

The Test

An Adventure Chronicles Prelude

June 10, 1988

Friday, 3:00PM

Yoshi looked into the open coffin of her father. She wanted to turn away . . . she wanted to look at anything but the calm face of her male parent. But she could not. She could not even blink. He was dead, and it was *her* fault. This was her punishment. She had failed her parents and she must never forget.

She glanced at the coffin of her mother. It was closed. The mortician had commented that the wounds that had been inflicted upon her were too horrendous to be seen. But she had seen them. She had seen the results of the quick, but deadly tortures that had been visited upon her sweet mother by the Warui ninja.

Looking back down at her father's lifeless body, she gently reached out and touched his cheek. It was cold. Her uncle Tanemura had told her that her parents were with Jesus and would never again suffer. But that did not seem fair. She wanted them with *her*.

But she had failed them. And now they were gone.

A gentle hand came to rest on her shoulder. She turned her gaze to meet that of Jamie Raleigh, her uncle's pupil. She deserved his disdain. But she found none of it in his eyes.

The dam that she'd been using to hold her emotions in check broke and she buried her face in her friend's chest, tears streaming, as she wailed her anguish for all to hear. She felt his compassionate arms wrap around her and she was numbly aware that her tears were soaking the black jacket that he wore with his suit.

He gently moved her toward the edge of the tarp that formed the ceiling over the two freshly dug graves. She could feel the warm breeze coming in as a slow *hum* began that signaled the start of the machines that lowered her parents into the ground.

She didn't look up when she recognized the voice of Ben Shalley. "How is she?"

"She's in pain," replied Jamie. "This is the hardest thing that I can imagine anybody having to go through." Yoshi was always amazed at the difference between the two friends' voices. Ben's voice had a cold edge to it that made those who heard him slightly uncomfortable. Jamie's voice, mixed with the gentle arm that he had around her and the warm shoulder upon which she was still crying, helped him to be a compassionate whole . . . a figure of kindness and virtue. How could she have ever treated him as badly as she had in the past?

They walked along the rows of gravestones as they headed toward the road that wound its way through the cemetery. Yoshi looked around herself to see all of her Jameston friends walking in a disarrayed group around Jamie and herself.

Ahead, she could see other members of her clan, all of whom had come for her parents' funeral. Uncle Tanemura, his black suit matching that of his student, was speaking with some of the elders. Some of the younger *chunin*, who were among the highest ranking of their individual families, stepped forward. Tang Shakato eyed Jamie with contempt and said to Yoshi in their native tongue, "I see you have a new *hand-maiden*."

Yoshi frowned. In English, she retorted, "He is my *clan-brother*, Tang . . . as well as *yours*. And we will speak in English when in his presence. I have nothing to hide from him." The conversation had caught Tanemura's interest and he had moved to stand behind his pupil and great-niece.

Tang spoke from between clenched teeth. "He is not a member of our clan yet. And the rest of these *gai-jin* have no place here, at all."

Yoshi could hear her great-uncle's intake of breath, but she beat him to the punch in rebuttal. "They are *not* barbarians, Tang! These are the people to whom I owe my life!" Yoshi risked a glance around. With few exceptions, her American friends were eyeing Tang with the same contempt with which he was regarding Jamie. Buster was merely shaking his head and Ben's eyes twinkled in amusement.

Young Shakato's voice brought her back to focus on him. "I do not see your *champion* going after the Warui ninja who killed your parents," he chided.

"Dude," bellowed Dave, Jamie's large cousin, "I'm gonna pound you into *hamburger!*" Tang smiled and spread his arms, as if to accept the challenge. Dave stepped forward, but Yoshi shoved herself between the two.

"Leave now, Tang," the girl demanded.

He glared at her. "Your family's devotion to this westerner is going to be the downfall of our clan, Yoshika."

She stood her ground. "Call me Yoshi! And Jamie Raleigh had the Warui party leader terrified, Tang. He had the monster *scared!* He will *not* be our downfall!"

