

Jiraiya didn't want to return to his home village, and he certainly didn't want to start any trouble. But he needed money and the offer was too good to refuse. The mighty samurai had become a shadow of what they once were. A wealth of training and combat experience, only to wind up as bounty hunters, mercenaries, bodyguards, and hired goons. They were some of the ways a warrior could still make a living. It had been years since they fought on the battlefield, but the fighting spirit remained.

Jiraiya changed a lot in the past fifteen years. It only seemed fair that his hometown did too. Tsuwano was a notoriously poor village. Now it was barely recognizable, and that wasn't a bad thing. Buildings that were once tattered had been restored and repainted into a sea of white earthen walls and dark reed roofs, which added colour and vibrance to the evergreen trees and cascading hills that surrounded the area. It was like a weathered tree had been nourished and restored and blossomed into something beautiful.

The main street stretched from one side of the town to the other, in perfect harmony with a natural stream that ran along with it. The town centre, which once hosted the samurai mansions and encampments, was now a thriving marketplace with merchants and businesses on every corner. They sold everything from food, tea, medicine and scented herbs, to fine-art, swords, sculptures, and exotic services. Jiraiya wanted to indulge and experience everything on offer, but he had the discipline and mental fortitude to resist temptation – or so he thought.

‘Samurai,’ shouted a deep-voiced merchant. ‘May I interest you in some fine-art? We have the best in the village.’

‘No thank you,’ said Jiraiya, averting his eyes towards the ground.

‘Come and eat our delicious Unagi!’ shouted another merchant. ‘Nobody can match our quality and prices.’

‘Not now,’ said Jiraiya. His stomach growled in disapproval.

‘What about a mistress for the night?’ said a shady-looking man with a menacing grin. ‘I know the best place in town and can take you there for a small price.’

‘Perhaps later tonight,’ said Jiraiya in a discreet tone.

With too many temptations on offer and not enough time to enjoy them, Jiraiya scurried further down the marketplace, hoping he could escape the busiest area unscathed and stick to the plan. Suddenly, the entrancing smell of high-quality green-tea swept across his nostrils. It was a light, fresh and soothing aroma, with a hint of chestnut. Jiraiya could resist food, art and even sex for the time being – but good tea was hard to come by, and temptation had won him over. He followed the scent to its source like a bee seeking pollen, and it led him to an overcrowded tea shop, which he entered without hesitation.

‘Welcome to Horaido Tea House!’ shouted an enthusiastic young woman standing beside the door. ‘I’m sorry, but we’re a little busy right now and all the seats are full. Please wait for a few minutes. There will be something available soon.’

‘It’s not a problem,’ said Jiraiya, scratching his head.

The woman turned around and walked towards a group of different customers, telling them the same thing.

Jiraiya moved to a less-crowded corner where he could lean against a wall and observe his surroundings. Samurai were trained to be mindful of their environment, no matter where they were or what they were doing. There were people in all shapes and sizes; young and old, rich and poor, fat and skinny. And they were gathered under the same roof, sharing the enjoyment of tea. What a beautiful sentiment, he thought to himself. This place had a real sense of democracy in an otherwise class-ridden society.

Jiraiya noticed a beautiful woman with seductive dark-brown eyes gleaming at him from the distance. She wore a neon-pink robe with a matching ribbon in her hair, which contrasted against her pale skin and dark black hair. But there was also something dark and mysterious about her. She wasn't quiet and reserved like most Japanese women at the time. She was confident and inviting, and her body language was candid. Something seemed a little off.

'She looks at everyone like that,' grunted an old man standing next to him.

A well-groomed man tapped her on the shoulder and discreetly placed a gold coin into her hand. She nodded, and then they walked away together. Jiraiya thought she might have been a prostitute, but now he knew for sure.

'Filthy tramp,' mumbled the old man.

‘She’s doing what she needs to do to survive,’ said Jiraiya.

The old man disdainfully rolled his eyes.

