

48 Hours 571

Chapter 571 Gion Blood War (VI)

Zhang Heng had already thought about it. While dealing with a Satsuma Domain samurai who charged at him, he said to Okita Soki, "Hey, let's discuss something."

"What's the matter?" Mr. Okita was busy coughing and beheading his enemies, but he could still make time to reply to Zhang Heng. Even in this bloody and messy battle, he still maintained his elegant posture. His Tachi was like the moon in the starry sky, exuding a faint cold light. Swiftly and sprightly, he beheaded every single enemy that stood in his path.

"It's such a pity your Shinsengumi failed to kill Kido Takayoshi at Ikedaya," said Zhang Heng. "This is your rare opportunity to make up for it. Want to watch it slip away from your hands?"

"What do you mean?" Okita Soki raised his eyebrows.

"Shinsaku Takasugi. He is among them," replied Zhang Heng. "What?!" Okita Soki was stunned. "That man... didn't he just die not long ago?"

"That doesn't seem to be the case... I just saw him earlier. He was well alive and most busy preparing for a grand plan." "Ah, these people are so annoying. No wonder Mr. Kondo said that the world is in chaos thanks to them," grumbled Okita Soki, shaking his head and complaining about the Tobaku supporters.

The truth was he actually did not know how much evil Shinsaku Takasugi had done. Whatever it might be, his sensei asked him to kill all of them if he saw them. Okita Soki was certainly not stupid, but he was sometimes very lazy.

"If you go against him now, you might be able to catch up with him," Zhang Heng reminded.

"Huh?" Okita Soki did some fast thinking this time, "You want to get your hands on the Juzumaru, and it is with Kirino Toshiaki right now. Kirino Toshiaki is protecting Shinsaku Takasugi, right?" "Yes, catching up to Takasugi will allow us to get what we both need." Zhang Heng finally threw out the terms of cooperation. Okita Soki's eyes widened, "... don't you think you that you are out of your mind? Most head to a safe place as soon as possible when they get ambushed or assassinated. As for you, not only will you not escape but you'll go after the enemies..."

"If I was alone, I would have escaped by now. But now that we are paired up, there is still a certain chance of success, but you have to make up your mind quickly. Otherwise, Shinsaku Takasugi will run away," Zhang Heng explained sincerely.

"Since you don't care about the danger, then I, as the captain of the first strike team, have no reason to retreat as well!" Okita Soki was a young man, and he was unwilling to fall behind. Besides, he witnessed Zhang Heng's swordsmanship, and he too got very excited about it after admiring him. So the two changed directions. Instead of running towards the main entrance, they ran to the side door. Their actions immediately caught everyone's attention in the tea house, and many were caught off-guard, especially the Choshu and Satsuma samurai who chose to stay behind.

The elder samurai's previous polite smile was gone from his face. Now, they were replaced by eyes that were filled with rage.

“Hey, asshole! Damn it! How dare you undermine our authority?!”

While he yelled, he raised his katana and rushed towards Zhang Heng and Okita Soki, while the other samurai followed behind him, grunting and throwing curses at the same time.

“Great timing!” Okita Soki was thrilled when he saw the enemies charging at them.

It had been a long time since the Ikedaya Incident that he’d felt this excited. Although he had been battling for a long time, the sudden secretion of adrenaline completely nullified his pain and fatigue. The katana in his hand never felt so light before.

He was at his peak right now!

Seeing that the enemies took the initiative to attack, Okita Soki would bring out his best to defeat them. So, he instantly employed the skill he was proudest of—a three-stage charging strike, the Seigan no Kamae. The tip of the katana was pointing at the bottom right direction. From there, Okita Soki would smack it down abruptly to stop the opponent’s strike. After that, he would lift the sword with all his might and slash his opponent with lightning speed. At that time, the opponent would be left defenseless for a split second, as if killing them without them putting up a fight.

The older samurai was considered an experienced warrior. He had encountered all kinds of opponents, and although he knew these two men before him were mighty, he was somewhat confident that he could defeat them. As long as he managed to block their attacks a few times, his allies behind him would charge and kill them. By that time, the massive mound of pressure he was experiencing would be reduced by a lot. Even if it were not easy to win the fight, at least he wouldn’t be banished to the losing side.

Dreams were always perfect, but the reality was crueler than he thought. He did not even get to see how the young man in front of him move. After a second, the world around him began spinning wildly. The last question that crossed his mind was why the trees in the courtyard were slanted. After killing an opponent, Okita Soki did not feel much excitement because nearby, Zhang Heng had also killed an enemy with a clean strike. This round could only be considered a tie at best. He did not even know the name of the man he just killed. To him, he was just an unimportant character.

“Come and kill me!!! Do it now,” Okita Soki eagerly darted around, seeking out his next prey. “Don’t forget our main goal.” Zhang Heng saw that Okita Soki was enjoying slaughtering the enemies. He could not help but remind him about their task on hand.

“You’re right. Only by eliminating Shinsaku Takasugi can the world return to its peaceful state.” Okita Soki agreed with Zhang Heng’s point of view. Both of them continued to battle for a little longer and defeated the samurai who stayed behind. Tobaku supporters in the tea house gradually reduced in numbers to the point that they could no longer stop the two of them.

Zhang Heng killed the last enemy that was closest to him and rushed to the side door. He then raised his head and looked out the tea house, quickly lowering down his head again.

There was a gunshot!

Before the Satsuma Domain samurai managed to draw their katana at the alley to ambush Zhang Heng, their throats were slit when he charged at them. And Okita Soki was following right behind. After

dealing with the two annoying flies, Okita Soki's face flushed red from the vigorous exercise, and he could not help but start hacking away.

"Are you okay?" Zhang Heng remembered that the young man beside him had a cough like Shinsaku Takasugi, but Okita Soki seemed to be in a relatively better situation.

"It's not a problem. I have this sickness since I was a child. I need to take it easy." The Okita Soki was not bothered by it. He then added, "It's okay if I don't rest. It's important to go after them."

Zhang Heng was worried about him.

"You can rest for a while. I want to confirm their current location as well." After he said that, he climbed up to a machine nearby and actively searched for the positions of Shinsaku Takasugi and Kirino Toshiaki. Soon, he saw the samurai who escaped from the tea house were divided into two groups, one of the group was heading to the west and the other to the east.

Shinsaku Takasugi should be hiding in one of the groups.

Chapter 572 Tonight, Your Opponent is Me

As Zhang Heng observed the whereabouts of Shinsaku Takasugi on the roof, Okita Soki didn't have a long time to rest because the remaining of the samurai from the tea house were going after them. Okita Soki's back was against the wall, and he only had seconds to catch his breath. With determination, he turned around and engaged the samurai again. The Tachi in his hand howled in the air, orchestrating another brutal baptism of blood.

Zhang Heng jumped down from the roof, swiftly slashed to the left and right, and killed two enemies in one breath. Having managed to help Okita Soki clear the enemy wave, he told him what he saw earlier.

"What should we do, shall we separate to go after them?" Okita Soki asked.

"No, I already know which team Shinsaku Takasugi is in!"

The fact that Zhang Heng was far away from, and it was night, there was no way to get a clear look at them. No matter what happened, Kirino Toshiaki, the bodyguard, would definitely not leave Shinsaku Takasugi's side. Besides, he was taller than most people, making him easy to spot in a group. That was how Zhang Heng found out the whereabouts of Shinsaku Takasugi.

"Great, let's rush over!" Okita Soki's eyes were irritated by sweat, and it seemed something was stuck in his throat as well. He looked uncomfortable, and he coughed twice. On a night engulfed with blood and flames, Okita Soki did not notice the taste of blood in his mouth.

