

SAMURAI BARBER VERSUS NINJA HAIRSTYLIST

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For the doubters.

THE SAMURAI BARBER

THE SAMURAI BARBER was headed to a job interview when someone shouted, “Yo, Samurai Barber! Cut my hair, yo!”

Turning to see who had so rudely asked for tādē services, tā saw that it was a child, around six or seven years old. Based on the child’s sheepish afro and the two friends who were snickering nearby, the child had probably been egged into asking for a haircut.

It was five minutes past three and tā had a job interview at four. There was more than enough time for one haircut. Tā drew tādē katana.

The katana was almost as tall as the Samurai, and it was impressive how the child was standing still, albeit with eyes shut tight, instead of running away. Tā sometimes forgot just how imposing tādē katana could be. It took a certain amount of courage to do that and it was so at odds with the child’s hairstyle.

Ah, this was an easy one. All of the child’s sheepishness could be traced back to the ends of tādē hair, probably because those “friends” nearby had only started to make

fun of the child recently. Tā only had to trim off the ends and bring the child's courage to the fore. But the child's hair was curly and had to be straightened before tā could cut it. It would not do to cut off the roots of the child's courage, after all.

Tā breathed in through tāde nose and out through tāde mouth, steadying tāself, and swung tāde katana over the top of the child's head with all of tāde might. The blade touched only air, but the child's hair seemed to reach out to it, straightening itself out for a moment. Tā used that moment to reverse tāde swing.

One smooth motion and the trim was done. But there was one more thing to do. Tā swung tāde katana over the top of the child's head again, this time twisting tāde wrist while swinging. The result was a slight wave to the child's hair, now looking like a lion's mane.

Tā looked upon tāde work and decided that it was good.

The child looked at those "friends", waiting for a reaction.

"Whoa!" said one of the friends. "That was awesome!"

"You look great!" said the other friend.

"Hah! Of course!" the child said, beaming with confidence.

"Do me next!" one of the friends said to the Samurai.

"No, do me next!" said the other.

"I'll give you ten dollars if you cut my hair first!" said the first one.

"I'll give you twenty!" said the other one.

"What? No fair. Rich butoh."

The Samurai couldn't believe that such language was

coming out of the mouth of someone so young. Kids these days needed to learn some manners.

“Ain’t my fault your parents can’t get a good job!” was the retort.

“Say that again! Say that again!” said the poor kid. It looked like they were going to get into a fight.

The little lion whispered something into the poor kid’s ear. Whatever it was, it seemed the poor kid didn’t mind the rich kid getting a haircut first anymore because tā said, “It’s okay, you go on ahead.”

Judging by the way the poor kid was smirking, the little lion had probably said something like, “Just let tā go first, in the end tā will be twenty dollars poorer while you get a free haircut.”

The Samurai took the twenty dollars from the rich kid before the kid could realise what was happening. After cutting the rich kid’s hair, tā went on to do the same for the poor kid. And since tā didn’t accept any money from the poor kid, a line formed. Yup, the one thing that you could count on from the citizens of Lionfish was that they would queue up for anything that was free.

Cutting hair was what tā loved to do, what tā was born to do. And looking at all the people lined up with their problems, problems that tā could fix by fixing their hairstyles, tā couldn’t say no.

As strands of existential ennui fell to the ground, tā looked up and saw that tā was done. Tā looked at tāde phone to see the time and—

Stupid! Stupid butoh! It was already five thirty! Tā was so bloody late for tāde interview and all tā had to show for all that hard work was twenty dollars. It was a particularly

bad haul. Usually some people would pay tā to cut the queue. Usually tā got at least a few hundred dollars. No such luck this time.

Another thing you could count on from the citizens of Lionfish was that they could be such cheap butohs.



THE RUSH-HOUR TRAIN was packed with people, some of them so annoyed by the Samurai's katana jutting into them that they violated polite decorum by rolling their eyes and clicking their tongues. The Samurai didn't care though. Tā had other things to worry about, like how to pay tāde rent and what tā should buy with the measly twenty dollars in tāde wallet. It was either an apple or a slice of kaya toast.

Oh, the crunch when biting into a green apple, followed by that tart yet sweet taste. Tā preferred that over the nauseating sweetness of the red counterparts. But kaya on grilled bread, that was the ultimate temptation. The caramel-like taste of crispy, almost burnt, bread combined with the soft sweetness of kaya spread on top – just imagining it made tā salivate. The healthier option would be the apple, but tā had a craving for the pure rush that only kaya on grilled bread could provide.

Kaya it was. It was better to indulge tāself first and deal with the consequences later. The job interview had gone as well as could be expected considering that tā had been two hours late. It could be a long time before tā got any more money.

“Good afternoon, Mister Ken, so sorry I’m late,” tã had said to the interviewer. Tã had offered tãde hand for the customary handshake.

But Ken did not deign to reciprocate the gesture. “Good afternoon? Good afternoon?! Do you know what time it is now?” Ken had asked instead.

“It’s six o’clock,” tã had answered.

“Wow!” Ken had rolled tãde eyes. “You do know what time it is. I thought that perhaps your phone had gone síáu or something. But maybe you’re the one who went síáu. Do you remember what time you were supposed to be here?” Ken had almost screamed out that last question. The verbal attack made tã flinch and tã looked down in silence.

“Well?” A vein had popped on Ken’s neck.

“Four o’clock.” The answer had gone out like a thief trying to sneak away.

Ken had motioned for tã to stand. The motion had been gentle, at odds with the simmering fury that erupted as soon as tã stood up. “Get out, you bloody butoh!”

Ken’s hairline was receding a bit too early for someone who seemed to be in their late twenties. In an effort to hide this fact, Ken had slicked up what remaining hair was left and combed it downward. The result was that it looked like Ken was wearing a black helmet.

And while a katana could not fix faulty DNA, tã had seen the strands of shame and despair taking root on Ken’s head of hair. A couple of swipes from tãde katana and those errant strands would have been cut down. Ken could have been saved from a lifetime of low self-esteem. If only Ken had asked, tã would have barbered Ken for free.

Tā really should stop giving out free haircuts, if only to stop tāself from getting too much into it and messing up tāde schedule. Tā had tried charging for tāde services a long time ago. Unfortunately, it didn't work out because tā had done it for free before. No one in their right mind would buy something that had once been free. There was no solution to this paradox of the free market, which was why tā had applied for the package management job at the Confiscatorium. Locating confiscated goods and moving them to the auction house wasn't barbering, was probably soul-crushing monotony, but it had to be better than surviving on donations. The only good thing about donations was that they were tax free. The downside, well, downsides, were plenty. Tā really needed another way to make some cash.

Perhaps tā could go into casting, share tāde exploits for everyone to see. There had been a couple of casts from people watching tā cutting hair that had been pretty popular. Those casts had garnered at least a couple of million views each. So maybe a lot more would plug in if tā started casting. But tā didn't know much about how to monetise casting. Hopefully the Archive would have some guides.

The train stopped at Lakeside station. There were two orderly lines of people outside the door waiting to get in. But the lines dissolved into chaos as soon as the doors opened. The ones who wanted to get off and the ones who wanted to get on, neither group gave the other any quarter. Through a remarkable feat of human osmosis, everyone got to where they wanted to go before the train doors closed.

The train lurched while leaving the station and there was another minor miracle as almost everyone on the train maintained their balance. Almost. The sole exception was the old woman standing next to the Samurai, who stumbled and stepped on tādē foot. The pain, originating from tādē pinky toe, stabbed up into tādē spine and flew out of tādē mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” the old woman said.

“It’s okay.” Tā managed a smile. Tā had already forgiven the old woman with gauzy silver hair, for tā was magnanimous. The woman was just old.

The old woman bowed tādē head in apology, and there, rising from tādē crown, was a lonesome strand that stood apart from the rest. It was the embodiment of heartache and loneliness.

“Did you recently lose someone?” tā asked the old woman.

Maybe the old woman thought it would be rude not to answer or maybe the old woman just wanted someone to talk to. Whatever the reason, the old woman answered, “Why, yes. How did you know?”

“You look lonely and sad,” tā said.

“Oh, yes. I lost my son.” The old woman had a faraway look.

So tā patted the old woman’s head and coaxed that lonesome strand back down to join the others. The old woman laughed, eyes tearing up with what must be tears of joy. “I’m sure your son wouldn’t have wanted you to grieve alone,” tā said to the old woman.

The old woman took the Samurai’s hand away; tā looked serious now. Perhaps it had been too soon for the

Samurai to mention the son, but at least that lonesome strand wasn't alone anymore. The old woman pointed at the Samurai's phone. "And are you looking into going into casting? I couldn't help but notice what you were watching."

"Yes," tā replied.

"I can help you with that," the old woman said. "I have... had my own channel with more than a hundred thousand subscribers. Apparently, there is a niche for old cooking recipes that I fulfilled."

"Wow!" Tā was puzzled by the technological savvy of this wizened old woman. Getting a hundred thousand subscribers was no small feat.

"Anyone can cast, but that's like shouting into the wind nowadays," the old woman said. "What you need to do is to cast to a recasting network. A good network is going to have a searchable list of casters so that people can find you easily. The best network by far is Stream Monster. The rest don't even have a behemoth computer and can't compete. With Stream Monster, people can even subscribe to you so that they get a notification whenever you start casting. The best thing about Stream Monster is that it won't cost you anything. They will even save your casts to the Archive for you, automatically, for free. In fact, if you are popular enough, you might even get paid! I used to get about thirty thousand dollars a month."

Thirty thousand dollars a month! Tā might get some money out of this. It wouldn't be much after taxes, but it was better than the inconsistent donations that tā was getting. This could be the solution to tāde cashflow problems. "But what's the catch?"

“No catch,” the old woman said. “They just modify your casts with product placements. Subliminal advertising, very effective.”

The Samurai didn’t care about that. Tā was already thinking of all the things thirty thousand dollars would buy.

“Does tā have a name?” the old woman asked, looking at the phone that was in the Samurai’s hand. The phone yawned, a sure sign tā was about to enter sleep mode.

“Sammy,” the Samurai said, suppressing a yawn of tāde own.