A prostitute normally wouldn’t leave the pleasure quarters and seek business beyond the walls. Men were supposed to seek them out in private. But society was changing, and it seemed to affect everyone – not only the samurai.

Jiraiya looked around the room and noticed a table filled with troublesome-looking men. They were yelling and laughing obnoxiously as if they owned the place. These men had swords strapped to their hips, and strangely, they wore matching blue robes with a unique crest etched into the fabric – which looked familiar. There was also a man sitting among men with the same robe but coloured in red. He had an eye-patch covering his left eye, and a unique-looking sword strapped to his waist. It was obvious they were a gang, and he was the leader. Jiraiya assumed he was more skilled than his subordinates, and maybe even a samurai.

‘Pardon me, sir’ yelled a voice, distracting Jiraiya from his thoughts. It was the enthusiastic young woman from before.

‘We have a seat ready for you. Please follow me,’ said the woman. She led him towards an empty seat on a small table. But one of the blue-robed men noticed Jiraiya and was intrigued with his unique appearance.

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa,’ scoffed the man in the blue robe. He stood up and walked towards Jiraiya. ‘I haven’t seen you around here before. ‘This

is our district. And we don't take kindly to strangers. If you want to sit in this store, you'll need to pay us a small fee.'

Jiraiya wanted to draw his sword and cut off his head. But there was a time and place for that, and the tea shop was neither of them. Although he saw the unique crest on the man's robe from a closer angle and immediately recognized it.

'That's not very fair,' said Jiraiya, with a sneer. 'Not that I would expect any less from the infamous Kogashiwa Clan.'

The entire store went quiet, and the man in the blue-robed turned to his troupe in embarrassment. They were almost as shocked as he was, except for the man in the red robe, who continued sipping his tea. Disrespect was the last thing they anticipated, especially when it was one against five.

'How dare you question me,' said the man in the blue robe, reaching for his sword.

Suddenly, the man in the red robe stopped sipping his tea. In an instant and without hesitation, he stood up and he shattered the cup across his subordinate's face, sending him flying across the room and into a pack of innocent people. Nobody said anything, not even the staff, who helplessly watched on in awe.

'Don't mind this insolent fool,' said the man in the red robe. 'It seems he was unable to realize that you are a samurai.'

Jiraiya was a little shocked this man attacked his subordinate, but he was more impressed with the speed, balance and refinement of the attack. It was obvious this man was a samurai and a skilled one at that.

‘Please, sit down and enjoy some tea,’ said the man in the red robe. ‘I will cover the costs. It would be disrespectful for you to decline.’

‘Thank you, kindly,’ said Jiraiya, tipping his straw hat towards him.

‘My pleasure,’ said the man in the red robe.

Although it was a polite exchange, it was a façade. There was tension and suspicion between them, and both men made quick and subtle observations to deduce who the other was and what they were capable of.

The man in the red robe had exceptional balance and a strong foundation - like his legs were rooted into the ground. But he was also light and nimble. The main weakness he had was not being able to see out of his left eye, meaning he would be more susceptible to attacks from that side. But it was too obvious of a weakness, and the chances are he would expect an attack from that side.

‘I mean no disrespect,’ said the man in the red robe. ‘But once you finish the tea, could you go about your business quickly and without any trouble?’

‘I’m afraid I cannot do that,’ said Jiraiya, apologetically.

The man in the red robe raised his eye-brow. It was the first time he showed any emotion whatsoever.

‘It’s unfortunate,’ said Jiraiya. ‘But my business here coincides with trouble.’

The man in the red robe remained calm and composed but was noticeably more cautious and guarded than before.

‘I was worried you might say that,’ said the man in the red robe. ‘And may I ask what that trouble might be?’

Jiraiya reached into his pocket, took out the small scroll, and placed it on the table. It was the same emblem like the one on his robe. And oddly, the man in the red robe wasn’t surprised.

