

# Johnny Devil Press

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## Editor's Note:

When I was kid—I mean like single digits-old—we lived in a dim, murky world still awaiting the advent of cable.

We had six TV stations. Total. Six. Seriously.

For some reason, one of them—I think it was the independent station out of North Jersey that broadcast Mets games during the summer—decided every Christmas Day to show a marathon of...Hammer *Dracula* movies.

I never understood the connection: Dracula and Christmas? I mean, maybe Easter, what with the Count's repeated resurrections from film to film, but Christmas? It never made any sense.

Still, every Christmas afternoon around four—tired from a hard day of playing constantly with new toys and crashing from too much sugar—my brother and I would watch Christopher Lee do battle with Peter Cushing's Van Helsing while waiting for our relatives to come over for dinner.

In that same spirit of Something-Cool-That-That-Has-Nothing-At-All-To-Do-With-the-Holiday-Season, *Jersey Devil Press* presents...a novella about ninjas.

Because whether you celebrate Christmas or Hanukkah or Kwanzaa or Solstice or Gurnenthar's Ascendance, we can all agree that ninjas make the world better.

(And did we mention they're ninjas in the suburbs?)

We're proud to present "Keeley Kunoichi" by Jimmy Grist. It's one of the best damn things we've read in a long time. Enjoy it with someone you love and we'll see you back here next month.

Unless, of course, the Mayans knew what they were talking about and the Earth is destined to be a smoking shell of cinder and rubble in a couple of weeks.

But if that *doesn't* happen, we'll totally see you in a month.

— Mike Sweeney

## Keeley Kunoichi

### Jimmy Grist

Keeley had finally tracked the neighborhood ninja to a small grove beyond the subdivisions. It was a summery dusk, and the space between the trees was lit with firefly lanterns as shadow cloaked the land. The grass crunched beneath her *wushu* shoes. In one hand, she clenched a collar—black, with a silver bell. She gave it a jingle.

A voice came on the resurgent wind. “Hi,” it said, small and embarrassed.

Keeley coolly scanned her field of vision, to no avail. She looked up—down—over her shoulder. “Master Ninja,” she called, “Keeper of Nothing and Employer of the Shadowhand: I have bested one of your disciples and demand that you train me.” Her voice echoed around the clearing. She shucked the collar to the brittle grass.

The wind shepherded another reply. “Is there a, uh, a tag? On that collar?”

Keeley glanced down, careful not to break her stern, dual-fisted posture. “Yeah, it looks like there’s a nametag.”

“What’s it say?”

“It says ‘Boo.’”

“Yeah...that’s not one of mine.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah...”

“I was told that if I caught one of the elusive black cats that mirrors the master’s abilities and brought its collar as proof, I would have earned the right to training.”

“I don’t have any shadowcats named Boo, though. I’m sorry. There’s a Boots. Did you find her?”

“No. I found Boo, and I chased Boo, because I thought Boo was one of your feral disciples.”

"I think he belongs to Mrs. Weyrauch, over on Gaslight Avenue."

Keeley jammed the collar into her pocket. "Well that sucks. Can I at least demand an audience or something?"

"Sure, I guess so. I mean, you've got my attention, so..."

Keeley aligned her chakras and said, "I demand that you train me in the art of concealment."

"Oh," said the wind. "I dunno about that. See, by taking the wrong collar, you kinda threw off the balance of the universe. *Ninjutsu* is all about the balance."

"Balance is exactly what I seek. I want to wage a campaign of unmitigated revenge."

"Uh...I dunno if I can help you there. I'm really just kind of good at, like, hiding and stuff. Striking from the shadows, if I have to strike. I mean, I'd rather not strike. At all."

"No. The art of concealment is exactly what I need," Keeley said. "For my foe is samurai."

The wind ceased. Keeley heard a single leaf fall behind her and felt a dull presence, masked. She tumbled forward and flashed around and there, rubbing the back of his head, stood the master ninja. He was shrouded in black and carried no visible weapons. In his mask was a thin eyeslit over which he wore a pair of thick eyeglasses.

"You totally knew I was behind you just then, didn't you?" he said.

"My gut informed me."

"Guts are great. Did you know—it's weird—that human skin can feel pressure as soft as 0.00004 of an inch? Or something like that?"

"I believe it," Keeley said, and she did, though it sounded bogus.

"So, wow. Samurai. Really?" he asked. "Like, throw-yourself-on-a-sword?"

"Like, full-on *bushido* code."



"Wow. Who is it?"

She eyed him up and down. "Don't you know?"

"Yeah, maybe. I think so. I could be testing your honesty, too, maybe."

"You can't talk to me about honesty. You're a ninja."

"Or I've at least made you think that I'm a ninja."

Keeley squinted at him. Part of her was impressed, but it hid behind her skeptical eyelid. "His name is Tonka," she said.

"The school quarterback?" the ninja blurted.

"Shutup, I'm trying to tell you." Keeley cleared her throat. "It's said that once, like, a million moons ago, a Great Quarterback went to war with a rival clan for the State Championship. Few today know what happened on that fateful field of battle—least of all the referees—but the Quarterback and his Wildcats returned stinking of defeat. It wasn't long before the Great Quarterback succumbed to the temptation of the ricebrew, and the next eve, he rode into the school's Homecoming dance with his brothers-in-arms, a small cadre of jocks galloping on Ford Mustangs. Together they gave gifts of draconian, misdirected vengeance by the light of Tsukuyomi."

"Tsukuyomi-no-Mikoto the moon god, who slew the goddess of food?"

"Tsukuyomi the Japanese steakhouse. It was a popular dinner destination for dances."

The ninja lowered his gaze. "...I see."

"To the Cheerleaders, Toneless Sirens, the Once-Great Quarterback gave heartbreak and chlamydia. To the Abandoned Children of the New Wave, he gave quaking gender insecurity. To the Twelve Great Nerds he gave atomic wedgies and hung them from the stars by their waistlines. He set fire to the amateurish fields of the Agricultural Club and pissed on their potatoes."

"The Homecoming King stepped up to stop this madness. With the full authority of the shogunate, he ordered the Quarterback and

his Varsity Squad to cease this dishonor. But the Quarterback was an *oni* with an iron club. He overthrew the King. And when the Homecoming Queen stepped in, boldly—I mean, it didn't go super well."

"They got married after graduation, right?" the ninja said.

"Yeah," Keeley said. "The Quarterback cast a spell of subjugation or some arcane ridiculousness. Or so she *said*."

"Wow, that's heavy. Way stronger than the ninja school of magic."

"And the fallen quarterback repented, and became, like, a youth minister or something, eventually, and they got all married and stuff, and then divorced way later or kind of recently, but not all of that before they had a baybay."

"A what?"

"A baby. He was born a blending of his father's temerity and his mother's timorousness."

"Is it okay if I go look those words up? I've got a dictionary up that tree."

"Basically, he had mommy's kind heart and daddy's martial prowess. And that baby was Gold-Fisted Tonka, the Wildcats' present qoob."

"I need to look that up, too, when you're done."

"Today Tonka is the top-ranking warrior of his *daimyo*, Coach Cutler. The fields are dead and yellow. The Varsity Squad is fresh and fiery. They are amassing an army once again. They aim to conquer the State Champions for their Homecoming Game and consolidate power here, in the west. The son of the Once-Great Quarterback is set to follow in his father's footsteps, restoring glory to that blighted family; yet he is poised higher than ever for his fall, as a heron standing one-legged."

"Sheesh. Sounds exciting. But, one thing is, how come you want revenge on Tonka? What'd he do? Because that story you told didn't really, you know, *tell me* any of that."

"What, you don't know?"

"Oh, nah. I never claimed to know everything. I mean, I try to keep tabs on the neighborhood goings on, but . . . Who told you I knew everything?"

"Do you know who I am?" she asked. She figured she kept a low-enough profile, and, unlike other people, she didn't have any stories of the time she caught the neighborhood ninja monitoring her through a periscope or circling her house in a hang-glider.

"Pretty much, I think. You know like in old kung fu movies where they call people grasshopper? Don't take this the wrong way, but you're like a cricket. I heard you coming from, like, two miles out. You make a lot of noise."

"My name is Keeley. I make noise because I am untrained and unafraid."

"Okay," said the ninja, raising a *tō*-like finger. "Right there, you kind of skipped my first question and answered my second one."

"No, I didn't."

"You did, though."

"Not on purpose."

The ninja lowered his finger and rubbed his windpipe as if he had just been choked. "So," he said, "are you gonna answer my first question, or...?"

"What was the question?" Keeley said.

"Why do you want revenge on Tonka?"

Keeley looked up at the stars, the moon. "Because Tonkaaaa...Tonka lies."

Crickets chirruped.

"That's it, huh?" said the ninja. "That's all the explanation I'm gonna get?"

Keeley shrugged.

"Well, do you wanna tell me more about yourself?" the ninja asked. "I mean, I'm not persuaded to help you get revenge yet."

"I used to be a girl scout, growing up. I can hold my breath forever."

"What kind of music do you like?"

"Eh."

"Favorite food?"

"Ribs."

"Go on any trips this summer?"

"Arkansas."

"RevengeOnTonkaWhy?"

"Nope. All you need to know right now is that I have watched Tonka extensively, and the only path for my revenge lies in *taisavuki-jutsu*."

"The art of avoidance? Yeah, okay, I know that one. But, I mean, without knowing more about the whole situation, it's kinda hard to say whether or not I should, you know? I would hate to make the universe *imba*. That's, imbalanced. And the whole thing with apprehending the wrong cat—"

"Listen, dude. To make a demand, I don't have to jump through zany hoops or explain my zany self. I need merely speak it. And I demand you train me, because I *demand* revenge on Gold-Fisted Tonka." Keeley made an outward-facing fist. "I refuse to let his Wildcats ride to victory. And my reasons are as valid as they are my own. So let's play poisons or something."

"Okay, wait. Com-pro-mise. Let's do it like this: I show you something, and you tell me more. And then I show you something else, and then you tell me more. And then so on, et cetera, ad infinitum."

"That...might actually work," Keeley said. "Are you going to show me something right now?"

"Yeah, why not?" The ninja shifted his weight to one foot. "So your first task is to answer this question."

"Is the answer 'a ninja?'"

He held up his index finger to the swirling night then pointed at her. "Yes. Do you want to hear what the question was?"

"No. What's my second task?"

“Um...you’re gonna need a good night’s sleep. Meet me at the elementary school tomorrow, if you want, and I guess we can get down to it.” He cracked his knuckles as quietly as dissolving pop rocks.

“But tomorrow’s the last day of summer! Look, I’m rested.” She jogged in place and did a karate chop. “Why can’t we do it now?”

