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# YOUNG WARRIORS

Book 1 of 3:

*“Jacob’s Fire”*

Written by David Jurasek & Jack Manchester

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# Courage

is not being without fear.  
It's about being terrified  
and doing what's right,  
anyway!

~ Sensei Dan

# CHAPTER 1:

## “GO! NOW!”

In a small and misty mountain-top village, a clan of ninjas slept. Everyone except a boy ninja, who was lying huddled on his side, fully alert, unable to sleep. Something made him terribly uneasy.

The trickling sounds of a small stream that flowed nearby was a constant companion. The chatter of distant chirping insects was soothing. Now and again, a breeze would blow between the bamboo-walled buildings that stood huddled together in the middle of the village.

The great stone wall that encircled the mountain-top village was silent and sturdy; built by the ancestors to keep out invading clans. Now it also kept out all the monsters of the wide world beyond. At certain spots in the craggy rocks along the top edge of the wall, ninja sentries would conceal themselves, sitting still and watching. They would look out at the world beyond and ready themselves to sound the alarm bells for the rest of the village if trouble should be lurking on the outside.

From the floor of his cabin, the boy ninja sat up and peered out the window. Looking at the great stone wall, he saw no guards upon it. This was not right. Day and night, it made no difference, ninjas are vigilant and they are always ready. It made no sense to

him so he rubbed his eyes and looked again. He jumped out of bed, silently putting on his clothes and weapons. Something was terribly wrong...

As he crept silently out of his room, he noticed the rest of his hut was empty. Where are my family? He wondered.

He went out into the night air, quick and silent as a shadow, to look for them. He headed for the great stone wall that encircled the village and its main entrance, the tall iron gate. There were always ninjas posted there.

As he made his way between the buildings, he came into pools of total shadow. He did not mind -- in fact, he preferred it. This was his village. He was in the place he knew best in the world. It was the place where he was the safest. So why did he feel so much dread?

He knew every inch of this darkened dirt path that led behind the rows of bamboo buildings, so much so that he didn't need any light to swiftly and silently place his feet.

Uuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrrrrrr...

The sound made him freeze and crouch low to the ground. It was a long, low moaning sound. It was off in the distance, but not too far away. Definitely outside the village walls, but not much further. He lay low, quietly and listened.

Uuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrrrrrr.....

.....Uuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrrrrrr.....

It sounded as though the moan was coming from multiple sources, not just one.

The boy ninja began to tremble slightly. It was as if deep down inside, a part of him knew what was making that sound.

He crept forward toward the corner of the shadowy building. Reaching one arm up over his head to the hilt of the sword that stuck out above his right shoulder, he gripped the laced handle for

strength and courage. His hands trembled in their thin black gloves. His grip felt weak. He rested himself against the side of the building, and peered around the corner for a look.

His heart pounded in his throat as his eyes fixated upon the sight.

Just beyond where he lay hiding, was the tall iron gate of the great stone wall. Outside the gate, a crowd of figures slowly swayed and stumbled. Together they made the sounds that he had heard, and now that he looked upon them with his own eyes, the sounds grew louder.

Uuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrrrrrr..... Uuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrrrrrr....

U U U U U U U U U U U U U U U U U U R-  
RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!!!

They were not ninjas. They were not Samurai. They were not animals. These were Zombies -- mindless monsters who stalked the earth, looking for live prey to devour. They were once living, breathing people. Now they were grisly shadows of living things - - no beating heart, no warmth, no life in their greying eyes. Their lifeless bodies were half-clothed, dilapidated, and torn apart. They stumbled and lumbered forward with sickening creaks and groans.

He knew from stories told around the village fire that one zombie was easy enough to kill, but when hoards of zombies invaded villages and towns like swarms of flesh-eating ants, they would eat everything and everyone in their path. It was hard to believe, but now the force of their weight was pushing against the old iron bar gates of his village.

The moans turned into a cacophony. They knew he was there. They knew he could see them. How do they know? I'm dressed all in black, standing in the shadows!

It did not seem to matter. Perhaps they could hear his pounding heart or smell his fear. They wanted his blood. They were craving it. With greater pressure, they were pushing against the bars, determined to get in. The first row of undead figures were being squashed harder against the gate, shoved by the countless figures that lumbered behind in the back ranks.

