someone might be spying on you, you suggest, "Takeshi, let's talk somewhere else."

Takeshi nods in agreement. Grabbing the *shuriken*, you slip on a pair of sandals and head out.

Turn to 105.

230

The Master says solemnly, "Your friend was used only to lure you out alone."

"But he received a *shuriken*, too," you argue, fearful of what might have happened to Takeshi in a test such as you just went through.

"We were testing Takeshi, but he never took the final test and knows nothing of all this. He is back at the *dojo* now, resting."

You let out your breath, greatly relieved that your friend is safe. Then, painfully, you realize you must keep this secret from Takeshi for the rest of your life.

The Master stands and waves to the south. "Come, Kurasai. We must return to the *dojo* before dawn."

You start to follow the Master, then look back, remembering the ninja you fought, but he is gone.

You turn from the barren cliff and follow the Master into the forest.

Turn to **213**.

231

Genzo senses your intention, twisting to avoid your body slam just before you hit him. Tensing every muscle, you collide with the big samurai shoulder first, bouncing back in pain as you lose 2 hit points of damage.

But with satisfaction, you see your efforts rewarded. As Genzo topples over, he tries to tuck into a roll, but he crashes awkwardly onto the gravel. Before he can move, you kick once more, catching him squarely in the belly. You know he felt that blow as he scrambles to get away.

Not wanting to lose your momentum, you close in again, but Genzo musters enough strength to kick back at you with both feet, grunting with the effort. You block his armored boots just in time, but you bruise both arms in the process and lose 2 more hit points.

If you have 20 or more hit points left, turn to **32**. If you have 19 or fewer hit points, turn to **217**.

232

The strenuous climb saps at your little remaining strength. Finally, relieved, you haul yourself over the edge and sprawl onto the rock, your face lowered. A familiar, quiet chuckle freezes you where you lie. You know the voice, but you are still surprised when you look up and see the Master standing a few feet away. You blink and rub your eyes. You know he is the Master, but he looks almost youthful, standing with barely a hint of the crippled old man you know.

Confused, you lift yourself to your feet. The Master



points to your left, saying, "You were almost at the end of your strength, Kurasai, but you were wise not to climb the rope."

You look to where he points and recoil in fear. Only ten feet away, the ninja you just fought kneels at the cliff's edge beside the rope. You see it is secured by a grapple hook wedged in the rocks. If you had climbed the rope, he could have cut it at any moment.

You start to draw *Kurodachi*, but the Master lifts one hand, saying, "Secure your blade, Kurasai. You are no longer in danger. You have already passed the final test of the ninja!"

Turn to 159.

233

The tall figure of Takeshi emerges from the underbrush, looking battered and exhausted. His clothes are torn and stained, but he's alive! Relieved, you rush to your friend and clamp your arms around him. "Takeshi, you old goat! How are you?"

He laughs and answers, "I feel like you look, Kurasai."

You glance down and realize you look every bit as battered and exhausted as he.

"Come," the Master says. "We have much work to do. In the next few weeks, you must train harder and demand more from yourselves than ever before so you can be ready for the battle against the Mongol invaders!"

You and Takeshi look at each other, determined to meet the challenges ahead and happy for the chance to face them together. You say to the Master, "We will not fail you, Master."

The Master nods, and you sense a new bond of understanding, trust, and respect among the three of you.

Slowly the Master reaches into a small bush and draws out his cane. When he turns around, he is bent over, leaning on his cane for support. Even his face seems more wrinkled. Once again he appears old.

"Shall we return to the *dojo*?" he asks in the same soft but penetrating voice you have come to be familiar with. He begins to hobble down the path toward the *dojo*.

"Yes, Master," you reply, hurrying ahead to lead the way for the "crippled" old *sensei*.



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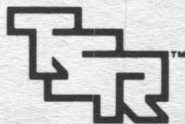
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