“It’s getting late. I gotta go. I’ll see you tomorrow, maybe.” The ninja hooted like a baby and hopped behind a tree. Keeley ran after him, and outside the grove, she saw him—a trick of perspective?—dashing over a hill, one hundred feet ahead of her. He waved back with a thick book. It might have been a dictionary.

## **Down to It**

“Okay, this one’s a classic.”

It was the middle of the next day, at the elementary school playground. School started up again tomorrow, but for now the place was empty save the occasional helmeted kid on a bike and training wheels.

Keeley hung upside-down from the monkey bars, knees pointing at the sky. The neighborhood ninja set down a plastic bucket of water with a slosh. He wedged an identical empty bucket above her, between two of the bars. Then he handed her a small ceramic bowl.

“So what you do is,” he said, pointing along the way, “you reach down with the dish and scoop some water, and then you let it out in this upper bucket.”

“How many times?”

“Just one bucket is probably enough.”

Keeley rolled her neck and tried to scoop some water from the bucket. She came up short.

"I can't reach your stupid bucket."

"Oops." The ninja picked it up and kicked some mulch into a mound, then set the bucket on top of its booster seat.

"Now try," he said, and she did, and could reach. She scooped some water and did a dangling stomach crunch. The backs of her knees pounded. At the top, she found that most of the water had spilled from her cup. She poured a spitting amount into the empty bucket.

"See, that's kind of the hard part. You have to keep really steady or else you lose it all."

"I don't think this is good for a person," Keeley said as she hung like a bat. "My shoulders are trembling and I can't feel my arms."

"You know what else isn't good for a person: revenge. That's not gonna dissolve any arterial plaque."

She made a determined face and scooped more water.

"You're doing really good. Keep it up." The ninja glanced at his wrist, where a watch would have been. "I've gotta go do something. Did you know you can tell the time of day by observing the dilation of a cat's pupil? Wider equals further from noon."

"Why not—just look—at the sun?" Keeley said between motions.

"I dunno. Because sometimes, when you're hiding, you might be indoors or under a porch or something, and all you can see is the cat's eyes."

"But a good ninja—wouldn't be seen—by the cat."

"That's true, I guess. I'll see you later. I'll be back when you finish the bucket thing." He darted up the swirly slide into the playhouse. She never saw him emerge, but she knew it was empty.

She thought the water thing was freaking stupid. But she'd seen kung fu movies before. The master always tested the student first, to see how studenty they were, and that's what this must've been. Totally. So she squeezed out trip after trip between the low bucket and the high bucket.

But eventually Keeley's face was red and there was a line in her forehead like a crazy straw. She was sweating. She had to poop. And the lower bucket was still three-fourths full. She reached down one more time and—spasming—lost the scooper. It dropped into the water with a splash.

She uncinched her legs, stood upright again on wobbly knees. As the blood seeped from Keeley's head, she got an idea. She climbed the monkey bars and switched the buckets, lugging the full one up to the top and leaving the empty one on the ground. Booyah. Easy. Who could tell the difference?

She wanted to feel her clotted legs drain. She wanted to stick them straight out into the sky. So she went and swung while she waited for the ninja to come back and say, "Good job."

"Wow. Good job on the water thing. I kind of thought you would lose a lot more water, honestly. You must have a really steely balance. Steely Keeley."

Keeley leapt from the swing like a slingshot pellet. As she landed, her *wushu* shoes left skidmarks in the mulch. "I didn't do it," she said proudly. "I thought it was stupid."

"You didn't do it?"

"I switched the buckets."

"You switched—! But, I was trying to show you something about perseverance. And dedication. And...and stick-to-it-iveness."

"I know, and that's *bushido* bullcrap. I'm not going to defeat a samurai if I'm thinking like a samurai. Instead, I taught myself about deception."

"Oh, okay. I get it. Wow." The ninja laughed. "Maybe you should be the master ninja."

"Your false modesty doesn't deceive me, dude. I know you've got lots more clandestine ninja stuff to show me." Keeley stood under the monkey bars and high-kicked the bucket, which twirled

end over end and splashed water everywhere. "Or at least you'd better."

"Hey, I never claimed to know everything," the ninja said.

"Well, what do you know?" she asked him.

"Whoa; there it is again. Like a skipping record."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. But I guess there are nine halls of mastery in *ninjutsu*." The ninja counted off on his fingers. "Four of them are combat ones, but that stuff's not really applicable. That stuff's for, like, middle school ninja. But those combat ones are halls of training in unarmed, bladed, wooden, and flexible weapons."

"Flexible weapons?"

"Yeah, you know, *kusarigama* and...I mean, like chains. Whips. A scarf."

"A scarf."

"Sure. Scarves are great impromptu items, when it's scarf season."

Keeley scratched her throat.

"And beside the combat stuff, you've got a hall for espionage, and one for disguise, and one for escape. Man, what else? Mysticism. That's one." He counted what he had named off on eight fingers. "I'm missing one. It's a dumb one. Let's just say it's survival. Survival would be like, setting traps and identifying poisonous berries and starting fires and stuff."

"Do you ever need that stuff?"

"Sometimes. I like eating the berries. Hey, I remember what the ninth hall is! It's not that dumb, actually. Forget survival. The real one is specialized combat training."

"How is that any different from the other four halls of combat?"

"Specialized combat training is dodges, parries, counter-attacks, combo-breakers. Et cet."

"Like backflips? You can do a backflip?"

"Sure. I can do a double. But you see how many different halls of mastery there are."



"Yeah. I think we're going to have to slow down," Keeley said. "I'm starting school tomorrow. Senior year and all that."

"Oh, totally. Yeah. Slowing down seems like a great idea."

"I mean, just a bit."

"Right. Yeah, we can slow down a bit. That's no problem. Why rush? True mastery takes, like, ten thousand hours of practice, whether it's making riceballs or becoming a ninja or memorizing a poem." The ninja clasped his hands behind his back, like someone at peace or waiting to win an award.

"How come you don't go to school?" Keeley asked, arms crossed.

"What makes you think I don't go to school?"

She frowned. "What, you do? You act like you just sleep all day, or deliver pizzas or something, and ninja it up every night."

"Sorry. All I meant was, what makes you think you know where a *shinobi*'s been?"

"What does that mean? Glasses-wearer?"

"*Shinobi*? 'One who sneaks in.'"

"Oh, dude—that's so perfect."

"What if I *do* go to school?" the ninja said. "Maybe my disguise is a normal guy, sitting behind you in fourth hour. Or maybe I lurk in the ventilation ducts and hear all lectures at once, absorbing. Maybe I'm the principal. Hey, ooh, maybe—maybe I'm Gold-Fisted Tonka. What would you do then?"

"What would I do then?" Her knuckles clenched. They were sharp and pointy, all of them, not at all like the teeth of an herbivore.

The ninja was taken unawares. The universe's balance first tipped at his nose. There was a split second where he could smell her hand, the smell of rain before thunder, and then the symmetry was smashed. Her fist jammed his nostrils shut and put dents in his maxilla. The saliva in his mouth was knocked down his throat and his bottom front teeth jiggled like jinglebells.

It had been many months since the ninja was taken unawares. It was kind of, well, exciting, to be honest. It jarred his glasses out of place.

The follow-through pushed him backwards. He adjusted his trajectory and turned the fall into a flip. From a handstand, he pinned Keeley's wrist between his ankles and, with a twist of his torso, threw her out of close-quarters. She took an unwilling dive into the woodchips.

"Ow," he said, standing straight and rubbing his mask. "I'm not Tonka, though. Can't you tell from my build? That guy's like five times my size."

"Black is a slimming color!" she said from the ground, enraged but calming.

"That was a really good punch," he said. He worked his jaw over and over, "Man." He maybe had a nosebleed—nothing gushing, but contained, high up in the bridge, that would result in some black ninja boogers later that night. "Is that what you're going to hit Tonka with?"

"I'm going to hit Tonka with everything I've got." She brushed the chips from her front.

"But *why*? I've given you some training. You said now you'd give me more info."

"Yeah, but that training sucked."

The ninja's face broke behind his glasses.

"I mean," Keeley said, "it didn't *suck*. It just—wasn't what I expected. I...sorry. Hm."

The ninja swept a hand in front of his face and the hurt expression disappeared. "You said Tonka lies."

"All the time."

"Like, give me an example. I feel like you've got something particular in mind."

Keeley sat in the mulch, and the ninja crouched across from her. He had a chunky woodchip jammed between the split-toe of his

*tabi* boot. She grabbed her feet and yanked them into a lotus position.

"Tonka and I grew up on the same cul-de-sac."

"Really? Aw, man, I would have been just a little ninja back then. So you guys know each other?"

"Roots so deep, Alex Haley couldn't script this."

"Hey, is that Edo G? That's Edo G! You *do* like music!"

Keeley *pf*ff'd. "We were the only kids our age, and we used to play together. I was a boy scout, and he was a girl scout."

"You mean—"

"Yeah, whatever. We always competed. We used to compare merit badges, but I gave up after he earned Nuclear Science."

"Is that a joke?"

"Hey, screw you. It's a hard subject to wrap your head around."

The ninja shrunk back, fearing another punch. "No, I meant: you giving up. Kinda farfetched."

"Oh. Well sure. I give up all the time." She threw a handful of mulch at the buckets beneath the monkey bars.

"Oh," said the ninja. "Duh. Why did I say that?"

"Playing together was always competitive," Keeley went on. "It was good-natured, sure. But, like, there was a pink dogwood in the center of the cul-de. We kept climbing higher and higher to beat each other's records, and when we both got to the top it became about who could do it fastest. We used to race around the neighborhood on whatever we could: trikes, bikes, roller skates. He had a wagon and I had a skateboard, so we would take turns in those and time each other and end up fighting about the timekeeping. We used to wrestle, and the loser was the person with the most grass stains. Dog poop counted for double. And when the ice cream truck came around, we would buy the biggest superhero face we could and try to eat it first. Then, we'd chew the gumball eyes and blow huge bubbles while we swordfought with the popsicle sticks."

"Holy moly."

"You got a point if you popped the other person's bubble."

"So that's what this is all about? Tonka's blown this big old varsity bubble, and you're still trying to pop it?"

"No. That's not it at all. We may've grown up like that, but things didn't stay that way."

"What happened then?"

Keeley stood and brushed herself off. "Then I got my next dose of ninja training."

"Aw, come on. You shouldn't keep stringing me along. It's not very polite."

"Was that one of the nine halls of mastery you mentioned? Politude?"

"I could just go ask Tonka what the story is. I bet he'd tell me."

"Yeah, maybe he would. Or maybe he'd lie. And either way, then I would disappear and you would retreat into your little grove again, maybe play all day with your cats and try to catch Mrs. Weyrauch undressing."