He drew his two swords and stood, but something cold and stiff glued his feet to the ground. He urged his knees and hips to move forward, but his legs, enveloped in a black shadowy cloud were stuck. He did not know what to do.

Where is everyone!?! he thought. At several points along the wall there stood dusty old alarm bells, with ropes that hung out from the center. All he needed to do was get to the nearest bell, ring it, and within seconds he would be joined by all the warriors of his clan, ready to fight together and defend the village. He knew what he had to do to protect his home from this swarm. But his feet would not budge. When he looked down, at the black darkness gripping his legs, he felt sick to his stomach.

He looked away, his face contorting underneath the black scarf that covered his head. He gritted his teeth. Move! His heart pounded as he struggled to shift his weight forward, but his feet would not budge.

Then, something hopeful caught his eye. From amidst the buildings, deeper within the village, a flickering orange light appeared. Another member of the clan was awake!

He opened his mouth to call out to them. Only dry whispers came from his mouth, lost in the sounds of the wind and the moaning from outside the gate. But no matter. The orange light was coming through the buildings towards him. It was a hand-held torch. Someone was using it to light their way as they moved between the shadows of the bamboo-and-paper village.

He waited and held his breath, listening to the sounds of the moans growing louder and the tall iron gate beginning to creak under the weight of the swarm.

Out from between the buildings emerged the lean and quick silhouette of his mother. Her stride was fast and sure, and she wore a fiery expression on her face that glowed orange from the light of her torch. She was dressed from head to toe in the black silk of their ninja clan. He felt so relieved at the sight of her, that he could only heave a silent sob. No sound came from his mouth, only tears of joy and relief welled up in his eyes. It's going to be OK. The village is going to be saved. Ring the Bell!

Then she trotted up to him and squeezed him by the shoulders. Looking him in the eyes, she breathlessly sputtered, "They are going to break through. Too many to stop. You have to get out of here. Somewhere safe."

Her body stood firm and strong before him, but her eyes watered up. It took him a moment to understand what was happening. Before he could grab onto her, she had turned and was running up to the gate.

As she approached the gate, she seized the rope tugging at the warning bells, clanging them loudly. The zombie hoard responded by pushing even harder against the gates, their hunger now insatiable.

She bent to hoist up a wooden beam to prop up and support the gate, but at that moment, the gates burst open. Arms reached through and then a swarm of undead bodies rushed forward like a tidal wave.

She fell back from the force and pulled out her sword, slicing down the first few of the cold and hungry attackers. But it was no use.

He felt a dark-crushing sensation in his chest. His whole body seemed to freeze in place.

Watching his mother fighting back, the dark mist that held his feet began to billow into a larger cloud, blowing slowly across the ground, mixing with the shadows, making him feel a dreadful sensation, something worse than fear.

His eyes were wild and frantic as he watched, still frozen. DO SOMETHING!

His mother hurled her torch at the hoard now. The flames seemed to hurt the zombies, as many of them shrieked and crumpled to the ground. But a few seconds later, more pushed on from the endless river of bodies flowing through the broken gate.

She retreated, hacking and slicing, back to where she was still standing like a statue. Quickly, she turned to him, no longer pleading but with a fierce look. "Jacob! Be Brave!"

The words struck a deep chord within him, but his body was still frozen.

"Go! Now!!" Her voice erupted as she pushed him with enormous force, making him fly backwards.

Finally broken free from the grip of the dreadful dark force, he found himself able to move. He took off, running so fast that his feet barely touched the ground. As he turned to look over his shoulder, he saw his mother still fighting off the waves of moaning corpses. Many were lunging at her with their jaws wide open. The flames from her torch had ignited and spread, and now started to burn the buildings around her.

I can't just leave her! The thought twisted in his belly, but his feet kept running. He ran through the streets of his village, darting just ahead of the tides of invaders that nipped at his heels. As he sprinted, he clutched the handles of his two short-swords, one in each hand, razor sharp. The calm blue light of the moon was

gone now, replaced by the glowing orange light emanating from the inferno that was consuming the village's buildings, one by one. The sky was blood red, as morning crept over the horizon.

