

The Paper Fan

By Sean Madden

Grabbing onto the last large rock above me, I pulled myself up to the steady ground above the jagged fall below. At last, I'd climbed up to my destination, the home of the hermit who lived on the peak. The location I had reached couldn't look more mysterious, with an oriental house constructed from bamboo high up on a mountain, and the cloudy evening sky above me seemingly within reach. The house was built into the mountainside, cut to fit inside the rock walls, with more cleanly cut statues lining the exterior. It certainly looked to be the home of the mystic swordsman I was told about. With my goal just in sight, I grabbed the great brass handle and knocked on the front door.

"Come!" the clear voice called out from inside.

Hesitating only a bit longer, I pushed open the heavy door and arrived inside a warm, Japanese-styled home. Oriental masks lined the walls along with several watercolor paintings, but were mostly outshone by the gleaming *katanas* suspended on the wall. In the center of the room was a table, supporting a vase of fine flowers and a bonsai tree. In front of the small table, was an old man resting on the floor, wearing foreign-styled clothing. His great white beard trailed off like a snake as he sipped a cup of tea.

"What business do you have here?" he asked me, still not looking in my direction. "If you have climbed all the way here for my assistance, I will gladly listen."

"Sorry to bother you," I sheepishly spoke, "But you're a mystical sword master, correct? The people in the village below said you specialize in swordplay, and even have some magical power... is this true?"

"Yes, you heard correct."

“I have a request. I come from a village not too far from here, and they’re going to be having a swordsmanship tournament there very soon. I hate to bother you, sir, but I would like to improve my skill before it begins. Please, I wish for you to take me in as your student to help me train!”

“No,” he said almost immediately in a stern tone. “I am no teacher. Having a student is a liability, I do not and will never take any pupils under any circumstances. If that is the only reason you have come, leave now.”

I couldn’t believe it. After all I’ve been through, he instantly shot me down as soon as I asked him to help me! All the while he hadn’t even bothered to look at me. I clenched my fist in frustration at this new discovery. But I wasn’t finished yet: I don’t give up that easily.

“Excuse me, good sir, but you just rejected me as soon as I asked you for your help. I refuse to take that and leave after all I’ve been through. I will not leave until we reach an agreement!”

“Please don’t make this any more difficult,” he said while his back still faced me. “I will never accept a student. Please depart before I have to resort to force. Get out.”

Anger began to swell throughout my body. Why was he so against having students? A fire started burning inside me as I began to march toward him.

“You think you can just turn me away after everything I did to get up this godforsaken mountain? Do you even know what kind of death trap you live on? Then let *me* educate you! At the foot of this mountain there’s this giant red troll that is way too strong to be anywhere near a village! The caves I climbed through were filled to the brim with scorpions the size of footballs! Look at all of these places I got stung! And don’t even get me started with those poorly-made bridges. I broke at least half of those boards on the way up and got swept away by that crazy fast

river all the way back down to the bottom where the troll was! But those turkeys... those turkeys were the worst! I have never come across anything more randomly aggressive than those hell-spawn birds! They chased me all the way around the mountain and pecked every inch of my body! But worse still, they chased me to those bridges and made me get pushed by the river back down to the damn troll and the caves!! And the worst part is they're just birds!! I've been climbing this hell-hole of a mountain for 3 days, and you want to turn me away that fast?! Sorry, but that's not happening!!"

Suddenly, the man glanced back at me. He seemed to be fed up with me as he glared with a cold look in his gray, misty eyes. "This is your last chance. Leave now."

Feeling the cold gaze was highly unsettling. I felt almost paralyzed. But I was not going to leave, no matter how murderous his glare seemed. I couldn't go back now. If I lost the tournament again, I could never recover from that defeat. I must know for certain from a master that I am ready. Not fearing what could happen, I glared right back at him. I would get through to him one way or another. As we stared straight into each other's eyes, it felt like there was lightning jumping between us. He would probably be able to kill me in one movement, but I kept scowling right back anyway. Suddenly, the old man roared with cheerful laughter. I was so startled by it that I fell straight back onto the floor.

