

Timid Pirate Publishing
Presents a Cobalt City Adventure
A Neighborhoods feature by Jeremy Zimmerman

Sword Saint of Karlsburg
By Jeremy Zimmerman

Jamie Hattori pounded at the heavy bag with a series of rapid punches, then tossed in a knee to the side before returning to the rhythm of her punching. The sound of the blows echoed off of the concrete walls and a part of her remembered she'd been meaning to get a rug for the place. She'd been working out for a while, leaving her feeling soaked and itchy from the sweat. With each blow of her fist, sweat splashed off of her.

The room was part of her so-called "secret headquarters." Once upon a time this had been a bolt hole maintained by some hero in the 60s called Devil Cat, but he had long since moved out. Karl, the spirit of the neighborhood that had convinced her to fight crime in the area, had found this place for her to serve as a home for her alter ego: Kensei. The spirit also helped her reactivate the security systems. She wasn't sure that fifty year old alarms were going to stop a professional, but it was better than nothing.

She only kept a few things in her headquarters: changes of costume and street clothes and some exercise equipment, including the three-foot piece of rebar she used to practice her katana forms. She'd used a can of spray paint to tag the room with the *kanji* for *kensei*.

"Do you have a moment, Miss Hattori?" Karl asked, his voice appearing out of nowhere. He usually addressed her by the name her parents gave her rather than the one she chose. She got her name and her eyes from her Japanese father. The rest of her looks came from her African American mother: dark skin, short spiky dreadlocks, full lips and a broad nose.

She slumped against her heavy bag to mask her surprise, trying to play it off as resting from her workout. As the spirit for the neighborhood of Karlsburg, he could appear almost anywhere. Unluckily for her, she was one of the few who could see and hear him.

"For you Karl," she said while gasping for air, "I've got five." She pushed away from the heavy bag and went to grab her towel to mop off the sweat.

"Is there something wrong?" She noticed, not for the first time, that his voice didn't echo off the concrete like hers did.

"You asked for a moment of my time so you could check on my mood?"

"No, but you seem upset. I have a favor to ask of you, and I do not wish to catch you at a bad time."

She leaned against the wall, taking comfort from the cool concrete, and scrubbed her face with her towel. "I graduate this year."

"Congratulations," Karl said. "Transitioning to adulthood is a good thing."

She shook her head. "My parents are getting more insistent on me committing to something after graduation. School or move out or get a job or something."

Karl nodded. "This seems reasonable."

"If I do that, then I can't keep up the Kensei gig."

Karl shrugged. "You do school and Kensei now. What is the problem?"

She threw her towel at him, even knowing that it would pass through him. "I'm a solid C-minus student. I couldn't bus across town for Cobalt U or community college and still do this. And I can't think of a job that would allow me to stay out at all hours of the night and still keep it."

"Have you considered talking to your parents? I understand communication is important."

“And say what? ‘You know how we reported Great-Grandpa Hattori’s sword stolen? Well I’ve actually been using it to beat up muggers around the neighborhood.’”

“I can... see your point.”

“Thanks. So we agree. I’m screwed. Now that I’m ready to stab something, what’s the favor? I’m assuming this is a problem that requires Kensei.”

Karl nodded. “There is something invading the neighborhood.”

She rolled her eyes. “There’s always something invading the neighborhood.”

“I think it is a new gang,” Karl said.

“Then when they start causing problems I’ll beat them up with the rest of the muggers and pimps.” Jamie fished out the bottle of milk from her backpack and poured it into the saucer in the corner of the room. From nowhere a red and black cat, the “house” spirit of her secret lair, crept over and began lapping at the milk.

“These men are more persistent than the other people you rough up,” Karl said, shaking his head. “They are like a new disease entering the system. My body feels the dread of long term illness if they settle into the area. Good people will suffer if this is not stopped.”

“What am I supposed to do about a gang? One girl with a sword is good for surprised muggers. I don’t know that I’m up for a gang war.”

“If not you, who?” Karl asked.

She turned to respond to him, but he had already left. She hated when Karl used that line.

#

The Sunday afternoon pedestrian traffic was heavy by the time Jamie left her secret lair. Families with arms full of groceries came out of the Amir’s Halal Market, a pack of blonde bearded men that looked like Vikings went into Scandinavian Imports, and old men played chess in the outdoor seating in front of Costa’s Greek Deli.

