

The *Secret Diary* of the

WORLD'S WORST Samurai

Written by Tim Collins / Illustrated by Isobel Lundie



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First published in the UK in 2020 by The Salariya Book Company Ltd

This edition published in the UK in 2024 by Hatch Press,

an imprint of Bonnier Books UK

4th Floor, Victoria House

Bloomsbury Square, London WC1B 4DA

Owned by Bonnier Books

Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

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ISBN 978-1-80078-777-3

Written by Tim Collins

Designed by Kieran Hood

Production by Nick Read

Printed in 2024

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Chapter I

Japan, 1582



Day One

Mother thinks I'm practising my writing. I do it every day and she never reads it. So while I kneel here in my silk robe, dabbing my brush onto the paper like an obedient daughter, I'm going to reveal my true destiny.

I, Suki Akiyama, am going to become a samurai warrior. My father is one, and my brother is training to become one. It's in my blood.

Mother thinks I'm going to help her with the fish soon, but I'm not. I'm going to take my bamboo stick up to the jagged rocks, and train myself to become a fearsome fighter.

My family won't need me to chop up fish if our daimyo calls us to battle. They'll need me to chop up enemies.

GET REAL

Women in medieval Japan were brought up to serve their fathers, and eventually their husbands. But some chose a life of violent battle instead. Female warriors who fought alongside men were known as 'Onna-Bugeisha'.



Day Two

Mother couldn't find me when she needed me to slice the fish yesterday, so now I'm forbidden to go outside. She's standing behind me in her green silk robe, with her neat hair tied back, her black eyes fixed on me and her small mouth fixed in a scowl.

I don't think she's reading what I'm writing, though. Let me test it.

I'm still going to be a samurai. She can't stop me. No one can.

My true place is charging into battle and beheading enemies, not preparing food and sweeping floors.

When I was out on the jagged rocks yesterday, I told myself I was a samurai and it felt right.



The rocks are to the north of our village, and they overlook the main path, which winds down a steep hill, and eventually takes you all the way to the coast.

I held up my bamboo stick and pretended to be a fearsome warrior, facing hordes of enemies armed with swords, lances, bows and arrows.

In my imagination, the stick became a long, curved sword that was created by a master craftsman. As the waves of enemies came at me, I sliced their heads off and added them to my collection. I soon gathered over a hundred, each with an identical expression of terror mixed with grudging respect.

The final line of enemies surged forward in a last, desperate attempt to beat me, but I rushed out to meet them with my blade so high that the sky itself was carved in two.

I heard a ripping noise, which took me out of my fantasy. I turned around and saw I'd torn the back of my robe on one of the jagged rocks.

I knew that honesty is part of the way of the samurai, so I trekked home and admitted what I'd done to Mother.

If anything, she was even more ferocious than the enemies I'd been imagining. She told me to mend my robe, and stay inside from now on.

But she can't stop me practising my samurai skills. I know I'll need them one day.



Day Three

My father and my brother Yasutaro have arrived home, and I can hear them talking in the next room. At 13, Yasutaro is a year younger than me, yet he was the one chosen to go to samurai school. It's bad enough to imagine him there, learning all those amazing skills, but it's even worse when he returns home and boasts about it.

He says he's doing brilliantly, but I bet I'd do even better if I were given the chance. He's just finished intense training with a teacher called

Yoshihiro, a samurai who Father has fought alongside many times. This teacher has been very strict, and pushed him very hard, but he's come out of it as a great fighter, or so he says.

Mother and Father were distracted by Yasutaro, so at least I could sneak away and practise my sword skills again. I bet I could beat my brother in a battle, despite all of his fancy training.



Day Four

Yasutaro is telling Father all about the military tactics he's learned. Father is stroking his moustache and questioning him about imaginary battle situations. Yasutaro is scratching his head and dispensing wisdom like he's a veteran of a hundred battles, even though he hasn't been in a single one.

Father has the traditional samurai hairstyle which is shaved at the front with a small topknot. Yasutaro isn't old enough for this yet. His black hair is still short and spiky. But soon, if his teachers let him, he'll go through the coming-of-age ceremony and he'll be allowed samurai hair too.

I can't bear to hear Yasutaro discussing tactics. I'd be so much better than him if someone just gave me the chance.

I always beat him whenever we were playing Go. I could always second guess what he was going to do. If I was in charge of an army, I'd outthink any opponent.



GET REAL

Go is thought to be the oldest board game that is still regularly played. It was invented over 2,500 years ago in China, and was very popular in medieval Japan.

One player uses white stones, while the other uses black ones. They take turns placing them on a board to try and surround the largest area. They can also capture their opponent's stones by surrounding them. The player who has taken the most territory and removed the most enemy stones wins.



Day Five

I finally did it. As Father, Mother, Yasutaro and I were eating our morning rice, I stood up and announced I was going to be a samurai.



Yasutaro laughed, and I had to stop myself from throwing my bowl at him. I don't know much about the code of the samurai, but I'm guessing that attacking your own brother during a meal probably isn't part of it.

Mother told me to stop talking nonsense and get on with my chores.

I was expecting Father to say something similar, but he didn't. He froze with his rice bowl in his hand and peered at me in silence. Then he asked why I wanted to be a samurai.

I told him I was from a great samurai family, and it wasn't fair that Yasutaro got to be one and I didn't.

Father nodded and asked if I had any other reason.

I said I was better at fighting than Yasutaro, and if I could be sent to Yoshihiro I would emerge as the true warrior of our family.

Father nodded and asked if I had any other reason.

I said I was better at tactics than Yasutaro, and one day I could become a great commander and lead troops to glorious victories.

Father finished his rice in silence. When his bowl was empty, he said he refused to send me to samurai school.

I tried to keep my anger in, but it was no use. I said it was ridiculous that he wouldn't let me train just because I was a girl.

Father laughed. He said that wasn't the reason, and there were many stories about

female samurai who'd commanded armies of thousands. He said the reason he wouldn't send me was because I wasn't thinking like a true samurai should.

Mother repeated her demand for me to get back to my duties, but Father said I could be excused for one day. He told me to take the time to think and then answer the question again tomorrow morning.



GET REAL

Female samurai were rare, but some became legendary figures whose stories were repeated long after they died. An epic account of 12th century battles called The Tale of the Heike describes a female warrior called Tomoe Gozen. It says she was 'fit to confront a demon or a god' and 'worth a thousand warriors'.

Day Six

I spent yesterday wandering around our village and thinking about my answer. Only a few people live here. There are five other samurai, plus their wives, plus a few elderly people and some children who are much younger than me.