"I ask you again," smirked Tang, "why he is not chasing down those men to avenge your parents' deaths?"

Yoshi folded her arms across her chest. "Because *that* pleasure will be *mine!*"

* * *

Jamie's right foot lashed out, barely stopped by Ben's rising block. Ben retaliated with a punch, but the young ninja-in-training grabbed the wrist and flipped the *karateka* to the ground. Jamie backed up a step and bowed to his friend.

Ben chuckled. "You could have taken my nose off of my face there, Raleigh."

Jamie smiled and shook his head. "You blocked it well enough."

"And what, *pray tell*, if I had failed?"

"A broken nose builds character, dude," commented Dave, who had been watching the exchange alongside of the rest of *Adventure*.

"Well," commented Buster, habitually playing with the cross that hung around his neck, "Jamie's still up. Who's *next*?"

"I am," commented a feminine voice from several yards away. Jamie looked up to see Yoshi approaching, two wooden *ninja-tos* in her hands.

"Wha . . . what?!" demanded Mike, Dave's friend who was one of the only two in the group who was as big as Jamie's cousin.

"I wish a turn," replied Yoshi calmly. She handed one of the *bokken* to her clan-brother.

"Yer *kiddin'*, right?" remarked Simon, the other large teen.

"You can't fight," smirked Sean, Simon's smaller . . . and snottier . . . twin.

"Actually," returned Jamie, "Master Tanemura has been continuing her training. She's doing pretty good."

Sean snorted. "What changed her mind?"

"I am right *here*, Sean Wilson," declared the young kunoichi-in-training. "Do not presume to speak of me in the *third person*." She twirled her sword a few times to check the balance. "I cannot avenge my parents' deaths if I cannot fight, now *can I*?"

Sean rolled his eyes. "Should'a thought about that a little *earlier*."

Jamie shot a fierce glare at the twin. "That was *totally* out of line, Wilson!"

"I agree," commented Ben. "If you're going to pick arguments, then choose a different target."

"I think an apology might be in order," stated Buster.

"Look, *preacher-boy*," returned Sean, "just because your *all-knowing God* makes you be a total pansy, doesn't mean that *I* have to be!"

"Dude," mumbled Dave, "he *creamed* you in yer last sparring match. I'd say the 'pansy' here'd be *you*."

"Can it, Dave!" snapped the twin.

"Wanna try an' *make* me?"

Zack now spoke. "*Please* say yes! I'd really like ta see'im squash ya."

"I came here to practice!" yelled Yoshi, successfully gaining everyone's attention. "I did not come here to watch a chorus of adolescent men work off their testosterone!"

Dave and Sean cleared their throats nervously. The rest of the group quieted.

Jamie held his sword underhanded in a battle-ready stance. "Are you ready for this?"

She assumed the same stance. "I am ready."

Their swords shot out, the rickety sound of wood smacking wood echoing through the town park. Jamie was pleased with his clan-sister's progress. Tanemura had told her that he would not force her to finish her training, but she had insisted. Her unarmed prowess was quickly becoming a match for that of Jamie. Her skill with weapons was catching up with his, as well. But she concentrated more upon the sword than upon any other weapon. And learned it well, she had . . .

Jamie looked calmly at the point of her sword, barely jabbing him in the gut. He turned his head to glance at his own bokken, now lying ten feet away. Then he looked back at her and smiled.

Her frustration confused him. She threw down her sword and stomped her foot. "You *let* me win!"

Jamie narrowed his eyes. "I most certainly did *not*!"

She cocked an eyebrow at him, seemingly unaware of the voices of their friends mumbling all around them. "You did *not*?"

"No! I fought you with every bit of determination that I use when I spar with *anybody*." He smiled. "You're just getting good."

She sighed, her smile now matching that of her clan-brother.

* * *

Tanemura answered the phone in English. "Hello?"

The voice on the other end was in Japanese. "*You wished to speak with me?*"

Tanemura switched to his native tongue. "Yes, Elder Tatsu. I wanted to speak with you about my apprentice, Jamie Raleigh."