"It's been a long, long time since I've seen someone as determined as you. Anyone else who's ever climbed this far for me to teach them left after I glared at them. But not you. I will say this though... it sounds like you've had a much harder time climbing this mountain than anyone else. Was old Rotbart really that bothersome for you?"

"Rotbart? Who the hell is Rotbart?"

“Ah, that’s the troll. You’ll have to excuse him, he’s very territorial. But even after all that, you still climbed all the way up here. I suppose if you’re really that persistent, I could teach you what I know for three days. However, I must warn you before you train with me. Aside from human necessities, you will be using every moment of your time with me training. It will be intense, and even your life will be put at risk in some situations. Are you really willing to go through with that?”

“Yes,” I declared looking straight into his eyes. “I have to give it everything I have, even if it costs me my life.”

“Very well,” said the old man as he stood up to his full height, his long white beard reaching down to his knees. “I shall be your instructor for the next few days, starting tomorrow. But I would like to test your skills in a moment so that I can determine what kind of training you need tomorrow. First, however, you shall now address me as ‘*Sensei.*’ As for you, I’ll give you a name fitting of your actions on your climb up here. You shall now be addressed as ‘*Baka.*’ Now then, let me test your skills.”

Sensei then seemed to chuckle to himself. I don’t know what “*Baka*” meant, but I assumed it must be really fitting of my accomplishments. I followed him into the next room, apparently a fighting dojo. He gestured me to the practice sword on the wall. As I took it off, Sensei stood on the opposite side of the room and addressed me.

“Now, Baka, there is no more need for words between us as we practice. I want you to come at me with everything you have. Do not fear for my safety, just hold nothing back.”

Waiting for the right moment, I charged with all of my speed straight at him and thrust the blade directly at him. As something parried my blade, I looked down in utter shock. He had simply moved my lightning-fast thrust out of the way with a paper fan. Recovering from the

initial surprise, I jumped around to his backside and slashed again, only to be parried once again by the fan. How could I get so humiliated by just a feeble fan?! Agitated, I let lose everything I had in me, slashing the sword in a blind rage. I was going to land a hit in, no matter what!

I lost track of time as I kept at it. Eventually, my limbs became limp as I continued without pause. I soon fell to the floor, slowly and weakly chopping my sword in one spot, still being blocked by the fan. My body was all worn out, but I still wanted to fight. I wasn't going to give up until I landed a blow. However, Sensei caught my sword in his hand, stopping it from moving altogether.

"I think that's quite enough," Sensei declared as my sword dropped to the floor. "Your attacking styles are good for the most part, and your spirit is very willing. However, you lack some speed and a lot of defense, all of which will be needed. I know now what it is you need. That is all I needed for today. You are dismissed for the night. Please sleep out front. I don't have any normal accommodations for guests, so that will have to do."

"But, I'm not through just yet," I started. "I can still fight-"

I was immediately met by a forceful blow to the head by the paper fan.

"You fool! Go to bed."

With Sensei's final words of the evening, I went out front, made some dinner from my leftover rations, and fell asleep on the sofa.

I awoke with a start early the next morning when something smacked me in my face. With the sun still just starting to rise outside, Sensei was standing over me with his paper fan.

"You fool! Why are you sleeping? Your training begins now. Follow me!" he declared.

Sensei lead me out to the front yard, along the edge of the cliff top. He gestured to what appeared to be a pathway that ran along the side of the mountain.

“You will start here,” he stated. “I want you to run a lap around the mountain and make it back in two hours or less.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I yawned. “I haven’t even had breakfast yet, and you want—”

Again, I was met with another blow to the face by the fan.

“You fool! You may have access to my kitchen after you return. I thought you might be difficult, so I shall grant you a partner to help you with your training.” Sensei turned to face his house and called out: “Come, Nicodemus!”