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Shinsaku Takasugi had to admit that he underestimated the Shinsengumi this time. It wasn't just their mighty combat power-the most important thing was that he misunderstood Zhang Heng's identity, thinking he was a secret agent of Shinsengumi. Otherwise, it was hard to explain where he learned martial arts. And why did the Shinsengumi aid him the moment the samurai in the tea house attacked?

Gabriel was also on the escape team. Although he exchanged clothes with a samurai from the Choshu Domain, the samurai's haori looked funny on him, especially how it didn't seem to fit him at all. Gabriel

could only put the haori on his body instead of wearing it. Running and panting, he wiped the sweat off his brow, looking very, very helpless. He was the one that hired Zhang Heng as a translator. His original translator fell ill, and he had to stay in Osaka. It was an emergency, Logically speaking, the Shinsengumi couldn't have planted someone by his side in advance. Besides, Gabriel was cautious. Before hiring Zhang Heng, he'd been observing him for some time, and after seeing Zhang Heng talking with other Western businessmen about work, he finally hired him as his translator. Initially, he just wanted Zhang Heng as an expandable tool. He did not expect him to cause such disastrous consequences. In short, whether Shinsaku Takasugi or Gabriel, both now believed that Zhang Heng was a member of the Shinsengumi or at least a shogunate member. Even in their wildest dreams, they would never have thought Zhang Heng was here tonight for a katana.

Shinsaku Takasugi was first to flee because of his special status. When Okita Soki told his enemies about his intention to come here, he was already to flee the tea house whether the Shinsengumi's reinforcements would come here. Unfortunately, his health would pose a big problem. When he first entered the tea house and chatted with Gabriel, he seemed fine. Now, he could not hide it anymore. After running for a few steps, he started to pant.

However, Shinsaku Takasugi refused the offer of help from others. He gritted his teeth and insisted on continuing to run. After running for a while, he tripped and fell to the ground. His arms and palms were bleeding. And he was embarrassed by it. No one thought that the legendary commander who fought against the shogunate would become weak after a year.

Everyone who witnessed this scene could not help but think that this was the end of a legendary hero. Kirino Toshiaki had a rare look of worry on his face. He then said to the Choshu Domain's warrior next to him, "Go and look for a litter."

Gion was a famous place for entertainment in Kyoto. It was very lively every night. Usually, there would be many influential individuals who came to this place, meaning it wasn't that difficult to look for a litter. In order to confuse their enemies, they decided to divide the troops into two groups. That was why Shinsaku Takasugi chose not to leave in a litter.

But now, his physical strength had reached its limit. It was pointless keeping his whereabouts a secret anymore. At their current speed, their enemy had enough time to kill another team and catch up with them afterward.

But at this time, some of them were still feeling hopeful and said, "Maybe both of them have been killed by our people?"

Kirino Toshiaki looked back in the direction of Ukichi, shook his head, and said, "If those two are dead, someone will put out the fire immediately."

But the reality was that the fire in the tea house was getting bigger and bigger, and it even alarmed the building next door. The two samurai drew their katana and forced a man who came here to have fun and drink to get out of his litter. And then, they worked together to put Shinsaku Takasugi in.

"Get out of here quickly!" Kirino Toshiaki told the bearer.

His tall figure and his temperament made the bearers absolutely compliant to him. They lifted the litter obediently and moved in the direction that he commanded. Kirino Toshiaki was about to follow the

litter, but he stopped moving after a few seconds when he turned around and saw the young man on the other side of the street. The latter looked terrible. There were several wounds on his arms and calves. The haori on his body was soaked in blood and stuck to his chest. However, his eyes seemed to burn with determination.

“Keep up with our lord. Let me take care of the threat here.” Kirino Toshiaki said in a deep voice to the rest of the people around him.

Several samurai warriors, including Takeuchi looked at each other. They did not say anything, running immediately to catch up with Takasugi’s litter. Although Kirino Toshiaki stood alone in the middle of the street, he acted as if he had thousands of soldiers standing behind him. He then raised his head and said, “Okita Soki?” “Hmph!” Okita replied and drew out the katana from his waist. He killed so many enemies tonight that even his scabbard was covered in blood. The blood dripped down from the tip of the katana to the ground. His face was also stained with bloodthirst.

“No matter who you are, you will die tonight if you stand in my way!”

“Then it depends on whether you are good enough to kill me,” replied Kirino Toshiaki indifferently when he heard the words, his right hand slowly reaching out to his waist to draw his Juzumaru.

Just then, a voice came from the roof in front of him, “You are my opponent tonight.”

Zhang Heng turned to face Okita Soki. “Go after Shinsaku Takasugi, and leave him to me. If you do that, we can consider the plan we discussed as complete.”

Chapter 573 Chips

Kirino Toshiaki knew that the soldiers protecting Shinsaku Takasugi were no match for Okita Soji. Still, when the guy on the roof appeared, he no longer had the energy to stop the Shinsengumi guy.

Zhang Heng’s presence alone had placed him under tremendous pressure.

Kirino Toshiaki could not remember the last time he felt this tense. Even the slightest distraction amid the ensuing fight might cost his life.

On top of that, he was also a little nonplussed that he met two of “his own kind” on the same night.

Never mind the Shinsengumi; vassals of the Bafuku, who had been chasing down and killing anti-bafuku samurai—even Kido Takayoshi nearly lost his life in the Ikedaya Incident. Sure, Okita Soji was still young, but he was the Shinsengumi’s best swordsman—he couldn’t have spilled less blood than Kirino Toshiaki. The other person, on the other hand... The name Yuta Abe was unknown to Kirino Toshiaki.

He had never heard of this person before, and they had met for the first time tonight. This Yuta guy came to the tea house as the French merchant’s translator, and Kirino Toshiaki made a rare mistake of failing to recognize him as a threat.

But as they were leaving the tea house, Kirino Toshiaki spotted the fight in the courtyard. He could tell that the man had fought many battles and looked like he must’ve lost count of the people he killed. In fact, this Yuta Abe could very well be the most experienced soldier among the three of them.

How was it that no one knew about the existence of this man?

Nevertheless, this wasn't the time to be getting to the bottom of such matters because Zhang Heng had just jumped off the roof.

When two skilled individuals engaged in battle, attacking the enemy from a high vantage point was a rare course of action, not unless it was an ambush-doing so may grant them an advantage of extra gravitational potential energy. As a result of not moving mid-air, the person would suffer the disadvantage of being passive.

Kirino Toshiaki waited until Zhang Heng landed on the ground before drawing out the Juzumaru on his waist.

Under the moonlight, the body of the Juzumaru let out an icy glimmer, a drastic juxtaposition to the Buddhist rosary wrapped around its hilt. Yet, they perfectly fused to achieve a remarkable balance-much akin to the cycle of life and death.

Kirino Toshiaki spoke first, and his words were neither swift nor slow. "I began training when I was fifteen, did 8,000 strikes with the bokuto every day. After ten years, my skills on the sword improved drastically, and in another five years, I obtained this sword from Master Inoue and killed forty-four enemies.

"...Koyama dojo, Yuta Abe, borrowed this sword from the Take-no-gāidian Dojo," responded Zhang Heng with a simple introduction.

Kirino Toshiaki did not comment and said nothing more, raising his sword as in response.

Kirino Toshiaki's style originated from Jigen-ryu, a traditional school of swordsmanship unique to the Satsuma Domain emphasizing charging headlong, using momentum to defeat the enemy-a style both bold and fierce. If the Tennen Rishin-ryū was the Shinsengumi's choice of kenjutsu, then the Jigen-ryu had to be the sword technique most favored by the venerable samurai.

Kirino Toshiaki lifted the Juzumaru over his right shoulder and swung it at Zhang Heng. With the increasing momentum of his body, he locked onto the target. Back then, this move would overwhelm his enemy, who would turn retreat and evade, thus falling into Kirino Toshiaki's trap.

