

## 48 Hours 551

### Chapter 551 May I Know the Name of the Famous Dojo In Kyoto?

The first day on the job wasn't that difficult. As Gabriel said, all they did was enjoy good food and have fun. The two of them went around Kyoto's city and would head to whichever lively and fun spot. The French businessman even told Zhang Heng that he was free to go in the evening. As they strolled, Zhang Heng could feel some sneaky guys trailing them closely from behind.

Since Gabriel only paid for his translation service, Zhang Heng was not obligated to protect him. Unless they decided to assault Gabriel, where it might cause Zhang Heng to lose his income source, Zhang Heng would ignore them since they were doing nothing except following them.

Gabriel looked cheery, but perhaps he already knew that he was being followed. Or he wouldn't have just wandered around the city whole doing nothing important.

Zhang Heng had no interest in their affairs. Of course, he would avail himself to all of Gabriel's bidding, but when it came to rest, it wasn't his concern. When work was over, he returned to the house that he just rented. After stepping through the mansion's gates, he scooped some water from the well and drank

The chilly well water had to be the best thirst-quencher of the era. Zhang Heng wiped his mouth with his sleeve after having enough, but it was then that he heard a series of yells and the sound of wooden knives clashing from the Akane Dojo beside his house.

Zhang Heng remembered Akane Koyama's invitation last night, and he also happened to have something to ask her. He put down the scoop in hand. Since he came home early today, it was a good idea to head to the dojo next door.

A plaque hung above the dojo's main entrance with two characters on it, Myoshin-Ryū written by Akane Koyama. Zhang Heng searched his memory, and he was certain he had never heard of such a sect before. It wasn't extraordinary, though. The Shogunate was where the last golden era of Japanese swordsmanship. There were more than two hundred recorded sects, and one could bet that there were hundreds of unrecorded ones around.

Unfortunately, most of them would be lost forever in time, where only the most famous ones survived. In the era of Heisei Losers and Reiwa Sexless Men, there were few people still learning swordsmanship. Various sects emphasized self-cultivation, and swordsmanship was no longer considered an essential tool to kill enemies.

Myoshin-Ryū must have drowned in the torrent of history like other insignificant sects. Zhang Heng didn't delve too much into that and entered the dojo.

The first thing that captured his attention was a verdant grape rack, covered with luscious vines. It wasn't the fruiting season; hence, few flowers bloomed among the green leaves. Next to the grape rack was a maple tree, its bark wide enough for a person to hug. Akane Koyama had built a fence around the tree to protect it. Other than that, there were three hens and a small crop plot on the chicken coop's right-hand side. It seemed the vegetables were growing well. Zhang Heng was baffled by the place that he just stepped in. It didn't look like a dojo at all. Instead, it looked more like a small farmyard. After

walking past the little tillage, Zhang Heng arrived at the main house. The first thing he saw was a weapon rack with numerous bamboo katana and karuta. There was also a shrine so visitors could pay their respect to the previous sensei of the dojo. Other than that, there were also small wooden plaques with each person's name written on them. They were arranged in the order of teacher and student.

The dojo was very lively at the moment. Akane Koyama was teaching her young students. The oldest ones were probably only fourteen or fifteen, and the youngest were perhaps seven or eight years old. Though they were just kids, they were entirely focused on practicing on their swords. They were instructed to form a team of two and sparred with protective gear on them. Akane Koyama walked amongst her students, carefully observing their moves, correcting them, and cheering them up.

When she saw him, Akane Koyama gave Zhang Heng a nod. After learning he had ventured abroad to the west to further his studies, she no longer regarded him as a loiterer and troublemaker.

After Akane Koyama gave the kids some instructions, she walked out of the dojo to talk to Zhang Heng. "Are you here to practice your katana skills?"

"No, no, I want to ask about the famous temples in Kyoto."

Akane Koyama was stunned. A look of shame and anger flashed across her face.

Zhang Heng then realized that she had misunderstood what he said. He quickly added, "I have no intention to become an apprentice. In fact, I... came to Kyoto to compete with the master here."

"Eh, what did you say you came to Kyoto for?" Akane Koyama's eyes widened to the point of popping out. Although she said nothing more, the way she looked at Zhang Heng was more than an explanation.

Akane Koyama's impression of Zhang Heng had improved to a certain extent. However, when he was at the market, he just stood there and watched the whole thing unfold before him. He did not even dare to save the little girls. It was hard to imagine a person like him would have the bristols to say he was here to challenge the masters. However, Akane Koyama still liked to think that people were generally good. Maybe it was because Zhang Heng had been studying abroad for too long, and upon his return, perhaps he did not know the country that well anymore. He could just be deluded. This man must be thinking that he's a master. But then again, if he thought he was, then why didn't he try to save the two little girls?

While the problem got Akane Koyama's mind grinding, she suddenly saw the middleman running toward them. At the same time, he was yelling, "Something awful is going to happen to you guys! Run now! A group of samurai is asking where your dojo is. They look aggressive. It's probably your father's enemy. I pointed them in a random direction, but I think they will get back to the right track soon!"

"Enemies? When my father was alive, he never made any enemies. And I've never heard of him having grudges with anyone." Akane Koyama shook her head.

Zhang Heng's expression changed. He did remember the three samurai warriors of Choshū Domain from last night. The man who drew the tachi and attacked others was more powerful than Akane Koyama. Besides, this matter involved the honor of the Choshū Domain. It was impossible that they would just let the case slide so easily.

The middleman was anxious.

“This is not the time to talk about this! You should look for a place to hide first!”

“Are you telling me to leave the dojo and hide?” Akane Koyama frowned.

“Or what? You want to bring your dojo with you?” The middleman rolled his eyes.

What he did not expect was that the group would arrive a lot faster than he thought. Before they could come up with a solution, a total of five samurai barged into the dojo. Yamada, who previously fought Akane Koyama at the market, was with Matsuo and Takahashi, while there were two other unfamiliar faces as well.

Yamada looked furious. Last night’s defeat was an utter disgrace. After he sobered up, he wanted to get his revenge at Akane Koyama’s dojo, but unfortunately, they were one step too late. The Tobaku supporters had heard about their fight last night.

Shinji Takeuchi was among the Tobaku supporters, and his relationship with Yamada wasn’t that good. Like Yamada, Takeuchi was also born in the Choshū domain and was a renowned samurai among the Tobaku supporters. It was inevitable that they would start comparing each other, and as time passed, a certain extent of hatred festered between them.

About half a year ago, Takeuchi went to challenge Yamada. He thought it would be a close fight, but Yamada lost the battle quickly to his surprise. The two pulled about a dozen moves, and Yamada was entirely suppressed. In addition to the significant difference in strength, Yamada wasn’t as skilled on the katana as Takeuchi, and hence, the real reason he lost.

After that fight, Takeuchi became more famous among the Tobaku supporters. On the other hand, Yamada showed signs of going downhill. That was how they got the bad blood between them. The last thing Yamada wanted was that Takeuchi knew what happened to him last night. Unfortunately, his worst nightmare came true. The relationship between Takeuchi and Takahashi was excellent. Yamada suspected that Takahashi leaked the matter to Takeuchi. The latter came to knock on his door early in the morning and expressed his doubts about Yamada’s strength. Takeuchi insisted on going with Yamada to the dojo. Otherwise, they would tell more people about what happened last night.

Yamada had no choice but to agree to his request. For today’s battle, not only was it compulsory for him to win the fight, but he had to make sure Takeuchi wouldn’t have room to criticize him. The stakes were high.

### **Chapter 552 Please Enlighten Me**

Yamada stormed into the dojo, only to spot the boy who pointed them in the wrong direction. He glared at the poor kid with the eyes of a tiger.

“Hmph! I’ll deal with you later!”

The boy turned as white as a sheet and hid behind Akane to avoid Yamada’s death-stare.

The samurai ignored Zhang Heng and said to Akane, “This is great. That fight last night you attacked me when I was drunk and insulted our Choshu warriors. We get to fight again today.”

Yamada was as shrewd as ever. He spoke first, making sure to classify last night's ambush on a drunk man as foul-play as an excuse for his defeat. But he wasn't all that wrong. If he had not been so tipsy last night, he would not have lost to Akane, who was only wielding a wooden sword.

