

SAMURAI BARBER VERSUS NINJA HAIRSTYLIST



ZED DEE

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PART ONE: 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 tāde 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 tāde 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 tāde 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 tāde 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.

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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," tā had said to the interviewer. Tā had offered tāde 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," tā had answered.

"Wow!" Ken had rolled tāde eyes. "You do know what time it is. I thought that perhaps your phone had gone siáu or something. But maybe you're the one who went siáu. Do you remember what time you were supposed to be here?" Ken had almost screamed out that last question. The verbal attack made tā flinch and tā 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 tā to stand. The motion had been gentle, at odds with the simmering fury that erupted as soon as tā 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, tā had seen the strands of shame and despair taking root on Ken's head of hair. A couple of swipes from tāde 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, tā 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 soulcrushing 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 tade foot. The pain, originating from tade pinky toe, stabbed up into tade spine and flew out of tade 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 tāde head in apology, and there, rising from tāde 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 tade 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 tāde will. The ninja had violated tā.

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 tā 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 tā 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 tāde katana.

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

"I did tā a favour," said the ninja. "But you would have condemned tā 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 tāde wakizashi at the Samurai. Tāde 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 tāde wakizashi over tāde head, ready for a downward swing.

The Samurai blocked the attack with tāde 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 tāde hand and it was coming for the Samurai's head.

The Samurai dodged the clumsy stab, bowed tāde 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 tāde katana.

In through the nose, out through the mouth.

Again.

The train sighed disappointment as tā 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 tāde katana

"Stop this, seriously!" said the Samurai. The ninja stabbed with both weapons at the same time. Tā 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 midswing. 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 tāde hair took the shape of a horn, a majestic monument to tāde great barber skill. No way tā would let the ninja harm a single hair upon tāde 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 tāde hair. It was enough. Each micron of each hair had been essential. As one strand fell, the others followed and tāde hair collapsed in billowing cascades until tāde 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 butch 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 tāde parry in time. Tāde 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 tade eyes as well as tade 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

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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 tāde skin, as if tāde skin was trying to crawl away from tā, a monster.

Sammy looked up at the Samurai with tāde 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.