Once the enemy took a step backward, they would find their positions becoming even more passive, and Kirino Toshiaki's attacks would continue like a tide, one wave after another until the enemy descended into a confused frenzy. It was at this moment that death was determined.

Zhang Heng did not fall into the snare, not even backing down once against Kirino Toshiaki's unyielding strikes. Instead, he met his enemy's sword with his own.

"Good!" Kirino Toshiaki shouted, unsurprised, and delighted

Jigen-ryu was no jest to frighten people. In fact, Hanjiro Nakamura spent ten years training day and night to improve his strength and speed. Ordinary swordsmen would never be able to parry his blows. Unless one was an expert at determining the severity of strikes, chances were that the weapon in hand would be knocked off.

Hence, this move was no ruse, but an honest and upfront open-plan.

However, this dual swordfight turned out to be way beyond Kirino Toshiaki's expectations. The guy he was fighting actually received his full-blown assault, and although a little strained, Zhang Heng managed to pull out his wakizashi to block the attack at the last minute.

Stopping the back of the assailing sword at the last moment as it was bouncing towards his shoulder?

Zhang Heng, too was a little surprised at himself.

His persistence in maintaining fitness and the long hours he spent training did not go to waste. With the advancement of science and research, the modern-day diet became more nutritionally balanced, and the human physique was far more robust than people of a decade ago. In this quest, Zhang Heng's foundation was superior compared to the people of this period, and it was rare to encounter an opponent that could subdue him with strength alone.

Of course, he had not fought any battles as fierce as this one, and his physique had weakened a little. But undeniably, Kirino Toshiaki's training for the past ten years had not been for nothing. In fact, he overpowered every opponent Zhang Heng had encountered before.

Despite the discouraging odds, Zhang Heng did not panic—the stronger the enemy, the more valuable the lesson. Most importantly, it would greatly help in improving skills. In gaming terms, fighting bosses and elite monsters meant earning more experience than fighting small, insignificant enemies. Zhang Heng had challenged so many dojos, yet, what he gained could never compare to tonight's battle. After this, he would need to take this experience back with him and slowly digest it.

Upon realizing that he was at a strength disadvantage, Zhang Heng decided to change his approach, moving more actively while his footsteps grew more rapid. In Kirino Toshiaki's eyes, it was not a smart move. Kirino Toshiaki could see the effect all the continuous high-intensity fighting had on Zhang Heng. Moreover, the latter had sustained multiple injuries. It would not end well for him if they were to embark on attrition warfare.

In fact, the pair duelled for a while but came to a draw. Zhang Heng took a step back and then raised his sword to his eyes, using the moonlight to size up the chips on the blade. The uchigatana he held might not be as valuable as the Tenka-Goken, but it was not too bad either. During the battle at the tea house, there were not so many chips on the blade. But after only ten strikes against Kirino Toshiaki, the chips had more than doubled. The Juzumaru in Kirino Toshiaki's hands were just too sharp.

Chapter 574 Annie-ryu

Since Zhang Heng was dealing with Kirino Toshiaki, Okita Soki soon caught up with Takasugi and his gang. At the same time, only four samurai were now left beside Shinsaku Takasugi. It was true that there were numerous Tobaku Supporters in Kyoto, but none of them were reliable. So these four were the last armed personnel that Takasugi had for protection.

The Choshu Domain's leading samurai harrumphed with conviction to Shinji Takeuchi, "Takeuchi, I will leave you now to protect the lord!"

Shinji Takeuchi gritted his teeth. "I don't think it's a good idea that we keep running. So let's fight the common enemy together! He has endured a fierce battle. We might just be able to defeat him."

The leader shook his head. "The lord's safety is our priority. If there's no one to follow the litter, the group of bearers will definitely leave our lord behind!"

After hearing what the leader said, Takeuchi was speechless. In the end, he could only do what was asked of him. With him following the litter, those bearers had no choice but to continue carrying it.

But after taking a few steps, Takeuchi heard angry shouts of his allies behind him and the clash of weapons. At that time, he knew they had to be fighting the Shinsengumi kid named Okita Soki. He had been killing everyone that attempted to stop him tonight, and only one goal was in his mind-come what may, he had to send Shinsaku Takasugi to his maker tonight. Anyone who dared cross his path was an enemy.

Seeing how the three enemies from the opposing side were rushing forward, Okita did not retreat but charged at them instead. He swung his katana before the three encircled him, the sword landing on an enemy's chest. However, the latter knew what Okita's goal was. Not only did he not lose his combat effectiveness, but he became even more courageous.

The wounded man transformed into a wild maniac upon receiving Okita's heavy blow, rushing towards Okita with his katana, swinging his wakizashi at the same time. "Shogunate bastard! Die!!!" His two allies also took the opportunity to attack Okita as well. Okita was extremely calm in the face of such peril, the corner of his eye-catching the trajectory of the three katana aiming at him. After that, he pulled off what was a precarious move.

He first let go of the Tachi that was stuck in the enemy's body, then stepped half a step back to dodge the attack. Without hesitation, he charged at his enemies once again, reached out to his Tachi, swung it vigorously before his opponent's wakizashi attacked him.

This time, he used his strength very well. Not only did his Tachi manage to cut into the enemy's flesh, but he even cracked through a few ribs. However, there was a master samurai among the two remaining enemies. While Okita was dealing with another enemy, he stabbed him in his calf.

At this point in the battle, techniques were no longer that important anymore. Willpower and determination were the two factors that would determine the winner of this battle. The man with the knife in his chest was obviously expiring soon. He reached out and grabbed Okita Soki's leg as he fell to the ground, trying to create an opening for his allies to kill Okita.

Presently, Okita seemed to have given up on defense. He bore the price of letting his enemy slash his left arm, rushing to stab the opponent in the throat before another enemy swung a katana at him. After that, he beheaded the man holding on to his thigh. Now, there was only one enemy left.

Okita Soki prepared himself for the final battle. The last remaining enemy was stunned by his overbearing aura, his hands trembling slightly as overwhelming fear engulfed him. Among the three enemies, this was the one with the least combat experience. After witnessing the tragic scene, he seemed to have lost all will to fight.

His allies had been ticked off one by one, causing him to lose his battle intent entirely. The strong pillar of faith in his heart was shaken to its core. Just as he hesitated, wondering if he should escape to save his life or uphold the samurai's honor, Okita swung his katana and struck first. At that time, the winner had already been decided. Indecision was a big taboo in any battle.

Okita Soki effortlessly sent his enemy's katana flying away. It was so easy, even he was surprised. He then swung his Tachi at the enemy for the second time, and that was when he heard the frail voice of the enemy begging for dear life. Unfortunately, the continuous onslaught of wonton violence and blood seemed to have invoked something evil buried deep within Okita Soki.

Ignoring his enemy's pleas and cries to spare his life, Okita landed a lethal blow on his enemy with no respite. When that was done, he tended to the wound on his leg and quickly and went after the litter.

His blood-washed appearance made pedestrians scream, but General Manager Okita ignored the irrelevant guys. There was only one goal in his mind.

Soon after, Okita managed to catch up with the litter. Immediately, the bearers knelt and begged for mercy. Okita lifted the curtain with the tip of his katana, and lo and behold, discovered that no one inside. The Choshu Domain's samurai were gone as well.

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On the other side of the street, the battle between Zhang Heng and Kirino Toshiaki had reached its climax. To drain the enemy's stamina more effectively, Kirino Toshiaki changed his previous valiant and fierce fighting style to a more defensive one. He skillfully executed his attack's angles and timing, forcing Zhang Heng to make more moves than necessary. The two were fighting on the street, and it attracted the attention of many passers-by. Compared with Okita Soki's battle, Zhang Heng's battle was obviously a lot more elegant. After they fought for some time, neither of them got hurt. It seemed more like a gentleman battle. However, only experts could see that this battle was actually far more dangerous than Okita's battle. There was not much difference between their strength, which meant the battle would be broken down into smaller pieces and would emphasize handling details. It was one fight too close to call.

