

Rise of the Shogun Fiction
By Alexei Othenin-Girard

The Miko knelt and cleared her mind, the vapors from the bowl of tea in front of her aiding her relaxation. Her crimson sleeves pooled over her snowy white hakama. The room was almost dark, and filled with the smell of incense and the sharp, bitter scent of tea, lit only by the faint illumination of the burning censers. She whispered prayers to the local spirits, entreating them to help her find her way. Little by little, a glimmer formed in the bottom of the bowl before her, casting a murky, greenish light into the little altar room. The priestess peered into the bowl before her, and smiled slowly. Her course was clear. She waved her hand, and instantly the light in the bowl winked out. She stood, deliberately, and picked up her sword, and exited the shrine, disappearing into the night.

The tapers burned down as the Lord knelt by his shoji wall. The slightest rustle informed him that his associate, his Ninja, had alighted on the other side of that wall. The lord's eyes never flickered from the scroll in front of him. "Ahhh...curse the Emperor's failing health. And curse these dark times that loom ahead of us. Even now, the Taira and the Minamoto mass their armies, as the blind fools in Heian fritter away their time writing poetry..." The lord stopped. There was the slightest noise of rustling assent, and then merely a sense of absence. The Ninja had departed, off on the mission which his lord required of him. "Be safe," the lord sighed to himself. "Be safe, my son."

Deep inside his gilded palanquin, the Prince smirked behind his fan as he reclined on his pillows. It would only be a little while longer until his plans came to fruition, only a little while until he could bypass all the tiresome regulations of official succession and place himself on the throne. Thoughts of wealth and power ran sluggishly through his head, each more extravagant than the last, and the steps of his four bearer/bodyguards lulled him to sleep. Suddenly the Prince perked up, and twitched aside a curtain on his palanquin. "Whose manor is it that we're passing?" he asked his bearers. "Sir, it is the manor of the Honorable Minister of the Sixth Rank." Through the curtains, the sounds of laughter and music were floating into the palanquin.

"It sounds as though the Honorable Minister is celebrating the Spring Festival a little early this year...I've just remembered. The way back to my grounds is under a directional taboo for me tonight. Run to the Honorable Minister and tell his house of my predicament." The reply came that the Prince should feel free to accept the hospitality of the Honorable Minister for the evening.

The Prince smiled and leaned back again in his chair. The Honorable Minister of the Sixth Rank was a powerful opponent of his, and certain...accidents could be persuaded to occur during the pageantry and distraction of a festival. Besides, the Honorable Minister also had several very attractive daughters...

The Samurai grunted and rearranged his pack. It was the only thing he had to use as a pillow, but as it contained his armor and supplies, it wasn't very comfortable. His one extravagance, his horse, was sleeping nearby. The snows had melted, but the night was still bitterly cold. His Lord hadn't had the men to spare for an official delegation to

deliver the artifact to its rightful place, so the duty fell to him. He'd been forced to hole up in the lee of a stand of trees, hoping for the wind to die down. He hadn't even been able to make it to a way-station before it got so dark that he feared his horse would break a leg if he continued. A sudden snapping sound brought the Samurai immediately out of his contemplation. Indeed, another faint crackle sounded, this time from the other side of the copse. The Samurai slid his hand silently down towards his sword and grasped the hilt of the katana. Other than that, he didn't move a muscle. Time seemed to crawl. His horse whickered softly in its sleep. As if on cue, the Samurai whipped his katana out of its sheath, just in time to block the blow which rained down from above him. He launched himself to his feet and whirled, trying to find the opponent who had attacked him. "Who are you?! Announce yourself," the Samurai yelled into the still, cold night. The copse was dark and even the moon seemed to have disappeared. A sudden flash of reflected light was the only warning that another deadly attack was imminent. The Samurai barely managed to block the blow with the hilt of the sword. In that moment, the Samurai got his first look at his opponent. The cowed face and short sword were all the Samurai needed to see, as he and his opponent clinched. "Ninja..." he hissed and, with a mighty shove, threw the other figure off him. The Ninja leapt, seeming to twist in mid-air, and landed on one of the low branches of the trees around him.

"What do you want, Ninja?" The Samurai spat the word as if it offended his mouth.

There was a dry chuckle from the branches. "What do you think?" The voice was soft as paper, but cut through the air like a knife. The chuckling sound continued for a moment. At the last possible instant the Samurai recognized the sound of thrown darts, and scrambled out of the way. One of the darts grazed his ankle and he grunted as a numbing pain shot up his leg. "Come down and fight me!" roared the Samurai. He flexed the muscles in his leg against the numbness, keeping his toes alive inside his tabi, and drew himself upwards into a fighting stance, sword held straight in front of him. It bisected his field of view. The Samurai cleared his mind, and waited. A moment of silence, a rustle of leaves, a sense of motion. The Samurai's sword arced out, fast as lightning, and struck the Ninja's shorter sword with a sound like thunder. The Ninja, caught off guard, flew back to sprawl under the roots of the tree he'd jumped from. Almost immediately he was on his feet, and threw himself at the Samurai. The sound of blades sang like bells in the small copse, shattering the silence of the night.