Akane was unfazed. It was probably because she grew up in a dojo that she had grown used to such threats. She wasn't bothered to argue with Yamada, merely gesturing him to enter the building. The entire group entered the main hall.

The children that were training put down their bokuto\* and stared. The atmosphere in the dojo had suddenly shifted.

Akane pulled two bokuto from the shelf, one for herself and the other for Yamada.

She threw the sword to him, but he did not reach out, letting the bokuto land by his feet.

"I don't need it. I brought my own."

Yamada pulled out the Tachi at his waist.

Instantly, the children went into an uproar. Friendly duels among warriors were nothing unusual, and even if they had trained under different schools of swordsmanship, there were always areas where they could learn from each other, just like research, the more a truth gets debated, the clearer it becomes. Other than training daily, warriors were also required to compete with others to gain experience.

Generally, a wooden katana would be used for obvious safety reasons. It helped to determine who won, and both warriors generally benefited from the maintained peace.

If real weapons were used, lives would surely be put at risk, mostly when the competing party's skills were on a similar level. Just one wrong move would lead to an inevitable disaster.

Akane did not realize that Yamada had meant for them to use real weapons when he challenged her to a duel. She shook her head.

"I haven't trained my Myoshin-ryū enough. I'm nowhere near my father's level. I cannot guarantee that I can fight with a real weapon without hurting my opponent."

"It's alright. Swords are meant to injure, and life and death are ruled by fate. We can swear that whichever way the duel ends, we will not hold the other party responsible and allow our past grievances to be forgotten," Yamada answered.

He barely finished when Takeuchi chuckled aloud. "This is about the Choshu samurai's reputation! Since when did you start calling the shots? Just because you say bygones are bygones doesn't mean it is."

Yamada was speechless. Even though what Takeuchi said was unpleasant to the ear, it was the truth. Last night's incident was about the serious crime of insulting the Choshu warriors. Just because he said it was forgiven did not mean it was. Yamada believed himself to be the better fighter, and it was proven during last night's fight. Even though he was drunk, he was able to work out the fundamentals of her skills. According to Yamada's own reasoning, getting rid of Akane will solve the problem, but there was nothing he could do about Takeuchi finding fault with his choice of words.

“If you insist on using a real katana, then I’ll just admit defeat,” said Akane frankly-she really did not mind. This, however, caused Yamada to panic. He did not actually come here today for a duel but for the kill. Only by terminating Akane would he make up for his mistake last night-otherwise, he would become a Choshu criminal. The law was not as harsh as it was back during the Sengoku period\*, and other than those Shinsengumi lunatics, obligatory seppuku\* was no longer used as punishment for petty crimes. But even so, he had lost that much face, and unless he did this, it was going to be thought to keep being a part of the Tobbaku group. Yamada looked around the hall, and his gaze settled on the wooden table where a shrine had been laid out. He then drew his sword and sliced the table into half.

Finally, Akane’s expression changed.

“You’ve crossed the line! What made you think that you can just waltz in here and do whatever you like?!”

Akane stormed toward the only weapon rack with real swords, subsequently picking out the uchigatana at the top.

Yamada was pleased to see that Akane had finally accepted the duel. He grinned in relief, letting out a satisfied ‘ahh.’

“I’ve come today to learn your Koyoma Myoshin-ryu.”

But it was then that a voice cut in.

“Wait.”

Everyone in the hall was taken aback when they turned to look and saw Zhang Heng. They, too, like Yamada, didn’t notice his presence and wondered where this person dressed like a ronin had come from.

Only Takahashi and Matsuo winced as if the man had brought up some unpleasant memories. Takeuchi, on the other hand, examined the strange ronin with interest.

It had not been easy finding suitable lodging to settle down in Kyoto, and obviously, Zhang Heng did not wish for his landlady to be hacked to death on the second day of his stay. Who would the property belong to then?

Zhang Heng walked up to Akane and whispered under his breath, “Can’t you see he’s attempting to provoking you? Don’t fall into his trap. You are no match for him.” Akane said nothing in response. She grew up in the dojo and had always been good at reading people. After last night’s fight, she understood that Yamada’s fighting skills bettered hers, but what he had just done was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Not only was the dojo her father’s legacy, but it contained precious memories of her childhood. She watched her father build a nameless dojo into a place of high reputation. The place was filled with visitors in its heyday, but after her father passed away, the dojo began to decline, and many teachers and students left.

Akane certainly wasn’t blind to the fact that she couldn’t sustain a dojo; she simply couldn’t find it in herself to shut it down. Some time ago, she offered free lessons and lunch to recruit children from poor families but the running costs of the dojo skyrocketed as a result. To ease her increasingly strained finances, she had rented out a part of the small courtyard. In no thanks to Yamada, Akane refused to

return to where she started just when the situation had finally taken a turn for the better. She would have given up everything else, but definitely not the dojo her father left her. She had to protect it with everything she had.

This was probably when Koyama dojo was at its weakest. All these students in the hall, they had just joined no less than a few months, having never been in any actual fights. She was the only one who could step up to face this crisis, and she had to.

Akane nodded at Zhang Heng, "Thank you. I know what I'm getting into."

Zhang Heng wanted to say more, but Akane was looking up at Yamada, saying, "I'm ready. Please grant me the favor of enlightening me."

Translator's note:

Bokuto: a Japanese wooden sword used for training in kenjutsu (also bokken)

Seppuku: sometimes referred to as harakiri, is a form of Japanese ritual suicide by disembowelment reserved for samurai.

Obligatory seppuku: capital punishment for samurai to spare them the disgrace of being beheaded by a common executioner. Sengoku period: a period in Japanese history of near-constant civil war, social upheaval, and political intrigue from 1467 to 1615.

### **Chapter 553 The Decided Winner**

Yamada had been waiting for Akane Koyama to say yes to his challenge. Seeing that the other party finally agreed to a battle, his gloomy face finally showed a touch of joy. The others had consciously stepped aside and cleared the space in the middle for the two contenders.

Only Takeuchi and Zhang Heng still stood there. Takeuchi then chirped, "Great! I can witness brother Yamada's Oishi Shinkage-Ryu stabbing technique again! My people will be proud of him."

After that, he slowly retreated to a corner.

Yamada discreetly scolded Takeuchi. The competition had escalated to the point it now involved a Choshu domain samurai's honor. But Takeuchi didn't seem satisfied. He had to involve the fight between the sects as well. This had increased Yamada's stress level tremendously. His Oishi Shinkage Ryu Stab Technique was a sort of quick melee attack. If he hesitated at any moment, the technique could fall apart completely. From the surface, Takeuchi appeared to be encouraging him, but he was actually taking the opportunity to disrupt his mind.

Yamada, on the other hand, had been adopting Shingyōtō-ryū for a long time. He was the kind of samurai who paid close attention to his surroundings, employing elements that could benefit him. After all, Yamada was a man who had been through the Kinmon incident and wouldn't be affected so easily by Takeuchi. Moreover, one's state of mind would only be affected if the opponent's strength was equally powerful. As long as he stayed sober, he was confident that he would win the battle.

Yamada saw that Zhang Heng was still in his way. Sternly, he waved the Tachi in his hand and urged, "Go away, or I will slash you with my Tachi!"

Zhang Heng pretended he heard nothing, turning to Akane Koyama instead. "If you can't defeat him, just give up. Don't take the risk. If you make one wrong step, this dojo will be shut forever."

Then, like Takeuchi, he too retreated to the side.

Yamada was getting impatient. Not even bothered to perform the pre-fight salutation, he raised his Tachi and lunged straight for Akane Koyama.

Since the two fought at the market last night, Akane Koyama knew that Yamada's left-hand was swift and she had been guarding her right against being attacked. However, as soon as the fight started, Akane Koyama realized she made a mistake. The Yamada right now and the drunken Yamada last night were completely different people.

This time, Yamada was adamant that Akane Koyama paid for what happened to him last night. Not only was his performance unaffected by the pressure, but it actually brought out the best in him. Now that he was fully focused on the fight, he was faster than before, but his form was impeccable as well. Coupled with indomitable momentum, he had managed to produce a perfect rendition of the Oishi Shinkage-Ryu Stab Technique.