So far, Kirino Toshiaki was undoubtedly on the winning side. One of them had the speed advantage, and the other one held the edge in power. Hence, they could be considered as standing on equal ground. However, Kirino Toshiaki had one of the five best katana in the world, and it enabled him to gain the upper hand in this battle. On the other hand, Zhang Heng's katana was already riddled with cracks. It wouldn't last any longer than a couple more hits.

The balance of the battle would eventually lean towards Kirino Toshiaki.

Zhang Heng seemed to be aware of this, as well. Instead of changing the way he fought, he took his offense up a notch. Finally, the katana in Zhang Heng's hand could no longer withstand another heavy blow; one-third of it was sliced off by Juzumaru. And the broken blade flew out obliquely and stuck on the door of a nearby tea house. Kirino Toshiaki's expressionless face finally showed a touch of joy.

Since Zhang Heng's weapon was broken, it would definitely affect him greatly no matter what sect he was in. After that, Zhang Heng's fighting style started to change drastically. It transformed from a Niten Ichi-ryū to something he had never seen before. There was no fixed attack pattern, and it seemed that he was just waiting for the opportunity to land a heavy strike on him. Every single strike was life-threatening.

"I have seen your sigen-ryu. Next, it's your turn to see Annie-ryu."

Chapter 575 A Ghost

Almost twenty days had passed since Zhang Heng entered this dungeon. He had challenged many dojos and learned many skills from them. Now, he could switch between sword techniques according to the circumstance. However, during life and death situations, people would still choose to rely on their instincts.

Here, Zhang Heng's instinct was the swordsmanship he learned from the Black Sail quest. Honed by fighting with other pirates as a pirate for ten years, the so-called Annie-ryu was actually a sword technique that did not belong to any sect. It relied solely on combat instinct and experience.

After Zhang Heng's katana broke off, he took the initiative to get closer to Kirino Toshiaki, hoping to narrow the gap between them. The battle became more perilous, and at the same time, their reflexes were being put to the test.

When it came to the speed of his reflexes, it had to be Zhang Heng's forte. He had experienced more battles than Kirino Toshiaki and knew how to capture the right time to land a critical hit. There was no one better than him

– it was something Zhang Heng relied on when he was in a life and death situation. Kirino Toshiaki, fifteen years older than Zhang Heng, had better swordsmanship and was physically stronger than Zhang Heng. The age, however, meant that the speed of his reflexes might have declined over the years.

At this critical moment, though, he still managed to remain calm. Since he could no longer mount a defense, he turned to the offense again. The only thing on his mind right now was that he had to fight to save his life. Since he was still conscious, he had to look for every opportunity to land a critical blow on Zhang Heng by using his Juzumaru. And at the same time, he would wait for the chance to increase the distance between him and Zhang Heng.

Both were trying their hardest to fully utilize their specialties while looking for each other's weaknesses. Kirino Toshiaki was considered the most potent adversary that Zhang Heng had encountered in this quest so far. It was also the battle he enjoyed the most. For now, neither could take advantage of anything.

However, as time went by, Zhang Heng had become more and more familiar with Kirino Toshiaki's moves—the way he struck and his strategy was made known to Zhang Heng bit by bit. On the other hand, Kirino Toshiaki had just gotten used to Zhang Heng's Niten Ichi-ryū. Unfortunately, Zhang Heng changed to a new fighting style in a blink of an eye. This time, he had become more elusive. His swordsmanship was something the Japanese had never seen before, leaving for a very confused Kirino Toshiaki.

At this time, Zhang Heng finally his counterattack klaxon. The katana in his right hand initiated contact with the Juzumaru, blocking Kirino Toshiaki's attack. Meanwhile, his wakizashi stabbed Kirino Toshiaki's lower ribs.

Kirino Toshiaki realized that he was in grave danger. Instead of pressuring Zhang Heng, he withdrew his Juzumaru decisively and attempted to slash Zhang Heng's left wrist—he was trying to minimize the injuries that Zhang Heng was about to inflict. In the process, however, he sensed something wasn't right. Zhang Heng had to be pretending that he was going to stab him in the lower ribs. Apparently, Zhang

Heng must've predicted his fighting style a long time ago, waiting for an opening, and slashed Kirino Toshiaki with his katana when the time was right.

Kirino Toshiaki immediately stepped back, but it was too late—the two drew apart again. However, Kirino Toshiaki's right hand was bleeding, where on the ground lay two severed fingers.

Zhang Heng's strategy was to change the way he fought in a short period. He had taken advantage of Kirino Toshiaki's slower reflexes. Simultaneously, he was also deliberately tempting Kirino Toshiaki to go back to his previous fighting style. In the end, Zhang Heng was rewarded with an excellent yield.

Kirino Toshiaki could no longer hold Juzumaru with a hand left with three fingers and was forced to hold his weapon with his left hand. But his left hand was definitely not as flexible as his right. He would not have any problem if he were fighting ordinary battles, but now that he faced a formidable opponent like Zhang Heng, a disadvantage like such cost him the winning spot.

Looking at the severed fingers on the ground, Kirino Toshiaki finally put up an expression on his poker face. However, the expression was not despair or fear but rather a relief.

He opened his mouth and said in a low voice, "I can finally show my gratitude to my Master Saigo Takamori today. It's a pity... I will never see the new era you promised." After that, he raised his Juzumaru again. He then nodded at Zhang Heng and said, "Come on, I'd rather die in your hands than in the hands of some fool." "As you wish." Zhang Heng held on tightly to both of the weapons in his hands.

Okita Soki knew that he was cheated by the enemies when he drew the door curtain. However, he didn't overthink it. Shinsaku Takasugi was in horrible condition. There was a high chance that he could no longer walk on his own, the reason why they were willing to rob the litter and risk being exposed. Besides, only one samurai left to protect Shinsaku Takasugi, which meant he needed to carry Shinsaku Takasugi on his back.

Soki recalled the split road he encountered along the way, and he turned around to head there. He soon made a new discovery. At one of the intersections, he saw a fresh blood pool. Shinsaku Takasugi appeared to be in a worse condition than he thought. Instantly, he went after them by following the trail of blood.

He had left Gion, and not far away was the residence of Tsu Domain. Tsu Domain belonged to the shogunate, and it was unlikely that Shinsaku Takasugi would ask for their help. However, a house belonged to the Hiroshima Domain on the other side of the street—many in Hiroshima Domain were quite close to the Tobaku supporters. Although the Shinsengumi's wasn't influential enough in Kyoto to break into a samurai's house, Okita Soki would never let Shinsaku Takasugi get away anymore. Hence, he decided to climb the wall to enter the house.

As soon as he landed, someone was waiting to attack him. Fortunately, Soki had anticipated the sneak attack, managing to block the attack the moment it struck.

With the help of the moonlight, he could see the opponent's face clearly. It was a young samurai that was about his age. He was the last samurai tasked to protect Shinsaku Takasugi. Seeing that the sneak attack had failed, the opponent soldiered on and continued to attack Soki. He wanted to turn the situation to his advantage.

His swordsmanship bettered most of his peers in all fairness, but he was still incomparable with a master like Okita Soki. When Soki was at his peak state, he could defeat his opponent in less than ten moves. But now, he had consumed too much of his stamina, and he was severely wounded as well.

