

A dark silhouette of a samurai figure, seen from behind, with a sword tucked into a belt on the left side. The figure is set against a solid light blue background.

ZED DEE

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 *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 tāsēlf, and swung tādē katana over the top of the child’s head with all of tādē 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 tādē swing.

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

Tā looked upon tādē 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 tādē rent and what tā should buy with the measly twenty dollars in tādē 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 tāsēlf 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 tādē 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 tādē 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 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.

Tã really should stop giving out free haircuts, if only to stop tãself from getting too much into it and messing up tãde schedule. Tã had tried charging for tãde services a long time ago. Unfortunately, it didn't work out because tã 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 tã 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 tāde foot. The pain, originating from tāde pinky toe, stabbed up into tāde spine and flew out of tāde 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 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 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 t̄a 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 t̄a 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 t̄ade katana.

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

"I did t̄a a favour," said the ninja. "But you would have condemned t̄a 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 t̄ade ground without losing t̄ade balance. The ninja did the same.

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

The ninja pointed t̄ade wakizashi at the Samurai. T̄ade 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

w000000 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 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 tade 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 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 tā 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 tade hair. It was enough. Each micron of each hair had been essential. As one strand fell, the others followed and tade hair collapsed in billowing cascades until tade 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 *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 *tāde* eyes as well as *tāde* 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 tādē 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 tādē bum.

"Ali!" tādē 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 tādē mother, beautiful in a white one-piece swimsuit and straw hat, hair flapping in the wind, and laughed. Tādē mother smiled back.

Tādē father came and scooped tā up, throwing tā up into the air and catching tā. Tā liked it when tādē 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.

* * *

Two sets of feet clad in black leather boots and dark blue pants blocked the Samurai’s view of tāde victim’s corpse. The police had come.

“Do you know tāde 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 tāde katana. One of the two plugged in to the van and off they went, leaving the Samurai alone with tāde 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 tāde katana at tāde 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 tāde 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 tāde thoughts went, revolving between anger and guilt and back again. They put tā in a small cell to await tāde trial. There was barely enough room to stretch. But even then, it was not small enough to contain the storm of tāde thoughts.

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

They gave tā a shaver instead. Just as well. There was no salvaging what was left anyway. Tāde 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 tāde 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 *tā*’s 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 *tā*’s ravaged flesh were already firing *siáuly*. There was nothing *tā* could do to stop *tā*’s 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 *tā*’self. The only way to survive this *siáu*ness had been to

disassociate tāsself 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 *tā*'s 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 *tā*'s phone. “Meal time is not for another three hours.”

“Please?”

The nurse contemplated the request, *tā*'s bangs alternating between being greedy and kind. “I'll see what I can do,” *tā* said, *tā*'s 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 tā 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. Tā wasn't surprised, not anymore, just disappointed that tā 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 tā yawned. Both phones were already asleep and now it was tāde 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. Tā looked busy busy busy.

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

Tā got out of the cheap gown and looked in the mirror. Tāde 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 tā had changed and left the bathroom, the nurse was already replacing the linen. Tā 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 t̄a 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 t̄a could have done better, and only because t̄a 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 t̄a more.

“Hey!” The Samurai approached a man with a fringe that wound around t̄ade 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. T̄a started opening t̄ade mouth like t̄a was going to speak. After what seemed to be minutes, t̄a started closing it, perhaps deciding not to speak after all. Even the flies seemed to fly slower around t̄a.

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

“Leave t̄a alone!” A woman with an authoritarian ponytail grabbed the Samurai. The woman was missing some teeth, but every strand of t̄ade hair was in the right place, another masterpiece. “T̄a be missing some screws up in t̄ade 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 tāde 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, tāde life be changed thanks to that ninja fella.

I guess that's why tã went outside, to help other people answer their questions. I plugged in to the cast, tã be trying to help you too. I think tã be too soft for the world outside, that's why tã came inside. But you killed tã. 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? Tã was wracked by great sobs that seemed to crack tã open, so great was the guilt that tã was trying to extricate.

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

"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 tãself between the woman and the two, but the woman had already slinked away. The duo surrounded tã, looked tã over.

"You think we should put the brand on tã?" Muscleman asked the teenager.

"Tã 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 siáuiness 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 tādē lips. "Get away from me!" the Samurai shouted.

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

* * *

The storm was still raging when the Samurai recovered tādē senses. Muscleman and the teenager were gone. Tā was alone.

It made no sense. Tādē fear made no sense. And that síau 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 tā found the duo or the woman, tā could ask them about the Ninja. If tā found the Ninja, well, tā wasn't sure what tādē reaction would be.

It was easier said than done. The building had three stairwells, so tā 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 tā might miss them anyway while searching. And when tā found the bridge on the second floor that went into another building, tā knew that all hope was lost. The only way tā would find any of them was by sheer dumb luck.

Tā 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 tāde 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 tāde 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 tāde 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 t̄a. T̄ade sanity was being pulled in a million different directions, past the point of no return, and there was no escape.

* * *

“Ah!” The Samurai woke, drenched in cold sweat.

Wait, the sunlight was still an ambiguous reddish brown. T̄a could still be asleep. That nightmare visage could still be around.

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

That nightmare was the síauest t̄a had ever had! T̄a had no idea which part of t̄ade 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 tāself. Please, please say no. Tā didn't have tāde katana anymore. All tā had was a pair of scissors and that would mean getting tāde 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 tā was not sure what for. Perhaps tā 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, tā really felt sorry for the man because no one lived in the centre by choice. If not for tāde barbering, it was quite likely that tā would have been forced to live in the centre also.

But all that talk about food had reminded tā just how hungry tā was. And the homeless man was right: tā 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, tā found out that the mystery ingredient was the black sauce. It was a full-scale assault on tāde senses. All sorts of tastes and flavours clashed together in tāde 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, tã wanted to go home and relax. Today, tã was full and satiated. Today, tã was content.

* * *

The Samurai was hungry. Tã 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; tā 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 tā 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 síáu, don't you?"

"Yes!"

"Yeah!"

"Super síáu!"

"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 tādē 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 tādē 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 tādē orifices. Tādē 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 tādē, 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 tādē 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 *tāde* 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 tāde 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 tāde scissors with tāde 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 tāde katana.

THE NINJA HAIRSTYLIST

The Ninja had a stalker. Wow, a stalker! Tā had never been the subject of so much attention before. But being the subject of constant attention also meant that tā couldn't relax and take off tāde mask. Also, tā hadn't seen tāde stalker eating or drinking anything the past few days, although it was possible that the stalker took care of those needs when tā was asleep. Whatever the case, this had gone on long enough and it was time to confront tāde stalker.

Tā went into a room and gathered some firefly bait. The room had only one door, so tā knew that tāde stalker was right outside.

"You can stop hiding now," the Ninja said.

Nobody revealed themselves. "Yes, I'm talking to you, the one that's been following me the past few days, whoever you are."

A figure stepped out of the shadows wearing office attire. A dishevelled, dirty mess sat atop tāde head.

"We meet at last," the Ninja said. "Come sit by the fire."

The stalker stood in the doorway, unwilling or unsure about taking up the Ninja's invitation. A phone took a peek out of the stalker's pocket, then went back in.

"What's your name?" the Ninja asked.

"Ali," was the reply.

"Well, Ali, whatever your reason for following me this past

week, you are going to get a better view of me from over here rather than way back there.” The Ninja motioned Ali to come sit by the fire.

Tā could see it on Ali’s face: a narrowing of the eyes, the clenching of the jaw, the moment when Ali decided to break past whatever was inhibiting tā and take tāde first step towards the Ninja. And once that first step had been taken, the rest followed easily.

“You are probably going to be more comfortable if you sit,” the Ninja said.

Ali sat.

“Isn’t that better?”

Ali was content to stare back at the Ninja, stare at the Ninja’s hair.

“It looks messy at first glance, doesn’t it?”

Ali didn’t respond, was still transfixed.

“You’re probably wondering why you can’t take your eyes off it. Your eyes follow a strand, and there behind it is another strand going its own way, and beside it another strand going in yet another direction. Before you know it, your gaze has been caught in a labyrinth of my making. And if you relax and look not at the individual strands but at the whole...”

Ali looked into the keratinous maelstrom, eyes widening, pupils dilating.

“What do you see?” the Ninja whispered.

Ali stared, rapt, jaw slack. “I see...”

“What? What do you see?” The Ninja really wanted a coherent answer. Some people had a kind of ephemeral, mystical

experience upon seeing tādē hairstyle. None had ever articulated with sufficient accuracy the details of that experience. Would Ali be the first one to relate something concrete?

Ali continued staring.

Sigh. In just a moment, Ali would break down and sob uncontrollably. Tā would then hold and comfort Ali, even though tā could never empathise with what Ali had gone through. Then Ali would go on with tādē life, changed in some unknown way, and they would never meet again.

Ali did weep. But when the Ninja reached out to comfort tā, tā kowtowed to the Ninja and said, “Master, teach me.”

That had never happened before.

“I’m no master,” the Ninja said. “But I’ll try to teach you what I know.” And why not? The Ninja had a feeling that Ali wanted to copy tādē hairstyle. And if tā could teach Ali well enough, perhaps tā would have a similar mystical experience looking at Ali’s hair and finally figure out what was going on.

* * *

Ali was a good student, but it was impossible to teach anyone, good student or not, knowledge that had been gained through years of training in a short period of time. And even though the Ninja knew rationally that tā was once as unskilled as Ali, it was hard not to show tādē frustration when Ali failed at, what was to tā, a simple task.

It didn’t occur to the Ninja until tā was trying to teach Ali that it might not be immediately obvious how to use a wakizashi

or even a kris. Even basic things like how to draw and hold the weapons had to be taught.

Ali didn't have much of a problem drawing and holding the kris. This was because of its curved grip, which naturally guides its wielder into holding it in the proper manner.

The problem Ali had was with drawing and gripping the wakizashi. Tā drew the weapon in such a way that left tāde wrists in an awkward position and made it easy for any opponent to smack it out of tāde hands.

Why? What was Ali doing differently? It turned out to be a small thing. Ali was using tāde palms to draw the wakizashi. This left tāde wrists out of alignment with the hilt when the wakizashi was drawn. The Ninja had to teach Ali to use tāde fingertips to draw instead. This allowed the hand to fall into the correct grip without much effort.

Even then there was still something wrong with Ali's grip. Tā gripped with all of tāde fingers, except for the index finger. This was actually the proper grip for fighting, as it allowed the wielder to maintain control of tāde weapon when it hit something hard like another sword. But they were cutting hair, not flesh, and a looser grip that used mostly the thumb and index finger was better.

A true ninja hairstylist should be able to switch between the two grips as the situation demanded. Sure, tā could style the hair of the people here in the centre, but it wasn't like the Ninja had gotten into a fight before. Everything tā was teaching Ali was only theory at this point.

"What's next, Master?" Ali asked.

The Ninja was no master. Tā was only slightly better than

Ali. There was still so much that tā didn't know.

"When you're fighting, your swings should have as much power behind them as possible," the Ninja said. "Rotation of the arm, elbow, wrist – it's all important, but most of your power will actually come from the rotation of your hips. And how you move your feet determines how much your hips rotate. The most important thing to do is to get your footwork correct. But that's for fighting. When you are hairstyling, what you want is to use mostly your wrist and fingers because you don't need that much force to cut hair. You also need precision. And you need to be able to switch between fighting and hairstyling depending on the situation."

"Master, let's rest," Ali said after practising some footwork for a while. Tā sat down, not waiting for the Ninja's response.

"Okay, sure," the Ninja said. Ali had shown up in office attire, having probably led a sedentary lifestyle before coming to the centre. Tā could understand why Ali might be feeling tired even though what they were doing was just taking a few steps here and there and swinging a sword. "Ali, why don't you ask Toshi to search the Archive for a halfcast called 'Samurai Barber cutting hair'."

Toshi perked up upon hearing tāde name. Ali plugged in to Toshi and there were a few results. "Which one?"

The Ninja pointed to the second result. "That one."

The halfcast was from someone who was watching the Samurai Barber cut a man's hair.

"Notice how tā uses a full swing to raise the hair? Then tā follows it up with small cuts, using only the wrist?" the Ninja asked.

"Yes," Ali replied. "But how does tā raise the hair like that?"

"I've looked at this a thousand times and there is nothing about the way *tā* swings that would explain the hair-raising effect," the Ninja said. "The only possible explanation is that *tāde katana* is somehow producing the effect."

"How?" Ali asked.

"I don't know," the Ninja replied. "It's why I came up with the dual-wielding technique, using a sheathed kris to manipulate hair position and a wakizashi to do the actual cutting."

"Master, that's amazing," Ali said.

"I'm no master, Ali," the Ninja said. "Please don't call me that."

"Don't be modest," Ali said. "I know I never would have made the leap from katana to wakizashi and kris, a sheathed kris at that. Only a master, a genius, like you, could have come up with something like this."

"Ali," the Ninja said. "What you call genius, I call common sense. I don't have a magic katana, so I made do with what I had. I had to use a weapon that could be wielded with one hand so that I could use my other hand to manipulate hair. I chose the wakizashi because it could be used one-handed or two-handed, just in case I needed to fight. For my other hand, I needed something small, easy to use, since it was my weaker hand. I went with the kris because its wavy blade could be used to do an asymmetrical cut if needed. Also, if I just wanted to manipulate hair without cutting it, I could use it sheathed. It all comes from a logical exploration of what I was missing and what I could do to fill in the gaps. I'm no genius, Ali. I only did what anyone is capable of doing."

"Master, you sell yourself short," Ali said. "Perhaps it is because you have lived in the centre for so long that what seems

impossible for me is obvious to you. Because if I could do what you do, if I..." Ali trailed off.

The Ninja was about to say something but stopped tāsself. Whatever the circumstance that had led Ali to the centre, it was clearly painful. Even Toshi knew that, mewling softly, trying to give some amount of comfort to Ali. There was nothing the Ninja could do but to wait patiently for Ali to tell tādē tale.

Ali breathed deep, then said, "I used to have a job, nine to five, nothing special, wasn't glamorous, just eight hours a day in a cubicle working on balancing the books. Those were the official working hours, but I had to work overtime, unpaid, just to meet deadlines and keep from getting fired. I had a family too, a wife and child. My salary wasn't much, but it paid the bills, put a roof over our heads, put food on our table. My wife worked too and tā worked just as hard as me. Together, we squirrelled away enough to make sure that our child could get through school."

Ali took another deep breath. "One day, while on the way home, an attractive young lady in a red dress stopped me and talked to me, all smiles. Tā had tādē hair pulled back tight and braided. Smart dress, smart hairstyle – tā looked professional, like someone I could trust. My wife and I, we had been so busy working we barely saw each other. So when someone showed some interest in me, I liked it. Who wouldn't? Tā said that tā needed my help for a survey. I said sure, why not. It turned out to be one of those surveys about income and savings that would later segue into a sales pitch for some sort of investment package. And yes, I knew at this time that tā was more interested in my bank account and didn't give a damn about me. But it was fun to pretend. So I

played along. When tā said to follow tā to tāde office, I followed. Tā brought me to a residential zone, to a basement repurposed to be an office, and sat both of us down at a table. In the office were other couples, beautiful men and women, all trying to sell something. Tā started explaining to me how much I could earn in ten or twenty years, after investing ten million dollars. I never intended to buy whatever tā was selling. I didn't have ten million to spare anyway. So I didn't care how much their package was worth. But seeing tāde finger twirl a fringe as tā spoke, seeing how tāde eyes dilated as tā looked straight into me, it felt nice to be wanted. But a strange thing happened. Tā thanked me and escorted me out. I hadn't signed anything or even said anything. Didn't tā want me to buy their package? Whatever. I left and thought that was the end of it. I only found out that my bank account had been emptied when my wife confronted me about it."

Ali's voice took on a different, grittier timbre as tā continued, "I traced back the theft to a series of debits made to a Shade Consultants Private Limited. That was the name of the office the woman had led me to. I hadn't bought anything from them and I haven't given them any of my particulars. This was theft, pure and simple. Or so I thought. My bank told me they couldn't reverse the charges until they had a confirmation of criminality from the police. Since I must have given my ID for the debits to be made, the transaction was legal until proved otherwise. The police investigated and found no evidence of criminal behaviour. No evidence? I told them that I hadn't given them any information, that clearly my details had been stolen. No, they said. By entering the premises, I had given my consent to

have my information taken from me. They had a halfcast of my conversation with the woman. The woman had explained to me that by entering the office I would be entering into a contract with Shade Consultants Private Limited. I didn't remember because I had been too distracted to pay attention to what tā had been saying. That contract allowed them to debit the necessary funds for the purchase of their services. All they needed was my ID, which they got when I plugged in to their door. Yes, I had thought it was a little weird that the woman was waiting for me to open the door instead of opening the door for me. So that was just to steal my ID. With my ID, they could approach my bank and set up a direct debit. They just needed to present an invoice."

Ali got more agitated, pitch rising. "But surely there must be a need for both parties to consent to a contract, I said to them. I certainly did not say or sign anything that would indicate my assent. And isn't it illegal to get my ID without my consent? They shrugged, said I should make a case to my local magistrate. So I did. Surely the law would be on my side."

Ali clenched tāde fist. "No, it was all in accordance with the law. Just last year, a high magistrate had ruled in a similar case that implicit consent was sufficient for two parties to enter into a contract. And in my case, just entering the premises of Shade Consultants Private Limited was all the implicit consent they needed to get my ID and empty my bank account. And now we had no money to pay our bills. Our joint account was thankfully spared due to them not having my wife's 'consent'. But that account was for our child's future education. Because of my mistake, we had to take out some money from that account

and risk my child's future. My wife was livid. My last hope was the Consumer Protection Act. I could demand a refund if the purchased goods had not been received. And I was sure that I had received absolutely nothing from them. I made my case to the magistrate again. But it was in vain. I had purchased a consulting service and that sit down with the woman qualified as consulting. While the magistrate agreed that the price was a bit too much for the service, it was not the purview of the law to dictate the value of goods. It was then that I knew that I had been robbed and there was nothing I could do about it. I had exhausted all avenues for redress. I had lost."

The Ninja reached out and placed *tāde* hand upon Ali's clenched fist. How could such an atrocity happen? *Tā* had not lived in the city for a long time now, but surely it was not this bad? Surely there was still some humanity left in the law of the land?

"I had failed my family," Ali said. "My wife was relieved when I asked *tā* to sign the divorce papers. My child didn't understand why but signed the emancipation papers anyway. I knew it was the only way for my family to be free of my financial liability. Because even though they had taken everything from me, I still owed them nine million dollars for their 'consultation'. I couldn't burden my family with this debt, a debt that I knew I would spend the rest of my life paying back and maybe not even then. Because I had spent so much time fighting my case in the courts, I couldn't meet the quotas for my job and was fired. They had taken my family, my savings, my job, everything! But it was a good thing, being divorced and emancipated. It would shield my family from any liability, financial or criminal. And I was going to

be a criminal. I was going to make damn sure that they paid for what they had done to me.”

Ali's face hardened and *tā* moved *tāde* fist away from the Ninja's hand. The ruthless gleam in Ali's eyes terrified the Ninja. “I waited for everyone to leave Shade Consultants and then I sneaked in. I found the employee handbook. In it were instructions for an employee to mention as casually as possible that entering the premises would be the same as consent. If they didn't attach any importance to it, the victims wouldn't either. Yes, the handbook used the word *victims*. These *butohs* knew what they were doing. To think that I had wanted to torch the place at night when there was no one working! No, I needed to destroy everything and everyone in that evil den. From the layout of the office I knew that there were at least a dozen employees. All would burn! None were innocent! Some of them had pictures of their families on their desks and for a moment I faltered in my plan. I would be taking fathers and mothers away from their children. These *butohs* should die, but their families were innocent. For me to inflict needless suffering upon them, why, I would be no different from them. Then I noticed that the families on the different desks were all the same. A different employee would be in a different picture, but the smiling spouse and two children were always the same. It was a tactic, to project an air of trustworthiness that only a father or mother of such a happy family could have. Perhaps some of them had actual families, perhaps some of them only did the job to feed their kids – the job market is crap, after all. The official statistic is that one in one hundred million are unemployed. But what the statistics don't

tell you is that most people are underemployed, working for their survival, like I was. But to take on this job, this job! To burden unsuspecting victims with ludicrous debt! To inflict the ultimate despair, to make known to someone that their lives were essentially over, because it was – there was no hope of ever paying that debt back. There was no excuse! I checked the handbook again and made sure. Yes, it was a standard employment contract. Any party could give a one-month termination notice. Some of them might have had a conscience, perhaps some of them had reported the company to the authorities, had been disappointed as I had been at the state's unwillingness to declare them as outlaws. But they had continued working there. They were villains all, rotten cunts, deserving of death! So I waited. The charlatans waded in one by one at around three in the afternoon, later than I had expected, but logical once I thought about it. Their work would only begin in earnest once the rest of the world had ended their shifts and were heading back home. I saw them, getting their caffeine, sitting at their desks, plugging in to their phones, preparing to go out and do their evil deeds. When they were all in the office I went about my plan. There is a trick to doors, you see, a tendon that can be cut so that the door can't contract anymore and has to be opened by brute force. So I threw a Molotov and forced the door shut. I expected to hear screams as they burned, but there were none. I thought that I had failed. Maybe they had extinguished the fire somehow. It was too silent. Then I heard their phones screaming. If their phones were burning then they must be too, but it was like they didn't care that they were going to die. There was no sound that I heard that was made by a human. Were they

even human? I waited until I could hear no more, then waited some more until even the door was ash. I was afraid to take a peek inside. I knew that what had happened was unnatural, something beyond my comprehension. I waited for the police to come. But nobody came. Nobody cared. I had meted out justice, but it seemed like justice was blind to me.”

