

## Lunchtime Samurai

The air whistled as it parted around the wooden sword's edge, ending in a loud whack as it hit another of its kind. Strike. Block. The swings were clumsy at first, but one by one, they got sharper, faster. Strike. Deflect. Counter. The red samurai steadied his breath, and his pulse slowed. Anticipation. He gazed intensely at his opponent, noticing the slightest shift in weight from one foot to another, the way the blue swordsman adjusted his grip. A shakuhachi started to drown out the surrounding noises, but it too faded away as the red samurai swung once more, this time with precision.

Jaime leaned in until his face was only a few inches from the TV. When he first began learning the blade, he'd been perplexed by the nature of the shakuhachi's cool, breathy whistle. Its noise was pensive, foreign to him. But the more that the boy studied the samurais' movements, the less aware of the music he became. He remained frozen in place until the screen went black. It took a few seconds for him to recognize the bloodshot eyes, busted lip, and determined expression reflected in the display as his own. *Bedtime*. He took the VHS tape out of the Philips and put it back in its box, then crawled up the stairs on all fours towards his room. Usually, when his mom worked late, he'd stay up until he heard the garage door open at the crack of dawn. But tomorrow was a big day. He hopped onto the mattress, pulled the sheets up to his neck, and closed his eyes.

That morning, the Philips ate the tape with a loud whirr. Some amount of whining was to be expected—it had been eating the same snack for the past month. Jaime patted the VCR player

empathetically. He left it playing while he crawled underneath the sofa, reaching, reaching—*there*. His hand wrapped around something cold and plastic. With a practiced effort, he pulled the toy katana out from its hiding place. Then, he got down to business, mimicking the combatants' movements. He swung with as much strength as he could muster, over and over, breathing strenuously. The swings were clumsy at first, but one by one, they got sharper and faster. Attack. Deflect. Anticipation. Attack. Block. Counter. Strike. His heart began to race—

A sharp honk broke the concentration. Jaime jumped and scrambled for his backpack, stuffing it with the essentials: pencils, erasers, unfinished homework, snacks, comic books—and, of course, the sword. He only had a few minutes until the bus left without him. That wasn't an option. *Not today.*

The boy reclined at a shaded bench underneath the playground system, patiently reading an issue of *Usagi Yojimbo* that he rested on his crossed leg. An array of snacks lined up at his feet so he could reach down and grab whichever he felt like at the time. Savory for the fun parts, sweet for the sad ones, and sour for the action. His baseball cap was tugged forward so that the brim stuck out below his eyebrows, shielding his eyes from the sun. *And enemy surveillance.* Jaime's backpack sat by his side, wide open. The sword's hilt poked ever so slightly through the front flap.

Then came the inevitable crunch. Jaime looked up from the sour scene he'd been reading to see a white leather sneaker standing on a now-crushed bag of chips right in front of him. The shoe was brand new, unblemished by dirt, grass, or time, save for the fresh chip particles. Jaime's shoes were hand-me-downs from his older brother. Old and dusty, and the soles were starting to come off. At least *his* didn't have Cheeto dust on them, though.

More footsteps began to tromp up. Jack and his goons were back. Jaime began fidgeting with the corner of the page, flicking it back and forth. He refused to meet the older boys' gazes.

“Jaime, What did we talk about last week?” said the seventh-grader. His tone was familiar, and demeaning in a way that made Jaime clench his jaw.

Jaime’s pupils dilated, but as they flicked to the front flap of his backpack, he took a deep breath and went back to reading, licking his finger to turn the page. Wait—he’d missed a plot point. He flipped back to the previous page.

Above, Jack scowled at the obstinate fourth-grader. “Can anyone here remind him?” Jack looked at Colin, who stepped forward and snatched Jaime’s comic book with his stubby, fat fingers.

“We told you. This is our spot, vomitboy,” growled Colin.

“Nice one.” Ryan let out a thin, nasally snicker. Jack’s pair of cronies had always vaguely reminded Jaime of a mean SpongeBob and Patrick, but stupider—if that was even possible.

Colin looked over his shoulder towards the rest of the schoolyard before turning to Jack. “The lunch monitor is gone,” he whispered excitedly.

Jaime finally looked up, making direct, unblinking eye contact with Jack. The older boy wore full camo, an auburn buzz cut, and a supervillain grin—like Joker’s, or Loki’s. This kid had never faced the consequences of his actions. He would today.

Jaime wiped the sweat and crumbs from his hands onto his pants and froze for a second. *Say something.*

“I was reading that,” said Jaime in a shriller voice than he’d anticipated.

“This nerdy shit?” Jack took the comic book from Colin and tore a few pages out before throwing it onto the hot asphalt. He took another step towards Jaime. They were within arm’s reach of each other.