‘I see,’ said the man in the red robe. ‘So, you are a wandering samurai seeking to claim the bounty on Hideo Kogashiwa?’

‘That is correct,’ said Jiraiya. ‘But I am after him and him alone.’

‘It just so happens that he is my employer,’ said the man in the red robe.

‘That’s unfortunate,’ said Jiraiya, scratching his chin.

The atmosphere was becoming tenser by the second. People in the tea-shop started to understand what was about to happen. Most scurried out as quickly as they could. But a few lingered around, hoping to see a spectacle.

The man in the red robe signalled towards his subordinates, and they immediately stood up and positioned themselves around Jiraiya.

‘What is your name?’ asked the man in the red robe.

‘Jiraiya Uzumaki,’ said Jiraiya. ‘And what about you?’

‘Kazuya Saito,’ said the man in the red robe. ‘And it will be the last name you ever hear.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure about that,’ said Jiraiya.

‘It’s a shameful path for a samurai to become a bounty hunter,’ said Kazuya.

‘Perhaps,’ replied Jiraiya. ‘But it’s more shameful to protect a spineless leader who extorts peasants for his benefit.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Kazuya. ‘But it all comes down to perspective. The way I see it, I’m killing dishonourable samurai - and the job pays well.’ He raised his hand, showing off the gold rings on his fingers.

‘It’s more honourable to slay an evil man than to work for him,’ said Jiraiya. ‘That’s the way I see it.’

‘But killing him will only to benefit another evil man,’ said Kazuya. ‘Is it any different?’

‘I’m not killing him entirely for the money,’ said Jiraiya. ‘I’m also killing him for the greater good.’

The man in the red robe heard enough. He ordered his men to attack, and they rushed towards Jiraiya in a synchronized assault. But their movements were too slow and predictable. Jiraiya unsheathed his sword and attacked three times in quick succession. The first strike hit an attacker across the shoulder. The second deeply cut into the arm of another, and the third and final slash struck the side of the remaining

man's torso. It happened so fast, nobody had a chance to react. They fell to the floor writhing in pain.

Kazuya saw an opening and made a move, leaping in the air with his sword raised above his head, and swinging down with all his might. But Jiraiya nonchalantly stepped out of the way.

'Impressive,' said Jiraiya, 'A samurai's first attack is always swift and calculated. It seems you haven't lost your touch.'

Kazuya launched another attack. This time he kept his feet on the ground and slashed horizontally. Jiraiya managed to evade it in time, but the force unsettled his balance and he almost lost his footing. Kazuya noticed and immediately attacked again, and again, and again. He managed to knock the straw hat off Jiraiya's head but failed to land a successful strike.

'It seems you're an expert at evasion,' said Kazuya. 'But you cannot defeat me without drawing your sword.'

'You wouldn't want that,' said Jiraiya. 'The battle would be over too soon.'

'Such arrogance!' yelled Kazuya, with a furious scowl. Jiraiya's words seemed to have struck a chord.

Kazuya raised his sword above his head and lunged forward once again. Somehow, he was faster than before. Jiraiya couldn't dodge it in time and drew his sword to block the attack. Kazuya continued attacking with a relentless flurry, slashing and swiping from left to right, and back,

and back again. Jiraiya managed to block each strike, but it wasn't as easy as he'd like to admit.

Sensing his opponent expended a lot of energy and needed a few seconds to recover, Jiraiya launched his counter-attack. Although it made sense to exploit Kazuya's blind spot, it was far too predictable. Instead, Jiraiya stabbed his sword directly towards Kazuya's good eye. The attack was lightning-fast and caught Kazuya off-guard, but he managed to narrowly avoid it in time. Jiraiya didn't stop moving and repositioned himself on the left-side of Kazuya's body – the side that he couldn't see. Kazuya panicked and turned as fast as he could, but it wasn't fast enough. Jiraiya drew a smaller hidden blade with his left hand and wounded Kazuya's arm, disarming him in the process. In the same motion, he pirouetted around and pressed his main sword against Kazuya's throat, stopping before he made contact. Debilitated and no longer able to use his good arm, Kazuya conceded. The battle was over.