Ali was a murderer, cold-blooded and ruthless. Tā had been driven to it by extraordinary circumstance, but still, it took a certain psychopathy to be able to rationalise the slaughter of a dozen people. The Ninja didn’t know what to think. But there was more to the tale.

“I was perplexed,” Ali said. “No news casters, no police, not even the owner of Shade Consultants, cared about the burnt remains of the office. Were all the employees orphans with no family, no lovers, no friends, no acquaintances, not even landlords, to wonder about them? The residents that lived in the tree above the office would have no idea that anything had happened. The charred staircase down to the office was not visible from the lift landing and the fire itself had been contained by the earth. The roots had not been damaged. Soon enough, even the burnt remains would be eaten by trashmites and there would be no evidence to show that anything had happened. There had been no mention of who the owner was in the employee handbook, but surely tā would notice that no new victims had been reported from this office and come down to see what had happened? I waited another day, but no one ever came. What do I do now? My vengeance was sated, but my life was still ruined. I went to the station, wondering where to go next, when I saw the same

woman who had approached me before. Tā was talking to another unsuspecting victim-to-be. How could it be? I had seen tā going into the office and tā had not come out before I burned that place. And yet, tā acted as if tā did not know me. I followed tā to another basement, to Easy Consultants Private Limited. I didn't enter but looked through their door. I recognised them all! From the pictures of fabricated families in Shade Consultants, I recognised them all! I went to another station. I followed another doppelganger to Lucky Consultants Private Limited. Through the door, the woman in red, the rest of them, all of them again. What was going on? Were the employees fabricated as well? Had they been grown somewhere for the sole purposes of perpetrating this scam? Evidently, it was now possible to manufacture people. Surely manufacturing people was a line that we as a society should not cross. But the line had been crossed by someone or some organisation, in secret. To callously do this and to do it for the purposes of populating a workforce for multiple companies with the same predatory business model, something must be done! I went to the offices of Lionfish News, told them about it, told them that I had proof if they would just follow me to the offices I had uncovered and see the truth for themselves. Do you know what they told me?"

The Ninja shook tāde head.

"They told me that there was more profit in not casting the story!" Ali said. "They would most certainly get hit with a libel charge, even if my story were true. Preparing and presenting their case to a magistrate would take too much time and money. Better to do nothing. Then they said thanks and goodbye and

threw me out. Was I going *siáu*? Or had the world gone *siáu*? For the first time, I saw behind the curtain of our society and all I felt was despair. For humanity, morality, dignity, even the truth itself, had become subservient to the almighty dollar. The cruelty of the situation is apparent for anyone to see, but it seems that everyone has turned a blind eye to the truth. The ones with the power and resources to change society are happy with their lot, while the ones that need to change society lack the ability or the will to do so. What could I do? I had gone to journalists, magistrates, even killed, but nothing changed! Even worse, no one cared! If only I had been caught; I would have been sent to gaol or executed but at least there would have been a change. But not even that! I'm still without my family, without my savings, without a job, without purpose. That is the saddest state of all, to be without purpose. Behind the curtain was an elaborate abomination bred solely to serve the top elites of society. All of us are only cells in that abomination. Anyone who has seen this must be *siáu* if they continue to be a part of society. So I rejected society! And I came here to the centre. Where else could I go?"

Ali's eyes and voice brightened. "Then I saw you, Master, going around cutting people's hair with your wakizashi and kris. I was curious at first. I had heard of the Samurai Barber but never of a *ninja* hairstylist. Why not? Why did you do your work in secret? I wanted to know. And your haircut was such a mystery. I followed you for days, hoping to solve that mystery. Even following you from a distance I could tell there was something special about it. And when you invited me closer, my heart leaped, for that was what I had been hoping for: a chance to examine for myself at

close range the enigma that is your hair. Oh, if only I had the words to describe my experience to you.”

Even though Ali had just said otherwise, tā had proved in the telling of tāde tale that tā had no lack for words. Perhaps the Ninja would finally get the answer that tā sought.

“Our society is based upon the distribution of power,” Ali said. “The basis of all our relationships is power. We make friends with people of similar social standing. The boss holds power over the worker. The magistrates hold power over all in matters of the law. Councillors hold the power to change the law. And at the heart of everything is money. Money is the ultimate power. With it you can even buy councillors to change the law. It is a disgusting state of affairs; any checks or balances against tyranny that might have existed have long been eroded away. We have a democratically elected council, but we are nonetheless in a tyrannical regime. It isn’t the council that are the tyrants but money. Our tyrants are the private limiteds and the public limiteds of the city! How did we ever come to this state? Were our tyrants so devious in their accumulation of power that no one foresaw the consequences? Or perhaps it was just apathy; perhaps no one cared enough.

“But in your hair I saw the answer,” Ali said, hope in tāde voice. “Each strand growing its own way without any interference from other strands, each strand equal in its say of where to go. Strands growing in a similar direction joining together to form a spike, a community. And even then, with multiple spikes growing their own way, no spike interfered with another. There, near your crown, two spikes that look like they might clash, their paths crossing each other. Look closer and they are in perfect harmony.

Each strand from the spike growing leftward has the space to grow in the spike that is growing rightward and vice versa. Thus, the identity of each strand is preserved even when it grows against the flow. And throughout your entire scalp, I could not find a single tyrant strand. In your hair, there is no analogue for councillor, no analogue for private limiteds and public limiteds. There is only a vision of a society where everyone is equal, the opposite of a hierarchical society, an anarchy! In your hair I found my meaning, my purpose. To spread this hope of anarchistic utopia to every citizen of Lionfish, to start a revolution and bring down the current tyranny and in its place install a paradise, this is my purpose! Master! Help me!”

Ali was certainly passionate. What *tā* said made sense. The Ninja had always felt an unease, a wrongness, but had never been able to narrow down *tāde* reason for rejecting capitalism. Perhaps deep down below the level of conscious thought, *tāde* subconscious had also peeked behind the curtain. Perhaps *tāde* hairstyle was a manifestation of *tāde* subconscious desire to fix what was wrong with the world.

Ali had found *tāde* purpose in the Ninja’s hair. The Ninja had also found *tāde* purpose in Ali. Who cares if Ali had murdered some fake people? *Tā* had given the Ninja hope for the future.

“If you truly believe in anarchy, then I cannot be your master,” the Ninja said. “Call me sensei – no, that doesn’t seem right either. Call me comrade. Yes, we are comrades. I will do this with you. I will help you!”

“Comrade!” Ali said, hugging the Ninja.

“Comrade!” the Ninja said, hugging back.

“Anarchy!” Ali pumped tādē clenched fist up in the air.

“Anarchy!” the Ninja followed suit.

“Anarchy!” They did it together.

“Anarchy! Anarchy!” They cried as they ran – hopped, flipped, twirled and cartwheeled around like siáu people, laughing all the while.

“A... narchy!” They sang as they skipped along, hand in hand. So infectious was their joy that two others joined them: a tall, muscular man and a young teenager. Both sported shaggy hairdos that were the result of extreme negligence.

“W-what is this a-a-narchy?” the teenager asked when they were exhausted from their merriment.

“Look at tādē hair,” Ali said, pointing at the answer.

And they looked.

* * *

The Ninja had Ali practise hairstyling moves on the two newcomers.

“You’re up,” the Ninja said to Naz, the big, muscular man.

“Let the pipsqueak go first.” Naz shoved Billie forward.

“I-I-I don’t want to!” Billie said.

“You go first.” Naz gave Billie a noogie.

“S-s-stop it!” Billie said. It sounded like tā was on the verge of crying.

The Ninja coughed and stared at Naz until tā stopped bullying the teenager and stepped forward. Could Naz’s behaviour be traced back to a bunch of errant strands on tādē head?

Ali looked over Naz's messy hair, brows furrowed. Would tā be able to see that clump, to the side of Naz's crown, that was spreading its oppressive tendrils all over tāde head?

Ali used tāde kris to separate that clump from the rest of Naz's hair, then cut down that tyrant clump with tāde wakizashi. Then, tā gave Naz a high slope. But tā wasn't done. With some hair mousse tā gave Naz's hair a slicked-back look.

The Ninja nodded, gave Ali a thumbs-up. It was exactly what tā would have done. There were some inconsistencies in the cut, but that was due to Ali's inexperience. With time, Ali could become a master hairstylist.

"Thank you, Senpai!" Naz bowed.

Did that do it? Did Ali manage to excise Naz's tyrannical nature?

"Whatcha think of my new haircut?" Naz asked Billie, running a hand through tāde hair.

"I-i-it's great," Billie said.

"Can't wait to see what haircut you are going to get!" Naz locked Billie's head in tāde massive arms and gave the teenager a noogie again.

Hmmm, maybe the haircut didn't work.

"S-stop it!" Billie cried out. But tā was laughing. It was a gentler noogie, a fun noogie. The haircut might not have been a complete success, but a partial success was better than failure.

"I-i-is it m-m-y turn?" Billie asked.

The Ninja nodded.

Here, then, was an enigma. There seemed to be no reason for Billie's stutter. Tā did not lack confidence. It was tā that first

asked about anarchy, not Naz. The Ninja could not see the reason for the stutter on Billie's head. Would Ali be able to? Ali took a long time studying Billie's hair. Perhaps tā did not have the skill either. It was okay. The Ninja couldn't expect the student to surpass the sensei so soon.

But Ali did something unexpected. Tā took tāde kris and offered it to Billie, hilt first.

"W-w-w-what?" Billie looked confused.

"Take it," Ali said to Billie.

"B-b-but what do I d-d-do with it?" Billie asked.

"Whatever you want," Ali said. "Because I am not going to cut your hair. You are."

"T-t-that's síáu, I c-c-cant," Billie said.

"Sure you can," Ali said. "Just take the kris, go in front of a mirror, take some of your hair and cut it."

Billie took the proffered kris and Ali held a mirror in front of tā. Then tā grabbed tāde fringe and, after some hesitation, cut it. Tā took another clump and cut that as well. And another, and another. Soon, tāde hair became a messy pixie cut that was full of uneven surfaces.

It was the work of an amateur, but that was okay, since the Ninja hadn't taught Billie anything yet. But there was something pure, something raw, in that haircut. It was full of flaws, sure, but the flaws were an integral part of the whole. It reminded the Ninja of tāde own haircut. The uneven clumps were all striving for something, some manifestation of Billie's heartfelt desire to express tāself, without hesitation, without stutter.

"T-t-t-thank you, Senpai!" Billie bowed, offering Ali the

kris back.

“You’re welcome.” Ali took the kris.

Naz whistled. “Nice cut!”

Billie grinned. “A-a-aren’t you g-g-g-going to give me a noogie?”

“What? No!” Naz replied. “I’m not going to mess with that awesome haircut! Maybe Master should take you as another student!”

“W-w-what?” Billie shook tādē head. “N-n-no way. I-I-I-I just did what I always wanted to do. Long hair is so irritating, the way it tickles my ears and my neck, so I cut it all short. I wasn’t sure I could do it, but when I did that first cut, it was like a part of me was free. So I did it again and again – it felt so good. I was a bit disappointed when I had finished... W-w-why are y-y-you all looking at me l-l-l-like that?”

“Why?” Naz was tearing up. “You weren’t stuttering just then!”

“R-r-r-really?” One of Billie’s eyebrows shot up.

Naz took Billie in another headlock and was about to give tādē another noogie but gently ruffled tādē hair instead. “I’m so happy for you!”

Billie went beet red.

Ali looked at the scene, smiling. The duo’s happiness had infected tādē too. Even the Ninja’s mask was unable to hide tādē smile.

“Why didn’t you cut tādē hair?” the Ninja asked Ali.

“I didn’t know what to do at first,” Ali replied. “I looked and looked and couldn’t find anything to fix with tādē hair. We all know that tādē has a stutter, so why couldn’t I find anything wrong? I tried to look at tādē hair from above, from below, from

the side, from all possible angles, and still couldn't find anything. I was about to give up and ask you to take over. Then it hit me. I examined tā one more time just to confirm. Yes, I couldn't find anything to fix because there was nothing to fix. Tāde hair presented itself to me as perfectly fine no matter what angle I chose to see it from. And therein lay the conundrum. What could I do? What should I do? I didn't think I should try and change tāde self-expression when I didn't know what I should be doing. So I offered my kris to tā, to use it to do with tāde hairstyle as tā wished. When tā stammered tāde confusion, I noticed that tā was looking at all of us. It was then that I thought that perhaps tāde stutter is a result of tāde obsession with what we are thinking about tā? A kind of anxiety about how tā was being perceived? When tā held that kris and went to work cutting tāde hair, did you notice that tā was talking to tāself?"

The Ninja shook tāde head. Tā hadn't noticed, but tā hadn't been right in front of Billie also.

"Well, I couldn't hear tā," Ali said. "I think tā was just mouthing the words. But I read tāde lips and there was no stutter. Because after that first cut, when tā really got into cutting, it was just tā and tāde reflection in the mirror. None of us mattered anymore."

The Ninja was on the verge of crying happy tears. Tā was so proud of Ali. To know when to take a step back and not do anything? Tā would never have done that. In that exact situation, tā would have imposed some style on the teenager instead.

Ali's technical ability was still lacking, as evidenced by Naz's uneven cut, but that could be improved upon with time and practise. The situation with Billie had shown the Ninja that Ali

had an intuition and empathy that tã lacked. And those attributes would ensure that Ali would one day surpass the Ninja.

* * *

“Argh!” Naz was pacing back and forth, footsteps echoing around the derelict building. “Why did you have to bring us to see that? Those people, all the same, that’s so siáu! It really bothers me!”

“B-b-but Ali already went to Lionfish News about it and they didn’t want anything to do with the story,” Billie said. “What can we do about it?”

“Not much,” the Ninja said.

“Yeah,” Ali said. “There is a much deeper problem here. As long as rich butohs can get away with anything, there is nothing we can do.”

All of them were looking at Ali.

“Err, why are you all looking at me like that?” Ali asked.

“Well, what do you want to do?” the Ninja asked.

“I don’t know.” Ali put out some firefly bait.

They sat around the fireflies when Ali was done, watching the fireflies play games around their faces.

It was Billie that broke the silence. “W-w-we need a campaign.”

“A campaign?” Naz asked.

“Ya, a campaign,” Billie said. “Like what the candidates do before elections.”

“A campaign!” Naz seemed to think it was a great idea.

“We can cast all we want, but it doesn’t matter if people

don't care," the Ninja said.

"T-t-t-that's why we should get someone famous to join us, s-s-s-someone like the Samurai Barber," Billie said.

"I don't know about that," the Ninja said. "I think people view the Samurai Barber more as a joke or a way to get a free haircut. I don't think people will care what tā has to say even if tā did a cast. I also don't think the Samurai will agree with what we are doing. If you look at all of tāde casts, you will notice that tā always asks for permission before cutting someone's hair. But what we are doing is starting a revolution, basically forcing change upon society."

Billie looked dejected, looked down at tāde phone. Naz put an arm around tā.

"You got a better idea?" Ali asked the Ninja.

The Ninja stayed silent. Perhaps tā had been too critical of Billie's idea.

"Anyone have a better idea?" Ali asked.

No one else did.

"It can't hurt to try," Ali said. "Let's at least talk to the Samurai."

"Yes, that's probably best," the Ninja said.

"I-I-I think I already found tā," said Billie, holding up tāde phone for them to see. On the phone's belly was an image of the Samurai in the middle of a crowd, cutting hair.

Billie had not been feeling dejected but had been searching for casts of the Samurai Barber instead. The Ninja felt a little silly for having thought Billie so emotionally fragile.

"I know where that is, that's in the Batam district," Naz said.

"Are you sure?" Ali asked.

“I grew up there, I’d recognise those trees anywhere,” Naz said. “It’s close by, about an hour away by train.”

“Let’s go!” Ali said.

The Ninja wore a cap. Tā couldn’t afford to have people ogling tāde hairstyle and then breaking down in public. But tā shouldn’t have bothered. No one cared that there were four people in black and wearing masks on the train. They were too busy with their phones.

Naz led them to the spot that was on Billie’s phone, but the Samurai was nowhere to be found.

“T-tā looked like tā was dressed for work,” Billie said.

“There’s still a chance, then, tā might still be in one of the offices nearby,” Ali said.

“And tā will be heading home after work,” Naz said. “There are a couple of stations nearby, we’ll have to split up.” Naz directed them to the nearest stations. There were only four of them, so they couldn’t cover all the stations, but some chance was better than no chance.

“Call the rest of us if you see the Samurai,” Ali said to the group. Then to the Ninja, “See you back home in a few hours.”

The Ninja went back to Batam station and sat at a bench overlooking the entrance.

What should the Ninja say to the Samurai if tā actually showed up there? How does one convince another to give some time, a part of their lives, for a revolution they might not even believe in?

Without a phone, the Ninja could not know exactly what time it was. But tā had sat on the bench for what felt like a long

time and several waves of office workers had walked past tā into the station. The sun was setting. Perhaps tā had waited long enough. The Samurai wasn't going to show up here.

But there were a lot of unknowns in this situation. What if the Samurai was working overtime? Perhaps tā should wait just a bit longer. Just a bit longer. That was what tā kept on saying to tāself.

"Last train is departing in five minutes' time," came the announcement. Right, even trains needed to sleep.

The Ninja went down to the platform, went into a carriage right in front of the stairs so that tā could see everyone who was coming into the station.

But what if the Samurai was still working and didn't know that it was the last train? Would tā still come to the station? Or perhaps tā was running towards the station right now and would miss the train by a few minutes. Batam was an hour away by train from the centre, but walking would probably take half a day. It might be faster to just sleep somewhere and wait for the first train.

All the Ninja knew was that tā wouldn't be able to live with tāself if tā knew that tā hadn't done everything possible to find the Samurai. So tā got out of the train and went to sit at the bench by the entrance again.

"Train doors closing, train doors closing," the announcement said.

There was a man who ran into the station a few minutes after the announcement. The man came out a few seconds later and sat at the bench opposite the Ninja. Perhaps tā had the same idea – that it would be faster to sleep there and then take

the first train home, instead of trying to walk.

The man laid tādē jacket on the bench and used tādē briefcase as a makeshift pillow. After a few minutes, tā was sound asleep. The man looked dishevelled. It looked like a long time since the man had had tādē hair cut. And the reason was obvious. How many times had tā worked until tā missed the last train? The Ninja guessed that the answer was too many. The poor man was probably going to work tāsēlf to death. And for what?

Look, there it was: a disorganised strand, casting all the other hairs on the man's head into disarray. It was probably the source of tādē perpetual overtime.

The Ninja drew tādē kris and cut that strand off. Immediately, the man's hair fell into a side parting. It was better than the mess it was earlier, but tādē hair hadn't been cut for so long that it wasn't much improvement. The Ninja couldn't do much else without waking tā up. But it should be all right. Tā should be better organised when tā woke up. Tā should be able to get tādē work done in a more efficient manner and actually get to go home on time. Until Ali's revolution deposed the despots of society, it would have to do.

The lights in the trees around the station winked off one by one. Soon, all that was left were the stars shining through the canopy. The Ninja waited for a few more minutes, but no one showed. The Samurai was not going to come to this particular station tonight.

* * *

The Ninja woke up. The man was gone. The trains had been running for some time. Tā went home. Hopefully, the rest weren't too worried about tā.

A high-pitched keening could be heard the moment tā stepped out of the station. It sounded like it was coming from the building where tā and the others made their home, but tā couldn't be sure.

"Shut up already!" came a distant shout. "You've been crying all night! People are trying to sleep here!"

"Noooooooooooo!"

The wailing was definitely coming from home. But who was making such a ruckus? The Ninja couldn't recognise the voice.

The wailing was coming from Naz. There were dried tears and snot all over tāde face.

"Master!" Naz came running the moment tā saw the Ninja. "Where have you been? We thought you were dead too!"

"Dead too?" The Ninja was confused. "Who's dead?" But the answer was clear. Billie was in a corner, staring at tāde phone, catatonic except for some erratic sniffles, eyes red and puffed.

Ali? Ali is dead?

"What happened?" the Ninja asked Naz. But Naz collapsed into a heap on the floor. If tā had been crying like that all night, tā was probably exhausted.

Billie was still plugged in to tāde phone. On the phone was the frozen image of Ali: arm amputated, blood everywhere, bright red mixed with fuchsia. What had happened? Who had killed Ali?

"Play it back," the Ninja said to Billie. Billie continued to

stare at that gruesome image. Had *tā* heard what the Ninja said? There was no way for the Ninja to know. If not for *tāde* blinks and the rise and fall of *tāde* chest, the Ninja might have thought that *tā* was dead as well.

“Please,” the Ninja pleaded.

Billie did a kind of silent hiccup, as if *tā* was stifling a sob. That was the only indication that *tā* might have heard the Ninja’s plea. Whether or not *tā* heard the Ninja, the cast began playing back on the phone’s belly.

There was Ali, behind a man whose hair had been freshly cut. Even through the phone’s furry belly, the Ninja could see bits of hair on the train floor and on the man’s shoulders. The Ninja could also see that the haircut had been uneven, almost amateurish. Ali was better than that. The only possible reason the man’s haircut was so uneven was because the man had been an unwilling recipient.

Ali said something to the person casting. Who was it? Without being plugged in, the Ninja couldn’t hear what *tā* was saying.