One of the old men, Fujioka, asked me what the problem was. I told him I was trying to work out how to answer an important question, and he said I should just tell the truth, as it was always better in the long run. I bowed and thanked him for his advice.

Another of the old men, called Kuroki, said that lying could lead to many problems, but so could telling the truth, because life was full of pain and if I didn't believe him I should try coping with his back. I didn't bother to thank him.

I paced around the whole village, from the rice fields on either side and the edges of the dense forests beyond, to the steep cliffs that rose up on the south.

I tried to work out what Father wanted to hear.

At first I couldn't get my angry, jealous thoughts about Yasutaro out of my mind. But I already knew Father didn't see these as a good enough reason to become a samurai.

Maybe I could explain how good I thought I could be without being mean about Yasutaro? But it would still sound boastful.

What did he want me to say? That I was brave enough to be a samurai? Or obedient enough to train with that strict teacher?

Then I remembered something Father says before leaving for battle. He doesn't talk about how great he is at fighting, or how certain he is of winning, he just says it's his duty.

That seemed like the sort of thing I should say.

After we finished our rice and bean curd this morning, Father gave me the chance to answer again. He asked why I wanted to become a samurai, and I said it didn't matter if I wanted to or not. I had to do it because it was my duty.

He nodded and said I'd answered well. He said this was a much more honourable reason than envy or personal glory.

He asked if I could swear to be respectful, honest and brave, and I said I could. Then he said that I could return to the school with them,

and he'd ask Yoshihiro to take me on for fifty days. At the end of that time, the teacher would decide if I was worth keeping on.

My brother grumbled that Yoshihiro wouldn't want to train me just because I'm good at Go and told Father what he wanted to hear, but Father told him to be quiet. He said he had battled alongside Yoshihiro many times, and he would agree to his request.

I thanked Father and bowed.

I worked out the correct answer to Father's question, but I wasn't being totally honest, even though a samurai is meant to be. The truth is, I do want a little bit of personal glory. Well, a lot really. Okay, I'll admit it. I want to be the mightiest and most glorious warrior in the whole world.

GET REAL

The code of the samurai was known as Bushido. It demanded obedience, honesty, respect, courage, self-control and dedication to duty. The principles of Bushido are still hugely popular in Japan, in much the same way that the notion of chivalry lives on in Europe. Modern Japanese people might follow Bushido in the workplace rather than the battlefield, but it's basically the same thing, only with more spreadsheets and less gushing blood.



Day Seven

We set off early this morning. I tied my sleeping mat to my back and followed Father and Yasutaro along the path that leads through a narrow gap in the jagged rocks and down the hill.

We soon turned into another path that forked off to the right, and Father said we could follow this one all the way to the school.

While Father strode on ahead, Yasutaro hung back and told me horror stories about Yoshihiro's teaching methods. He says he makes you train all day, and if you collapse with exhaustion, you have to clean the entire hall with a brush that only has three bristles.

He says Yoshihiro won't go right ahead and teach you how to use a sword or fire arrows. He'll make you do weird tasks first, and if you fail them, he'll say you aren't worth training.

Yasutaro and the others have already been through this hell, and they'll be based in the main hall with another teacher called Moriyori while Yoshihiro instructs me in the Zen garden, the side room and on the veranda.

I know my brother is just trying to put me off,
but I have to admit I'm pretty worried.

But I'm sure it will be okay. I'll just have to call
on the strength of my ancestors if I'm stuck. If
they could survive years of real battles, I'm sure
I can survive fifty days of training.

GET REAL

*Zen gardens used rocks, water features, trees
and bushes to create tranquil environments
where samurai could relax and banish
worries from their minds. The word 'Zen'
comes from a branch of Buddhism which
values self-control and intuition.*



Day Eight

We've been walking on this path from dawn
until dusk for two days now. My legs are aching
and the straps of my sandals have rubbed so
deep into my feet that they're surrounded by
brown clumps of dried blood.

But I'm not going to complain. A true samurai
never would. They could get both their legs
chopped off in battle and they'd still keep on
marching without grumbling.

I hope this journey lasts another ten days. I
wouldn't care. I might just check with Father to
find out how long it will be, though.





Day Nine

We can see the coast in the far distance, which means we'll arrive at the training school tomorrow. We've placed our mats down earlier than usual tonight because we've made such good progress.

Father has brought some rice cakes and honey for us to eat tonight, but I'm not sure I'll manage to stay awake long enough to get any.

It's more important that I get some proper rest before my training begins.



Chapter 2



Samurai school



Day Ten

The school is a long, flat building with white walls and a red roof, surrounded by a big wooden veranda.

There's a large exercise area at the front, and to the left there's a walled garden filled with cherry blossom trees, green shrubs and winding paths of smooth pebbles. There's a small round pond in the middle spanned by a low wooden bridge, and there's a row of miniature trees growing in pots to the left of it.

Most of the space inside the school is taken up by the training hall, but light walls of wood and paper mark out the sleeping quarters and the side room.

The other students were lined up in the main hall when we arrived. They were all boys, some younger than me with short, black hair and

some of my age or older with shaved heads and topknots. They were holding wooden swords and standing with their feet apart.

They all turned to look at me.

A tall man with small eyes, grey hair and bushy eyebrows yelled at them to focus on their task and their eyes darted away again. I guessed the man must be Yoshihiro.

He was standing with a shorter man in a blue robe, who I took to be Moriyori. Father strode over to speak to them, and Yoshihiro fixed his gaze on me as they talked. I tried to stare back at his intense black eyes, but couldn't stop myself looking away.

After a few moments, Father returned and said Yoshihiro had agreed to train me for fifty days.

I thanked Father and bowed. I felt as though my whole life had been leading up to that moment, and I had a squirming feeling deep in my stomach as I thought about how badly I wanted to succeed. My hands were shaking, so I put them behind my back where the teacher couldn't see them.



Day Eleven

Moriyori showed me a small gap on the floor at the back of the sleeping quarters last night. It was just about big enough for me to unroll my mat and lie down.

I tried to relax. Bright moonlight was shining through the window right onto me. I felt like it was marking me out, bringing the awkward new girl to everyone's attention.

It turned out that I didn't need the Moon to pick me out. As Moriyori left, I heard two other pupils whispering about how long they thought I'd last with Yoshihiro. One of them said he'd give up on me after two days, but the other said he thought I could make it to three.

I sighed. If I let them get away with this sort of talk, it wasn't going to stop. Putting them in their place wouldn't make me popular, but I needed to do it.

I was about to tell them to shut up or I'd chop their heads off and use their hair to sweep the floor, but someone else spoke up first.

