

Black Snake Weeping

By: Kyle Jones

My name is Asai. Of my last name, or of my parents, I know not, for I was taken at a very young age to be trained in the silent art of the ninja. I was raised and trained in the province of Mikawa. My instructor was the legendary assassin Saito. I was one of thirteen pupils that he trained in his lifetime. Of them, I am the only one still alive. When I began training, my peers came to call me Black Snake, because of the customary black garb of the ninja, and also for my prowess for silence. I could tread across any terrain, as quiet as a snake and with as little effort. I have spent my whole life dedicated to the art of moving in shadow, and I have never been caught. But this time I have failed, and in doing so have dishonored my name and my Taisho, which is why I am here, kneeling in the soft grass, the early morning dew tickling my knees.

The training process takes ten years. After my training was complete, I began infiltration and espionage until I was nineteen, then I began my career as an assassin. In my years prior to being an assassin, I would sneak into besieged cities under the shroud of darkness. If it were one of ours being besieged, I would bring supplies of food and information on when the army would arrive to repel the attackers. But, if it were an enemy city, I would sneak in and poison their water and slit the throats of their livestock. Survival is used in all aspects of ninja life. My master once said that survival and assassination are as much the same as the river and the fish, each need the other for their own survival. For is that not why we kill? To survive?

The life of a ninja is one of solitude. By my profession, I am forbidden to know no love except the love of one's clan. Love makes one weak and susceptible to pain. That is why they pick ninjas at so young an age, so that we know nothing of family, the foundation of love. But secretly, I have found a love more eternal than the light of our souls. I love Earth. I have seen all of Japan, and its beauty, and it is a shame that it has to be torn by war.

Takeda, the neighboring clan to the north and east, began to raid our towns close to the border. At first, Lord Tokugawa thought it was the work of the insolent Ronin, the rebel factions that exist throughout all of Japan and plague every clan and its respective territories. Emissaries were dispatched to the Takeda clan, asking for aid with these rebels. These raids continued sporadically for years, until one day Lord Tokugawa received the heads of the two emissaries he had sent to the Takeda clan in a basket. Lord Tokugawa immediately declared total war on our neighboring clan. A war that would not stop until the leader of one clan was dead. And it was in the early months of the war, that I was assigned my first assassination.

The Takeda are known for their fierce cavalry. My first assigned assassination was that of the Captain of a company of Yari Cavalry. The name of this man escapes me, for I have killed as many men as I am years old. I remember tracking the company's movement into Tokugawa territory. When finally, they stopped to rest their horses and await further orders. It is this night I made my kill.

I stole into their camp under the shade of night, being cautious to stay away from the horses. No matter how quiet one is, an animal always knows one's presence. The

sentries were weary from days of hard travel and so were easily avoided. I searched the camp for the Captain, moving from shadow to shadow, making no sound. I at last found him, his tent marked by the sigil of the Takeda clan and by the sigil of his own house. The guard outside was asleep and inside the tent there were the smoldering ashes of a small fire, which provided the light, needed to watch the Captain's eyes lest he awake upon his own execution. As I entered the tent, I pricked the sleeping guard with the needle of sleep so he would not wake up in my dark act. I stood in the corner of the tent, letting my eyes adjust to the light and then drew my blade out of its linen sheath. It was a black blade, as to not shine in the light of the stars, which were my friend as well as my foe. As I gripped the handle of the blade of shadow, I could feel my heart pounding in my fingertips. I then knelt behind the head of the Captain and without hesitation thrust the blade home behind the lower part of the ear and into the brain, killing him instantly. I proceeded to turn his head to the side on which I had inflicted his death so that the wound would not show.

My exodus from the enemy camp was the same route from which I had come. The sensations I felt upon my flawless completion of my first kill were ones that I had never felt before. Sensations of joy and pride in myself and my skills, but yet, I inwardly felt as if I killed a part of myself when I killed that captain. I was no longer a boy jumping fences to spy on people, I was now an assassin. This feeling of pride grew ever higher with the more men I killed, until this last assignment.

Winters in Japan are cold and harsh and it is impossible for an army to move and operate in its conditions. During the next several years of the war I was assigned more

and more men to kill. Through self-discipline, I never let my pride get in the way of my work for if that happened; I would die as so many other ninjas had. When a ninja is caught, his clan of origin denies his existence. The ninja does not hate his clan for this, for it is understandable, and it is in the best interest of the clan. However, upon capture, a ninja is not killed immediately, but rather he is taken and held in a prison and tortured for information. If the ninja escaped the captors, however, he would be free: Free to return to his clan or free to start his life anew, for his clan would assume his death.

At this moment, I am not free, but I am shackled by my inability to perform my duty. This inability, this weakness, is why I am here, in the forest, kneeling in front of this ancient, moss covered shrine. This weakness spawned inside me without my notice, until it surfaced and got in the way of my duty. Since I have no child of my own, I am quick to look upon children with a kind heart, if such a term may be used for a man whose sole occupation is killing. This last assignment was what exposed this weakness.