"And what do you wish to say about him?"

"After the day that the Warui ninja attacked and killed my nephew, I really started to pay attention to Jamie's skills," began Tanemura.

"And?"

"And I feel that he is ready for admittance into the clan."

There was a pause. *"He is rather young to be admitted as the chunin that the jonin of our clan's student will be."*

"His rate of learning is unprecedented."

"Training is one thing . . .," began the elder.

"From all reports, he defeated the Warui party leader with ease," interrupted Tanemura.

"These reports come from his friends," returned Tatsu.

"The fact remains that he and his friends defeated the Warui, when even my nephew, whose skills are still legendary in our clan, could not."

"And if this was a fluke?"

"Then *test* him, if you will."

"Very well. He will be tested."

* * *

"A test?" asked Jamie curiously. "What kind of a test?"

"It is simply a means to see how well you are progressing in your training, my pupil," responded Tanemura calmly. "It is nothing that should cause you undue worry."

The young ninja-in-training cast a confused glance at Yoshi, who widened her eyes and shrugged.

"Well," said the boy, "if you want me to take the test, I *will*."

The old ninja master smiled. "We will hold it this Saturday evening. The Funakoshi clan has made a sizeable donation to the city for exclusive use of the park." He patted Jamie on the shoulder, then turned and walked out of the living room.

Yoshi climbed from the chair in which she had been sitting and seated herself on the couch next to Jamie. "I have never heard of such a test."

"*That* doesn't set my mind at ease," muttered her friend.

Yoshi rested her head on his shoulder and he reflexively put his arm around her. "You *will* be careful, will you not?" she asked.

He looked down at her and smiled. "Of *course*. Besides, you heard Master Tanemura. They'll only be using blades made of aluminum alloy. They can't be sharpened."

* * *

Jamie fastened the *tabi* on his feet. The split-toed boots always felt less than comfortable to the teen. They made it feel as if his sock were bunched up between his big and second toes.

He glanced to the table at his side. The mask of his suit lay upon it, its blackness marred here and there by specks of dust that had landed on it in the short time that it had been there. He was puzzled by Tanemura's insistence that he wear an actual ninja suit for the test. It wasn't something that was typically allowed for a student to wear.

He reached out and grabbed the cool cloth, pulling it over his head. He wondered briefly if this was how Peter Parker felt when he wore his mask. Of course, his favorite superhero's mask covered his eyes. The ninja mask did not do that for Jamie. Those who were testing him would be able to see the fear in his orbs.

He took a deep breath, somewhat uncomfortable with the way the air came through the material.

His right hand moved up to grasp the cool hilt of the ninja-to that was strapped to his back. He pulled it from its scabbard and ran his left thumb along the edge of the blade. The aluminum felt smooth, but was not sharp.

A knock at the door caused the young ninja-in-training to jump, nearly dropping the weapon. He nervously slid it back into its sheath and said, "Yes?"

"Are you decent?" called Yoshi's voice.

"Yeah," replied Jamie.

The door opened and his clan-sister peered in. "They are ready for you."

* * *

Jamie stood with Yoshi, one elder and a group of ten uniformed ninja at the gate to the City Park. He glanced back at the travel trailer where he'd gotten ready, wishing that he could run back in there and hide.

The elder . . . Tatsu, if Jamie remembered correctly . . . handed him a pair of goggles. "These are to protect your eyes." He picked up a belt and handed it to Jamie, then pulled Jamie's sword from its sheath. "The weapons in the pouches on this belt are coated in a washable, white ink of a type that will show up on black fabric." Another Japanese man handed Tatsu a flask of yellow liquid, which he promptly poured into Jamie's scabbard. He then replaced Jamie's blade. "The ninja who are testing you have been instructed that they are *dead* when you hit them with one of your weapons and leave a white or yellow mark upon them."

The elder gestured to one of the ninja who was dressed in his black suit, whose eyes Jamie recognized as those of Tang Shakato, and said, "They each have green ink of a type that will show up on the black fabric of your suit."