It was my brother. He said that Yoshihiro had agreed to train me, and if anyone had a problem with it they should tell him. He said they wouldn't find it easy to make jokes when

he was making them lick the training yard clean with their tongues.

The giggling cut out and I thanked my brother in a low whisper.

It's strange that he spoke up for me after spending all that time frightening me on the way here. His rule must be that he's allowed to tease me, but no one else can.



Day Twelve

I woke up early this morning and watched the room fill with soft orange light as the Sun rose. I knew that today was going to be the start of my training, but I didn't know where I was meant to go or what I was meant to do.

I looked up at the neat wooden beams of the roof and wondered if I was meant to go and find Yoshihiro. Then a dark shape appeared in the corner of my eye, and when I looked around I saw he was standing right next to me.

He must have entered the room and stepped over all the other sleeping pupils without making a sound.

He strolled silently out again and I followed him.

I could hear my feet thudding across the floor and it made me wince to think how much heavier my tread was. I heard a loud, confused cry and realised I'd accidentally stomped on the hand of one of the sleeping students. I hoped Yoshihiro hadn't heard.

I found the teacher at the entrance to the

walled garden. He walked inside with his hands tucked neatly behind his back.

When he reached the pond, he turned and stared at me in silence. I wondered if I was meant to show initiative and start demonstrating my samurai skills. But after a while, he said Father had asked him to train me for a short period, and he'd agreed.

I took this as a cue to tell him all about how brilliant I would definitely be at sword-fighting and firing arrows.

Yoshihiro held his hand up and I stopped.

He said all that could come later, but first I had to learn how to be a warrior on the inside. He hit his own chest as he said this.

Then he picked up a small grey pebble and placed it in the palm of his hand. He told me to prove myself by grabbing it from him.

I squinted at him. I couldn't imagine how this skill would ever be useful in battle. Unless I were fighting an enemy who loved a pebble so much that they'd burst into tears if it was stolen from them.

I lunged forward and tried to grasp the stone. My hand swatted thin air. When I looked up, I saw that Yoshihiro was holding his hand high above his head.

It seemed impossible. I hadn't seen Yoshihiro move his hand at all. One moment it had been there and the next it was gone. It was as though it had disappeared and reappeared again somewhere else.

I would never have believed anyone could move that fast, never mind someone so thin and old.

Yoshihiro said we'd try it the other way around. He handed me the pebble and told me to stop him from grabbing it. I placed it in my palm and took a deep breath. This didn't sound too hard. All I'd have to do was clasp my hand as soon as I saw him move.

I told him to go ahead. His hand moved in a rapid blur, and my fingers slapped into an empty palm.

We tried again. I snapped my fingers shut sooner this time, but they still closed on thin air.

I asked Yoshihiro to give me one more chance. He agreed, and this time I smacked my hand shut even faster.



I gasped. There was something inside my hand. On just the first day of training I'd beaten his test. Here was proof that I was destined to be a great warrior.

I opened my hand. In the centre was a small pebble that had been painted red. For a moment, I wondered how it could have changed colour. Then Yoshihiro opened his own hand to

reveal the original grey pebble. He hadn't just managed to take it this time, he'd switched it for a different one.

He bowed and walked away, leaving me to stare at the red pebble in shock.



Day Thirteen

Yoshihiro led me into the garden again today. He was carrying a large white jug with pink flowers painted on the side.

He plunged the jug into the pool and dripped the water back in very slowly. He said that a true samurai warrior would be able to pass their hand between the drops without getting it wet.

It was another task that didn't seem to relate to battle very much, but also didn't seem too tough.

I stepped up to the jug, held my hand flat and tried to swish it through. I could have sworn I'd aimed at a gap, but I felt the cold splash of water on my knuckles.

I tried again. And again. And again.

Finally, I had to admit I couldn't do it. My hand was getting soaked every time. I looked at Yoshihiro and saw that his blue robe was covered with dark splashes. There was even a drop of water running down his moustache.

He dropped the jug into the pond, bowed and then left.

Another failure, then. But so what? I want to fight enemies, not drops of water.



Day Fourteen

Yoshihiro guided me onto the veranda to the right of the school today. There was a long roll of thin rice paper unfurled there.

Yoshihiro removed his sandals and walked across without making a noise. Although the paper was incredibly thin and fragile, he left no mark.

Then he pointed to the paper and told me to try.

Again, it didn't seem too difficult. Yoshihiro was much taller than me, and although he was thin, he must have weighed a lot more. All I had to do was flit quickly across, and I was bound to leave the paper intact.

I took my sandals off and stepped across. I made no sound, and thought I'd been doing well until I looked over my shoulder and saw tiny rips where my feet had been.

I groaned, but there was still time to save it. If I left no mark on what was left, Yoshihiro might still count it as a win.

I tried to go on tiptoes, but could feel right away that I was tearing the paper.

I decided my best bet would be to bound across in huge leaps. I jumped high in the air, but landed awkwardly on my left foot, and crashed to the ground. The rice paper disintegrated as I landed on it.

Yoshihiro stepped over me and returned to the far end of the veranda. As he disappeared around the corner, he said I'd never be a samurai. He said he'd tested my reactions, my speed and my stealth, and I'd failed miserably on all counts.

My eyes were stinging. Father had convinced Yoshihiro to give me fifty days of training, but he'd only needed three. It was over already.

I couldn't even bring myself to get up. I just lay where I'd fallen and let my tears fall onto the torn rice paper.



Day Fifteen

Yoshihiro didn't come for me this morning.

I dressed and joined the others in the hall for rice and soya beans. I sat next to my brother and told him what had happened. He said Yoshihiro had never given up on anyone so soon, so I must be the worst pupil ever. I told him he'd made me feel a lot better, and jabbed him in the ribs with my chopstick.

He said the best thing I could do was sit in the Zen garden and reflect on what had gone wrong. Perhaps Yoshihiro would see how seriously I was taking it and decide to give me another try.

It was quite a good idea, for something that came from my brother.



When the bowls had been cleared away and the others began their training with Moriyori, I made my way to the garden.

I knelt in front of the pond and watched the gentle drift of the water lilies.

I tried to look like I was full of remorse, but the truth I was just angry. How was I meant to have grabbed the pebble from his hand when he's been practising for hundreds of years and it was my first try?

And I'm sure I would have got better at avoiding the drip of water and walking over the rice paper if I'd had time. He was meant to be training me, wasn't he? Doesn't that involve making allowances for some mistakes?

I felt my breathing getting faster and my cheeks getting hotter. I wanted to grab a sword

and chop the bridge up so it could float in the pond right next to the stupid water lilies.

I heard a rustle near the door as if someone had walked past.