As the boy ninja darted between buildings, zombies began to catch up with him. He was faster than they were, but somehow they were getting to the deeper parts of the old village more quickly than he was.

As he passed by a small cabin to his left, a zombie darted out from behind it with its arms held out in front, sweeping the air and grabbing for him. He ducked his head just in time to dodge a flailing arm, but the zombie caught the fabric of his hood and caused him to stumble. He turned and slashed wildly at the attacker with the sword in his left hand. He made a clumsy chop at the zombie's arm, severing it with a messy stroke. From the impact of the blade slicing its target, the boy ninja lost control of his weapon and it flew off into an alley between two houses.

No time to go get it. He scrambled back to break-neck speed. His ears rang with the loudness and chaos and the terror of the inferno around him.

Up ahead was the back of the village, ringed in by the great stone wall. He headed straight for it at full speed, feeling the weight of gravity lifting away from his shoulders. The faster he ran, the lighter he felt. With a small hop, he went shooting up into the air to the height of the roofs of the smaller buildings around him. He was bewildered by how he gained this strength and speed, but there was no time to think. He hit the ground running and continued to sprint, getting closer to the wall. With another stronger jump, he rocketed up in the air, almost to the height of the lip of the wall. He hit the ground, again, still running.

Zombies appeared from behind him, as well as from the alleys on the side and ahead of him now. They were running after him

now. They shrieked and screamed with the heat of the flames behind them. Some of them were on fire as they ran at him, ravenous with hunger.

He was only a few strides away from the great stone wall now. With all of his might, he leaped high into the air and sailed forward to the top of the stoney structure. He caught the edge of it with both hands, and felt the thud of the hard brick against his torso.

He pulled himself up. On the top of the wall now, he dared to look back. It was a scene from hell. Everything was in engulfed flames or suffocated in smoke. He could not see his own house or the houses of his family members. He could no longer see his mother. They were all gone. No members of his clan were left alive. Nothing was living. This place now belonged to the dead.

He sheathed his one remaining sword and felt the welling up of tears behind his eyes, about to burst. He used the scarf that covered his face to wipe the tears. Then, he heard the sound again.

U U U U U U U U U U U U U U U U U U R-  
RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!!!

Down below, just a few feet, there were arms, reaching up and climbing the stone wall. The zombies were lifting themselves over the bodies of one another, determined to get him.

There was no turning back. Nothing he could do. His mother's words rang in his mind.

“Be brave... Go! Now!”

He turned and looked to the treetops beyond the great wall. The land that lay beyond was a thick jungle, green and lush. Many strange sounds came from the ground on the other side of the wall. He couldn't even see the jungle floor through all the dense leaves.

Fearful of falling from such a height, and wanting to let himself just collapse in grief, he paused to catch his breath.

Then, an image flashed through his mind: his mother fighting the horde, protecting him with her last living breaths, as he just stood there, frozen. The black smoke returned. It wrapped itself around him, wanting to strangle him.

At that moment, a hand grabbed his ankle. He jerked forwards and almost fell off the wall. He swung around and fell with his butt hitting the top of the stone wall instead. As it was about to bite his heel, he swiftly kicked the zombie's head, sending it hurtling over the edge.

He got up and did not look back. Leaning forward, bent his knees, and leapt. As his body flew off the top of the wall, he reached and grabbed onto the stalk of a bamboo tree that swayed high up in the air. The leaves ripped through his hands, burning his palms as he slid down. Finally, his grip caught on and he stopped falling. Relief. The tree wobbled and waved back and forth under his weight. The sounds of the jungle surrounded him.

There he remained, clutching onto the branches of the bamboo tree, hanging on for his life. All he heard was the sounds of rustling and thudding, moaning and hissing, and all manner of other mysterious sounds coming from the unseen ground below.

Everything was black around him. All he felt was despair and terror.

Cool air rustled and blew the trees. The bamboo creaked and crackled.

Then, suddenly something stung his face and caught him off guard. Against his will, his hands let go of their grip. He felt himself slipping, falling faster and faster down into the darkness...



# CHAPTER 2:

## “RUDE AWAKENING”

“Oww!” An elastic band stung his face.