"Hey, you think this is all I do? I do lots of stuff. I got lots going on."

Keeley made a fist and pretended to punch him in slow-mo. "Just admit that you haven't had this much fun all summer."

"I can't do that. You need me a lot more than I need you. That punch, just as an example: that punch was maybe dynamite, but it wasn't TNT. You might give Tonka a teeny tiny bruise with something like that, if you hit his armor in the right place."

"Please. That was just my *jab*. I need your training to get into close range, undetected. I don't see how Ms. and Mr. Bucket're supposed to help me do that. Once I can sneak up on Tonka, you leave the rest to me."

"But I still want to raise the question, Keeley: should you be doing this?"

"I'm not *doing* anything. Shouldn't *you* be teaching me something?"

"No, really. Should you be seeking revenge? It sounds like you and Tonka were good friends growing up."

"We were *best* friends growing up."

"Then what makes you think this is okay? Like, cosmically?"

"If rhymes is hot, then the beats'll come," Keeley said.

"I mean it. From everything I know about the situation, which could be *more*, this doesn't seem right."

"Look: didn't I give you information you didn't have, just now?"

The ninja nodded.

"Then we're even. I kept my word. And I'll tell you more after you show me more."

"I've gotta think about things, though," the ninja said. He was quiet, serious. "Maybe tomorrow, I can show you something else. We might take a different tack."

Keeley glared scornfully at her knuckles. "Fine. Whatever. But you'd better show me something killer."

## **Tonka on the Field**

Early morning. Cherry blossom sky. Two-a-day practices. Tonka hosed himself off beneath a water bottle. Hair the color of wet sand. He took good care of the family armor, but in the thick of things, his pads were scuffed and stained.

They had wargamed since sunup. Today, the first day of school, was Keeley's first excuse to observe. Coach Cutler smacked the quarterback's butt as Tonka jogged onto the field with two fingers in the air. He spoke briefly to the offensive line, his most devout. Then he put in his mouthguard and fell into position. The receivers took their places, moving like one man in a mirror. The defenders

exchanged glances, fidgety. Then, at a barked command, the ball was hiked.

Tonka caught the snap and a precise pocket formed around him. Bodies collided, but his soldiers stood like stone against the onslaught. His receivers dashed along their routes, swift and devious as *tengu* birdfolk. One of them was missing a defender. This extra man rushed the line. He plowed through Tonka's barricade and charged the samurai himself. Keeley waited for the throw.

But Tonka met the blitzer—stiff-armed him from a standstill. The butt of Tonka's palm fired like a cannon and knocked the attacker on his back. Then, as if he was waiting all that time on the slowpoke receiver, Tonka launched an efficient spiral into the end zone.

There was the Gold-Fisted moniker, in two dynamic senses. From start to finish, the skirmish had barely been an instant. Tonka was unstrapping his helmet and returning to the sideline before the throw was even caught, half a field away.

Keeley watched through the chain-link fence. The Wildcats were fantastic. The team had yet to play its first game, but already they were the stuff of legend. The foes they faced would be crushed; the glory they sought would be theirs. The great tragedy was that she could not allow it. Her backpack was stuffed with empty folders, blank notebooks, and unsharpened pencils. Her heart was stuffed with fury, embitterment, and, worst of all, respect.

## Here He Is at School

"See, check it out. Here I am at school, ninjaing it up."

He was standing in her locker—a new locker she had only just opened for the first time—and blending in. His glasses floated like a Cheshire smile.

“Man, I really thought you were just some day laborer,” Keeley said. “I still do. I bet you’ve got a pizza delivery packed away somewhere under that suit. Like, slices wrapped around your limbs.”

He snickered behind his mask and said, “Wow. That was really funny. We don’t laugh much, ninjas, unless it’s part of a disguise, but *that*. I thought that was funny.”

“You can come out of my locker.”

“I’m in concealment, though.”

“It’s passing time. Nobody cares what’s going on between classes.”

“Maybe you’re right. Hey, did you see Tonka sparring this morning? Fierce, right?”

“You were there? I seriously hope you know what you’re talking about with this training. The Homecoming game is next Friday. I need to act quickly if I’m going to have any chance at stopping him.”

A kid rolled by in a wheelchair. “Hey, ninja,” he said as he went.

“Oh hey man!” He watched the kid go, then said to Keeley, “Such a nice guy.”

“Were you here for something? Or are you just hiding explosives in my locker.”

“What? No. No, no. I don’t use explosives; I create the *illusion* of explosion.” He handed her a flyer. “I think you should do this.”

Keeley opened and read the note right away. “Dash for Diabetes, blah blah blah . . . charity fun run? Are you serious?”

“Yeah! Haven’t you ever done one? It really is fun. Nobody’s competing or anything, so nobody loses.” His eyebrows scrunched down. “Except for diabetes. Diabetes loses.”

"I barely have enough fun for myself. I don't have any to spare for charity," Keeley said. "And what the heck is this about a registration fee? Fifteen dollars?!"

"It's okay, I'm sponsoring you! Check inside your shoe."

"But this isn't even until Saturday!"

"Oh, whoa, we're not training during the week."

Keeley threw the flyer up in the air. It seesawed to the ground like a feather. "I just told you we've got, like eleven days until the big game! What am I supposed to do all week if I'm not training?"

"Your homework. Duh."

"Hey! HEY YOU!" Coach Clark, a lesser daimyo, stomped from his biology classroom. "Hands in the air, and off with the mask!"

"I think I'd better go, actually," the ninja said. "See ya!" He *pfffed* a smokebomb and an inoffensive gray cloud filled the hallway. Someone nearby yanked a fire alarm.

Everyone evacuated. They waited on the lawns a long time for the fire department to show up. Keeley sat in the grass and took off her shoe. It was empty. Then she took off her other shoe, and found a ten dollar bill and five ones beneath the insole. When the students were readmitted, Keeley broke the orderly lines to be one of the first back inside. Near her locker she found an origami crane, hanging perfectly still, from a piece of fishing line in the ceiling.

## Fun Run

On Saturday morning, Keeley got up at 7:30 and went to the park. The place was filled with two or three hundred people, from fit pro-runners to ten-year-old showoffs to unfit regular people to a million moms with strollers (and a couple dads with strollers). So that meant a lot of stroller-sized people, as well. There were even some dogs. An old, old DJ—like a Casey Kasem type—was playing Cyndi Lauper-style stuff near the registry table. Keeley signed in



with the charity organizers, hid her free t-shirt under a rock, and selected a blueberry bagel from the catering table. She was sitting on the sidewalk, lotus position, and spreading cream cheese with her finger when a stroller stopped in front of her.

“Morning, Keeley.”

Keeley looked up. The woman in front of her was wearing some weird shoes and a bright blue tracksuit. She had wiggy blonde hair that reached her shoulders and framed her face—and a black mask over her face with a dopey pair of glasses.

“Did you just put that disguise on over your ninja suit?” she asked him.

“Sure,” the ninja said. He tossed back the long hair. “That way, I can lose the disguise and not be naked.”

Keeley stood and looked into the stroller at the bundled blankies. “Is this your ninja baby?”

“This is your training partner!”

“I’m not pushing a stroller.”

“But look.” The ninja lifted the covers. The stroller was filled with loose barbell weights, some the size of saucers and some the size of plates. He seemed really impressed with his own idea. “You push these babies through this run and you’ll have stamina kablammina.”

“I don’t care how much Schwarzen you’ve eggered in. Everybody’s going to think I’m a mom or something. And look at all these moms. Moms don’t run with strollers.”

“Hey, don’t talk bad about moms. I’ve got a mom.”

“You sure?” Keeley raised an eyebrow at the ninja. “According to neighborhood legend, the doctor just pulled you out of the shadows beneath the delivery table.”

“No, my mom used to push me around in this thing.” He revved the stroller’s handle like the handlebars of a motorcycle, growling. “I used to hide in there, during walks, and she would see

it empty and think I'd been abducted or something. I was a little brat."

"I can't believe you want me to push around your old stroller. How long is a 5K, anyway?"

"It's about five kilometers."

"I know *that*. But what does that even mean?"

"Five thousand meters." The ninja made a face. "About 3.10685 miles," he said, "or one two-billionth of a lightyear."

"Oh." Keeley frowned at her bagel. "Crap."

When everyone herded to the starting line, Keeley tried to get a spot near the front. But the organizers made all strollers go to the back. She fell in with a bunch of people who were at least five years older than her, mostly, and didn't make conversation. Someone told them some facts about diabetes, which she couldn't hear from the back. Then they shot a fake gun, or just a fake bullet, and the fun run began.

Keeley took off running, shoving the stroller in front of her. But this far back, everyone was a walker. She tried to pass them, but it was slow going. They formed tight-knit walking walls that she couldn't get through, and each pass was like cresting a wave. So she took this opportunity to push with one hand and bagel with the other. Eventually, she finished her breakfast and reached the null space between walkers and runners, populated by those weirdoes who do both. She started speeding behind the stroller.

She was sweating after two minutes, and tired after three. But then the ninja was beside her, skating along like the path was ice. She glanced down at his old *tabi* boots.

"Do those have wheels on the bottom?" she puffed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," the ninja said. He twirled around and started skating backwards beside her. "How do you feel?"

“Mommyish.” She rubbed her forehead and her hand came away dripping.

“Well, hang in there.” He looked ahead down the path. “Only two-point-sevenish miles to go. I’m gonna be watching, okay? You can walk all you want—I’d even recommend it so you don’t get hurt—but don’t drop out. Also, don’t throw any of these weights out. I’ve got to give those back.”

“Gurghhh.” Keeley popped a burst of speed and dashed in front of the ninja, but he caught right back up. “You know I don’t plan on chasing Tonka down,” she said. “All I wanted you to show me is how to conceal myself, and—*gah*—strike from the shadows.”

“Yeah, but all I want you to tell me is what Tonka did that deserves your revenge. And the longer you take to answer, the more skeptical I’m gonna be.” He skated around her in a circle, then hopped into a garbage barrel like a rodeo clown.

“Stupid ninja master jerk,” Keeley said beneath her failing breath. “I’ll show you a...ugh. Stop talking. Running. Eeewp.”

The sun came up as the race went on. Seventy degrees became eighty. Sweat poured from every pore, painting Keeley’s shirt a darker shade. She ground the stroller along as if she were plowing a field with a deadline. The tiny wheels kept skittering to one side or trying to jump off the bike trail. In the carriage, her iron babies cooed and clacked together.

After the longest twenty minutes of her life, she came around to the starting line again. It was finally over. One of the organizers stood there in a Dash for Diabetes t-shirt, clapping for everyone as they crossed. He made a V-for-Victory with his fingers and yelled to Keeley, “Halfway there! You can do it! Keep going! One more time around!”