“Tough.”

Jaime’s eyes narrowed.

A few feet from their conversation, a bright green leaf gradually floated down towards the playground structure.

Jaime's busted lip started throbbing, but he remained quiet, maintaining eye contact with Jack as his hand inched toward his backpack. Jack cocked a fist and lunged forward, crushing more unfortunate goldfish crackers in the process.

The leaf hit the ground.

Wham! Jaime swung his katana out of the bag and struck Jack in the jaw, stopping the bully's punch in his tracks. Jack yelped in pain and hopped back.

Colin drove in and swung at Jaime, who ducked just in time. A cool wave of wind rolled over Jaime as he slashed his sword in a swift diagonal motion, pounding Colin in the ribs. Grunting, Colin quickly clamped his arm down, catching the toy blade, and yanked backward, pulling Jaime with it.

"Got you!"

Jaime stumbled forward, gripping the hilt tightly. "Give it back!"

Ryan grabbed Jaime from behind, coiling python-like arms around him and forcing him to let go of the sword. Jack, now recovered from the previous blow, planted a fist square in Jaime's stomach, leaving him winded. Then another one. Then, a left jab to his chin, followed by a heavy right hook that hit Jaime right in the mouth with a loud crack, reopening the wound on his lip.

"How's that?" Jack shrieked triumphantly.

"Yeah," said Ryan, almost spitting into Jaime's ear. "That's what you get for hitting us."

Jaime's ears rang violently as his entire body slumped from the pain. "You made me do this." Jaime's voice shook as he tried desperately to hold back tears. "I didn't want to fight back, but you kept hurting me, every day, and—" Jaime paused and hung his head, unable to squeeze any other words past the lump in his throat, except for an anguished "Why?"

Encouraged, Jack leaned in closer, flashing a wicked grin. “‘Cuz it was fun. And you wanna know the best part about all of it?” Jack picked Jaime’s head up by his long hair so they were face to face. “The best part is that when I tell my dad that you hit us, you’ll get expelled, and there’ll be one less of you *beaners* in my school.” Jack released Jaime’s hair all at once, letting the younger boy’s head hang limp again.

Jaime felt his stomach squeeze at that word. *Oh*. He let out a long, low sigh, trying desperately to keep himself from throwing up in front of his bullies. In doing so, though, his pulse began to steady itself. Something clicked at that moment—maybe it was that the situation reminded him of his favorite movie or the outrage of his ancestors, but when Jaime lifted his gaze to meet Jack’s again, his eyes were wider. Rounder. His irises shifted from dark brown to solid amber, and his gaze held an eagle-like intensity. No—they *were* eagle eyes.

Jack flinched. “What the...”

With his heightened vision, Jaime saw the shift in Jack’s demeanor—the slightest shift in weight from one foot to another. The tinnitus began to drown out all surrounding noises.

Jaime raised his chin. “Fuck you, and *fuck* Mister Smith.”

Jaime spat blood in Jack’s face. Then, he swung his leg up and kicked Jack in the crotch, sending him crumpled to the floor.

The younger boy curled into a low stance, pulling his center of gravity down and allowing him to elbow Ryan, who doubled over, wheezing. Lunging for his sword with both arms and yanking hard, Jaime managed to pull it free from Colin’s hands, bending it in the process. In a flash, Jaime poked Colin in his Lunchables-bloated belly, bashing the wind out of him. Colin fell to his knees alongside the others.

Jaime leaped towards the jungle gym, and using a platform to launch himself higher into the air, brought the sword down on the base of Colin’s neck, knocking him out. The plastic toy vibrated as it bent even further from the blow, bruising Jaime’s palms from the sheer impact. He clenched his teeth.

Ryan, now several paces away, charged towards Jaime, frothing at the mouth. Still eyeing Colin, Jaime flipped the sword, grabbed it by the blade, and swung the hilt behind him without looking. The hilt hit Ryan directly in the temple, and he fell down with a satisfying thunk. *Two down.* Jaime walked towards Jack slowly.

Still sitting on the ground, Jack struggled to wipe the bloody spit out of his eyes as the shadow of righteous nerd fury loomed over him. “Listen, I’m sorry about the comic book! I-I’ll buy you a new one!”

“Tough.”

The cool, pensive whistle of a shakuhachi played in the background. The air whistled as it parted around the bent, plastic sword’s edge, ending in a loud whack.

The front door swung open fast and loud, hitting the wall behind it so hard that the whole house seemed to shake. Jaime walked in with a black eye and a tattered uniform. In one hand was a now taped-up comic book. In the other, the battered and bent plastic toy katana. On his face was a massive grin and two missing teeth.