Ali charged and attacked. When *tāde* wakizashi was parried by a katana, the Ninja knew then that the caster was the Samurai.

No, Ali! What was *tā* doing? Was *tā* *siáu*? *Tā* was no match for the Samurai. And why did *tā* force that haircut onto that man? Surely *tā* must have known that the Samurai would not look kindly upon such an act. The Ninja had told *tā* as much the day before.

Ali’s attacks were clumsy, even the Ninja could see that through the phone’s small belly. Ali’s few weeks of training could not stand up to the Samurai’s lifetime of experience. But Ali kept

on at it, not giving up. The Ninja could see that Ali was getting desperate. Tāde attacks were getting wilder, more reckless. Why was tā trying to kill the Samurai in the first place?

No, Ali was not trying to kill the Samurai. All the attacks were aimed above the point of view. Ali was trying to cut the Samurai's hair.

Then came the beginning of the end, the severance of Ali's arm. Great arterial bursts of blood spewed forth from the wound. There was no way Ali was going to survive that.

Ali's eyes grew wide as tā also realised that tāde time was coming to an end. Tāde face grew paler as death drew closer. Then the Samurai performed a miracle, cleaning and styling Ali's hair into the shape of a wave crashing upon tāde head.

Even though the Ninja couldn't hear anything, tā was pretty sure that Ali had said "Mom". Tā was certain that Ali was remembering that day on the beach, Ali's happiest memory.

Finally, Ali died. For such a gruesome end, Ali looked peaceful.

How had the Samurai known to do that, to make Ali relive a happy moment from tāde past? It was on the level of Ali letting the teenager cut tāde own hair. Ali and the Samurai, they were really two of a kind. Hair was a veil they both could peer past to see the inner workings of a person. It was an intuition the Ninja never had and never will. The Ninja was no master, not when compared to the Samurai. If only Ali had met the Samurai instead, had the Samurai for a sensei. The Ninja could not even begin to fathom the things that the Samurai could teach Ali. Ali could have been the Samurai's equal, perhaps even surpassed the Samurai one day. Instead, Ali had died a stupid and tragic death.

“What are we going to do now, Master?” It was Billie. Perhaps it was the grief or shock, but tade stutter was gone.

What to do now? Ali was dead, gone forever. There was nothing to do now.

“If only—” The Ninja couldn’t finish the sentence as something caught in tade throat. If only tā had taught Ali better, taught tā to run away from fights that could not be won, if only they had never met, then perhaps Ali would still be alive. “It’s my fault that Ali is dead.” Saying that should have broken tā, but tā didn’t feel anything.

Billie looked up from tade phone at the Ninja. “Your fault? Do you want to know what the Samurai felt before tā killed Ali? I know because it was a fullcast. The Samurai felt smug, confident, annoyed. And you know what tā felt when tā killed Ali? Pure disgust, loathing even. And why would the Samurai feel that way? Tā must have been wondering what a low-class person like Ali was doing trying to attack tā, someone higher up on society’s hierarchy. Your fault? No, Master. The fault lies with that smug butoh, the Samurai.”

“No...” the Ninja said. It couldn’t be true. Didn’t the teenager realise what the Samurai had done for Ali at the end? Someone who was a smug butoh could not have done that.

“And if the fault lies with someone,” Billie said, “surely it lies with me. It was my idea.”

But that wasn’t true either. All of this could be traced back to Ali meeting the Ninja and the Ninja’s hair. All of this could have been prevented if tā just had a different haircut.

“But playing the blame game is meaningless,” Billie said.

“We can go back even further: if the Samurai hadn’t been born, if you hadn’t been born, if this, if that, ifs all the way to the beginning of time. The only thing for us to consider now is what do we do from here? We have to continue Ali’s work. We have to! Or tā would have died in vain. And we must do it without the Samurai. This we must do. Master, help me!”

The words sounded so familiar; the Ninja’s heart felt like it had wrenched into a knot. Hadn’t Ali said almost the exact same thing to tā all those nights ago?

“No,” the Ninja said. “I can’t anymore.”

“Then we will do it without you,” Billie said. “We believe too much in Ali’s dream to let it die with tā.”

Yes, Naz would go along with Billie on this. First Ali, now them too? Would the two of them rend the Ninja’s heart into two when they died? It would be better if they had never met at all. But that was impossible. What was done was done. The best thing to do now was to leave. There was no chance for their passion to fizzle out before they got into trouble if tā stayed. And if it was really too late for them, then at least it wouldn’t be tāde fault.

“Please don’t leave,” Billie said.

The Ninja hesitated. “I’m sorry.”

* * *

The Samurai was talking to a woman. What was tā doing in the centre? Some distance behind, Naz and Billie were following the Samurai. They had knives. This couldn’t be good.

A storm was coming. The woman the Samurai was talking

to had the sense to go into the nearest building. Naz and Billie stayed under shelter as well. Only the Samurai lacked common sense and was standing out in the open.

The storm broke. The Samurai was lucky that tā was only drenched. Others had not been so lucky. Tā had heard about a clueless census officer that had been struck by lightning.

The Samurai followed the woman into the building.

Naz and Billie began looking for another way to follow the Samurai. Whatever they were planning on doing with those knives, it wasn't going to go their way. The Samurai was still dangerous, even against the two of them.

When the Ninja caught up to them, Naz and Billie had drawn their knives, but the Samurai was still weaponless. Actually, the Samurai didn't even have a weapon on tā. What had happened? And where did the woman go? Not the way the Ninja had come, that was for sure.

A bolt of lightning illuminated the space and all of them turned to look at the Ninja.

"Master!" Naz fell to tāde knees. "Don't leave us!"

Billie stood defiant, probably still angry about the Ninja leaving them, but Naz pulled Billie down and both of them were now kneeling, heads to the floor. Billie's head stayed on the floor with some help from Naz's arm. The Ninja was pretty sure Billie didn't want to kowtow.

When were they going to stop with this "master" nonsense? And what was with the Samurai's reaction? Tā looked like tā had just seen a ghost.

"Are the two of you still doing this?" The Ninja bent down

and took their knives away from them. Billie looked sideways at the Ninja, full of hate.

Well, Billie could hate the Ninja all tā wanted. If it kept the both of them alive, tā could deal with being hated.

“Don’t leave us, Master!” Naz said again.

The Ninja sighed. Tā wished tā could have said that tā was sorry, but the less contact that tā had with the two of them, the more likely it would be that they would give up this revolution idea of theirs.

Whoa! The Samurai was holding a pair of scissors in tāde hands in a grip so tight that tāde hands were shaking. And it was pointed at the Ninja.

“Get away from me!” the Samurai shouted.

What was that? Why was the Samurai acting this way? It was like the Ninja had killed off the Samurai’s family or something.

Another bolt of lightning blinded the both of them. The Ninja took this opportunity to get away. No point trying to talk to the Samurai or Billie right now. And the Ninja had been living in the centre almost tāde whole life. Tā knew this place like the back of tāde hand. Tā didn’t need to see to know where tā was going.

Since tā had come from the second floor and tā hadn’t seen the woman up there, there was only one other exit the woman might have taken. And the woman looked like Sindi. When the Ninja caught up to the woman, tā knew that tā was right.

“Hey, Sindi!” the Ninja said.

Sindi started. “Oh, hi.”

“Saw you talking to the Samurai, did you do that fake accent with tā?” The Ninja grinned.

“That butoh killed Ali,” Sindi said. “I’m pretty sure tā fell for it and thought I was an uneducated bum. But I couldn’t go through with it.”

The Ninja wasn’t sure exactly what Sindi couldn’t go through with. It probably had something to do with the shiv that was on the ground by tāde feet. “Did you notice the Samurai no longer has tāde katana?” the Ninja asked instead. “Do you know what happened to it?”

“You don’t know?” Sindi plugged in to tāde phone, searched for a cast and played it for the Ninja.

The Samurai was standing before the magistrate.

“Charge was murder,” Sindi said. “Not contested. Sentence was a million dollars, twenty strokes and tāde katana was confiscated.”

Murder? Why didn’t the Samurai contest the charges? It was trainslaughter at best. But if tā had contested the charges, tā would have lost the no-contest discount. Not only that, tā would have had to prove tāde case. Even if tā had managed to prove that it was indeed trainslaughter instead of murder, the sentence for it was fifty strokes and ten million dollars. It was actually cheaper to plead guilty to murder than to fight for a lesser conviction. Was tā thinking of all this when tā had pleaded guilty?

Then the Samurai was taken to a small clearing, stripped to the waist and strapped to a sapling. Wait, what? Was that really the Samurai?

“Professor, is there something wrong with your phone?” the Ninja asked. “I just saw the Samurai and I could have sworn that tā was a woman, but here on your phone, tā is a man.”

“The Samurai has always been a woman in my mind,”

Sindi said, pausing the cast. “And even looking at this, I think t̃a is a woman.”

“How can that be?” the Ninja asked. “How can I see a man but you see a woman?”

“That’s a really good question,” Sindi said. “I have never had the cause to think about it. I think it’s because I never had to compare what I saw with what anyone else saw. I’ve always been plugged in. But you aren’t plugged in, and you see casts on different phones.”

Sindi was silent for a while. The Ninja waited. Sindi had always answered t̃ade questions with good and considered answers, but always after Sindi had thought the question through.

“I’m sure you know what the Archive does, but do you know what the Archive is?” Sindi asked.

The Ninja shook t̃ade head. T̃a had only used the Archive to play back casts like everybody else, but never thought about how it was done.

“The Archive is a kind of behemoth computer,” Sindi said, “but instead of performing calculations, t̃a just stores casts and replays them back when needed. Basically, t̃a is a behemoth that remembers things for us. And what is a memory? It’s not an exact representation of an event. We humans remember things more in how they made us feel instead of how they were, like when going back to a childhood home, everything seems smaller because we were small as children and everything felt bigger back then. Or remembering a funny conversation that we had with someone but not remembering the joke or the exact words that were said, only that it made us laugh. And memories are constantly being

reinterpreted by us when we remember, like remembering that you liked durian as a child, but now that durian makes you want to puke you can't understand how you ever liked it as a child."

What was this heresy? The Ninja's taste buds had never betrayed the almighty durian.

"That's how we remember things, but how does the Archive remember?" Sindi said. "Behemoths are manufactured and are, for all intents and purposes, asexual. Would tā even understand the concept of disparate genders? When you replay a cast from the Archive, what you are getting is a version of events as interpreted by the Archive, a creature that might not even know the difference between a male and female human. The cast is interpreted again by the person who is plugged in, or in your case, by the phone. Most people don't look at the phone's version, of course, you are the only one I know who does that. But I imagine it is even more abstract."

"I guess that's why people prefer live casts," the Ninja said.

"Yes," Sindi said. "But even then, there are differences of interpretation between people. Take, for example, the colour red. Your concept of red could be a different shade from my concept of red and our reds are definitely different from the red of someone who is tetrachromatic."

"Why isn't this more of a problem?" the Ninja asked. "It sounds like I can't trust anything that has been casted."

"I can't be sure, but I think it was a huge problem," Sindi said. "I was lucky to be alive before a rare genetic cascade failure killed off the oldest Archive. We lost a lot of accumulated knowledge that day as they couldn't transfer everything to the new Archive

in time. Then Ranai happened and we lost even more.”

The Ninja had never really thought about it, even though Ranai was where *tāde* parents had died. But now that Sindi had said it, it was scary to think that the sum of all human knowledge could be wiped out just like that.

“Anyway,” Sindi continued, “this is just what I remember and there is no way to verify this anymore, but back in the time of the first Archive, English was the most common language in the region, with almost everyone speaking it as a first or second language. Unfortunately, English didn’t have gender-neutral pronouns.”

“What? Really?” The Ninja couldn’t imagine how that could be true.

“Well, I guess the word *they* can be used in a pinch,” Sindi replied. “But the problem was that *they* is also a plural pronoun. Like, I can say that Naz told Billie a joke that made *tā* laugh and you understand immediately that it was Billie who laughed. But if I say that Naz told Billie a joke that made them laugh, then it becomes ambiguous if it was only Billie that laughed or the both of them. So monolingual people who only spoke English had trouble describing the gender-ambiguous people that showed up in replayed casts. However, Malay was the second most used language in the region, followed by Mandarin and all its dialects, and both of those languages have gender-neutral pronouns. Malay speakers began using *dia* and the suffix *nya*. For example: *dia* plugged in to *phonenya*. Meanwhile Mandarin speakers began using *tā* and *tāde* to deal with the ambiguity. In the end, instead of doing the grammatical gymnastics involved in using *they*, and dealing with the slight change in grammar

needed for *dia* and *nya*, we ended up with the easiest solution, which was *tā* and *tāde*.”

Wow! Even language was changed to deal with the problem. So was the Samurai male or female? It didn’t help that the Samurai was so androgynous.

“And once people started using these gender-neutral pronouns all the time,” Sindi said, “I think that people started forgetting why it mattered in the first place. The Samurai is the Samurai. It doesn’t matter whether *tā* is male or female. *Tā* is who *tā* is.”

Yes, that was true. It really didn’t matter.

“Sindi,” the Ninja said. “You are so smart. How do you know all these things, and why are you even here, in the centre?”

“Sure, I’ll tell you all about it,” Sindi replied. “Just as soon as you take off that mask and tell me your story.”

Sindi resumed the cast. They both couldn’t help flinching every time that whip raked some flesh off of the Samurai’s back. If what Billie said was true, that the Samurai had been a smug *butoh* when *tā* had killed Ali, then *tā* deserved to be whipped. Billie had been plugged in, had access to the Samurai’s feelings on the cast. But if what Sindi said was true, then what Billie said had only been *tāde* interpretation of the events.

What was the truth? The only certain fact was that the Samurai had killed Ali. But the why of it was more important than the act itself. People are not solely defined by what they do. The difference between justified self-defence and murder was the intention behind the act.

* * *

The Samurai's katana had been confiscated. This meant that it would be sold off via an auction soon, if it hadn't been already. The Ninja might not be able to buy it, but at the very least tā could examine it and see what, if anything, made that katana special.

The Confiscatorium was near Batam station. It was weird, going back to the place where tā had seen Ali last and not feeling anything. Shouldn't tā be grieving? Was something wrong with tā?

Even though tā had never been to the Confiscatorium before, it was easy enough to find it by following the signs. Lucky for tā, it was on the ground floor, so tā didn't have to take the stairs. The door was open. Facing the door, seated behind a desk, was the man with male pattern baldness from the cast, the man whose hair Ali had cut. According to the man's name tag, tāde name was Ken.

Ali had done a better job than the Ninja had expected. Ken's haircut had looked uneven and sloppy on the cast, but it seemed that Ken had settled into it. Tāde male pattern baldness had a sexy zing to it now.

"How may I help you..." Ken looked up and stared.

Had Ken caught a glimpse of the Ninja's hair? It was not possible; the Ninja was wearing a cap. What, then? Tā wasn't wearing the black garb but had a mask and had a wakizashi by tāde side and kris on tāde back. Perhaps tā reminded Ken of Ali?

"Hi," the Ninja said. "I am looking—"

"Phew!" Ken said. "For a moment I thought you were a ghost. A ghost ninja, hah! You might look a little like the ninja that cut my hair, but you certainly don't sound anything like tā."

Ken leaned forward, motioning for the Ninja to come closer.

The Ninja leaned forward.

“Are you the master ninja?” Ken whispered.

What? Where did this “master” stuff come from? How did Ken know about that? Maybe the Ninja should have left *tāde wakizashi* and *kris* behind. If *tā* were Ken, *tā* would have been angry about the whole having-a-haircut-forced-on-*tā* thing.

Ken leaned back. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me. It’s too bad I never got the chance to thank the other ninja.”

Wait, what? Ken wasn’t angry?

“I didn’t want this hairstyle at first,” Ken said. “Like, who was *tā* to come into my life and force it on me? Like, what a *butoh*, right? Then, the *siáuest* thing happened. I was getting my morning coffee at my favourite coffee shop when I noticed the barista flirting with me. I had to pinch myself to see if I was dreaming! Like, whoa, *tā* was like ten years younger than me – I felt like a dirty old man just flirting back. I mean, *tā* was a pretty woman, but I always thought I had no chance. Like I got the genes for male pattern baldness and that’s like one in a million. I’m already damaged goods. So why would *tā* even want to talk to me? I tell you, after that haircut, it was like I suddenly had my *mojo* back or something. *Tā* even asked me out! Can you believe it?”

The Ninja nodded. But it seemed a little far-fetched.

“So, too bad so sad the ninja fella got killed,” Ken said. “How to thank *tā* now? I was stupid. I didn’t want the haircut and I didn’t even know that I needed it. But it changed my life! Why the Samurai fella have to go and kill the ninja fella? I plugged in to the cast on the Archive – *tā* never even wanted to kill the Samurai. *Tā* only wanted to give the Samurai a haircut. Why so

stupid? Why so siáu? But I guess I can thank you instead. Because of you, because of your disciple, I got a girlfriend now.”

Perhaps the Samurai’s way of always getting permission before performing a haircut was not so right after all. Look at Ken. Tā was living proof. Sometimes people are too focused on what they want to know what they need. If someone needs a haircut to save them from depression and loneliness but doesn’t want one, aren’t we morally obligated to give one to them anyway? Perhaps Ali had not been trying to impress the Samurai. Perhaps Ali knew that Ken had needed this haircut. Perhaps Ali saved Ken from a lonely and loveless life.

“So, what can I do for you?” Ken asked.

“I’m looking for the Samurai’s katana,” the Ninja said. “It was confiscated so I was hoping it’s still here.”

“You mean this katana?” Ken took the katana out from under tādē desk.

“Yes, can I take a look at it?” the Ninja asked, not really caring why it was under Ken’s desk instead of in the warehouse like the rest of the confiscated items.

Ken nodded.

The sheath was plain, unassuming. The Ninja drew the katana and it looked like any other katana. Tā reached out to feel the blade and felt a tingling sensation. Tādē hair on tādē fingers stood up on their own. What was this? Tā slowly pulled tādē hand back, just to see how far this strange effect extended. It turned out to be quite limited in its reach, extending only a few centimetres away from the edge. But when tā moved tādē hand to the blunt side of the katana, the hair on tādē fingers seemed to be repelled.

“Wow,” Ken said. “That is so siáu.”

“Do you mind if I try something?” the Ninja asked.

“Sure,” Ken said.

The Ninja held the katana over Ken’s head and rotated the blade like tā had seen the Samurai do so many times in casts. Ken’s hair was short, but it could still be seen to be attracted and repelled by the katana. Why did this effect not show up in the casts? Perhaps the Archive didn’t know what to make of it.

“Whoa,” Ken said, “I feel strange. I think what you did made me taste something sweet.”

The Ninja moved the katana slightly to the left.

“Now I feel cold,” Ken said.

This was interesting. Was this another hidden property of the katana?

“Here, you try it on me.” The Ninja handed the katana over to Ken.

Ken held the katana over the Ninja’s head and did the same thing, rotating it. The Ninja felt a vague sense that all was right with the world and that everything would be okay.

“Wow, that feels good,” the Ninja said. “Now move it to the left a little.”

And in the instant that Ken moved the katana, the Ninja felt nauseous and smelled durian.

“Okay, that’s enough,” the Ninja said. Whatever was happening, it might be dangerous if it could make tā betray the king of fruits.

Ken handed the katana back to the Ninja and the Ninja sheathed it.

“I smelled durian but felt nauseous at the same time,” the Ninja said. “But I actually like durian and the smell usually makes me hungry.”

“So, you hate durian now?” Ken asked.

“I don’t know,” the Ninja said. “I hope not, but I guess I’ll find out the next time it’s durian season.”

How was such a blade made? The Ninja had no idea. Whatever the method, it must have been expensive. As far as tā knew, the Samurai wasn’t rich, so how tā had gotten a hold of it was a mystery.

And it seemed that the katana had the power to change people’s minds. The Ninja and Ken had been clueless amateurs. What wonders could the Samurai perform with this katana in tāde hands?

The Ninja handed the katana back to Ken. Whatever miracles the Samurai could perform with it, it was the property of the state now and would soon be the property of the highest bidder.

“Oh no no.” Ken pushed the katana back into the Ninja’s hands. “Take it, I’m giving it to you.”

What? Ken was going to give the Ninja the katana? For free? Did Ken steal it or something? What was the catch?

“Don’t worry, I bought it myself,” Ken said. “I didn’t steal it.” Had the Ninja’s reaction been so obvious?

“And here, take these as well.” Ken pushed Ali’s wakizashi and kris towards the Ninja.

Those weapons, Ali and the Ninja had made them themselves. They had been lucky and had found a wild colony of fabricator ants, had coaxed them into spitting steel into the two

configurations that were now lying on the table before the Ninja. It hadn't been easy. They had to make the moulds themselves and these were wild fabricants. It took a few weeks, but they were jumping for joy when the blades were finally finished.

Eh? What was this? Why was the Ninja crying? Of all the things in the world, it would be the sight of Ali's weapons that would start the flow of tears?

It was so stupid, so *siáu*. The Ninja tried to hold back *tāde* tears. But it was unbearable; it felt like *tā* would burst open if *tā* did not let go. So *tā* did.

"There there." Ken patted the Ninja on *tāde* cap. "You must have been very close to *tā*. I'm so sorry for your loss."

Ken's actions made the Ninja cry harder and louder but at the same time made the Ninja feel better. It was so funny how these things worked.