Sammy perked up upon hearing tāde name.

“Hi, Sammy, would you like to set up the Stream Monster application?” the old woman asked Sammy.

Sammy looked to the Samurai for reassurance and tā gave it by nodding. So Sammy chirped happily and set up the application. Tā chirped again when tā was done. The old woman was such an expert that the Samurai was finished with the whole registration process for creating a channel a few minutes later, when the train reached the next station.

“There you go, nice job, Sammy.” The old woman took out a battery from tāde purse and fed it to Sammy. Sammy gave a contented purr.

“Do you think I should do a fullcast or a halfcast?” the Samurai asked the old woman.

“I do a halfcast myself,” the old woman said. “My viewers don’t need to know whether I’m sad or angry or bored when I’m cooking; they just need to see what I’m doing and hear what I’m saying. But if I was a good enough actor, I would go full. Fullcasts are so rare that people will

tune in just to experience it, the content doesn't really matter. It is one thing to share your vision and hearing with the world, but it is quite another to share everything. But if you can stomach that, you should do a full because you will definitely get more money with a full."

"Full it is then." All the Samurai cared about at that point was the money.

"We've never been properly introduced," the old woman said. "I'm Greta."

"Nice to meet you Greta, I'm—"

A scream cut the Samurai off. Everyone turned to look in the direction of the scream, to see what was going on.

"There's someone with a sword!" came a cry from someone in the front of the train.

The weight of a hundred passengers pressed against the Samurai. Everyone was trying to get out of the train by any way possible. Tā tried to shield Greta from the worst of the crush. Luckily, they were between two exits and the crush dissipated as soon as the people behind them exited the train.

There was a figure in the compartment up ahead. Black garb, check. Face mask, check. Yup, before the Samurai Barber stood a ninja, wakizashi at the ready, spiky hair twisting back on itself like something out of a surreal nightmare and held together by a heretical amount of mousse.

Between the ninja and the Samurai was Ken. Ken had left the interview after the Samurai, so Ken must have been in a hurry for the both of them to end up in the same train. Ken's hair had been cut. It was no longer trying to hide the *M* of male pattern baldness. It was now short-cropped and angular, accentuating the *M* instead, celebrating it. It was

exactly the cut that the Samurai would have done, except for the patches of hair where the cut had been uneven. Ken had not stayed still for this haircut. It had been done against tade will. The ninja had violated tã.

No one should force a hairstyle on another, no matter how stylish or beneficial it might be. The cut and style of someone's hair was part of their identity. Who someone was and how they presented themselves to the world must always be decided by the person themselves. No one, not barbers nor hairstylists, should force themselves into that sacred role.

How dare this ninja assume omniscience and omnipotence! And the thing that pissed tã off most of all was that the ninja wasn't even that good of a barber.

Ken got out, a little happy but a little peeved, as was to be expected from the sloppy haircut.

"Get out, Greta," the Samurai said, but Greta was already gone. It must have been obvious to tã that this act of follicular terrorism was meant as some kind of message for the Samurai. Besides, Greta was unarmed. This was a situation to be handled by the ones with weapons.

The two of them stared at each other – the ninja with wakizashi unsheathed, the Samurai with a hand on the hilt of tade katana.

"Who are you to force a haircut on that poor fella?" the Samurai asked the ninja. Perhaps it was still possible to talk tade way out of this without a fight.

"I did tã a favour," said the ninja. "But you would have condemned tã to a lifetime of suffering, wouldn't you?"

"Because it is a choice that is not ours to make," the Samurai said.

The train lurched again. The Samurai stood tade ground without losing tade balance. The ninja did the same.

The train screamed with glee when tā ran into a tunnel. The fireflies in the train went into a frenzy, flickering on and off.

The ninja pointed tade wakizashi at the Samurai. Tade stare seemed to pierce through the Samurai, seemed to be able to discern all of the Samurai's darkest secrets. "Woo weed wa where wart," the ninja said.

"What?" the Samurai shouted over the train screaming *wooooo* and the pitter-patter of tade many feet.

"Woo weed wa where wart!" the ninja shouted back. The Samurai couldn't be sure, but it sounded like the ninja was saying, "You need a haircut!"

In one of the short spans of darkness, the ninja charged. In the following span, the light revealed the ninja holding tade wakizashi over tade head, ready for a downward swing.

The Samurai blocked the attack with tade sheath. Tā pivoted to let the ninja stumble past and fall, leaving the wakizashi stuck in the sheath.

The ninja recovered with a flip, then stared at the Samurai.

The Samurai pried the wakizashi loose and threw it away.

A flicker later, the ninja held a kris in tade hand and it was coming for the Samurai's head.

The Samurai dodged the clumsy stab, bowed tade head to avoid the follow-up swipe. But stepping aside to avoid another clumsy lunge might have been a mistake, as it allowed the ninja to pick up the wakizashi.

Footwork alone was no longer sufficient to defend against two blades coming in at different angles. It was time to get serious. The Samurai unsheathed tade katana.

In through the nose, out through the mouth.

Again.

The train sighed disappointment as tã sped out of the tunnel. “Next stop, Pagoda station,” said the announcement.

The ninja leaped at the Samurai, spinning to generate some momentum. Since the attacks were coming from the same general direction, it was easy to parry the first and deflect the second attack. The Samurai knocked the ninja aside with the flat of tade katana.

“Stop this, seriously!” said the Samurai. The ninja stabbed with both weapons at the same time. Tã deflected the two blades upwards with a single motion.

The ninja began to attack wildly. It was a desperate tactic. The Samurai had trouble figuring out what the ninja was doing, because the ninja didn’t know either. The ninja began changing the angle of attack mid-swing. Doing this would negate any momentum generated, making the swing useless for the purposes of inflicting harm upon the human body. Which meant that the ninja didn’t want to cut through flesh and bone, only keratin.

Each strand of the Samurai’s hairstyle had been groomed to take its rightful place, each strand supporting other strands that had been laid on top of it until tade hair took the shape of a horn, a majestic monument to tade great barber skill. No way tã would let the ninja harm a single hair upon tade head.

The Samurai backed away from the ninja, to get out of

range of the kris. The fight would be much easier if tā only had to deal with the ninja's wakizashi.

The ninja threw the kris at the Samurai. Tā dodged the throw by reflex, but it nicked a micron or two off of a strand of tåde hair. It was enough. Each micron of each hair had been essential. As one strand fell, the others followed and tåde hair collapsed in billowing cascades until tåde sharp horn became a fluffy pompadour instead.

"No!" the Samurai cried. The pesky ninja had destroyed years of careful grooming with that throw. The ninja came at tā again with a swing.

Enough! The swing was clumsy, leaving the stupid butoh open to a counterattack, an opportunity the Samurai was fully intent on using. But tā changed the counterattack into a parry when tā realised that it would have been lethal.

The ninja's swing was a feint; it was actually a lunge. The Samurai could not stop tåde parry in time. Tåde katana cut into the ninja's flesh. Because the parry had started out as a lethal swing, its momentum was enough for the katana to cut through bone. The ninja's arm was severed below the armpit. While the hard steel of the wakizashi might have stopped the katana, calcium did little, and the blade went on to slice apart the train as well.

Maimed, the train crawled onto the station platform and fell. The ninja fell as well, blood spouting from the stump that used to be an arm. The belly of the train was splattered with huge splotches of red and fuchsia. There was too much blood. Both the ninja and the train would bleed out soon.

The ninja stared at the Samurai. There was confusion in tåde eyes as well as tåde blood-matted hair. The Samurai could do nothing; the ninja was going to die.

“Let me help you,” the Samurai said to the ninja.

The ninja muttered something, eyes glazing over. The Samurai took that for consent. The ninja was not capable of a more coherent response.

The Samurai propped the ninja up against a wall, then swung *tāde katana*. The blade passed over the ninja’s head. All the blood and hair mousse was sucked from each and every strand, right down to the roots, and a dark red mess splatted against the side of the train.

The ninja mumbled something. It did not matter now. The Samurai had work to do. *Tā* placed *tāde katana* above the ninja’s head and rotated it a full revolution, making the ninja’s hair crest and trough. From the back to the front *tā* did this, gently, patiently, until the waves of hair crested and then crashed upon the ninja’s forehead.



THE CHILD HAD brown hair with curls like ocean waves. It was a beautiful day at the beach. The sunlight reflected off the golden shore, making the child’s hair seem almost hazel. The sky was every shade of blue, stretching out all the way to the horizon, the gradient reflected in the water.

The child laughed. The water felt cool.

“Ali!” the child’s mother called out. “Careful! Don’t go in too deep or the sharks will get you!”

Careful was a word Ali did not yet understand. *Tā* kicked the water, seeing the droplets arc up into the air and glisten in the morning sun. A wave came in and knocked *tā* onto *tāde bum*.

“Ali!” *tāde mother* cried out, worried. But there was

no need to worry because the sand was soft and tā hadn't been hurt. Tā looked back at tāde mother, beautiful in a white one-piece swimsuit and straw hat, hair flapping in the wind, and laughed. Tāde mother smiled back.

Tāde father came and scooped tā up, throwing tā up into the air and catching tā. Tā liked it when tāde father did this – it was so fun! Tāde father then lowered tā gently onto the beach and attached two floaties on tāde arms. They went deeper into the ocean until the water was up to tāde father's waist. Holding hands, tā kicked with glee. Today tā was going to learn how to swim.

Tā let go of tāde father's hands so that tā could splash some water on tāde father's face. Grinning, tāde father splashed some salty water back at tā. Tā looked back at tāde mother and started crying.

Tāde mother came running, yelling at tāde father, "What did you do?"

Tāde father shrugged.

When tāde mother got close enough, tā splashed some water on tāde mother's face, suddenly switching from crying to laughing. Tāde plan had worked. They were all together now.

"Oh, you cheeky monkey!" tāde mother said. "I'm gonna get you!" Tāde mother made an angry face, but tā could see the happiness behind that mock anger. Tā giggled and tried to swim away.

"Oh no you don't!" tāde father said, catching tā.

"Here comes the tickle monster!" tāde mother said, fingers descending upon tāde yummy little tummy. Both parents proceeded to elicit as much laughter as possible in order to appease the tickle monster.

