

ONE

28 Shigemoto (Cycle 2284)

Moon 4 (Colored Leaves Falling) - 14th Day

Chaka Isawa awakened in a medical tent, with a bandaged chest and arm. Feeling his long sandy hair gracing his shoulders, he glanced over and saw his brown-laced breastplate and helmet with bandana lay beside him near the cot and his two trusted blades, an ivory-handled golden tachi named Kagesureiyo and his slender blue-steeled blade, an uchigatana named Hitokiri leaned against the armor.

Chaka tried to speak, but could only form voiceless words. Outside the encampment, he heard the roar of battle in the distance, of swords clashing and of horses thundering across the plains. The moderately humid air was thick with the scent of death and Chaka felt ill at ease when he sensed something *else*, an alien otherness that made his skin hairs stand on end.

He wondered if his side was winning the battle against the invaders, a group of devils formerly in control of the Hakukishinoheiya area. His brigade, in charge of holding them back while Clan Champions closed the gate, had many losses yet continued pushing forward, clearing the fields of the demonic threat. Chaka passed on being Clan Champion,

instead becoming an officer to fulfill his dreams of being in charge of a unit.

In the era of the court nobles, mainly commoners set foot on a battlefield and just a handful ever survived. The House in which Chaka belonged produced only Champions trained in the art of destroying demons. Wanting nothing to do with such barbaric practice, Chaka disregarded his former duties and proved he could force unruly foot soldiers into proper fighting men capable of destroying any aggressor that set foot on the Emerald Island, Midorishima.

Originally groomed to become a Clan Champion for his House, Chaka learned the art of the sword and using *kamui* to defeat demons. This holy power was inherent to all people of Midorishima as the gods blessed them; however, those with exceptional skill honed these powers further and fought in the name of the Empress, keeping the devils that threatened the isle at bay.

During his strict training, Chaka kept his personal opinions to himself despite being told that he and others like him were ordained in keeping the delicate balance between the Material World and Oblivion. He was told in no uncertain terms that the honors of battle were few and far between, as demons made swift work of even the best skilled master sword fighters.

Chaka knew demons killed innocents and stole souls from the living - that he understood, yet he always wondered if demons simply committed such atrocities as a way to live. As far as he was concerned, the devils came from the Void, born of hatred from the hearts of men. Punishing the living was part

of their mode of operation since the gods were not able to do so.

Chaka preferred fighting other swordsmen, taking any chance he could to improve his technique. He at times fought other armies in the trenches and sometimes faced the occasional harquebus or field cannon, yet fighting demons seemed never ending. He hoped at least the war would end one day, some day, though it was not any time soon. Watching his companions falling by the dozens, Chaka thought killing others would be small comfort instead of watching devils or disease take people he knew away.

Having no worries about revenge for taking the life of some innocent and having to deal with a vengeful family member starting a new recurrence of violence, he felt some solace that the enemy he faced was someone he did not know. Destroying devils wasn't quite the same as killing humans, but Chaka knew he had to keep fighting on through every battle while his sword arm was still working.

Working for the Imperial Army had better prospects than living in a farming or fishing village. It was either die of disease or hunger - and thousands of people did every cycle in Midorishima - or died trying to stop others from going across the river. The army had some benefit - two meals a day and never without action fighting some new enemy. Campaigns were frequent, as the various demonic gates that littered the islands were difficult to close and soldiers fought the remaining devils that weren't destroyed.

Imperial officers made frequent appearances in various townships, encouraging able-bodied men and women to join

the fight and that going to war was the right thing to do, as a fighter's place in society was to die for the honor of the Empress. There was no real point in applying and there was no choice in wanting to go to war or not, since conscription was mandatory and escaping enlistment meant death when caught.

Convinced that his chance arrived when a gold-emblazoned banner stating an army mobilization order was posted in his village's magistrate's office, Chaka yearned to enter the fray and prove his mettle, wanting desperately to demonstrate he was a force to be reckoned with. He even looked forward to decapitating an enemy general, quickly rising in rank and command his own squadron.

Chaka hated the Imperial officers who found death amusing, watching others below them dying on their account. It hardly affected them, since they were descended from nobility and never really had to dirty their hands with death. They dictated battle from the rear lines safely in their tents, gaining notice of formations and the tide of battle from scouts who kept track of the current conflict. At times, the information came late and the generals made errors, which amounted to more needless loss of lives in the very domain they had sworn to protect.