"The reason I'm giving you all of this, instead of selling it to you, is because I want to thank you," Ken said. "I can't express how much I want to thank *tā*, so I thank you instead. Thank you thank you thank you. Without you, *tā* would never have found me and changed my life so much. It has only been a day since I met Jan, but we fullcasted each other and we both know that we have found the one, the loves of our lives. And it was because of *tā* and because of you and the bond between the two of you that let *tā* change my life. What would my life have been like without *tā*? I think it would have been lonely days and nights, slaving away at this desk, no hope for the future, just getting enough to eat and drink. Just surviving. What a terrible fate to live and die like that, never to have experienced love and joy. A life like that

isn't worth living at all. But thank you, thank tā! Now I can see a future, a life worth dying for."

Yes, a life alone and without love; it would have been a terrible life indeed. The Ninja knew. Tā had been living like that before tā had met Ali and they had become friends.

Ken pushed the weapons into the Ninja's arms, then embraced the Ninja. Tears of joy flowed freely from tāde eyes. "Thank you thank you thank you."

So infectious was Ken's joy that the Ninja couldn't help but feel happy together with tā. But what was this? Was this the result of Ali's haircut?

Ken's joy mixed with the Ninja's sadness and produced a bittersweet concoction that the Ninja would treasure for the rest of tāde life.

Ali had not died in vain. In tāde death, tā had revealed a way for a revolution. Not by overthrowing the regime nor by societal upheaval. Society could be changed one haircut at a time. Here was the proof, weeping with joy, embracing the Ninja. With tāde wakizashi and kris, tā had exorcised from Ken the capitalistic core that lay in the heart of every citizen of Lionfish.

The katana was the key. In the hands of the Samurai, such a tool could be used to great effect. It could change the disposition of the councillors, of CEOs. It could change society from the top down. The only thing that was stopping the Samurai from doing that was tāde need for consent.

Did Ali intuit this? Was that why Ali seemed so intent on cutting the Samurai's hair? Did Ali see the root of the Samurai's lack of initiative and know that it needed to be cut down?

The Samurai had killed Ali. Forgiveness was hard at the moment. But only the Samurai could proceed, only tā had the skill. Perhaps the Ninja could learn, in time, the necessary skill in order to help. But, for now, tā had to find and convince the Samurai of the righteousness of tāde cause. Ali had done this miracle without the benefit of the mysterious katana. With the katana, how much more could the Samurai do?

“Thank you thank you thank you,” Ken said again.

“Tāde name was Ali,” the Ninja said.

“What a beautiful name,” Ken said. “That is what I will name my firstborn when I start a family.”

“Then take this.” The Ninja pushed Ali’s wakizashi and kris towards Ken. “I am sure Ali would have been honoured for you to take this.”

“No no, the honour is all mine,” Ken said.

“And don’t worry.” The Ninja took the katana. “Life will be better for you and Jan soon.”

* * *

How to find the Samurai? More importantly, how to convince the Samurai? The Ninja pondered these questions as tā swayed with the train.

“Hey hey, that barber fella is doing a fullcast again,” the Ninja overheard someone saying.

“What is it about?” someone else asked.

“I don’t know, there’s a ninja talking about something,” was the response.

“You think tā gonna kill someone again?”

“I don’t know, why don’t you tune in yourself and stop bothering me!”

The train was crowded and the Ninja couldn’t see who had been talking. But almost everyone around was on their phones. The Ninja looked over the shoulder of the man in front, and on tāde phone was an image of Billie. Billie was standing on a small hill, addressing a crowd of people.

A lot of the people around were plugged in to the same cast. What else could it be but the Samurai’s fullcast? And just like that, the Ninja knew where the Samurai was. That small hill that Billie was standing on was in a clearing near Kallang station, just a few steps away from the centre.

But what was going on? All the Ninja had to go by was the expressions on the faces of the people plugged in. But were those expressions a response to what Billie was saying, or was it a response to the Samurai’s response to what Billie was saying? There was no way to know, even if tā had been able to listen to what was going on.

Kallang station was on another line, so the Ninja got off and transferred. People on the platform were plugged in. When the train arrived, so were people in the train. Whatever Billie was saying must have been engrossing because the Ninja had to squeeze past all the people that were just standing near the door in order to get on the train. There was enough space deeper in, but these people had their eyes closed because they were plugged in.

It looked like Billie was still talking. It was amazing how far tā had come. Tā was still stuttering just a few days ago and now tā

was speaking publicly in front of a few hundred people. Unknown to tā, tā was also speaking to everyone that was plugged in.

“Anarchy!” came a lonely shout from somewhere deeper in the train.

Billie was speaking well, well enough to affect that man who had just shouted at least.

Why, Billie, why? Why did tā continue on this path? Didn’t tā know that tā was putting tāself in danger?

“Anarchy!” This time there were more people joining in.

From all the raised fists, it looked like everyone in that clearing was shouting it as well. It was only a few hundred people there, but judging from the reaction of the people in the train, it might be a few million tomorrow.

Billie had started a revolution without the Ninja, all right. But if only Billie had waited. There was a peaceful way to change society. Revolutions only led to conflict and bloodshed.

There was a collective gasp. Why? What had happened? The Ninja looked at the nearest phone and saw Billie. Something was happening – Billie’s face was distorting. Was there something wrong with the cast? Some signalling glitch? No, from the expressions on people’s faces, it was real. The Samurai was still fullcasting whatever was happening. And when grey sludge started oozing out of Billie’s face, the Ninja gasped too.

Billie was dying.

Billie was dead.

Naz appeared in the cast, kneeling over Billie’s body, shaking Billie’s body. No, Naz, what are you doing? Run away! Don’t you see what is happening? The violence has started; the hierarchy

has retaliated. Run, save yourself!

Naz fell, grey slush oozing and mixing with Billie's. No, Naz, not you too.

The Ninja wanted to shout, to scream, to rip out tādē heart to soothe its pain. All of tādē friends were now dead and it was all because of tā. Tā and tādē stupid hair. How satisfying it would be to pull out tādē hair in big, dumb clumps.

And what was the Samurai doing? Tā was just standing there. Run away, stupid butoh!

It was a woman now, coughing up red gunk. Three people had been killed now. How were they being killed? Who was killing them?

There were horrified gasps all around. People started unplugging. From the screens of those still plugged in, it was a child this time! A child! Seeing the child die on screen was horrible enough. No wonder people were unplugging.

Finally, the Samurai looked away, looked at a young tree, and started running.

Then the cast faded away. People checked their phones, looked at each other. There was no signal. It was unprecedented. Only the state had the power to sedate all the repeaters in an area. Did that mean that the state was behind the attacks? The weapon used was unlike anything anyone had ever seen before. Who else had the resources to have a weapon like that?

The train arrived at Kallang station. Only the Ninja got out; everyone else was trying to get in, trying to get away. Tā had to push tādē way through the throng all the way to the station exit. The area near the exit was eerily quiet and deserted.

There were bodies lying on the ground nearby but none right outside the exit. Perhaps people were just being extra cautious. Tā couldn't blame them; tā would have done the same thing tāself. But the young tree that the Samurai had been running towards was just a few hundred metres away. People were huddled against the trunks of trees between that young tree and the station. There were some bodies on the ground in the open area between the trees.

But as far as tā could tell, there were no new victims. Whether that was because the killer had stopped or was just waiting for some poor fool to step out into the open, nobody knew. Nobody, not even the Ninja, wanted to be the first to take the risk.

There was a scream from the direction of the young tree. A figure was falling from the canopy, holding what seemed to be a rifle, something ancient, definitely not biological. The rifle was longer than the person holding it. Was it the killer? It didn't look like it was the Samurai, but the Ninja was too far away to tell.

The figure and the rifle hit the ground and bounced. The rifle fell a short distance away from the body. Then the Ninja heard the splat and a metallic clang. Whoever that was, at least the weapon was no longer in the hands of the killer. So why was it still so hard to move? Tā had just been wondering why the Samurai had taken so long to start running and now tā knew. Tā just could not take that first step knowing that it might also be tāde last.

It took a braver soul than the Ninja to prove to everyone else it was okay to move. A teenage boy, wearing a mask and the anarchic symbol shaved into tāde head, started running from the

trunk closest to the station. It was only when tā had successfully made it all the way into the station that everyone else started running. But unlike everyone else, the Ninja was running towards that young tree, not away from it.

The person that had fallen from the canopy was a man. Maybe it was the killer? None of the other bodies around looked like the Samurai. There were a few bodies in the clearing. Two of them were Billie and Naz, and another two were the woman tā had seen in the Samurai's cast and the child.

There was a scream from the canopy. It didn't sound like the Samurai, but tā couldn't be sure; tā had never heard the Samurai screaming before. But if it was, then the Samurai was in trouble.

The Ninja raced up the stairs to the top. It didn't take long; tā had had lots of practise, living in the centre.

The Samurai was on the roof, along with a man with tāde back facing the Ninja, who was holding a pair of scissors in one hand and a knife in the other. What was going on? One of the Samurai's hands looked like it was in bad shape. It seemed likely that the man, who was probably the killer, had been fighting the Samurai all this time. And it looked like the killer was winning the fight.

Quietly the Ninja unsheathed the katana and approached the killer. The Samurai looked intently at the killer. It was not possible for the Samurai not to have noticed tā. Perhaps the Samurai didn't want to give tā away? If the Samurai had lost this fight, then the killer was dangerous. Tā needed all the advantage tā could get.

The killer had hair that was all the same length, all standing

straight, every strand the same. It was almost ludicrous how precise the similarity was. But there was a single strand that was different. It grew from the back of the killer's head, so the Samurai would not have seen it from the front as it looked the same height as the rest. But from the back, the Ninja could see that it was slightly taller. And now, it seemed like the rest of the strands bowed slightly towards it.

The Ninja raised the katana. That strand was the key – it was the ideal that the other strands strove to be, an ideal worth killing for. Cutting off the killer's motivation for *tāde* evil deeds was the first step towards justice and redemption. But as the Ninja swung the katana, the killer rose, turned around, and the katana cleaved off part of the killer's jaw instead.

Tā pulled back *tāde* swing, but the katana was sharp and it had been too easy for the blade to cut through bone. By the time *tā* had stopped *tāde* swing, the katana had already cut through a part of the killer's neck.

The blood spurting out of the wound meant that the killer wouldn't live long. The Ninja didn't know what *tā* would have done if *tā* was in the same situation, but certainly not what the killer was doing, which was to stare at *tā* with malicious intent. The killer didn't even scream. Who was this person and how had *tā* come to be this way, to be able to so calmly assess options for murder while *tāde* life bled away?

Something had changed. Even though there was no change in the killer's expression, the Ninja knew beyond a doubt that something had changed and that *tā* was in danger. The killer still had the knife and the Ninja knew that the killer intended

to use it. So the Ninja decapitated the killer before the killer could do anything. The killer continued staring at the Ninja, even as tādē head rolled off the canopy. The headless body fell, the arm that was holding the knife twitched a little, the remnant of latent malevolence.

The Ninja should have been relieved. Instead, it was like a thousand ants were crawling all over inside tādē skin. Was this what the Samurai had felt when tā had killed Ali?

The Ninja threw away the katana, the weapon that tā had used to kill someone, but the horrible feeling would not go away. Sure, tā had killed someone who had been trying to kill tā, but it still felt like trashmites were eating away at all the goodness that was left in tā. There was nothing that tā could do. It was an inescapable fact. Tā had killed and there was no way to undo that.

Someone was laughing. Who could be laughing at a time like this? The Ninja looked at the Samurai and no, the Samurai wasn't laughing. Tā looked as horrified as the Ninja felt.

It wasn't laughter. Someone was trying to hold tādē soul together and the staccato was the sound of that person failing.

It was the Ninja. Tā was crying.

SAMURAI BARBER VERSUS NINJA HAIRSTYLIST

The Samurai stepped forward and swung tade katana.

The Ninja blocked the swing at the very last moment.

Damn the butoh! Even though tade had been gloating over the kill, the psychopath still had the presence of mind to draw tade wakizashi and block the swing.

The Samurai went back into tade original stance, a sort of half-squat with both of tade feet apart and pointing in opposite directions. Tade was supposed to hold tade katana with both hands above the head, but since that was impossible, tade rested the katana upon tade shoulder instead. If tade was lucky, the Ninja wouldn't know what to make of this stance and would underestimate tade range.

"What are you doing?" the Ninja asked, angry and possibly in pain. Perhaps that first swing had been more effective than the Samurai had thought.

There! The Ninja was letting down tade guard. The Samurai transferred tade weight from tade back foot to tade front foot and stepped forward, keeping low all the while, and swung tade katana down at the same time.

Sadly, the Ninja brought up tade wakizashi just in time to block the attack. But there was a small wince of pain from the

Ninja. Perhaps it was a sprained wrist from that first attack.

“What are you doing?” the Ninja asked again. There was a hint of desperation as well. Yes, in time, if the Samurai attacked relentlessly, the Ninja’s wrist would fail.

“Why are you trying to kill me?” the Ninja asked.

The Samurai’s response was to attack again.

* * *

From the corner of tādē eye, the Ninja saw the katana coming for tā. Instinct drove tā to draw tādē wakizashi, just in time to block the attack, but tādē reaction had not been fast enough. Tādē wrist was at an awkward angle when it absorbed the impact of the katana upon tādē wakizashi.

“What are you doing?” the Ninja asked the Samurai.

The Samurai didn’t respond. Why? What was going on? Didn’t tā just save the Samurai? Did the Samurai really want to kill tā? Anyway, the Samurai looked far enough for tā to lower tādē wakizashi a little bit. There was no use trying to defuse the situation by talking through a sword.

The attack came as a surprise. The Ninja barely had enough time to bring tādē guard back up to block the attack. Tā couldn’t help wincing in pain. It hadn’t looked like the Samurai was in range. It was probably that stance the Samurai was in, that made the distance look deceptively far.

“What are you doing?” the Ninja tried asking again. Tā was in serious trouble. With tādē wrist in such bad shape, it would only be a matter of time until the Samurai broke through tādē

guard and killed tā. And from the looks of things, the Samurai was really trying to kill tā.

“Why are you trying to kill me?” the Ninja asked. Tā didn’t understand why the Samurai would act this way.

The Samurai attacked again, not even bothering to change the angle of attack. It seemed like the Samurai knew about tāde wrist. If tā didn’t figure out something soon, tā was going to die.

The biggest problem was that the katana was longer than the wakizashi. The Samurai knew this and stood far enough where tā could attack but the Ninja could not. And with the Samurai’s practised stance and footwork, tā could attack the Ninja with impunity all day long without risk of reprisal. And that swing was deadly, even with only one hand.

That was it, wasn’t it? The fact that the Samurai only had the use of one hand? It meant that tā couldn’t have a firm grip on the katana.

The Ninja drew tāde kris, holding it in a reverse grip. Tā knew the angle of the Samurai’s next strike. The plan was to block the katana in such a way so that the katana would slide along the kris’s sinuous edge. Instead of rebounding, the katana would be deflected downward and back towards the Samurai’s feet. That would put the Samurai off balance and give the Ninja a chance to disarm the Samurai. And maybe stop this stupid fight once and for all.

But the Samurai went into a more neutral stance, both feet hip-width apart and with the katana held in front of tā. Whereas before the Samurai looked too far away, now tā looked too close for comfort. The Ninja squirmed, fighting the urge to take a step

back, to run away. But wasn't running away the best thing to do? This was an opponent that was years beyond tā in terms of experience. The Samurai had known right away what tā was up to when tā drew tāde kris and had adjusted accordingly. This was a fight that tā couldn't win. Running away was a good idea, but tā didn't know if the Samurai would stab tā in the back or not.

A stab from the front was what the Ninja should have been worried about. There was no footwork from the Samurai, just a sudden jerk of torso and arm, and suddenly the katana was coming for the Ninja's face.

* * *

The Samurai let out a breath that tā hadn't known that tā was holding. Tāde katana had impaled the Ninja's cap. The Ninja had leaned back, as people reflexively do when they see something coming at their face. Free from its confinement, the Ninja's hair revelled in its newfound freedom, each strand unfurling and proudly taking its place.

It was not natural; it was impossible. For the hair to have been under a cap and then settle naturally into that chaotic configuration once it was free, it was as if they had a life of their own.

The Samurai couldn't suppress a shudder. The Ninja's hairstyle reminded tā too much of the nightmare with the infinite eyes. The Samurai was not prepared for the Ninja's counterattack.

Perhaps inspired by the Samurai's thrust attack, the Ninja threw tāde kris right at the Samurai's face. The Samurai leaned back and also brought up tāde right hand to protect tāde face.

There was barely any sound, maybe a kind of *thunk*, when the kris embedded itself into tåde useless hand.

As soon as tåde brought tåde hand back down, tåde saw that the Ninja was already inside of the katana's range. There was nothing tåde could do except to fall onto tåde back as the Ninja tackled tåde. The Ninja then kneeled on tåde chest, with the other foot pinning down tåde hand, and pointed the wakizashi right at tåde throat.

"Why are you trying to kill me, you siáu butoh? I just saved you!" The Ninja seemed to be on the verge of tears, shouting at the Samurai.

"Why? Did you take a good look before you came up here? Did you take a good look at all the bodies? All your victims?" It was hard to breathe with the knee on tåde chest. The words came out more as a wheeze.

"What? I had nothing to do with that!" the Ninja said.

With the knee on tåde chest, tåde laugh was more like a cough. "Do you think I'm stupid? All of your disciples, they dress like a ninja and emulate your hairstyle by chance? For fun? I find that hard to believe."

"Disciples? What disciples? Are you talking about Billie and Naz? They called me master, sure, but I've always told them not to call me that. And what has that got to do with anything? Their killer is lying dead right over there." The Ninja looked away for a moment, at the dead body, but not long enough for the Samurai to do anything.

"That's where you're wrong," the Samurai said. "Their deaths have everything to do with you. The only possible result of you going around spreading your anarchist ideology was their

deaths. You must have known this, that the powerful would not bow and give up their power without a fight. And here they are, fighting back. All those people, fathers, mothers, children, even your friends, all dead because of you. Even Ali is dead because of you. You sent Ali after me and now tā is dead.”

“I sent Ali after you?” The Ninja seemed angry now. “My anarchist ideas? You stupid butoh, this has always been Ali’s revolution. Tā found me in the centre and shared with me tāde idea of anarchy. Tā was the one who wanted to recruit you to our cause, even after I told tā that you wouldn’t want to. And after you killed tā, Billie took over. If you want to blame someone for what happened here today, blame yourself. Because if you hadn’t killed tā, things could have been different.”

The Ninja seemed to be telling the truth. But then again, tā could be lying. Tā must have been lying. It was hard to believe otherwise. It didn’t make any sense. Everything that came out of tāde mouth and through that mask must be a lie.

“Don’t believe me?” the Ninja asked. “Go ahead, ask me how I managed to get your katana.”

The Samurai’s katana had been confiscated by the state. For the Ninja to have gotten it, tā must have met Ken. The katana must have been worth some money at least, maybe even a lot of money. In either case, the Ninja did not look like the type to have that kind of money. “Did you kill Ken?”

The Ninja sighed. “Ken is fine. In fact, tā couldn’t be better. Tā said that tā found the love of tāde life and it was all thanks to Ali’s haircut. Then tā gave me your katana, for free.”

“Pah!” The Samurai couldn’t believe it. “Don’t lie to me!

Nothing in this world is for free!”

“Well, it’s true,” the Ninja said. “If you don’t believe me, you can ask Ken yourself. Ali’s haircut saved Ken from a long and lonely life. But, more than that, it also cut out Ken’s capitalistic core.”

That was impossible. The Samurai knew what a hairstyle could do, better than anyone else. Cutting hair was more like making a suggestion. Whatever change the person manifested had always been a part of that person. A haircut just brought it to the fore. It couldn’t change who someone was. It couldn’t change something so ingrained. It just was not possible.

“So you see,” the Ninja continued, “if Ali were still alive, this revolution would have been done one haircut at a time. But you killed Ali. And Billie took over. And this was the result. But this wasn’t my fault or your fault; it’s just the way things happened. And the reason I come to you now, saved your life even, is because I need your help. If anyone can do what Ali did, it must be you. You can change society for the better.”

“Even if what you told me was true, even if it were possible, you think changing people without their permission is a good idea?” the Samurai asked.

The Ninja seemed to consider the Samurai’s words, so the Samurai said some more. “You think it’s okay to change who someone is, just because you think it is for their own good? What happened, then, to that Ken that you thought would have never found love? Maybe that Ken might have found love by tāsēf, might have changed tāsēf in tādē own time, in tādē own way. Maybe tādē loneliness might have been fuel for tā to go on and

achieve great things. But now we will never know because Ali came along and forced a change upon tã. And what if in the future, Ken realises that all tã did was due to Ali's haircut and it was never tã in the first place? What if tã becomes even more unhappy? If what you are saying is true, then Ali killed that Ken and who that Ken would have become, and replaced it with a Ken who might be happy right now, but who knows if tã will stay happy."

"Come on," the Ninja said, "Ken is alive and well. To say that Ali killed Ken when all tã did was help, that is so siáu."

"What's siáu is that you are trying to do the same thing to society," the Samurai said. "Change society for the better, or more precisely, for what you think is better. Who are you to decide? Are you a prophet now? No, because no one can know the future. And that's why you are so dangerous. Why do you think people try to emulate you, your ninja clothing, your hairstyle? Whether or not people follow your orders, you are their leader. You are the embodiment of this idea that individuals can try to change society to suit their own tastes and that they can try to do so without any kind of plan. Change society one haircut at a time, hah! You have no idea what you are doing and yet you are trying to meddle in things that you don't even understand. You don't even know what you don't know. You think you've got it all figured out, don't you? Ignorant butohs like you who think you can change the world are the most dangerous."