When tā was exhausted, tā laid on tāde father's chest and looked up into the sky where the clouds were slowly rolling by. The rise and fall of the ocean, along with the sound of waves crashing upon the beach, was comforting. One of the clouds looked like tāde mother's face. Tā compared it to the real thing, smiling down at tā, full of love and happiness.

"Mom," Ali said, full of love and regret.

Ali turned to look for tāde father but found the Samurai Barber staring back instead.

"Master, I failed," Ali said, staring past the Samurai at a view of the cloudless crimson sky.

The rise and fall of the train's breathing turned ragged and was no longer reminiscent of the ocean's sway. When tā stopped breathing and died, so did Ali.



THE SAMURAI BARBER laid the ninja down. Then tā looked down at tāde bloody hands. They were the hands of a murderer. Tā had killed a person and a train!

Tā leaned against the wall and sat down, waited for the police. The sirens were still far off; tā had some time.

A phone peeked out from a pocket in the ninja's pants. Poor phone – tā must have been wondering whether tāde master was okay.

As the phone squiggled up the ninja's body, the Samurai realised that not only had tā killed a person and a train, tā had also orphaned a phone.

The phone started to lick the ninja's face, tried to wake the ninja up with tāde feeble pushes. The Samurai saw this

and it felt like a million trashmites were scurrying around under tādē skin, as if tādē skin was trying to crawl away from tā, a monster.

Sammy looked up at the Samurai with tādē singular eye, and although tā had no tear ducts, the Samurai could tell that tā was crying. Tā whined, trying to comfort the Samurai.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, go to sleep, Sammy,” said the Samurai as tā unplugged from Sammy.

Thus ended the Samurai’s first fullcast.



TWO SETS OF feet clad in black leather boots and dark blue pants blocked the Samurai’s view of tādē victim’s corpse. The police had come.

“Do you know tādē name?” tā asked the two police as they took tā away. All tā got were shrugs in response.

They brought tā to a police van which was sitting quietly, chewing some grass. The van stank of vomit, piss and blood. They shoved tā into the back after confiscating tādē katana. One of the two plugged in to the van and off they went, leaving the Samurai alone with tādē thoughts.

Tā had killed someone. The worst thing about it was not knowing the victim’s name. And the death of the train was even more tragic. The train might have lived for a long time, chugging along, happy to ferry passengers around, if not for tā. It would take a decade or so to grow another one.

If the ninja had not attacked tā, tā would have never killed anyone! The ninja was to blame.

But tā had wanted to kill the ninja for a moment. It was only for a moment, but it was enough. The ninja was dead.

But what the ninja had done was inexcusable. It wasn't like tā could swing tade katana at tade own head. It had taken just the right amount of mousse and styling, and tā had to use scissors, a clumsy instrument compared to a katana, to groom tade hair. All that effort had been wiped out when the ninja had thrown that kris.

But hair was just keratin. It was nothing compared to two lives. Tā should have been more careful. Tā could have parried with the dull side of the katana instead of using the edge.

On and on the cycle of tade thoughts went, revolving between anger and guilt and back again. They put tā in a small cell to await tade trial. There was barely enough room to stretch. But even then, it was not small enough to contain the storm of tade thoughts.

Tā asked for a pair of hairdressing scissors. If tā spent any more time seesawing between guilt and anger, tā would go siáu. Perhaps there was some peace to be found in trying to repair tade hairstyle.

They gave tā a shaver instead. Just as well. There was no salvaging what was left anyway. Tade hairstyle had been the result of years of careful cultivation, of building a foundation and layering on top of that foundation. The only thing tā could do at this point was start over.

Tā was dragged into court after a couple of hours.

"You are charged with the murder of a train, Volvi-0410. Do you contest this charge?" the magistrate asked the Samurai.

Tā shook tade head.

"The ninety-nine per cent no-contest discount will now be applied to your sentence. That makes it a million

dollars and twenty strokes. Also, your right to bear arms will be stripped from you.” The magistrate waved the Samurai away. “Next!”

“Wait, what about the person I killed?” tā asked.

“What about tā?” The magistrate looked irritated. One could easily infer from the long line of people outside the courtroom the reason why. “It was clear from your cast that you were in the right. Next!”

“Do you know tāde name?” the Samurai asked.

“No, and you better shut up and get out before I charge you with contempt of court! Next!”

Tā was taken to a clearing with a young sapling in the center. Then tā was stripped to the waist and strapped to that sapling. A man with a whip stood behind tā.

When supersonic leather met skin, skin had no choice but to give way. When the whip retracted, it took with it bits of skin, flesh and nerves. The pain was intense, more so because it had come suddenly. There had been no countdown; no one had even shouted an order. The only warning had been the whip cracking, and by the time the Samurai heard it, the nerves in tāde ravaged flesh were already firing siáuly. There was nothing tā could do to stop tāde scream.

The man threw the whip again. The whip hit the same exact place as the last time, making the pain before pale in comparison to the hell tā was experiencing now.

There seemed to be someone else getting whipped also. Tā heard the other person scream after each crack. No, there was no one else. What tā had thought was another person was actually tāself. The only way to survive this siáuness had been to disassociate tāself from what was happening.

Tā had thought that being punished would have eased tāde conscience. But each crack of the whip drove tāde guilt deeper into tāde soul instead. There, the guilt transmuted into indignation. Tā had been wrong. It wasn't tāde fault. The ninja had mentioned a master right before dying. It was this master ninja that was to blame. Each stroke now seared into tā a growing need for righteous vengeance.

Tā was only aware that the whipping had stopped when tā was released from the sapling and fell, exhausted but still in pain. Every moment was slow and torturous, until tā was granted merciful oblivion via a sedative.



CRACK! THE SAMURAI flinched awake, body tensing in anticipation of supersonic leather. But tā was in a hospital room and there was no one around. Perhaps the crack tā had heard had only been in tāde dreams.

Tā was wearing a cheap gown. Sammy and tāde clothes were on a table nearby. Tāde katana was nowhere to be found. Ah, that was right. Tā no longer had the right to bear arms.

Getting up, tā saw that there was actually another phone beside Sammy. It was the orphaned phone. They were both blinking lethargically, which meant that a day or two had passed since they had been fed. Another few more hours and they would have gone into hibernation. It took weeks to wake a phone up from hibernation and it was time that the Samurai couldn't afford, not if tā wanted to find the master ninja anytime soon.

“Do you have some spare batteries?” tā asked the nurse with kind bangs that had come into the room.

The nurse took out two batteries from tāde pocket and fed it to the phones. Sammy gave a happy purr and slurped tāde battery. The orphaned phone nibbled at tāde battery sullenly.

“Thanks, I’ll pay you back,” the Samurai said.

“No problem, and no need,” the nurse said. “I’ve already added a hundred dollars to your hospital bill.” One hundred dollars! These hospital batteries weren’t even premium grade. They were just normal batteries that tā could have bought anywhere else for ten dollars. Robbery! Daylight robbery! Those weren’t kind bangs, those were greedy bangs. Perhaps the sedative had not worn off completely. It would explain tāde poor judgement.

The nurse left tā alone with tāde thoughts and the fading embers of tāde traumatised back. Tā had ample time to wonder about the ninja and how to find the ninja’s master. Lionfish had a population of two billion people and had an area of a million square kilometres. Finding the master ninja would be no easy feat.

Tā saw that tāde cast had been plugged half a billion times and that tā had close to fifty million subscribers. Tā also found out that tā was now a millionaire, even after subtracting the million-dollar fine.

It would be impossible to find the master ninja by tāself. Tā needed help. Perhaps tā could ask tāde fifty million subscribers if they had seen a ninja anywhere, but tā doubted very much the veracity of any information tā could get from them. Maybe the ninja’s phone could help.

Sammy squiggled over to be closer to the other phone, perhaps to cheer the orphaned phone up. No, Sammy was eyeing what was left of the remaining battery. The orphaned phone gobbled up the rest of the meal post-haste, before Sammy could steal it, staring daggers at Sammy all the while, which reminded the Samurai that tā was hungry. The concoction that they had fed tā via intravenous drip had done nothing to assuage tāde stomach.

“What time is it, Sammy?”

Sammy’s belly showed that it was three in the afternoon. Right in between lunch and dinner. The Samurai paged the nurse. Tā couldn’t wait – the void within demanded to be filled immediately.

“Could I have something to eat?” tā asked the greedy nurse.

The nurse looked at tāde phone. “Meal time is not for another three hours.”

“Please?”

The nurse contemplated the request, tāde bangs alternating between being greedy and kind. “I’ll see what I can do,” tā said, tāde bangs finally settling on kind.

“Thank you,” the Samurai said.

“Oh, no need to thank me, I’ll just add another hundred dollars to your hospital bill.”

Those bangs had been greedy all along! The Samurai must have been hungrier than tā thought to have made such a mistake. Tā knew that nurses took a cut out of any extra services they upsold to patients, so those bangs couldn’t have been kind at all. The nurse came back with a tray that had a cloche on it and left in a hurry. Why stay to watch the Samurai eat when tā had more patients to fleece?

A hundred dollars was enough for a few apples and a kaya toast. But what awaited the Samurai when t̄a lifted the cloche was a translucent pinkish jelly square, something which looked exactly like a battery except that this was bigger. But it was only bigger when compared to a battery; this jelly square was only the size of one mouthful. T̄a wasn't surprised, not anymore, just disappointed that t̄a hadn't expected something like this.

At least the jelly square didn't have that acidic smell that batteries have. It didn't have any smell at all. It was tasteless but surprisingly filling. They probably added some kind of sedative to it as well because t̄a yawned. Both phones were already asleep and now it was t̄ade turn.



THE NURSE OPENED the window blinds and the morning light that filtered in was lethargic after being reflected off a thousand windows.

“Get dressed, it's time for you to go.” The nurse left in a hurry. T̄a looked busy busy busy.

The Samurai was still groggy from whatever was in that jelly. But t̄a managed to grab t̄ade clothes and stumble into the bathroom.

