

BLOOD NINJA



N I C K L A K E

Blood Ninja

Blood Ninja is the story of Taro, a boy from a simple fishing village who is rescued by a ninja when his father is murdered, and who finds himself dragged into a bitter conflict between the rival lords ruling Japan. What is the connection between Taro and Lord Tokugawa? What could an ancient curse on the Emperor's house have to do with a fisherman's son? Where will Taro's love for the evil Lord Oda's daughter Hana lead them both? What is the Buddha Ball, and why are men and gods alike willing to kill for it? And is Taro, a peasant-turned-ninja, destined to become Shogun?

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Though Taro remained worried about his bow, he wasn't able to sneak out the next night either, nor the night after that.

He was too exhausted.

The first morning after they arrived, it seemed like Taro had hardly slept when he was awoken by a rough hand shaking his shoulder. He looked up to see Shusaku looking down on him. "Come on," the ninja said. "It's time you learned to handle yourself with weapons. Now that we are in the crater, we can train before nightfall, thanks to the caves and the covering over the main hall."

Hiro, Yukiko, Heiko and Little Kawabata joined them, though Little Kawabata wouldn't speak to Taro, or even meet his eye. In that first lesson, Shusaku showed them the basic principles of *taijutsu* – unarmed combat.

Hiro challenged Yukiko to a fight straight after their lesson.

He lost.

Soon they progressed to the sword, which all of them took to naturally, as if they had spent their early childhoods wielding *katana*, and had simply forgotten about it. Initially they were given wooden *bokken* to fight with—unable to cut flesh, but hard and heavy enough to break bones if the attacker—and the defender— were not careful. However, Taro progressed so quickly with the main forms of *kenjutsu* that Taro soon entrusted him with a *katana*. Taro loved the elegant blade, despite the nicks and scratches in its body. He slept with it next to him, encased in a silver-chased sheath.

Unfortunately Little Kawabata, too, was rapidly fighting with a real sword.

When Shusaku wasn't instructing them, Yukiko and Hiro would go off together, wrestling or sparring. They were both excellent sword-fighters and often as Heiko and Taro played there was the ringing sound of metal on metal, for they had all been allowed to practice with real swords, so quickly had they progressed.

Though neither of them were as good as Taro.

He had never felt anything like the joy—the *rightness*—that he felt when wielding the sword. It was one with him; it was meditation in movement. There were the stars of the crater, and the tedium of lessons; there were the games of Go with Heiko, who had taught him to play, and the conversations with his new friends; but always in his mind's eye there was the flash of steel.

And always there was the joy of swift movement, the cutting of the air.

But on this occasion Shusaku did not want to spar. He wanted to show Taro one of his own *kata*—a formal sequence of movements that a swordsman would practice over and over again, until its execution flowed from a particular mistake of the opponent's as quickly and unstoppably as ripples from a stone dropped in water.

“Can't we just spar?” asked Taro. “Learning sequences by heart is not going to help me in the real world.”

Shusaku sucked his teeth. “Most sword fights in the *real world*,” he said, “are over before your heart can beat twice. If you practice these *katas* every day, so that you can perform them without thinking, you will have an advantage over your opponent.”

Taro nodded, unconvinced. He liked the random spontaneity of sword-

fighting, the sense that the fight itself was alive, evolving all the time out of the movements and snap decisions of its violent actors. *Katas* seemed to him boring and rigid, like the rules that governed a Geisha's life. They didn't seem suited to ninjas, who should be cunning and unpredictable, rather than restricting their motions to rote patterns.

Shusaku gave a little bow, which Taro returned. Then the ninja raised his sword. "Get ready," said Shusaku. "Hold your sword as you normally would, ready to block me if necessary."

Taro warily drew near, his eyes fixed on the ninja, his sword trembling slightly in his hand. "Good," said Shusaku. "Now, imagine we are deadly enemies. Try to destroy me quickly. React as you normally would." As he said this, he moved forwards, tipping his sword a fraction to his right, but keeping his eyes low, on Taro's face.

Taro glanced down at the ninja's feet, looking for the tell-tale muscle contractions the older man had taught him about – the ones that revealed a person was about to spring forwards, lowering his sword.

Shusaku's feet were perfectly flat on the ground.