Was that Yoshihiro? Had he somehow sensed I was annoyed instead of remorseful?

Probably not. If it had been him, he'd have made no sound at all.



Day Sixteen

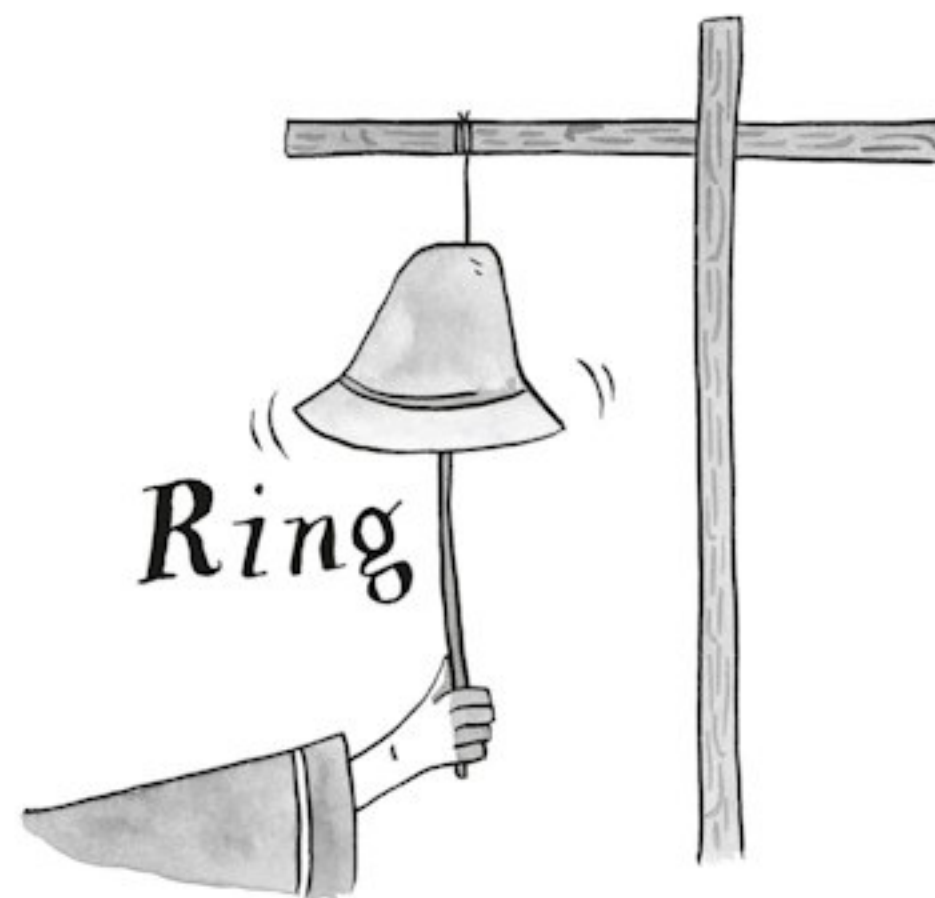
I didn't want to go back to the Zen garden today, so I decided to stay in the main hall after I'd finished my sliced trout in vinegar. I sat at the back with my head down, and nobody seemed to notice.

I told them to stand up straight and hold the tips of the lances to the throats of their imaginary opponents. Then we practised pulling the lances back and thrusting them forward to deliver a killing blow.

Takenaka managed to follow my instructions perfectly. But Mother couldn't stay in time, and I kept having to stop and make her do it again. After all those years of being told I was doing my chores wrong, it was fun to finally turn the tables on her.

Surprisingly, Mother didn't even argue back. She's accepted that I'm in charge now, just like everyone else.

I'd feel pretty good about it if it wasn't for the group of bloodthirsty bandits waiting to invade.



Day Thirty-Nine

It was still dark this morning when I was woken by the bell. I grabbed my sword, bow and arrows and ran over to the rocks. The others were already gathering, so I pushed through and climbed to the top of the jagged rocks.



Takenaka was on guard duty, and she'd spotted movement in the far distance. It was hard to make anything out, and at first I thought she might have woken us all for no good reason. But as I peered into the gloom, I found I could make out eight figures moving slowly towards us.

I told everyone to get into position and wait for my instructions. It was time to fight.

Mother and Takenaka stood behind the narrow pass, and held their lances out to block it. The samurai wives gathered behind them, ready to pounce on anyone who got through.

I climbed onto the highest rock and placed my first arrow into my bow.

Okay, so there were eight bandits. This was going to be tough. But I could reduce their

number to five if I scored a fatal hit with each of my arrows.

As the group got closer, I could see that the two figures at the back were limping slightly, and one was much taller than the other. Our old friends were back, despite their promises to keep away.

I aimed my arrow at the tall bandit and stretched the bow back. I let it go. It plummeted straight down, landing nowhere near any of the invading bandits.

I knew I should be taking time to think. Shooting over such a long range would be difficult for the most skilled archer. For someone who couldn't even hit a tree they were standing right next to, it would be impossible.

I tried to make myself wait until the group got closer and give myself at least a small chance of hitting them. But I'd given in to my anger. They'd gone back on their word and now I wanted revenge.

I picked up the second arrow and placed it in the bow. This time I aimed for the air above the tall bandit, hoping that the arrow would arc down onto his head.

The arrow flew high, but it was too steep. It rose up then fell straight down again, landing closer to us than them.

Without pausing, I fired off my last arrow. This time it hurtled along, not too high and not too low. I followed its white feathers as it sped towards the group.

I sighed. The arrow landed on the ground in front of the tall bandit.

Not only had I wasted my last chance, but I'd drawn their attention. The tall bandit pointed at me and shouted something at the others. Then they all held out their swords and ran up the hill towards me.

I told everyone to get ready to fight. I did my best to sound confident, but my voice was already wavering.

The six new bandits looked much stronger and fiercer than the ones we'd already met. And I'd managed to take out absolutely none of them with my arrows. This was going to be a fierce, bloody battle.

I held my sword up as they stormed towards us. I wanted to look like a fearsome warrior and

frighten them off, but it's not easy when your legs are shaking.

I shut my eyes and told myself to be brave. I had a sword. I'd trained with a master samurai, even though it hadn't gone very well. I still had a chance.

When I opened my eyes, I saw that something very strange had happened. The bandits had suddenly disappeared.

I glanced down at the bottom of the rocks to see if they'd somehow managed to make it all the way there already, but there was no sign of them anywhere.

It was like one of those moments when you put your cup or writing brush down, and then when you look again it's gone. Except the missing thing in this case was eight merciless robbers.

I heard screams coming from a dark patch further down the hill. I could just about make out a narrow gap, as if the hill had cracked open without warning.