As a result, it cost him some effort to win this battle. Soki had to use his signature skill to stab the opponent's throat with his katana. Seeing blood spurting from the mouth of the young samurai, Soki finally felt exhausted. But fortunately, the battle was finally over now. What he needed to do right now was to look for Shinsaku Takasugi, who was hiding in the house, and stabbed him in his to make sure that he stayed dead this time.

In fact, Okita Soki wasn't one to fancy killing people. But in this era, every man was forced to make tough choices.

He was a relatively lazy person and was closest to Kondo Isami, the Shinsengumi leader. He followed Kondo Isami from his hometown to Kyoto. The latter wanted to achieve something great. In the end, they chose to join the shogunate.

However, Okita Soki's mind was not at work at this moment.

Once he dealt with the last samurai, his mind drifted to other places.

"Real headache... How can I see Miss Saya again? Okita Soki had been worrying about this matter for some time now. When the two met for the first time, he forgot to ask her address after a good chatting session. After that, he had "coincidentally" crossed paths with her several times, but he still failed to muster enough courage to ask for her address. Sometimes, he was only dared to look at her from afar.

He also went to consult the most resourceful member of Shinsengumi, Hijikata. The latter said to him, "Be brave! Just go and propose the marriage to her father. What she thinks is not important at all."

Soki scratched his head cheeks repeatedly after hearing Hijikata's words. He knew something wasn't right with the idea, not to mention how he didn't want to be hated by Miss Saya.

The next moment, he heard the sound of a bucket falling to the ground.

Were there more enemies?

Soki turned around abruptly, tightly clutching his katana, and that was when he saw someone he had been dreaming of.

However, this time, her innocent, healing smile was replaced by one of fear.

What was she afraid of?

'Oh, it's me. I'm now covered in blood like an evil spirit,' thought Okita. "I'm sorry that you've to see my ugliest side before I could introduce myself to you."

Chapter 576 A Fruitless Relationship

Although losing two fingers meant that Kirino Toshiaki would eventually lose the battle, he had no intention to admit defeat just yet. Instead, he chose to fight to the last minute, defending his dignity as a

samurai to the end. As a top master of the Bakumatsu era, once he decided that he would fight till the death, he would tremendously boost his combat power.

Kirino Toshiaki shoved away the distracting thoughts flooding his mind. Every strike he made was designed to inflict injuries to both sides. To a certain extent, he made up for the disadvantage of holding the katana in his left hand. Zhang Heng still had the upper hand in this battle, though. As time went by, the wounds on Kirino Toshiaki increased.

His chest, waist, abdomen, arms, and neck had been stabbed. He applied pressure on the wounds with one hand to stop the bleeding while his other hand still wielded the katana. Unfortunately, he only got weaker over time. Zhang Heng slashed his chest again, and Toshiaki straightened his back before falling to the ground unwillingly. Against all odds, the stubborn Kirino Toshiaki stuck his Juzumaru into the ground, attempting to use it as a support to help him to get on the feet again.

Walking over, Zhang Heng stabbed Kirino Toshiaki's heart, helping him end the suffering once and for all. He then took a deep breath before pulling out the Juzumaru stuck in the ground. The rosary that was entwined on its hilt was frosty as Zhang Heng laid his hand on it. It somewhat soothed his racing heart after the fierce battle. He then scrutinized the Juzumaru.

Some supernatural powers appeared to have protected this sword. Even after battling for such a long time, not a single dent could be found on it. Looking back at the weapons in Zhang Heng's hands, they were both dented and chipped. If the battle had dragged on any longer, both his weapons might just shatter onto pieces.

Zhang Heng took a good look at it again before putting Juzumaru back into the scabbard. His quest was half completed at this point, and he had found a legendary katana that was close to the level of Mikazuki Munechika. Now, he only needed to hone his swordsmanship and see if a better katana could be found. The battle of Gion had finally come to an end. It was unclear what happened to Okita Soki. In fact, Shinsaku Takasugi did not care much if he was dead or not-whether the Tobaku or the shogunate, it made no difference to him who won or lost. Not to mention that the current shogunate's downturn was impossible to be restored by one person. Even if Shinsaku Takasugi died here tonight, Okubo Toshimichi, Saigo Takamori, and others were insufficient to prevent Taisei hōkan and the Battle of Toba-Fushimi.

Zhang Heng made an offer Okita Soki could not resist since he needed him to get the Juzumaru. Now that the katana was in hand, there shouldn't be anything else that required his attention. Suddenly, he remembered that Okita Soki fought beside him tonight. If the latter hadn't come to his rescue, all he could do was flee, and getting the Juzumaru would have been out of the question.

In the end, Zhang Heng decided to check on him. The bloody battle that went down at Gion sent shockwaves to the public, and bystanders stared at Zhang Heng with fear in their eyes. They were so terrified of him that they took a few steps back each time he approached any of them. It wasn't like they knew who he was, and he might just kill them if they crossed him.

After that, Zhang Heng walked to the place where Okita Soki fought earlier, and he saw three corpses on the road. All were samurai of the Tobaku sect, and each one died had in a different manner of horror. One of them was even without his head. Then Zhang Heng turned to the bloodstains on the ground.

The whole time training with Holmes saw the art of tracking become a specialty of Zhang Heng, and he hurriedly tried to figure what happened here. Takasugi should have abandoned the litter to buy himself more time, but somehow, Okita Soki still managed to catch up with him. Zhang Heng was about to move forward, but the next moment, he saw a figure holding a katana appearing in the dark.

“Who are you?” Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows and asked.

The opposing party gave no answer, so Zhang Heng slowly moved his hand to draw his Juzumaru.

A few seconds later, the lantern on the side of the road revealed the man’s identity. It turned out to be Okita Soki, who separated not long ago. However, the man looked as if he’d just endured something horrible.

“What happened?” Zhang Heng was a little surprised, “Did Takasugi run away?” “No... I killed him,” murmured Okita Soki. “I killed him in front of her... in front of her... I killed someone who lost the ability to fight back.”

“Him?”

Zhang Heng had no idea who he was talking about.

“Miss Saya... Shinsaku Takasugi fled to her home. When I got there, she was just about to treat Takasugi’s wounds. I ignored her pleas and killed Takasugi, who happened to be already in a coma at that time. I had to knock his father out as well.”

Okita Soki raised his head and looked into Zhang Heng’s eyes. He looked like he was in great pain. “Did I... did I make a wrong choice?”

It was hard for Zhang Heng to answer the question. The conflict between the shogunate and the Tobaku was irreconcilable. Their struggle would determine the course of Japanese history. As a member of the Shinsengumi, Okita Soki, even if he did not care about politics anymore; he knew very clearly that the side that he was on.

Tonight, the two had spent too much energy and paid an enormous price. Okita Soki had to kill Shinsaku Takasugi no matter what, but unfortunately, luck wasn’t on his side tonight. Before the love between him, Miss Saya could even blossom, killing Shinsaku Takasugi in front of her only permanently destroyed their relationship.

But to be honest, even if nothing happened tonight, Zhang Heng was actually not too optimistic about their relationship.

No matter how beautiful the encounter was, the fact that Okita Soki was captain of Shinsengumi’s first strike team could never change. And Miss Saya’s father was from the Hiroshima Domain. He wasn’t about to let Soki marry his daughter. After all, Soki was the executioner of the shogunate. How was he going to face his relatives and friends if his daughter married someone from the shogunate?

Besides, Soki couldn’t hide his identity from Miss Saya forever. So, Zhang Heng thought, perhaps this was the best ending for him. Since the two hadn’t officially gotten together, this was the most decisive way to end the ailing relationship

Like most lovers, their relationship was destined to be over before it could bear fruit.

Only the two would know what it felt like.

The distress and heartbreak in Okita Soki's heart were difficult to understand. Zhang Heng could feel the pain and contradiction he experienced but chose to say nothing. He just patted Soki on the shoulder, and said, "Go home, take a hot bath, find a doctor, get a good night's sleep, and tomorrow will be a new day."