At the same time, Chaka envied the Imperial officers, who were ignorant fools so rich that they could afford to throw money away by wasting on entertainment, fine wine and delicacies such as sushi that he never had access to. The Imperial officers learned useless arts from Imperial instructors, which such forms would never survive on the

battlefield. Chaka swore to his protector god that if he rose in high enough grade, to grant him a place in the Imperial instructional schools, defeating the masters with his martial power honed by constant deadly combat against soul-hungry devils.

Twenty cycles ago, strong *mahoutsukai*, sorcerers skilled in controlling demons, successfully closed the gates. Yet demonic remnants still combed the lands, struggling to remove the seals and reopen the portals between realms.

Chaka secretly wished the land-plaguing devils would take down those useless officers and let the battle-hardened men and women who knew exactly what went on in the fields take control and put an end to the fighting. For over two-hundred and fifty cycles, the islands were constantly at war.

“Isawa,” a voice called to Chaka, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Chaka immediately stepped out of his cot and stood at attention as an army captain with a cut over her eye and wearing dented crimson armor entered the tent. “Ho, *Bansho* Kurebayashi,” he greeted.

Kurebayashi nodded and Chaka relaxed slightly. “You probably won’t survive the next campaign,” Kurebayashi said grimly. “*Taichou* Kazunao, Shimukita, and Narikore have fallen and we haven’t received word yet of the fates of *Taishou* Uchitsune and Hisamasa.”

“What of their units?”

“They’ve blown like leaves in the wind.” Kurebayashi gestured with her chin toward the outdoors. “If I get injured tomorrow, you’ll have to move on to the next battle. We barely

have one brigade left and I need you to hold out until we gain more reinforcements.”

Chaka nodded and Kurebayashi exited the tent. He then proceeded to pull into his breastplate and tie on his pair of swords. After placing on his bandana and tying on his helmet, Chaka exited the tent, catching sight of the battle below the steppes: a wave of soldiers and their tattered battle flags clashing against a horde of warriors in black and navy armor.

Charging forward from the front line in heavy soaked armor, Chaka sliced into approaching enemy soldiers who kept coming as a wave. Never once shrinking away, he focused his attention to his lightweight one-handed sword Hitokiri, hacking off limbs easily with each swift blow from the slender sharp blade. Above him, low dark clouds shifted ominously across the sky, throwing a torrent of blinding rain that drenched the plains of Chinokaigan.

Chaka's uchigatana clashed with another soldier's katana and he quickly deflected a fast succession of fatal strikes with the seasoned fighter before finally taking off the man's head. Surging forward, Chaka continued fighting and around him, soldiers fell by the dozens, their corpses littering the muddy ground beneath his feet. He felt as if he was the only one fighting and the other allied soldiers from the two regiments that merged with his unit was just dolls holding back the invasion.

The encounter's tide soon turned and battle flags from his allies were everywhere. Others in crimson armor, azure armor, and emerald armor cluttered the blood-soaked grasslands. The

battle stretched on late into the night as the enemy kept coming with renewed strength, as if animated by a sinister force.

Chaka found his blade that at first made considerable damage now no longer cut into the flesh of his opponents. It merely passed through without spraying blood and soldiers in his unit reversed their positions, the offensive now turning for the defense.

The roar of shouting men and clashing swords were suddenly cut by the sharp sound of a blowing conch shell, signaling a rout. Chaka grew enraged at the sound of retreat, continuing his fight despite how numb his body became from the cold hard rains.

Withdrawing his secondary blade, his golden field sword Kagesureiyo cut easily into the revived soldiers and Chaka knew these men were no longer among the living. He had no qualms about sending them across the river to spend eternity in Hell contemplating on their mistake of coming across his path.

A flash of steel cut across Chaka's head, throwing off his helmet. He turned with a whirlwind slash, cutting down more enemy soldiers armed with thick heavy blades that easily busted iron and steel headgear with a strong enough blow.

Sharp pain slammed into Chaka's side and fiery agony ripped into his shoulder. A fierce strike rammed into the back of his head and Chaka fell forward on his face as his world darkened around him immediately.

Awakening some time later, Chaka found himself lying among the thousands of lifeless corpses that surrounded him.

The harsh frigid rains tapered into a heavy drizzle, pattering against the mud and slain bodies their dented armor contained as the wan skies slowly darkened once another evening approached. Chaka noticed one nearby corpse moving and he clenched his teeth, stunned.

“Please let not that soldier be possessed,” he prayed. “I don’t have enough *kamui* to defeat them...”