T̄a got out of the cheap gown and looked in the mirror. T̄ade back looked better than it felt. There was no scar tissue, considering the abuse it had suffered. Still, the memory of the flogging lingered, the phantom pain of a million mangled nerves.

After t̄a had changed and left the bathroom, the nurse was already replacing the linen. T̄a thanked the nurse and

said goodbye, even though the nurse had ripped tā off with those fifty-dollar batteries and that hundred-dollar jelly. The nurse smiled back, but it was a perfunctory smile.

The Samurai paid the bill on the way out. It turned out to be two hundred thousand dollars, most of which was for the reconstructive treatment that they had used to heal tāde back. This was on top of the million-dollar fine. Tā should have known that the state wasn't going to subsidise treatments for punishments. But tā was a millionaire now. Tā could pay for everything without getting a loan. Thank Greta for that.

On the way to the train station was a store selling all kinds of utensils. All the steel on display reminded tā of tāde katana. There were all sorts of knives, but the only thing tā could legally buy to fill the void left by tāde missing katana was a cheap pair of hairdressing scissors. Sure, a pair of bone scissors would have been a hundred times cheaper, but it wouldn't be steel. Tā could afford the twenty thousand-dollar price tag now that tā was a millionaire.

The train looked exactly like Volvi-0410, but it somehow felt different. This train went *weee* when going into a tunnel, while Volvi-0410 had gone *wooo*. This train had a rhythmic pendulum-like sway, while Volvi-0410 had a gentler sway that was like ocean waves. Volvi-0410 had been unique. Tā had killed it, had taken away something wonderful from the world.

It was all because of that ninja, and the mysterious master. If there was a master, then there were more students, more ninjas going around cutting people's hair without their permission. Just thinking about it made tā

angry. The freedom of each and every person to determine the course of their lives is the cornerstone of modern civilisation! The ultimate arbiter for how anyone decides to live their lives must be the person themselves. A new hairstyle can change someone's life. What's in the head affects what's on top of the head and vice versa. People came to tā for help and tā helped them by cutting deviant strands. But what these ninjas were doing, going around imposing hairstyles on people, ninja hairstyling, it was barbaric! Tā must stop them somehow. But first, tā must find them.

"What's your name?" tā asked as tā plugged in to the orphaned phone. *Toshi* showed up on the phone's belly. "Hi, Toshi," tā said, patting Toshi on the head.

Sammy woke up. Tā looked to the Samurai, eye following the plug from the Samurai's nape all the way to Toshi, and pouted.

"Do you know your owner's name?" the Samurai found tāself whispering to Toshi. The way Sammy was looking at tā, it was like tā was betraying Sammy somehow.

Toshi's belly was clear. It was possible that tā didn't know the answer. So the Samurai asked tā where tā was three days ago. A map showed up on tāde belly, showing the centre of the city.

The Samurai unplugged from Toshi before Sammy got any more jealous. Sammy rolled tāde eye and went back into the Samurai's pocket. Well, there wasn't much the Samurai could do about a jealous phone right now. Maybe later tā could get some batteries.

But now tā had a lead as to where to go: the city centre. Tā had never been there before, never had a reason.

Right outside the station near the city centre stood a stone statue of the mutant abomination that was the city's namesake, lit harshly by the midday sun. It was a lion with the body of a fish, or perhaps a fish with the head of a lion. But since the head was recognisably a lion while the body could have been that of any fish, it was called a Lionfish. It was said that lions used to rule over all the animals of the Earth. But those days were long gone. Lions had gone extinct. Nowadays, they existed only as symbols.

There was a lion in the city flag which represented nobility. The dual lions in the corporate logo for Lionfish Incorporated represented honesty and a commitment to quality. Lions had come to symbolise every virtue under the sun. Even tā had used a lion as a metaphor for courage when tā had cut that child's hair a few days back. But for all anyone knew, lions could have been lazy creatures that lounged around all day.

And perhaps the fact that the Lionfish statue was located in the most dilapidated part of the city spoke to how much the people of the city valued virtue. The buildings were ancient, precursors to trees, the tallest of which was only about a hundred metres tall, dwarfs compared to modern trees. They didn't have an ecosystem, weren't even living things, which also meant no self-repair, and so they looked like they were falling apart. It was a wonder how they could remain upright without roots to support them. That they still stood was a testament to the engineers of old. They built things to last. It was tragic, then, that the walls of these testaments to ancient engineering principles had been vandalised with graffiti.

Tā could feel when tā had stepped onto the city centre. Outside the centre, roots and gyro-organs helped to stabilise the ground, although nothing could really compensate for the rise and fall of the ocean underneath, so there was still a little wobble. In the centre, though, whatever stabilisation method was used was clearly not organic because tā could feel the wobbling in spurts and jerks. Hoo boy, it was enough to make tā nauseous.

Tā couldn't imagine choosing to live here in the centre. Whoever was in the centre couldn't have been here by choice, must be society's outcasts. There was barely anyone around, however, the result of Lionfish's effective government. Nearby there was a handful of homeless. One of the homeless wore a pair of pants that might have been as old as the buildings around. The knees had worn out, leaving just scraps hanging around the shins. Perhaps it was a pair of bermudas instead. Another wore a T-shirt so faded and torn that only the collar was left intact.

Even though tā couldn't smell them from where tā was, the halo of flies around them assured tā that they all stank.

But something was off about them. The answer was floating around in tāde mind, just waiting for tā to reach out and grab it. Maybe the sedatives had been more potent than tā thought. Or maybe tā was just being a little siáu. Tā turned around and started walking towards the train station. Whatever it was that tā had to find, tā couldn't find it while fighting the urge to puke.

Realisation slapped tā in the face, spun tā around. It was the people! Every single one wore a proper haircut even though they were clothed in rags. As far as tā knew,

tā was the only one giving out free haircuts. The rest of the barbers in the city – barbers with a small *b*, amateurs compared to tā – all charged exorbitant fees for their services. These people would not have been able to afford a haircut.

The reason tā did not see it before was because they were still filthy. Their hair was matted with dirt and other vague liquids. But the cuts were masterful, considering the condition of their hair. Only tā could have done better, and only because tā would have washed their hair first.

The only explanation was ninjas, perhaps even the master ninja. Some of the homeless might have been willing, but surely not all. Willing recipients or not, all haircuts were immaculate with no uneven surfaces to be found. The one or ones responsible were true barbers, and if they were not nearby, at the very least they had been here before. Perhaps one of these poor souls could tell tā more.

“Hey!” The Samurai approached a man with a fringe that wound around tāde forehead like a confused snake and was wearing a faded red windbreaker stained brown from dirt and perhaps other gross substances. “Could you tell me who cut your hair?”

The man, ever so slowly, got up and stared blankly at the Samurai. Tā started opening tāde mouth like tā was going to speak. After what seemed to be minutes, tā started closing it, perhaps deciding not to speak after all. Even the flies seemed to fly slower around tā.

“Hey!” The Samurai poked at the man, who was starting to lie back down.

“Leave tā alone!” A woman with an authoritarian ponytail grabbed the Samurai. The woman was missing

some teeth, but every strand of tādē hair was in the right place, another masterpiece. “Tā be missing some screws up in tādē head!”

“Well, maybe you can tell me who cut your hair?” the Samurai asked the woman.

“Nuh uh, I know you – you’re the Samurai, the one that killed Ali,” the woman said. “Go away, no one be helping you here. Ali be nice, kind.”

“Ali? Is that the name of the ninja I killed?” the Samurai asked.

“Ya, and you the one that killed Ali!” the woman replied.

The woman turned around to leave. Shaved into the back of tādē head, underneath that ponytail, was a circle with a hollow triangle that lay on top of the circle.

The Samurai saw it everywhere now, as graffiti on the sides of the buildings, as logos on T-shirts, as tattoos, as irises on fake eyes. Sometimes the triangle was a chevron, sometimes an A, sometimes an arrow, sometimes a person standing strong with legs apart. Tā saw circles of every colour. But the triangle and circle would always be different colours, and always the triangle would be bursting out of the circle. Perhaps the heterogeneity of the symbols prevented tā from noticing the pattern at first. But now that tā was aware of its existence, it was everywhere.

“Hey!” tā called out to the woman. “That symbol, what does it mean?”

“What ya talking about?” the woman asked.

“On the back of your head,” the Samurai said.

The woman did not answer. Instead, tā looked up at the sky, tasted the air, then said, “A storm be coming.

You be better off coming inside.” Tā went into the nearest building.

The other homeless started going into buildings as well.

The Samurai had heard tales of how the weather in the centre was fickle, how it could be sunny one minute and raining the next, and had always wondered if the tales had been exaggerated. Tā found out the ridiculous truth a second later. It was sunny and dry one second, and the next it was hurricane gales and sheets of rain so thick that tā thought that night had come. The tales paled in comparison to the truth.

A sudden peal of thunder helped tā cement tāde decision to follow the woman. But the few seconds tā was out in the open was enough to drench tā.

“Should’ve listened to me,” the woman said. They were in a hall with a high ceiling. They went deeper into the building to get away from the chill of the storm outside, right to the foot of a grand staircase. There was a landing in the middle of the staircase where it split into two and on that landing was a glass window, through which the raging tempest outside could be seen.

“Come here,” the woman said. “Even Ali’s killer don’t deserve to be shivering from the cold.”

They huddled.

“Can you tell me what that symbol means?” the Samurai asked again.

The woman sighed a deep sigh that seemed to come from tāde soul. “Ali, tā be one of us. How tā came to be here, tā never told. One day, tā just showed up, said tā had enough. Enough of what? I don’t know. Maybe just enough of life itself. Tā be quiet, never talked. Kept to tāself.”

The woman looked at the Samurai, made sure that tā was still listening. Tā was. Tā thought that tā owed Ali at least that much.

The woman continued, “Ali still had a few hundred dollars from tāde life outside. Tā used that few hundred to buy us food, nothing fancy. Tā be happy when we be happy. I be happy when I ate salted egg chips – oh, that be my favourite. But that money only lasted for a day and after that tā be just one of us: no money, no job, no one to care. Tā be learning how to eat like we eat, taking what other people throw. And some people be thinking that poor folk like us, we be easy to bully. They come and beat us, kick us, for fun, they said. We took it – we can’t do nothing. But tā stood up and fought back. Tā got beat and kicked worse than the rest of us. Then tā met the ninja. The ninja be like you, cutting up people’s hair, whether they asked it or not.”