Meanwhile, Akane Koyama was doing all she could to defend herself. She felt almost completely powerless against Yamada's dominating blows. The Koyama Flow was a technique that focused on defensive abilities. She was supposed to pay attention to the Tachi's movements and feel them with her heart. Unfortunately, Yamada's attacks were so swift, and as her eyes darted around, she had no idea how to suppress him.

In less than ten moves, Akane Koyama's right arm was slashed by Yamada. The onlookers immediately had the feeling that Akane Koyama would lose the battle. Akane Koyama, however, had no intention to surrender anytime soon. With gritted teeth, she passed the katana to her other hand.

Yamada was disappointed that he failed to land a heavy blow to Akane Koyama. If only she had dodged a second slower, he would have been able to cripple her. This time, his goal was not only to defeat Akane Koyama but to end her life for good. An arm might not be enough to cleanse the offense suffered by the Choshu Domain Warriors.

The few previous rounds of sparring had Yamada getting a clear grasp of Akane Koyama's strength. He figured that they had a rather significant gap between them, and it was then that he thought he could finally let out a sigh of relief. He was glad that Akane Koyama had no intention to surrender. However, he knew that she would definitely not continue the fight if something similar happened again, no matter how stubborn she was.

So, he covertly changed tactics. First, he changed forms and slowed down his attacks. In exchange, the trajectory of his strikes became more evident, hence easier to dodge. It allowed Akane Koyama to think she could relax a little when the truth was that the threat had just escalated to a serious level.

Yamada hid his trump card, for now, seeking the perfect opportunity to land a fatal blow. Few that were there could really figure Yamada's true intentions. When they saw Akane Koyama bleeding from her wounds, Matsuo and Takahashi could not help but cheer for Yamada. Nonetheless, as the fight progressed, they could not help but start worrying about him. On the contrary, Akane's dojo children had stopped their anxiety and began to see the light of hope. Akane Koyama had taught them-as long as

they managed to defend from the attack, they could capture the opponent's weakness, thereby looking for a counterattack opportunity. But Takeuchi, who was also a master, knew exactly what Yamada was thinking.

"How dare he say that I am cunning? He is no better than me," Takeuchi proclaimed with a chuckle.

The battle ended faster than everyone expected. A second ago, Akane Koyama was still fighting with Yamada. The next second, without warning, Yamada sped up his attacks again, changing from his previous habit of assaulting from the left. He aimed at Akane Koyama's forehead and slashed at it with all his might! The sudden change caused Akane Koyama to misjudge the direction of the opponent's move, barely lifting the katana to block the attack. She was forced to take half a step back. It appeared she had underestimated Yamada's strength. The blow was so powerful that Akane Koyama fell to the ground, her katana clattering noisily along with her.

At this point, no matter how unwilling Akane Koyama was, she could only accept defeat. However, as the winner, Yamada had no intention to stop. A cold, bloodthirsty madness flashed in his eyes. He raised his Tachi and charged at Akane Koyama.

She gasped in shock, thinking if this was the day she would leave the world. What would happen to the dojo her father left her after his death? These children were still working on their foundation. Without learning the skills she wanted to teach, would the Koyama Flow be lost forever?

In stark contrast to Akane Koyama's despair, Yamada's eyes were filled with excitement. The battle last night had greatly tarnished his reputation. Takeuchi even deliberately made a trip here to watch the battle. While they were on the way, he did not stop teasing and ridiculing him. Now, he finally had the chance to put a stop to this nonsense.

As long as he killed Akane Koyama, he'd regain all that he lost. Then, something totally unexpected happened. A katana stopped Yamada's final blow. His hands went numb for a while, almost causing him to lose his grip on the Tachi.

Simultaneously, the katana that stopped his attack remained unmoved.

"The winner has been decided. You don't have to kill her."

The opportunity to kill Akane Koyama had come and left. Yamada couldn't help but boil with rage. When he saw the ronin who stopped him, his anger only amplified.

### **Chapter 554 Three Moves**

The sudden turn of events caught everyone off-guard. No doubt the duel results had already been determined, Yamada's attacks only raged on, where even swore he'd take Akane's life. Then, at the critical moment, Zhang Heng appeared out of nowhere and blocked the fatal blow.

Takeuchi inhaled sharply, and his sleepy eyes lit up.

Even he had to admit that Yamada's plan had been successful. Little by little, he led Akane into his snare, only revealing his fangs at the end. Unfortunately, it fell short. It wouldn't have been easy for that ronin to parry Yamada's attack. He would have to react fast enough, where if he were to be one second late, Akane would have been slain. But speed alone was not enough. Yamada's last two attacks were



undeviating. If his intention to kill Akane was only realized at the last second, it would still have been too late even if the ronin was quick to react. Like Takeuchi, the ronin would have to see through Yamada's intentions ahead of time to be able to save Akane by the skin of her teeth.

Takeuchi thought back and recalled seeing Zhang Heng taking a half-step forward when Yamada launched his final attack.

The small half a step shouldn't be underestimated. For Akane, it was a difference between life and death.

She didn't anticipate Zhang Heng to step in.

When the drunken Yamada caused a commotion at the market last night, Zhang Heng played the daft baddie. Sure, he was also carrying a weapon, but the ronin strangely didn't step in to stop the rogue samurai, something Akane misinterpreted as cowardice.

However, after learning that Zhang Heng had traveled to Western countries, her opinion about him changed, but only to a certain extent. She thought that Zhang Heng was the kind who held culture in low esteem and despised martial arts. Warriors of the Edo period were literate individuals and good fighters because how could illiterate men be expected to rule the territory? (Not to mention, the Japanese literacy rate actually exceeded that of many Western countries during that time).

During those turbulent times, men with noble aspirations actively sought ways to save their county. While some used their swords, others went the course of the pen. In Akane's opinion, however, there was no difference between the two.

But after last night's incident, Zhang Heng came to the dojo, explaining that he had come to Kyoto to challenge a high-ranking samurai warrior. Akane thought that must be a braggart who knew not his place. She simply wasn't certain if he just wanted to show-off or if he really planned to get bashed at a dojo somewhere.

Before she could answer the question, the Choshu people were already knocking on her door, forcing her into accepting a duel with Yamada. She noticed the bloodthirst in Yamada's eyes and thought that must be where she would meet her end. Imagine her surprise when the man she believed to be unreliable saved her when her life hung by a thread.

The guy did not step in to help when she was up against three men, but now that there were five, he suddenly stepped up to the plate. Could he have measured the gap between the enemy and her based on the number of people in the dojo where he included the children?

As Akane tried to make sense of the situation, Yamada suddenly bellowed, "This concerns the very soul of the Choshu warriors' reputation! It's a duel between Oishi Shinkage-Ryu and Myoshin-Ryu! Who the hell are you?! What makes you think you're qualified to intervene?"

"Oh, I just recently found lodging here." Even though the samurai was uncouth, Zhang Heng told him the plain truth. "Oh? So, you're just another parasite? That means you're one of them?!" hissed Yamada with malice.

The samurai had misunderstood him, and before Zhang Heng could explain, Yamada snapped, "You came at the right time. Since you're from this dojo, then you have a share in this woman's crime! If that's the case, both of you can pay with your lives!"

"Hold on!" Akane picked herself off the ground, clutching her injured right hand. "This has nothing to do with him. I am your opponent here!"

"Stop blabbering. Don't worry, none of you will escape today!" With his carefully formulated plan now quashed, Yamada was incensed. He would instead shed all pretense of cordiality than continue rambling.

Without another word, the samurai raised his katana in menace.

"Might as well!" Zhang Heng shot Akane a look, telling her to step back. Then he looked at Yamada and said, "Unlike this lady here, I fight to kill. Once my sword leaves its sheath, I'm afraid it won't end well for you. You and I are on different levels. Since you've already gotten the victory that you wanted, yesterday's grievances should have been settled. Why don't all of us take a step back?"

"How bold!"

Yamada threw his head back and laughed hysterically as if he had just heard the funniest joke. "Even your dojo master lost to me. Yet, here you are, a parasite, making such lofty statements." Yamada's laughter abruptly stopped, and he looked Zhang Heng in the eye, enunciating every single word, "I hope that your swordsmanship is half as powerful as your mouth; otherwise, you might even last ten moves."

Zhang Heng shook his head. "Ten is too many. I only need three moves to defeat you."

