



Blades of the Spider

by Nizar Musa

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Three years ago...

It was in the month of the rooster, on one cold autumn day, that a terrible storm had descended from the heavens. Swirling dark clouds that stretched for miles loomed in the distant horizon, their heralds of lightning and thunder resounding ominously. The storm brewed for the longest time, its thick blanket gradually blotting out the light of Lord Sun, yet without yielding a single drop of rain. But finally arrive it did, a raging tempest of such magnitude it seemed as if the earth had incurred the wrath of Osano-Wo himself.

The storm grew stronger with each passing minute, a howling gale that screamed through the purlieus of the Shinomen with a ferocity that made the forest an impossible environment to navigate, let alone attempt to hunt down a mad ise zumi and his band of heretics.

With the wind and rain lashing against his *kabuto*, Mirumoto Nobutsuna decided that enough was enough. He raised his fist and brought his company of thirty-strong bushi to a grinding halt.

The move came as an unexpected surprise to the samurai riding beside him. "Commander, we are making good progress," Hegyu said, a precociously talented young Mirumoto. "We should press on. I am certain they are not too far ahead of us."

Nobutsuna peered at his second-in-command through the veil of rainwater that dripped off his visor. "Even a monkey knows when to heed a storm, Hegyu-san," was his curt response.

They dismounted, Nobutsuna beckoning his scouts. When the two men appeared, he pointed towards a denser copse of trees in the distance indicating the path he wished to take once the storm had subsided. The scouts bowed affirmatively and quietly slipped into the forest depths.

They would have to do for now, Nobutsuna ruminated. The tall and striking Mirumoto duelist, a veteran campaigner of twenty-six or so years of age, disliked tracking the enemy in such unfavourable conditions. But that view had changed when they collided with the zealots earlier that day. And their presence was as good a sign as any that Kokujiin, was nearby.

Strong wind and rain continued to buffet the beleaguered group, forcing the Dragon commander to take shelter within a grove of sturdy-looking oaks nearby. His men dug themselves in, and Nobutsuna took position under one of the big trees. Hegyu tethered their horses before joining him and together, they waited.

For the first time since the hunt for Kokujiin began, Nobutsuna felt the tiredness in his bones. And whilst the pursuit was bearable in the earlier stages, the prolonged lack of success was starting to take its toll. Matters worsened still as their mission had taken them far from their lands, and as villages became sparse so did their own supplies dwindle.

Nevertheless, these men had served under him in countless battles, and their trust in his leadership was implicit. Likewise, their unconditional loyalty was for him a source of both strength and courage. Under no circumstance would they abandon him or show him any sign of weakness, even if it meant them their lives.

Despite the bleak outlook of the present, Nobutsuna allowed himself a smile.

He was adjusting his obi when he caught Hegyu's dour expression out the corner of his eye, the younger man clearly unaccustomed to sitting out bad weather. Nobutsuna gripped his subordinate's shoulder reassuringly.

"Patience," he advised, his voice calm. "Our prey is close; our encounter this morning proves this. It will be only a matter of time before he is within our grasp." Hegyu was about to protest, but Nobutsuna would have none of it.

"So, wouldn't we would be doing ourselves and our mission a great disservice if we were to lose the lives of our men because of this?" He gestured to the sky, and as if on cue, another big branch snapped under the storm's heavy barrage. It fell several feet away, narrowly missing their startled horses.

"Is it not better to die with honour by the sword, than in shame by a tree?"

Raising his head, Hegyu couldn't help but smirk at his leader's wisdom.

Their attention turned to sudden sound of two dull thuds. Hegyu sprung into a defensive stance, just as a severed head rolled to his feet.

It belonged to one of the scouts.

"Command--" was all that escaped his lips, his eyes widening in shock at the arrow lodged in his neck. The Dragon samurai dropped onto his knees, then pitched face-first into the damp earth, the light in his eyes extinguished forever.

A heartbeat later, and all hell broke loose.

From between the oaks poured hundreds of Kokujin's fanatics, a combined horde of armed ronin, vagabonds and bakemono. They outnumbered the Dragon bushi ten-to-one; the samurai warriors braced themselves. The time to fight had arrived.

Nobutsuna rushed to Hegyu's side but the youth was already dead. Damn them, he cursed. When three goblins launched their attack, he held nothing back. The duelist was a blur of motion, the extended reach of his katana severing the legs and limbs of two attackers while a swift cut from his wakizashi eviscerated the third.

"To arms!" Nobutsuna cried to his men, his flawless niten technique disposing several more of Kokujin's minions. "If it is Jigoku they want, let us send them there!"

The Dragon bushi cried in unison as they plunged into the swarming enemy ranks.

Hard rain pelted the two forces from every angle and both sides found it increasingly difficult to gain an upper hand, their movements restricted by the patchy and muddied

forest floor. Blows were traded with little or no finesse, each individual more than happy to dispatch his opponent in any way possible.

A large Dragon samurai ran through two men with his yari, only to be cut down from behind. Yet another samurai-ko brought down a tetsubo-wielding ronin, but a dagger's thrust into her side was all it took to end her fight.