Taro grinned inside. He recognised the ninja's intention—Shusaku wanted him to believe that he was about to lunge, but in fact he was going to slash across Taro's body. Taro had seen the slight movement of the sword's tip, and knew that the ninja planned a strike from the right—and that, by readying himself for it, he was leaving an opening. Seizing his chance, Taro snapped his sword up and then round in a tight curve, through the channel of empty air that led to the ninja's neck.

But Shusaku's sword was suddenly raised in a vertical block that stopped

Taro's blade, and then in a continuation of that blocking motion the ninja flipped his wrist over, bringing his sword under Taro's.

Taro looked down.

Shusaku's blade was pressed against his stomach.

"That," said Shusaku, "is a *kata*. I call it the high-block-and-gut-slash. And if we were fighting for real, you would be dead."

Taro swallowed. The whole thing had been so fast – he'd moved to exploit the man's opening, and a heart-beat later he had been dead. In theory, anyway.

"Show me again," he said.

Shusaku's eyes sparkled. "Of course. But remember, this one only works if your opponent underestimates you."

Taro blushed. He *had* underestimated the ninja. He had thought he'd learned so quickly, had grown so strong. But of course he'd only been here a few days, and it was arrogant to think that he would have advanced so far in such a short time.

Taro lifted his sword.

"This time," said Shusaku, "you try it. Come a little closer to me, then let your sword-tip waver a little to your right, as if you're planning a high slash. Not too much. Yes, that's it. Now I think I can strike at your neck..."

He went for the same attack that Taro had adopted, and Taro raised his sword to block it. Then he tried the wrist-flip to turn the block into a low belly-strike, but he wasn't quick enough and Shusaku blocked him in return, before bringing his sword to shivering rest against the skin of Taro's neck.

It felt cold.

“Not fast enough,” said Shusaku. “That’s why you practice over and over.”

Taro nodded, a little ashamed. “Yes. I see. Sorry for—

But Shusaku waved the apology away. “Until you see how quickly it is possible to lose a swordfight, you don’t know how important it is to be quick, and to move without thinking. The *kata* should become unthinking reactions – just the way that your body responds to certain attacks. In a way, they’re spontaneous. It just takes a lot of boring practice to make them so.” He laughed.

Taro laughed too, although the muscles of his forearms ached already. “So,” he said. “This wrist-flick...”

Shusaku stepped closer and put one hand on either side of Taro’s wrist. “You turn it like this,” he said, pressing down with his top hand. “As it goes over, push your forefinger forwards – that will help the sword to bite forwards in a low arc, and you only have to give a little push with your arm to finish the slash.”

Taro tried it, and again he wasn’t quick enough, and again Shusaku put his hands on his wrist to show how it was done. Taro was reminded of when his father had taught him spear-fishing, patiently repeating the wrist-flick time after time, as they shivered in the cold water of the bay.

At that thought, he fumbled the movement, and more than just being slow this time, he twisted his hand too hard and caused the sword to drop from his fingers. He cursed.

“Something wrong?” asked Shusaku, concern in his eyes, and again

Taro was reminded of his father's solicitude, the way that he had so patiently showed Taro time after time how to make the spear leap forwards from his hand.

And now his father was dead, and he was standing in a crater many *ri* from home, practising *katas* with an assassin who had not only subtracted Taro from his old life, but had imposed on it too a new and terrible addition—a real father, a *samurai*, a stranger.

But for Taro there would only ever be one real father.

Ignoring the sword at his feet, he stepped back from Shusaku's well-meaning touch as from a snake.

Shusaku bent to pick up the sword. "It takes time," he said. "You'll get it eventually."

Taro walked away, not bothering to tell the ninja that it wasn't the *kata* he was worried about.

He knew that he would get it in the end. After all, it was a matter of coordination and speed, and those things were in his power. What was not in his power was to bring his father back to life, to speed that cursed pigeon towards the mountain, with its news of his mother.

Taro walked over to where Yukiko and Hiro sparred with swords. Yukiko parried a strike from Hiro and, pirouetting lithely, executed a perfect movement that would have taken off Hiro's head if she hadn't stopped the blade just in time. He held his hands up in surrender.

Hiro stomped over to Taro.

"Commiserations," said Taro.

Hiro grimaced. "She cheats."

“What, by being more skilled than you?”

“Exactly. I’m bigger and stronger than her and she knows it, so she should lose. But she doesn’t. Therefore: she is a cheat.”

Taro laughed. “One of these days you’ll best her, my friend.”

“One of these years, maybe,” said Yukiko, walking past. Hiro gave her a push and soon they were fighting again.