He had never fought Yamada, but he had already seen the samurai fight twice and was somewhat familiar with Oishi Shinkage-Ryu. To boot, he also had the opportunity to observe some of Yamada's style and tendencies.

When Akane and Yamada were fighting, Zhang Heng imagined himself in the fight and thought about the fastest way to defeat his opponent. Three seemed to be the more accurate number.

Yamada obviously thought otherwise. To him, the ronin was simply trying to ruffle his feathers.

For the time being, it could be a countermeasure. But only the weak would use such a feeble trick to close the gap between themselves and the strong, a method completely ineffective in terms of actual strength.

As long he kept his cool, calmed down, and gave it all he had, the ronin had absolutely no chance against him. And that was exactly what Yamada did.

He shoved Zhang Heng's pesky words to the back of his mind, raised his weapon, and charged towards the ronin. As he gushed forward, he focussed his mind and produced his best, of not, second-best moves. If only Susumu Oishi was here, he would have been very impressed.

Zhang Heng, on the other hand, did not react. He was not even in a combat stance.

Akane held her breath.

Just when Yamada was right in front of him, Zhang Heng finally made his move. It was no fancy performance, and all he did was raise his sword to meet his opponent's.

A sly look passed over Yamada's eyes. He was waiting for Zhang Heng to do just that. But when his sword was in midair, Yamada suddenly shifted from striking to slashing, and he targeted Zhang Heng's neck. If successful, Zhang Heng would probably be unable to keep his head.

The onlookers let out a hushed gasp, not expecting Zhang Heng to transform such a simple move into something artful. However, Zhang Heng's reaction was swift. He repositioned his sword from horizontal to vertical. Yamada was pleased to see that. He rarely met anyone faster than him.

Too bad it all amounted to nothing in the end. Because before he made a move, he found a good spot. Even if their swords were to clash again, he could rush and stab Zhang Heng in the chest.

But on the spur of the moment, he heard Zhang Heng say, "Three moves."

Swords flashed, and blood splattered. Yamada's left hand flailed wildly in the air.

### **Chapter 555 Are They In Kyoto Now?**

Everything happened in an instant. Matsuo, Takahashi, and others were still admiring Yamada's exquisite swordsmanship when, unexpectedly, Yamada's situation took a sudden roll downhill. There was no transition in the middle, and Yamada, a minor but renowned samurai among the Tobaku supporters, was now a cripple, seeing how his left hand had been sliced off.

Bright red blood spurted out from the wound, splattering on Zhang Heng's Haori that had not been washed for a long time. The bloodstain made Zhang Heng's unusually tall figure look even more terrifying now. Matsuo and Takahashi were so shocked by what they saw that they unconsciously stepped backward. They did not stop until their backs hit the wooden fence. They nervously glanced around their surroundings, ever ready to flee if things turned sour. On the other hand, Takeuchi's pupils contracted all of a sudden.

Even Yamada, having lost his left hand, was probably oblivious to what just happened. Judging from the expression on his face, he had a hard time believing that he lost the battle, considering he had the upper hand earlier.

Takeuchi, a master swordsman himself, could barely keep up with Zhang Heng's last strike as a bystander. That was how he realized that Zhang Heng's final blow had to be extremely powerful.

Zhang Heng caught the slight setback between Yamada's first change of moves and the second, and he charged toward him as quickly as he could. At the same time, he flicked his wrist so swiftly that his katana's tip drew an arc, thereby dodging Yamada's attack. During that time, Yamada was swinging the katana in his hand. From Takeuchi's perspective, it looked like Yamada deliberately moved his wrist towards his opponent's blade.

Takeuchi took in a deep breath. He was amazed by Zhang Heng's incredible speed and accurate calculation. It seemed like everyone he met today were better than him, and it wasn't until the severed limb landed on the floor that Yamada realized that something had gone terribly wrong. Beads of sweat started forming on his forehead as the pain in his left wrist intensified. However, a samurai's pride

withheld stop crying, and he fell on his knees from the debilitating pain. On the ground, his chest heaved violently, and his face as white as a ghost.

The dojo became quieter than ever, where the sound of a needle falling on the ground could be heard. Akane Koyama opened her mouth wide, standing there staring blankly. She, too, was having a hard time grasping what had just happened to Yamada.

Not too long ago, she was worried about Zhang Heng's safety. Before she realized it, he had already defeated the terrifying enemy in front of her. As a person who fought against Yamada twice, Akane Koyama was probably the most qualified person to talk about Yamada's true strength. Although this Yamada may not be as good as her father, they weren't too far apart.

With such skills, he could be regarded as a master no matter where he went. Therefore, it was only reasonable that she lost the battle with him. However, such a master had fallen in the hands of a ronin returning from overseas.

Akane Koyama had never experienced something like this before. The man in front of her, of whom she had despised, was actually a formidable master. After three moves, Zhang Heng did not turn back to check on Yamada.

He then talked to the Koyama Akane, "I'm sorry."

"Huh? What, what are you sorry for?"

"For dirtying the floor of your dojo." Zhang Heng pointed to the blood on the ground, sending a glare to Matsuo, Takahashi, and the others. The two wished that they could transform themselves into earthworms burrow deep into the ground. The other Choshu Domain samurai with Takeuchi was horrified by what he witnessed as well. In the end, Zhang Heng finally fixed his gaze on Takeuchi. He could see that the man before him was probably the leader of the samurai group. Seeming to have encountered some difficulties at the moment, he just stood there, arms folded and deep in thought. Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows and asked, "What say you? Should we fight?"

Takeuchi looked very distressed.

"I figured... I might not be able to defeat you. But that idiot kept talking about insulting the samurai of the Choshu Domain before. I don't think it would be appropriate that we just leave like that."

Upon hearing that, Matsuo and Takahashi's hearts became colder. The belief that was still supporting them was that Takeuchi was better than Yamada. Although Takeuchi was not as scary as Zhang Heng, he did defeat Yamada with ease before. Maybe, another battle would sprout out?

But now, Takeuchi personally admitted that he was inferior to Zhang Heng. Their only hope was now shattered. "Oh, do you have any masters in Choshu Domain?" asked Zhang Heng.

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"Of course! Although Yamada is quite famous, he is not as strong as me!" gushed Takeuchi, "Although I am not that bad, there are still many who are better than me."

Zhang Heng seemed to be interested in it when he heard this. "Are those guys in Kyoto now?"

“Well... Most people are still in the Choshu Domain, but most masters now gather in Kyoto in these troubled times. Men are destined to make great achievements. Indeed, many people are traveling to Kyoto now.” Takeuchi nodded.

“Great! Can you go back and tell those guys that if they want to avenge this man, come to this dojo to look for me. I’m here waiting for them,” continued Zhang Heng.

“Happy to do so!” Takeuchi slapped his thigh. “I was right about you! In that case, we will see you another day.”

After he finished speaking, he gave Matsuo and Takahashi a look and told them to leave with the injured Yamada.

Upon exiting the dojo, Takeuchi asked Matsuo and Takahashi to send Yamada to the hospital to get treated. Meanwhile, Takeuchi and his companion hurried to find the chief of the Choshu Domain in Kyoto.

Yamada and his people aggressively came to the dojo, but when they left, they were dingy. As the group left, Akane Koyama finally realized that something was not right. “Hey, why did you tell them to come to my dojo just now? Think I need more bad things to happen here?” Zhang Heng spread his arms. “There’s nothing I can do about it. I’m living here now. Since I’m starting it, I will make sure I’ll take the responsibility to end it. There’s nothing for you to worry about. No matter who comes next, I will deal with them personally. There is no need to be so pessimistic. To be honest, your dojo is dilapidated... it can’t get any worse than this. Maybe after this incident, Maybe your dojo will become famous in Kyoto after this incident.”

Zhang Heng was not bothered by it. After all, he was here to challenge the masters in Kyoto. His goal was to look for the whereabouts of the famous katana. Saying that he belongs to Akane Koyama’s dojo was just to smooth things up for him. “...But you are not from my dojo.” Akane Koyama looked helpless, “Let’s not mix these matters up. I am very grateful that you saved my life. I will find a way to repay you. How about I give you a waiver on your rent... Although Myoshin-Ryū is only a small sect and is not famous in Kyoto, I will not allow an outsider to help me boost this dojo’s reputation. It might look stupid, but this is my principle. I will not hold you responsible for taking advantage of this dojo. Judging from the way you fight, I’m pretty sure that your sensei must be someone great. Will he allow you to join other sects?”