Takenaka asked if they were close yet, and I replied that I couldn't actually see them. I tried my best not to sound too confused.

Fujioka said they must have fallen right into the trench. He said he'd made it very deep, just like I'd wanted.

At first I had no idea what he was talking about. But then I thought back to the day I'd drawn my map in the sand. I made a mess of it by trying to draw arrows at the front and then crossing them out. Fujioka must have thought I was asking for another trench halfway down the hill, cutting across the path.

I'd have thought the ground there would be too hard and rocky to dig in, but it looked like Fujioka had managed it.

I thanked him for carrying out my plan and scrambled down from the rocks. I walked slowly down to the trench and the others followed.

As we approached, I got Mother and Takenaka to flank me on either side with the lances in case any of the thieves decided to leap up and attack us.

The first streaks of light were appearing in the sky as I peered down into the pit. All eight of the bandits were at the bottom, wincing and picking shards of wood out of their feet and legs.

They were covered in moss, rocks and twigs, the remains of a false covering Fujioka must have laid over the trench.

The bandits, who had looked so fierce a few moments ago, now seemed totally helpless. I should have put an end to it all by burying them alive, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

I told them I'd let them go if they handed their weapons over and agreed to stay away forever. Murmurs of agreement came from the trench.

Seven swords, some of which were as old and rusty as mine, landed on the ground in front of us. I handed them to the samurai wives.

Then I lowered the broom into the deep hole and used it to pull the bandits up one by one. None of them tried to fight when they were out. They just jumped back across the gap and slouched away down the hill.

Soon they were all wandering away with their heads bowed and their shoulders slumped. The tall bandit who'd visited the other day seemed to have twisted his ankle, and was limping far behind the others and asking them to wait.

The Sun came up as we watched them hobble away out of sight. Then we made our way back to the village.

Everyone congratulated me on my great plan, and I didn't have the heart to admit it had been an accident.



Takenaka said I was a brilliant leader and it was no wonder my teacher had said I was ready to be a samurai. I'd almost forgotten about that lie. I'll have a lot of explaining to do when Father hears about it.



Day Forty

Maybe I should have killed the bandits when I had the chance. The first two didn't keep their promise to stay away, so there's no reason they will this time. But at least we have better weapons now, I suppose.

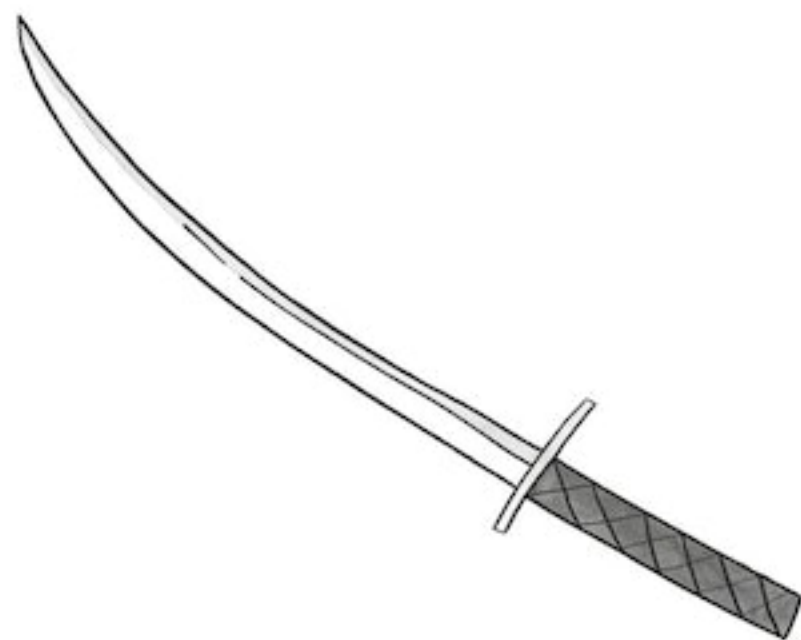
I let the others get back to their normal lives today, but I stayed on the rocks with my sword in my hand, looking out for movement.

I saw nothing, but I can't get rid of the feeling that the threat isn't over yet.

Chapter 7



A great samurai



Day Forty-One

I couldn't sleep last night, so I grabbed my sword and made for the jagged rocks again. I stood on the top, gazing down the path.

It was too dark to see properly, but I thought I could see something in the far distance.

I wondered if I was imagining it. After all, I'd been staring at the path for so long, and I'd had so little sleep, that I couldn't trust my eyes.

I scrambled over to the bell, but couldn't bring myself to ring it. I was a hero to everyone in the village, but if I woke them up in the middle of the night for a false alarm that would all change immediately.

I went back to the high rock and stared down at the path. I'd been right. There were definitely people approaching.

I could make out eight figures. The bandits were back. And they must have all recovered quickly from their injuries because they were hurrying towards me.

There was no time to think about it. I'd already waited too long. I dashed over to the bell and rang it.

I could hear distant cries from the village, but no footsteps. It was going to take a while for the others to wake up. Meanwhile, the bandits were gaining fast, and there was only me to fend them off.

Fighting eight reckless thieves with their hearts set on revenge was going to be tough, even if they didn't have swords. But I couldn't live with the dishonour of running away. Yoshihiro might not have wanted me to be a samurai, but at least I could die like one.

I lifted my sword and ran down the path screaming at the bandits.

I screamed louder and blinked tears from my eyes as I got closer. They seemed to be shouting something, but I couldn't hear or see them very well in the dark.

I charged at them with my sword out. The one at the front had a sword too. This wasn't good. They must have found some other weapons to attack us with.

The bandit clashed his sword into mine with such force that I tumbled to the ground and my weapon rolled away.

So this was it. I would be an easy kill for the bandits now. I just hoped they'd make it quick.

But none attacked. Instead, they seemed to be calling my name. How did they know it?

I wiped the tears from my eyes and looked up. Yoshihiro and Father were looking down at me. Behind them was my brother and the five others who had gone to battle.

Yoshihiro tucked his sword back into his belt and asked what I was doing. I tried to tell him about the bandits, but I knew I wasn't making sense. The fall had knocked the wind out of me and a wave of exhaustion was hitting.

Yoshihiro pulled me to my feet and we continued up the path. By now the others from the village were streaming down to meet them.

Soon excited conversations were breaking out all around me. The samurai were telling their

families about their victory in battle, and the families were telling them about our brave defence of the village.

As we reached our house, Father caught up with me and said he'd heard all about the brilliant work I'd done while they were away. He wanted me to tell him more, but I said I needed to sleep first.