I had been assigned to kill Sorun Takeda, the son of Lord Oda Takeda, Taisho of the Takeda clan. In order to do this, I had to live in the city that Sorun governed. I had to learn where his palace was, make friends with his royal guard, and seduce women of his court all to passively gain information on Sorun Takeda. After months of infiltration, I felt I could now carry out the assassination. This would prove to be my most difficult assignment yet, both logistically and morally.

During the day, people are allowed to walk the palace grounds, which span miles around the palace itself. There are many gardens and sanctuaries of meditation on the palace grounds. I explored all of the grounds, but was forbidden to enter the palace.

Then the day came when I felt I knew enough about my enemy. I took action that day.

During the later part of the afternoon, I made my way to the northern meditation pool. After my meditations, I went to view the large clay vases that stood by the entrance of the palace. When nobody was looking, I sneaked into the largest of them. There I stayed for hours, periodically looking up at the sky to judge how late it was. When the guards came around at the closing of the palace grounds to look inside the vases for people with the same intent I had, all they saw was black shadow. In the middle of the night, I proceeded to disengage myself from the vase.

I timed my exit from the vase with the passing of the patrolling guard. I waited until I heard his footsteps echo away past the corner of the palace before I thrust myself out of the vase. From there I quickly scaled the wall of ornately carved wood onto the second story balcony. As I had snaked over the railing of the balcony, I heard a guard's footsteps coming from around the corner, approaching me. I leapt back onto the railing of the balcony, then jumped onto the roof of the second story. I waited on the roof for the guard to pass before I got back down.

After the guard had passed, I lowered myself from the roof and onto the balcony, making no sound on the dense wood. I drew my blade and crept up behind the guard patrolling the balcony and killed him. I held his upright body until I was sure he was dead. Once I was sure, I sat him on the floor and propped his back against the wall to make it look as if he were sleeping. I set out to look for Sorun's quarters. I had never been there, only heard about its lavishness from those of his royal court I consulted with prior. I walked around the balcony, feeling the wall with my hand until I found what

was I was looking for, an ornately carved screen handle fashioned in sigil of the Takeda house; the quadruple diamond.

I put my back against the wall, and slid the screen away from me. I only opened enough for me to snake through sideways. I quickly stepped into the room, slowly closing the screen behind me. I stood against the wall next to the screen for many moments letting my eyes adjust to the darkness of the room. I began to see Sorun's bed, and slowly the other furniture about the room. Once I was clear of my path to Sorun, I began to stealth closer to him, making slow, precise movements until I was an arms length from the bed. I drew my black blade, which was still warm from the guard's blood. I positioned myself behind Sorun's head, poised to strike. I brought the blade back and began to thrust it behind his ear when I saw the linen sheet by Sorun's shoulder move, and the head of a small boy became visible. The child was not awake, but I had almost dropped my blade in shock. I watched the child and his father until I was convinced neither was awake. I repositioned my blade and prepared to deliver the killing blow, but I could not take my eyes off the boy. His hair perplexed me. It was as dark as the sky outside and looked suppler than the finest of silks, like mine. I could hear his small breaths underneath his father's snore.

I told myself to get on with my mission, kill Sorun Takeda, but my hand and my heart seemed to have conspired against me, for they would not obey my mind. I had been here too long trying to make myself kill this man, this father. I often thought about the families of the men I killed, even though I never knew them. I had never seen them, until now. I had been here too long. I was supposed to already be done with my task

and be fleeing the palace but no, I was still in this room. Realizing this, I came to two decisions: complete my assignment or run. I chose the way of shame: I ran.

My fleeing of the palace was of the same nature I came, over the balcony then down the wall and into the gardens. I had no problem scaling the outer wall of the palace grounds. From there, I ran away from the city, into the forest and arrived where I am now, kneeling in front of a stone shrine of some god whose face has long since weathered away. My instruments of death lay beside me. The early morning sun is starting to chase away the darkness of night. I have dishonored my name, and my clan and so cannot return to my beloved land ever again, nor can I flee to start anew, for this failure would loom above me until the end my days, always reminding me of my weakness. I cannot live with this. I must now do the most honorable thing possible, bushido.

I picked up the black blade, which dripped of sorrow and held no mercy. I wonder what my parents looked like, and how my children might have looked. A single tear formed at the corner of my eye; dripped down across my cheek and fell onto the blade. Clearing my mind of all thoughts, I set the blade's point against the right side of my body on the section of flesh below my ribs and above my hip.

He plunged the blade into himself, doubling over as he brought the blade across the rest of his front side. The blood of his ancestors wept from the fatal wound and onto the soft, wet grass. He made no sound.