

A Blade of My own

In the old days, a man could prove his worth with the skill of his hands and the sharpness of the sword he wielded. In such times, ruffians and thieves were not tolerated because men of honour did not allow them.

I look out at the bodies in the street, all of them riddled with automatic weapons fire.

I wish it were the old days

Hiding below the level of the window, there's silence out on the street, the thunderous sounds of the gun cut off almost as soon as they'd begun, just another gang war starting and finishing. I crawl over to the counter and sneak around the back, the body of the guy behind the counter is still bleeding. He'd had time to look up when the firing started, two stray shots had caught him and he was down while the rest of us had been dropping to the floor.

Just another day in Chiba...

The register was pulled to the floor when he went down, the cash strewn all around, and bills mixing in with blood. There's a noise from the front of the store as the door opens with a soft creak. The sound of a footstep, heavy on the ground, sounds like they're dragging the other foot behind them. I glance around the side as the person comes into view. Dressed in a Black Hakama and wearing a Kimono over the top, both of the garments have no gang colours attached, no symbols of rank or affiliation. There's a thin line of blood running down one of their legs and I look up to see them hobbling slightly, their right leg stiff and rigid. I lean back behind the counter and hear them stop.

"I can hear you," A man's voice, gruff, the manner strained as if he was trying to conceal something.

"I can hear you." I don't lean back out.

"You have nothing to fear from me unless you intend me harm." He shuffles closer to the bar and I hear him lean on it. He leans backwards over the edge and down at me, "And you appear not to mean me harm, there's no sense in sitting down there in the blood."

I stand and he looks me up and down as I come around the bar.

"No weapon, no colours," He nods, "Just having breakfast?"

Just begging for it...

"Yeah..." I nod, "You?"

"Got caught in a fight outside," He nods towards the window, "Caught a stray round at the end of it, getting slow in my old age."

I look him up and down, he's in his late twenties, clean shaven using a long blade, but his hair has a wild edge to it, held up with natural oils and the shredded remains of a silken sash. His Kimono is open slightly and there's the hint of strong muscles under the cloth.

"You're my age," I shrug, "That's not old."

"It's old when you've been fighting as long as I have," He groans as his leg spasms, "Would you know how to tie a tourniquet?"

"Yeah..." I look down at his leg, "Where'd you get hit?"

He reaches down, his mouth tightens as the movement puts pressure on the muscle, there's a red line down the outside of his thigh.

Couple more inches and it would have been the main artery...

I go behind the counter and take one of the tea towels, taking the first aid kit off the wall as I come back around. There's a few bandages in the kit, none of them in date, all the chemicals are more than three years past expiry and I take out the bandage, folding the towel twice and then winding the bandage around till the wound is completely covered. He flexes experimentally on the knee twice and then nods, letting his Hakama drop down over it. "You have my thanks," He reaches into his belt for his money and I see the two sword handles protruding from the sash.

"Not necessary," I shake my head.

"Then I would be in your debt," He looks down, "What can I do to repay the debt."

"Any chance of an escort?" I pick up the bag containing all the money I'd managed to gather that morning and point up the hill to the shanties on the top. He looks up the hill and sighs.

"No chance you live at the bottom of that hill is there?" He stands and tests his leg again.

"No?"

He sighs again and points to the door, "Alright, let's get going."

It's cold outside, and even though I have more layers of clothes on than he does, I'm shivering.

"How far to your house?" He looks up the hill with an air of resignation

"It's not my house."

"Alright," He nods, "How far to where I'm taking you..."

"Less than a mile," I say, "But it's all uphill, sorry."

"Not a concern," He flexes on his feet and sets off at a brisk pace, "Let's get going then."

He's taller than me by a foot and even with his injured foot, I have to double time to keep up with him. He walks as if there's nothing wrong with him, only sometimes does the wound show, and even then only in the turn of his lips.

"So where are you from?" I look sideways at him as he moves forwards, the motion too smooth to be called walking, his shoulders are always level, like he's gliding along.

"Grew up just around the corner from here," He says without looking at me, "Came back to settle a debt with an old friend."

"And got caught in the middle of a firefight for your trouble?" I point at the bodies on the other side of the road.

"No," He nods, "That was the debt."

I look at the bodies, none of them punctured in the way that bullets would do, all of them bearing deep cuts to the arms or neck in varying degrees. I look at him as he glides forwards, not paying them any attention.

"What..." I snap out of my reverie and run after him, "All of them?"

"Not all of them, no, just the ones that were trying to kill him."

"What did you owe him?" I get a little ahead of him and try to see his expression.

"It was mine to owe;" He nods, "Now the debt is paid and I can move on with my life."

"Who's your friend?"

"Heihachi Mitsuro." He says, pointing to the junction ahead, "Which way?"

I point to the left and stand still for a second before running after him again.

"*The Heihachi Mitsuro?*" I say as the road slopes upwards, "Crime Boss of Chiba Low?"

“I don’t know what he does for his work these days,” His expression doesn’t change, “I know that I owed him for the debt and now I am clear of that debt.”

“And that’s it?” I ask, “Are you going to see him later to talk to him?”

“I haven’t seen him in ten years, not since I left here; he asked for this in payment of my debt, he knows enough that it will be done.”