Immediately, a gigantic turkey sprung down from the roof and charged toward me. I was so startled I barely had time to react before the monster began to flog me with its wings. Crying out in surprise, I started to sprint down the pathway as the barbaric bird chased me. I forgot everything that was going on and just ran. Eventually, I saw the house once again. I wearily approached it, and Nicodemus had stopped chasing me and returned to his perch atop the house. As I went to go speak to Sensei, I was once again greeted by the fan.

“You fool!” he shouted at me again. “You were too slow. Next time you must be faster! Quickly go and eat your food, and then we can continue your training.”

The rest of the day was just as unpleasant as the morning. Much of my training made no sense at all. The tasks I was required to perform varied from simply washing my dishes to jumping onto upright poles while carrying buckets of water. But no matter the task I was given, I was always met with a paper fan to the head and a “You fool!” Even when I was doing nothing wrong, I was still met with the stupid fan. Was he just enjoying himself or something? After a long and tiring day of what I assumed was supposed to be training, I almost immediately went to sleep as soon as I laid down for the night. I was hoping I had come to the right place.

The next morning was no different than the last. I awoke after getting hit in the head yet again, and proceeded to be chased around the mountain by Nicodemus. After another series of random tasks and getting hit by the fan, something very surprising happened: Sensei invited me to have lunch with him. Knowing better than to act like a fool at this point, I immediately agreed. As we sat down at the table, I happily enjoyed my curry while Sensei sipped some tea.

“So, you seem to be very concerned about this tournament, Baka,” Sensei said as he added some more spice to his curry. “Why is it so important to you?”

“Talking about it makes me very uncomfortable,” I stated. “Mainly because of what happened last year. Let’s just say I desperately need to win it this year in order so I can respect myself again. That’s the biggest reason. That’s when my sister suggested I look for you.”

“Ah, so you have a family. I assume they might be somehow involved, too. Are they important to you? Perhaps you can tell me a bit about them?”

“Well, I suppose. While I call her my sister, we’re technically not related by blood. She was adopted into my family when we were both young. In truth, I would have no reason left to live if it weren’t important for me to be there for her. That’s another reason why I have to win, so I can have the confidence I need once again, but enough about that, this curry is pretty tasty. In fact, I really enjoy it. But there’s a selfish favor I’d like to ask... do you think it would be possible to have a pizza or something tonight?”

Sensei looked very shocked at my question. Again, I had no time to react as he leapt across and once again hit me squarely in the face with the paper fan.

“You fool!” he shouted. “Even if we were to do such a thing, how could it be delivered up this mountain you had so much trouble climbing? Besides, you are going through training

right now. Such a thing to reward you with would make all of your efforts a waste! Hurry and finish, you shall wash the dishes after you are done.”

“Well, there goes my hopes for pizza I guess. I was looking forward to having some pepperoni, or even some bacon on it.” I then directed my words at the ceiling: “Specifically TURKEY BACON!”

The sound of angry gobbling and rustling feathers came from the roof.

The rest of the day finished up like the first, but now I was starting to get better at some of the tasks, and even accomplishing some. But that made no difference to Sensei. Apparently he must think my head is a fan-magnet or something. After a long, hard day’s work, I settled down once again on the sofa. Tomorrow would be my final day of training.

Awakening to the usual fan-to-the-face, I started my run around the mountain and proceeded to go about the usual training afterwards. However, it was much easier for me this time around, and not only because my body was getting better at performing the tasks. I had actually improved enough to start avoiding the “paper fan of doom.” I already got hit so much, something in my mind had begun to adjust to let me sense when it’s coming. The serene atmosphere around me is disrupted by a foul feeling when it’s about to happen, allowing me to react better. I still get hit by it, but with less of an impact. That never stops the accompanying “You fool!” however.

Around dinnertime, Sensei was nowhere to be seen. As I walked into the kitchen, I was greeted with a sight that almost made me break down into tears of joy. There was a pizza box sitting on the countertop. Sensei really did care about me after all! Without a moment’s hesitation, I threw open the box. A note was attached to the inside of the empty box with a giant “YOU FOOL!” written on it. As soon as I read it, I automatically knew what was coming, but I

still couldn't react in time. The fan came down hard on the back of my head. Then, something else I wasn't expecting happened.

