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GRENADE



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HIDEKI

THE END

APRIL 1, 1945

An American bomb landed a hundred meters away—*Kra-KOOM!*—and the school building exploded. Hideki Kaneshiro ducked and screamed with all the other boys as they were showered with rocks and splinters.

Hideki couldn't believe it—one minute his school was there, the next it was gone. Worse, the bombs meant that the American battleships had found them! He turned to run.

“Don't move! Nobody is to move!”

Hideki froze. Every atom of his being told him to *RUN*. To find a cave somewhere to hide. But Lieutenant Colonel Sano's voice was so commanding, so forceful, that he didn't move. No one did. Even the governor of Okinawa, who was already three steps toward a shelter, stopped in his tracks.

“Return to your ranks!” Lieutenant Colonel Sano yelled.

Hideki inched back into line with the other boys and stood at attention, his heart pounding. Takeshi, another fourth-year boy, whimpered softly beside him. Katsumasa, who was Takeshi’s best friend, stood ramrod straight, a bead of sweat rolling down his face.

“What’s the matter, babies?” Yoshio whispered from the row of students behind them. “Ready to run home to Mommy?”

Hideki’s neck burned hot with shame for being scared. Yoshio was a fifth-year boy who had made it his personal mission to terrorize all the fourth-year boys—especially Hideki. Yoshio was half a head taller than Hideki, with arms as big as tree trunks and a face full of chicken pox scars that made him look twice as old. Hideki had always been the smallest boy in the school, and Yoshio had never let him forget it. Hideki was fourteen years old but looked like he was twelve, with a round boyish face, thin arms and legs, and short-cropped black hair.

Hideki had to keep an ear open for whatever stunt Yoshio might pull behind him. But the rest of him was transfixed on what was happening in front of him. If he could have moved without being scolded, Hideki would have made a rectangle with his fingers like a

photographer had shown him once, to frame a picture of what he was seeing. And what a picture it would have made.

A hundred boys stood in a small clearing outside what was left of their middle school. All of them wore their tan Imperial Japanese Army uniforms and caps. It was almost two o'clock in the morning, and it was dark. The ground shook with the heavy booms of artillery shells falling all around them, fired by American battle-ships offshore. A single flickering lamp cast an eerie, dreamlike glimmer on two rows of students standing on one side of the schoolyard, and a row of teachers on the other.

In the middle stood their principal, Norio Kojima, alongside the governor of Okinawa and Lieutenant Colonel Sano of the Imperial Japanese Army.

Hideki studied Sano, who stood rigid in his khaki uniform and knee-high leather boots. A sword hung from the lieutenant colonel's belt, and the breast of his jacket was crowded with colorful ribbons. Hideki knew that all the other boys were as spellbound by Sano as he was. Sano was the one they wanted to be.

They were gathered here now, outside their bomb shelters, because tonight Hideki and his classmates were graduating early. The governor of Okinawa and a Japanese lieutenant colonel usually weren't in attendance at

graduation, and the ceremony wasn't usually held at two o'clock in the morning. But then, it wasn't every day America invaded your island either.

Today was the end of everything Hideki had ever known.

"Later this morning, the enemy will land on Okinawa," Lieutenant Colonel Sano announced in his imposing voice as the bombs continued to fall. "American devils, whose only purpose is to kill you and your families in the most brutal, merciless ways possible."

Hideki shuddered, hoping that Sano—and Yoshio—wouldn't notice.

"They will hunt your grandparents down and burn them alive," Sano continued. "They will torture your mothers. Butcher your brothers and sisters. They will try to trick you too. Offer you food and kindness. But the food they carry is poisoned, and the hand that beckons you with friendship hides the one behind their back, holding a grenade."

Kra-KOOM!

Another bomb exploded nearby, destroying a tree that had stood for generations, but no one was going anywhere now. Sano had their attention.

Hideki knew that America and Japan had been at war for almost four years, fighting each other all over the Pacific in places like the Solomon Islands, the Philippines, and Iwo Jima. Then, a year ago, the Imperial Japanese

Army had arrived in force on Okinawa to dig defenses for the inevitable American invasion.

Okinawa was a tiny island, just a hundred and ten kilometers long and eleven kilometers wide. It lay south of the Japanese mainland and had once been an independent kingdom, with its own language and religion. But Japan had annexed Okinawa and made it a province back when Hideki's grandparents were children. And now, because Okinawa belonged to Japan, the American army was coming to attack.

"From this moment," Sano went on, his voice heavy with importance, "you have graduated from students to soldiers. You are now the Blood and Iron Student Corps. Each of you must be ready to die a glorious death in the name of the Emperor. This is your island. It is *you* who should be fighting for it, not the Imperial Japanese Army! You must fight like demons to protect your homeland. One plane for one battleship, one man for ten of the enemy!"

Another bomb exploded nearby, and Hideki cowered. He agreed with Sano, but if this ceremony went on too much longer he would never get to trade his life for ten American soldiers. An American battleship would kill him and all the rest of the students with one shot.

Fearless as he was, Sano seemed to come to the same conclusion. He nodded, and one of his lieutenants went

down the row and put two grenades into the hands of each middle schooler.

Hideki glanced at Takeshi and Katsumasa in disbelief—the IJA was giving them real grenades!

Hideki accepted his two grenades. Each was cylindrical, like a drinking cup, and weighed about a pound. They were a little bigger than Hideki's hands and looked like pineapple-shaped lanterns painted shiny black.

“What's this?” Yoshio asked, and Hideki turned to look. Yoshio had been given two grenades that were very different from Hideki's. Yoshio's grenades were made out of pottery!

“The American naval blockade has made metal scarce,” the lieutenant explained. “Some of you will be given ceramic grenades.”

“Ceramic?” Yoshio said when the lieutenant moved down the line. “But if these crack, they're useless!” He glanced up, saw Hideki had been given two metal grenades, and quickly took them without asking, pushing his pottery grenades into Hideki's hands with a wolfish grin. Hideki wanted to complain, but he knew it was pointless—and would only make things worse with Yoshio.

Hideki examined the glazed brown pottery grenades he'd been stuck with. They were the size and shape of baseballs, and much lighter than the real metal grenades.

Inside the small rubber cap at the top, there was a match-like fuse and a little piece of rough wood. You activated the grenade by striking the fuse against the wood, but Hideki had no idea how fast the fuse burned and how long he would have before the grenade exploded.

The complicated trigger distressed him, and the soft *clink* of the delicate pottery grenades against each other made him worried that they *would* crack—or worse, explode in his jacket pocket.

But if these grenades work, Hideki thought, I can finally overcome my family's curse. I can prove to Lieutenant Colonel Sano and to Yoshio and to everyone that I really am brave. And I can make the Kaneshiro family fearless again.

“One grenade is for the American monsters coming to kill your family,” Sano told them, and Hideki looked up. Sano’s gaze swept down the row of boys until it stopped on Hideki, like he was talking to him alone. “Then, after you have killed as many Americans as you can,” Sano added, “you are to use the other grenade to kill yourself.”