"And who are you?" the Ninja asked. "You don't know the future either. Who are you to try and kill me?"

"I don't know the future," the Samurai said, "but I know

what you have done and what you want to do. You told me yourself. Your life, for the lives and safety of all the other two billion in Lionfish, that is an easy choice to make.”

“So what? I should have left you and that killer alone?” the Ninja asked. “I should have asked you if you wanted help first?”

The Ninja had a point. But the Samurai had no chance to mull it over because the Ninja continued, “I see someone who needs help, I help. It’s my duty to help. And right now, I see that society needs help.” It seemed the Ninja assumed assent when the Samurai was silent. Good. Tā could think of how to get out of this situation while the Ninja thought that.

“You know that Ali got scammed out of tādē life savings?” the Ninja asked. The Samurai just looked on and let the Ninja assume whatever tā wanted to assume. “It was one of those touters around the stations. Ali went with one of them, didn’t sign anything, didn’t agree to anything, and still managed to get all of tādē savings stolen. Tā had to divorce tādē wife and emancipate tādē child so that they wouldn’t be liable for tādē debt. And why? Because last year, a magistrate had ruled that implicit consent was all that was needed to enter into a contract. That ruling enabled Ali to be scammed like this. The implicit consent in tādē case was to simply enter the office. They got tādē ID when tā plugged in to their door. And with tādē ID, they were able to set up a direct debit with tādē bank. And that’s not the worst part. Ali brought us around a few stations and it seemed like the same scam was being run on every station. And they were run by literally the same people! And I mean literally the same people. As in someone or some company is growing people, the same set

of people, to staff all these scam companies.”

That sounded preposterous. Surely there were laws against this sort of thing?

“I know, I didn’t believe it myself either until I saw it with my own eyes,” the Ninja said. “And Ali had went to Lionfish News, but they didn’t want to tell the story because there would be libel suits filed against them if they did. It was cheaper and more profitable not to run the story. This is the sickness at the core of our society. This is what happens when money is valued above all else. Even you were affected by this sickness. You didn’t contest your murder charge when the most you were guilty of was trainslaughter. Why? Because you wanted the ninety-nine per cent discount. You traded being a convicted murderer instead of a trainslaughterer for the rest of your life for that discount.”

The Samurai was careful not to let *tāde* anger show. To ascribe such intentions to what *tā* had done, what a *butoh*! No, *tā* had accepted the murder charge because *tā* had murdered Ali. Money had nothing to do with it.

“And this is all due to the power structure in Lionfish,” the Ninja said. “With money being the only thing of value, it is not people but the public and private limiteds that have the most money. And what is a company? An abstract entity, not human, and yet having more rights and privileges than one. It has no compassion and morality. It is only driven by greed. All it wants is more money. And it will do anything for profit. Doesn’t it scare you to be ruled by such inhuman entities?”

The Samurai stayed silent.

“It should,” the Ninja said. “I don’t know if anarchy is the

answer. But it must be better than the current hierarchy at least? So what do you say? Will you help me?"

This was it. This was the chance that the Samurai needed. Tā nodded but didn't say anything. Tā didn't trust tāself to keep tāde contempt out of tāde voice. Then tā looked at the wakizashi at tāde throat, then back at the Ninja.

* * *

It seemed like the Samurai understood what the Ninja had been saying all along. And yes, it was a little hypocritical to talk about power structures and how bad they were when the Ninja was on top of the Samurai, holding a sword to tāde throat.

What could the Ninja do? The Samurai had been trying to kill tā all this while. Tā didn't know if the Samurai really believed in what tā was saying or just wanted to get out of a bad situation. To trust the Samurai now would be foolish, but what else could tā do? If tā wanted the Samurai's help, tā had to trust the Samurai.

The Ninja stood and sheathed tāde wakizashi. The Samurai smiled. There was something about the smile that was predatory. Was the Ninja making a mistake in trusting the Samurai? Had tā really won the Samurai over to tāde side? The answer to both of those questions seemed to be no. What now? Draw tāde wakizashi again? No. There was no point. Tā needed the Samurai's help, whether the Samurai wanted to kill tā or not. The only chance tā had, that Lionfish had, of saving itself from capitalistic dystopia, lay with the Samurai.

Tā offered a hand to the Samurai. Was that surprise or

disgust that crossed the Samurai's face? Whatever it was, the Samurai took the proffered hand and helped tãself up.

The Samurai was still smiling. The Ninja wasn't surprised at all when the Samurai head-butted tã. It wasn't even that painful compared to tãde heart being crushed by tãde disappointment.

Tã fell. Now it was the Samurai on top of tã, kneeling on tãde chest, holding tãde kris against tãde throat. Why wasn't tã dead yet? The Samurai could have easily killed tã already.

"Did you really think I would want to help you?" the Samurai asked. It must have been rhetorical because the Samurai didn't wait for an answer. "Anarchy, what a siáu idea! If everyone is equal, then who is going to have the power to punish the criminals? Anarchy assumes that everyone is ideal. But people aren't ideal. Society needs rules and a hierarchy to enforce those rules."

There was a pause and it seemed like the Samurai wanted the Ninja to respond. Refracted through tears, the expression on the Samurai's face was a blur, but the Ninja's despair was crystal clear. They disagreed on how society should be structured, but come on, they could have put aside their differences and worked together. If this was the way it was going to be, with the Samurai slitting tãde throat with tãde kris, then maybe society didn't deserve to be saved.

* * *

"Aren't you going to say something?" the Samurai asked. Even though the rest of the Ninja's face was masked, the eyes, eyes that were on the verge of tears, told the Samurai that there was

something obvious that tā was missing. It told tā that tā was wrong.

It was infuriating, the Ninja's assumption that tā was right, that tā knew the way forward. Nobody knew. Nobody could know. It made the Samurai want to punch the Ninja in the face, punch that smugness right out of the Ninja, but one of tāde hands was holding a kris to the Ninja's throat and the other was useless.

"You're wrong!" The Samurai shifted more of tāde weight onto tāde knee, applied more pressure onto the Ninja's chest.

The Ninja began gasping for air.

"You're wrong!" There was a crack. The Samurai had gone too far.

It all happened so fast. The Samurai hadn't expected the Ninja to go into a coughing fit, and the kris that tā held against the Ninja's throat drew blood. The Ninja's mask got wet with blood. But it couldn't have been blood from the shallow wound on the Ninja's throat. A broken rib must have punctured one of the Ninja's lungs.

If tā didn't do anything, the Ninja would die. It was what tā wanted all along. It would be a slow and painful death, something the Ninja deserved.

But tā had been holding the kris against the Ninja's throat all this time. If tā really wanted to kill, tā could have done it as soon as tā had gotten the upper hand. Perhaps, deep down, tā didn't really want to kill the Ninja, didn't want to kill anyone ever again.

If tā killed the Ninja, tā would be cutting off the Ninja's capacity for change. And tā had to believe that the Ninja could change, that tā could help change the Ninja for the better. Because tā had to believe that tā could change. Tā didn't want

to be a killer, not anymore.

The Ninja's mask was drenched in blood now. The Ninja was gasping, trying to breathe, but drowning in blood instead.

The Samurai used the kris and cut off the mask. When the mask unravelled, it revealed the reason for its existence. From the right edge of the Ninja's lip to tādē ear was a jagged scar. But that wasn't the worst of it. Tādē plug was too short, extruding just a few centimetres from tādē nape. Most of its length was a strip of flesh that looked more like a ragged piece of cloth, like it had been torn out with great force.

The Samurai couldn't suppress a shiver of revulsion, couldn't stop from imagining what such an event must have felt like and shivered once more. To have the most sensitive organ of the human body ripped out like that, what had happened to the Ninja?

All this time the Samurai had assumed that the Ninja had worn tādē plug in a loose loop around tādē neck underneath that mask. But if the Samurai had just given it a second thought, tā would have realised just how ridiculous that scenario was. Most people's plugs were long enough to reach their waists. Some were shorter, tā had seen some that reached only the shoulders, and some longer. But even if the Ninja had been one of the unfortunate people to be born with a shoulder-length plug, it would not have fit underneath that mask without a visible bulge.

Ali's mask had had a bulge. Even Billie, Naz and all the other ninja wannabes that the Samurai had seen. Everyone had assumed the same, that the Ninja had a working plug. The reality was too painful to fathom.

Plugs are used for everything. Phones, doors, bank accounts,

everything. Even sex. The intimacy that can only be gotten from a mutual private fullcast between lovers, there is nothing quite like it. The Samurai couldn't imagine how the Ninja had lived tade life all this time without a plug.

Perhaps that was why the Ninja wore the mask. Because tā couldn't live like the rest of society, tā had to hide tade disability in order to try to fit in.

All of this didn't fit with how chaotic and evil the Ninja's hairstyle was. The Samurai had been wrong about that. What tā had once thought was the manifestation of a defiance against the natural order of things was instead a deep-rooted self-loathing causing each and every strand on the Ninja's head to avoid any and all contact with any other strand.

Living tade life so profoundly disabled could not have been easy for the Ninja. Add to that the scar that marred tade face. Both scars looked really old. Perhaps tā had had them ever since tā was a child. After a lifetime of other people hating tā, tā must have started hating tāself. The self-hate was so ingrained into tā by now that the Samurai could see no way to cut it out.

The Samurai put away the kris. Tā had been wrong, so wrong. To want to better society even after all that the Ninja had endured, the Ninja was someone special.

* * *

The Ninja coughed. It was a dry cough, so at least the blood wasn't coming from tade lungs. It was just a case of saliva going down the wrong pipe.

“Are you okay?” The Samurai helped the Ninja sit up. What was this sudden change of heart? Just a few moments ago the Samurai was trying to kill tā.

The need to cough finally faded and tā could breathe again. And tā had a lot of catching up to do.

“Are you okay?” The Samurai placed a hand on the Ninja’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” the Ninja said between deep breaths. Why was the Samurai worried about tā? Why wasn’t the Samurai running away? Everyone else who had seen tā unmasked had done that.

“Are you sure?” The Samurai was looking not directly at the Ninja, looking a little downward, probably at tāde mouth. Of course, tā must have looked terrible with all the blood over tāde face. The Samurai must have thought that the blood had come from a punctured lung as well.

“No no, I’m fine.” The Ninja wiped off the blood from tāde face with a sleeve. The blood had come from the cut – more of a nick, really – on tāde chin, when tā had started coughing. If the Samurai had been serious about killing tā and had held that kris more firmly, then tā would be in serious trouble now.

“I’m so sorry.” The Samurai embraced the Ninja.

“Ow!” The embrace was too tight. Tāde ribs were still hurt.

“I’m so sorry!” the Samurai said again. Probably for the ribs this time and not the whole trying-to-kill-tā thing. And while tā was grateful about the Samurai not killing tā, tā had to wonder what was going on here. Things had turned around so fast that it was a miracle no one had whiplash. And one or two of tāde ribs were probably broken thanks to the Samurai. But

that hug had felt so good. It had been so long since anyone had held tā like that.

And why was everything starting to blur?

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” The Samurai hugged the Ninja again, gentler this time.

No no. There was no way this was happening. Tā didn’t deserve it. The Samurai was trying to trick tā, again.

Tā tried to wriggle out of the embrace. It should have been easy; the Samurai was one-handed, after all. But tā did not succeed. The Samurai managed to hold on.

The Ninja was bawling now. But tā didn’t know why. Tā tried to stop but couldn’t. There was just something about being held this way, with the Samurai whispering, “It’s okay, it’s okay,” into tāde ear, something buried deep within tā, something so familiar.

* * *

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” the mother whispered to the crying child. The child had hair that went every which way, each strand entangled with the strands around it, like they were play-wrestling. Tā had been playing tag on the branches of a sapling when tā had fallen and broken tāde arm.

“Stupid kid,” tāde father said. “Fall once not enough? Have to fall and fall until you break your arm?” Yes, it was not the first time that tā had fallen. In fact, just last week, tā had fallen a couple of times also while playing tag. But this time tā had fallen one time too many. At first it seemed that everything was still fine. But when tā had tried to push tāself up this time, tā heard a crack

and then a kind of hammering pain that was more intense than anything tā had ever felt in the six years tā had been alive. Tā had even fallen on tāde plug that one time, and while it had been painful, it wasn't anything compared to what tā was feeling now.

"Shut up!" tāde mother snapped. "Tā is in enough pain already."

"Stupid stupid stupid." Tāde father kept on repeating those words, like a mantra.

Maybe tāde father was right. Perhaps tā really had been stupid. Why else would tā keep on playing tag with tāde friends after falling so many times? Tā should have stopped playing after the first time. But tā had kept on playing and tā was in this state now because tā had been stupid. No amount of crying could help with the pain.

"Shh, shh," tāde mother whispered into tāde ear. "It's okay. Your dad loves you very much, but tā has some trouble showing it sometimes." That wasn't true at all. Tāde father hated tā. Tā knew because tā had seen this look on tāde father's face before. A few weeks back, tā had asked tāde father to play with tā. But tāde father had been plugged in to a cast and didn't respond. So tā shook tāde father. The look that tāde father had after unplugging from the phone was the same one tāde father was giving tā now. It was the same look that everyone else on the train was giving tā. Everyone hated tā.

Tā stopped crying, took to sniffing instead. Tā didn't want to disturb anyone with tāde crying any more.

They got out of the train but couldn't get out of the station as there was a crowd of people blocking the exit. Now it was tāde

turn to be annoyed. Tāde arm was still hurting. Why couldn't these people get out of tāde way?

"Stay here, I'll go see what's happening," tāde father said.

But no one was going anywhere. The crowd was thick and unmoving.

"What's that sound?" Tāde mother asked aloud. There was a sound like distant thunder, except that it was continuous.

"Don't know," tāde father said.

The sky, what they could see past the crowd, turned an orange-red, like a sunset but darker.

"Stupid stupid stupid people," tāde father said, "stand around for nothing. Come, let's go to the hos—"

The thundering grew unbearable. There was a loud crash, the unmistakable sound of a tree splintering. Then there was a flash of very intense blue, followed by another crash, which shook the ground. The thundering had stopped, now replaced by the twisted screams of wood and steel breaking apart. The screaming was replaced by a loud roar. Tā tried to cover tāde ears, but all that did was make the pain in tāde broken arm flare up again. But at least tā had hands. Tāde phone had no hands. All tāde phone could do was scream.

Tāde father was shouting something, but all tā could hear was a ringing in tāde ears. Tāde father said something to tāde mother, then picked tā up and ran back deeper into the station. Tā could see why. Looking over tāde father's shoulders, tā could see a severed canopy getting bigger, falling towards them.

Even though tā didn't know back then what that falling canopy meant, the looks on tāde parents' faces told tā all tā

needed to know. They were scared beyond anything tā had ever seen before. If they were scared, then it was a really bad situation. Tā started crying.

Tāde mother held tā in a tight embrace, saying something that tā could only hear in the dreams or nightmares to come. But back then, all tā heard was the ringing in tāde ears. Sometimes, in dreams, tāde mother would say, “I love you.” Other times, in nightmares, tāde mother would just scream. Whatever it was, it did not matter back then. There was a great rumble and everything went black.

* * *

It seemed like the Ninja might cry forever. Even after shedding all those tears, tāde heart still felt as heavy as before.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” the Samurai whispered into tāde ear. It seemed that the mystery of tāde mother’s last words had been solved. Surely tāde mother had been trying to comfort tā. Surely tāde mother had been saying, “It’s okay, it’s okay.” Although tā could not have heard it back then, it comforted tā now to know that tā had been loved so much.

But tāde mother was dead. Nobody could love tā now. Even tā tāself was disgusted when looking into a mirror without the mask. How could one not? Tāde plug was disgusting.

Tā didn’t know if the care and concern the Samurai was showing tā now was genuine or not. Back then, twenty years ago, the nurses and doctors who were supposed to care and be concerned for tā couldn’t conceal their revulsion. So how could

the Samurai be genuine now? How could anyone accept tā for who tā was, unmasked, when even tā tāself could not?

But it felt so good. Why should tā care if it was genuine or not? Tā hugged the Samurai back, pressed tāself against the Samurai, rested tāde head against the Samurai's shoulder – oh, how good it felt. Tāde ribs hurt, but tā didn't care. It felt like tā was melting away.

And with every cry, it seemed as if tāde heart was getting lighter.

* * *

The Samurai stroked the Ninja's back, saying, "There there, it's okay, it's okay."

But everything was not okay and just saying that it was wouldn't make it okay. The Ninja was still crying so hard that tā was worried each time the Ninja sobbed, especially with those ribs that might or might not be broken. If tā didn't do something, then nothing would change. The Ninja would remain just as broken as before. The proof of any change, positive or negative, would be in the hair. But right now, the Ninja's hair was still the same.

Tā ran tāde hand through the Ninja's hair. Tā didn't know why tā did it; it seemed like it was the right thing to do. The Ninja responded by taking a sharp intake of breath, then looking up at tā with tear-filled eyes. Perhaps tā had been wrong about this. The Ninja's hair was still the same.

When tā lifted tāde hand away from the Ninja, the disappointed mewl the Ninja made almost gave tā a heart attack. Even worse, the spaces between the Ninja's hair had

grown wider, the self-hate more evident.

Tā quickly brought tāde hand down, as if patting the Ninja on the head had been the plan all along. There was a gasp and maybe a soft moan from the Ninja. Tā lifted tāde hand up and this time the Ninja's hair didn't get any worse. It seemed like the Ninja understood now that it wasn't a gesture of rejection.

Tā brought tāde hand down again. There were tears falling from the Ninja's eyes, but they were tears of joy. That joy was infectious, travelling up each strand of hair, bringing them closer together, tiny pinpricks of it suffusing into the Samurai, going from tāde palm right into tāde brain. The Ninja purred, the delightful timbre making the Samurai smile also.

With each pat, the gaps between the Ninja's hair shrank. This was it; this was how the Samurai would transmute the Ninja's hatred into love. But it wasn't enough. Every time tā patted the Ninja, tāde hand would mess up the Ninja's hair a little.

Gently, with a finger, the Samurai lifted the Ninja's chin. Tā looked into the Ninja's eyes, wondered how it was possible that eyes that had seemed evil just a few minutes ago were now so trusting and vulnerable. Tā had to tread carefully now. Any mistake would undo all that tā had done up till now and the Ninja's self-hatred would come back stronger than before.

Tā was suddenly afraid. Tā now held the Ninja's sense of self in tāde hands and tā was afraid tā would mess it up. But the Ninja's trust in tā never wavered. And right now, tā was the only one who could do what the Ninja needed. So tā did.

Thunder and fire. It must have been what the Ninja had felt because tā felt it also. An electric shock where tāde lips

touched the Ninja's forehead that spread from there, turning into a warmth that drove away the shivers that had been going up and down tãde spine. And right in front of tãde eyes, the hair on the Ninja's head coalesced, each strand embracing every other strand around it. When the transformation was finished, what was left was a keratinous maelstrom of intertwining clumps of hair going every which way. The self-love was evident all the way down to the roots. There was no danger of the hairstyle ever being usurped by self-hate ever again. And just like the clumps of hair that were reaching outward, the Ninja radiated love. The Ninja leaned forward and hugged the Samurai, who wasn't prepared and fell backward.

There they lay, faces mere centimetres apart, looking into each other's eyes. The Ninja was crying and giggling at the same time, and that pure joy made the Samurai do the same.

It made no sense at all; they had exchanged no words, yet the connection between them was deeper than a fullcast. The Samurai was afraid to look away, tã didn't want to lose whatever it was that was between them.

G R E T A

Greta was dreading going down the charred stairs, not because of the crime scene that lay behind the singed door at the bottom but because tā would have to climb back up after tā was done. And tā didn't really want to put on the full-body suit that tā had to wear in order to avoid crime scene contamination, but tā had a job to do.

Tā could only make out the word *Shade* from the sign above the door; the rest of the words were just patches of soot. Beyond the door was the síauest sight tā had ever seen.

The bones of – tā counted fourteen – people were in a circle in the centre of the room. In tāde experience, people in burning rooms usually went for the door. In this case, the door was right there; why didn't they try to escape?

"Sun, you gotta see this!" Greta said.

"See what?" Sun was in the same getup as Greta, coming down the stairs. "Hmmm," was all Sun said when tā saw the síau sight. Yup, that was Sun all right, cool under any circumstances except when there were trashmites involved. In fact, Sun was already examining the door, leaving the trashmite-infested interior to poor old Greta.

"Really?" Why did tā always get the dirty work?

"Love you," Sun said with an impish grin.

It wasn't funny. The trashmite infestation was no joke. At least the trashmites scurried away instead of crawling all over tā as tā entered the room.

Usually, tā could point Huahua at the victims and get some information from the Archive. Unfortunately, the pests had eaten that option away. All that was left was a half-burnt picture of a smiling man with close-cropped hair that stood up straight. Tā asked Huahua to run a facial match, but the Archive returned thousands of results, so it looked like this was a dead end.

"You have anything?" tā asked Sun.

"Take a look at this." Sun pointed at a spot near the door, which looked like any other spot near the door. "The tendon has been cut."

Tā adjusted tāde glasses but still couldn't see any difference.

"The tendon was on the outside, so this was murder," Sun said.

"Shit." If the tendon had been on the inside, then at least they could have written this off as some kind of suicide cult. Since it was on the outside, any hope tā had for a quick resolution to this case was now gone.