“No! Freaking—rrrr. Noooo. Whyyy did I wear *wushu* shoooooes.”

After another trip around, Keeley could barely stand. She was in the thrall of a bodily phenomenon, something experienced runners and new mothers call *catatonic locomotion*. She pushed the stroller over the finish line then threw the stroller sideways to the ground. A few people behind her gasped. One of the 25 lb. weights rolled out like a penny and wiggled to a stop. The ninja waited atop a hay bale.

“Well, Keeley,” he said, and Keeley—glaring—hobbled past him. “Hey, wait; you did it. The 5K’s over. Keeley? It’s over! Where are you going?”

But Keeley kept jogging down the bike trail, barely lifting her feet from the ground. She wouldn’t stop until she’d gone around twice more, running her own 10K—or as the ninja would tell her, 6.2137 miles.

## Icey Cweam

Keeley chucked a shuriken at the frozen custard place’s sign. It snipped through the air and thunked, high overhead, into the giant plastic ice cream cone.

“Do you have a second ninja-star?” she asked the ninja.

“They’re like potato chips,” he said and handed her another.

“So, how do you feel?”

They sat on the custard place’s patio, at a table with a beach umbrella. The barbell-loaded stroller sat nearby. Overhead, the sun was nearing its noonday point, and cats’ eyes everywhere were fully dilating.

“How do I feel?” Keeley’s two scoops came in a paper bowl. She held it to her forehead like a psychic trying to read its contents. Inside, the rocky road melted into a tarry choco-swirlyirl, threaded through with mallow marrow and chunken nut debris. “Baking. I feel like I am baking.”

"I'm really impressed," said the ninja. "I didn't think you had that kind of determination yet." He had a butterscotch malt in a polystyrene cup. He put the straw to the mouth-region of his mask and Keeley could see shadows being slurped up; but if there was a mouth-slit in the fabric, she couldn't see it. "I mean, do you feel at all...embiggened?" the ninja asked. "Or enlightened? I don't wanna sound too hippy-dippy."

"I feel swollen and lightheaded, so yeah. I think I feel both of those things."

"What did you learn?"

"Ummm . . . let me, just, think about it. Over the weekend. And I will tell you when I don't have a simultaneous brainfreeze and brainbake."

The ninja slid his straw up and down in the cup. The lid made a squooting sound where they grated together. "Would, uh, would now be a bad time for you to tell me more about you and Tonka?"

"Oh, fudge." She lowered her ice cream and finally ate some. "Mmmm, fudge." She wiped her mouth with a napkin. "I told you about us playing together."

"But you said something changed."

"Tonka started playing mitey-mite football when we were eight. But I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because girls can't *play* football."

"Do you really believe that?"

Keeley gave him that familiar death stare and the ninja retreated to his malt.

"Tonka and I kept hanging out. You wanna know how he got so good?" She waited for the ninja to nod. "It was me. We ran and planned plays. We took turns tackling. He threw me about a million passes, and a lot of them sucked. But even our other games made him a better quarterback."

The ninja fanned his face. He looked awfully warm in that black bodysuit.

"We got a little older, and everybody started riding bikes around more, and soon—all the guys from Tonka's team started coming over to play in the backyard."

"Tonka's backyard?"

"Right. Tonka's backyard." Keeley squinted at the ninja. "What?"

"What?" The ninja started. "What did I do?"

"Nothing. I remember the first day I went to play with all the boys. Tonka and I did stuff all the time, and we had a better mental connection than anybody else."

"Chemistry," said the ninja, knowingly.

"No. Not chemistry. More like matching frequency. When I walked in on their game, they looked at me like my face had fallen off. And Tonka stepped forward to say, 'It's okay, guys. She can be the *kicker*.'"

The ninja raised a hand, meekly. "I, uh, I dunno much about football. Is there something bad about being the kicker?"

"There's something bad about being relegated. I knew how to tackle; I knew how to catch; there's a good chance I was the fastest person in that backyard. But in all our practicing, I had never once kicked the ball. Yet that was the first thing Tonka said, and it made sense to the boys."

"Because you weren't on their mitey-mite team?"

"Because I was a *girl*. Also, what you said."

"How did it go?"

"Terribly. The game ended when I blasted the ball one whole block over, and it rolled into a storm drain because this was before they put those metal covers on all of them."

"I love those, though. They help keep safe our waterways and my shadowcats."

"And that was just the beginning. Tonka was less and less willing to hang out with a *girl* because of his stupid friends, and

pretty soon I was less and less willing to even try because he was a stupid jerk. I hadn't bothered to make any other friends at school, and all the girls I was *supposed* to hang out with thought I was a freak."

"You didn't try to make friends?"

"They called me 'Smellsey.'"

The ninja rocked back in his chair, balancing on two legs but without touching the table for stability. "Why would they call you Smellsey, though? It's not like your name is Kelsey."

Keeley quickly filled her mouth with runny ice cream.

"Wait a minute..." the ninja said.

"Bwut?"

"Who *are* you?"

Keeley swallowed. "Who am I? Who are *you*? I don't know the first thing about Mr. The Neighborhood Ninja, yet I'm telling him all these secrets about my past."

"These don't sound very much like secrets. And you're doing it because you need me to get your lousy revenge. Which I still think is a bad idea, by the way."

"Oh, you think my whole vendettic journey is a bad idea?"

"Yeah, I do. And I've only tried to tell you, like, fourteen times."

"Well if you still think it's such a *bad idea* then why don't you ever say so?"

"I'm saying so right now!"

"Yeah, but you weren't!"

"Maybe because I wasn't going to say anything right now because I wanted to be *polite*!"

"You wanted to be *polite*? What, was that one of the nine halls of ninja mastery you mentioned? Polititu—?"

"You made that joke last week. And 'polititude' isn't even a word!"

"Everything isn't a word! Word schmörd!"

"Fine!" said the ninja.

"Alright!" said Keeley.

They watched the cars go by. *Vvvvmmmm*. The ninja squirked at the bottom of his malt.

"Oh, freaking freak," Keeley said.

"What?"

"I left my free t-shirt under a rock in the park."

A gust of wind blew away her napkin.

### **Pam-Podd**

At lunch on Monday, Keeley took her time selecting food. She was mostly trailing Tonka, noting all of the things he put on his tray: iceberg salad; chicken strips; honey mustard; frozen peanut butter cup; sports drink. Two napkins. One spork.

When she wound up at the cash registers, she realized she hadn't bothered to put anything on her own tray. She snatched a cellophane six-pack of chocolate-frosted mini-donuts and paid for them with quarters.

Out in the cafeteria, Tonka sat with some other football players at a full table. Keeley looked for an empty table, but the closest she could find still held one person: Pamela Todd, eccentric mascot.

"Hey Pamela Todd," Keeley said as she stood beside the table. "Do you want to give me that seat?"

Pamela Todd looked around the table. There were seven empty seats surrounding her.

"Why do you want this one?" she asked Keeley.

"I need to sit with my back to a corner. That's like the first lesson of situational awareness: control over your vantage point."

"Oh! Right." Pamela slid over one seat. "Far be it from me to put you at a disadvantage point."

Keeley remained standing, staring at her, until Pamela Todd slid over one more seat.



They sat in silence for a while. Pamela Todd watched her food and Keeley craned her neck to eyeball Tonka. Eventually, a pack of cheerleaders came to talk with the quarterback's table and blocked Keeley's view. She grunted and punched her mini-donuts, smashing half the roll. Pamela Todd couldn't help but notice.

"You like that guy?" she asked.

"What?" Keeley said, sounding as if she'd been personally insulted.

"Tonka," said Pamela Todd, pointing with her spork. Keeley pushed her hand down.

"Don't point at him. Sheesh. You trying to give me away?"

"Sorry," said Pamela Todd. She set her spork in the strawberry milk, like a quill into a bottle of ink. "He's, like, the most popular guy in school."

"I know that."

"I thought maybe you didn't know that. You *are* new, right? Where're you from? Please say Alaska."

"Why do you want me to be from Alaska?"

"I'm a Pisces," said Pamela Todd. Keeley kept her pokerface up. Pamela Todd added, "So people from Alaska are good luck."

"Good. I'm totally from Alaska."

Pamela Todd smiled and raised high her skim milk. "Cheers."

Keeley toasted back with her mini-donut roll.

"So," Keeley said, unwrapping her lunch, "let's talk about how much I like Tonka. How much I want to crush him. Crush on him."

"Is this..." Pamela Todd tugged at her earlobe. "Is this *girl-talk*? I've never girl-talked before."

"Give it your best shot. I wanna know about Tonka. Spill."

"You look like him, kind of." Pamela Todd pretended to rearrange Keeley's face. "Maybe thirty percent. You'd have beautiful baby boys and chunky baby girls."

"Not interested in the future. You practice with the football team, right?"

"I suppose we operate in the same vicinity."

"Do you think he's a good guy?" Keeley asked.

"Tonka! *Tonka!* He's this town's George Clooney."

"Who?"

"Like Tom Hanks, with all of the talent and good humor and social activism, only sexier."

"Who?"

"He and me—i.e., *Tonka* and *I*—we talk about movies at each practice." Pamela Todd made a viewfinder with her fingers and spoke through it. "He likes Arnold Schwarzenegger but I like Sylvester Stallone, and we like to play the game where we transpose one into the other's movies and hilarity ensues. Like, *Demolition Man*. People call me spacey, but they call him down-to-earth. So together, it's like troposphere. Last year..." She told a long story about how great Tonka was, how nice and everything, to her personally and to about a million other people. Keeley didn't listen.

"Do you ever, like, overhear the football conversations?" Keeley said. "In your mascot suit? Detect any exploitable weaknesses in their formations?"

"You don't hear very much in there," the mascotteer said. "It's kind of like doing a spacewalk. Your head is encased in a visibility-killing dome. The sun burns immoderately hot. Sound doesn't really travel, except your own breathing. And sweating. And *then* you have to do a cartwheel."

"That sounds...kinda strenuous, actually. Do you ever just wanna get away from it all?"

"Not really. I go the distance. It's like . . . you can take the mascotteer out of Willie the Wildcat, but you can't take Willie the Wildcat out of the mascotteer." Pamela Todd licked her hand and then rubbed it over her face, a classic feline grooming gesture. "But if you're saying you want to take the suit for a spin some time—"

"That's exactly 100% what I'm saying, yep. Good idea. You'd let me?"

"If you promise to . . . *take me to Alaska someday!*" Pamela Todd gripped the table as if she were at risk of floating away.

