

Mark of the Ronin

Near a desolate plain, and under a harsh scorching sun, a lone man wanders down a thin dusty trail in a slow steady pattern. He slowly walks along into the desert wind. As he traversed the desert he would encounter desert mice and small birds that were at the mercy of the desert. The man is covered in tattered loose rags, sunburns, and was coated with stains of battles long ago. His skin is burnt, dark, bloodied, and beaten with dirt. Upon him he carries a hoard of different items and trinkets he had collected in his journeys, all weathered and coated in the desert's dust. In his collection of treasures, junk, and rags, he carries one possession more valuable than all else, it is the one possession that is clean, cared for, and not weathered; a long steel sword encased in a finely made sheath. It is a Katana, the sword of a Samurai.

He stops briefly on his journey to drink from a water flask that he carries. He keeps marching for many hours, not stopping very often, only to drink or adjust the many items on his back. Eventually he comes across something, a cross road. There is a sign there, but it's rotted and the text isn't readable. He stands there in consideration for only a moment, referring to an old hand drawn map. He then decides to continue down the left path. It is vast and extends many miles, and the desert extends around like a sea of sand. Towards the tail end of the day, as the harsh sun begins to set, he finally stumbles into a quiet and quaint town. Exhausted and sure he can't continue any farther, he walks into the nearest inn.

"Greetings," he says awkwardly to a short, old, wrinkly man working the front desk as he stumbles through the door. Finally safe from the harsh environment outside, he exhales in relief.

"Why, hello there," replies the old man as he slowly adjusts to look at him. "W-wow, you aren't looking too great. Are you alright?"

"I-I just need a room. With a bath. Please."

"Of course!" He looks confused, but shuffles under the desk grasping a key for him. "I- uh, never did get your name."

“I am called Yato, that is my name.”

“Well, it's... uh, great to meet you, Yato,” He shakily hands over the keys with an unsure expression on his face. Yato gestures goodbye to the man and heads to his room. He takes a bath and cleanses himself, carefully tending to his wounds. Once he finishes he exits into the empty street, where he begins to search the street-side shops. As he looks, he attempts to gather information on where exactly he is.

“That sword!” One man says, noticing the blade on his hip. “Are you a Samurai?”

“Something like that,” He examines the man's wares, specifically a new cloak that the man is selling.

“Are you willing to take a job?” the man asks with a sense of desperation in his voice. “Please - our village is suffering. We could use your help. I can pay whatever you ask.”

“What's the job?” Yato inquired, grabbing the cloak he was examining.

“There's a village a few miles north of here that raids us monthly and demands payment we don't have or owe them!”

“Tell me where this village is, I might be able to help.” Yato states offering a handshake to the man.

In the morning, Yato began his slow trek North through the harsh desert. He bid farewell to the Inn worker, and left a few possessions there. He hiked faster this time and was no longer weighed down with dirt, blood, and old rags. The trail continued uphill this time with more vegetation and wildlife, suggesting that he might be near the edge of the Endless Desert. Finally he arrived at the front of the village. There was a large wooden gate blocking most of the view of the large fortress inside. He approached it carefully, reaching the large wooden door without any resistance. He slowly pushed the door open to an empty scene. The fort felt still and cold. Something wasn't right. Yato had a strange feeling since the first time he saw the fortress. There was an odd familiarity to it even though Yato was certain he had never been there before. “Hello!” Yato called into the fort. His voice echoed through it.

“A lone swordsman thinks he can best us,” A sourceless voice mocks him from the shadows.

Yato moves his hand to the hip that his sword rests on, preparing to strike any foe who steps in his path. A single person jumps down from the shadows, staring down at Yato. Their lower face is covered with a wooden oni mask.

“Tell me Ronin,” She begins to pace towards Yato. “Why don't you leave the desert? Is it really worth risking your life? I'll gladly kill you if that's your goal.” She equips herself with two Ninjato swords that rest on her left hip.

“I don't care if I die, as long as I make a difference and help those villagers.” He unsheathes his Katana and scowls. They sprint towards each other keeping their blade ready for combat... Clash! She swings high for Yato's head. He narrowly ducks beneath and goes for a return jab; she meets him halfway and he twists out of the way. He pulls around to her side and lands a single slash across her arm. She stumbles back and misses a slash towards Yato, but the second slash lands in his stomach. Yato leans in and thrusts his blade forward, piercing directly through her heart. She returns a final cut into his arm, lodging her blade deep inside it.

“Y-you actually got me...” She looks shocked and coughs blood as she speaks.

“Tell me, what is your name?” He slowly sets her down on the ground.

“K-Kukimi...” She manages before she starts to drift off.

“You fought well, Kukimi.” He says somberly. He retrieves his blade and searches for a shovel in the fort. He stumbles outside and digs her a grave, making sure to give her an honorable death. By the time he is done, the sun begins to set and a gold aura fills the air. The twinkles of stars begin to blink in the sky.

Yato remains for a while, but begins to limp home before it becomes too dark. He uses a lantern to set the wooden fort aflame before wandering back to the village. He rests for the night, and wakes early and enters the town to bid farewell.

After announcing his departure one villager stops him, “Wait, where do you plan to go next?”

“I'm not quite sure,” He replies. “I plan to go wherever the desert takes me.”