'You've bested me,' he said, bowing his head in shame. 'You never intended to land that first strike, did you?'

'It was a distraction,' said Jiraiya. 'A form of misdirection that allowed me to reposition myself on your vulnerable side.'

'Clever,' said Kazuya, turning his attention towards his subordinates, who were still alive but in a world of pain. 'And you managed to defeat us all without fatally wounding any.'

'Tell me where I can find Hideo Kogashiwa,' said Jiraiya.

‘I will only tell you if you promise to give me a warrior’s death,’
said Kazuya.

Jiraiya hesitantly nodded.

‘Follow the stream and you will find Kogashiwa’s gambling den,’
said Kazuya. ‘It will be heavily guarded. But you shouldn’t have any
issues.’

‘Thank you,’ said Jiraiya.

‘I never really liked Hideo Kogashiwa all that much,’ said Kazuya. ‘I
wanted to kill him myself a few times.’

‘Why didn’t you?’ said Jiraiya.

‘Because I needed a roof over my head,’ said Kazuya. ‘And working
for him gave me that, as well as some other nice things. I had more food,
gold and women in the past year than I ever had in my life.’

‘But you had less honour,’ said Jiraiya.

Kazuya looked towards the ground in shame. He couldn’t hold back
a tear or two as he tried to mask his emotion.

‘Make it a quick death,’ said Kazuya, closing his eyes. He took a
deep breath, ready to embrace his fate. But Jiraiya withdrew his sword
and headed for the door.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ yelled Kazuya, shaking his fist in
the air. ‘I am ready to accept my death, and you choose to leave me here
in shame?’

‘The only man who will die to my sword is Hideo Kogashiwa,’ said Jiraiya. ‘I don’t want you to accept your death. I want you to accept your life.’

‘What are you saying?’ beckoned Kazuya, with a confused look on his face.

‘Samurai are no longer needed in this world,’ said Jiraiya. ‘But we are still humans, and the world needs strong humans to protect the weak. That is the path I have chosen for myself, and you can do the same.’

‘But I have brought dishonour upon myself and the samurai code,’ said Kazuya. ‘I deserve to die.’

‘You are a samurai who has lost his way,’ said Jiraiya. ‘But you are a samurai at heart, and that will never change.’

‘I understand,’ said Kazuya, collecting his sword from the ground and placing it back in the sheathe. ‘It was an honour meeting you, Jiraiya Uzumaki. I will remember the name.’

‘I will remember yours too, Kazuya Saito,’ said Jiraiya. ‘Perhaps next time we meet, we can be allies.’

Jiraiya walked out the door and headed towards a crowd of curious onlookers. Some were frightened and angered. Others were inspired and captivated with what happened. Nobody knew where the samurai stood anymore, or what they represented. Not even the samurai themselves

Jiraiya approached the young woman who tried to escort him to the seat before all hell broke loose.

‘My deepest apologies,’ said Jiraiya. ‘I didn’t get the chance to enjoy the tea, and I made a terrible mess. Please accept this to cover the cost of the damages.’ He reached into his pocket and handed her a small pouch filled with gold coins.

‘T – Thank you,’ said the woman. ‘Those men have been coming here and taking a quarter of our earnings for quite some time.’

‘I don’t think they will bother you anymore,’ said Jiraiya.

‘My name is Asami, and you’re welcome to come back anytime,’ said the woman.

Jiraiya bowed his head gracefully. The satisfaction of helping people in need was better than even his most celebrated victories on the battlefield. But there was a lot more he still had to do.

The samurai believed the most important thing in life was the purpose of the present moment, and a man’s life was a succession of moments. And right now, Jiraiya’s purpose was to restore peace and balance to the village.