Jamie slouched as she wove through the crowds, trying to maintain a low profile. She kept the hood of her sweatshirt up despite the warm weather. Over the chatter of the street traffic, the squawk of her police scanner kept her company through her earbud.

She didn’t know how she’d be able to take out a whole gang, but she didn’t doubt Karl when he told her this was important. She could pick them off one by one, but that would just piss them off unless she stooped to outright murder. She wasn’t sure that everyone she fought had managed to survive, but that was a far cry from hunting people down.

Across the street, families poured out the main doors of the Cobalt Betsuin Temple, dozens of Japanese Americans clad in their Sunday finest. On spotting her father in the mass of exiting church goers, she turned and walked into the first storefront she came to. She wasn’t in the mood for another round of arguing with him right now. The musty smell of books overwhelmed her and she realized she’d stepped into Melchior’s New and Used Books.

She pulled down her hood and glanced idly at the books as she walked through. Despite dodging her father, she felt more tense than she did on the street. Small cues nagged at the edge of her senses: the ringing of silver, low growls, hints of some sour smell in the air. She spotted eyes watching her from the top of a bookshelf: a small bespectacled and bearded face peeked over the edge at her, eyes wide with terror.

Jamie raised a hand up at the store’s spirit, trying to seem friendly, but the spirit only pulled farther back from the edge of the bookshelf. She frowned and looked around. A cat’s tail lashed back and forth from under a table, and she realized that this was the source of the growling. She walked farther down to see what had the store cat freaked out. As she came clear of one of the bookshelves, her eyes met the lurking threat.

Louis Malenfant didn’t look like much: a middle aged man with a pot belly and a widow’s peak. Most people in the neighborhood didn’t take the man seriously. But Jamie’s sensitive vision picked out an unclean misma that lingered around the man. Karl had told her that Malenfant was the avatar of a dark god, and the cold dagger of terror in Jamie’s gut made her believe him. The ringing of silver on silver and the sickly stench seem to emanate from him.

She didn’t know what sort of expression her face made as she stared into the abyss, but Malenfant glanced around as though afraid there was something behind him worth noticing. Jamie couldn’t find the

humor in the situation and chose to bolt out of the store before he could call up his dark master and swallow her soul.

And ran into her father.

"I thought I saw you," he said. He glanced up at the store she'd exited. "Bookstores don't seem like your usual place."

Her heart pounded in her ears and she desperately tried to control her breathing. She shrugged. "Is there something you want?"

Her father winced. "Just saying 'Hi' to my little girl. Still mad about our conversation last night?"

"Excuse me," said a voice next to her. She looked over and saw Malenfant standing next to her at the bookstore entrance. Could her day get any worse? "I'd just like to get through, please."

She stumbled away from him and let him pass, then turned to look back at her father. Anger and terror raged in her chest and her eyes ached from the tears that were ready to start gushing.

When Jamie didn't answer, her father said, "I guess you're still mad." After another pause he added, "We aren't mad, we just want you to stand on your own and find your place in the world."

"I have a place in the world," she muttered, fighting down the urge to cry.

"Stalking around Karlsburg in your hoodie and being a sullen teenager is not a place in the world. You've... you've just pulled away from everything. You no longer come to temple, you stopped doing martial arts, your grades have been suffering. Are... are you doing drugs?"

Jamie moved to walk around him, unable to speak. When her father's hand closed on her arm, instinct kicked in. She shifted forward, pulling him off balance. With a turn, she used his momentum against him to launch him forward. He stumbled past her and fell to the pavement. People stared as they walked past, but didn't stop.

He looked up at her, eyes wide with shock. She gasped and clutched a hand to her mouth, then turned and ran away. The sobs cut loose and tears blurred her vision. She couldn't think of any way she could make this right. Maybe she'd have to live in the hideout full time. Like some homeless person.

She turned down an alley and slumped against the wall, letting the crying jag run itself out. She sniffled and wiped at her eyes with the sleeve of her hoodie. Some superhero she was. She bet Wild Kat didn't blubber after dealing with her parents.

She pulled up her hood again, taking shelter in a bit of anonymity, and resumed walking down the street again. If her father caught up with her, she might just have a meltdown in front of everyone.