“How could he know that?”

“Because he knew I chose the path of the Samurai, and my honour is intact, no matter the state of his, he knew that I would come and that this would be done.” He nodded and turned his head to me a fraction, “As you can be assured that I will see you to your place, even though it is up a hill.”

“Sorry,” I glance down for a second, “You don’t have to, I can make it myself.”

“That is not the point,” He nods, “You asked for this to pay my debt to you, I will see it done.”

“What’s your name?”

He remains silent and I wonder if I’ve overstepped the mark, then he nods and looks at me.

“I am Kojiro, so named by my master.”

“I’m Jenny,” I half hold my hand out to him before putting it back down again, I think I catch the edge of a smile on his lips as he continues upwards, putting more effort into making his leg keep up.

“So what are you doing here Jenny?”

“Just gathering things for the morning meal.” I hold the bag a little closer

“There is no shame in having to steal,” He looks down at me, “The shame comes in doing something you feel to be wrong whilst continuing to do it.”

“I didn’t steal any of it.” I look down

“Take possession of without the owners consent,” His lips quirk up again, “Borrow without intention to return, it all adds up to the same thing.”

“Suppose you never stole anything.”

“I never said that,” He glances down at me, “But I made every effort to ensure that I took back what was owed and more besides, to settle my debt.”

“Must be better where you live.” I sigh, “Around here we just try and make it through the day.”

“You do,” He pauses in the street so abrupt that I think he’s bumped into something, “Kherin Clan, am I correct?”

“That’s who I work for.”

“Would you work for them if you had the choice to do something else?”

“Like what?”

“Like what I do, go from place to place and make things better?”

“I couldn’t do that,” I look up at him.

“Why not?” There’s no hint of irony in his voice

“I…” I look for a good reason, “haven’t got a sword.”

“The sword is only a symbol of my commitment,” He opened his kimono to reveal a holster across his shoulders, “We understand that things have moved on since the days of honour.”

“Besides, you need training to do what you do.” I look into his eyes, “Don’t you?”

“There is time for that,” He nods, “Make your choice before you reach the door that I am bound to deliver you to, if you choose to do something better, tell me, and I will see to it that you get a sword.”

A hundred yards from the door and I see that the rest of the Kherin are massing around us. Most of them are standing far closer than would be appropriate for greetings a guest. It's easy to see that they're considering whether or not they could take him down without him doing for them. At the end of the road, the double doors swing open and Hanjo stands there, framed by the light behind him. Kojiro stops at the same time as I do and waits with his thumbs tucked into his sash.

"So you brought us more than the morning money," Hanjo steps forwards, his shoulders rolling under the weight of the implanted muscle on his frame, "Where did you find this?" "He's just walking me home," I stand in front of Kojiro, "I bandaged his leg and he walked me home to settle his debt."

"You bandaged his leg..." Hanjo's tone mocks mine and he looks around me at Kojiro's swords. "Now those will fetch a good price with the Yak around here..."

"My debt was to bring the lady home," Kojiro looks up, seeming fragile against Hanjo's mass, "You do not have the honour to ask a second debt."

"Then maybe we'll just take them," Hanjo looks down and beckons from both sides as the other members of the Clan close in."

Kojiro looks at me and nods, "It is not too late for you to choose the sword."

Hanjo looks at me and I shrink away from his gaze, he turns back and snaps his fingers, the clan all drawing their weapons and starting to aim.

Kojiro glides to the side without pause, the movement unhurried but faster than everyone else around him. A Head flies up into the air and then an arm falls to the ground as he glides again, the bullets from the guns on the other side of the field pepper the bodies of those already dead as he moves around the edge of the clan, cutting and gliding, never slashing, every movement controlled, every strike where he directs it. Many of the clan turn and run as the black clad spectre glides around the buildings, still cutting, never stopping.

Hanjo reaches down to his belt and takes out his machine pistol, opening up on the last member of the clan as Kojiro reaches him, the body jerking backwards as Kojiro hides behind it. There's a sharp cry of pain and I see Kojiro's leg twist under him as one of the rounds catches him. He falls to the floor, his sword still in his hand as Hanjo remains stood, switching the clips out. Kojiro looks up at me and we both know he's not going to make it. I look around, seeing only a wire brace from the construction yards up the road. I grab it and swing, the movement causing Hanjo to flinch as he finishes changing the clip. Hanjo and I both stare at the stump of his arm from where the wire has gone straight through muscle and bone.

That shouldn't have done that...

He looks up at me, cradling the stump and trying to stem the bleeding. Within a half minute he goes pale and collapses to the floor crying like a child. Kojiro stands and looks at me, bracing himself against the pillar as his leg fails to support him.

"So you have chosen your sword." He looks at me and nods.

"This isn't a sword," I look at the long wire rod, "It's a support."

"It is not the sword that cuts," Kojiro nods, "It is the person who wields it."

I look down at the wire and nod as Kojiro hops to keep balance.

"And now I know that you have honour," He bows his head and looks at me, "I am in your debt for my life and I must ask you a further debt in binding my leg again."

“And in return?” I look up at him

“In return,” he nods.

“I will teach you how to use your own sword.”