

TO PROTECT AND SERVE

A BLADE IN THE DARK

Hajime Saito, Kyoto's silent protector, is never off duty.

BY SHIZUKANA SHUJINKOU



Hajime Saito follows orders.

Among the larger-than-life personalities of the Shinsengumi it is—ironically—his taciturn and obedient nature that set him apart from his comrades. There are plenty of other things unique to Hajime, such as his left-handed iai-do, or perhaps his conservative dress, but there are few things quite so striking as this small man in black sitting calmly among his compatriots as they drink, fight, and carouse.

Not that this solemnity should be taken as fear, or cowardice. Far from it: Few among the Shinsengumi can lay a claim to fearlessness as legitimate as Hajime Saito's. Whatever seals his lips and stills his limbs is a mystery, and given his reticence to discuss any subject—especially himself—the chances of learning it are slim. There's something almost regal about his bearing, but he never comes off as superior: Deference is his default mode of communication. One can't help but look at him and feel that if anyone is the ideal of vassal swordsman made flesh, that person is Hajime Saito.

His quarters in the mansion the Shinsengumi are occupying are like him: quiet; spartan; effective. There's nowhere for a guest to sit, but it's hard for me to imagine

him ever entertaining guests anyway.

He lifts a sword—plain, black-lacquered scabbard with no decoration save a dull metal cap on the tip—places his hand on the hilt—as plain as the scabbard, with simple black braiding and a metal cap also worn dull with use—and draws the blade. It's just as unremarkable as its scabbard would suggest, but immaculately cared for. He tilts it back and forth, slowly, examining the line of it with the eye of a practiced expert. Then he holds it up straight, the tip pointing at the ceiling, and his eyes meet mine.

"This is me," he says.

What does one say to something like that? But he doesn't seem to care. His eyes move to the sword again, and he slides a delicate finger along the flat, like a craftsman inspecting his tools. Seemingly satisfied, the sword goes back into the scabbard, and the scabbard goes back up against the wall.

It's relatively common knowledge that Hajime Saito is one of, if not the, most active members of the Shinsengumi. The number of recorded confrontations he's taken part in is staggering, and whispers in Kyoto suggest that he's been involved in most of his organization's off-the-

record activities as well. Not only is his sword among the best the Shinsengumi commands, it is also the most prolific. Where Hajime goes, bodies fall.

Today, however, he's just going to the courtyard, and so far his sword has stayed sheathed, so hopefully all the bodies will remain upright.

"Skill is practice in action," he says, as we near the sparring area. Several other captains are already there, along with a number of the rank-and-file foot soldiers of the Shinsengumi. I can recognize Toshizo Hijikata—but then, who couldn't?—the inseparable Sanosuke Harada and Shinpachi Nagakura, and Heisuke Toudou. Hijikata and my companion share a short glance, and Harada, Nagakura, and Toudou favor him with a shout and a wave. Hajime's only response is a curt nod for each, neither rude nor friendly. He taps a lone soldier on the shoulder and with a shallow bow requests to spar with him.

It's difficult to actually watch Hajime fight because he's simply too fast. He runs through some routine exercises with the soldier first, but once he's warmed up, the real action begins. Iai is about moving the sword quickly, in one strike that's both a draw and an attack, but Hajime's sword doesn't move such much as it simply disappears from his scabbard and reappears wherever he wants it.

As I watch, I think about what he meant when he held out his sword and said: "This is me."

In a sense, one could say he is the sword of the Shinsengumi: He has participated in every major action that's taken place since he joined their ranks and as I watch him practice it's hard to imagine he wasn't the most lethal and efficient soldier at every one of them. His eyes are cold and sharp, and the brilliant blue of

cold steel in the winter sun. The katana, sword of the samurai and symbol of their power and skill, is famously forged using a process that folds softer, more malleable metal with a harder, more brittle variant, making for a sword that is strong, sharp, and flexible. Hajime is the same: Every movement speaks of strength and an iron resolve that is never compromised, but also of an adaptability rarely seen in the notoriously hidebound samurai class.

The cool detachment never leaves his face, but after he bows again to his partner and walks back over I can see that his face is covered with a thin sheen of sweat. It's some reassurance, at least, that such superhuman feats do apparently require effort.

Kyoto's streets are relatively quiet as we set out for Hajime's evening patrol, his 3rd Division marching behind him with the muted swish of their hakama and the dry skritch of their sandals on the dirt marking time. I've heard whispers that the city's criminal element has gone to some great pains to learn Hajime's patrol times and routes so that they might avoid his legendary ruthlessness, and the silence that follows us seems to bear those rumors out. If there are ronin acting up in Kyoto tonight, they're making sure to do it where Hajime Saito can't hear them.

At least that's what I think until we see them: A group of three ronin, poorly dressed and clearly drunk, lounging in front of the sake bar from which they have likely been recently ejected. They leer and catcall the women who walk past, but that seems to be the extent of their misbehavior. We're still a hundred yards or so from them when that changes.

A particularly attractive young girl quickens her pace to move past

them, but before she can the leader's hand snakes out and grabs her by the wrist. She lets out cry of surprise and fright, and the men respond with a trio of grotesque, slimy laughs. They begin to move toward a nearby alley, the girl in tow, but she struggles to get away. The leader's hand tightens on her wrist, and his hand moves toward the knife still sheathed at his waist. He grabs it, draws it, and turns back to the girl to find that his arm now ends where his hand used to be.

I never even saw Hajime move, but his sword is out and bloodied, and a hand lies on the Kyoto dirt. The man turns to him and, as recognition dawns, the color drains from the ronin's face. Whether from blood loss or terror is unclear. His mouth moves, but no sound comes out. Then, gripping his stump, the ronin turns with his companions and runs.

Hajime gestures toward them—no words are needed—and the rest of the 3rd Division breaks into a run, funneling into the alley after the hapless ronin. Captain Saito stays still however. He quietly wipes the blood from his sword, returns it to the scabbard, and then turns to help the stunned young woman to her feet. I can't hear his words from where I am, but as he speaks her look of terror fades. She gives him a wavering smile and I can see a little color rise to her cheeks.

Later, after returning to headquarters, Hajime and I enjoy some tea in the Shinsengumi mansion's common room. When I ask him about the evening's incident, he looks at me with barest hint of a smile—the most emotion I've seen him display all day.

"I did my duty," he says by way of an explanation. "That makes today a good day." ♦