The Ninja could use both terrain and position to great effect, flitting in and out of the shadows, baiting the Samurai. Unfortunately, the Samurai had the edge in strength and speed and, as soon as he was able to move, began gaining the advantage. Blow after blow, the Samurai began to deflect the strikes of his opponent.

With a snarl of rage, the Ninja returned to the tree branch from which he'd originally attacked the Samurai. "I would stay and kill you, but I have business elsewhere, and this fight has gone on long enough." And with that he was gone, leaving only a whirl of shadows in his wake. The Samurai sheathed his sword and slumped to the ground, finally allowing his body to react to the poison. The attack had been unexpected, but its message was clear. He would have to move fast. Time was running out. As he dragged

himself back to his horse, he noticed that the sacred bronze mirror, Yata no Kagami, had been stolen from his saddle bags. Mounting, slowly, he cursed the unknown name of the Ninja.

The Prince and his entourage hastened from the house of the Minister of the Sixth rank. The body probably wouldn't be discovered for several hours, but it was best to be far away when the shouting started. The Prince sighed to himself. It was so regrettable that there were still those who felt the need to meddle in his affairs, obstructing his plans. After all, it was only what any enterprising young nobleman with an ounce of sense in his head would do in these troubled times... The palanquin came to an abrupt halt, jerking the Prince out of his reverie.

“Why have we stopped?” he demanded hotly.

“Sir, there's a girl in the road.”

The Prince made a sound of disgust. “If she doesn't move, simply run her over. She can't possibly be important.”

“Umm...sir? She has a sword...”

“WHAT?” The Prince sat bolt upright in his palanquin. He poked his head through the curtained windows. Indeed, standing in the middle of the road was a young woman, dressed in the traditional garb of a Miko, with a sword strapped to her side.

The Prince waved his fan at her. “Go home. Go away.” He tapped his fan on the side of the palanquin, indicating to his bearers that he wished to continue his journey. There was some desultory shuffling, but the bearers resumed their forward motion. They had taken three steps when the distinctive sound of a sword being pulled from its sheath stopped them. The bearers danced nervously, rattling the prince inside his palanquin. The prince poked his head out again, and saw that the Miko had now unsheathed her sword and was standing in a combat stance.

“Little sister, you are making a very grave mistake. I am a extremely important man, and I don't have time to play with you now. Leave here or I will have my men hurt you very badly.”

The Priestess spoke for the first time. “If you send your men here I will kill them. Spare their lives and fight me yourself. I have seen your machinations, and I can not allow them to come to fruition. Now come, if you have any honor, and fight me yourself.”

The Prince sighed. He tapped his palanquin twice with his fan, and his bearers obediently placed the covered chair on the ground. The Prince took a long moment to compose himself, then stepped out of the sedan chair. His garments were of the finest silks, and he looked especially elegant on that day. With a snap of his wrist, he unfurled his Tessen, an iron fan. He gazed down imperiously at the woman standing before him in

the road. Finally, he sighed. “Kill her,” he commanded his men, and turned away. The sight of a woman’s death always brought him a sort of melancholy, no matter how necessary it was or how she obstructed his path. The sounds of combat rang swiftly behind him until he heard the distinctive sound of a body hitting the ground. He was about to turn around again when he heard the sound of a second body hitting the ground, then a third, and a fourth. The Prince spun, enraged. Standing exactly where he’d left her was the Miko, and surrounding her were the fallen bodies of his men, arranged in a neat tetrahedron around her.

“I told you that if you sent your men, they’d die.”

With an inarticulate scream of rage, the Prince flew over the bodies of his dead bearers, producing a dagger from somewhere beneath his robes, and began slashing furiously at the Miko.

“*NOW (slash) I (slice) HAVE (cut) TO (slit) WALK (stab) HOME (cut stab slice)!*”

The Miko backpedaled in the face of this onslaught, her sword whirring to block the Prince’s flashing dagger. Dodging agilely over the bodies of the bearers, she was nonetheless harried backwards by the Prince, his fury growing with each swing and each step. His attack left her no room to counterattack, her every resource necessary to keep that dagger from finding her heart.

“What’s wrong, little sister? You didn’t expect an aristocrat to be easy prey, did you? You’ll have to take your thieving elsewhere,” the Prince grunted as he continued to slash away at the Miko. He did not notice as a light seemed to spark in her eyes, didn’t notice until the glow had extended to encompass her entire form, a light which turned his dagger away, and burned his eyes.

“**PARASITE!**” The Miko’s voice resonated with divine power. “**YOU TAKE ME FOR A THIEF? I HAVE COME TO WREAK HOLY VENGEANCE AGAINST YOU!**” And power crashed down from the sky, momentarily obscuring both the Miko and her assailant.