“Her? I think she should be fine with it.” Zhang Heng thought about it carefully before he replied to Akane Koyama. He’s honed his swordsmanship from the Black Sail quest. Anne was barely qualified to be called Zhang Heng’s sensei. After all, Zhang Heng practiced with Anne for a period, and they would usually use sparring to learn from each other. To Anne, the sword technique that allowed her to kill her enemies was good.

“If you really care about this kind of thing, then let me join your sect,” Zhang Heng proposed a solution.

“Eh?”

**Chapter 556 Nara Chameshi and Grilled Bonito**

Zhang Heng held up the rice bowl in front of him, put it under his nose, and took in a whiff. Akane Koyama's Nara Chameshi had a heavenly fragrance, a mixture of tea and grain with hints of salt and wine.

A serving of Nara Chameshi had more than just rice in it. Usually, the Japanese included millet, dried chestnuts, glutinous rice, red beans, and fried soybeans. After brewed with the stock, it was typically served in a bowl paired with pickles and tofu soup. Originally, Nara Chameshi was something only monks would eat at the Toda-ji and Kofuku-ji Temple in Nara. However, it had since gained a lot of popularity since it was served to ordinary people.

"Give it a taste," Akane Koyama put down the wooden spoon and urged. "I shall."

Zhang Heng took his chopsticks, picked up a pickled stick of radish, and chomped on it with the steaming hot Nara Chameshi. "How is it?" Akane Koyama asked nervously, sitting on her knees and eagerly leaning forward.

Zhang Heng did not answer her immediately. Instead, he closed his eyes, allowing himself to savor the taste lingering between his lips and teeth. After a while, he opened his eyes.

"Well, that was unexpectedly delicious. I didn't know you can cook so well."

"You are too generous with your praises. I learned it from my father," said Akane Koyama, relieved after seeing Zhang Heng's reaction.

"Can your father cook?"

"Yes, my father once said that cooking is the same as swordsmanship, a form of cultivation on its own. It takes great patience to get the results we desire," continued Akane Koyama.

Five days passed since Yamada and his men came to challenge Akane Koyama. After the Choshu Domain's samurai retreated, Zhang Heng volunteered to join the Koyama Dojo. However, she didn't agree to let him join immediately, urging him to rethink it for a few more days.

In Akane Koyama's opinion, apprenticeship was one of those significant events in life. When it came to that subject, one was usually discouraged from making a hasty decision. Moreover, Zhang Heng's swordsmanship was formidable enough that even her father might not beat him if he were still alive. Hence, Akane Koyama did not know what else she could teach Zhang Heng. To thank him for saving her life, she invited Zhang Heng over by cooking him a simple meal. Other than Nara Chameshi, she also prepared grilled bonito. The fresh fish and its skin were grilled over the fire until they turned white. After that, he was supposed to dip it in vinegar with wasabi. Delicious, it was a very popular dish in Kyoto.

Matsuo Basho (yes, that's right, the famous Hihori haiku master) once said, "The wisteria blossoms / bending the finger and waiting patiently / it is a good day to eat bonito." The haiku was used to express his desire to eat bonito. There was also once a saying, "I will pawn my wife to eat bonito."

When the yearly season of bonito was available in the market, its price was comparable to gold. Back in the day, only the generals were allowed the pleasure of savoring it.

Now, it was finally the people's turn to enjoy the bonito. Akane Koyama had spent a lot to make the meal. Coupled with the children's subsidies, she had been stretched so thin, she probably wouldn't be holding up any longer even though Zhang Heng just passed her the rent. Her best option was to close down the dojo and live in Kyoto with the rent she received every month. Or, she could marry someone and give birth to a child. These were the possibilities that she had never considered before.

As the two ate, someone suddenly knocked on the door.

Akane Koyama put out the fire. "I'll open the door. Carry on with your meal."

She then ran to the front door and when she opened it, standing outside was a couple that looked unfamiliar.

"How can I help you both?" asked Akane Koyama.

Before the man could even say a word, his wife was already down on her knees in gratitude.

"Huh?"

Akane Koyama was baffled by the situation. Fortunately, the man quickly explained, "We are Chiyo's parents. A few days ago, you rescued two little girls at the market? One of them is our daughter."

"Yes. I remember. It's not a big deal... I just did my best to help them."

Akane Koyama seemed a little shy when she talked to them. At the same time, she also saw Chiyo hiding behind her parents. The latter was holding a box and was a little bashful as well.

Taking the box from Chiyo, the man handed it to Akane Koyama.

"We know we can never repay you for saving our daughter. I hope you will accept this little gift from us."

Akane Koyama opened the box and saw a wakizashi.

"My ancestor is a famous blacksmith in Ise, but I am ashamed to tell anybody. In my generation, I only know how to make some farming tools. Fortunately, a wakizashi was still handed down to me. I hope you can find some use for it," said the man.

"This is too precious. Since it's a legacy from your ancestors, passed down for generations, you should keep it," replied Akane Koyama, politely declining the offer. "No, no, we are not samurai. Even if we have it at home, all it would do is collect dust. It'll be better for us to give it to someone who really needs it. I believe that you will be able to use it well."

Seeing how Koyama Akane refused to accept the gift, the man became a little anxious. Immediately, he pulled his daughter to him and knelt on the ground like his wife.

When Zhang Heng heard the commotion outside the door, he thought that the Choshu Domain's samurai had come to their doorstep. He quickly put down his bowl and chopsticks and walked out of the dojo. Chiyo seemed a little surprised to see Zhang Heng, not expecting him to be living with Akane Koyama. The little girl looked at Zhang Heng curiously and guessed the relationship between the two in her heart.

In the end, Akane Koyama couldn't refuse them, so she gladly accepted the wakizashi. And thankfully, the family of three soon left. Akane Koyama stood silently at the entrance of the dojo as she held the wakizashi. The sword appeared to have invoked some deep memories. Zhang Heng did not want to bother her. After a while, she raised her head.

"Sorry. I remember some things my father said before-Koyama Myoshin-Ryū focuses more on defense than offense. Everyone has something or someone they want to protect. A blade is used to inflict hurt. However, as long as it is used well, it can also be used to save. This is probably the reason why he opened the dojo. Today, his words have left a deeper understanding of me."

"Can I see it?" Zhang Heng stretched out his hand and took the wakizashi from Akane Koyama's hand.

The wakizashi was slightly lighter than an ordinary short sword. Although it had been forged a long time ago, it was well maintained, and the blade was still sharp. Using the jade technique, the iron sand was first smelted into iron blocks in a furnace. After that, the blacksmith would bludgeon the iron block with a hammer until it turned into a flat bar, subsequently molding it into shape. The wakizashi was indeed an excellent weapon. "Take it if you like it," said Akane Koyama. She had noticed that Zhang Heng only had an old knife, and he did not have a wakizashi.

The wakizashi was not used regularly like Tachi. In most cases, it was used for emergency after the samurai lost his primary weapon. Or the samurai would use it to break armor and fight in small places.

### **Chapter 557 I'm Here To See Someone**

Zhang Heng never thought that the first item he would get would be a wakizashi.

He hadn't even started on the main mission yet but had already completed one side mission and even obtained a piece of novice equipment.

In all fairness, the knife was of relatively good quality. Even though it was no acclaimed sword, it was finely-made, much better than the one he had, which looked like a fake blade. Of course, when compared to a renowned sword like the Mikazuki-Munehika, the wakizashi was, to some extent, a little inferior.

Moreover, short swords like this one were more suitable for hand-to-hand combat. When the enemy was plenty, short blades weren't as ideal as an uchigatana or a tachi. Zhang Heng wasn't too concerned about one-on-one combat. He was looking to obtain a proper sword in case he found himself in a one-to-many situation.

But since a sword had been presented to him, he decided to accept it anyway.

This quest was similar to Master Builder, the previous special quest. It focused specifically on honing his swordsmanship, which was why other items were not allowed to be brought in. He could still access his skills, but many of them weren't very useful in the Edo period, which meant that he had to hone his swordsmanship.

But perhaps during the process of creating the quest, the developer did think it possible for the players' sword skills to be at Lv.3—Zhang Heng was walking around Kyoto like a video game boss character rather than fighting monsters and leveling-up like a rookie. Low-level monsters were insignificant to him.