But Hiro had not been the wrestling champion of Shirahama for nothing. The next day, Hiro came swaggering up to Taro, Yukiko rolling her eyes behind him. “I beat Yukiko at sword fighting *and* wrestling just now,” he said. “She is like a child before my superior skill.”

Yukiko jabbed him with her elbow. “One victory, and he thinks he’s Yamato Takeru.” This was a famous prince who had defeated many enemies, and who had fought in later life with the legendary sword *Ame-no-Murakumo-no-Tsurugi* – the Gathering Clouds of Heaven – which Susanoo the *kami* of storms had taken from the belly of the sea serpent.

“Two victories!” said Hiro.

“Two in one day only counts as one. Think of the number of days on which I have beaten you.”

Hiro sighed good-naturedly.

Taro was glad for Hiro that he had found a new friend, while a small, jealous part of him wished that he could keep the big wrestler to himself. But so much had changed for Hiro – it was good that he had found a measure of happiness in his new life.

All in all, life at the crater *was* good – though something always seemed unreal about it, to Taro; like the death of his father and the unknown fate

of his mother existed in some other world, some other realm of *samsara*, far from this hidden place.

It was a sort of magical realm in which they lived, learning to fight and to move in harmony, no longer bound by the twin worlds of day and night, but living in a constant semi-darkness, illuminated by torches. Taro felt that he would like to remain here forever, though the thought of his mother was always at the back of his mind, and once he had dreamed a terrible dream that his father, the one who had brought him up, still lived – that his death was a colossal mistake – and he had come to Taro with open arms, saying I am here, don't cry any more.

Then Taro had woken and his father was still dead, and he had cried till he thought the moisture would be wrung from his body, and he would be wrinkled and dry, like a piece of fruit left too long in the sun.

He would have liked to have stayed in that dream forever, by the sea, with his father fishing its depths and his mother always by the fire in the evening. But he had been rudely awakened.

And unfortunately, it was about to happen again.

Taro was woken by a rough hand on his shoulder. Shusaku leaned over him.

“*Taijitsu*. Get up.”

Taro followed, bleary eyed, as Shusaku woke the others and began clearing a space in the middle of the weapons hall.

First, Shusaku explained that no ninja ever fought *entirely* unarmed. This, in fact was one of their great secrets.

Each of them were given a wooden ring to wear on their right hands. The ring – called a *shobo* – was rough and unevenly textured, designed to stand out from the hand. It could be used to strike pressure points on an opponent's body, immobilising or even killing him.

Shusaku stood, his shadow shivering under the candlelight. "First I'm going to show you some grips and throws. These are moves that send an assailant's body – or part of it – in an unexpected direction. Now... I'll need two volunteers." His gaze travelled around the room, until it came to light on Little Kawabata. "Come on," he said. "Let us see if you're as good as your father. He was a talented fighter before he got so fat."

Little Kawabata, scowling, came forwards.

Shusaku once again scoured the room. Then he called Taro forwards. Heiko gave Taro a little smile as he passed her. "Make sure you beat him," she said.

Little Kawabata turned and gave her a nasty smile. "The only one doing any beating will be me."

The two boys stood in the middle of the cave and stared at each other. Taro saw malice and amusement in the other boy's piggy eyes. He knew that Little Kawabata had hated him almost on first sight – for making the arrow shot that had secured his entry to the school; for being already a vampire; for showing up his father by so easily passing the test he set him.

Shusaku stepped up to Little Kawabata. "Strike out with your arm flat, as if to hit me with a direct punch, then keep your arm outstretched." The chubby boy did so and Taro saw that the layer of fat was deceptive – Little Kawabata was fast. And strong.

Shusaku put his two hands out, placing one under Little Kawabata's wrist, palm up, and one above it, palm down. He rolled his hands in opposite directions and Little Kawabata's legs gave away as he screamed a high-pitched scream. Shusaku helped him up, then showed him how to place his hands in order to do the same thing. The teacher put his own arm out and Little Kawabata demonstrated the move, forcing the older man to the ground. Shusaku nodded. "Well done."

Taro walked over to them, anxious to learn the trick himself, but Shusaku waved him back. "Patience," he said. "You will learn it soon enough. For the moment, I want you to keep trying to strike Little Kawabata. Let us see how well he can do it when it really matters."

Shusaku positioned Taro right in front of Little Kawabata. "Alright. Start punching."