The Samurai was about to ask about the ninja. It sounded like the master ninja that tā was looking for. But tā was silenced by the woman’s stare. “When the ninja went around cutting hair, I be okay, might as well, had no good reason to pass up a free haircut. Others be happy to get haircut as well. Some be upset, they liked the way they be, but this ninja come and change it. But they couldn’t do anything about it. The ninja be stealthy and cut their hair before they even knew tā was there. Ali started following the ninja around, disciple-like. Ali followed true, even started to dress like the fella. When tā made the knives, we know tā ain’t playing around. I thought tā be siáu when tā started going around cutting up other people’s hair like that ninja.”

The woman paused for a while. “Ali, I think, had a question that needed answering. Tā didn’t find the answer

outside, didn't find it inside. But the ninja? I think the ninja answered tade question. Tā believed in the ninja fella. Cutting hair could change people's lives, tā said. I said to tā, nonsense! Then tā told me, not nonsense, tade life be changed thanks to that ninja fella. I guess that's why tā went outside, to help other people answer their questions. I plugged in to the cast, tā be trying to help you too. I think tā be too soft for the world outside, that's why tā came inside. But you killed tā. You killed a nice and kind person who only wanted to help others. You killed Ali."

"I'm sorry!" No amount of self-restraint could have held back the Samurai's tears.

"What you be sorry to me for?"

"I'm sorry!" What else could the Samurai say? Tā was wracked by great sobs that seemed to crack tā open, so great was the guilt that tā was trying to extricate.

The woman was right. The person the Samurai had to apologise to was dead. But there was nothing that tā could do except to say, "I'm sorry!" again. Tade tears fell freely but could not assuage tā.

"Look at this! What do we have here? The Samurai Barber?" A tall, muscular man looked down at the Samurai. Behind that man stood a teenager that couldn't have been older than sixteen. The storm had masked their approach. They both had the A and circle symbol shaved into their heads, and they both wore masks that covered their faces. Ninjas!

The Samurai stood up, put tāsself between the woman and the two, but the woman had already slinked away. The duo surrounded tā, looked tā over.

“You think we should put the brand on tā?” Muscleman asked the teenager.

“Tā was the one that killed Ali,” said the teenager in a tinny voice.

“I know. But that don’t mean that tā can’t be branded as well.” Then Muscleman pointed at the Samurai, saying, “Yes, it’s your fault that Ali is dead and it’s your fault Master left us.”

They took out their knives. The Samurai’s hand went to tāde side by instinct, but the katana wasn’t there anymore. Tā was about to take out the scissors from tāde pocket but decided not to. Tā had already killed two; tā was not going to kill two more.

A bolt of lightning limned a figure standing on the middle landing, dressed in black, arms crossed. In that brief flash, the Samurai saw the figure’s hairstyle and it was beyond anything tā could ken.

Through years of tāde experience, the Samurai knew that although every person’s hair told a different story, each strand on any person’s head told the same story. For each strand was connected to the same head and that head only had one story to tell; this was a fundamental truth. And yet, here before tā stood a contradiction to the very laws of the universe. On that head, every follicle had its own shade of emotion, its own history, its own tale. On that head was the embodiment of chaos. Each spike on the figure’s head went its own way and the whole configuration existed with nary a trace of hair mousse. Each strand had grown naturally into the style. But, paradoxically, such a feat could not have been natural. And that hair, cacophonous though it may seem, could only be the result of cultivation from a master barber.

Any person that could manifest such a chaotic configuration deserved a certain amount of respect. But there was a malevolence emanating from the spikes that defied the natural order. Only a great evil could have given rise to such an abomination. And in the back of tādē mind was the feeling that tā had been in the presence of such evil before.

Ali's hairstyle was but a poor copy of the siāuness that was before the Samurai. There was no doubt that this figure was Ali's master.

It was dark again and the figure disappeared into the blackness.

"Master!" Muscleman cried out as tā fell to tādē knees. "Don't leave us!" When Muscleman saw that tādē partner was still standing, tā pulled the teenager down.

A flash of lightning revealed that the ninja was now beside tā, looking down at the duo. Muscleman's hand was on top of the teenager's head, forcing the teenager to kowtow along.

"Are the two of you still doing this?" The Ninja took their knives from them.

"Don't leave us, Master!" Muscleman cried out.

The Ninja sighed and turned to face the Samurai.

The Samurai drew tādē scissors, but the hand that held it shook fiercely. This person was the reason Ali had attacked tā, the reason that tā had been forced to defend tāsēlf, the reason tā had killed. This person, this Ninja, was evil incarnate.

The Ninja stared back, eyes like fathomless abysses, expression inscrutable.

The Samurai couldn't move. Fear had frozen tādē

limbs but not tãde lips. “Get away from me!” the Samurai shouted.

Another flash of lightning temporarily blinded the Samurai. When the green afterimage faded and tã could see again, the Ninja was gone.



THE STORM WAS still raging when the Samurai recovered tãde senses. Muscleman and the teenager were gone. Tã was alone.

It made no sense. Tãde fear made no sense. And that síáu hairstyle – it was just hair, just keratin. There was no reason for the Samurai to be afraid.

The Ninja and the other two, even the woman, they couldn’t have gone out in this weather. They must still be in the building.

All the Samurai had to do was to go up and search each floor. If tã found the duo or the woman, tã could ask them about the Ninja. If tã found the Ninja, well, tã wasn’t sure what tãde reaction would be.

It was easier said than done. The building had three stairwells, so tã could be going up one of them while they could be going down any one of the others. And the floor space was large enough that tã might miss them anyway while searching. And when tã found the bridge on the second floor that went into another building, tã knew that all hope was lost. The only way tã would find any of them was by sheer dumb luck.

Tã continued searching. There wasn’t anything else to do anyway with the storm still going on. The building had fifteen floors and each one was empty.

The bridge to the second building looked unsafe, hanging in the air without any kind of support. It didn't help that it was made from a transparent material. Tā didn't know what it was but knew that it wasn't glass. Stepping onto the bridge was like stepping out onto thin air and into the storm.

In the other building were two other bridges leading to two other buildings. Well, that was it. There was really no hope of finding anyone now. But it was still a veritable typhoon outside, so tā decided to search the building anyway.

It was a decision tā would regret. By the time tā reached the forty-ninth floor, the top of the building, tāde legs had turned to jelly. No, it wasn't tāde legs – it was the floor. Everything was swaying. It was better when tā was moving, but now tā was too tired to move. And it had all been for nothing: tā had found no one else.

It was strange that the place was so empty. The last census had estimated about a thousand people living here and it was only five square kilometres on the map. Surely tā would have bumped into someone, anyone. But that didn't take into account vertical space. Tā had probably searched through five square kilometres in this building alone, probably more. A lazy guess was that there was at least a hundred square kilometres of space here in the centre.

So even if there were a thousand people here, it wasn't strange that tā hadn't run into any of them. Come to think of it, the census officer had probably run into the same problem. A thousand people was probably an overestimate, judging by how tā hadn't seen or heard anyone else.

Leaning against a pillar helped a little bit with the nausea. Closing tādē eyes helped a bit more.



THE SAMURAI STARTED awake. Tā must have fallen asleep. The sunlight was reddish brown, but tā couldn't tell if it was dusk or dawn – at least it meant that the storm was gone.

There was someone in the shadows. Unfortunately, the sunlight was not strong enough to pierce the darkness that infested the stairwell. All tā could do was to wait for tādē eyes to adjust.

“Who are you?” the Samurai called out.

There was no reply. Whoever it was, tā was content to just stand there. Perhaps there was nothing there, only an interplay of light and shadow.

Nope, there was definitely someone there all right. The shadowy figure had just moved deeper into the stairwell, to the right, out of the Samurai's line of sight.

“Wait!” The Samurai went after the mystery person. But when tā got into the stairwell there was no one there. In fact, there was only a dead end on the right. This was the top floor.

Tā looked over the railing. Nope, the mystery person hadn't jumped down to the stairs below. Tā couldn't hear any footsteps. The person had disappeared into thin air. Tā stared down the stairwell a bit longer, waiting for tādē eyes to adjust to the darkness, trying to detect a hint of movement in the murky black.

There was nothing, no one. Past ten floors or so, the stairwell got too dark to see anything, which meant that

tā couldn't go down this stairwell. But not to worry, there were other stairwells, hopefully better-lit ones, and—

Bloody butoh! There was someone behind the Samurai! Tā turned around, and the first thing tā saw was that hairstyle, that vortex of chaos – the Ninja! But it was not the Ninja. It was not even human. Human hair did not writhe around like snakes.

The inhuman apparition turned around. Instead of a face, it had a featureless face-shaped thing. There were no eyes, nose, mouth nor ears – just smooth, human skin.

A line started to form on that smooth not-face thing. It was a vertical rent. It seemed like the thing's not-a-face would split apart. Then two eyes opened, but not where they should be. One opened at where the forehead would be and the other at where the mouth would be. The eyes were not human. They were abyssal black pupils surrounded by blood-red sclera.

The Samurai screamed.

In response, more eyes opened. All over the thing's head, even the thing's hair. Eyes opened in the darkness of the stairwell. Soon it was just eyes all around the Samurai.

Red nebulae and black holes surrounded the Samurai, all staring at tā. Tāde sanity was being pulled in a million different directions, past the point of no return, and there was no escape.



"AHI!" THE SAMURAI woke, drenched in cold sweat.

Wait, the sunlight was still an ambiguous reddish

brown. Tā could still be asleep. That nightmare visage could still be around.

Phew, tā was alone. According to Sammy it was dawn. Tā had been asleep for a little more than twelve hours.

That nightmare was the síauest tā had ever had! Tā had no idea which part of tāde subconscious it had come from.

The stairwell that the many-eyed monster had been in was lit well enough to see all the way down to the ground floor – another welcome indication that tā was no longer dreaming. Tā stepped lightly as tā made tāde way down; tāde footsteps and their echoes seemed too loud for the eerie silence.