In the midst of the frantic hand-to-hand combat, a Dragon archer picked out a towering barrel-chested bakemono with mottled grey skin. It had a name: Arctung. He had heard an opposing ronin yelling for its aid, which it gladly gave as it crushed the life out of a Dragon samurai. The archer aimed at the creature's head, then loosed his shot. But a sudden gust wind sent the arrow wide, where it bounced harmlessly off the goblin's large *sode*. Annoyed, Arctung flashed its menacing array of sharpened yellow teeth at his assailant. The muscular goblin flexed its powerful arms and hurled its two-headed battle-axe, the weapon whirling through the air before splitting a tree trunk in two... as well as the archer's torso.

Arctung's inhuman roar of pleasure echoed throughout the battle arena, Kokujin's army rallying behind their fearsome comrade. Their victory was almost complete.

This will be glorious day to die, Nobutsuna thought, his arms aching from combat. His daisho and armour were slick with the blood of his enemies yet in his heart he despaired, for he was the last of his men.

The duelist gritted his teeth.
Defeat was not an option.

Even as the sounds of battle began to die down, the downpour remained relentless. The enemy fell away from Nobutsuna, visibly relieved to be clear of his swords. They held a perimeter from which Arctung stepped forward. In one hand, it clutched its bloodied battle-axe, the other the head of the Dragon archer. The creature tossed its prize at Nobutsuna and emitted a hideous guttural bellow, its gleeful laughter filling the duelist with revulsion. He would ensure this abomination was silenced. Permanently.

"Samurai. Give up," Arctung pointed at the last Dragon with the tip of its axe.
"You cannot win fight."

Nobutsuna's relaxed stance revealed nothing of its deadly potential.
"I do not need to win, monster. What I need is for you to *die*."

The giant bakemono snarled and launched itself forward, axe raised high. Its wrath was great, its aim deadlier. Yet when it struck, there was only empty air where Nobutsuna had been.

Then, searing pain filled its thick neck, the likes of which it had never felt nor ever would again. But that was nothing compared to the sight of seeing its own body fall onto the ground, headless.

Nobutsuna flicked his blades, a reflex action.

“Your champion is dead!” he yelled out to the zealots. His vision was obscured by the rain, but he knew they were there. He wanted to incite their anger, provoke them to attack.

“I am Mirumoto Nobutsuna of the Iron Mountain!”
“Today, I give you all the opportunity to claim my head... if not, I will gladly claim yours!”

The taunting worked. Kokujin’s men were enraged and surged forward. There was no respite from their onslaught. He cut the first one to the hip, the second straight across his chest. The third crashed into him, sending him tumbling backwards. But Nobutsuna steadied himself, digging his heel into the ground before taking off the ronin’s arm. A fourth pummelled him in the ribs. He winced but ignored the pain. Like a dancer he spun with his arms outstretched, his blades forming a circle of death.

The fanatics fell but they pushed on, wave after wave, after wave.

Until finally, they pushed no more.
Kokujin’s horde was destroyed.

Nobutsuna dropped onto one knee, his body shivering from the exertion. He drove his katana into the mud, trying hard not to keel over. But the nausea proved too overwhelming, and he retched convulsively.

Minutes passed, the rain washing over the dead to form pools of coalescing blood. Wiping the bile from his lips, Nobutsuna surveyed the carnage. The bodies of his men and horses lay scattered among those of the enemy. He felt deep anguish for their loss, but that anguish made way for a greater sense of pride. These Dragons had died with honour, and the realm of Yomi now awaited them.

He decided that he needed to find the other parties. With so many dead, Kokujin’s numbers would be greatly reduced. The Clans had to act quickly before the mad man secured additional reinforcements.

As he attempted to stand, a lone figure materialised out of nowhere. It looked like a robed man, a monk. Lightning illuminated the area, revealing tainted skin and swirling tattoos under the dark brown robes. Nobutsuna spat, his grip on his swords tightening.

Summoning every iota of strength left inside his battered body, Nobutsuna raised his weapons once more. “Kokujin!” he screamed, and charged.

The Mirumoto covered the distance that separated the two men in seconds, and unleashed a vicious strike that would have ended the lives of several men. But his opponent was anything but ordinary. His swords didn’t find their target, Kokujin already on his blind side. The tattooed monk back-handed Nobutsuna across the face, his unnatural strength sending the samurai tumbling to the ground, a broken heap.

Kokujin knelt above the warrior, a feral grin on his face.

“I despise you, Dragon,” he sneered. “Yet I cannot deny that you are a man of considerable talent.”

“Who would have the audacity to take on my men by themselves... and win? Now, that is truly outstanding.” Kokujiin chuckled, as if the bloodshed had meant nothing.

“And even someone such as I, who is destined to join the great pantheon of Tengoku, can appreciate such a display of martial skill.”

Nobutsuna’s mind was alive with vengeance. All he needed to do was to lift his sword, and drive it into Kokujiin’s heart... but he couldn’t. His body no longer obeyed his instructions. He was at the mad man’s mercy.

Kokujiin stood.

“You shall be spared, samurai,” he uttered.