Taro let out a right-hand strike to the head which was too fast for the clan leader's son – Little Kawabata yelped and clutched his ear. But Taro's next shot – a lefty to the solar plexus – was caught in a vice like grip and suddenly Taro's upper body was twisting despite itself and he fell to the ground. He got up again and lashed out instantly – his vampire's speed allowing the upper cut to find Little Kawabata's chin. Little Kawabata staggered backwards and Taro moved in to press the advantage, but the other boy wasn't only fast, he was a quick learner, and Taro's next few strikes were all easily caught, depositing him on the floor. The pain was not as bad as it might have been if he were human, but bad enough – with the humiliation – to sting.

Taro struck out viciously, again and again, and each time he was

parried or caught, and his muscles sang out with the strain of the torsion. Involuntarily, he began to sob. Why wasn't Shusaku putting a stop to it?

He fixed his eyes on Little Kawabata's, gathering his strength. His blood thundered in his ears and his arms throbbed. Surely with the speed and agility that came with his vampire nature, he should be able to defeat this fat, spoiled child? He grimaced, spat out a mouthful of blood. The last fall had been a hard one.

Collecting all his *qi*, Taro let fly with a feint to the left, followed by a devastating blow to the right, which would have connected with Little Kawabata's neck and probably knocked him out, if not killed him by snapping his spine – but the leader's son twisted out of the way and caught Taro's arm as it passed him, putting all his body weight into twisting it.

Taro crashed to the ground, his arm flapping as he tried to push himself upright again.

Little Kawabata laughed. "You're not fishing now, boy. I'm harder to catch than the sprats in your little bay."

Taro grunted.

"Get up," said Little Kawabata. "Your feigned injury insults me."

Taro turned his head – his arm was hanging at an unpleasant angle from his shoulder. Dislocated. He got up painfully, shaking his head. Surely Shusaku had to stop it now? He was hopeless. He was already a vampire, and he couldn't even beat this stupid, podgy brute.

He staggered to his feet, then stumbled forwards. He pawed at Little Kawabata, looking for purchase, staining the fat boy's robes with blood.

Little Kawabata sneered. "Peasant. Your manners are a disgrace. No

doubt you tricked my father, too – put the idea in his head of testing you with the bow, somehow. You will pay for your insolence.”

Taro caught his breath. Yet, as much as he hated the boy, he couldn't help feeling jealous. *At least you have a father*, he felt like saying. All he said, though, was “Ugh...”

“Stop,” said Shusaku. Taro gave a little whimper of relief.

Thank the gods...

He looked up through a film of sweat and blood – not all of it his own – and saw Shusaku staring grimly at him. Then the sensei threw a heavy stick to Little Kawabata – the kind used for sparring before the kids were trusted with swords. At the same time, he held out his other hand to Taro. “Hand me your *shobo*. You will fight now with no weapons.”

“What?” said Taro. “Why? Why are you doing this to me?”

“Be quiet. Hand me the ring.”

Taro pulled the wooden ring off his finger and handed it to the man who had rescued him, the man who had escorted him half way across the country, the man he had *trusted*. He was incredulous. Was Shusaku trying to get him killed? To make a martyr of him in front of the class and so prove some kind of point? Or was he hoping to exhaust Little Kawabata's supply of hatred, by making Taro his punching bag for the afternoon? If so, Taro thought the teacher was badly mistaken. No amount of one-sided combat could satisfy Kawabata's bloodlust. He would not be content until Taro was dead.

And if he died, he would never find his mother again.

Someone had stepped up from the ring of students – Hiro. “What are you doing to him?” he asked. “He has no weapon. This is unfair.”

Shusaku whirled on Hiro. “Sit. Down. Now.” His voice was deadly cold. “A ninja always has a weapon.” He turned to Taro. “Remember that. You always have a weapon.” Then he put a restraining hand on Hiro’s chest and snapped his fingers in Little Kawabata’s direction. “You are free to attack as you wish,” he said to the grinning boy. Little Kawabata advanced on Taro, brandishing the stick and grinning.

Little Kawabata lay on the cold, hard floor, listening to Shusaku’s hateful voice. How this man had taken over the clan was beyond him. His father had told him the whole story – how he had sent a ninja girl named Mara to protect Lord Tokugawa, and how Lord Shusaku Endo had learned her secret and forced her to turn him, before murdering her in cold blood.

The devious brilliance of it was that no one could accuse him, because everyone had to pretend she was only a serving girl. And for the same reason, Little Kawabata’s father had never been able to prove what Lord Endo had done – Lord Endo claimed that the girl had been killed by some mysterious agent working for Lord Oda, and how could anyone contradict him? No one had seen her die.