Jacob, no longer a ninja but a sleepy boy of 11 years, lay buried under thick covers. He rubbed the part of his face that felt the sting of the elastic band. He heard Leo’s unmistakable voice, loud and deep.

“Get up, you Lazy bum! Mom has been calling you for ten minutes now! Time for breakfast, which I will eat if you don’t!”

Leo did this sort of thing a lot. He was a head bigger than Jacob, and he seemed to have made it his mission as his big brother to both annoy and boss him around.

Jacob’s hair was the same as in his dream, long and dark, with a thick curtain of bangs that hung down in front of half of his face. Right now, it was a tangled mess. His room was small, dark and silent. His family had moved to this house only a week ago. Half opened boxes and plastic containers lay all around. The blinds were closed, but sharp lines of light burst in as the wind parted them now and again.

Jacob ducked his face under the covers, hoping to fall into dreamless sleep. Or at least to hide in bed all day. He hoped for anything, but having to get up.

It was the first day of school.

It seemed only a moment later that his covers flew right off. He gasped, surprised, and swallowed some cool fresh air. A chill came over him, making him curl up into a ball. The bright sunlight made him shut his eyes tight.

“Just leave me alone, Leo!!” He lashed out with a kick, hitting empty space.

“Today is the day, honey.” It was his mother’s soothing voice. Her warm hand on his shoulder made him feel like he was going to melt into a puddle. Jacob pulled away and buried his head deeper into the pillow.

He felt his body dip lower as his mom settled down on the edge of his bed. She was small and quiet in the way she carried herself, but her eyes were always intensely aware, like she could see right into him. She looked down at Jacob’s curled up body unsure of what to do.

“How you feeling about your first day?” She tried to ask it in a way that didn’t sound as nervous as she felt.

No answer.

“Come on, Jakub.” Something in him melted a little more. She said his name in the same way as her own mom would, yet without the thick Eastern European accent. When Jacob’s grandmother, whom he called Bubbie, said it, she pronounced it like Yeah-kub.

“Ok! Let’s go. Up and at ‘em.”

He shifted in place and curled up even tighter, more tense, like an armadillo closing into a ball. His chin was tucked down against his chest. “I’m not going,” he grumbled.

She sighed, blowing a strand of wild curly hair out of her face. Her shoulders slumped a bit. Pleading with him. “We talked

about this. And, you got to have fun and stay with Bubbie all summer. And..."

He tried to pull up the sheet to bury himself again. Seeing him do so, made something inside her snap. She stood up, standing over him now, her hands on her hips. The ferocity came out, though she tried to temper it.

"Jacob! We made a deal. You can't keep running from things and avoiding school. I need you to think of other people. I have to go back to work today."

He felt some bile in his throat, wanting to spit it out. Finally, he turned to look at her. "You don't have to! You decided to!"

He held her gaze for a moment. On his teary face, his mom could see the spark of anger fade away and get extinguished by a flood of fear and something worse. That feeling of giving up which she hated. He curled up and turned away from her. In his stomach, he could feel a dark-crushing feeling.

"Yes, I did decide to... After staying home for 6 months last year."

"It's not my fault." Jacob said in a seething whisper.

"I know that... And you know what? I am glad I did." She sat back next to him on the bed. "I'm glad I did, because you needed me and school was too hard." She put her hand on his shoulder again. "But. We can't keep doing this. Running. Avoiding people. This is a new school... we moved here so things could be better."

He snorted back, "School just sucks. Everywhere."

She caressed his neck lightly, making him feel tickled. He turned his head to see her through his thick wild mane of hair. She shot her eyebrows up.

"You sure of that?"

He nodded silently, certain.



world that you're not someone who gives up so easily. I need you to do this, honey."

Suddenly Jacob saw his mom in a strange light. Her face shifted a bit and she looked exactly like Bubbie, just a younger version. So sweet and kind, yet also very firm and strong at times.

"Will you do this today, for me?" She asked. It felt like both his mother and Bubbie were speaking at the same time.

Jacob nodded, pushing back some tears. He felt a surge of energy, wanting to show his mom and his Bubbie that he could live up to be as courageous as they wanted him to be.

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