

It was a cold October day, the wind was rustling in the trees and the last rays of sun were shining through the clouds. On the horizon the storm was brewing. We were gathered here, near the Hagukumi Dojo. Two clans from opposing factions in the war torn nation, this scene repeated countless times over the course of history. Each time different yet each time the same.

As we prepared for battle and gathered the troops I could not help but think about how I had been chosen to lead the army. I had always thought that she would be Daimyo. I always thought that I was not ready for such a task, that it was not me and that it was not in my nature. Now it was forced upon me and as I swore in the troops, I listened to the oath as it was repeated: "do you swear to do your best at every one of your challenges" and remembered that I too was bound to this oath.

Once sworn in, the troops assembled and I made the final address, there was nothing important to say, nothing these warriors did not know. They were trained for this, it was their nature. I could only remind them that they were already dead and that the only thing that mattered was their effort in combat, death meant nothing only the beauty of their actions did.

I had to choose a sentry, this warrior would be the eyes of the clan he would be our flag, our anchor, our center, unable to move unable to fight unable to join in the battle. He would stay motionless and distant yet still in the middle of it. I had no idea how to choose the right warrior for this task and asked for a volunteer. After a short silence he stepped forward and after making sure it was what he really wanted, I asked him to take position at the gate of the camp.

After choosing the sentry I hired an expert ninja, she would be our eyes and ears in the enemy camp. Her mission would be to infiltrate the enemy and obtain information and on some occasion make an attempt at sabotage. It turned out that she would not have so many opportunities to do so and spent most of her time watching the battle. As time passed it became clear that she had more samurai in her than ninja and wanted to participate in the challenges. I weighed my options: if she fought as samurai and died we would lose our ninja, but keeping her away from the challenges would only leave her sidelined and possibly frustrated. I thought it would not be worthwhile having a ninja who wanted to be samurai and thought that if we lost our ninja we would have to do without one. I would have to accept the consequences of that. What I would not accept though, was to restrict or curb a warrior from expressing himself on the battleground

Once the troops were ready, the generals were summoned to prepare the tactics. It seemed chaotic and I was lost, I did not want to impose my ideas and wanted to try to understand what each general thought was the best path. So many ideas, so many contradictions, so much confusion; and to make things worse the sentry had reported the entry of a ninja in our camp. I tried not to let my worries take over and thought that the strategies and tactics would become clear as the battle unfolded, it was too soon to judge who possessed which strengths and how best to use them.

The ritual begins with a first duel, one samurai from each camp moves forward, they meet in the center and begin the duel, they fight and one samurai dies, the other returns to camp. This happens repeatedly and as Daimyo I am left to observe the samurai fall or stand. Sometimes fate intervenes and the weaker samurai leaves the battlefield and the stronger one does not and again I must remember that victory is not always decided by chance or ability. Winning or losing, dying or living are secondary in front of the expressions of the samurai on the battlefield. Courage, honor, beauty are not measured in terms of victory, of life or of death here.

I do not participate in the duels, I have to select which warriors fight, however, I trust my warriors enough to let them decide for themselves, when there is confusion or hesitation, I step in and at these points I make decisions and give instructions. It is difficult to choose which warrior to send to his potential death but I try to focus on the fact that death is not important but that the honor of the samurai is and that without the opportunity to fight, his honor can never be proven. When I have to choose, I try to send the most confident samurai to battle, the one who truly believes in himself. Sometimes this is hard to judge but sometimes it is clear as crystal.

The battle starts slowly one duel at a time but the troops are eager and soon duels spring up simultaneously sometimes three or four at a time. Every so often the bodies get in the way and a truce is called to allow us to remove our dead and give them an honorable burial. We have a ritual and though it has been many years since the last war the samurai slowly start to remember this ritual, which they have performed countless times. Some words are said in memory of the warriors. I observe their duels and focus on the details of how they fought and died, so that I can remind the troops of why we remember the fallen, not because they are dead but because they have lived and because they have shown courage.

Each duel is an expression of their strengths, their weaknesses, their honor and their soul. Each duel is different some fights require speed and agility, others patience and perseverance and some duels turn into a beautiful spectacle of art and music. These are the hardest to judge the ringing of metal on metal, the rhythms, the sounds, the movements, all become like a dance, like a poem and there is nothing left but the beauty of the motions. How is such a battle decided? Which samurai should win or lose when such beauty is shown and how do you measure the bravery of a samurai when there is no rule to measure with?

Through the day I see many events unfold, two samurai locked in an unforgettable dance in the center of the field, one samurai bravely rushing into a battle that seems lost from the start. In a beautiful display he moves like a bird into battle, spreading giant wings and moving with the wind. His opponent responds to this, with bravery that is hard to understand yet hard not to appreciate, she stays motionless, completely still. There is a moment where time seems to stop and the two warriors are locked in combat, two opposing displays of beauty and bravery crashing headlong into one another and both refusing to

give in, each ready to live or die for their honor. Then time catches up with them and they both fall to the ground struck dead by an act of Fate.

At a critical point in the battle the armies of the south need to send their ninja to battle as their samurai are spent. She makes the challenge and a samurai accepts, it is a physical battle, a battle of stamina and perseverance and as time goes by it is clear that the North samurai is taking the upper hand but the ninja refuses to submit and keeps going and keeps going and her determination and will power shine through and when she finally is defeated there remains nothing but respect for the spirit she showed.

As the fight goes on weariness takes over, the battles are shorter, the warriors are tired. My sentry opens my eyes and shows me that the focus is gone, the warriors are exhausted. Slowly they are starting to cling to life and the intensity of the battle is affecting them, the deaths around them are taking their toll. Some warriors seem to be forgetting honor in favor of life and death. Yet in the middle of all this two warriors stand in the middle of the battleground a beacon of light in the darkness, a South samurai and our ninja who had asked to take part in this battle, the risk of losing our ninja had seemed acceptable in comparison to her desire and confidence. The combat these two warriors led was exemplary, a fight of perseverance, of stamina, of strength, yet also of calmness, of relaxation and serenity. Both warriors were facing the other calmly and respectfully, they were not fighting each other but were mastering themselves. The combat lasted for what seemed an eternity and neither of them seemed ready to be defeated, then Fate intervened and spared both their lives.

After this, the battle started becoming more chaotic, nearly all the troops had been spent and the battle slipped into a free for all. Combats sprung up everywhere and continued until only two warriors were left. The last combat was won by our ninja, leaving the Daimyo of the south alone with his sentry. All his troops had been killed and I had expected him to accept defeat honorably and join his troops by taking his life, yet he clung on and issued a last challenge saying that to honor his fallen comrades he would fight a last duel. Although this surprised me I thought that I would easily defeat him in single combat and accepted his challenge.

The battle was epic, a poem, each fighter pouring his heart and soul into the combat. I could clearly see how much my opponent was determined to defend the honor of his fallen warriors. I fought with all my heart and thought that I had clearly defeated my opponent yet as I looked in his eyes I saw the unyielding resolve and also my own reflection. He was seeing what I was seeing, He was feeling what I was feeling, we were one. It became clear to me that there was nothing more to win, defeating him would be defeating myself. I had fought with my heart and had mastered myself. I was at peace and respectfully took my life to honor the beauty of our combat.

In my dying moments I saw how our ninja defeated the last Daimyo in single combat and was left to make the eulogy for the dead and to watch over the field of fallen warriors, victorious.