Even the sight of a homeless person was of no comfort, because all the Samurai could see was the person's back and the back part of tāde hairstyle, a close-cropped high fade. It wasn't a wavy-snaky nightmare hairdo, but the person could turn around and reveal a featureless oblong instead of a face.

The Samurai was torn between approaching the person and running away. So tā stood transfixed. Tāde fear was irrational. There was no doubt that tā was awake, but tā couldn't help it.

The person turned around slowly. The breath that the Samurai had been holding was released when tā saw the silhouette of a nose. The person turned some more, revealing a mouth with thin lips and dark brown eyes surrounded by white. It was just a man. But the man had the A and circle symbol shaved into tāde head.

"Hey!" The Samurai approached the homeless man. "The muscleman and tāde short sidekick, where did they go?"

“Short sidekick, short sidekick!” The homeless man started chuckling. Whatever the joke was, only tā understood it.

“Did you see where they went?” the Samurai asked.

The homeless man pointed in the direction of the train station.

“Do you want me to fix that haircut?” the Samurai blurted out and then immediately wanted to kick tāsself. Please, please say no. Tā didn’t have tādē katana anymore. All tā had was a pair of scissors and that would mean getting tādē hands into the man’s mess of a hairdo that probably hadn’t been washed for decades.

“What? Why?” the man asked. Ignoring the Samurai’s sigh of relief, the man continued, “I like this, it’s anarchy.”

“What do you mean, you like chaotic hairstyles?” the Samurai asked. And the homeless man’s hairstyle was just a close-cropped buzz-cut with a big A and a circle shaved into it. It was zen when compared to the embodiment of chaos that was the Ninja’s hairstyle.

“Chaotic?” The homeless man was puzzled. “No, oh no, anarchy as in the opposite of hierarchy, not chaos. At first, they were coming up to me with those masks on and the ‘short sidekick’ had these two blades up, I was like, ‘Whoa, what are you two doing?’ Then Muscle restrained me while Shorty cut my hair, all the while describing to me the current system of oppression we live in and how anarchy is the answer. I was like, ‘Yeah, that’s sounds right.’ So down with hierarchy, long live anarchy.”

“What exactly did Shorty say?” the Samurai asked.

“Oh, I can’t really remember the exact details,” the homeless man said. “I think it was something like the

richer you are, the higher up you will be in the hierarchy, so poor people like me are at the bottom. And you need to spend money to make money, so people like me can't make any, while the rich people can make more than they will ever need."

"That's not one hundred per cent true is it?" The Samurai crossed tade arms. "I was poor like you too."

"Ya, until you fullcasted yourself killing Ali," said the homeless man.

"I'm sorry," the Samurai said.

"Well, you're sorry, but Ali's still dead," the homeless man said. "And what a rare set of circumstances that made you the millionaire you are today. You can now pay people to do stuff for you, like cook for you. Me? I have to spend my day scrounging through trash for food that the trashmites haven't gotten to yet. Where am I going to find the time to train myself in fighting? How can I replicate your success story? I can't."

"I'm sorry," the Samurai said, although even tã was not sure what for. Perhaps tã was sorry for being luckier than the homeless man.

"Go away," the homeless man said. "If I spend any more time talking to you, I might not find enough to eat. And you know what they say, time is money."

"I'm sorry," the Samurai Barber said again as the homeless man walked away. Yes, tã really felt sorry for the man because no one lived in the centre by choice. If not for tade barbering, it was quite likely that tã would have been forced to live in the centre also.

But all that talk about food had reminded tã just how hungry tã was. And the homeless man was right: tã could

afford to pay someone else to cook for tā. There was no way to know where Muscle and Shorty had gone from the train station anyway. Tā might as well take the time to eat a nice warm meal.

Tā headed to the train station, but tāde nose led tā astray. The fragrant scent of spices in the air was too strong to resist. The trail ended at an open-air restaurant.

“What’s that smell?” the Samurai asked the waitress.

“That’s our famous assam laksa,” the waitress replied.

Ah yes, the sign for the restaurant read “Famous Assam Laksa”. Unimaginative, but with a smell like that, it must be accurate. The Samurai had walked half a kilometre in search of its source, after all.

The sign also said that each bowl was five hundred dollars. There was a time when the Samurai might have balked at the price, but that time was gone. Tāde nose, mouth and brain were all in agreement; all wanted to have some assam laksa.

The bowl came, and in it were noodles in broth topped with shallots, lettuce, red chillies, cucumbers, shreds of pineapple and mint. None of those ingredients explained the smell that had seduced tā from half a kilometre away, though. On the spoon was a black sauce that tā guessed was to be mixed into the broth. The black sauce dissolved into the broth, making it dark.

Tā picked up some noodles with a pair of chopsticks and slurped it up.

The spices made tā cry, but they were tears of joy. Never had tā experienced such flavours, such bliss. The noodles were soft and slippery, and the toppings made for a crunchy contrast. The broth was sour, courtesy of tamarind, but a

mystery ingredient made it sweet as well. Turmeric and the chillies provided the spicy punch, and the cool mint of that leafy vegetable provided the counterpunch. It was all held together by fish paste, a little taste of brine.

Licking the spoon, tã found out that the mystery ingredient was the black sauce. It was a full-scale assault on tãde senses. All sorts of tastes and flavours clashed together in tãde mouth and the end result was the answer to the question: “Why are we alive?”

Why else but to taste the glory that is assam laksa?

Oh no, all the laksa had disappeared into tãde belly. To serve a portion so small was a violation of human rights.

“Another bowl, please!” the Samurai Barber said to the waitress.

Goodbye, kaya toast and green apples. This was the life. And that homeless man was just a butoh-head. The Samurai had worked hard, had lived on donations for years before getting tãde big break. Tã had become rich enough to afford five hundred-dollar bowls of assam laksa, not because tã already had money to begin with but through tãde own merit. In fact, tã was barely scraping by before Ali came along.

This was meritocracy at work. It was blood, sweat and tears, good old-fashioned hard work, that got tã to where tã was. Anarchy was siáu!

But the rent for the small room that tã was living in was about five thousand dollars a month. Add to that expenses like food and batteries and tãde money wouldn’t last long. Tã had to come up with something to cash in on tãde opportunity, especially now when tã still had plenty of subscribers. Maybe a fullcast of tã eating culinary

delights. It probably won't be good enough for fifty million subscribers, but just a small fraction of that would be enough to live by. It was a problem for tomorrow. Today, tā wanted to go home and relax. Today, tā was full and satiated. Today, tā was content.



THE SAMURAI WAS hungry. Tā never had the money to satiate tāde morning hunger before. But tā did so now and tā wanted some more of that assam laksa. Perhaps tā could do a fullcast of tā eating it. On second thought, that might not be the best idea. It wasn't tāde first time anymore. If only the Samurai had thought of doing this yesterday.

It was like a compulsion. Tā could not help going back to the restaurant, to place tāde senses once more at the mercy of that glorious dish. But it was different today, the balance thrown off because of the extreme saltiness of the fish.

"There seems to be something wrong with my laksa," tā said to the waiter. "It's way too salty."

"It's shark week," the waiter said, and left.

Yes, shark week. That meant that they didn't have fresh fish and had to use preserved fish, in this case salted fish. It explained the saltiness. But it didn't explain why it still tasted so good. Tā could not say which version was better; they both filled different niches in tāde food palate.

There was an energy, a spring, in tāde step as tā walked, almost skipped, to the train station. Maybe tā could fullcast a hairstyle repair of one of the many people in the centre that needed it. Tā could also keep an eye out

for the Ninja while doing that. Two nests on one branch; tã liked the idea.

“Excuse me? Would you mind helping me fill up a survey?” asked a woman.

The Samurai turned around. The woman was in a red dress, hair pulled back tight and fashioned into a trustworthy braid. “Yes, yes, of course.”

“Thank you, thank you,” the woman said. “I’ve got a quota to fulfil and you just saved me, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” the Samurai said.

“First off, how old are you?” the woman asked.

“Twenty-six.”

“And what are you working as right now?” the woman asked while writing something down onto the survey form tã was holding.

“I’m a Samurai Barber.”

The woman paused for a while, then ticked the ‘Other’ checkbox. “And what is your monthly income? Less than twenty thousand a month, twenty thousand to fifty thousand, fifty to two hundred thousand, or more than that?”

“Kind of hard to answer that. I guess it is usually less than twenty thousand, but I recently got a million dollars. It’s not like I get a million a month or anything like that. I don’t know?”

The woman ticked the “>200k” checkbox. “And how much do you save per month?”

Ah, it was one of those investment package schemes masquerading as a survey. The Samurai could afford to invest some money now; in fact, it would be a good idea. “Why don’t you get straight to the point and give me the brochure for whatever it is you’re...”

There it was, spray-painted onto the side of the station trunk, an A breaking out of a circle, the symbol for anarchy. It must be those pesky ninjas. And there was something off about the symbol: it was rotated – the A was pointing towards the right. Tā looked to the right and there was another symbol there, spray-painted onto the side of another trunk a hundred metres away.

Someone, maybe Muscle and Shorty, had left a trail. What the trail led to tā didn't know, but tā had no choice but to follow it and find out.

“Hey!” the woman shouted after the Samurai.

Well, tā had no time to deal with some investment package right now, tā had to find out what was going on.

The trail of vandalism led to a large clearing in the middle of a copse of trees. In the middle of the clearing there was a small mound. There were maybe a few hundred people gathered around this mound. A large number, maybe a third of them, sported the anarchic hairdo. Everyone was milling about in small cliques, waiting for something.

Apparently, it was Shorty that the crowd had been waiting for. When tā appeared at the top of the mound, clad in black garb and mask, sporting that ridiculous hairdo, Muscle started clapping and cheering. Then all the other anarchists joined in. There were enough anarchists, enough peer pressure, to goad the rest into clapping along.

Shorty held up a hand. The crowd fell silent. “Greetings, fellow citizens,” Shorty said.

It looked like Shorty was going to give a speech, was probably going to talk about anarchy. The Samurai started fullcasting. Tāde subscriber count might take a hit, but it

was for the good of Lionfish to let people know how stupid tā felt the idea of anarchy was.