All the worry that had been surging through me had gone, and I could barely keep my eyes open.



Day Forty-Two

The bell is back in the centre of the village now. We gathered around it this afternoon and Father made me tell the story of how we protected the village. I told him every detail, except that I hadn't actually meant for Fujioka

to dig the big trench. Father said he was very proud of me, and congratulated the others for carrying out my plan so well.

There was something I still needed to apologise for, and I thought I should do it while Father would be in a forgiving mood. I admitted that I'd pretended Yoshihiro had said I was a great samurai. I knew this was a lie, but I thought it would be easier for the village to rally around a brilliant fighter than someone who had failed their training.

Father said he understood, and that I was completely forgiven.

Then Yoshihiro stepped forward and said there was nothing to forgive because it wasn't a lie. Now that he'd heard how I'd protected the village, he really did think I was a great

samurai. He asked me to return to school with him so I could complete my training.

I agreed at once, even though I knew I was letting myself in for a world of frustration and pain. But I know it will all be worth it, because I'll emerge as a brilliant warrior.

Then Yoshihiro offered his sword to me with both hands. He said he'd finally found a pupil worthy of it.



I bowed and took it. Then I stepped back and held it up. Now I could understand everything he'd said about the sword being part of me, and about its ancient power. I'd tried so hard to feel like this during training, but now it was happening naturally.

With my new sword in my hands, I could see a future of tough battles and glorious victories laid out before me.

All my life I've felt like I was destined to become a great warrior. It turns out I was right.

The End



Samurai warriors

Samurai were a fierce group of Japanese warriors who were at their most important between the 12th and 18th centuries. They served lords known as daimyo, who owned land and were in charge of private armies.

Much of the samurai era was marked by fierce conflict between feuding clans. Rivals would fight each other in violent battles that lasted for months or years. They would have to survive in a harsh rocky landscape, braving heavy rain in summer and snow in winter.



They followed a code known as Bushido, which required honesty, courage and absolute loyalty to their lords. They would fight to the death to defend their daimyo, and seek revenge on anyone who wronged them. Going to battle was seen as a male duty, though women were expected to defend their homes from attack. However, a number of female samurai such as Tomoe Gozen became legendary warriors and commanders.



The era of civil war came to an end in the early 17th century following the victory of Tokugawa Ieyasu in the battle of Sekigahara. A period of peace followed, and samurai began to learn about philosophy and the arts as well as military skills. Edo, now known as Tokyo, was the centre of power for this time, so it is often called the Edo period.

In 1868 the last of the shoguns descended from Tokugawa was overthrown, and Japan was opened to international trade. Industry and business were the important things in this new world, and the samurai seemed to belong to the distant past.

But the idea of the samurai remained a part of Japanese identity. Popular martial arts such as judo, kendo and karate require the strength and self-control of the great warriors. Learning them will give you a taste of the tough training that young samurai had to endure.

The samurai lives on in countless games, anime, manga and movies. The filmmaker Akira Kurosawa directed many classic films about them, including *Ran*, *Throne of Blood* and *Seven Samurai*.

And the samurai code of duty, loyalty and honesty continues to inspire Japanese people in all walks of life.

Samurai castles

The period 1570–1690 is often called the ‘Golden Age’ of Japanese castle building. Unlike traditional Japanese buildings, they were several storeys high. ‘Golden Age’ castles were also admired for their innovative layout. They were planned as clusters of towers, and included features like gateways, courtyards and reception halls, borrowed from all kinds of traditional buildings, from temples to townhouses.

The resulting castles were very beautiful, with carved and painted woodwork and steep, soaring roofs. The outer walls of Matsue castle (completed 1611) were covered in shiny black lacquer, earning it the nickname ‘Raven Castle’. Hikone castle (completed

1603) was decorated in gold. Himeji castle (completed 1609) was covered in special, fireproof white plaster. This, plus its graceful, curving gables, won it the name 'White Egret Castle'. Until the early 17th century, these magnificent castles had an extra purpose: to display samurai power. That is why, in 1615, shogun Ieyasu banned samurai from building more than one castle on each of their estates.

Originally, strength and security were the prime consideration for samurai, but soon castle interiors began to be planned – at least in part – as showcases for their owner's wealth, good breeding and excellent taste.



How do we know about samurai warriors?

The era of the great samurai began over eight hundred years ago. So how do we know so much about it?

One reason is that many written documents have survived. There are hundreds of scrolls, letters and maps that give us valuable evidence about the world of the samurai.

Finely crafted pieces of art have also survived. These include paintings, sculptures, pottery and carvings. Other objects can teach us about Japanese life. Many genuine swords still exist, some dating back to the very beginning of the samurai period.



Buildings such as castles, Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines are still standing. Millions of tourists every year visit Himeji Castle, which was rebuilt in 1609.

And some research is more gruesome. Scientists have examined the skeletons of samurai to find out things like how they were killed and how many had their heads chopped off to become battle trophies.



Timeline

1192 AD

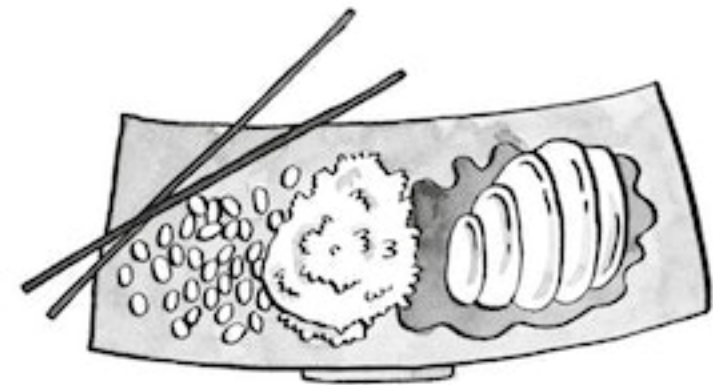
Minamoto Yoritomo becomes shogun for life after winning the Genpei War. It ushers in an era in which samurai become powerful figures.

1336 AD

Ashikaga Takauji defeats Emperor Go-Daigo and becomes shogun. The Muromachi period begins, named after the district of Kyoto where the government was based.

1467 AD

The Ōnin War marks the beginning of the 'Age of Warring States'. This was a long period of violent conflict in which powerful daimyo and their armies fought for dominance.



Timeline

1543 AD

Portuguese traders arrive in Japan for the first time. Over the next few years traders will introduce goods that will transform samurai life, such as muskets, which are heavy guns that are fired from the shoulder.

1603 AD

Tokugawa Ieyasu becomes shogun, having defeated his rival warlords and seized power. He passes strict laws to stop the violent feuding between daimyos and their armies. The 'Edo period' of Japan begins.