Chapter 577 Enlighten Me

Akane Koyama only heard about Gion's battle when it was almost noon the next day, and it was the same guy called Takizawa Masata who told her about it. He had been loitering outside her dojo for some time now and was filled with excitement and admiration as he related the story to her. According to him, it seemed Zhang Heng and Okita Soki had defeated the more than 200 enemies last night. Not only did Kirino Toshiaki fail to stop them, but it was also rumored that several powerful and influential people were killed in that battle as well.

Takizawa Masata explained it with color and vividness as if he was at the scene last night. Akane Koyama had already known from Takizawa Takizawa Masata about Zhang Heng's challenge to various dojos. When the two met, Zhang Heng once mentioned that he wanted to visit all of Kyoto's major sects. Akane Koyama thought he was kidding. Now, she knew that he was serious.

Akane Koyama was worried about Zhang Heng's safety after he secretly challenged so many dojos in the name of Koyama Dojo-it was no wonder Takizawa Masata was so eager to sign up. He wouldn't be the last one, though. This morning, Akane Koyama met seven people who wished to apprentice under her. It seemed the meeting with Zhang Heng would have to be postponed. It was estimated that what happened at Gion last night would spread even further-it meant that more people would only come to apprentice at Koyama Dojo.

Akane Koyama had to close the dojo temporarily, and everyone, Takizawa Masata included, was asked to come again tomorrow. Then she knocked on the door next door, but no one responded.

Initially, she intended to confront Zhang Heng about this issue, curious about why he would challenge so many dojos and get himself caught in the battle between the Shinsengumi and the Tobaku supporters. However, it turned out Zhang Heng wasn't at home, prompting her to start worrying. She did not believe a word from Takizawa Masada about Zhang Heng killing hundreds of enemies. No matter how powerful a master was, they had to have a limit. Even if a hundred enemies simply stood there and allowed Zhang Heng to slaughter them, both of his hands would eventually become numb.

Zhang Heng and Okita Soki were only a two-man army. Only God knew how they defeated so many-not to mention that they actually won the battle in the end. Takizawa Mazaki only described how invincible they were but said nothing about how badly wounded they got or how severe their injuries were.

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After hesitating for a while, Akane Koyama climbed the dojo's wall and entered Zhang Heng's courtyard. Fortunately, her worst nightmare of a bruised and battered Zhang Heng lying in a pool of blood in the courtyard didn't materialize. She pushed the door to Zhang Heng's house, only to find him sleeping on his bed.

Zhang Heng had gone to seek a doctor before returning to his house, where his injuries were treated with herbal remedies. Fortunately, most of them were just external, where Kirino Toshiaki caused the most severe wound on his body. After fighting for so long, the adrenaline rush had all but fizzled out, hence the fatigue. Not even bothering to grab a bite of breakfast, Zhang Heng went right to sleep the moment he arrived home safely.

Akana Koyama was embarrassed when she saw that everything was fine. It was impolite of her to come into his room without knocking on the door first, not to mention that she might be mistaken for other intentions.

Fortunately, Zhang Heng was still sleeping at this moment, and Akane Koyama attempted a tiptoe, gunning to leave the house gently and quietly.

However, right when she took a few steps, a familiar voice caught her. "Miss Koyama? Can you pour me a glass of water?"

"No, don't get me wrong... I didn't mean that," replied Akane Koyama with incoherence, as she was taken aback.

"I know you are simply worried about me," Zhang Heng went on. He opened his eyes and flashed a smile at Akane Koyama, "I can't move that well for now, which is why I'll need your help..."

"I see." Akane Koyama took the copper pot and poured a glass of water for Zhang Heng quickly. She was so nervous that she forgot why she came here. She did not know what to do while Zhang Heng drank the water.

"Thank you..." he paused. "...sorry for all the trouble I caused you."

"It's okay. I'm glad you're fine," Akane Koyama replied in her heart. But halfway through, she realized something wrong. Initially, she came here to ask Zhang Heng how he got so close to the Shinsengumi. If she continued the current topic, she would not ask those questions.

But fortunately, Zhang Heng seemed to know her frustration, taking the initiative to answer the questions in her mind.

"I have nothing to do with the Shinsengumi. I just met Okita Soki last night."

"A random encounter? In Choshu and Satsuma samurai territory?"

"Well..." Zhang Heng pondered for a moment, eventually deciding not to tell Akane Koyama about the French businessman's conspiracy with Takasugi. Even if Tobaku's plan failed this time, it would not affect the overall situation. In the next few months, Tokugawa Yoshinobu would still return the power to the emperor, and the battle of Toba Fushimi bound to happen in January the following year.

In the end, the shogunate would be completely defeated, and a new government would be established. In fact, Zhang Heng did not want to cozy up too much with the Shinsengumi, one that was destined to be dismissed in the end. The last thing he wanted was to cause unnecessary trouble to Akane Koyama. After what happened last night, Zhang Heng was thinking to show his goodwill to Tobaku. Forget about Saigo Takamori. During the Satsuma Rebellion, he would have chosen to side with the losers. And in the

end, they were all wiped out by the new government. As for Okubo Toshimichi, he died too early. Perhaps Ito Hirobumi would be the right choice?

Zhang Heng did not tell Akane Koyama about his plan. He simply smiled. "I was there for some other reason."

"Because of that?" Akane Koyama pointed at the Juzumaru on the table.

She had also heard about Zhang Heng's habit of borrowing a katana everywhere he went, but now she finally had the opportunity to advise him. "Yes, a good katana is the crux of a samurai, but if you are too obsessed over this, your cultivation will be affected. Moderation is the key to success."

"You are right. I will return all the katana I don't need tomorrow." Zhang Heng nodded.

Hearing Zhang Heng's hasty reply, Akane Koyama felt a little uncomfortable. After that, she did not know what else to say anymore.

On the other hand, Zhang Heng felt that the rest of the katana was no longer good enough since he acquired the Juzumaru. Unless he came across the five most powerful katanas in the world or something better than Juzumaru, he would accept no more swords even if he were to get it for free.

When the topic was over, the atmosphere in the room became awkward again. Akane Koyama did not know what to say next. Should she ask Zhang Heng to rest well or not to cause so much trouble in the future? In the end, Zhang Heng broke the silence. "I heard Kiyomizu-dera has stunning maple trees. We should head there together in the autumn."

"Hmm... Sounds like a plan."

Chapter 578 Every Relationship Is Different

Zhang Heng and Okita General Secretary both looked like they were seriously injured. Fortunately, their injuries were not life-threatening. After a proper three-day bed rest, he could move around freely again. Two weeks later, his physical and mental state fully recovered. That one battle against Kirino Toshiaki actually brought him more gain than challenging all those dojos. During that time, he gave it all he got to absorb what he learned so far.

Kirino Toshiaki was like a mini-boss in the gaming context that gave out a lot of experience points. Encountering someone like him in the Bakumatsu era was rare. Then, there was another as good as Kirino Toshiaki waiting to challenge Zhang Heng. After waiting another week, Zhang Heng figured Okita Soki should have fully recovered as well. Since they had agreed to a challenge, he went looking for him at his house only to find that Soki wasn't there. After asking around, Zhang Heng was told that Kondo Isami had asked Okita Soki to take a long break. Instead of resting to make a full recovery, he spent the time going out early in the morning and only returning at dusk. No one knew where he went or what he did.

Since Zhang Heng had nothing to do, for now, he decided to try his luck and see if he could meet Soki outside his residence, asking those living nearby about the places Soki frequented. Even after walking around the area, Zhang Heng still failed to locate him. So, he went back to Gion, the home where they met for the first time.