But for Lord Endo to become such a strong vampire that he ended up leading the clan, at the expense of the man whose envoy he had tortured and killed?

That was unbearable.

And now, to add insult to injury, Shusaku had brought another samurai-vampire to the mountain. Tokugawa’s son, of all people. This would destroy the clan, Little Kawabata was sure of it. How could Lord Oda allow such a boy to live – how could Lord Tokugawa allow it? He was willing to use the ninjas, but to have one as a son? It was grotesque.

Little Kawabata's head was aching terribly and his mouth felt filled with broken glass. But he felt strong – he felt good. His father had never succeeded in ridding himself of Shusaku; but his father had always relied on words. Little Kawabata thought words were perhaps not the best way to deal with one's enemies.

He spat something white out onto the floor – a tooth. In his mind he still heard Shusaku saying even vampires can be hurt. He was relying on it.

Blows rained down on Taro and he covered his head with his hands. He thought he felt bones splintering in his fingers. He barely even cared. His world had shrunk to this cave – its hard rock floor, its dusty crevices, its leering carvings.

He crawled towards where he thought Shusaku was, his broken hands scraping claw-like at the rock. He could dimly hear Hiro, Yukiko and Heiko shouting at the master, calling on him to stop the rout. He couldn't make them out – his eyes were half-closed by bruises, his cheeks and nose swollen from numerous blows. Blood trickled into his right eye.

What had Shusaku meant by that? *You always have a weapon...* Was he supposed to meditate, make a *mudra* of protection with his shaking hands? Tentatively, he formed the *mudra* for banishing evil – hand outstretched, palm out. He was on his knees with his hand stuck out towards Little Kawabata; the boy simply smashed it down with his stick, sending a jarring pain right down Taro's arm and pinning it to the ground.

Little Kawabata turned, his stick still trapping Taro's hand, readying a spinning kick that would catch Taro in the jaw. A drip from the rock ceiling landed on Taro's forehead, cold and slick, like an intimation of mortality.

Taro thought about that little drop.

You always have a weapon.

Moving so quickly he felt his arm reach out before he was conscious of the desire to move it, Taro scabbled at the floor and came up with a handful of dust, in which nestled a couple of sharp stones. He could feel them pricking at his hand – he could also feel the bones knitting already, a warm spreading sensation as the fingers healed. He grinned, tasting blood

that dripped into his mouth. In an instant, his warmth, his compassion, his pity, all fell from him like vain ornaments.

He was not himself; in the space his body normally occupied was a spectre that thought only of blood and violence.

He moved.

Little Kawabata's head turned towards Taro before the rest of his body as he unleashed a textbook spinning kick, lining up the target before bringing his foot round. His eyes just had time to widen in surprise as Taro surged upwards and towards him, knocking the fat boy's stick aside and throwing a handful of glittering, wicked rock dust into his eyes.

Little Kawabata screamed and fell blindly backwards – he had kept only one leg to the ground as he turned into his kick, and now he toppled like a tree, hitting his back hard against the stone floor. Immediately, Taro was on him, grinning like a lunatic through a mask of blood and tears. The vampire held the black stick in his right hand, and as Little Kawabata watched, powerless, Taro swung it in a hard, low arc. Little Kawabata felt his head snap to the side, then darkness descended like a sheet of heavy rain.

Just before he sank into dark water, Little Kawabata had one thought, which echoed like a mantra.

I'll kill him.

Taro stood shakily. He dropped the stick, then knelt by Little Kawabata. He felt the boy's pulse. Weak, but present. He staggered over to Shusaku. The ninja smiled at him and put a hand under his arm to support him.

“When I say that you always have a weapon, I really mean it,” he said. “You always have your mind with you – your greatest weapon. And it's

amazing what your mind can find to fight with, even in an empty room. Or a cave. Very rarely are you ever *completely* unarmed—even if you lose your *shobo*.”

Shusaku summoned Hiro and handed Taro to him. Taro felt a little better as soon as he felt his friend’s hands under his armpits. He walked past the other students, Hiro taking most of the weight off his feet. He passed Yukiko, who looked ashen, and Heiko, whose eyes were lit by a kind of pained triumph. He smiled weakly at them.

“Take him to the sick room,” said Shusaku. “He will need patching up. Even vampires can be hurt.”