"Don't worry, we'll solve this case and then we can get you a new pair of glasses." Sun patted tā on tāde head, which was under the full-body suit, so the gesture didn't do much except to annoy tā.

"I'll go and follow the money, you check out the IDs from the door," Sun said. Tā should have been the one poring over accounts, not Sun. Tā was the better accountant. Stupid optometrists and their exorbitant fees!

“See you tonight.” Sun gave Greta’s hand a light squeeze, then went up the stairs.

Greta went back to work.

* * *

Greta had interviewed nine suspects so far, heard nine different stories, all with one recurring theme. These people had been swindled out of their hard-earned savings, no doubt about it, but that wasn’t an excuse to commit mass murder. The law was the law; there were legal recourses available, especially when, from what tā had heard, they hadn’t even signed anything.

So far, all nine alibis checked out. There had been eleven IDs from the door, though. One had killed tāself and the other, Ali, was recently divorced. Ali’s spouse – ex-spouse, rather – didn’t know anything about where tā had went but had mentioned something about a court case where the swindlers had been acquitted. Greta had to find out more about that. But first things first, tā had to go home and get some sleep. Tā was so tired after walking around all day.

Sun still wasn’t home by the time tā got out of the shower. Tā checked with Huahua and there was a message from Sun. “Money trail leads to Dawn Consortium in Kay-Ell. Be back in a few days.”

“Okay, take care. Nothing on my side yet.”

Greta tried going to sleep, but the court case was still nagging at tā. Tā couldn’t see how Shade Consultants could have been acquitted. So tā woke Huahua up, found the case in

the Archive and read the magistrate's judgement.

What the shit was this? Implicit consent is all that is required to enter into a contract? Even the judgement in the second court case, where Ali had sued Shade Consultants for breach of contract, was irrational. The part where they were trying to sell Ali some stupid investment scheme was the goods? Any reasonable person could see that Ali and all the other victims had been defrauded.

Tā looked up the court case where implicit consent had been first recognised, and it was a strange case. Two magistrates had died of natural causes before the third magistrate had made that *siáu* judgement. One died of anaphylactic shock and the other from cardiac arrest – both rare things to die of in this day and age. There had been no evidence of foul play, but tā only had to look at the name of the defendant, Dawn Consortium, to suspect that something was going on.

Upholding the law used to be righteous. It was supposed to protect ordinary people like Ali, like Greta and Sun, but nowadays, the law felt more like a plaything of the rich and powerful, a tool to oppress the masses. But what could tā do against a monstrosity like Dawn Consortium? They seemed to have their tentacles in everything, were able to bend even the law to their will. Tā was only a detective. Tāde job was to uphold the law, not to determine its morality.

At times like this, tā usually had Sun to talk to, but Sun was three hundred kilometres away in Kay-Ell. The only thing tā could do was to send a benign message, “Sun, look at these,” along with a link to the court documents, because tā knew for a

fact that all messages were sent to the Archive. Anything tā sent could be used against tā in a court of law.

* * *

Something was missing, but Greta couldn't figure out what it was. Tā got out of bed, trying to remember. Perhaps tā had missed a clue as to Ali's whereabouts? No, there was nothing to do on that front but to wait for Huahua's facial recognition app to get a match. Tā knew that Ali was somewhere in the centre, though, but tāde knees weren't what they used to be, and tā didn't want to split the case bounty with another detective, who might even steal the whole thing and leave tā with nothing. There was only one other detective that tā trusted.

"Sun!" Searching for Ali would go much faster with the two of them. But where was Sun?

It finally hit Greta: the realisation that the thing that tā had felt was missing was Sun's presence. How long had it been? The last time tā had even heard from Sun was two months ago, when Sun had went to Kay-Ell.

For all tā knew, Sun could be lying dead in a shallow grave somewhere. Or perhaps Sun was being kept prisoner, being tortured? Those were the only reasons tā could think of for why Sun hadn't contacted tā.

But the thing that disturbed tā the most was that tā had managed to forget, had gotten used to Sun's absence.

* * *

Greta got an alert. It was Huahua's facial recognition app. Sigh, it wasn't Sun. Ali had been spotted in Batam. It was too early, and costly, to call for backup at this point, so tā went alone.

Batam was about twenty minutes away by train. Maybe Ali would still be around by then, maybe not, but this was the best lead tā had so far. The train started to fill up with people heading home as the train went through the business districts around the centre of Lionfish. An old man came in, scrawny legs shaking, both hands gripping a walking cane. Every step the old man took without falling was a challenge against fate. Everyone else was deep into their casts. Young people nowadays! Greta knew that one day tā would be as frail as the old man, but not today, so tā gave up tāde seat.

The old man sat down with a huge sigh of relief, then plugged in to tāde phone without saying a word to Greta. Et tu, old man? Et tu?

The train lurched and Greta lost tāde balance. "Ow!" someone cried out. It was the person tā had stepped on.

"I'm so sorry," Greta turned and said.

"It's okay," the person said, but tā was definitely still pissed. Tā looked familiar, Greta had to take a second or two before realising it was the Samurai Barber. Greta had always wondered why the Samurai hadn't gone into broadcasting – the casts of the Samurai had a few million views each. Looking at what was on the Samurai's phone, with casts about how to make money from casting, it seemed like the Samurai was wondering the same thing.

"Did you recently lose someone?" the Samurai asked.

What? "Why, yes," Greta said. "How did you know?"

“You look lonely and sad,” the Samurai said.

Was that true? As far as tā could tell, tā looked the same as tā had always looked, when tā had checked that morning.

“Oh, yes. I lost Sun,” Greta said. Maybe it was a gradual change. Maybe being away from Sun for so long had an effect that tā couldn’t have noticed.

The Samurai reached out and patted Greta on the head. What the shit was this? But why did it feel so good? Why couldn’t tā help but laugh? It must have been the way that the Samurai had patted tā, filled with such tenderness. That must have reminded tā of Sun, the way Sun would hold tāde face, like it was the most precious thing in the world, before they kissed. What was it now, two months? Three months? If Sun was still alive, tā would have found a way to contact Greta by now.

“I’m sure your child wouldn’t have wanted you to grieve alone,” the Samurai said.

Wait, what? They never had children. What was the Samurai talking about? Anyway, tā had a job to do, a suspect to arrest. Tā couldn’t afford being mushy-mushy now.

“And are you looking into going into casting?” Greta asked the Samurai. “I couldn’t help but notice what you were watching.”

“Yes,” the Samurai replied.

Greta wondered if it was a good idea to help the Samurai get into casting. But there didn’t seem to be any reason not to. “I can help you with that. I have...” Tā hadn’t casted ever since Sun went missing. Tā couldn’t get into tāde jovial personality with Sun who knows where, and besides, tā hadn’t had the time to research recipes while in the middle of a case. “...had my own channel

with more than a hundred thousand subscribers. Apparently, there is a niche for old cooking recipes that I fulfilled.”

“Wow!” The Samurai looked like a child that Greta had given some candy to. The Samurai wanted to know more and so Greta obliged, imparting as much of *tāde* casting wisdom as possible. How was someone as young as the Samurai such a newbie at this? *Tā* even had to help the Samurai set up a channel. And Sammy, the Samurai’s phone, had this impish personality that reminded *tā* of Sun. Everything nowadays reminded *tā* of Sun.

Come to think of it, *tā* didn’t even know the Samurai’s name. “We’ve never been properly introduced. I’m Greta.”

“Nice to meet you Greta, I’m—”

A scream cut the Samurai off.

“There’s someone with a sword!”

Everyone except the Samurai scrambled to get away from a ninja with a sword. It was hard to tell, what with the face mask and different hairstyle, but Greta was pretty sure that the ninja was Ali. After staring at Ali’s face for a few hundred hours or so in the facial recognition app, yup, it was Ali.

It was time to close this case once and for all. *Tā* should call for backup, should stay and try to arrest Ali, but the crowd kept pushing *tā* back, pushed *tā* right out of the train.

The train ran off with the Samurai and Ali still inside. Argh! Stupid shit! *Tā* was so close! If *tā* had stayed on the train, at least *tā* would have gotten *tāde* arrest participation cut. Now, all *tā* would get was a measly information bounty. Argh!

Some money was better than nothing, so *tā* called it in.

* * *

“What about Sun?” Greta couldn’t believe that the Captain was giving up without an investigation. It was like Sun had been written off already.

The Captain leaned closer to Greta, whispered, “Helios Systems.”

Helios Systems was a major contributor to the police, supplying phones, cars, even a computer. One could even say that the police worked for Helios. But why was that important? Why had the Captain whispered the name of their patron company?

Tā used Huahua to look up Helios. Helios was a subsidiary of Dawn Consortium. Shit, shit, shit. What had Sun gotten into?

The Captain looked almost sad. Probably the Captain wanted to but couldn’t do anything about Sun. “There’s some sort of public gathering at Kallang. Should be a good first day for you to show your new partner the ropes. Now get out of my office!”

Greta would have preferred to go solo instead of being assigned a conscript. Even worse, tāde new partner had breath that smelled like piss after asparagus.

Acrid-breath followed tā with a blank look. Probably one of those conscripts that didn’t care about the whole patriotic enterprise, which meant that tā would have to pick up the slack.

The gathering they were supposed to keep an eye on turned out to be a massacre. What a first day for acrid-breath, who was now vomiting. Poor thing. Seeing a dead body was one thing, no cast in the world will prepare you for seeing one in person, but these bodies were grotesque. Some of the bodies had faces

which seemed to be sloughing off, others were lying in a pool of bloody chunks of what was probably their lungs. Ack! Tā shouldn't have had a heavy breakfast that morning.

There was even a decapitated head. But what was left of the face was still recognisable. Where had tā seen that face before?

Near that head another body, limbs splayed out unnaturally. Tā had seen bodies like this before, usually the result of falling from a great height. Near that body was a rifle, except that it wasn't alive. It had the barrel, the trigger, the stock, so it sure looked like a rifle, but it seemed to be made out of what was probably a few hundred thousand dollars' worth of steel. And, instead of an opening to shoot a projectile, the barrel had some kind of lens instead. What did this thing shoot?

Looking at the head again, it too looked like it had fallen, probably from the canopy of the young tree nearby. Whatever had happened to these two had happened on top of that tree.

The lift took its own sweet time climbing up the trunk. That meant that Greta had plenty of time to get acclimated to the addition of a sour tang to tāde partner's acrid breath.

"Here." Greta handed over tāde canteen.

The little shit took it and drank straight from the canteen! Normal people would hold the canteen a slight distance away from the mouth, so that there wouldn't be any contact between someone else's canteen and their mouths; it's just proper etiquette, after all.

"Thanks." Acrid-breath handed the canteen back to tā.

"Keep it." Tā was getting too old to get angry at this shit. At least tāde partner's breath smelled a little better.

The lift finally got to the top, but there was one last staircase. Sigh. Stairs. The door to the canopy was open and when tā looked out, there were two people sitting together embracing each other like lovers. Tā might have thought that they were up here enjoying a romantic respite if not for the splatter of blood and the headless body near them. Tā turned and wanted to warn acrid-breath about the grisly scene, but tā was too late. Tāde partner was already throwing up in a corner. At least there wasn't much to throw up this time.

Obviously, the head down below belonged to the headless body up here. Then there were the weapons, two swords of various lengths and a twisted dagger, lying around. Who was or were the perpetrators and who were the victims?

"Greta?" one of the two, the one with the shaved head, asked. Tā took a closer look, and it was the Samurai Barber! And it looked like the same thing that had happened to the dead people in the clearing had also happened to one of the Samurai's hands. It was unlikely that the Samurai was the perpetrator.

The other suspect had a plug that was disgusting to look at, but that didn't look recent. It also seemed unlikely that the Samurai, as a victim, would sit together with the perpetrator in such a manner, which, after taking a closer look, was more parental or familial than romantic. But it was possible that there could be two perpetrators. Perhaps one was a spotter or lookout and the other the shooter. Tā just didn't have enough information.

Tā could smell acrid-breath coming. "What should we do?"

"Arrest these two and bring them to the hospital," Greta said. The Samurai's hand needed looking at, and the other one

was covered in blood. Tā didn't know whose blood, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Acrid-breath cuffed the two of them and brought them away. Great job, conscript!

"Go on, I'll finish up here," Greta said. But really, tā just wanted some time to think without gagging.

First thing tā needed to do was to call forensics and get them to look at the bodies and the rifle. But according to Huahua, there was no signal. Huahua looked as confused as Greta felt. As far as Greta knew, only the police, or maybe some other branches of government like the military, had the resources to put repeaters to sleep. But both the police and military couldn't have done something like this; both had old equipment that were more likely to cough bullets than shoot them, not hundred-thousand-dollar rifles that shot who knows what.

This whole situation was looking like another big steaming pile of shit, like Shade Consultants big. And Greta knew, without any doubt, that tā was getting too old to deal with this kind of shit.

* * *

Greta wanted to return the Samurai's katana without any fuss, just put it down and go, but the Samurai was awake, sitting up on the bed, so tā asked, "How's the hand?"

"A little weird, I guess." The Samurai flexed tāde right hand. "It's still too weak to do anything, though."

Would it kill the Samurai to be a little more grateful about

the miracle that was modern reconstructive treatment? Just ten years ago, the Samurai would have had tādē hand amputated instead of reconstructed.

“But that’s still better than having no hand at all,” the Samurai said. That was the proper grateful attitude that the Samurai should have had in the first place.

“Spoke to your friend. Tā told me what happened.” Greta uncuffed the Samurai’s left hand. The cuff gave a big yawn, making Greta stifle a yawn of tādē own, and went back to sleep after wrapping itself around Greta’s belt. “Also checked the Archive for your cast so we know it wasn’t you that killed all those people. You’re free to go.”

“How is tā? Is tā okay?” the Samurai asked.

“Yes, tā is fine,” Greta said. “Tā has a broken rib but not enough money to get a more effective treatment, so tā will be staying here in the hospital for a few more days.”

Pain, or perhaps regret, flickered across the Samurai’s face. Maybe the Samurai was the one who had inflicted that injury? Well, that was between the two of them.

“As far as the police are concerned, you’re free to go,” Greta said, “but you should probably check with the nurse before you actually go.”

“Any idea who the shooter was and why tā was doing it?” the Samurai asked.

“No, but your friend did mention something about clones...” That was it! The decapitated head that had the face which tā felt tā recognised, tā had also seen that face at Shade Consultants, in the half-burnt picture. Clones! What the shit!

Maybe those thousands of facial recognition matches were actually matches, not a glitch. Tā took out Huahua and checked a few. There they were – different clothes, doing different things, but wearing the same face.

“Recognise tā?” Greta showed the Samurai one of the matches. Tā wanted a second opinion because maybe tāde old eyes were playing tricks on tā. The Samurai’s eyes widened. Yup, there was no doubt about it now – it was the same face.

“Where is that?” The Samurai hissed that question out.

“Now this is interesting,” Greta said. “Recognise them?”

The Samurai looked confused now. On Huahua was a picture of two of them, talking to each other.

But weren’t there thousands of matches? This was so siáu. They were just doing their jobs, then they got the wrong case and now Sun was dead. Bad luck, then dead. What the shit was this? Why was the world like this?

“Did you know there used to be something called retirement? Basically, you worked until you have enough money to stop working, then you stopped, retired and did whatever you wanted to do. Can you imagine that?” Greta asked the Samurai.

The Samurai shook tāde head.

Greta didn’t really care if the Samurai was listening or not. Tā just wanted to say what tā wanted to say. But the Samurai was really listening, and tā was thankful for that.

“My parents did that; just about thirty years ago they were able to retire. If they were alive right now, they would call me siáu for still working. But what can I do? I can’t stop, I still have bills to pay! So we work work work, our whole lives, and for what? All

it takes is a little bit of bad luck, just assigned to the wrong case, and now Sun is dead.”

Tā would never see Sun again. Sun was really dead. And the last time they had seen each other, the last time Sun had said goodbye, tā hadn’t even replied. Why? Why had tā been so stupid? Why hadn’t tā held on with all of tāde might?

The Samurai gave tāde hand a light squeeze. Wasn’t that the last thing Sun did as well?

With tāde other hand, tā wiped away the tears that tā hadn’t even realised were there. It wasn’t grief, tā was sure about that. It was more like tā had been so stupid! There were so many things tā could have done that day when Sun went off; tā could have done anything and that would have been better than the nothing tā did. Argh! So pathetic!

“You know, it wasn’t a coincidence that we met on the train. I was there to arrest Ali for murder. Tā had killed fourteen people and one of them looked exactly the same as the person you fought today, the same as the two fellows I just showed you, the same as these thousands, probably. And look where they all are!” Greta showed the Samurai. “They are all in Kay-Ell! Sun was following the money trail for Shade Consultants and ended up there. These people, Shade, the one today, they are all connected somehow, which means that... if they are even just a little like the psychopath today... then Sun has no chance. Tā is dead!”

Tā looked at the Samurai and the Samurai was hurting too. Why? Did the Samurai know Sun? But no, the Samurai was hurting because tā was hurting. In the Samurai’s eyes was the reflection of tāde own pain.

“I’m sorry,” Greta said. And tā left. Tā couldn’t, wouldn’t, stay. What was the point? The Samurai was practically a stranger; tā had no one left that tā actually cared about. Tā had nothing left to care about. The job that tā had worked at for most of tāde life had betrayed tā, taken away the one thing tā had loved, when it should have protected them. Instead, the love of tāde life had been devoured, sacrificed to the capitalist monsters of Dawn Consortium. What could tā do? What could tā even do? Tā was too old for this shit.

There was someone at the door to tāde house. Dishevelled hair, clothes almost rags, it wasn’t anyone tā could recognise through tear-blurred vision. Was it an assassin? Come to tie up loose ends? Great, maybe tā could meet up with Sun again in the afterlife, if there even was such a thing. Tā would not go down without a fight, though. If it was another one of those clones, tā would have no chance in a straight fight, but the ledge was right there, and tā was sure tā could take both of them out.

But it wouldn’t do to fight with blurred vision, though, so tā wiped away tāde tears. Greta still couldn’t recognise who it was. The assassin’s eyes were covered by hair, or maybe shadow. It was hard to tell where dirt ended and hair began, the assassin was so dirty and messy.

The assassin approached.

Greta went into a wider stance, readied tāself to fight. But tā did it subtly. To the assassin, it should look like tā was just continuing to walk forward. But the assassin stopped. How did tā know?

Greta looked at the assassin, saw that tā was just standing there, arms at the side, palms open, unarmed. Well, the assassin

could stand there looking nonthreatening all tā wanted, but Greta wouldn't be fooled.

Then a tear fell, winding its way down the assassin's face, past the grime, past the lacerated lips, lips with a hint of an impish grin that Greta had known most of tāde life, lips which said, "Don't you recognise me?"

Sun? Tā wanted to cry, laugh, run, ask what the shit had happened, all at the same time, but that seemed really complicated, so tā did nothing at all.

Sun crossed the gulf between them, held Greta's face, tender, delicate, and kissed tā. How did tā ever forget about the taste of these lips? So pathetic!

"Are you okay?" Sun asked.

No, of course not! But Greta kissed back anyway.

THE SAMURAI'S REVOLUTION

With thousands of those psychopathic butohs in Kay-Ell, the Samurai knew that tā had to go there and try to stop them. Cutting people's hair without their permission had been one thing, at least the ninjas had been trying to do something good, no matter how misguided they might be, but these bastards were killing people outright! And it seems like that was not all they were doing. They were also running scams and swindling people out of their hard-earned savings, which was probably worse. At least dead people were dead; their scam victims would suffer the consequences for the rest of their lives. There didn't seem to be anything tā could do, though. Greta and tāde son were police and even they hadn't been able to do anything.

Maybe it was impossible after all. Whoever was behind this had a lot of resources, was able to get away with growing people, making clones, with killing police even, could even sedate repeaters like it was nothing. Tā would be going up against someone at the very top of the food chain, while tā was somewhere near the bottom. Tā couldn't do anything, not alone.

Tā didn't expect to agree with the ninjas, but they were right about one thing: to topple any hierarchy, tā needed anarchy. The top of a hierarchy was only at the top because it was supported

by the people at the bottom, people like tā.

Or maybe not so much like tā. Tā had close to half a billion subscribers now. Wow! Well, at least it made tāde job a little easier if tāde cast would reach half a billion instead of fifty million, and the extra money in tāde bank account didn't hurt either.

But tā had to do something first.

"Hey, you wanna upsell me on another one of those reconstruction treatments?" tā asked the nurse with the greedy bangs. Tā could see the greed spread to the nurse's eyebrows immediately.

"But you already had one of those." The eyebrows turned disappointed when the nurse's read through the Samurai's chart.

For someone whose job was to take care of other people, it was strange that the nurse couldn't fathom that of course the treatment wasn't for the Samurai. It was for the Ninja. Tā was responsible for putting the Ninja in the hospital in the first place.

The nurse was more than happy to quote the Samurai a price once an understanding was reached, a price that would wipe out the Samurai's newfound wealth, wealth that was enough to do that thing that Greta was talking about, stop working and eat assam laksa every day. Well, tā couldn't do that with someone out there making thousands of psychopathic butohs, and it sounded like a really good way to bore tāself to death anyway.

After paying for the Ninja's reconstructive treatment, tā really didn't know how to tell the Ninja about it. Tā stood outside the door, pondering, prepared a speech, but when the Ninja smiled at tā when tā entered the room, tā forgot all tā had prepared and just said, "Hi."

"Hello," the Ninja said back.