Zhang Heng remembered a tea stall there, and as expected, Okita Soki was there. Who knew how long he had been sitting here. He stared at the house across the street, but the door remained closed.

"A pot of tea, please." Zhang Heng told the owner before seating himself next to Soki. Soki forced a reluctant grin, and he wanted to say something, but he only moved his lips, unable to squeeze out the words that he tried to utter.

"Have you been spending your day here lately?" asked Zhang Heng.

Okita Soki nodded and removed his gaze from the house in reluctance. He looked down, staring at the plate of rice cakes that had been left alone for some time.

"You two can't be together." Initially, Zhang Heng wanted to convince Okita Soki to give up on the relationship. However, when he saw how depressed he became, he decided to be honest and speak his mind.

"I know." Okita Soki's eyes were dim. "I don't expect her forgiveness. I just want to come here to look at her from a distance. Just one look."

"If you insist on investing your feelings into this relationship that yields no result, you will only bring more troubles to yourself. You will encounter..." Zhang Heng paused, almost forgetting that Okita Soki would die in May. In other words, the hearty and sincere boy in front of him only had about a year to live.

This was likely to be the last relationship of his life.

Okita Soki coughed twice. "Hijakata told me the same thing as well. But... it's different. Every relationship is different. Even if I do meet someone I like in the future, she will never completely replace Miss Saya in my heart."

Zhang Heng was moved by those words, and he fell into silence.

At this time, the tea house owner served them the tea, and Okita Soki seemed to realize his willfulness. He was a little embarrassed by it. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kondo told me many times that I'm too emotional."

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"There is nothing wrong with being too emotional. If it were not for your feelings, I would have to find a way to escape that night." Zhang Heng replied while pouring tea for Okita Soki and himself, "I heard that your chief gave you a long break?"

Okita Soki sipped the tea and thanked him. "Well, I killed Shinsaku Takasugi, but it's been said that the current situation is a bit different. The higher-ups are considering cooperating with Tobaku supporters. This decision was made confidential, and the director told me he would reward me afterward. Actually, I don't care about the reward, which is why I asked for a long break."

After that, something seemed to cross Soki's mind. "Oh, yes, you are here for a friendly duel. I'm available now. Where should we go? The Koyama dojo?" "No need." Zhang Heng's answer was unexpected. "I want to fight the top master of the Shinsengumi—a man known as the Heavenly Sword, not a sad person trapped by love. For now, you have no value to me."

"I'm sorry," Okita Soki apologized, "I really don't feel like touching my weapon now."

"When you are fully recovered, come to the Koyama Dojo and find me." Zhang Heng finished his tea, got up, and left ten copper coins on the table.

"Okay, I won't break the promise again." Okita Soki said seriously.

Zhang Heng had underestimated the impact of this incident on Okita Soki. It was said that fearing the Shinsengumi's retaliation, that house' owner decided to marry off his daughter to someone from his hometown. When Okita Soki knew about it three days later, Saya had already left Kyoto.

That day, Mr. Okita sat in front of the small tea stall from the morning until the night. When the owner was closing up, he did not dare to retrieve the stool that he was sitting on. Until midnight, Soki continually gazed at the house with bloodshot eyes, so stubborn he refused to get up and leave.

After another month, Zhang Heng heard that Okita Soki was gravely ill. When he visited him, Soki had lost a lot of weight. He was only skin and bones on of his body parts, and among other things, his cough had worsened as well. He was still suffering from mild fever too. When Zhang Heng saw him, he was sitting in the yard, looking at an orchid in the corner.

Okita Soki didn't notice Zhang Heng walking into the yard. A master like Okita Soki would have noticed him the moment he stepped into the yard. Zhang Heng then sighed secretly in his heart. Soki was deteriorating rapidly, and with his coughing, coupled with the emotional trauma he experienced earlier, he might die earlier than expected.

However, he seemed quite sprightly now. When Zhang Heng put down the pork he was holding, Okita Soki finally noticed him and said, "You are one rare visitor."

"I am nearby doing something. I came over when I remember that you are staying nearby here."

"Are you still challenging the dojos in Kyoto? Mr. Abe, you are such a weird person." Okita Soki smiled. "Nowadays, there are legends about you in the streets and alleys of Kyoto. I heard that thanks to you, Koyama Dojo has become very famous, recruiting many disciples."

Chapter 579 Coming As Promised

Okita Soki related to Zhang Heng about the recent happenings brewing within the Shinsengumi. It appeared that Kyoto's public security was worsening by the day, and the general's behavior was getting more and more ambiguous. The director Kondo Isami and the deputy Hijikata Toshizo were getting increasingly worried. With the rapidly deteriorating situation, rumors that a new government would soon be propped up began to spread widely among the public. The ronin in the group also began to worry about their future. If the new government fell into the Tobaku Sect's hands, they would definitely come up with everything they had to destroy Shinsengumi since it was the shogunate's main force.

While everyone was panicking, Okita Soki, trying to make a full recovery at home, was exceptionally calm.

He knew how bad the situation was, but he managed to convince himself to simplify the whole thing. Since the director and deputy director were still in discussion, he just needed to execute them as usual. Okita Soki just did not know if he could even swing the Tachi in his hand.

"In two months, the maple leaves of Kiyomizu-dera should turn red too," Okita Soki blurted to Zhang Heng.

"Yes."

"Ah, when the time comes, I really want to take a look," Okita Soki sighed.

"I see."

"Unfortunately, I have lost a reason to go there again." A trace of sadness lurked beneath in Okita Soki's signature hearty smile. Perhaps he saw his destiny from the orchid in the corner.

"Get well soon. I heard that Director Kondo and Deputy Director Hijikata are busy seeking a potential partner for you. Your sister Ako entrusted them with your marriage before you left home," replied Zhang Heng.

Okita Soki shook his head. "You don't have to lie. I know my body. I am afraid this sickness that plagues me is incurable. So, I shouldn't waste the time of any other woman."

Zhang Heng was speechless.

But then, Okita Soki reassured Zhang Heng. "Don't worry; I haven't forgotten the agreement between us. I will go to you when my health gets better."

"Well, if there is anything at all that you need, get someone to look for me in the dojo."

Okita Soji's health deteriorated faster than expected, and there was a good chance the friendly match with Zhang Heng wouldn't even take place. It was a shame that Zhang Heng was unable to fight the top Shinsengumi member in this dungeon. But such was life. Nobody got what they wanted all the time.

After that, Zhang Heng wasted no more time, quickly building a good relationship with the Tobaku supporters. Initially, he wanted to look for Konda Isami, but he wasn't in Kyoto at that time. Since he knew Saigo Takamori, Kido Takayoshi, and Sakamoto Ryoma were going to live a short life, he gave up on looking for these historical celebrities.

He wasn't asking for much, anyway. All he wanted to do was protect Koyama Dojo from certain destruction after the new government was established. It could easily be made possible by anyone with a little influence. The new government had a challenging journey ahead of them. Many lost their lives in civil wars and assassinations, where practically none of them had a good ending. Hence, it was a bad idea to get too close to them.

Besides, Zhang Heng made some time to watch the maple leaves with Akane Koyama at the temple. Everything happening to her now was something she never dared imagine before. Koyama Dojo had been given a new breath of life. Presently, it had become even better than when her father was alive. Nonetheless, she didn't know why her joy faded when she heard that Zhang Heng would leave Kyoto next year. When she went to the temple, Akane Koyama's mood had changed.

Including the extra 24 hours, Zhang Heng had spent 270 days in this dungeon, equivalent to almost nine months. Besides obtaining the legendary katana, Zhang Heng's most significant gain from this dungeon was that his Lv3 swordsmanship was finally improving again after a long time of stagnation.