"Done." Keeley leaned back as Pamela Todd danced in her seat. "Also, if you want to creep on the neighborhood ninja, I could give you some pointers on finding him."

"Really? You know him?"

"I'm training with him. He's, like, showing me secrets and stuff, and I'm giving him someone to talk to besides his cats. It's not gonna last, though. But you guys...you guys might make a really weird couple."

"That's incredible. You think so? What's he like?"

"He's a butterscotch-malt-drinking dork. But I mean, I can't tell you too much here. You've gotta be careful what you say about him. You never know when he's hiding under the table, if you know what I mean."

Someone snickered beneath the table.

"Oh, come on," Keeley said. "Seriously?"

She scraped back her chair and stuck her head below the table. The ninja sat in the middle, trying to hold in his laughter.

"Oh my God," said Pamela Todd, who had also dipped under the table. "It's you."

"Hi." The ninja reached out and they shook hands. "Hi," he said again.

"Call me Pam. Or Podd."

"Hi, Pam-Podd. I'm, uh..." The ninja rubbed the back of his head. "This is embarrassing, I know, but I'm a mondo fan of your work."

"You're a fan of *my* work?"

"Okay," said Keeley. She stood and picked up her lunch tray. "That's enough of that."

\* \* \*

## Afterschool School

Keeley sat on her knees in the sandbox, as instructed. "What's with all the playgrounds?" she asked. "Isn't it time you took me to a hidden monastery, or a subterranean sewer base, or at least the gym?"

"So, your training is to punch this sand," said the ninja.

"Is it...Tonka-sand?"

"The idea is fist plus grit. See, they get tougher and tougher." The ninja bumped his fists together. "It's called *conditioning*."

"I'm playing in a sandbox. I might as well call it shampoo."

"I know, I'm sorry. It's kind of stupid. I never really stuck with it for very long in my own training. But you—you have to do it. It's really important, actually. Like the most important thing I can have you do. I only realized the other day."

"So I just...?" Keeley made a fist and inspected it. "I just swing this thing?"

"It's kind of, more, underarm turned up—uh huh—with your fist at the hip; and then you twist your body and extend through the whole shoulder. Like, you know." He did a halfhearted, slow motion demonstration. His fist was barely closed.

"I don't want to do it like that."

"Oh. Are you sure? I'd kind of recommend it. Because, see, you get your whole body back there..."

"That's not how I throw a punch. You ought to know, Mr. No-Crust Knuckle-Sandwich. This is how." She threw a Keeley-punch that made a plump *piff* in the sandbox, like a high-caliber bullet hitting a desert.

"Huh. I mean, if that's what you want to do. Just make sure your knuckles are getting, like, mealier. You want obduracy. You want to leave the crusts *on* the sandwich."

"When do I stop?"

"Yeah...I didn't say anything about stopping, I don't think. Did I? If I did, I didn't mean to. It was an accident."

"I just sit here and punch the sandbox? Where're *you* going?"

"Well, you have to admit, it's kind of boring." The ninja shrugged. "Would you want to watch me punch sand all afternoon?"

"That's your job. You're my trainer."

"But I have a lot of other jobs to worry about, too."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Like...I dunno. Clan meeting?"

"What if I just cheat again like the other day, or walk off?"

"I'm pretty sure you won't, since you want to learn this stuff."

He high-jumped the fence and dashed out into the street before Keeley had a chance to respond. A squat sedan cruised by, blocking her sight of him for a split second, and then he was gone.

"Alright." She kissed her phalanges. "Let's get conditioned."

## **Punching Stuff**

Keeley punched the sand. She did it with her teeth clenched. She did it with her muscles relaxed. She did it with a full swing. She did it from an inch away. She did it under cloud cover and she did it with the sun on her back. She did it past rush hour. She did it while the cows came home. She did it with the smell of Backyard Burgers in the air.

Keeley punched the sand. She hit it into dusk and beneath streetlights. She hit it kneeling, after her legs had fallen asleep. She hit it from a lotus position. She hit it on all fours, or threes, since one was punching. She hit it by the light of Tsukuyomi. She hit it while the cats came out. She hit it through the evening news. She hit it while the ninja watched from the rooftop. She hit it 'til her knuckles turned raw.

Keeley punched the sand. She struck it while the businesses closed. She struck it with some backbone. She struck it with some elbow grease. She struck it like a dinosaur. She struck it like she meant it, and she struck it like she didn't. She struck it with her left hand once or twice. She struck it as the roads emptied. She struck it 'til her knuckles bled. She struck it until tiny, irritant granules got under her skin.

Keeley punched the sand. Keeley punched the sand. Keeley punched the sand.

The ninja brought her some water at midnight which she poured over her fingers before she took a drink. And after that, at home in bed, Keeley dreamed of punching the sandman.

The next day the ninja took her beyond the housing developments, where they first met, to a white gravel road. The ninja bumblingly told her about time and balance, and that she was supposed to punch the sand for three years before moving up. But both of them knew she had no time, and the world had no balance.

So Keeley punched the gravel. She did it soft, hard, fast. She did it without mercy, so the chalk stuck to her knuckles. She did it slow. She did it with such concentration that the stones were undisturbed. She did it through the morning, gray as a gorilla's back. She did it through school, in-class, because she filled a coinpurse with gravel and hid it in her pocket.

Keeley punched the gravel. She hit it after school, lovingly, as it had been on her mind all day. She hit it timelessly, so there was no flow. She hit it explosively, so pieces scattered. She hit it in the face. She hit it with her backhand. She hit it like it was deserving of punishment. She hit it like a four-letter word. She hit it like a drum solo.

Keeley punched the gravel. She struck it with forced brutality. She struck it as cars approached on the road. She struck it as they honked at her, leaning down on their horns. She struck it as they flashed their brights. She struck it as they drove around, through the grass, and cursed out the window. She struck it with their

aggravation, redirected through herself. She struck it zenfully. She struck it purple. She struck it until her knuckles looked like holey socks. She struck it so hard, its quarry felt it.

Keeley punched the gravel. Keeley punched the gravel. Keeley punched the gravel.

And when the ninja tore her away from it and turned her towards home, she ground her fists together the whole way. In her kitchen, quietly, she tried to soothe her hands in a tray of ice cubes. But they, too, were gravelish, and she ground them vengefully beneath her well-honed fists.

The next day the ninja sent a doctor's note to the school on her behalf. He guided her to the grove where they had met. The winds still swept that choked lawn, but there was no longer a taste for mystery. No thirst for knowledge. No yearning for achievement. Perhaps, momentarily, not even a demand for revenge. In this grove, for Keeley's second visit, there was only her training and the trees. She found the most badass, barky trunk around.

Keeley punched the tree. She did it with her lip tucked and bit through the flesh. She did it with her tongue out like Air Michael Jordan. She did it with the blast-heat of the drought. She did it head-on. She did it in a sneak-attack. She did it open-palmed, just once, to try it on. She did it with a history of gravel and of sand. She did it un-band-aided and it ripped open her scabs.

Keeley punched the tree. She hit it not with malice, but with balance. She hit it with an understanding about diligence, ignorance, grievance, seasons. She hit it with her bruises. She hit it with a memory, wrapped around her fingers, of being young and terrified and suicidally frustrated at her impuissance. She hit it where roots ran deep and slurped at the earth.

Keeley punched the tree. She struck it with ample amplitude. She struck it with a death sentence and struck it with her death wish. She struck it blind. She struck it deaf. She struck it incontinent. She struck it barkless, leafless, limbless, sapless. She

struck it so strong that the planet shook. She struck it so savagely that the wind turned around and went the other way, whistling nervously to itself.

She struck it psychically, a mindfist striking the universe, and she struck existence so hard that she knocked it all off balance, and the stars slid in a new direction. Then the world got all slanty and Keeley looked down at her body. She watched herself wind up and punch over and over, then noticed her ghostly *wushu* shoes. She was floating about eight feet off the ground and could've kicked her physical self in the head, maybe.

She spun her immaterial head in a full circle, just to see if she could, and found herself face-to-face with a raccoon. The raccoon was floating in mid-air, too, only her tiny bandit-hands clutched the stabilization bar of a raccoon-sized hang glider. Wind rippled the wing of the glider, but it hovered without moving too much. Kind of like bobbing on a spectral sea.

"Guess what," the raccoon said.

"I just punched out my last brain cell," Keeley said. "I'm a ghost, and you're the Big D."

"Nope and newp. You just went astral, that's all."

"Astral projection? You mean I'm an astralite?"

"Actually, I kind of brought you here, but not really. Tell the ninja, though. He'll be super jealous."

"Holy crap that's awesome." Keeley glanced at her body again. Her fist left blood-skids on the bark. "Uh oh—you aren't, like, the guardian spirit of this tree, are you?"

"In a roundabout way, you might say I am." The raccoon raised a hand to scratch at her nose. "Believe it or not, I'm the concretized concept of Justice."

"No kidding? You mean right now, I'm communing with cosmic Justicism?"

"Yawp."

"Holy craaap, he'll be so jealous."

The raccoon shrugged. "It's part of life," she said.



"Are you here to help with my training?"

"I'm here to tell you that there are right things and there are wrong things. But the rules are really recommendations, and the Universe usually isn't very forceful about them. The important part is that people—like you, the ninja, and the samurai guy—what's his name?"

"Tizzonka."

"Right. People are the ones who make and maintain balance. You are just one part of a complicated—eh, a mildly complicated drama, unfolding in the blink of a cosmic eye. Nothing you do will stop the globe from spinning."

"Okay." Keeley patted the pockets of her astral pants. "I don't know if I need to write this down, or . . ."

"Let me ask you a question. I know how evasive you can be, but I'm no pushover. I want an answer. So you tell me—why do you want revenge on Tizzonka?"

"Because he deserves it."

"Why does he deserve it?"

"Because...because I'm in a jail, and he's the warden."

The raccoon floated there, thinking about that for a minute. Her tail slinked on the astral wind.

"Let me ask you a set of questions," the raccoon said. Her whiskers twiddled. "What's your least favorite food?"

"Peas."

"Really? I love peas."

"I dunno, I just said something."

"That works," said the raccoon. "What about fears? What scares you more than anything?"

"Tarantula fur. I don't care about their size, or their legs, or their teeth. But that freaking fur. No offense."

"None taken," said the raccoon. "And who is your best friend?"

"Oh, come on. Really?...I dunno. Just put the ninja down, I guess. For now."

"Okay then: if you could have your revenge on Tizzonka, but first you had to eat your body weight in peas, would you do it?"

"Yes," Keeley said.

"Look at that. You didn't even have to think about it."

"Nope."

"Okay: if you could have your revenge, but you had to bathe in tarantula fur. Would you do it?"