Timeline

1609 AD

Himeji Castle is rebuilt into a stunning complex with multiple levels, steep roofs and walls covered in white plaster. This is the golden age of castle building, when daimyo were competing to build extravagant structures that would display their power.

1853 AD

Commodore Matthew Perry arrives in Edo Bay with a fleet of American ships, demanding trade with Japan. Many are worried that Japan has fallen behind other nations in areas like technology and military power, and they argue that it must change.



Timeline

1867 AD

Tokugawa Yoshinobu resigns, marking the end of a dynasty founded over 250 years earlier by Tokugawa Ieyasu.

1868 AD

Emperor Meiji takes control of Japan and sets about transforming the country into a modern industrial nation. The time of the samurai is finally over.

1954 AD

Akira Kurosawa's classic film *Seven Samurai* is released. The samurai are long gone, but they live on in the imaginations of many great artists and storytellers.



Samurai Hall of Fame

Hangaku Gozen (c. 12th century)

Female warrior who fought as an ally of the Taira clan in the Genpei War. She is said to have commanded an army of 3,000 soldiers. After her death, she became a popular figure in paintings and prints, and is often shown wielding the naginata, which is a long wooden pole with a curved blade on the end.

Kusunoki Masashige (1294–1336 AD)

Most samurais were loyal only to their own families. Kusunoki Masashige became famous for his support of Emperor Go-Daigo, who came to power in 1318. Go-Daigo was one of the few Japanese emperors who wanted to stand up to the shoguns and rule for himself. Kusunoki Masashige gave him wise advice, but he was overruled by courtiers, who had none of his samurai skills. However, he chose to loyally obey the emperor's orders, and was eventually killed in battle.

Samurai Hall of Fame

Minamoto Tametomo (1139–1170 AD)

Legendary samurai archer. He was said to have won many battles with his bow skills, and it's even claimed that he once sunk an entire ship by firing an arrow into its hull. His amazing skills were apparently down to his right arm being much longer than his left arm, giving him more pull on the bowstring.

Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–1199 AD)

Ruthless leader who had his brother and cousins put to death on his rise to power. He defeated the Taira clan in the Genpei war, then placed allies in provinces all around Japan and made them lords. He now had power over the whole country, and in 1192 he became Shogun for life. He was fierce enough to win battles and wise enough to hold onto power.

Samurai Hall of Fame

Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582 AD)

Warrior and military leader who was known for his brilliant battle tactics. He once defeated a much larger army by making his troops circle them and launch a surprise attack, and was the first samurai lord to equip his troops with muskets as well as swords. He conquered many provinces and brought them together under his rule, laying the groundwork for the unification of Japan and an end to the age of warring states.

Otomo Yakamochi (718–785 AD)

Otomo Yakamochi lived in the 8th century. Although not a very effective warrior – the Emperor Kanmu called him an ‘incompetent coward’ – he was the first warrior to receive the title of shogun.

Samurai Hall of Fame

The Soga family

The Soga family were rich, noble warriors with friends – and enemies – at the emperor's court. They wanted to 'modernise' the way Japan was governed by introducing new ideas borrowed from China. But other noble families disagreed. So, in AD 587, Soga warriors fought a battle at Shigisen, and won. In 592, one of the family, Prince Shōtoku, became emperor. He passed many new laws, transforming the way the country was run.



Samurai Hall of Fame

Taira family

The Taira family were the most powerful samurai in 12th-century Japan; they ruled on behalf of the 8-year-old emperor Antoku. But they were defeated at the sea-battle of Dan-no-ura in 1185. They had no choice but mass suicide. Led by Antoku's grandmother, carrying him in her arms, all the leading Taira warriors jumped overboard in their armour, and drowned.

Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616 AD)

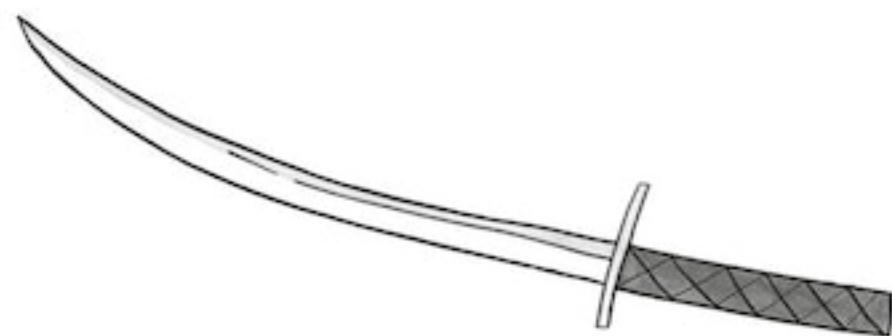
Samurai warrior who went on to become one of the most important figures in Japanese history. He was born into the age of warring states, when the country was torn apart by violent conflict between rival lords. He believed the daimyo should be brought together under a single ruler, and formed alliances with others

Samurai Hall of Fame

who felt the same way, like Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi. After winning victory in the battle of Sekigahara, Ieyasu became shogun in 1603. The Tokugawa dynasty would last for 250 years.

Tomoe Gozen (1157–1247 AD)

Female samurai known for her skill at archery and sword-fighting. She was appointed as a commander in the Genpei War and led thousands of samurai into bloody battles. It's said that she once fought with just 300 samurai against 2,000 rivals on horseback. Tomoe went on to become an iconic figure in Japan, appearing in Noh and Kabuki plays.

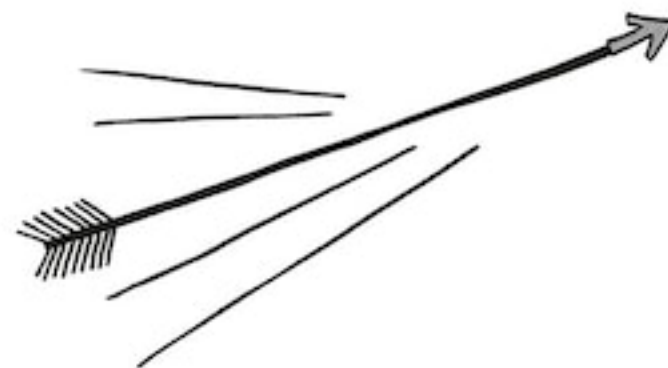


Samurai Hall of Fame

Toyotomi Hideyoshi (c.1537–1598 AD)

Samurai warrior who rose up from a low-ranking family to become a powerful politician, though he was never named shogun on account of his humble origins. He made several big changes to Japan, such as forcing samurai to move to castle towns and taking a census and then declaring that everyone had to stay in their areas unless they had permission. This helped to prevent groups of lawless bandits from roaming the country.