Chaka struggled to turn over onto his side and his body refused to respond. When he tried raising his head, his world spun crazily from the minute movement. Lying back, Chaka blew a hard sigh, begrudgingly accepting the cloudy dementia that filled his numbed mind.

“Isawa,” a voice barely groaned over the patter of rain. “Are you still here?”

“Yes, I am!” Chaka answered weakly. “Is that you, Kurebayashi?”

“You’d better not die out here, Isawa, or I’ll haunt you for the rest of your days!”

“I don’t plan to, *Bansho!*” Chaka heard the clatter of armor and strained to move his head. He spotted Kurebayashi crawling over with difficulty on her elbows, dragging her legs stiffly behind her. “Are you the only survivor?”

“It seems we’re the only ones left here,” Kurebayashi hissed. “Either the *kamisama* favor you or you’re really lucky...”

“Don’t speak so soon,” Chaka muttered. “Obviously we weren’t strong enough against the *akuma* that still haunt the area.”

“We can still get rid of them! Get up and grab your *Amahagane* blades!”

Chaka blew a hard sigh. “I’ll try, *Bansho*...”

Struggling to sit up, Chaka groaned and fell back, unable to stand. Kurebayashi grunted and withdrew her sword sheath, jamming it into the ground. Leaning against it, she got up on her knees, and then stood unsteadily to her feet. Lending Chaka a hand, Chaka took it, being pulled upright.

Suddenly the ground beneath them began to rumble and Chaka turned, stunned at the sight of lines of cobalt and sable-armored cavalry hurtling in their direction. Kurebayashi tensed and withdrew her sword, a large heavy oversized katana.

“Those bastards returned with devil horses!” the captain exclaimed. “We need to defend this gate, Isawa!”

“What happened to our reinforcements?” Chaka inquired as he quickly searched the ground nearby where he fell, finding nothing that resembled his blades. He snatched up a nearby katana and stood at ready beside Kurebayashi as the approaching whirlwind closed in on them.

“They seemed to have fallen by those hell spawn charging toward us.” Kurebayashi turned to the horde. “Cover my back,” she ordered. “We’ll have to give everything we got!”

“Our souls even, *Bansho*?” Chaka cracked.

“With this *Zanbatou*, I’ll handle the horses. You handle the soldiers.”

“Then it’s a good day to die!”

Kurebayashi grunted and glared ahead at the devilish equestrians and their corrupted steeds that soon drew around them, riding roughshod over the fallen soldiers in the fields. Letting out a battle cry, Kurebayashi attacked violently,

hacking at the horses and riders alike that flew past them, arresting any attack from the soldiers.

With weapons clanging, Kurebayashi immediately dispatched all fighters who neared her, dodging the lethal muddy hooves that nearly trampled her. Chaka treated the devilish riders with fierce wild abandon, taking off heads and arms with swift strokes.

The devils kept coming, seemingly at the hundreds as the evening light dimmed and turned to night. Chaka found it increasingly harder to breathe and his sword arm hurt tremendously. He switched hands, only to have that side sear in pain as well.

After beheading another soldier, the head dropped near Chaka and its helmet crashed against him, slamming against the chest. Chaka staggered back and glanced down, realizing the helmet belonged to the former officer of his unit.

“*Bansho*, these are our men!” Chaka cried. “They’ve been turned into *akuma heishi*!”

Kurebayashi turned toward Chaka, only to get a soldier’s spear piercing her through the back with its end protruding from her chest. Chaka watched in horror as the captain fell without a sound. Growing incensed, Chaka’s energy flared, cackling around the sword he held as the spear fighter circled, coming after him.

“*Yaketsuku Yunahikari!*” Chaka screamed and slammed his blade into the coming lancer aiming at him. A blast of light charged through the soldier and the others that rushed onward to where he was. The demonic fighters immediately turned to ash, ending the onslaught.

Chaka jammed the katana he held into the mud and fell to bended knee, gasping hard for breath. Once the drizzling rains subsided, an eerie quiet surrounded him in the looming darkness.

Chaka looked around the battlefield, noticing the last of the rains washed away the ash and blood, revealing skeletal remains in busted armor. Glancing skyward, Chaka found the clouds breaking and only stars dotting the heavens.

“Lady Shidzuki won’t shine my way this night,” he mused. *“It’ll be dangerous on the road tonight, with patrolling akuma looking for stragglers.”*

Blowing a heavy sigh, Chaka rose shakily to his feet and slowly made his way across the drenched steppes, heading for the wooded hills in the distance.