"Fuuuuuuuudge no. I mean—yeah, eventually. Of course. It would just be not easy."

"Very not easy. That's the idea."

Keeley shuddered, turning her astral self staticky.

"And if you could have your revenge," said the raccoon, "but it meant the betrayal of your best friend?"

Keeley stared straight ahead.

"That's a question," said the raccoon.

"Oh," said Keeley.

"...the question is would you do it."

"Right," said Keeley.

The raccoon waited patiently. Then she got impatient. "So would you?"

"Sure."

The raccoon sucked air between her teeth.

"Wait," Keeley said, "Waitwaitwaitwait. Are you here to tell me that revenge is wrong?"

The raccoon smiled with its little fangs. "Now, Keeley: I don't think I need to tell you that. Do I?"

"You...don't need to tell me that?"

"You're a smart girl. Right? I think you understand why I'm here."

Keeley squinted hard. "I don't think that I...huhm. I would expect you to be just like the ninja, and to tell me that revenge is wrong, and since I'm a responsible human I should strive to create balance in the Universe, and yadda else. But...is that what you're saying?"

The raccoon winked.

"Oh, my gosh," Keeley said. Her expression wiped clean. "For the first time in my life, I totally understand."

The raccoon smiled. "Okay! Then I won't keep you." The raccoon glided away, leaving a zebra-trail in its wake. And Keeley vacuum-zipped back into her body.

She looked around, stomped the ground to make sure she wasn't floating. Her feet were planted, but she was buoyed by retribution. She whispered to herself, "The Universe Raccoon just gave me her blessing."

What had she been doing again? That's right—punching.

So Keeley punched the tree. Keeley punched the tree. Keeley punched the tree.

And finally...timber.

## **Ready Ready READY READY READY**

She found the ninja training in the Smotts' backyard, surrounded by stray shadowcats, listening to Nujabes on a shiny ghettoblaster. He was kicking a tetherball back and forth, dodging it every few swings with a preternatural speed.

"Oh, yeah, they're out of town on vacation," he said about the homeowners. "I just wanted to, you know, keep the swings from getting rusty. Or, you know, maybe I'm their lost son who went away to college and disappeared or something."

"I'm finished punching stuff," Keeley said.

"I heard! That thing about how if a tree falls in the woods, and no one hears it? Totally not true." The ninja smiled. "Hey," he said, "I have something for you. I mean, it's nothing big. But you can have it, if you want it. It's in the battery hatch of the boombox."

She gave him a curious look, but went and opened up the stereo with her toe. The music stopped as she did, and instead of batteries a mess of black fabric unfurled across the lawn.

"Holy crap." Keeley knelt and ran her fingers through it. She picked up what turned out to be a sleeve, with a little thumbhole at the end. "Is this my *shinobi* suit?"

"You bet! I mean, mos def. I didn't get you any *tabi* boots because you seem to like the *wushu* shoes, but... You get this really cool title, though. Ready for it?"

"What's my title?"

"Check this out: you're the first *kunoichi* I've ever known."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, uh, incredibly super cool. Basically. There's translational minutiae, but, cool."

Keeley went to the space between the Smotts' shed and fence and changed outfits. She tried to do it really quickly, as part of the ninja mystique, but it still took her a minute or two.

"I'm really stoked for you," the ninja said. "I never got that far with my conditioning. I quit after about two months worth of sand stuff. Even today, I kind of hit like a gir—like a grrreat big baby. Sorry."

Keeley stepped out into the open. She looked like a stagehand (or a *kurogo*).

"You look awesome," the ninja said. "So what's next for the *kunoichi*?"

"Well, I guess I'm not quite done with the punchpunch. Still got one person left."

"What?" The ninja seemed confused. "You mean you still want to punch Tonka's lights out?"

"Uh, *yeah*. That's the whole point of us hanging out. Don't tell me you forgot."

"No, I didn't *forget*. I—jeez. This isn't—" The ninja put his face in his hands. "Okay. Wow. You're supposed to feel at peace now."

"What's that?"

"What's *peace*? Don't you feel more balanced? Like the universe makes more sense? Like you've seen the world on a cosmic scale, perfectly level, and that severe injustices or accompanying vendettas would knock it out of equilibrium? Don't you feel...equilibrated?"

"Dude, that stuff's all nonsense. Get this: the cosmic spirit of Justice came and spoke with *me*, and she said so. She also said, and this was the main message: 'Yo, Keeley, I got your back.'"

"What?"

"She's a raccoon on a hang glider. She gassed me out of my body and we had a really good conversation. You came up."

"My hang glider was parked near there. What would you say are the chances that you had a dehydration hallucination and saw a raccoon playing with my hang glider?"

"Thanks for the tip, Dr. Ninja, but I'm *pretty sure* I can recognize an authentic OOBIE."

"An ooby? Okay; what did the raccoon *say*?"

"I already told you," said Keeley. "She was like... 'Go get him, dude!'"

"Are you sure that's what she said? Exact words?"

"I mean, essentially. We had this long conversation about...something. I don't know. I was, honestly, really distracted by the fact that she was a raccoon. But at the end, when it came down to Tonka, we talked about revenge and I *thought* she was gonna be all lame like you and say, 'No, don't do it.' But then she *winked*."

"She winked?"

"Yeah," said Keeley, "she winked. And she was saying, basically, 'You have my endorsement.'"

"Is it possible," said the ninja, breathing slowly, "that you're misinterpreting this wink? Because it's a *wink*. The meaning of those can be pretty, you know, debatable..."

"Look, I'm still trying to get over the fact that raccoons can wink."

"I mean, how do you know that isn't like a biological thing they just do? Like a spasm, or a twitch? Can you remember the exact context of the wink?"

"Look, I don't think this kind of demideity would *allow* herself to be misinterpreted." She crossed her arms at the ninja. "In fact, the raccoon and I think *you're* the one who's starting to sound ridiculous."

"And you're using this wink as the ultimate justification of your revenge."

"Besides what Tonka did, yeah."

"I don't believe it. This is not what's supposed to happen at all. You're supposed to undergo a deep philosophical change. You're supposed to reform. You're supposed to see the issues in a wiser light and abandon your blood-spilling pursuit. It's, it's like the bumper sticker: *Coexist*. What about self-satisfaction? What about karmic wibbledy-wobble? What about peacelove?"

"I don't know what to tell you, man."

The ninja put a fist over his mouth. He looked like he might throw up. "Does your hand at least hurt? Because that was part of the plan, too. I said to myself, 'Gee, maybe if she messes up her hand, she won't want to punch *anybody*.'"

"My knuckles feel tectonic. They feel...Pompeiinous." She rubbed her ragged knuckles like a treasured heirloom. "It's a famous volcano. And the word 'heinous.'"

"I'm familiar with it, okay?" The ninja kicked the tetherball so hard that it flew off its pole and hit the side of the house.

"Whoa. Calm down, buddy."

"We're finished. I'm not training you anymore. I can't."

"Hey, hang on."

"Nope," said the ninja. "We're done. I was making you a certificate, but it's not finished yet, but it's not like you need it. Call yourself a master if you want. I don't care. Whatever."

"No," said Keeley. "Wait up. You still haven't taught me a single freaking thing about concealment."

"Yeah?" said the ninja. "What could I possibly teach you? You've done nothing *but* conceal this entire time. You still haven't told me the full story between you and Tonka. I mean, you don't devote your whole afterschool life to revenge over a couple of backyard football games from however many years ago. Friendships end. Life goes on."

"I've done nothing but conceal? Look at you, Mr. I'm-Gonna-Try-to-Brainwash-You-Away-from-Revenge-with-My-Training."

"Stop calling me Mr. Dr. Everything!"

"Stop not-training me!" Keeley said.

"Or else what?"

"Or else I tell the neighborhood who you are."

"Oh, yeah right." The ninja waved his hands all around. "You don't have the faintest idea—"

"You had a dinosaur backpack in kindergarten."

The ninja froze. He looked over his shoulder at the ghost of his old backpack. He asked, slowly, "What kind of dinosaur?"

"I don't know dinotypes! The one with the things." She used her fingers to imitate ambiguous something's. "I could draw it, if I had to."

"You really do know," the ninja said. "You'd really rat me out."

"No more ninjas jumping on the bed."

The ninja squatted, then fell back onto his butt in the grass. He sighed. "You know, there's this old Japanese saying. It, uh, it goes...hang on: *saru mo ki kara ochiru*. Even monkeys fall from trees."

"I agree. Even Tonka, for all his bushidoic prowess, is vulnerable."

"I'm trying to warn you, actually. I'm saying, like, you think you're swinging through the branches with aplomb, and all that jazz...but you could still get clumsy or a branch could break or

something. Maybe another monkey could come along and push your monkey out of the trees. I mean, that's happening to me right now. Metaphorically."

"But," Keeley said, "with a clever scheme and careful training, the monkey greatly decreases her tree-fally-outy chances to raccoon-like levels of arboreticism."

"Oh, you think you know schemes? Check this out: there was this one ninja I read about. He hid up in the rafters of a castle for three days, dead silent. He even had to pee on himself. Silently. Could *you* do that?"

"Okay, that's not quite how my scheme works."

"There was this other one ninja I read about. What he did was, he snuck into a compound and hid beneath an outhouse and waited three days for this kingy guy to come use it. All while other guys used the bathroom first. And when the guy finally came to use the restroom, after three days of waiting, the ninja got him. Could *you* do that?"

"What, did he attack the guy's butt?"

"I dunno. No one knows. It was a ninja strike. The ninja just *got him*."

"That's two potty stories in a row."

"I feel like we could have done pretty well together," said the ninja, his tone swiveling. "See, we're peers now. I'm really quick and pretty good at hiding and that stuff, and you're the hardest-headed cricket that anybody's ever stepped on. We could have covered each other's weaknesses."

"Well, you could show me a lot more about disguises and mysticism and all that."

"Yeah, that stuff's fun. But really easy, too. You're really going to do it? Still? You think this's the right thing to do?"

"Doesn't matter. The way I see it, it's the *only* thing to do. And the only thing you can do is teach me what I want to learn. Or else."



The ninja cracked a smokebomb in the yard beside him, but then just sat there and let the cloud wash over him. "I really wanna disappear right now."

"Go ahead. I'll take notes."

## How to Disappear

The ninja took her to a golf course, setting a snappy pace as a formality. Keeley flipped over the fence and dashed down the fairway, right behind him. They stopped on a pretty flat green. By the light of the moon, she could see the crisscross mowing and the candy-cane pin flag. It rippled in a subtle shadow breeze.