“But believe me, before I am through with you, you would have wished that I killed you here instead.” Grabbing the man’s armour, he dragged Nobutsuna into the darkness of the Shinomen.

Suddenly, the rain ceased.

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The present...

From the balcony of a ruined tower, Daigotsu cast his eyes over what was once the Imperial City of Ootosan Uchi. Ironic that I find myself here again, he rued, as he surveyed the collapsed roof tops and crumbling ramparts. And without having to face the wrath of the Clans, either.

His mirth was however interrupted by a Chuda that had joined him on the balcony.

“Speak,” he commanded.

The Chuda bowed low. “The ronin from the south awaits your presence, my Lord.” Daigotsu slipped his hands under the loose sleeves of his robe and made his way down the spiralling staircase to a meeting chamber several floors below.

The tower belonged to a Crane family and had in its prime, been the talk of the town with its lavishly decorated interiors that the clan favoured. But that was before the city was razed. All that was left were charred and broken furniture strewn in every direction. Scavengers had already ransacked the place a long time ago. In the meantime, the building would suffice as an outpost for the Spider Clan.

The makeshift velvet curtains parted as Daigotsu entered the circular room, already occupied by several Chuda shugenja and Jackals who were conversing in hushed tones. The chamber was dimly lit by iron lanterns that hung from the ceiling, casting moving shadows on the curved walls. The Spider Clan champion sat himself on a marble chair, and peered down at the man kneeling before him.

The ronin wore no kimono save a dark grey hakama, exposing a lean physique that could have easily belonged to a farmhand, his shoulder-length black hair draped over his face. But his erect posture, the defined musculature of his arms and upper torso, gave insight into the individual's true profession. A dragon tattoo coiled around his body, the crimson hue appearing stark against the sickly white pallor of his skin. The taint, Daigotsu surmised. A set of black *haidate* and a daisho completed the man's bare ensemble.

"You have travelled far, ronin."

"I have awaited your audience for many months, Dark Lord." The ronin spoke without emotion, revealing nothing in his voice.

"My master instructed that I seek you should he die," the man continued. "Alas, he no longer walks among the living."

"Kokujin was a great loss to our cause," Daigotsu lied. "But rest assured, we will seek retribution against those responsible." Leaving his chair, he paced around the ronin.

"Your master spoke of you when he was my guest at the City of the Lost. He told me that one day, your services would be available to me."

The man remained still, his tone solemn.

"Those services are now yours to command, Lord Daigotsu."

"I hereby swear fealty to you and the Spider Clan."

Daigotsu felt a pang of excitement, savouring his latest acquisition. If Kokujin was to be believed, here was a man who could prove extremely invaluable over the course of his campaign. And he was not one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"So be it," he finally spoke.

"Rise, Daigotsu Nobutsuna."

The tainted ronin rose to his feet, much taller than the Spider daimyo had earlier presumed. Returning to his chair, Daigotsu slid open a hidden compartment in the backrest. Within it he retrieved a daisho, their polished black *saya* reflecting the pale yellow light of the lanterns.

"I was told that you are a duelist." He handed the weapons over to Nobutsuna.

"These are now yours."

The former Dragon accepted the swords, and bowed. He replaced his own daisho with them, but as he slipped the weapons into the folds of his obi, a strange sensation overcame him. It was as if he could hear voices...

"Nobutsuna!" Daigotsu's booming voice snapped him back into awareness, the whispers of the other onlookers silenced.

"Heed the voices at your own peril. But I trust that someone of your capabilities will be able to tame the Shamesword."

The Dark Lord hoped that this was true, for he himself did not fully fathom the depths of Kokujin's madness when he created the *nemuranai*. But none could argue against their devastating efficacy. And that was all that mattered.



“Tomorrow, you shall travel to the lands of the Dragon.” Daigotsu strolled over to a window opposite the chamber entrance. “Once there, seek out my agents through the usual channels. Your task will be revealed to you then.”

From the window, a crescent moon could be seen in the night sky, the city ruins basking in its glow.

Yet there was one thing that the Spider daimyo felt compelled to ask.

“Tell me, Nobutsuna-san. How skilled are you against shugenja?”

A dark robed Chuda disengaged herself from the others and came between Daigotsu and the duelist. Silence permeated through the chamber as breaths were drawn in anticipation. Daigotsu peered over the Chuda's shoulder. She was an accomplished shugenja, her prowess in the dark arts proven by numerous victories.

Her fingertips suddenly flared with pulsing energy as she pointed them towards the ronin, before unleashing their scorching white-blue fury. Her attack happened in an instant, but that instant was more than enough time for Nobutsuna.

Her vision dimmed as her brain went into shock, the Shamesword having split her skull in two. The duelist stood between her twitching outstretched arms, and casually

lopped off her with a second deft stroke. The Chuda collapsed to the floor, a fountain of dark blood signifying her demise.

Nobutsuna's expert hands snapped the swords into their saya with preternatural precision. He then lowered his head and knelt once more before the Dark Lord of the Shadowlands.

"I assure you this, master," the duelist murmured. "That when these blades are drawn, even an Elemental Master will know the meaning of fear."

Daigotsu's mask hid his beaming smile.

Things were going to turn out quite well, after all.

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