Down the street she spotted Karl, waving his arms theatrically and pointing at a trio of Hispanic gangsters that loitered outside of the Tobacco Mart. She tilted her head in a slight nod to Karl, grateful that she was probably the only person around who could see him, and tried to avoid staring at the goons. Instead she took a disproportionate interest in the cigarette ads that the owners had plastered haphazardly over the storefront.

Ten feet past them she crossed the street and doubled back, scanning the area for some place she could sit undisturbed and watch them for a little bit. Sancho Panza's Mexican Cuisine had outdoor patio seating, which seemed like an excellent choice.

Within a few minutes she was seated near the railing with a plate of nachos and a glass of *agua fresca*, mariachi music blaring behind her. She no idea how to do a stakeout, but hoped that pretending to people watch while eyeballing the thugs would do the trick.

The men wore hooded winter coats despite the summer heat; one proclaimed loyalty to the New England Patriots, the other two wore Cobalt U. Cavaliers jackets. Jamie didn't think this was an alumni association. All three wore sweat stained wife beaters and low slung tattered blue jeans under their coats. She was pretty certain two of them used their hoods to conceal guns.

After twenty minutes of watching them bicker and play fight, motion in the corner of her eye drew her attention back to her immediate surroundings. The waiter stood near the door to the rest of the restaurant and eyed her pointedly. She picked up her glass and sucked crushed ice and cantaloupe juice through her straw while staring back. He scowled and went back into the restaurant.

"Four letter word," Karl said next to her. "Lin or Angelou."

She fought down the urge to jerk in reaction, instead turning to slowly to face the spirit. Karl, she noted, looked like an ancient Mexican at this point. She wondered if the restaurant influenced how he looked. “Shouldn’t sneak up on a girl like that, Karl.”

Karl shrugged. “Do you know the answer?”

“What answer?”

“Four letter word. Lin or Angelou.”

Jamie sighed and ran her hand back over her short spiky dreadlocks. “Maya.”

“Ah, very good.” Karl squinted and leaned in close to write on his newspaper. “I take it you got my hint.”

“It was a little hard to miss.” Jamie turned her gaze back to the thugs across the street. They continued skulking with no clear indication of doing anything different. “But I don’t think these are the guys.”

Karl looked over his paper at the men. “No. Is them.”

“These guys are dorks. They couldn’t find their asses with both hands.”

“I did not say they were masterminds. I only said they hurt the neighborhood.”

The goon in the Patriots jacket pulled out a cell phone out and answered it, finger plugging one ear as he strained to listen with the other. As he talked he nodded to the other and the three began walking.

“Showtime,” Jamie muttered. She walked back into the restaurant and towards the main entrance. The young men headed south for a few blocks, their earlier boyish tomfoolery forgotten. At a doorway wedged between the German butcher and the Swedish bakery, they went in and walked up a flight of stairs. Windows above the storefronts hinted at apartments upstairs. She walked past and crossed at the next light, doubled back and headed up the stairs.

Bass thudded through the walls of the building, with rap lyrics barely audible beneath it. At the top of the stairs she walked towards the sound of the music and walked past an open doorway where skunky clouds of marijuana smoke drifted out.

“We got the call,” she heard one of them say. She continued to the next door and knocked.

“When are they coming?” another voice asked. Footsteps walked towards the door she stood at. She’d hoped that this was a vacant apartment and she could just walk off when no one answered. No such luck.

“Tonight,” he said. “Ten o’clock.”

“Yes?” said a frail voice through the door. The pinpoint of light in the peephole had turned dark.

“Is Lisa here?” Jamie asked, flailing to maintain her cover.

“I think you have the wrong address.”

“Okay,” she said. “Sorry to bother you.”

She walked back down the hall and down the stairs. She needed to get some rest to make sure she was up for breaking up whatever deal they had going down at ten.

#

Kensei ducked under the swinging fist, stepped forward and sliced back with her katana to hamstring her attacker. He screamed in pain and fell with a crash behind her while she shifted focus to the next most pressing threat. Her *shinobi shozoku* felt sticky around her, soaked with sweat from the fight. The *tenugui* she wrapped around her head as a mask was especially gross, damp from the condensation of her heavy breathing. Superheroes like Stardust never mentioned stuff like that when interviewed for the Gazette.

