



Sanosuke Harada

There's a man sitting at the end of the bar. As I watch, he downs a cup of sake, grins at the bartender for another, and downs that one too. I know those aren't his first two drinks, but apart from a slight blush across the cheeks, he looks as sober as a priest.

He's the man I'm here to meet, but I decide to watch him in his natural environment before I introduce myself or he notices me.

The man's name is Sanosuke Harada. Captain of the Shinsengumi's 10th Division. One of the architects of the Ikeda Affair. Friend to the taverns of Kyoto and—if the rumors are true—her houses of ill repute as well. Plenty of people know of him, but only a few can claim to *know* him.

Walks Softly and Carries a Big Stick

an interview by
Rekishi Ka

Not that he's unfriendly or anti-social—far from it. Indeed, his gregarious nature and aggressive socializing are almost legendary on the streets of Shimabara.

No, Harada simply belongs to that exclusive club that some call ruffians and others call heroes: The ronin of the Shinsengumi.

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When I finally move over to greet him, pulling out my pad and pencil by way of an introduction, he slaps me on the back as if we're old pals. There's no jump of the eyebrows or widening of the eyes though, and I get the distinct feeling that those golden-brown orbs caught sight of me the moment I stepped in. They probably catch sight of just about everything, and they slide quickly across the room once before winking and offering me a drink.

So what does a person ask a man like this; a man who's killed other men in the hot, bloody press of battle? I start with something easy: How long has he been with the Shinsengumi?

“Pretty much since the beginning, I guess. There were a bunch of us, you know, kind of friends from a while back. I think at some point we just figured...we’ve got the skills, why not use ‘em to pay the bills?”

He laughs. It's a big sort of laugh, the kind you get from a guy who knows who he is, enjoys who he is, and doesn't really give a shit if you think it's funny or not, because he thinks it's great. He lifts another cup to his mouth, and his eyes shift focus to something at the back of the

bar. I sneak a glance, but it's nothing: He's just staring off into space.

“Sano's one of the best swordsman I've ever seen—well, except for me, obviously,” Harada's friend, Shinpachi Nagakura, tells me later over the phone. I can hear something in the background that sounds like a bar or a strip club—possibly both. *“But watching him fight with that spear of his is something else. He just gets this look in his eyes like...like I donno. He's a true warrior, no doubt, but sometimes I wonder if that's all he's gonna be, you know? Guy like that, he's got layers. I'm probably his best friend, but he'll say something and it just comes right out of left field, like he was thinking about something totally different.”*

Is that what I'm seeing in the bar, then? A glimpse into the emotional strata of this age's most prolific spearman?

Or is he just tired?

The hand he tips his sake back with is large; calloused; strong. The cup cradled in it looks as delicate and fragile as a flower petal.

I ask what's next for the Shinsengumi.

He coughs and thinks about it for a moment, then launches into an explanation that's half political editorial and half personal rumination.

“Well, I gotta be honest with you, I'm not really sure. We're here to protect the people, and that's never gonna change, but it feels like things are starting to get kinda messy up at the top. You've got imperialists that are sick and tired of the loyalist guys, and the other way around, and then half of 'em think we've gotta kick any and all foreigners out of the country while the other half think that the only way we're gonna make it on the world stage is to get cozy with England and France and all them.”

He runs a hand through his ruddy hair.

“I think... I donno what I think. If the shogun decides that the way to deal with these

Choshu bastards is to go to war with 'em, then we'll probably be going to war with the rest of the army, but I don't really think a war's what we need right now. We've got our hands full already—You've heard about Ikeda, right? 'Course you have, everybody has. But half of that was just luck. We got wind of what was going down, and we got there in time to stop 'em, but it could've gone the other way pretty easily."

Harada pushes his cup around in little circles on the table, his mouth twisted down into a frustrated scowl. Perhaps he's thinking about where he and his brothers-in-arms might be in a year's time, or perhaps he's thinking back to the role he played in the Ikeda Affair—the details of which are still a mystery outside of the Shinsengumi. Then suddenly his melancholy is gone, replaced by a rakish grin, and he suggests we move on to other, less dull subjects, such as the ladies he met last night—ladies he seems rather excited about.

And perhaps that's who Sanosuke Harada really is: A man whose thoughts run deep, even if his desires seem to hew toward the material. As his friend Nagakura says, a man with layers. ♡



Harada (top) with friends Souji Okita (left) and Heisuke Toudou (bottom) from the Shinsengumi.