Tā stood there, looking at the Ninja looking back, smiles wavering because it was really awkward that they still didn't know each other's names. "I'm Dakota," tā said.

"Oh, I'm Lee," the Ninja said.

Dakota laughed at that, stopping when Lee turned away. Lee probably thought that tā was making fun of Lee's name or something. "No, I'm sorry," tā said. "Lee is my surname!"

Lee looked surprised, then began to laugh as well, a gentle bubbling that was entirely unlike what Dakota had heard on the canopy the day before, the crying that tā had mistook for gloating. Tā felt silly for ever having confused the two.

Lee winced, stopped laughing. "Ow."

"I'm sorry," Dakota said.

"It's okay," Lee said but obviously still in pain.

"Lee?" Dakota wasn't sure how to bring up the fact that tā had paid for Lee's treatment, so tā went with a silly question instead. "Is that your first name or surname?"

"Eh? I don't know," Lee said. "My parents died when I was very young. We were living in Ranai when that shark attack happened, so I don't know if Lee is my first name or surname."

No, it couldn't be! If Lee was at Ranai, during the so-called "shark attack", probably what happened to Lee's plug also happened at Ranai as well. Which meant that Dakota was the reason for all of Lee's suffering, because tā knew what had really happened at Ranai, knew who was really responsible.

"Is everything okay?" Lee tried to hold Dakota's hand, but Dakota pulled tāde hand away.

* * *

“Dakota Lee! You come back here!” said the mother to the child with bangs going opposite directions from a centre parting, like open arms welcoming an embrace.

Mom tried to hold tādē hand, but tātā pulled away. “No!” tātā screamed and ran out of the house. It was so unfair – tādē little brother only got a light slap on the wrist for eating an apple tart before the new year, but when tātā did it, not only did tātā get a spanking, Mom also decreed that tātā wouldn’t get to eat any apple tarts at all! All because tātā was one year older.

“Dakota Lee! You come back here right now!” tātā heard Mom shout.

“Tātā will come back when tātā is hungry,” tātā heard Dad say.

Mom and Dad got into an argument that tātā was too far away to hear but tātā could guess that Mom was angry about Dad coddling tātā. Their arguments usually went like that. Well, tātā was angry with both of them right now – at Mom for being so unfair and at Dad for standing by and letting Mom be so unfair.

Tātā ran to tādē hiding place in a nearby tree, a hidey-hole in the roots. Tātā was still small enough to get in, but tādē katana was a bit too long, so a small part of it was jutting out. But it was okay since no one would think to look for tātā there. Even if they found tātā, they wouldn’t be able to reach tātā. And it was nice, dark and cool, although sometimes there were some trashmites creeping around, but they usually left tātā alone.

Tādē bum still hurt from Mom’s spanking, but tātā sat down anyway. The cool, hard earth made it sting a bit less, but it still

hurt a lot. Stupid Mom!

“Dakota! Dakota!” Someone was calling out for tā.

In the distance tā could see that it was someone with straight-arrow sideburns poking out from underneath a cowboy hat. Uncle Rudy!

Uncle Rudy looked straight at Dakota’s hiding place, but it seemed like tā didn’t notice. “Dakota! Dakota!” tā continued searching elsewhere, or at least pretended to. Slowly but surely, tā got closer to Dakota. And when Dakota saw Rudy’s grin, tā knew that tā had been found.

“Go away!” This wasn’t hide and seek. Dakota wanted to be left alone. Stupid Dad didn’t even come out to find tā.

And Dad was really stupid. Everyone had always said that tā had gotten tāde smarts from Mom’s side of the family. Last year during reunion dinner, Uncle Rudy had told a joke. Tā couldn’t even remember what it was about anymore, just that it was really funny. Mom, Uncle Rudy, and Dakota had laughed and laughed. Dad hadn’t gotten the joke and only had an awkward smile that only made them laugh more. Even tāde brother had joined in.

“You’re going to miss dinner you know.” Uncle Rudy peered into the hiding place, grinning.

“Go away!” Who cares! It wasn’t dinner without apple tarts.

“Come on, what’s wrong?” Uncle Rudy frowned.

Dakota’s response was to move away from Uncle Rudy and close tāde eyes. Tā heard some shuffling. Maybe Uncle Rudy had really left tā alone? Tā took a peek, ready to shut tāde eyes again just in case Uncle Rudy was still watching tā, but Uncle Rudy had taken a seat, facing away, not doing anything. And somehow,

Uncle Rudy just being there gave tā a small measure of comfort, but not enough to erase stupid Dad's betrayal! Tā had been hungry after doing katana practice all morning, so tā had asked Dad if tā could eat an apple tart. Dad had said yes, but Dad had kept quiet when Mom found out – what a useless traitor! Tā hated the both of them so much – oooh, tā wished they were dead! Even the pipsqueak of a brother!

“Dakota?” There was an urgency in Uncle Rudy's voice.

Tā looked up and everything was tinged red like it was dusk, but it was morning when tā had ran away and it hadn't even been an hour. Tā peeked past the roots, past Uncle Rudy, up at the sky. There were some clouds, but the red on them was shifting hue all the time, like it was flickering. Tā had no idea what was going on.

A shadow fell across the land, the leading edge of darkness racing up the trunk of the tree where tāde home was. Tā saw people, just tiny figures from where tā was, getting out of their homes and waiting at the lift landings. Some of them went to the stairwell instead. Tāde home was on the other side so tā couldn't see it, but maybe Mom and Dad and the pipsqueak were running down the stairs right now.

Even the people in the tree above tā were getting out as well. Tā could hear the commotion.

The red tinge turned to orange and it was getting warmer now.

Tā looked at Uncle Rudy, who was looking at the part of sky that tā couldn't see. Uncle Rudy was shaking, eyes wide.

“Uncle Rudy?”

Uncle Rudy turned to look at Dakota. “You stay in there, don't come out.” Tāde voice quaked. Dakota had never heard

Uncle Rudy sound like that before and that scared Dakota. What was happening? What was going on?

A flash of violet filled tādē vision, searing tādē eyes. Tā closed tādē eyes, but it was still there, a bright violet that could be seen even through tādē eyelids. Then a loud roar shook tādē hiding place, making the trashmites scurry all over tā. Before tā could feel disgusted, tā was thrown forward face first into the edge of tādē katana's scabbard. Through the pain and the din, tā could make out wood splintering and steel breaking apart. The roots tā was hiding in got uprooted and blown away by a gale, sending it and tā tumbling away.

Tā held on for dear life, not knowing what was happening.

The rolling stopped. The hiding place settled.

"Uncle Rudy?"

There was no answer.

Tā climbed out. Trees were burning everywhere, the heat making everything waver, the smoke stinging tādē eyes.

Tā couldn't see Uncle Rudy anywhere.

There was a great crash and tā turned toward it, faced a mountain of fire. And out of that rose a black thing, huge, expanding. It was like a void in the world; it was completely dark, even though there were fires all around it. It grew and grew; it wouldn't stop growing. It grew until it filled tādē vision, from horizon to the sky. Tā looked up and up, trying to find the sky, until it was like looking down a cliff and tā felt that tā was going to fall up.

All of a sudden, there were white spots all over the thing. In the centre of these spots was a black. They looked like eyes,

millions of them, all over the thing, the fires reflecting off the whites to make them look bloodshot. And the eyes, all of them, were looking at tā.

Some of the eyes seemed to be moving apart. A crack appeared where the eyes moved apart, although tā only felt it instead of seeing it, like there was an even deeper black against the black of that thing. It began to split, like reality itself was being torn asunder, revealing blue sky behind it, revealing inside it countless things that writhed.

The fires around the thing were extinguished, blown out by a great force, and tā heard a loud, warbling wail. Tā covered tāde ears, but it was still painfully loud. Tā tried to scream but couldn't hear tāself over the thing's wailing.

There was only a ringing in tāde ears now, so tā grabbed tāde katana and ran. Tā had to get away from that thing, it was so síáu! But tā knew that the thing was still looking at tā with all of its eyes, still laughing at tā, because tā had wished tāde family dead and it had come to grant tāde wish. Now, tāde family was really dead, Mom, Dad, tāde brother, Uncle Rudy, all dead, along with who knew how many others, all dead because of tā.

Tāde hair, once as welcoming as a fatherly hug, started to curl inward.

* * *

“Is everything okay?” Lee tried to hold Dakota's hand.

But Dakota pulled away, muttering, “I'm sorry, I'm sorry.”

“Why? What are you sorry for?” tā asked.

But Dakota seemed to be too distraught to answer, not even looking at tā while still repeating, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Tā didn’t know why Dakota was feeling guilty. That was it! Guilt. All these years, Dakota had only worn one hairstyle, that horn-like style. But Dakota had shaved it all off after killing Ali. Now, as a happy side effect of reconstructive treatment, Dakota’s hair was back to how it used to be. But tā had seen it short. Where once tā thought that the horn hairstyle had been the work of a master barber, now that tā could compare its beginnings to its apotheosis, tā knew that Dakota’s barbering had very little to do with it.

On the surface, it would seem like each strand of hair supported each other, intertwining in ways that ultimately resulted in that keratinous horn, but tā could see now that it was a deception. There was a single strand in the middle that was not part of that horn. The rest of Dakota’s hair had conspired, was conspiring now, was curling around now, to hide that strand.

Tā didn’t know what that lonesome strand was all about, but based on Dakota still profusely apologising to tā for some unknown slight, the rest of Dakota’s hair was probably filled with guilt. Each guilty strand reinforced each other until that was all Lee and everyone else could ever see.

“I forgive you,” tā said. Tā wasn’t sure it would help since tā didn’t even know what tā was forgiving Dakota for. But one of the guilty strands immediately turned straight, maybe even curved outward a bit.

“I forgive you,” tā said again. Unfortunately, no other strand turned straight. Dakota needed a hundred thousand or so

absolutions and tā could only provide one. What was that centre strand? What was at the core of Dakota's guilt? Tā didn't know, couldn't know. What could tā do? How could tā help Dakota?

Tā hugged Dakota close, whispered into Dakota's ear, "It's not your fault." But nothing happened. There wasn't much tā could do to help Dakota. The only person who could forgive Dakota was Dakota. All tā could do was to be there.

Dakota's phone squeezed tāself out of Dakota's pocket and looked at Lee angrily. Maybe Lee had been hugging Dakota too tight and smothering the phone?

"Sorry," Lee mouthed, letting go.

The phone climbed up Dakota and parked itself on Dakota's shoulder, licked Dakota's face. That seemed to calm Dakota a bit; at least the muttering had stopped.

Another phone was in Dakota's pocket, looked around a bit before clambering up Dakota's arm. This one looked familiar.

"Toshi?" The phone turned around, looked at Lee suspiciously. It really was Toshi! Toshi didn't seem to recognise Lee, though, and went on to lie down beside Dakota's phone.

When Dakota picked Toshi up, Dakota's phone cried out, reaching for Toshi. But Toshi didn't care. Ali's death must have affected tā greatly. And when Dakota put tā beside Lee, it only made Lee ask, "Why? Why are you giving Toshi to me?"

"I think Ali would have wanted you to have tā," Dakota said.

"But I can't take care of tā," Lee said. "I don't even have a plug."

"You will soon enough," Dakota said.

"Wait, what? What does that even mean?" Lee asked, but

Dakota had turned around to leave. Tā tried to hold Dakota's hand again. "Wait, wait!"

But Dakota pulled away again.

"Take care, Dakota," Lee said.

Dakota paused for a while, then left without saying anything.

It was so infuriating, not being able to help.

"What are we supposed to do?" tā asked Toshi. Toshi gave tā a raised eyebrow before going back to sleep.

* * *

Dakota had to leave. If Lee knew what tā had done, there was no way they would remain whatever it was they were – not exactly friends but not mere acquaintances neither. They had just met a few days ago and back then tā had wanted to kill Lee! So definitely not friends. But one didn't spend most of their wealth to pay for an enemy's reconstructive treatment either.

Whatever they were, whatever they were meant to be, it had to wait. Right now, tā had to go to Kay-ell, which was supposed to be three hundred kilometres away, about four hundred by train. It would take at least five hours to get there – more than enough time to calm tāself down. That was what tā thought, but the train was filled with people. All the jostling around only made tā more irritable. Nobody cared that tā was having a bad day.

When a spot between a seat and the door opened up, tā moved in immediately. With tāde back against the wall where tā could feel the ins and outs of the train's breathing, tā could at least start relaxing a little.

In through the nose, out through the mouth, in time with the train.

Tāde usual routine was to plug in to Sammy and watch a few casts, but tā didn't want to pass on this weird mood tā was in to Sammy, so tā watched other people plugged in to their phones. Everyone was plugged in. Entire families. Opposite tā was a family of four. All four of them were plugged in, connecting to someone else who was probably hundreds of kilometres away, on the other side of Lionfish, instead of connecting with each other, just centimetres away.

These people were squandering away their precious time together. Tā wanted to scream at them. But tā used to be the same. The only person tā had ever talked to on a train was Greta. And the only reason they had talked was because Greta had stepped on tāde toes and apologised, which had led tā to continue the conversation. If Greta hadn't said anything, tā might have just gone back to whatever cast tā was plugged in to at the time.

There was something wrong with society. Tā had no idea how it had come to this, how everyone had gotten so disconnected from each other. Casts were supposed to connect people, let people share their experiences and feelings.

Right in front of tā was a teenager in a school uniform who was plugged in to tāde cast from the massacre. The teen was slack-jawed, staring into space with a vacant stare. Show some emotion!

Tā saw the mother getting killed on the teen's phone. Tāde cast had been a fullcast, so tā knew that the teen should have been feeling the fear that tā had been feeling that day, but the teen had no discernible expression. When the cast ended, the teen

replayed it again. It seemed to be an edited version of *tāde* cast, with just the deaths. The teen's expression never changed.

Where was the anger? The outrage? What happened to grief or even fear? *Tā* had checked the statistics back in the hospital and more than enough people had seen it. Yet there was no reaction, just apathy. Or even worse, perhaps it was only morbid entertainment.

Tā went up and tapped the teen on the shoulder. "Pretty horrifying, right?"

"Eh? I dunno. Could be fake." The teen shrugged.

Of all the things *tā* had considered, *tā* had never thought that people would think that *tāde* cast was fake. "You think that was fake?"

"The way it cut off, it feels like a trailer for a new movie or something," the teen said. "Like the way they repeat what they said before they died, it's like they did it for dramatic effect or something. Shouldn't they be screaming in agony or something?"

That was so incredibly *siáu*! People actually died; *tā* saw them die with *tāde* own eyes. The teen was backing away, cautiously. *Tā* turned around to see if there was anything behind *tā*, but there was nothing. The teen was afraid of *tā*! *Tāde* expression was probably pretty frightening right now.

Tā couldn't understand these people, going about their lives like nothing had happened, as if there weren't any psychopaths out there that would kill indiscriminately and with impunity. Their constitutional right to free assembly was being eroded, even their rights to life and liberty, and no one seemed to want to do anything about it. In fact, they didn't even want to believe that

it was happening. They seemed content to go about their lives working overtime for some job until the day they died.

It felt hopeless, like there was nothing tā could do. If everyone else was as apathetic as this teen, then tāde plan wouldn't work.

But perhaps tā shouldn't be so quick to judge. Maybe people didn't care because there was no point. Maybe Lee was right. With the current hierarchy, there was practically no way for any one person from the lower echelons to effect change. So yeah, if tā was a normal person, tā would have probably reacted the same way. It was better to believe that the massacre was fake instead of believing that there were people out there that could take away tāde life just like that.

But tā was a Samurai Barber. Tā could effect change by cutting the hair of someone on the top of the hierarchy. Of course, the powerful never give up their power without a fight. Tā might just have to force a haircut if that was what it took. It was strange. Tā had used to think the very idea of doing that, of forcing a haircut on someone, reprehensible. But tā had been willing to kill Lee when tā had thought that doing so would save two billion people. If a forced haircut could do the same, then tā would be willing to do it.

The teen got out of the train. Tā looked around. There were less people on the train now, so much so that tā could get a seat. And when the train arrived at Six Horses station, almost everyone got off.

Tā was now in the middle of farmland; there were no trees to be seen. The train ran through rows and rows of patty fruit plants. Twenty minutes passed before the train stopped at another station.

“Last stop,” the announcement said.

Everyone else got off. They were probably farmers. They didn’t know that the announcement was a lie, that there was actually one more stop. This was the first time tā had been to the outskirts. If Greta hadn’t told tā about Kay-ell, tā would have gotten off too.

Now the train was running through paddy fields as far as tā could see. Ten minutes, twenty minutes, soon tā lost track of time, hypnotised by the sameness of the landscape. It wasn’t until the glint of the setting sun reflecting off the water in the fields blinded tā that tā realised just how far tā had come.

Tā had never thought about what it would take to feed two billion people and now tā knew. Rice for carbohydrates and patty fruits for protein. And this was just a small part of the northern section. Somewhere in the outskirts were apple plantations, vegetable farms. Come to think of it, tā didn’t even know how apples were grown.

Dusk turned into night and in the distance was a glow. Kay-ell came into view. It didn’t seem like anything special. A few hundred trees, one of them higher and bigger than the rest, and not much else. Why would anyone choose to live here, at the edge of Lionfish, so close to the Endless Dry?

Even the train station wasn’t special, no different from all the other train stations tā had been to. But tā couldn’t understand what tā saw outside. Everyone went about riding what seemed to be a two-wheeled breed of bike. Tā had never even seen a bike in Lionfish before then, only in movie casts. But in Kay-ell, everyone rode a bike.

Tā was sure they were expensive to own and maintain. And surely not everyone tā saw were CEOs and shareholders. Some of them must have been stablehands or domestic helpers. But everyone tā saw had a bike. Even the employees here were several orders of magnitude wealthier than the average citizen of Lionfish.

Spaced at regular intervals were clouds of fireflies gathered around what must have been premium bait. The light emitted by each cloud was brighter than anything tā had ever seen. Each cloud must have had thousands of fireflies. Off in the distance, one of the clouds was dimmer than the rest. There was someone there changing the bait. Even the firefly keeper was on a bike.

There was a restaurant nearby. A family of four was standing in front of a sign that said, “La Monde Des Pâtes”. What language was that in? Even the smell coming from the restaurant tasted delicious. A group of four on bikes were heading towards the family. They got down and handed their bikes over to the family, then bowed. Even the children had bikes! The family left and they remained bowed until the family went out of sight.

A couple came, both of them on a single bike. They went into the restaurant without even looking at the four outside. One of the four rode the bike towards the back of the restaurant. There was probably a stable there with stablehands to take care of the bikes.

As far as tā could see, the job of these four people was to take their customer’s bike to the stable and bring the bikes back out when the customers wanted to leave. And they probably had their own bikes also.

Everyone’s hair was immaculate, stylish. Tā had no doubt that the barbers here were the best in Lionfish. But they weren’t

samurai barbers. The haircuts were all perfunctory.

It took *tā* quite a while to believe what *tā* was seeing. The opulence on display was so unbelievable that *tā* had wondered if *tā* had fallen asleep on the train without realising it. But *tā* was awake all right. The sight of all these wonders only made *tā* angry. Look at all these people, smiling and going about without a care in the world, while the rest of Lionfish worked themselves ragged just to survive. No wonder Kay-ell was all the way out here. Anyone who didn't live here couldn't spare the time to come here to compare their lives. The adults were too busy making a living and providing for their children, while the children were too busy studying so that they could make a living in the future and in turn provide for their children. People knew about income inequality only as an abstract concept. The real inequality was in the way they lived. It had to be seen to be believed. And Kay-ell was all the way out here, out of sight and out of mind.

As for the rogues and the strays who made their way here, they probably stayed so that they could work here. If not, nobody would believe them even if they went back and talked about this wonderland. A place where everyone rode bikes instead of just the rich, that would have sounded like the ravings of a *siáu* person.

But *tā* should have probably thought of a plan before coming here. *Tā* knew there were thousands of the psychopaths around, but Kay-ell was bigger than *tā* had expected. All the way out here, *tā* had expected some small outpost, not this sprawling metropolis.

Maybe *tā* shouldn't have come. If *tā* was really honest with *tā*self, *tā* didn't know why *tā* had risked *tā*de life to come here. Sure, *tā* had told *tā*self that *tā* was the only one that had a chance

of changing things, but looking at all the people around that was snickering at tā, tā didn't want to bother anymore. Yes, tā was the odd one out just walking around, wandering around, really. But tā had no choice; tā didn't know where to go. Because these rich folk went everywhere on bikes, there wasn't any need for train stations.

Tā kept to the side of the trail, letting everyone else ride past tā. Some smirked, some taunted tā, but one of them rode up to tā and stopped, asking, "Dakota-sama?"

"Yes?" Tā turned to look and it was the killer! Not the killer, one of the clones. And the hair was different; this one had a sharp fringe instead.

"Boss sent me to get you," the man said, offering a hand to help tā mount the bike.

Tā didn't know who the Boss was, but whoever it was sounded important enough to send this man looking for tā. Maybe it was who tā was looking for, someone high enough up the hierarchy, on whom tāde barbering could have some kind of effect. Tā took the man's hand and got on the bike. At least tā didn't have to walk anymore. The man didn't offer any explanation and didn't seem partial to any conversation either. It wasn't like they could talk over the sound of the rushing wind anyway.

They arrived at the big tree, the one that was bigger and taller than the rest around it, the one tā had seen on the train. The driver got off and said, "This way, please, Dakota-sama." There wasn't a door, which was strange. Maybe there wasn't much robbery or theft in a town where everyone was rich. There wasn't anything on the ground floor except for a couple of lifts, which looked more muscular and well-fed than any other lifts

tā had seen, and a sign that said “Dawn Consortium”. Yup, dawn of a new tyrannical regime all right. Tā followed the man onto the nearest lift.