By the seventh month, however, Zhang Heng could no longer level up his swordsmanship by challenging Kyoto's dojos. After merging the signature moves of various dojos, he vaguely noticed that he was about to reach Lv.4 swordsmanship.

Unfortunately, he could not find a way to break through the barrier. At the end of the shogunate era, Kyoto was the best place to hone one's swordsmanship. This could be the last chance for him to improve. When he left the dungeon, it would be almost impossible to do it.

However, there was no one left in Kyoto worthy of fighting him.

Two of the four legendary samurais had been killed by Zhang Heng, and he even helped Tobaku to kill some of the shogunate's masters. An opponent like Kirino Toshiaki was indeed hard to come by. Zhang Heng was desperate to meet someone as good as him.

He thought about going to Edo if he wanted to improve his swordsmanship further—he wanted to challenge someone powerful over there. However, he did not know the consequences if he left the designated location of this quest. Zhang Heng would only do it if it were his last resort. When he was thinking about it, an old friend came to look for him.

Okita Soki had put on a light blue haori today. His cuffs had Shinsengumi patterns on them, and this was also his favorite set. Having his hair and beard trimmed, he painted some pastel on his face like one of those geishas to hide away how pale he actually was.

Early the next morning, he knocked on Koyama Dojo's door.

Akane Koyama was shocked to see the frail Okita Soki at her doorstep. Not long ago, she heard that his health had taken a worse turn and that death was inevitable, which was why she had gone to visit him only a few days ago.

Before he entered the dojo, Soki bowed solemnly at Akane Koyama. "Can you ask Mr. Abe next door to come over? Just tell him that Okita Soki is here for the appointment."

"Appointment?" Akane Koyama hurriedly let the ailing man enter the dojo, appearing to have forgotten the friendly duel entirely. After all, the appointment was made six months ago, not to mention the state Okita Soki was in. Let alone a friendly match; he might even have a problem walking. "I have adjusted my body and spirit to the best condition according to what I promised him. Mr. Abe and I will have to continue with our friendly duel no matter what."

Chapter 580 Favor

Koyama dojo was not what it used to be. It had way more students now, and after Zhang Heng's motivational speech, many came in early to train, forcing Zhang Heng, who was just a wall away, to develop the habit of going to bed getting up early. When Akane found him, he had already washed up and was getting just about to go for a run. Knowing that Okita was literally knocking on death's door, Zhang Heng had long given up hope of fighting a duel with him. Furthermore, in the current state he was in, Okita wasn't even expected to last one round. Even though Zhang Heng was stuck between levels 3 and 4 and had no way to move past that stage, the last thing he wanted was for Okita to sacrifice his life.

However, when Zhang Heng saw Okita, he knew that he would not talk the man out of the duel.

So, in the end, both ended up in Zhang Heng's little courtyard at Zhang Heng's request. Regardless of who won, he did not wish for the duel's result to be made public.

Okita Soji took the bokuto from Akane but was in no hurry to remove the tachi from his waist.

He looked at Zhang Heng in the eyes and said, "Before we start, I have a few questions I'd like to ask you." "Please, go ahead," replied Zhang Heng. "Are you working together with Satsuma and Choshu Domain now?"

The atmosphere suddenly turned somber.

Akane appeared to be troubled and was about to speak up when Zhang Heng raised a hand to stop her. "Yes," he nodded.

"Of course."

Okita Soji's reaction was completely unexpected. Instead of being angry and disappointed, he looked relieved. "I heard similar rumors. I also heard that the deputy leader of Kyoto Mimawarigumi died by your hand."

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"Mm, that's true," Zhang Heng answered. "So, have you come to avenge them today?"

"No, even though we do the same thing as the Kyoto Mimawarigumi, our association is perfunctory. Also, I'm not a perfectionist like the deputy leader." Okita Soji shook his head. "Times have changed; the general has already relinquished command and returned imperial rule to the Emperor. However, they are still not satisfied. No one knows what the future will look like, and there's panic among the people. Many are already seeking ways to escape the country, but because of the strict regulations, no one dares to say it aloud. The truth is, people are already thinking of other ways to deal with it."

Okita paused, "I want to speak to someone who has contact with the Sonno-joi. It's just perfect that Mr. Abe happens to be well-acquainted with them. It's because I know that I can trust you."

"You can always come to me if you need any help. Are you hoping to get out of Shinsengumi?" asked Zhang Heng.

Okita smiled. "How is my current situation any different from that? I don't care about the higher-ups' matters, but I've worn this uniform for so long, and I've gotten used to it. And why bother wasting energy taking it off when I'm already at the end of my life?"

Zhang Heng kept quiet and waited for Okita to continue.

"... there are two people in this world that I will never stop worrying about. The first is my elder sister Ako. Thank goodness, she's already married. The other person is Commander Kondo. He was the one who brought me to Kyoto, and he and Hijikata have been taking care of me all this time. I know the commander very well. He's a stubborn man-once he sets his mind on something, he will never change it. If... If the new government is established, I'm afraid he will never submit to those renegades. So, I'm asking you to do something that won't be easy to do..."

Okita Soji sighed. "...should the situation deteriorate to that extent, and if conditions permit, I hope you can help Commander Kondo

-pull some strings to have the commander's life spared, let him return to his hometown, and perhaps, live out the rest of his life as a farmer."

Okita was probably the only one among the Shinsengumi unconcerned about politics. Ironically, he was also probably the most thoughtful.

His worries were not unreasonable. In fact, they were bang on.

Zhang Heng, well-versed with the era's history, knew precisely what was to become Kondo Isami, Shinsengumi's leader. Even though, for some reason, Kondo was unable to participate in the Battle of Toba-Fushimi, he remained loyal to the Shogunate and returned to Edo after he lost the Battle of Kōshū-Katsunuma to the new government. On top of that, there was also internal conflict within the Shinsengumi. Kondo led the remaining members with their revolt against the new government, but he was captured in Nagareyama, then beheaded in public soon afterward.

Zhang Heng thought about the request and then decided to be forthcoming with Okita. "I can only do my best, but there is no guarantee."

The fact was, Kondo's death would be due in April the following year. By that time, Zhang Heng would have already left the quest. He had been swamped lately and found no time to use his extra game opportunity to return to the previous quest. In fact, he had no idea what would happen to this quest after he left.

However, he could find a way to smooth things over between him and the higher-ups ahead of time and maybe even keep Kondo Isami from dying. But then again, based on Kondo's personality, even if he was lucky enough to escape death, chances were he wouldn't retreat to his hometown and be a farmer. There was still the Enkyu Ezo War, the Satsuma Rebellion, and many more.

But even if Zhang Heng fulfilled his promise and saved Kondo, Kondo's death after the fact was no longer his responsibility.

Okita Soji sighed, obviously relieved. "That's enough. I never expected you to swear by it or anything like that. I just want to have one less thing to worry about when I leave. There is one last thing I need you to do for me."

As he was speaking, he removed the sword at his waist, and as he stroked the blade, his face softened. "This sword is called Kiku-ichimonji, cast by the swordsmith Ichimonji of the Ichimonji School of Bizen Province. It's seven hundred years old and has been my companion since I could remember. Unfortunately, our fate has concluded. I want to find a home for it, and you are the best candidate. I believe that, in your hands, it will dazzle with even more brilliance."

Zhang Heng was dumbstruck. The Kiku-ichimonji may not be one of the five heavenly swords, but it was also reputed as one of Japan's greatest. There were rumors on the internet claiming that its owner was none other than Okita Soji—though very few would agree to that. Yet, here was Zhang Heng, receiving the famous sword from Okita Soji.

Okita visited Zhang Heng at the Koyama dojo to make some arrangements for when he was gone. He clearly sensed that he did not have much time left, so he asked Zhang Heng for a favor and to bid the world farewell as a samurai.