More men poured into the room, leaving Kensei feeling less and less certain she could win this fight. Keeping her sword in a high guard position, she backed through the door she had come in through and stepped carefully down the stairs. A meaty hand reached through the doorway after her and she sliced at it. The owner of the hand grunted in pain and jerked his hand back. She glanced back as she continued out of the building, making sure the stairs were still clear behind her.

“Got any ideas, sword?” she asked as she scrambled down the stairs. She didn’t expect an answer. She could see and talk to any spirit, but only one had ever refused to talk back. The first time she’d picked up the sword it had called her a “filthy half-breed” in Japanese and refused to talk to her again. But she was desperate for ideas.

Kensei's plan had been simple: lure them out of the apartment one by one, pick them off and make it generally unprofitable for them to do business in the neighborhood. Unfortunately for her, they came out in force when the first of their number disappeared. And now she ran for her life through the residential streets of Karlsburg.

Out on the sidewalk she turned and ran, fighting stance dropped out of need for speed. Foot traffic was moderate and the late-night pedestrians pointed at her in surprise. Behind her she heard grunts of alarm as her opponents shoved through the crowd after her. Local spirits looked up dreamily from the cars and trees and other objects they dwelt in, awakened by the commotion.

Her foot caught on something she couldn't see and she tripped. She hit the ground hard and the katana flew out of her grip, clattering down the sidewalk. If the katana hated her before, it must really hate her now. She pushed forward and got to her feet at a run, intending to snag the sword as she ran past. But someone already held the sword: Her father. Right beside him stood Karl.

Her father looked up at her and their eyes locked. She stumbled to a stop, brain freezing and unable to will her feet to move.

The crack of gunfire behind her shook her from her reverie. She turned and ran through the door immediately to her left. There she found herself surrounded by dead fish sitting on beds of crushed ice.

Kensei recognized this as Jimmy's Asian Grocery. The eponymous owner gawked at her through his coke-bottle glasses, the adam's apple on his scrawny neck bouncing up and down as his jaw worked wordlessly. Clearly in his seventy years he hadn't needed to deal with cowled teenage girls. She ignored his outrage and ran deeper into the store, aisles filled with soy sauce and Pocky blurring past her as she ran. She turned to push through the rubber swinging doors at the back with her shoulder, knocking over a store clerk even younger than her and spilling a box of dried ramen packages across the stockroom floor.

Others working in the back called out to her in a mix of Mandarin and English, but she ignored them and ran out through the door marked "Emergency Exit Only, Alarm Will Sound." Out in the alley she looked up and down, seeing only closed doors and painted over windows. The shrill squeal of the emergency exit alarm nagged at her ears. The bottom of a fire escape ladder dangled down the alley, providing the option of rooftop access. She might even make it back to her bolt hole, but they were hot on her tail and she didn't want to compromise the sanctity of her secret headquarters. Or she could stay at street level, but she was running out of commercial areas. She'd be running through backyards and dealing with angry homeowners in one direction, deserted railroad yards in another.

She ran for the residential area.

A sedan roared around the corner behind her, followed by the chatter of machine gun fire. Sparks chased her along the sidewalk until she vaulted over a chain link fence and hid behind a hedge. After the car roared past she ran deeper into the yard, skirting the edge of the house. Light flared up around her, and she cursed as realized she'd tripped a motion sensor.

"There she is!" someone called back. She sprinted around the corner of the house just as they fired their machine gun again. Wood splinters chased her as the bullets impacted with the house.

She began to wish she'd gone with the rooftop option. At least she wasn't going to die in the middle of the railroad junction like some slasher victim. She racked her brains for some wisdom from *The Book of Five Rings* that would help her but she came up with nothing. She had lost all sense of mastery over her environment and it was beginning to show.

Kensei crouched in the shadows of the house and considered her options. She could see spirits. The thugs had machine guns. They had numbers on their side. The spirits could give her luck and information, but no actual firepower. There weren't any other superheroes that she knew of that lived in Karlsburg anymore.

She smiled and fought down a laugh as she realized there was one resident here that might prove helpful. A twig snapped behind her, suggesting that her pursuers were trying to find her on foot again. She crept across the back yard vaulted over the fence into the neighbor's yard. The jangle of the chain link gave away her position, and the thunderclap of a pistol indicated that this wasn't just Neighborhood Watch.