In the end, Zhang Heng stuck to his decision to join Koyama dojo so that he could deal with the Choshu warriors should they come again and challenge Akane. On top of that, being attached to a school would make it easier for him to go around and challenge other warriors to duels. Otherwise, his only other option was to explain that he learned his way on the sword by killing people in Nassau and that the founder of the school was a red-haired female pirate named Annie.

Akane filled Zhang Heng in on the rules that had to be followed when practicing Koyama Myoshin-ryu. Basically, they were not too different from other schools, where they all advocated courage, benevolence, upholding samurai morality, and the likes of it. Zhang Heng remembered the general idea of it. Although he was not too interested in these sorts of things, he figured that since he had joined the dojo, the least he could do was show respect. He listened to Akane's teaching and explanations as patiently as he could.

Akane dutifully chose a fine day to bring Zhang Heng to pay respects to the dojo's ancestors. To his surprise, the dojo's founder wasn't Akane's father but someone named Koyama Iwa. Akane had no idea who this person was either, and all she knew was that he was the founder of Koyama Myoshin-ryu, and assumed that he must have been an ancestor of the Koyama lineage.

Zhang Heng had no interest in finding out more about the man. Koyama-ryu was a small school. Even during Akane's father's era, it was not particularly famous, at least not to the level of Oishi Shinkage-ryu, much less the likes of Hokushin Itto-ryū, and Tenshin Shōden Katori Shinto-ryū.

To Zhang Heng, Akira Kokoro was a little too metaphysical. In his opinion, there was no difference between Koyama's swordsmanship and that of other schools—the combination of basic physical fitness, training, and experience. No matter how strong and invincible your mind had been trained, there were still others who would be indefinitely faster and more robust, and you would find yourself unable to defend against their attacks—this was perfectly demonstrated during the duel between Akane and Yamada.

Of course, it was only Zhang Heng's first day as a Koyama dojo member—he wasn't exactly in the position to be disparaging the school's core principles. On the other hand, Akane Koyama was surprised that a skilled fighter like Zhang Heng had no knowledge of basic training methods. And from what she observed during his battle with Yamada, his moves were also bizarre, very much inclined to Western schools of swordsmanship, something she attributed to his travels overseas.

However, during a conversation with Zhang Heng, she discovered that Zhang Heng's swordsmanship did not have a formal system, and to put it nicely, was just bits and pieces put together. As a matter of fact, this guy would stab and strike wherever he felt was right. When fighting an enemy, he would think on his feet. Could he really be telling the truth? Was he really self-taught?

But did such geniuses actually exist in the world, that one became a skilled swordsman simply by training their own?

Akane could tell that Zhang Heng was a very experienced fighter, or perhaps more accurately, his sword skills were crafted purely for combat. Regarding this, Zhang Heng merely explained that it was the result of his years fighting pirates in the West. However, this answer did little to satisfy Akane's doubts. Instead, it only served to deepen the mystery. This man was clearly relatively young, probably only in his twenties, and wasn't exactly old enough to have experienced so many battles. But she also noticed that

Zhang Heng would occasionally stand under the cherry tree in the yard, looking up longingly to the sky with an undeniable trace of sadness in his eyes.

Even so, Akane understood that everyone had their own secrets. No doubt, Zhang Heng had to have his own story too. And since she was reluctant to talk about it, she probed no further. She wrote the name Yuta Abe which Zhang Heng made-up on a piece of wood, then hung it alongside the names of the other students of the dojo.

And just like that, from that day onward, Zhang Heng was an official member of Koyama Dojo. He could work as an interpreter as he waited for the arrival of the Choshu domain.

But much to his surprise, before Takeuchi even sought revenge, someone from another domain came knocking on Koyama dojo's door first.

He was a cheery-looking teenager with a permanent smile on his face, as if he hadn't a single worry in the world. When Akane first laid eyes on him, she believed him to be a son of some noble family that must have gotten lost and ended up at the dojo.

The boy covered his mouth and coughed twice. It sounded like the fluttering of a butterfly's wings, strangely endearing. He smiled amiably at Akane and said, "Hi, I'm here to see someone."

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It was then that Akane noticed the black haori\* and the Tachi with a black scabbard he wore. Many warriors in Kyoto wore black, but among them was a notable group. The drawings of hills on the sleeves of the boy confirmed Akane's suspicion.

Before she could ask him, the boy confessed, "Yes, I am a member of the Shinsengumi." He paused for a minute, then smiled, "You must be Miss Akane Koyama."

"Why has a Shinsengumi come to see me?" Akane frowned, her senses perked up, instantly wary of him.

The Shinsengumi may have the support of the bafuku and was entrusted with the crucial task of maintaining the public order in Kyoto. But the fact was, this group of ronin were the ones causing more trouble than anyone else. They are lawless troublemakers who assassinated anyone that opposed the shogunate. Yet, despite the group's harsh and ruthless grip, they possessed incredible combat effectiveness and had many skilled fighters among their ranks. They were not a welcome sight.

Translator's note:

Haori: a traditional Japanese jacket that stops at the waist of the hip which is worn over a kimono

## **Chapter 558 Menjo Kaiden**

"People from Shinsengumi came to look for you?"

Zhang Heng accompanied the French businessman for an afternoon stroll around the hanamachi. Upon returning to the dojo, Akane related to him what happened that afternoon. As of now, work had been as easy as a breeze. He had only been asked to accompany Gabriel to eat, drink, and have fun. The latter seemed very patient, as well. So far, Gabriel had paid Zhang Heng four koban for his translation services. Coupled with other leisure expenses, it seemed like Gabriel wanted to experience Kyoto's exotic

atmosphere to its fullest. His activities these few days was truly baffling. Zhang Heng also noticed Gabriel's followers got lesser and lesser. He knew that the day Gabriel's plan to come to pass was not too far away.

"It's a young man," Akane said. She then described the appearance of the person to Zhang Heng briefly. When Zhang Heng heard that he was from Shinsengumi, the bright smile on the person's face, and the fact that he was constantly coughing, a name came to his mind.

Could it be that man?

"He came here because of the Choshu Domain's samurai. He heard about what happened at the market that day, and they came back to seek revenge. The reason why he came here today was that he wants to cooperate with us," Akane went on.

"Cooperate? And how do they propose to do that? Stay hidden in the dojo and ambush those samurai?" While talking, Zhang Heng took down the wakizashi from his waist. He recently followed Gabriel around to have fun in Kyoto, and since there was no danger, for the time being, he left his primary weapon at home and only brought the wakizashi with him.

Other than that, he no longer wore the haori that the system gave him by default at the beginning of the quest. Akane found some of her father's old clothes and gave them to Zhang Heng. However, Zhang Heng's height was very uncommon during the Edo period, and he stood out among the crowd everywhere he went. In the end, he had to look for a tailor to customize some clothes for him. Until today, he hadn't yet received any custom-made garments.

"No, Shinsengumi has no interest in ordinary Choshu Domain samurai. They seem to have bigger goals in mind."

Although the visitor did not elaborate on their intention, Akane wasn't the kind of girl who was oblivious to how the world worked. As the daughter of a dojo owner, she now bore the burden of running the center alone. She was informed about the current situation in Kyoto. Since the Shinsengumi had found this dojo and they weren't here for Yamada or the others, it was apparent they were looking for more important people.

"What do you think?" Zhang Heng asked Akane.

"When my father was still alive, Ito used to visit him to discuss the emperor's affairs. However, my father refused to divulge into the matter every single time. After that, some generals came to persuade him to serve the emperor, but he rejected them as well. He said that it wasn't something he wanted to do and that he was just a small dojo owner. He also said that he was not equipped with the knowledge to distinguish between right and wrong. In that case, it was better to focus and do what he knew was right, such as wielding the katana to protect the nearby neighborhoods or help people in need in these troubled times," said Akane. "So I rejected their proposal of cooperation."

"And then, what did that guy say?"

"He said that he understood and respected my choice, but the others in the group might not think so. He also told me not to worry too much, and he would try to persuade their chief to take another

approach. Before I forget, he heard about you slicing off Yamada's left hand. He said that he would come to see who you are when he has the time."

Such childlike curiosity did sound a lot like him.