"The eye sees in three ways," said the ninja, "motion, color, and silhouette. These are the three things it notices, in order. First, motion. Nothing is more immediate and attention-grabbing than movement. If you can appear inanimate and move when you aren't under scrutiny, you're on your way to invisibility. Second, color. In a still visual, the eye searches for broad inconsistencies; contrast is one of the broadest. Light and dark, warm and cool, yellow and anything else—except for yellow. This is why we wear black stuff, to utilize shadowisms. And then third, is, uh, silhouette. The brain catalogues shapes and derives meaning from them, *but* it also needs time to interpret recognizable shapes and unlock those associations. Still—you gotta take extra caution to disguise your silhouette while hiding." The ninja tucked a twig under his armpit and turned sideways. "See? Instead of the recognizable human form, now I'm all tree-y."

"Cute." Keeley picked up the golf flag and propped it on her shoulder like a bazooka, then turned sideways. "Check it out," she said. "I'm a horizon."

"That eye-stuff, that's just the science of it. Knowing the three sights, I can't just say, 'Now *disappear!*' and then you do it. Disappearing for real takes something else." The ninja threw up his twig and appeared on the other side of Keeley. "See, I was skeptical when you first came to me for ninja training. You were all like, 'I wanna learn *taisavuki-jutsu*,' and I was like, 'Gosh, but you're such a noisy cricket.' You remember that?"

Keeley bent the mini-flagpole over her knee. "What about it?"

"I don't disappear because somebody trained me," he said. "I disappear because I'm disappearable. Also because I read a few books on the subject." He whispered behind his hand, "At the bookstore, they keep the ninja tomes in the athletics section."

"What do you mean, 'disappearable?'"

The ninja shrugged. "All my life, people just kinda forgot I was there. The teacher would never call on me or collect my homework, or my parents would leave me at Pizza Street, or the soccer coach would never take me off the bench, or the lunch ladies would never put any food on my tray."

"I don't believe you. What would you eat?"

"Napkins, mostly. I was already a pretty wispy kid, and that made me even *more* unnoticeable."

"Well, I noticed you," Keeley said. "I sought you out."

"I know, but that was for your training. For your revenge. You think anybody ever seeks me out to learn about balance? Forget it. One person, once, and just because he was a gymnast. Are you still going to seek me out after you've got what you wanted?"

Keeley looked at her *wushu* shoes. "I don't think that far ahead."

"It takes a certain personality to disappear, is what I'm saying. But you don't have it. Look at you," he said. "You're an orange-aura'd fireball. You're so loud, you don't even hear half of what I say. You're so loud, the universe is waking up and telling you to can it. You're so loud...I'm jealous. I bet nobody ever forgets Keeley."

"Sorry I have to ask this, but I can't tell right now: are you or aren't you pissed off at me?"

"I'm mad," said the ninja. "I mean, I think you're doing the morally wrong thing. I think you're blackmailing my assistance. I think I've kinda created a monster by showing such an aggressively powerful person all this ninja stuff. But a lot of that's my fault. I never should've trained you. I knew it was risky."

"Then why'd you do it?" Keeley said.

"Um...because I thought the training could be like ninjanger management. I wanted you to learn to extinguish a little bit. And, you know, lose that desire to destroy another human being."

"That's the only reason you trained me?"

The ninja sighed. "Whatever you do to Tonka, there's a good chance people will see you at that Homecoming Game. And those people are going to think the assailant was their neighborhood ninja. And since you know who I am, that puts me kind of at your mercy."

"So what are *you* going to do?"

"Probably hang up the hood for good. If I was able to disappear from my first life, I can disappear from ninja-life. I don't see what other choice I have." He took off his glasses and cleaned them with his sleeve. Behind the frames, Keeley saw lines around his eyes. In the moonlight, he looked kind of like pancake batter.

"This is the last thing I'm going to show you," he said as he replaced his glasses. "So here's your ultimate test, Crickeley: I've hidden a tool here. It's the most powerful weapon in any ninja's arsenal. If you can find it, it will make you invisible. If you possess it, it'll make you invincible. It's a tool that you've gotta have if you're gonna beat Tonka. So try to find it."

"Where's 'here?' The golf course?"

"This particular green."

Keeley scanned the lawn-sized circle. She'd gotten pretty good at moonlight eyesight, and she didn't see anything right away. She went to the cup and dipped her hand inside. It was empty.

"Am I supposed to dig?" she asked.

The ninja stood with his arms crossed over his chest, watching. He didn't answer. Keeley didn't know if she had ever seen his arms crossed like that. Sometimes he clasped his hands behind his back, but that was it.

She sank her fingers into the green grass and tore up a strip. Then she knelt and punched into the earth, and soil flew out in a serpentine blast. When the dirt settled, Keeley had cut a deep trench into the green. Nothing was buried but grubworms and a sprinkler system.

She tore up a second strip of sod and punched into the earth beneath it. The dirt showered down in crumbs and clods, and nothing was buried. She tore another strip up, and another. She mangled the green. She punched so many linear craters into the ground that it started to look as if a meteor had sunk a hole-in-one. And when no secret weapon made itself evident, Keeley bent the pin flag back into shape and javelined it.

"Alright, it's pretty clear that there's *nothing here!*" Keeley hollered. The last two words echoed through the surrounding subdivision. "So what's the deal? Where's the mindscrew?"

"There is no spoon—I mean, tool. I mean, there *is*—abstractly. But that was a lie. The tool is deception. By far, the most effective disappearing act is making your opponent believe in the presence of that which isn't present."

"*That's* your big ninja secret? You stupid jerk—I already knew that!"

"You did?"

"Sure I did! I don't have the slightest idea about your real identity, and I don't even care."

"But you knew about my dinosaur backpack!"

"Dude, wake up and smell the kindergarten. *Everyone* had a dinosaur backpack."

The ninja counted on his fingers, tabulating in *tabi* boots. "Doesn't that mean that now you have nothing to use as blackmail? And I don't have to let you go through with this anymore?"

"Pretty much," Keeley said.

"Then I won't let you go through with this anymore."

"Yeah, right. What are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna stop you," he said. "All this time I thought I was preserving balance, but you were using my knowledge to skew things more and more. Not anymore."

"Ugh, balance, balance, balance. You know what?"

"No, what?"

"Shutup," Keeley said, and, cutting him off. "I think you're wrong about the universe. I think it doesn't care what goes on, and you just use that to justify your passivityiveness. You're all about *preventative* balance: 'Can't let this happen, oh no, can't let that happen.' But balance can be reactive, too. If somebody does something good, they should be rewarded. If someone does something bad, they need to be punished. Maybe if you'd gone out of your way to get noticed as a kid, someone would've stopped you from eating all those napkins. But as for me, I'm not counting on some moon raccoon to come down out of the sky and take care of any of that."

"Revenge is a positive feedback mechanism," the ninja protested. "Cyclical back-and-forth's don't have a safe outcome because both parties keep answering, and people get dragged in, and—while I hate to use the metaphor—it spreads like a freaking firenado."

"Which is why I'm going to strike back definitively, then, and put this to bed once and for all. It's not about revenge at this point. You wanted me to learn something? I learned something. I've

learned to see your crummy karmic balance. Now you're just throwing a hissyfit because we don't see it with the same eyes."

"I still can't believe it. I really didn't think it'd end up this way."

"Well now *I've* deceived *you*, and I guess that means the training is complete. So..." She flexed her fist. "You gonna stop me, or what?"

The ninja juked right and Keeley brought her hammer down, but then he edged to the left and got inside her reach. He rooted a leg behind Keeley's, said "Bwoop!" like a banana-peel sound effect, and toppled her to the dirt.

"What," she said, "still afraid to hit me?"

The ninja shrugged and Keeley kicked him in the knee. His legs went out from under him and he fell face first, catching himself in a pushup—and Keeley stomped the top of his head. He threw his hands up and fell to his elbows as she scrambled to her feet. She hopped back a few steps, bouncing foot-to-foot, and cracked her neck while she waited for the ninja to stand.

"I know you're trying to be chivalrous or something," she told him as she bobbed around, "but trust me: you aren't going to stop me without throwing a punch."

The ninja stood still. "I don't hit gi—"

"Don't play that card. Here." She dropped her ready stance and walked confidently to the ninja. Then she grabbed his wrist, forced him to make a fist, and punched herself in the face with his arm.

"Hey!" The ninja ripped his hand away and Keeley threw a punch to his gut. But he caught it in both hands, pulled her to the ground, and put her into an arm bar.

"Pfft," she said, "you think that huuuurrtrts?! Let go! Leggo! No fair! You never showed me any submissionisms!"

"I don't know—" the ninja said, between grunts, "—if I should—just—strain your muscle so you can't, like, attack him. I don't wanna *break* your arm, but I could if you're not careful—and it'd be all your fault for resisting wrong—and—"

Keeley roared and lifted the ninja off the ground with her arm, then smashed him flat. Her free fist swung over like a snapping mousetrap and crushed the ninja's chest. He coughed and let her go. As she tried to get up, he tripped her again. They lay on their backs and kicked at each other like two overturned turtles, or two kids fighting over sofa-space. Real *tabi*-boot-on-*wushu*-shoe action. Until Keeley's foot slipped between the ninja's legs and got him where it counted. He immediately gave up the kicking and cringed into a ball, rolling onto his side.

"I'm out of here," Keeley said, "and you're not gonna follow me." She stood and went to a nearby sand trap, then knelt and punched into it. There was a thundersome clap, as if she'd punched a pocket of air out of existence, and then the surrounding atmosphere filled the gap. The sand lifted and brewed into a swirling, small-scale sandstorm over the golf green. The ninja took one hand from his groin and shielded his eyes. After half a minute, the sandstorm died out. Keeley was gone.

The ninja groaned as he sat upright. The green was annihilated: a chocolaty mix of sand and soil, beveled twelve inches into the ground, ringed with carpet-like strips of sod. In the distance, the pin flag was speared sideways into a tree trunk.

"I still don't understand why," the ninja said to himself.

Keeley's answer came riding the wind, loud and thick, less like a stowaway and more like a tugboat. "I'm his *sister*," she said. "I mean, come on. You could've guessed that from the beginning."

"I was thinking it," the ninja said to the air around him, "but I didn't wanna say it in case it was wrong. If it's really true, though—you'll give him one more chance."

The air was very still in reply. If he shut his eyes, the ninja could hear the stony moon, grinding round its orbit.

\* \* \*

## Homecoming

The night of the big game, Keeley rode into the stadium parking lot atop a dry party bus, lying flat and clinging to the emergency exit hatch. She kept slipping around because the fabric of her *shinobi* suit was so slick. Rather than park, the bus drove straight to the gate and dumped its cargo, a load of pampered seniors clothed in purple-n-gold. As they headed inside, Keeley dropped down on the other side of the bus and peered beneath its undercarriage. There were a couple of PTA volunteers flanking the entrance, taking tickets.