“I’m here today to tell you a story, a story about a city, our city. In ages past we were but one city out of many great cities; today we are the last bastion of humanity. To the north is the Endless Dry. In every other direction, even underneath us, the Great Sea. Who knows if the other great cities of old still stand? We haven’t heard from them for so long that we have even forgotten their names. This city, our city, our home, might be the only city left on the face of this Earth.”

Someone in the crowd scoffed loudly and was shushed.

Shorty continued, “But all is not well in this city. We might be the last speck of humanity across the entire universe, but we are still bound by ancient democratic traditions. Every ten years we have an election. For some of you, it will be a good day. It is a public holiday, after all. You can spend the first five minutes voting and then carry on with the rest of your vacation. Some of you might spend the day thinking which of the candidates to vote for. But all of us will be forced to vote, to choose someone you don’t know, someone you have never met, to speak for you. With the move to phone voting a hundred years back, we can’t even spoil our votes in protest anymore. And there is no option for none of the above. We must choose, are forced to choose, one of the candidates presented to us. To some of us, it will be like choosing between the lesser of two evils. But in reality, it is a false choice, only an illusion. We might as well flip a coin and choose randomly because these candidates, they promise us better jobs, better housing, better lives, but in the end, nothing changes.”

The Samurai was pretty sure that was wrong. Things had changed, but perhaps too slowly for Shorty. Democracy worked.

“Damn right nothing changes!” shouted someone from the other side of the mound. All around, people nodded in agreement.

“Who are these councillors? According to parliamentary regulation section 617, a candidate for councillor must fulfil all of the following criteria. One, a candidate must be a citizen of Lionfish. Two, a candidate must be above the age of twenty-one. That’s it. Simple. It probably describes most of us here. Not me, though, I’m only nineteen.”

“I’m only six!” a child in the crowd shouted.

The Samurai laughed, along with some others. It was so cute the way the child had said it, like there was a competition to see who was the youngest.

Shorty smiled and continued, “If that is all it takes to be a councillor, why, then, are they always these rich folk? Let me tell you why. It is because in order to apply to become a councillor, there is an application fee of a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. That is no small chunk of change for us ordinary folk. A small flat costs a million dollars and a house big enough for a family costs ten million. We go into debt to buy a house and spend the rest of our lives paying it back. So who can afford to spend a hundred and fifty thousand dollars on the off chance that they might get elected? That is not counting the millions you have to spend on the election campaign in order to even have a chance. But the rich can afford it, of course. It even pays for itself! The salary for a councillor is ten million a month,

after all. I know I'll be lucky to get that amount of money in my entire lifetime. What about you?"

"Rich butohs!" went someone.

"And so, the rich get elected. And they stay elected. This is how they maintain their power over the rest of us. I don't think that's fair, do you?"

"No!" the crowd responded.

Even the Samurai did not think it was fair, but not for the reasons that Shorty had stated. Sure, tā could go up for election right now, but tā would be up against the incumbent, who had much better resources and experience. Nobody in their right mind would vote for someone new, untested and inexperienced against someone who had been doing the job for years. It was a rigged game, but because of competence, not money.

"Think about it," Shorty said. "Really think about it – what does the state actually do for you? We all know what it takes from us. Income tax is fifty per cent. Goods and services tax is twenty per cent. But that's not enough. The state needs more, needs at least two years of our lives. That's two per cent of our lives. That's the real stinker, especially for me. I just went through conscription. Most of us were police, nurses and clerks. I was one of the few that became a soldier."

Ouch, the Samurai had been a soldier too. The first day of basic training had been the worst day of tā life. Every recruit in the army had to have their hair shaved off. Tāde hairstyle, tāde identity, shaved off so that tā could be equal to the other recruits in stature. A soldier had no need for identity, only needed to follow orders. Two years of being forced to be a mere cell in the military organ was enough for a few lifetimes.

“When I was doing my service I asked myself, what was I doing it for? I didn’t know, so I asked the officers, ‘What exactly are we training to defend against?’ No one was ever able to give me a satisfactory answer. Some said it is to instil a sense of pride in our city. Some even said it is a rite of passage. But no one defined any kind of external threat. And how much did they give us while we were conscripts? A paltry thousand dollars a month! It’s not even a salary. The official term for it is allowance. That’s what they think of us; we are minions to them, to do their bidding. I’ll tell you what we were – we were cheap labour. That is what the state has taken from us, from all of us. And what have they given in return?”

“Not a damn thing!”

“Yeah!”

“Take take take, that’s all they know how to do!”

But that was wrong. It seemed like everyone had forgotten about the education, healthcare and infrastructure that they all had a right to.

Shorty swelled with confidence. “They might not be fair, but let us be better than them – let us be fair. To be fair, we have had an excellent education growing up. Most people have had a roof over their heads. There’s water whenever we need it and the food is not too shabby. Most of us have a job and only one in one hundred million are unemployed. Public transport is efficient, reliable and free.”

There, even Shorty conceded the point. The state was not some greedy thing that only took; it gave back as well.

“But here is the truth,” Shorty said. “None of that is due to the state. The state doesn’t teach, teachers do.

And teachers are ordinary folk like you and me. We grow our houses and if we need more, we can just plant more. Water and food – look around you. There's plenty of fruit all around. The trains run fine without any human intervention. That leaves the question of jobs. Why do we work? I'll tell you why. We work to get a wage, get money. Why do we need money? To buy a house, buy food, buy entertainment, buy services, buy things we don't need, buy things that might make us happy. For it is the destiny of all in this society to sell sell sell. And the ones that sell the most are the ones that are rich, because the rich are the ones with the most to sell. And so, the rich get richer while the poor stay poor. Why? Why do we need to pay for food when it is growing all around us? Why do we need to pay for water when it flows in the very walls of our houses? Why do we need to pay for houses when all we need to do is to take a seed and plant it ourselves? We pay for all of those things because it is illegal not to do so. And who writes those laws? The rich candidates that get elected! Here is the insidious truth behind work in our society. We work so that we can be exploited. We work to keep the powerful in power. We work so that the rich remain rich. We work to maintain our status as wage slaves! And that unemployment statistic gets touted as a good thing, but is it really? What it really means is that most people work until they die. Do you want to work until you die? Do you want to be a slave for all these corporations until the day you die?"

"No!" The crowd despaired, for they knew that they were hearing the truth.

The Samurai couldn't believe that people were this gullible. Come on, think for yourselves! Wage slaves –

what a conceited idea. People would die of boredom if they didn't work.

"All of this stems from a single fact: the fact that we are governed. The existence of a government predicates the existence of a hierarchy. And in all hierarchies, there will exist the few at the top who rule over the ones below. It is absurd that in this day and age of biotechnological marvels, where everyone's basic necessities can be automatically fulfilled, that the means to do so freely have been outlawed by the state. Even more absurd are the rich butohs at the top, who keep on gathering wealth and power even though they have no need for any more of it. Did you know that the richest person in Lionfish is richer than everyone else combined? One person in Lionfish has more wealth than the other two billion! I think that's siáu, don't you?"

"Yes!"

"Yeah!"

"Super siáu!"

"But the solution is simple!" Shorty said.

"What? What?" The crowd wanted to know.

With a knowing grin, Shorty said, "Why, the solution to hierarchy is anarchy."

The crowd fell silent.

Just saying something was the solution did not make it so. But the Samurai stayed silent. Tā wanted to see if Shorty would go into the specifics of the so-called solution.

Shorty continued, "Aren't you tired of being downtrodden your entire lives? Aren't you enraged that the same thing will happen to your children and your children's children? It has been this way for generations and it will continue to be this way if we do nothing. It is

up to us to secure our own futures and the futures of the uncountable generations to come. It is time to rise up and take back what is rightfully ours. No longer will anyone have the power to lord over us! The ultimate arbiter for how anyone decides to live their lives must be the person themselves!”

The Samurai had thought the very same thing. Every person had the right to manifest their own destiny. But for Shorty to talk about the right to self-determination while going around imposing their hairstyles and will on others, what a hypocrite! Not everyone wanted anarchy. Siáu butohs!

“The time for revolution is now!” Shorty pumped tade fist in the air and shouted, “Anarchy!”

Most of the crowd took up the cry. All but a few were of rational mind, able to look past the seductive words and extrapolate the carnage to come. For never in the history of human civilisation have the powerful given up their power willingly and without a fight.

The Samurai was sure that tā was not the only one casting. This seditious rant would surely warrant some kind of police response.

A tiny red dot appeared on Shorty’s forehead for a split second.

“Anar... Anar...” Shorty looked confused. Then skin and flesh started to melt, and a grey sludge oozed out of every one of tade orifices. Tā crumpled into a heap on the floor, head lolled back in an unnatural angle.

The Samurai was just as stunned as the rest of the crowd. No one understood what had happened. Shorty had somehow died right in front of them. No, not somehow.

The Samurai could smell it now. Shorty had been cooked alive.

“Wake up! Wake up!” It was Muscle, kneeling over Shorty and shaking tā, while the crowd was screaming and running away. A red dot appeared on the back of Muscle’s head.

“Wake... Wake...” Muscle collapsed, lying on top of Shorty, grey sludge oozing out of tāde orifices also.

It was some kind of ranged weapon, but the Samurai had never heard of or even imagined anything like this. There seemed to be no escape. Tā didn’t even know where the shooter was shooting from. Tā was going to die, standing there like a stupid *butoh*, frozen, too afraid to do anything else.

There were some people crouching on the south side of the mound, peeking over and looking towards the north. The Samurai followed their gaze and saw it, a glint on the canopy of a young tree.

The glint disappeared. If a red dot were to appear on the Samurai’s head, tā wouldn’t even be able to see it. Tā wouldn’t know that tā was going to die until liquefied brain started oozing out of tāde orifices.

A nearby woman screamed. The scream turned into a gurgling cough as the woman expelled a red frothy sludge from tāde lungs. It was tāde lungs.

The glint reappeared.

“Mommy! Mommy!” It was the child who had declared tāde age before.

The glint disappeared.

“Mo... Mo...”

No, no! What kind of... *Butoh* couldn’t even begin to

describe someone who would kill a child in such a manner.