The old man gestured toward the interior of the park. "Your sensei and the remainder of the elders are waiting for you in one of the dugouts in the baseball field. To pass the test, you merely have to get to them." He narrowed his eyes coldly at the teen. "One green mark and you fail."

Tatsu and the other ninja disappeared into the park. "Great," mumbled the adolescent, "my favorite color is going to make me fail."

Yoshi stepped up to him and grasped one flap of his vest, pulling it open and stuffing a white cloth into one of the inner pockets.

"What's this for?" he asked.

The girl smiled at him and he was caught off-guard by just how beautiful a sight it was. "In the Middle-ages, did the princess not give a white handkerchief to her champion?"

"I'd hardly say I'm a champion," was his response.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Even through the material of the mask, her lips felt warm. "You *are* my champion." She looked into his eyes and his breath caught in his throat. "Be careful." She then pulled away and disappeared into the park.

Jamie looked after her, his eyes narrowed in confusion. Their friendship had only strayed to such an affectionate level once before and they had both decided that it should never go there again.

Or had they?

The young man shook his head to clear it. He had to keep his mind focused on the task at hand. The baseball field was only a few hundred feet inside the park but, with a clan of ninja between him and that destination, it might as well be several hundred miles. He inhaled deeply, held it for a few seconds, and then let it out as he took a step toward the gate. He then took another. Then another. Until, finally, he was inside.

The trees cast long shadows in the twilight. The shadows cast by some of the trees looked as if they had claws and were reaching for him. The ninja-in-training closed his eyes, willing himself to tune out his vision. In this light, he knew that his sight could only hinder him.

As he stopped paying attention to his eyes, his other senses began to sharpen. The smell of the grass . . . the feel of the cool air on what little of his skin was uncovered . . .

. . . the whirring sound of something that was flying toward him.

Jamie dropped to the ground and rolled as two plastic shuriken flew over his head in different directions. He sprang to his feet and darted toward a tree. A black-clothed figure leaped out and launched another green-painted star at him. His blade leaped from its scabbard and swatted it away and then doubled back to swipe at the attacker's midsection, leaving a trail of yellow.

The warrior groaned in frustration and moved aside.

The teen moved past the tree and ninja, running toward the baseball field.

Another warrior jumped from a bush and swung a green-tinted *bo* at him. Jamie barely ducked the staff. *It's obvious that these guys don't want me to finish this test*, he thought as he leaped over an attempt to trip him with the weapon. *They could at least play a little less roughly.* At the height of his leap, the teen lashed out with his right foot, catching the ninja in the chest and sending him to the ground.

Another swipe of Jamie's ninja-to left a trail of yellow running diagonally down the prone warrior's vest.

He ran past and reached the baseball field. On the side exactly opposite him, he could see Yoshi and the elders, who had now noticed him. Fearing that the ink on his sword might dry, he sheathed it, and then started walking warily toward the dugout.

His heart leaped into his throat when he heard the yell. Since it was in Japanese, he had no idea what was being said, but it did alert him to the fact that the other dugout was occupied, as well.

He broke into a run for the elders' hiding place as he reached into a pouch on his belt, producing five plastic, white-coated shuriken. He could see the eight remaining ninja who had gone into the park pouring out of the *Visitor's* dugout.

Three of the five shuriken reached their targets. The other five ninja were still running on an interception course with him. He leaped to the ground and rolled through them as their ninjatōs swung harmlessly at air.

When he had finished the roll, he was back on his feet and his own blade now leaped into his hand, taking out two of his opponents with one swipe. Another of the ninja took a swipe at Jamie's head, while a second attempted a swipe at his feet. Jamie ducked the head shot, blocking the other shot with his own sword. His blade slid up that of the blocked warrior, slicing across both of his forearms and leaving a trail of yellow there.

That ninja yelled something in Japanese and threw his weapon to the ground in disgust.

Jamie dodged to the side as the ninja who had attacked his head attempted a downward swipe of his blade. Jamie's own weapon swept in an upward arc, leaving the ink on the warrior's face.