Zhang Heng had developed a lot of interest in that man. If the man was who he thought it was, it would be a more than worthy opponent to fight with. So Zhang Heng said to Akane, "If he comes here again next time and I happen to be away, can you help me to set an appointment with him?"

"Huh?" Akane misunderstood Zhang Heng's intention. She hesitated and said, "I think he... should be harmless. He just wanted to meet

you."

"You have misunderstood me. I'm more interested in Tennen Rishin-ryū," explained Zhang Heng as he splashed his face with well water.

The two had dinner under the maple tree of the dojo. When that was done, Akane cleaned up the dishes and leftovers and went back to the house to take out two wooden katana. Although she preferred to meditate than to wave her weapons around, it would be inappropriate for her not to know anything about the sword as the leader of a sect. After Zhang Heng joined the dojo and listened to Akane's explanation, he learned that he would need a certificate to practice the sword.

There were three tiers when the leader of a dojo assessed their disciples.

– Kirigami, Mokuroku, Menjo, or Mokuroku, Menjo, Kaiden.

Kirigami was the most basic pass for anyone wishing to join a dojo. When a person first enrolled, they could not tell others about their sect's name when they fought with others. After all, reputation was something fundamental to a sect. If others were always picking on the sect members, it was inevitable that their reputation would be affected. As such, for disciples who were still at the kirigami stage, the sect required them not to get into trouble as best as they could. If they somehow did, they were forbidden from mentioning the sect that they were in. At least, when they were defeated or wounded, no one would know who their sensei were. This could avoid bringing shame to the dojo that they were in.

As for the Mokuroku tier, the sect would give out the paper scrolls so their disciples could jot down the moves that they learned. Once they reached Menjo tier, the samurai would earn the right to tell anyone about the sect they were in before a battle's commencement. Like Akane and Yamada, the two of them were at Menjo tier.

And the last one, Kaiden, meant that the disciple had learned everything their sensei could have taught them. Those who had reached this tier could be considered as real masters of the sect. Just like the guy who came to see Akane this afternoon, if he was really the person that Zhang Heng familiar with, then he had achieved the Kaiden tier.

Back to Zhang Heng, he initially thought he could fight with anyone he liked after joining Akane's dojo. However, it appeared that he needed to get to the Menju tier first before he could fight anyone freely. This wasn't a difficult task for Zhang Heng, though, who had an Lv.3 in swordsmanship. Putting aside his

state of mind, he could master a technique in about two to three days. After all, his power, speed, and reflexes were top notch. Now, he just needed to acquire a license before he could kill someone.

Akane had to admit that Zhang Heng was better than her. When she was a child, she practiced really hard to master her swordsmanship. There were times that she shed tears for the tough training that she had to go through. To her surprise, Zhang Heng managed to learn and master it without needing to put too much effort into it. She often required to correct his form a few times, and Zhang Heng would perfect the moves.

Now the two were having a sparring session. Both were using Koyama Myoshin-Ryū. Akane could no longer defeat Zhang Heng. It made her wonder if she was a dummy.

### **Chapter 559 Suzaku Dojo**

It only took Zhang Heng five days to get the Menju certificate from Koyama Myoshin-Ryū. The speed of Zhang Heng's progress made Akane speechless. Judging by his skills, there was no reason for her not to give him the certificate. So from today onward, Zhang Heng could tell anyone that he was a disciple of Koyama Myoshin-Ryū.

He was in a good mood. And it happened that Gabriel had a gathering with a merchant group today. In other words, Zhang Heng was free for the whole day. Recently, neither the Choshu Domain samurai nor Shinsengumi made any moves, making it difficult for Zhang Heng to figure out what they were up to.

Although the dojo was still not improving, Akane, as the host, was very satisfied with her current life. However, for Zhang Heng, the current situation was different from what he expected. It was not a big deal for him. Since there was no one here to cause trouble, he could take the initiative to make some.

Recently, Zhang Heng had been inquiring about the whereabouts of the famous katana. At the same time, he also learned about Kyoto's big and small dojos from Akane Koyama, herself a Kyoto native. Finally, he set his sights on a dojo called Suzakukan.

It was a dojo that had only opened its doors in recent years, but it had grown a lot. Sugawara Saemon traveled to different dojos when he was young to learn all of their signature moves. In the end, he came up with Shigen Shinkai-Ryu and defeated a couple of well-known samurai at that time. Rumor had it that he even fought against Serizawa Kamo, the former director of Shinsengumi. No one knew how the fight ended, but the ability to survive the battle when going against the violent Serizawa Kamo was proof that Sugawara Saemon was indeed powerful.

After Serizawa was defeated by Kondo Isami, Hijikata Toshizo, and others, Sugawara Saemon established his Suzakukan in Kyoto, and a lot of people were interested in joining his dojo. Seemingly, he was doing quite well at the moment.

Zhang Heng knocked on the door.

"Koyama Myoshin-Ryū? Is this sect still in Kyoto?"

The disciple in charge of the reception at Suzakukan had his head held up high. Zhang Heng could hear a touch of disdain from his tone, but his attitude was not without reason. When Sugawara Saemon came to Kyoto looking to challenge masters to boost his fame, it was the happiest time of his life. However,

after he built up some fame and opened the dojo, others would come and challenge him, themselves wanting to be famous.

It was okay if someone skillful came to challenge the great Sugawara Saemon. However, many random sects from all over the country came to challenge him. Sugawara Saemon did something similar at the beginning as well. When he fought someone, his opponent would make-up stories to change how the battle went, regardless if he won or lost. And Sugawara Saemon could do nothing about it.

During the early days, he fought against Serizawa Kamo. At that time, Serizawa Kamo wanted to look for a sparring partner, and he was selected. However, someone changed the story to Serizawa Kamo fought Sugarawa Saemon but failed miserably. Therefore, when the Suzaku Dojo disciples saw Zhang Heng, he felt like he was here to pull the same stunt until Zhang Heng explained his intention.

“I heard that the owner of this dojo has a famous sword made by Miike Tenta Mitsuyo. I wish to have a look at it.”

The disciple in charge of the reception immediately was angered by what he heard. “How dare you?!” Miike Tenta Mits was a well-known blacksmith in Japan. He was active at the end of the Heian period, Miike District at Chikugo province. All the weapons that he crafted were priceless. His most famous work was completed during the Ashikaga Shogunate period. It was known as Tenka-Goken.

Zhang Heng came to the Suzaku Dojo because of the rumors that Sugawara Saemon owned a weapon crafted by Miike Tenta Mitsuyo. But what he said had obviously angered the people in Suzaku Dojo.

The samurai’s most trusted companion was the katana, and it was just as important as their life. Although most of the samurais failed to achieve where they lived and died with their katana, they would never lend their katana to an outsider.

Zhang Heng’s request was very rude to them. He was about to do something even harsher later on. If the katana that Sugawara Saemon own was Ötenta-Mitsuyo or a katana that was as good as Otenta-Mitsuyo, Zhang Heng would never return it after he borrowed it.

“Let me test your Koyama Myoshin-Ryū!” Immediately, a disciple jumped at Zhang Heng. Zhang Heng nodded as if he did not see the hostile gazes around him. He then grabbed the wooden katana handed over to him by others and said calmly, “Please enlighten me.”

Due to Zhang Heng’s previous disrespectful act, the person charged Zhang Heng without paying him any respect. Zhang Heng took his time and made the stance that he learned from Koyama Myoshin-Ryū. The wooden katana tip was slightly raised, and the defensive stance was leaned slightly to the left. Zhang Heng stood there and let his opponent attack first.

On the other hand, his opponent had no intention to hold back his strength. He was readied to unleash his might on Zhang Heng. A few seconds later, everyone around them heard a “pop” sound. Zhang Heng had managed to block his attack with his wooden katana.

Zhang Heng’s opponent was dissatisfied and shouted, “Again!”

After that, he lifted the katana and strike at Zhang Heng again. This time he was aiming at Zhang Heng’s right shoulder. However, the result was the same. Zhang Heng managed to block the attack once again. The opponent was having a hard time that he could not beat Zhang Heng. He kept making some strange

war cry and swinging the wooden katana in his hand. However, no matter which direction he slashed, Zhang Heng could always block his attack. He could not even touch the corners of Zhang Heng's clothes. On the other hand, Zhang Heng was standing, without even making a single move. All this while, he was watching his opponent jumping up and down, burning in a flame of anger.