The fan broke.

I stared at the broken fan in Sensei's hand, my mouth hanging open. Then I burst out laughing. I couldn't stop. The fan that had been giving me so much hell my entire trip here... It had snapped in two! I fell onto my back, laughing triumphantly. He couldn't hit me anymore! The tyranny was over! I began to jump up and down and dance around the kitchen while laughing like a maniac. I was free! Free of the curse of that stupid fan! Finally, I calmed down and smirked at Sensei. He said nothing. We were both silently standing there for a few moments. Finally, Sensei calmly walked over to the door on the far side of the room and opened it.

Fans. The entire room was a walk-in closet chock-full of paper fans. My heart sank at the horrific sight. There had to be at least a hundred. I could've broken down into tears at that moment if I wasn't so scared. So many paper fans, all of varying sizes. Sensei walked into the room and took one of the bigger fans off the shelf. He then smiled back at me as I whimpered.

"Eat your dinner quickly, Baka," he said to me. "You have something very important to do after you're done."

After eating, I followed him to right outside the room where we first sparred. He motioned for me to wait outside and shut himself inside the room. Curious as to what he was doing, I put my ear up to the door. I heard him open up another door inside the room and shut it. Then, the room was silent. I sat there for about a minute, listening intently, trying to pick up even the smallest noise. And then, a powerful blow from a fan came down on my head. Clutching my head in surprise and pain, I realized he must have walked around the outside of the entire room just to hit me.

“You fool!” he shouted at me again, “What are you doing? Wait here!”

I sat outside, making sure to keep my distance from the door this time. I thought I could hear strange incantations and unnatural sounds coming from inside. Was Sensei using his magic for something? Just what is he planning for me this time? Soon after, he came out of the room again, with a very serious expression. He handed me a moderate sized iron sword.

“Prepare yourself, Baka. This is your final test. I have used my magic to create an opponent for you. This task is set to be geared against you. Your opponent will take the form of an enemy you will likely have the most difficult time fighting. However, the danger is real. If you are defeated, whatever happens to you will be dependent on what your opponent is. You could face complete humiliation, lose all use of your body, or even die. Use everything you’ve learned to survive. These doors will not open again until your task is complete. Now, go.”

I shuddered a little on the inside. What could possibly be so difficult for me to face? I know I can handle more fans, or even some turkeys. Even if I had to fight a copy of my own sister, it wouldn’t be too bad. But if it’s an opponent I would truly be weak against fighting... No, there’s no way something as ridiculous as that could be my opponent. I walked inside, clutching the sword Sensei gave to me. The doors slammed shut behind me, and I looked to the center of the room. It was a pot. Seriously, a pot?! What was I supposed to do, just break it or something? As I approached it, a strange cloud billowed out of it and something jumped out.

It was a girl. Not much older than me, from the looks of it. But something was very wrong with her. Two goat-like horns were placed on her head, and she had a pair of great bat wings emerging from her back. A whip like tail with a strange tip waved around excitedly, and she was dressed in a rather promiscuous way. But the worst part... her voluptuous body. I felt a

chill run down my spine as I saw it. How? How did some magic spell know I'm horrified of girls with sexy bodies?! And it seemed I was dealing with a genuine succubus here.

"Hi there, boy," she whispered to me in a seductive voice. "Are you here to fight me? Why not just put down your sword so I can show you unmatched pleasures?"

"N-no!" I shouted trying not to sound scared. "There's only one thing on my mind, and that's defeating you so I can finish my training! Besides, I'm only sixteen, you lecherous freak!"

"That's okay," she giggled. "No one has to know. Besides, it's best to harvest around just when they start getting ripe, don't you agree?"

This was bad. My entire body was trembling from head to toe. I was sweating bullets of ice. How deadly could this opponent be? If what Sensei said was true, if I lost here... No! I couldn't think about that! I had to win! I took up a fighting stance, even as scared as I was.

"Oh, so you don't want to do lewd things with me?" she asked, looking amused. "What a shame. Well, I'll just wear you out then... then you won't have a choice!"