Four people had died that were not the Samurai. Four people had died so that tā could live. No more, no more! Tā needed to start running. But tā still couldn't move.

The glint was still there.

"Run," the Samurai said to tāself. Running away would just give that coward more time to shoot tā in the back. Tā could run sideways, but it was a large clearing. The best thing to do was to run towards that glint.

"Run!" the Samurai shouted, tāde rage overpowering tāde fear. Tā started running.

The glint disappeared.

Tā would either die in the next few seconds or not.

The glint reappeared.

Someone nearby screamed. The scream turned into a gurgle and then there was a thud.

The Samurai zigged to the right just before the glint disappeared. There seemed to be a cadence to the shots. Perhaps the weapon needed to be reloaded or recharged. Whatever the reason, it gave tā a chance to survive this.

The glint reappeared.

There was another scream, followed by a gurgling, then a thud.

The zig hadn't been necessary; the Samurai hadn't even been the target. But surely that murderer would have noticed tā zigging. The next shot might very well be aimed at tā. The question now was whether that lowlife would shoot immediately or wait to see if tā zigged or zagged. Guessing wrong at this juncture would be a fatal mistake.

Tā zigged, but the glint did not disappear. Stupid butoh! Tā had guessed wrong. Any moment now, tāde

brains would start oozing or tā would start coughing up tāde lungs.

The glint disappeared.

Tā continued running.

The glint reappeared.

Tā was still alive. Stupid stupid! The assumption that the shot was followed immediately by the glint disappearing had been wrong. Tā didn't know anything about how the weapon worked, so there had been no reason to make a stupid assumption like that. There was no scream that turned into a gurgle that time, no thud. That scum had fired and missed. But if it was true, then there was no way to tell when the shot was fired. Tā would have to make another assumption, possibly fatal, that the last shot had been aimed at tā and that it was tāde zig that had saved tāde life.

The glint was still there, but tā no longer had any idea how long it had been there. Stupid stupid butoh!

Zag!

The glint disappeared.

Tā was still running.

The glint reappeared.

Still alive. And tā was under the canopy of that young tree now. Tā thought that tā was safe, but that was based on another assumption about how the weapon worked. For all tā knew, the weapon could be shooting a projectile that could change course. Everyone else was huddled against the trunk of the tree itself; there was no one standing around under the shadow of the canopy.

Tā barrelled through the entrance to the tree, crashing against the huddle of people already there. Tā gulped big

breaths of air. It should be safe in the tree. However the weapon worked, nothing can shoot through solid trunk. Good thing tā was fullcasting this – surely everyone in Lionfish was now tuning in. No! What a horrible thought. Only the despicable thought of profiting off the deaths and suffering of others.

There was another scream that was cut short. It was not over. That rotten butoh perched on top was still killing people. And all the victims had died so that the survivors could live. They deserved justice.

One of the lifts was at the ground floor. At least the Samurai wouldn't need to run up the stairs. Tā unplugged from Sammy. That was when tā found out that Sammy had not been hearing anything for some time. There was no signal. The only ones with the power to sedate signal repeaters was the state. The state was trying to cover this up!

The Samurai plugged in to the lift and the lift took a deep breath before climbing the trunk. Tā was a young lift, not much muscle definition, and so tā was noisy, panting and grunting as tā went up the trunk. This was bad – the shooter would be able to know that the Samurai was coming.

There usually was a door that led to the canopy, so there was no way of knowing whether the shooter was still shooting at the crowd or aiming the weapon at the door, waiting for the Samurai to come out. But perhaps that was a good thing. If the shooter was aiming at the door, it meant that the shooter wasn't aiming at the people down below.

The lift arrived at the top floor, and there was already another man waiting at the door to the canopy. Tā saw an

insatiable rage beginning to take root in the man's hair: the loss was recent – the anger had had no time to settle into grief.

A look passed between them and they became instant comrades. Now that there was two of them, even if the shooter was waiting for the door to open, the weapon could only shoot one of them at a time. This was assuming, of course, that the shooter only had one weapon. If the shooter had heard the lifts and was ready for the both of them, and if the shooter had more than one weapon, then they both could die the instant they opened that door. But there was still a chance. Though slim, it was all that they had.

In through the nose and out through the mouth. Stay calm.

Three, two, one – they opened the door and rushed out. The shooter was still at the south side of the canopy. The weapon was some kind of rifle – not biological, something ancient – and it was aimed at them.

The Samurai had been the one plugged in to the door to open it, which made *tā* a fraction of a second slower in getting out of the doorway than *tāde* comrade. But that fraction was all it took.

The Samurai's right hand started to feel warm. *Tā* had been shot. By sheer luck, the shooter had aimed at the centre of the door, perhaps expecting them to come out single file. But they had come out side by side. What would have been aimed at someone's chest had hit *tāde* hand instead.

The warm feeling gave way to intense heat quickly. The sensation of blood boiling and flesh cooking, it was

beyond anything the Samurai could hope to bear. Tā screamed as tā watched the skin of tādē hand break apart as blood frothed from within.

The other man and the shooter were now struggling for control over the gun. The man managed to wrest the gun from the shooter. No, the shooter let go of the gun, letting the man's inertia carry tā over the canopy. Tā fell, scream fading.

The shooter drew tādē knife and approached the Samurai, whose right hand had turned into a misshapen hunk of twisted flesh and bone. There was no pain from the hand itself, it had been cooked thoroughly, but everything else hurt like hell. The Samurai drew tādē scissors with tādē left hand. While scissors versus knife was a much better proposition than scissors versus rifle, it still looked bad for tā.

Breathe in, breathe... It was no good. It was too painful.

The shooter seemed to know this. Tā approached, and the Samurai stayed out of range, backing away until there was no longer anywhere to back away to. Behind the Samurai was a long drop. The shooter taunted the Samurai with mocking lunges. Good. It was better to be underestimated. It allowed tā to study the shooter's hair. Each strand on the shooter's head was part of an orderly row of other strands, standing straight at attention, proud to have a purpose, to be part of a disciplined formation. Tā had expected some kind of perversion that would allow the shooter to kill innocents without remorse, but there was none that tā could see. The shooter absolutely believed in what tā was doing, that tā was doing the right thing, and that was what scared the Samurai the most.

A slash came for the Samurai's neck. Tāde hand might be useless, but tāde feet were fine. Tā avoided the attack and snipped off some of the shooter's hair. It didn't matter which strands tā cut because it was all the same anyway. Any cut should disrupt— Bloody butoh! The shooter's hair was still in orderly rows like nothing had happened!

The shooter slashed at the Samurai's neck again. The Samurai was not prepared. Tā knew at that moment that tā was going to die. Instinct made tā raise tāde hands to protect tāself and, in doing so, tā stuck tāde scissors into the shooter's arm.

The shooter screamed and dropped the knife. The Samurai was still alive! And tā had an opportunity. Tā picked up the knife and was about to stab the shooter in the neck but hesitated for a brief moment.

That brief moment was all it took for the shooter to twist the Samurai's wrist and disarm tā. By the time the knife clanged on the floor, the shooter had already taken out the scissors that was stuck in tāde arm and was lunging at the Samurai.

The shooter was bigger and heavier than the Samurai; tā would not be able to block or deflect the stab without losing tāde balance. So tā moved forward, past the stab, and kicked the shooter right in the butoh. That provided tā with the opportunity to get away from the edge.

The shooter was still pointing the scissors at the Samurai.

Come on, that wasn't even fair. Any other man would have been screaming in agony and rolling on the floor after that kick. But the shooter was acting like nothing had happened; tā hadn't even grunted.

Without a weapon and up against an unstoppable trained killer, it was not looking good for the Samurai. Tā took a step back and the shooter followed gingerly. Beads of sweat rolled down the shooter's face as they stared at each other. Now the fight was about to get real. The shooter had paid for underestimating the Samurai and was not about to make the same mistake again.

The Samurai took another step back and the shooter followed. They were both waiting for the other to make a mistake, but neither seemed to be willing to make the first move. The door to the canopy was now behind the shooter to the side. If the shooter was really in pain and it was not an act, perhaps it might be possible to get past the shooter and escape.

Without looking back, the shooter hobbled to the side and blocked the Samurai's exit strategy. Stupid stupid! Shouldn't have looked at the door. There was no choice but to fight now. Hopefully that hobble was real and not a ploy to make the Samurai overconfident.

And without looking away from the Samurai, the shooter kneeled down and felt around for the knife. There was nothing the Samurai could do but watch the shooter pick up the knife. The shooter held the knife up in a reverse grip, looking ready to counter anything the Samurai could come up with.

With both the knife and the scissors in the hands of the shooter, things looked grim for the Samurai. But from the door emerged a figure, wearing a cap and a mask. One of the anarchists, perhaps. No, it was the Ninja. Tā could see the unbridled chaos spilling out from beneath the cap. And in the Ninja's hands was the Samurai's katana.

Look at the shooter! Don't look at the Ninja! Don't give the Ninja away! The Ninja unsheathed the katana, closing the distance with silent steps. But the Samurai must have given the game away. The shooter started to turn while the Ninja was raising the katana.

The Ninja went for a downward swing, but with the shooter turning, the katana cut its way through the shooter's jaw. It was clear that the Ninja had not expected that.

The Ninja swung again, decapitating the shooter this time. The head rolled off the canopy and the headless body fell to the floor.

The Ninja threw the katana away and started laughing. Only a cold-blooded psychopath would laugh at something like this.

Ali and Volvi-0410 would still be alive if not for this butoh. And if this butoh hadn't corrupted the Shorty and Muscle with this anarchy nonsense, they and all the other victims would still be alive. Children, fathers, mothers, brothers, lovers – all dead because of the Ninja. And here the bloody butoh was, laughing.

The Samurai picked up the katana and flicked the blood off. Tā had the chance to kill the shooter before but had hesitated. That had been a mistake. Not this time. The Ninja was even worse than the shooter. The Ninja needed to die so that billions might live. The Samurai was down a hand, but the katana could be used one-handed.

In through the nose, out through the mouth. Again. And again.

The Samurai stepped forward and swung tādē katana.