Initially, Zhang Heng did not pay much attention to Koyama Myoshin-Ryū. To his surprise, it worked unexpectedly well in the battle. Before he learned Koyama Myoshin-Ryū, Zhang Heng had always relied on his speed and strength to bully his opponent. He had to admit that Koyama Myoshin-Ryū had made the battle more relaxing. No matter where the opponent came from, he could always put up his wooden katana to block the attack with the fastest speed.

The saber skills that leaned from the pirates were crude and simple. They did not pay too much attention to the details. However, Japanese swordsmanship had been passed down for hundreds of years. Naturally, they had their fair share of advantage.

For Zhang Heng, this quest was not only a journey to own a powerful katana but also a great opportunity for him to hone his sword skills further. Although he had countless opportunities to defeat his opponent, he chose not to do so. Instead, he made use of his opponent to learn more about Shigen Shinkai-Ryu.

Before he could do that, someone stopped the competition.

"Surrender now! You will not be able to defeat him."

Zhang Heng's opponent, a young man with a thin line of mustache, was angered, but he dared not to say no to the man. He stopped what he was doing and obediently retreated to the side.

It was a middle-aged man who spoke, but the man was not Sugawara Saemon (Zhang Heng asked about Sugawara Saemon's appearance when he came). "I'm the captain of Suzaku Dojo, Shimizu Isshin. Do enlighten me."

### **Chapter 560 Borrowing Katana**

Zhang Heng felt that Shimizu Isshin had to be a lot better than the young man before this.

Since he was the captain, he was second only to Sugawara Saemon among the dojo's ranks. He should have been practicing Shigen Shinkai-Ryu for some time now. Of course, who else would be the one to showcase everything that he had learned so far.

In fact, Shimizu Isshin had been following Sugawara Saemon even before he opened the Suzaku Dojo. After practicing Shigen Shinkai-yu for more than ten years, he finally acquired his Menju status. Now, he taught on behalf of Sugawara Saemon at the dojo. Even Sugawara Saemon himself wasn't sure if he could defeat Shimizu Isshin.

Now that he was standing in the face of Zhang Heng, Shimizu looked even more solemn than when facing his master.

Other practitioners observing them knew that the offensive side always had the advantage over the defenders. Like the saying went, no one could defend forever, where sooner or later, the attacker would creep up and break the opponent's defense. However, Zhang Heng insisted on staying at the same spot, not even moving his feet an inch. He managed to nullify his opponent's attack quickly. Even if Koyama

Myoshin-Ryū was a sect that emphasized defense, it was impossible that anyone maintained such a calm mind in the face of such a formidable opponent.

This could only mean one thing: the gap in strength between the two must be a lot wider than initially expected. Shimizu felt the pressure bearing down on his shoulders. Fighting this battle meant carrying the dojo's honor. Before the battle began, he bowed to his opponent, drew the wooden katana, and said in a deep voice, "Let's learn from each other."

Zhang Heng got his hands on the katana crafted by Miike Tenta Mitsuyo a quarter of an hour later. At the same time, he also got to witness the quintessence of Shigen Shinkai-Ryu. On the other hand, Shimizu was sweating profusely, gasping for breath, looking much like a fish out of water. There was fear in his eyes. He had tried his best, but it was fruitless.

He even felt that he was not much different from the junior that fought with Zhang Heng earlier. He failed to break his defense no matter how hard he tried.

No one had ever heard of a sect called Koyama Myoshin-Ryū, and they wondered how its disciples could be so skillful. Shimizu was known as an experienced master of Suzaku Dojo. No matter what happened, his expression always remained unchanged. Suzaku Dojo's disciples had always said that as long as Shimizu was here, there was no need to worry about anything, even if the sky fell on them.

However, at the end of the battle with Zhang Heng, Shimizu's mind was muddled. This was his first time experiencing helplessness, where the harder he fought, the sadder he felt. It was as if everything that he learned so far had been rendered useless.

Shimizu was actually not that weak. When the two of them fought, Zhang Heng could feel that Shimizu was stronger than Yamada. Shigen Shinkai-Ryu had always emphasized taking the first strike. Their iaijutsu was particularly interesting. The rumor was their iaijutsu was a fusion of Kinri Sankyo iaijutsu and So-Ryu iaijutsu.

After the battle with Shimizu, Zhang Heng had roughly figured out his strength and speed. When Shimizu was using iaijutsu, he unexpectedly managed to infuse an impressive strength into the strike.

Although his attack was still blocked by Zhang Heng, the ability where one could force its body into an overdrive state was actually quite interesting. After defeating Shimizu Isshin, Zhang Heng initially thought that he would face Sugawara Saemon, the ultimate boss of Suzaku Dojo. In the end, he was a no show. Instead, he sent someone to deliver the katana to Zhang Heng. It could also mean that Sugawara Saemon had surrendered.

Zhang Heng had no idea what was going on inside the Suzaku Dojo now. Shimizu Isshin was almost equally powerful as Sugawara Saemon. Since Zhang Heng defeated Shimizu Isshin, Sugawara Saemon would definitely not come to challenge Zhang Heng. It must be why he gave the katana to without saying anything

And Zhang Heng kept his promise. After taking a good look at the sword, he left satisfied. To everyone's surprise, Zhang Heng refrained from blurting out anything arrogant after that. Shimizu was relieved, quickly leaving the dojo and headed to his sensei's study room. Sugawara Saemon was intently practicing calligraphy, not even looking up when he heard someone knocking on the door.



So Shimizu stood aside respectfully until his sensei completed his brushwork. Sugawara put down the brush and sighed.

Shimizu bowed his head in guilt. "I'm ashamed. I failed to defeat him, and I even lost your beloved sword to him."

"It's okay," replied Sugawara Saemon. "There will always be geniuses in this world. Except for Miyamoto Musashi, the Sword Sage, no one can remain undefeated forever. Look at me. I failed to beat Serizawa Kamo as well. I had to wait for him to die before I could open Suzaku Dojo in Kyoto. It's just a katana. What more, he's only borrowing it. He didn't say he wouldn't return it to us, did he? He can take a good look at it as long as he wishes."

"I blame myself for not improving enough," Shimizu replied, his face sullen. "Now is the best time for the dojo to grow. I didn't expect this to happen to us, and everyone saw it as well. I'm afraid my loss has brought forth many undesirable consequences..."

"There's no need to worry..." Sugawara Saemon sneered. "Do you really think this Abe Yuta is only here to borrow the katana? Look, this is just the beginning. Suzaku Dojo isn't the only one in Kyoto that houses the famous katana. Maybe the man is the next Miyamoto Musashi. By that time, Kyoto would be in chaos."

Shimizu raised his head with a look of consternation, not expecting his sensei would give Abe Yuta such high evaluation. The weirdest part was Sugawara Saemon did not even go and watch their battle just now.

He seemed to know what Shimizu was thinking in his heart. Sugawara Saemon then shook his head, "You have been with me for the longest time and have the best aptitude. Of course, what I value most is your character. When I noticed that your opponent caused a great stir in you, I could roughly guess how strong he was. It is necessary to guard against arrogance and rashness, but you don't need to belittle yourself. Your strength is not bad, but your opponent was too strong. You were outgunned. Treat this loss as an opportunity. Everyone says that I traveled everywhere to learn each sect's best before I finally created Shigen Shinkai-Ryu. But in fact, my most precious moment was when I trained with Serizawa Kami. The tremendous pressure he inflicted on me forced me to fuse the bits and pieces I learned before. It's the same for you. Relive the battle. If you can find out your shortcomings, you will excel again. Go now. Suzaku Dojo will require your presence again." After that, Shimizu bowed and exited the study room. Before he left, he heard Sugawara Saemon muttering, "Koyama Myoshin-Ryū, Koyama Myoshin-Ryū... I've heard this name somewhere before. Now, why can't I remember anything about it?"

On the other side, after Zhang Heng defeated the captain of Suzaku Dojo, he realized that sweat hadn't even broken out. Since it was still early, he visited another dojo. After that, then turned to Shimon-ya at the market and bought some soba noodles, oden, and some roasted glutinous rice dumplings that Akane Koyama had been longing for a long time.

Zhang Heng slowly walked back to his residence.