The tail darted straight for my head, barely giving me time to dodge. I charged straight at the succubus, and swung my sword horizontally. But I didn't cut anything, it just bounced right off her chest. She giggled seductively, making me jump back. I dodged the tail again and came in for another attack, only to strike at the air. She had slipped behind me and grabbed onto me. I cried out in shock as her breasts pressed against my back. She wrapped her tail around my legs, so I could barely move now. Thinking quickly, I thrust my head back as hard as I could.

The shock from the impact uncoiled her tail, letting me sweep my leg under and trip her. Jumping back, I knew that if I could see her body, it would make me uncomfortable to the point where I could never win. Hoping I would somehow survive, I shut my eyes tight and listened closely. Hearing her behind me, I jumped up and slashed in that direction, now feeling more

empowered than before due to my senses being at ease. Again, I cut nothing, and lost my footing as I fell. I landed face-first into something warm and soft. It seemed shutting my eyes wouldn't work either. I fell back from the shock of the feeling, and the succubus jumped and sat on my chest. Panic was racing through my mind as her sweet aroma began to enter my senses.

“Well, it looks like I got the better of you after all,” she whispered, poking me on the nose. “Now, let me hear you scream out in pleasure!”

Attempting to calm myself, I slowed my breathing. Finally starting to calm down, I could sense everything around me. I felt her tail heading straight for my face. Moving my head, I dodged it easily. I realized her attacks were much, much slower than Sensei's fan. I had then realized how to utilize my training experience. I kicked upward and grabbed her neck from behind with my feet, and threw her off of me. Standing up, I sensed her tail shooting towards me again. I dodged the slow attack with my newfound speed and counterattacked with all my strength. The succubus screamed as I cleaved her tail right down the middle. I had become able to read her attacks easily.

I danced around a flurry of attacks from her sharp nails, and dashed around to her backside. I slashed at her wings and left them in tatters. With her mobility hindered, I was able to get in one final strike. I jumped up and aimed an overhead strike right at her head. She managed to block the attack with her nails, but I was far from done. I let out a battle cry as I put all of my strength into the blade. With all of my spirit burning behind me, I broke through her guard and landed a fatal blow. As soon as I did, though, she vanished. Looking around, I was shocked as I saw her a few feet away, lounging in midair, in perfect condition.

“Well, you put up quite a fight there, silly boy,” she laughed. “Don't look so surprised, now. I was created from magic, so recovering from that was no problem. But, you clearly won

this battle. I'm a little disappointed, to be honest. I wish we could've played a bit more roughly. But, I suppose you deserve this victory. Well done! Bye!"

With a final giggle, the succubus vanished back into the pot. I sat there for a minute, still dumbfounded. I was able to face my biggest weakness and live. I heard the door open behind me, and Sensei walked in with a bright smile. But that wasn't the best part. With him, he was carrying a box of pizza. A real one, this time.

After celebrating my victory, I awoke the next morning on my own, with no fan to do the job for me. Gathering my gear, I advanced toward the door. Opening it, Sensei was outside, feeding the turkeys. I cautiously approached as he fed them, and he turned to face me.

"So, you're leaving then," he said, almost sounding a little sad. "Well, you can come back anytime you wish. You are always welcome here. You definitely are ready for your tournament now. I wish you luck, Baka."

"Thank you, Sensei," I replied. "I'll be sure to win so I can also so I can make you proud! But one last thing, can you keep what happened during my final test a secret to everybody?"

"Well, of course I can," he said to me. "It's understandable that you should want to do that. Besides, I never even saw or heard what happened in there in the first place!"

Sensei roared with laughter, and I simply rolled my eyes. Exchanging goodbyes, I began to depart back down the mountain when something that had been bothering me for a long time reared up in my head. I turned back toward the house one last time.

"Hey, Sensei!" I shouted. "What does 'Baka' mean, anyway?"

"Oh? Are you really asking me that?" he said with a smile. "By this point I really thought you would have figured it out. Must I remind you once again?"

He pulled out the paper fan.