He only had one opponent left. And he could now tell that it was Tang. The two of them circled each other warily. The green ink on the blade of Tang's sword glinted in the evening light.

And then he was striking, pressing forward with every ounce of strength that he had. Jamie could do nothing but block the attacks. Whatever the reason for this test, it was obvious that Tang did not want him to pass it.

In desperation, Jamie used the split toe of his right boot to catch some of the dirt of the field. As he blocked an attack, he lashed upward with that foot, kicking Tang in the face and releasing a cloud of dust that caught the ninja off guard.

Jamie swatted the green inked blade away from its wielder. Then his own yellow mark was on the stomach of Tang's vest.

The ninja glared at Jamie with barely controlled rage.

"He has beaten you, Tang," called one of the elders from the dugout. "Let him pass."

Obviously using every ounce of self-control that he had, Tang moved to the side and Jamie walked the remaining ten feet to the dugout and dropped inside.

The elders examined him. "There is not a green mark on him," one of them said in awe.

Tanemura stepped forward and bowed to his student, who returned the act of respect.

"You have done well, my pupil."

"Thank you, sensei." Jamie risked a glance at Tang, who had removed his mask, his hate-filled face now regarding the teen coldly.

"You were obviously not exaggerating, Tanemura," commented Tatsu. "He is quite skilled."

Jamie blushed at the attention as he removed the goggles and his mask. "I was lucky."

Tanemura shook his head. "None of the ninja who tested you today wanted you to complete this test. They fought with every ounce of misguided disdain for you that they have." He smiled. "You have surpassed my every expectation."

Another elder, this one a woman, came forward with a wooden box. Tanemura opened it and produced a necklace with a small sparrow pendent dangling from the silver chain. "Jamie Raleigh," he said as he placed the chain over his student's head, letting it fall into place around his neck, "it is with great honor and pride that I admit you as a *chunin* to the Funakoshi ninja clan."

Jamie's eyes shot up at his sensei. Had he heard correctly? "What?!"

"You are now a ninja," commented Tatsu.

Jamie's eyes moved back and forth between the two older ninja in confusion. "But, I . . . I . . . I'm only *fourteen*."

"And already as skilled as many of our adults," said Tanemura, looking around to regard the ninja that Jamie had defeated to get to the dugout.

"But remember, young ninja," cautioned Tatsu, his face softer than before, "your training will *never* be 'complete.' Everything that you do in life will be a learning experience. Just as helping your sensei to complete Yoshika's training will be."

A gentle brush of a hand on Jamie's shoulder brought Jamie's attention to Yoshi, who smiled up at him and embraced him. He gladly hugged her back as she whispered in his ear, "You *are* my champion."

* * *

Jamie regarded his ninja suit, which now hung from a hanger in his closet, with pride that was mixed with confusion. Why had they decided to test him so early? Had it really been the battle with the Warui ninja, as Yoshi had suggested? If so, Jamie would much rather have Kuji and Mai alive and well with Yoshi than to be a fourteen year-old ninja.

But Fate had declared otherwise.

He sat his tabi in his closet under the suit. On the top shelf were a variety of weapons that had been given to him by the elders. His parents were not particularly pleased with them, but his father had simply told him that he trusted that he was mature enough to not play with them like toys.

Jamie walked over to his bed and seated himself. The old, boxed springs creaked. Lying on the bed next to him was the ninja-to that Tanemura had given him. Unlike the one that he had used in the test, this one was real and definitely sharp. It had been given to Tanemura by his father when he had completed his training years ago. And, should Jamie ever take a pupil, then the sword would go to that pupil. Tanemura had promised that he would purchase for Jamie, as soon as he could find a good enough craftsman, a ninja sword of his own . . . one that was personalized just for him. He might even have to travel to Japan to do so.

He grabbed the weapon from the bed, then stood and carried it to the closet, setting it gently on the top shelf. Then he flipped off the overhead light, walked back to his bed, climbed under the covers and let sleep overtake him.

END

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