"She's going over to the next street! Back to the car!"

In the distance she heard a police siren, which could be a mixed blessing. It would be nice to have someone intervene, but she didn't want to get arrested by mistake or get cops killed. She ran through the next

yard and looked around to get her bearings. If she remembered correctly, Malenfant lived just on the next block.

A car engine revved and tires squealed from the other side of the block. She gave up subtlety and ran as fast as she could down the street. She jumped over the picket fence that framed the old house and up the creaking wooden steps. If she'd had any doubts about whether this was the house, the sensation of icy hornets going nuts in her stomach would have been a good indicator that something bad lived here.

Car doors opened behind her as she kicked out the front window and jumped through. The ground floor of the house looked abandoned, and she panicked for a moment when she wondered if she was wrong after all.

Then a familiar voice from upstairs called out, "W-who's there?"

"Local superhero," she yelled back, running towards the back of the house. "I hear you're the avatar of some big evil god, so I'm hoping you can deal with the gangsters that are chasing after me. If you're not, well... Sorry?"

She unlatched the back door and ran into the night. Behind her she heard gunfire, shouts of alarm that turned into screams of terror, and then sudden silence. She glanced back and spied a large silhouette moving across the windows at the back of the house. The shape stopped and she could tell it saw her. She felt like someone had poured sewage in through her eyes as she stumbled to the ground.

Through force of will Kensei pushed herself back onto her feet and ran, her gaze locked away from Malenfant's house. Even with her lungs burning and her legs turned to rubber underneath her, she didn't stop running for a few more blocks. When she felt safer, she let her knees give out and she hid under a tree.

#

It was close do dawn when Jamie got to her house. She had stumbled back to her hideout, showered and changed into street clothes. She had expected Karl to come and shake his head with dismay at what she had done, or maybe even thank her for dealing with the problem. But she had been alone in the lair with just the spirit cat that prowled around.

As she walked down the sidewalk, she could see the light on in the kitchen in back. When she had been younger, before she started seeing spirits, her parents had stayed up late to make sure she was safe. Together they would sit in the kitchen, drinking coffee and worrying until she came in the door. As she got older, they worried less and stopped staying up. And as Kensei, she got home at all hours of the night. Given the events of the evening, she did not take this light as a good sign. She focused on her breath and walked into the house.

She had only taken a couple steps into the door when she heard her father say, "Jamie?"

Jamie frowned and closed the door before walking to the kitchen to meet her fate. Her father sat at the small table in there, a cup of coffee and a katana sitting in front of him. His eyes looked bleary, like he needed to be in bed, and he frowned as though disappointed. The spirit of the sword didn't manifest, but it grumbled something too quiet for her to hear.

"Hi, Dad."

"Your mother is asleep. I told her I needed to research some stuff on the Internet for work tomorrow."

She sat down at the table, held her hands together on top and looked down at them. She didn't know what to say.

"I'm a little disappointed in you." She winced. "We spent a lot of money on those martial arts classes. Your form was awful."

Jamie looked up, blinked a few times, then glanced around to make sure there wasn't a camera. Her father still looked sad. If this was a joke, he wasn't laughing.

"I decided earlier tonight that I needed to go for a walk. It was as though I was being urged to go walking around the neighborhood. I didn't expect to see a sword wielding vigilante stumble into my path, nor that I would know the eyes visible through her mask."

He looked at her, leaving her the opening to say something. But words just didn't come to her mouth.

"I talked to Reverend Nishijima at the temple, and he's willing to give you a part time job working at the Temple after you graduate. Mostly cleaning and paperwork. So you can say you are gainfully employed

and continue living here. You can set your own hours, in case you need more time for other things. And that will be all your mother will know.”

He picked up the sword and handed to her. The voice of the sword made a sound of surprise, and began to protest being given back to her. The cries of outrage went unheard by her father.

“Thank you, Dad.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I may still change my mind. But thank whatever compelled me to find you. Now go to sleep. I’ll call the school later and let them know you will be out sick, so don’t worry about setting your alarm.”

Jamie stood and hugged her father, relieved that something went right. He let go of her and gave her a gentle nudge towards the door. She shuffled out of the kitchen and towards her bedroom.

“Thank you, Karl,” she said in a whisper.

“You’re welcome.”

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