When the flash had passed, the Prince was nowhere to be seen. The Miko was alone in the road, save for the ruined palanquin and the bodies of the Prince’s men, now starting to groan and writhe. She sighed a little sigh. She’d hoped to end this here, but she had no more time to hunt the Prince down, and his bearers would be rousing themselves from their decidedly non-fatal wounds. With a final, brief glance backwards, she hurried away.

The Samurai stared out over the valley. His troops stretched away into the distance, mostly peasants who’d been drafted into his lord’s armies. They’d been stationed in this valley for four days, waiting for him to arrive and lead them. Now they just had to wait for him to complete one final task. The Samurai wheeled his horse around and galloped off down the hillside, threading his way through trees and boulders. He remembered this place from his youth, remembered the stream that cut through the rocks, remembered the

tiny shrine nestled in the hillside, the secret that was said to be held inside. Finally, as the sun set, he found it, a tiny shuttered shrine set into the earth of the hill itself, gazing out on the stream before it. The Samurai steeled himself for what he was about to do, and sat a while in meditation. Finally, he opened the shutters of the shrine, and reached into the dark space within.

The hand that grabbed his was scaled with long, curved claws, and the arm to which it was attached was horrifically strong. The Samurai suddenly found himself up to his shoulder in the small shrine, and in the unpleasant position of having his arm about to be torn off. The Samurai braced himself against the shrine and heaved, finally dislodging a greenish, lumpy creature which tumbled out with a shriek and a spatter of water.

“*Kappa!*” hissed the Samurai, scrambling for his sword. The creature lay motionless on the ground. The Samurai sprang up and brought his sword down over the monster and was about to lop off its head when it set up a plaintive wailing. The Samurai sighed. This was going to be a long night.

The Ninja had long finished his examination of his lord’s troops. As expected, they were ragtag peasants, barely kept in line by a handful of commanding officers. Still they were what his lord had to work with, and he had a more important job than supervising them. Thank the gods. He was within sight of the castle, but would be unable to approach further. He’d already seen the signs, and had no doubt that the lord’s guards had already spotted him.

The Ninja unslung his bow and removed the piece of parchment from his pouch which he’d written earlier in the night. He aimed carefully at the outer wall of the castle, making sure to place the arrow near a guard who would report it to his lord. He let the arrow fly, then let out a sigh. Mission accomplished. Moments later, however, another arrow sank into the tree next to him with a resounding “thunk.” He unrolled the parchment affixed to it, and read it with a growing unease. The death of the Minister of the Sixth Rank would have profound implications for his Lord’s plans. The Ninja sighed again. His course was clear. There would be no rest for him this evening. The Ninja set off across the treetops, jumping from tree, to tree, to tree.

The Prince surveyed his troops with a sigh. He’d requisitioned more, but the Emperor had made his levy politically untenable at the last moment. And all the impetus he’d gained with the death of the Minister of the Sixth Rank vanished like smoke when that self-righteous priestess had attacked him in the road. He’d been forced to abandon his palanquin and leave Kyoto at the earliest opportunity. Now he was far from his manor house, his palanquin, even his bodyguards. The plain stretched out before him, with a dark line of troops cutting a swath through it. From his vantage point, the Prince could see other forces massed on the horizon, their bright blue banners contrasting with the green standard that his forces wore. Their banners fluttered against the stone walls of a castle, huge and white, which thrust up from the mountains behind them. That was the Prince’s aim, the final. The Prince pulled himself up to his full height, made a desultory attempt to brush the dust of travel from his robes, and started down the hill to meet his troops.

On the hill opposite, the Samurai saw his enemy's forces moving towards him. He saw, also, the small dark shape that even now darted out from the river, scaly hands grabbing at soldiers with inhuman strength, dragging whole regiments away, off down the valley. He smiled grimly to himself. The *kappa* had proved an invaluable ally, at the end. It was only then that he saw a third line of peasant-soldiers, snaking off into the distance. They'd crept up under the tree cover, and were now threatening to flank his forces and shatter his supply lines. They carried banners of deepest lavender, which they unfurled against the forest. Behind them, the Samurai could barely make out a figure, visible merely as a spot of deeper darkness against the forest. The Samurai knew, without a doubt in his heart, that the Ninja skulked in that shadow, and spurred his horse towards his foe. But as he rode down the hillside towards the forest, he saw another figure, a woman, appear through the trees. She was wearing the traditional garb of the Miko, the shrine-maidens, and as she looked into the trees at the Ninja, a bolt of lightning struck from out of the clear sky. Two things fell from the tree, one a body, which fell heavily, and the other a shining object, which glittered as it fell. The Samurai was just close enough to see that it was a mirror, before the Miko caught it and the air around her began to shimmer. There was a bright light. And then the battle began.