Hideyoshi wanted his son to take over when he died. But he was betrayed by fellow samurai Tokugawa Ieyasu, who seized power instead.

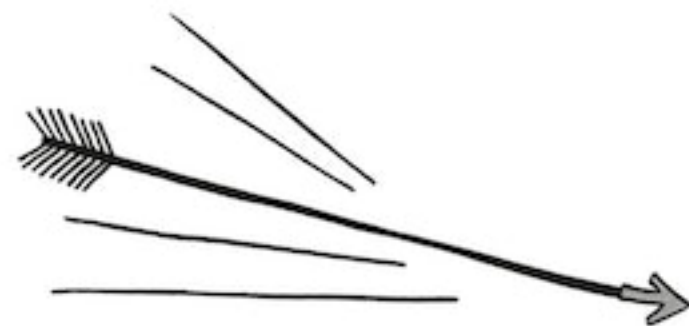


Samurai Hall of Fame

Yamato Takeru (72–? AD)

A brave and cunning prince who had an amazing sword that came from the belly of an eight-headed dragon and which could cut away burning grass. He defeated enemies by dressing up as a woman and killing them when they were drunk. And when he died, he magically transformed into a white bird and disappeared from the world.

As you might have guessed from these ‘facts’, Takeru was a legendary figure, and the subject of many elaborate folk tales. But his story inspired many genuine samurai.



Glossary

Anime

Japanese animated films with bright colours and frantic action sequences. The samurai is a popular figure in anime, and one even features in the oldest surviving Japanese animation made for public showing.

Ashigaru

An ordinary soldier that wasn't of samurai rank, but still fought in a warlord's army.

Bokken

A wooden sword used for training samurai.

Bonsai

The Japanese art of growing small, potted versions of different trees and shrubs.



Glossary

Buddhism

The fourth largest religion in the world, Buddhism grew from the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama, also known as 'The Buddha'.

Bushido

The name given to the samurai code of honesty, bravery, obedience and loyalty.

Chivalry

The code of honour followed by medieval knights. The European equivalent of Bushido.

Daimyo

Samurai lords who lived in great estates or castles.



Glossary

Edamame

Boiled soya beans served in their pods. The dish was popular in medieval Japan and is still eaten today.

Edo period

The time from 1603 to 1868, when Tokugawa Ieyasu and his descendants ruled from Edo, which is now known as Tokyo.



Judo

A martial art in which opponents use holds and throws to unbalance each other. In English it means 'gentle way'.

Kabuki

A style of popular drama developed in the 17th century which featured elaborate costumes and make-up. It was a blend of music, dance, mime and highly-skilled visual performance.

Karate

A martial art which involves striking an opponent with the hands, knees and feet. In English it means 'empty hand'.

Glossary

Katana

A sword with a long, curved blade with a single edge that was popular with samurai.

Kendo

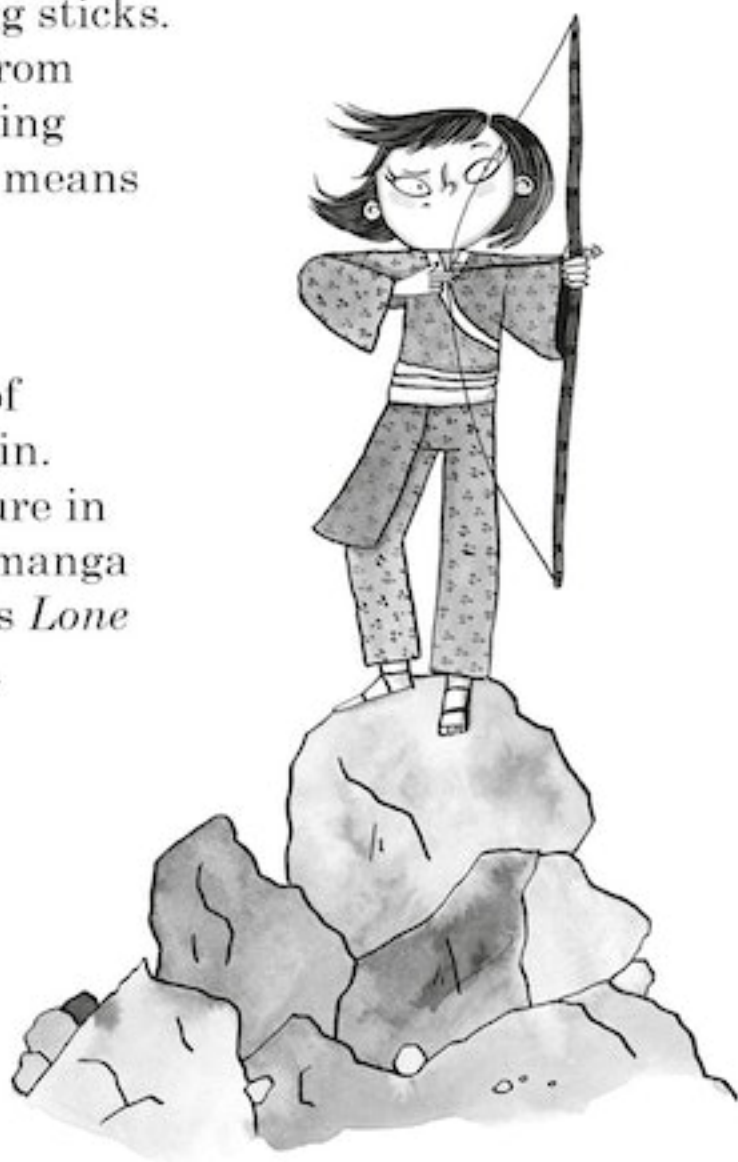
A martial art in which opponents fence with long sticks. It developed from samurai training methods, and means 'sword way'.

Manga

Comic books of Japanese origin. Samurai feature in many classic manga stories such as *Lone Wolf and Cub*.

Musket

A type of long, heavy gun that was loaded from the front. It was introduced to Japan in the 16th century, but took a while to become established as a samurai weapon.



Glossary

Naginata

Weapon that has a long wooden shaft and a sharp metal blade. These are the weapons most commonly associated with female samurai.

Noh

A traditional form of Japanese drama that featured masks, heavy costumes and stylised movement.

Samurai

Fierce warriors who fought gruesome battles in medieval Japan.

Shinto

Ancient Japanese religion in which people worship ancestors and different nature spirits.

Shogun

The military leader of Japan. He was second in rank to the emperor, and ruled on his behalf.

Zen

A branch of Buddhism popular in Japan. Its followers seek understanding through meditation and self-discipline.