But the plan didn't involve going in that way. At the end of the parking lot, watching the stadium enviously through unlit windows, sat the gymnasium. Keeley scurried between cars like a raccoon, avoiding arc-sodium lights like a vampire, and broke the gym's lock like so many similes will break a sentence—with sheer weight.

The door creaked and clanged. Keeley slid in, took a breath, and gave her eyes a minute to adjust to the darkness. The basketball goals were drawn up to the ceiling like sleeping bats. High windows overhead showed stadium lights and then an effulgence of fizzy fireworks. A thousand voices cheered. It had to be a home-team-touchdown cheer. Keeley was already running out of time.

A different door creaked in the building, echoing into the gymnasium. She heard big dumb footsteps and flattened herself against the dark wall. A distant light came on in a tiny locker room. There was a sigh, a plasticky clunk, and the trickle of a waterbottle being filled.

Keeley edged her way along the darkened gym to the locker room door, ajar, then knelt and leaned in from down low.

There were lockers. There were drums of untapped turf dye. And there was Willie the Wildcat, sitting on a bench, gulping water and chilling in the gust of a box fan. His head was off. Protruding from the neck was Pamela Todd. Keeley was just getting ready to



say, "Hi, Pamela Todd," and maybe put her lights out, when she realized that the ninja was sitting beside her.

"I haven't spotted her yet," the ninja said. "Have you?"

"No, but then again it's really hard to see in here. It's like doing a spacewalk. I do know one thing for sure, though," Pamela Todd said, "and that is that she's not inside my suit."

"Well, I'd like to keep reconnoitering," said the ninja, "but I don't know if we'll get another chance to switch."

"Probably not," said Pamela Todd, "but that's okay. I've done about all the riling up that one mascot can do. Just be careful out there. They're touchy-feely tonight. Lotta kids who want to pet you. Lotta middle schoolers who want to throw stuff at you."

"I'm used to that," said the ninja. "There's this really annoying clan of middle school ninjas I have to deal with."

Keeley, resisting the urge to throw something at him, slinked out of the doorway and waited.

"Do you know anything about their relationship?" she heard the ninja ask after a few moments.

"Aren't they adopted? I think we're all adopted, at some level, and nobody will mention it. Kind of like how all humanity can trace its evolutionary roots to the same place."

"Who told you that?"

"The Out of Alaska Hypothesis? It's kind of my own work. See, I study physical anthropology in the caves behind my house..."

Keeley stopped listening right there, up until she heard the door open and the tidal crowd-sounds from without. She glanced into the locker room then. A fully-suited Willie the Wildcat was exiting. The door clacked shut behind him.

"So that's how it's gonna be," she said. "Everybun versus Keeley." She went to the large canister of turf dye and examined the spray nozzle. "Suppose I'll just have to dye myself."

\* \* \*

## Halftime

Keeley, clinging to the underside of the home team's bench, fell to the ground—face-up—during the storm of retreating cleats. Her ninja suit and face were painted turf-green.

She had to lie low and flat as possible. She felt the vibrations of the drumline cadence. She imagined herself stretched taut, geometric over the rim of a resonant chamber, rattling. But as long as she dodged their steps, she could be thinner than fresh origami.

She steadied her breathing to a minimal level. She planted her fingers and heels in the turf. And she analyzed the positioning of the color guard in her peripheral vision. Then she began to inch. Inch, inch, inch. Inch-by-itchy-inch.

She felt the divot of every footstep from the first half. She counted and cataloged blades of grass beneath her. She was one-with-the-universing, and as she inched onto the field she felt herself filling some hole in existence, tipping some cosmic balance in favor of the favorable.

But she was in the middle of the halftime show. The Golden Regiment marching band sprayed up from the sideline like fountain jets. The illustrious band geeks lined up and knotted, then swirled and exploded. From the stands, it was like watching the band recreate the Big Bang. For Keeley, it was like being a piece of grass while somebody mowed the lawn.

Not one of the marchers looked at their feet. Under cover of the chaos, she abandoned her inches. She rolled and slid and scrambled with nirvanic precision, always avoiding their shifts in formation. All that dodging worked her into a sweat, and there was a moment near the end where a sousaphonist nearly crushed her head in. She wormed out of the way and after a grand, frozen finale, the band made their way off-field.

With a kickoff to the Wildcats, the second half began.

Keeley lay in the middle of the field, unnoticed, between two stampeding special teams. She adjusted to the minutest changes in

air pressure, using her senses down to 0.00004 of an inch. And the bodies clashed over her, cleated feet on every side. Their sweat sprinkled her, still unseen. The returner went down. The line of scrimmage was set. And the crowd began to chant.

*Ton-ka! Ton-ka! Ton-ka! Ton-ka!*

Tonka took the field, jogging in slo-mo. He was garbed in grass-stained battle armor, amped and awake in the moment. He waved to his adoring fans and subjects-to-be, winked at his girlfriend from afar with the eye of a falcon, and called his cadre into a huddle.

They formed a hasty ring around Keeley, hands on each other's backs. She could see all of their faces through slit eyes, but still she lay—stretched like a starfish—hidden in plain sight. Their words sounded alien, unintelligible. A series of numbers and colors and nonsensyllabistics.

Then the huddle broke. Their legendary guards and tackles mounted the line of scrimmage. The center bent over, ready to snap like a twig. And Tonka put up his hands, ready to summon the pigskin to his divine grip.

But before he could shout, between his legs: Keeley *psst*-ed like a snake.

The whites of her eyes stuck out at him from the turf and they locked gazes for a confused, anticipatory second. She mouthed the word *vacuum*, her mouth appearing like a golf cup on the green, and she knuckled her grassy green fist. Then—

## Deflected

A whistle blew. Keeley drove her fist forward with atom-smashing vitriol and found herself punching Willie the Wildcat in the gut as the mascot dove, bodyguard style, in front of Tonka. The mascot's stomach crumpled. His jersey caught fire and burned off. Instead of

completing the motion of his dive, the force of her punch flung him backwards as if from a cannon. Tonka ducked as the mascot tore through the air, spinning, and split the distant uprights. He landed with a *whamck* in the end zone and the crowd cringed in unison. His head was split down the middle, as if Willie the Wildcat had been brutally murdered in a horror movie. He didn't move.

"Too many men on the field!" one of the refs yelled. Keeley leapt up and the whistle blew again. "Too many men! Too many men!"

"Your own *sister*," the green ninja said.

"Kelsey?"

Keeley lunged at Tonka fist-first. He tossed the football up and caught her by the wrist with both hands, trying to assert some control. But then her left fist came around, aimed for his head. He reared back and her knuckles nicked his facemask, ripping it clean off. When she lunged again, he used the force to swing her — *aikidoic* — over his shoulder and onto the ground.

Two of the refs closed in on her, whistling and motioning her off the field. She leapt up and pulled the whistles from their mouths, then crushed them in her bare hands.

"What do you think you're doing?" Tonka asked her, but he was brushed aside by his offensive line.

"Let us handle this," said the left tackle. He lowered his head and bull-rushed Keeley. She made a fist and drove it into the top of his helmet, penetrating the super-hard plastic and pressing knuckle-grooves into his skull. He fell flat.

"Stop!" commanded Tonka, but his order went unheeded by all. Two more linemen, the offensive guards, tried to Bash Bro Keeley from either side. But she front-flipped out of the way, landing right in front of Tonka. The guards collided and collapsed.

"I'm here to mete out punishment," she told him. "You should've helped me. We could've fought him off together. He didn't have to control our moms or our lives, but he did — and we

let him. And the day that I stood up to him, you should've been there with me."

"You didn't live with him," Tonka said. "You didn't have to deal with him every day."

"You don't even know what I had to deal with every day." She held up her fist. "I punched sand for eight hours, and then gravel for twelve, and then a tree for, like, sixteen—and that was *easy* compared to everything else. I messed up my hand really bad and that was the easiest part."

"So you're here to wreck me? Is that it?"

"Basically," Keeley said.

"You are definitely his daughter."

She popped Tonka in the jaw, right there through his missing facemask. His cheeks shuddered seismic, then his helmet poked off and his knees buckled. The force of her fist traveled up his jawbone and made bone dust of his inner ear. Tonka's sense of balance was destroyed. He fell to a spinning world.

That's when both teams sprung. The heavy defensive side of the Wildcats left the bench and imploded onto Keeley. The other team shrugged and leapt on top of them. Everybody meshed together in a dogjam of a logpile, with Keeley and Tonka on the very bottom. They were sandwiched in such a way that one could only inhale when the other exhaled.

"You were going to win tonight," Keeley said, and each breath was a contest. "He's here—watching—and you were going to follow—in his footsteps—unquestioningly. You would restore—his glory. Someday—you're gonna thank me."

Gaps formed in the shell of the dogpile. Stadium lights found their way through an elbow crook here, an underthigh there. Someone pulled someone else off, and someone else pulled someone up, and soon the teams were born again. As Tonka had the room to move, he patted the ground like a baby. He swept his

arms around him in frantic circles, as if uncovering something buried. He pulled up great gouts of turf.

But there was no one there. No extra person on the field. No fist-headed snake with eyeball markings and a predilection for shattering groins. There was only the too-real memory of a voice that stung like poisoned barbs and a splintering, mandibular ache as Tonka lost consciousness.

At the far end of the field, an EMT carefully pulled off Willie the Wildcat's head. The suit, inside, was empty.

## Come Monday

There was a senior student who didn't show up for her classes, whose contact numbers had been disconnected, who had snuck in, bent the universe to her orientation, and snuck out.

There was another senior student who quit the team and took an extended medical leave, who installed a penitent's set of braces on his teeth, who started a garden filled with *bonsai* trees, happy koi, and zenny swirls. He had ceased to study war and—being pruned himself—chose to make himself a scholar of growth.

And in a grove beyond the suburbs, to this day, there is a studentless master who trains and trains and trains; who sits on a felled tree and listens each night for crickets, blundering loudly and fearlessly through the woods, so that he might learn something more. He argues with her in his mind. He is punching sand again, daily. He tries to start conversations with every raccoon he comes across. He has it in his mind that one day, the *kunoichi* will return. He has it in his mind that we are circular beings, and every quest ends where it first began. So he waits for hers to end. He waits at the end of her circle for her homecoming, to re-welcome her, to host the inevitable confrontation. Because, except for, maybe, yeah.

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**On the cover:**

**from "Book of Shadows"**

**Eva Steil**

**EVA STEIL** has gallery space at Blackbird Studios in Las Vegas and is there every first Friday. If you're lucky, you also can find her on Facebook. She has been shooting for almost thirty years.