They didn’t say anything to each other on the way up. And it was a long way up. When they arrived, the man led tā to a strange door, a simple piece of steel on a hinge, and bowed, hands held out towards that door, inviting tā to enter.

It was a door, just a simple door, but tā couldn’t do it. Tāde life would never be the same after tā opened it. Perhaps tā should leave now, just walk away from all this, go back to cutting hair and eating assam laksa.

The man got tired of bowing and went to sit behind a desk, plugging in to a phone. It was just tā and the door now. Tā was here to start a revolution, but tā hadn’t seen any repeaters on the train ride here. Which probably meant that Kay-ell had its own network that was cut off from the rest of Lionfish. Casting to these rich folk here didn’t seem like it would do much. Tā was alone. It would be just tā and whoever was behind that door.

Go forward or go back?

What the hell.

The door opened without complaining. On the other side was a spacious room, spartan and clean. There wasn’t much in it except for a hammock, tucked away in a corner, and a desk, where someone who was presumably behind all of this sat. Between them were some stools arranged in a loose circle.

That person was facing away so all tā could see was the cowboy hat on that person’s head. As that person turned, tā could see straight-arrow sideburns. Tā knew that hat, those sideburns,

knew that grim face that tā could now see, knew that the dour mouth on that face could turn into one of the sweetest smiles tā had ever seen. Tā knew because tā had seen it as a child, every weekend, when tā would wait by the windowsill, staring outside, waiting to catch a glimpse of that hat, and when tā did and tā ran outside, shouting that person's name, that was when that mouth would transform into something that brought joy into the world. It had been so long ago that tā couldn't remember that person's name, but tāde muscles remembered and they moved in unison to make tā say...

“Uncle Rudy?”

“Dakota? Is that really you?” It really was Uncle Rudy! How? Tā thought that everyone had died in Ranai.

Rudy looked all over tā, also unsure. “Your hairstyle is different, but it really is you!” There it was, Rudy's smile. But it was tinged with a bit of sadness, making it bittersweet instead. “I'm so glad to see you! I thought you were dead!” Rudy hugged tā and cried what seemed to be tears of genuine joy. “Come on, let me take a look at you!” Rudy let go of tā in order to see tāde face. “Eh? What's wrong?”

What's wrong? What's wrong?! “Didn't you know I was still alive all this time? Why didn't you try to find me?” Tā had been living on donations while here Rudy was, having more money than tā could ever dream of.

“Err... I thought you were dead?” Rudy took off the cowboy hat and revealed a head that was mostly burn scars. Areas of healthy scalp were few and far between. “I thought you were dead.” The tears that Rudy cried now came from anguish. Tā

knew that Rudy's pain was real and raw because tā felt it too.

But people were dead, tā was almost killed tāself, and tā knew that Rudy was involved. Tā didn't think it could be true, but the evidence was sitting right outside. Tā had to know. "Uncle," tā said with enough vehemence to shock Rudy into silence. "Were you behind the attack at the anarchist rally?"

The fact that Rudy didn't immediately say no or ask what tā was talking about made it clear that Rudy was somehow involved. Not only that. Because Kay-ell was isolated, there was no way Rudy could have known about the attack unless Rudy was involved. Of course, CEOs had to travel out of Kay-ell occasionally in order to do business, and perhaps one of these CEOs had returned and told Rudy about the attack. But even if that were true, someone who was innocent would have denied having any part in the attack. But come to think of it, someone who was guilty would probably deny it as well.

It was clear to tā now. The Rudy standing before tā was not the same Rudy that would bring tā apple tarts every weekend. Tā tightened tāde grip on the hilt of tāde katana, ready to draw, ready to strike tāde uncle down, because with all those burn scars of Rudy's head, there was nothing left for tā to cut. There was only one way out of this now.

Rudy walked back to the desk and plugged in to a grotesque phone with an abnormally large belly that was on the desk. This phone had a belly that was two or three times larger than a human head! How many batteries did that thing guzzle every day?

Tā felt the tree shift, heard the tree creaking. It was over as soon as it started and Rudy called tā over.

“Do you see?” Rudy pointed at the middle of that giant belly.

See what? Tā didn’t even know what tā was looking at. It was just some white dots on a black background. The dots seemed to be twinkling. Were they stars? It didn’t look like any part of the night sky tā had seen before, but tā couldn’t be sure because tā hadn’t been interested in it before. But the dots shown on the belly were far bigger than any star in the night sky, so perhaps the image was being magnified somehow. Of course! The tree was a telescope. The shifts and creaks had been the tree moving around to look at this particular piece of sky.

But why? There was nothing there but black. But it wasn’t just black; it was more like an absence of stars, a void ringed by white. The ring of white looked like it was twinkling, but it was fading in and out too fast for it to be stars. It almost looked like it was moving, like hair backlit by the moon in a breeze. With horror, tā realised what tā was looking at.

“Yes, it’s another one of those things,” Rudy said. “And this one is bigger – I think it’s at least a hundred kilometres in diameter.”

Tā tried to guess from memory how big the thing had been in Ranai but had no idea.

“From the blueshift, I think it’s travelling at ten per cent the speed of light,” Rudy said. Tā didn’t even know what that meant, but Rudy had always said things without caring if the listener understood or not. “I don’t know how, though. Sometimes I see flashes of ultraviolet. I wonder if that has anything to do with how it propels itself. I wish I could see what was going on the other side of that thing.”

A vision of a million eyes came unbidden to tā. Tā couldn’t

breathe. Even across cosmic distances these things terrified tā. Tā turned from the belly, walked to the window, breathed the cool night air. But that didn't help much; tāde heart was still palpitating because somewhere above tā was that thing.

Rudy pointed towards a patch of night sky. "Can you see it?" Tā couldn't. "Sometimes I think I can make it out, but that's probably my mind playing tricks on me. It's still too far out. And it's not even coming right at us, but it's going to where we will be in a few weeks' or maybe a few years' time. I don't know. It depends on how fast it can decelerate. But it will come and we need to be ready."

Tā didn't want to hear anymore. What a cruel fate to have to encounter two of those things in a lifetime! Rudy said they needed to be ready. But how? What could anyone possibly do against those things? And this one was bigger than the last one! Even if Lionfish had weapons, there was still the problem of people going siáu from fear when facing one of these things. Tā had only seen it from afar and tā still had nightmares about it.

That shooter on the rooftop hadn't been afraid. Was Rudy trying to breed fear out of people? If so, it seemed to have worked, but these fearless people were also cold-blooded butohs with no qualms about destroying people's lives and killing children. But the anarchist movement might have been a threat to the survival of humanity. The worst thing that could happen on the eve of apocalypse was a fracturing of power. Humanity needed to be united to face this threat. Maybe the shooter was just doing what needed to be done to rip out the roots of anarchy before it could grow. There was a difference

between being ruthless and being sadistic.

And that rifle the shooter had used – if it was scaled up, maybe it could be used against that thing. Tā remembered the sky on fire. If that thing's skin could survive that, then this weapon, burning from within, maybe it could work. Tā would have never even thought about doing that, much less design a weapon that could do that, but Rudy was smart, had always been smart. Dad had always said that tāde smarts had come from Mom's side of the family. And Rudy was even smarter than Mom. After all, Rudy was a cowboy librarian. If anyone could come up with a solution to the impending doom of the human race, it would be Rudy.

It felt wrong – surely there was a better way! Surely the best way to solve any problem was for every single person to put their minds to it, to solve it together.

No, that wasn't right. By any measure, half of humanity is worse than the other half. It didn't matter what the measure was, whether it is the ability to save humanity or the ability to weigh different options and vote for the best candidate, half of humanity will be worse at it than the other. This was probably why the last attack was reported as a shark attack instead, because half of everyone would react worse than the other half if the truth had been told, that humanity had an enemy that did with it as it pleased, destroyed Ranai then disappeared, and there was nothing we could do to stop it.

So no, the idea that humanity would come together was idealistic, not realistic. The most likely scenario would be for multiple factions, each with different solutions, quarrelling

among themselves about which approach was better and getting nothing done.

“I just want you to know that I had nothing to do with Kallang,” Rudy said.

“If not you, then who?” tā asked.

“I’m just a cowboy librarian to them now,” Rudy said. “They come to me when they need some ancient tech, but I leave the actual defence planning to them.”

“Wait, what?” tā said.

“See,” Rudy said, “when the first one destroyed Ranai, I knew that we had to prepare for the next one, and I knew that it was too big a task for me alone. If it wasn’t for that shark, that thing would have probably gone on to destroy the rest of Lionfish.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” There was an actual shark?

“Ranai was a floating district, so when it was destroyed, part of that thing sank into the ocean. Not that it mattered much; it was still moving towards Lionfish. But a shark came and recycled it before it could do any more damage. Anyway, it was just our luck that a shark was roaming nearby, and we can’t rely on them, especially if that thing out there hits a landed district, so I created someone else, someone smarter, more capable, to figure out what to do. Al out there was the first. I told tā about the problem when tā was old enough. After some research, tā came to the same conclusion I did. So tā went and created another generation, told the new generation about the problem, and that generation did the same thing. Now, the latest generation are several orders of magnitude more intelligent than any of us and they seem to have

stopped making more, so maybe they have a solution already.”

Wait, what? That was so síau! Probably the síauest thing tã had ever heard in tãde entire life. But, of course, tã had no right to judge. Tã also had no idea how to defeat one of those things. So maybe this idea, síau as it was, could work. It had better work.

“Before you ask me, no, I don’t know anything about what happened at Kallang. I tried asking them about what they were doing around generation three. They tried to explain their plans to me. I tried to understand, but I just couldn’t. No matter how they tried to explain it to me, I just couldn’t grasp it. You know, they all undergo accelerated growth so they were all only about a year old, but they were looking at me like I was a child! Al did a little better, at least tã seemed to, and tã tried to explain their plans to me. As far as I can understand, they were going to continue improving each successive generation until it didn’t make sense to do so. And Al tried to explain their organisational structure to me, which seems to be some sort flat structure with each person or each group doing their own thing. There is no oversight, at least none that I can see, or maybe none I can understand. But that was the third generation. I have no idea what they are doing now.”

Flat structure, no oversight, no hierarchy – that sure sounded like anarchy. Maybe Ali and the ninjas were right about that. After all, greater minds than tã had decided that anarchy was the best answer.

“As for Kallang, even though it looks meaningless to us, I’m sure that whoever did it had tãde reasons. Or maybe not, maybe the latest generation are just a bunch of psychopaths. But maybe

that's what we need to survive the next attack."

"So, you're just going to let them take care of it? You're not even going to do anything?!" Dakota didn't know why tā was so angry. Maybe because it seemed to tā that Rudy was a coward for not doing anything.

"Dakota, there's nothing else I can do."

There, there it was, the admission of cowardice. "No, I don't believe that! There is always something that can be done! There must be something I can do!"

"Dakota, there's nothing we can do."

"No, no! It killed my family, our families, we must do something!" There was a look on Rudy, a pained look, a pain that they both shared. But Rudy also looked resigned. Unlike tā, Rudy had nothing to do with it. "You don't understand, before that thing came, I had wished them dead!"

"Dakota, that thing that is out there right now, it is travelling at ten per cent the speed of light. It has been travelling for decades, if not centuries. There is no way any of it is your fault."

Of course not! Tā understood that. Maybe tā had thought it as a child, but not anymore. "No, Uncle, you don't understand. When that thing crashed through my home tree and killed Mom, Dad and my little brother, I was glad! For a moment there, I was glad that they were dead!"

Tā had just blurted out the thing tā had been hiding from everyone, even from tāself. Tā looked down, away from Uncle Rudy. What must Uncle Rudy be thinking of tā now? Surely tā was a monster! What kind of person is glad that they killed their family? Even though tā knew now tā had nothing to

do with that thing, that the event had been decades, even centuries in the making, tā had really thought that tāde wish had called that thing as a child. And even thinking that back then, tā had been glad that tā had killed tāde family. If Uncle Rudy told tā to leave right now, even shot tā with that pistol, tā would understand. Tā deserved it.

Uncle Rudy's boots came into view, the spurs on them jangling softly. Tā expected a punch, a kick, but when Uncle Rudy hugged tā instead, tā just burst into tears.

"There, there," Uncle Rudy said, patting tāde head.

Oh, why was tā even crying? Tā didn't deserve this kindness. Tā deserved to be thrown out the window right now. "Stop it!" tā wanted to say, but tā couldn't get it out past tāde sobs. So tā tried to wriggle out of their embrace, but Uncle Rudy gave no quarter and tā couldn't escape.

Way back when, tā used to hug Uncle Rudy's leg, held on for tāde dear life as Uncle Rudy walked around with tā in tow. That was so much fun. Tā wanted so much to hug Uncle Rudy back right now, but something was stopping tā. Oh, tā was still holding on to tāde katana. Why was tā still holding on to tāde katana? Why couldn't tā let go?

"There, there," Uncle Rudy said, stroking tāde hair.

Let go, Dakota, let go!

The katana clanged on the floor.

Tā hugged back, buried tāde face in Uncle Rudy's shoulder. Tā never thought tā could feel this way again, feel the warmth of another person supporting tā. With every sob, everything seemed lighter somehow. Here was someone who knew what tā had done,

what tā was capable of, but still cared for tā anyway.

“There’s that hairstyle I know and love,” Uncle Rudy said.

T H E E N D

AUTHOR'S NOTES

“Samurai Barber Versus Ninja Hairstylist” is such a ridiculous title that one might wonder if it’s based on reality at all. Well, I’m now going to tell you about the science behind the science-fiction.

First up is the idea that memories are reconstructions. This is based on the experiments done by Elizabeth Loftus that was detailed in the study “Semantic Integration of Verbal Information into a Visual Memory¹”. The experiments consisted of showing subjects a series of slides that depicted a traffic accident, then asking the subjects if the car involved had stopped at a stop sign or a yield sign before the accident. Some of the subjects were shown a stop sign and some were shown a yield sign, but some of those shown a stop sign were asked if the car had stopped at a yield sign and some of those shown a yield sign were asked if the car had stopped at a stop sign. Then the subjects were asked at a later date if they had seen a stop or yield sign.

What the studies showed was that a significant amount of

1 Loftus, E. F., Miller, D. G., & Burns, H. J. (1978). Semantic integration of verbal information into a visual memory. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory*, 4(1), 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-7393.4.1.19>

people, up to 68.5%, would answer wrongly if the misleading question was asked sometime after the slide was shown.

Elizabeth Loftus would later go on to publish about “The Formation of False Memories²” where 20% of subjects remembered being lost in a mall as a child, even when it didn’t happen.

The study, *Implanting False Autobiographical Memories for Repeated Events*³, seems to show that it is possible to implant false memories for repeated events. It also contains a handy table of all the false memories studies done before, with one of them showing an 82% false memory implantation rate!

Now, some autistic people have extraordinary memories. Unfortunately, I’m not one of them. See, one of the reasons I wrote my characters the way I did was because I was tired of seeing and reading about psychopaths who are a-okay after killing someone. Furthermore, these psychopaths are supposed to be heroes! The trigger for me was when I read my friend’s book, where I remembered that the protagonist shot the antagonist in the head and was a-okay.

Imagine my surprise when I told my friend about it and she told me that the protagonist doesn’t shoot anyone in the head. I

2 Loftus, Elizabeth F., and Jacqueline E. Pickrell. “The formation of false memories.” *Psychiatric annals* 25.12 (1995): 720-725. <https://doi.org/10.3928/0048-5713-19951201-07>

3 Calado, Bruna, et al. “Implanting false autobiographical memories for repeated events.” *Memory* 29.10 (2021): 1320-1341. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658211.2021.1981944>

went back, reread the section, and the protagonist had thrown something at the antagonist which had hit the antagonist in the head instead. Now, there's a pistol in the scene, so I didn't just make up a gun from nowhere. But what probably happened was I misread it the first time and was shocked beyond belief that my friend would write such a violent scene in a YA book, then I corrected my misread because the following paragraphs don't make sense if the antagonist was dead as he was still saying and doing stuff. But after some time, I only remembered the more emotionally intense of the two memories. And thus, a significant portion of the characterization in my book was inspired by memory shenanigans!

There is also this idea in the book that even if we could broadcast our consciousness in some form, it wouldn't be accurate because of differences in perception. The most famous example of this is perhaps *The Dress*⁴. Different people perceived the same stimuli differently, which lead to team #whiteandgold and team #blueandblack. A recent study, "Conservative and Liberal Attitudes Drive Polarized Neural Responses to Political Content"⁵, has also shown that people with different political attitudes can interpret the same stimuli differently. This is perhaps

4 "The Dress". (2023, Feb 8). Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_dress&oldid=1138283423

5 Leong, Yuan Chang, et al. "Conservative and liberal attitudes drive polarized neural responses to political content." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117.44 (2020): 27731-27739. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.200853011>

best exemplified by the Covington Kid⁶ event, with some people viewing the kid as trying to provoke a situation while others saw him as trying to defuse the situation.

Regarding the plug, the brain is a remarkable organ, able to adapt to all sorts of stimuli. The Innsbruck Goggle Experiments⁷ show that it is even able to adapt to a world that is upside-down, when the experimenter wore special goggles that inverted what he saw.

In the TED talk “Can We Create New Senses for Humans⁸”, Dr. David Eagleman talks sensory substitution, where the deaf can “hear” by feeling sound that has been translated into vibrations through their skin, before going on to talk about what is basically extrasensory perception. One example he gave was pilots learning to pilot a quad-copter better by feeling things like yaw and pitch.

So, the idea of a man-machine interface that can transmit and receive sensory stimuli and emotions (which might also be

6 “Lincoln Memorial Confrontation”. (2023, Jan 28). Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=2019_Lincoln_Memorial_confrontation&oldid=1136094108

7 Sachse, Pierre, et al. ““The world is upside down”—The Innsbruck goggle experiments of Theodor Erismann (1883–1961) and Ivo Kohler (1915–1985).” *Cortex* 92 (2017): 222-232. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2017.04.014>

8 “Can We Create New Senses For Humans?”. (2023, Feb 13). TED. https://www.ted.com/talks/david_eagleman_can_we_create_new_senses_for_humans

a kind of sensory stimulus⁹), like plugs, is not that far-fetched. I drew the line at thoughts though, because I think that conscious thought is probably the result of the brain interpreting stimuli and everyone interprets the world differently. This is why broadcasting in this story only involves senses and emotions but not thoughts. But I might be wrong though, who knows?

As for bioengineering, we are probably very far away from the mastery of genetics necessary to design and create complex organisms like the phones and trains in this story. But we have been modifying existing organisms to suit our purposes for quite some time now, golden rice¹⁰ for example. Another recent development is the engineering of adeno-associated viruses to deliver healthy copies of genes to patients with Spinal Muscular Atrophy¹¹.

Now, you might think that the idea that a haircut can change the person to be pretty ridiculous. But if you watch episodes of *Queer Eye* on Netflix, the people always say they feel like a different person after getting their hair done. So, all I'm doing is taking them at their word. There's also transcranial magnetic

9 Nummenmaa, Lauri, et al. "Bodily maps of emotions." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111.2 (2014): 646-651. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1321664111>

10 "Golden Rice". (2023, Jan 30). Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Golden_rice&oldid=1136496863

11 Mendell, Jerry R., et al. "Single-dose gene-replacement therapy for spinal muscular atrophy." *New England Journal of Medicine* 377.18 (2017): 1713-1722. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa1706198>

stimulation¹², which is basically what it says, stimulating the brain using magnetic fields from outside the cranium. There seems to be some results for using it to treat depression¹³, obsessive-compulsive disorder¹⁴, generalised anxiety disorder and PTSD¹⁵.

But no one would use a sword to cut hair, right? Wrong¹⁶.

Anyway, if you felt strongly about this book one way or another, please leave a review. I'm always interested to know how people experienced my book. In fact, I'm dying to know how people experienced the genders of the two main characters. Did you think they were male/female/other? Why? Tweet at me or even DM me on twitter if leaving a review is too troublesome.

12 "Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation". (2023, Feb 6). Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Transcranial_magnetic_stimulation&oldid=1137749506

13 Senova, Suhan, et al. "Durability of antidepressant response to repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation: Systematic review and meta-analysis." *Brain stimulation* 12.1 (2019): 119-128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brs.2018.10.001>

14 Trevizol, Alisson Paulino, et al. "Transcranial magnetic stimulation for obsessive-compulsive disorder: an updated systematic review and meta-analysis." *The journal of ECT* 32.4 (2016): 262-266. <https://doi.org/10.1097/YCT.0000000000000335>

15 Cirillo, Patricia, et al. "Transcranial magnetic stimulation in anxiety and trauma-related disorders: a systematic review and meta-analysis." *Brain and behavior* 9.6 (2019): e01284. <https://doi.org/10.1002/brb3.1284>

16 "I'm a Samurai Hairstylist | My Design Life, Glam.com". (2023, Feb 13). Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch/FxEu2hiSSgY>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zed Dee grew up in Malaysia where he was exposed to three languages; English, Malay and Mandarin. Then he moved to Singapore when he was nine, where he studied English as a first language and Malay as second, because he couldn't read Chinese.

He has a BA in Sonic Art but found out he wasn't really that good at it. So, he decided to work in the games industry, starting off as a game tester, then becoming a programmer, and writes on the side. Oh, and somewhere along the way he got diagnosed with autism.

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