

48 Hours 541

Chapter 541 I'm Happy When You Are Happy

The thickness of the old man's face went way beyond what Zhang Heng imagined. After the rescue team arrived to deliver the gasoline, he offered to let Zhang Heng and head back with him.

"The high-speed rail will only be completed by the end of the year. You can either go back by ordinary train or long-distance bus. Besides, after that, you still have to travel some distance before you can get to the train station. I don't think you can any cabs at this hour. We should go back together. Besides, I can keep you company as well."

Zhang Heng thought for a while before finally agreeing to the old man's proposal. He hopped into the driver's seat and the old man sat beside him. Zhang Heng started the car, and the Volvo's engine hummed to life. After twenty minutes, the two finally got out of the grasslands. Since the rescue team only brought them two small barrels of fuel, Zhang Heng drove to the nearest gas station to fill up the tank.

The old man in the Tang suit took the opportunity to sneak into the small supermarket at the gas station and bought a large bag of snacks, half of which were sweets of all kinds. After getting into the car, he tore open a pack of marshmallows and handed a box of egg yolk pie and a pack of braised eggs to Zhang Heng.

"Hey, it's almost dawn. Let's have some breakfast before driving."

Zhang Heng was browsing through the latest news in the player forum. The battle in the urban village had ended, but the outcome was not known for the time being. The Arc of Light blocked the news, and no statement was made. Other than that, Shen Xixi had not logged into the forum since midnight. Players hanging out on the forum were now waiting anxiously to acquire the latest updates of the battle. Other than that, many posts were discussing him on the forum. Zhang Heng took a quick look at it and turned off his laptop. He then started to devour the egg-yolk pie.

He had fought several battles in a row and was now famished.

The old man in the Tang suit looked at Zhang Heng. "Are you still angry with me for pulling you out of the battle?"

"Should I?" Zhang Heng asked, expressionless, as he finished the last bites of the pie and threw away the wrapping.

"To be honest, I don't like Justitia either. Roman mythology is like a pot of chowder. The folks pour everything into it and stir constantly. It looks good from the outside, but it might not taste as good in the mouth. They tend to mix up mythologies of the east and the west, even incorporating Greek and Egyptian mythology with folk religion. But you have to admit; they did a good job once. Now, most of them have fallen from grace. Justitia is lucky. She tied herself to the law. Nowadays, nobody believes in gods and monsters anymore. They are more willing to believe in the law." The old man babbled on as the Volvo pulled away from the gas station. In the rearview mirror, the staff on duty at the gas station walked back to the duty room with a yawn. "Let's not talk about these frustrating things."

The old man finished his marshmallows, then tore open a pack of popping candy. He stuck out his tongue, pouring in a landslide of sweets. His eyes closed as he took in the sweetness.

“How’ve you been doing recently? Is everything good? We haven’t met for a while. You should have completed seven games by now, right? Are you satisfied with the little gift that I gave you?” “What is this? User-feedback survey?”

“I can understand.” The old man smiled as he waved the popping candy. “I am different from deities like Justitia, who abuses her agent when she has nothing else better to do. I will always take care of my partner’s well-being. When you are happy, I’m happy. After all, I have invested everything I have in you. Like the old saying goes, don’t mess with a gambler who is already losing.”

Zhang Heng made no comments. If it was a few months ago, Zhang Heng might have still believed what he said. After the Greenland incident, however, he no longer thought that the old man approached him with the sole purpose of making him beat the game.

The old man continued, “Actually, I came here deliberately to look for you. You should already know that the proxy war is about to begin.” Zhang Heng first heard of the proxy war from Mr. Coffee, and then he also asked the bartender lady about this question. However, he only managed to acquire some ambiguous descriptions about it. Now the old man was here for this matter. It seemed like the proxy war was vital for him.

“Proxy war was somewhat similar to what you have experienced in thee games. It is still considered a quest, but it will be more dangerous. Not only do threats come from the quest itself, but also your competitors. As its name suggests, the proxy war only involves only the agents. Of course, your former teammates can continue to team up with you as an apostle—Don’t underestimate the apostles—If you can lead them well, they can become a mighty force. After all, many players have skills that equal the agents, and it’s only because of affiliation or better choices that caused the deity to give up on them. Of course, if you like to fight alone, that’s up to you as well. The gift to you is still valid.” After eating the popping candy, the old man finally stopped talking for a while.

“Other than that, I have to remind you of something. When we first met, I warned you to be careful of other agents. Some of them will use every means necessary to get rid of their competitors in the real world. Especially after tonight’s events, you are now famous among the players. Fortunately, other than Justitia, no one can recognize you. Just be careful not to run into her again. If you have the time, you can also kill the players you don’t like. I have to say that you are very decisive tonight.”

“Just paying back the favor,” Zhang Heng replied nonchalantly.

“Yea, yea, whatever you say,” the old man shrugged, “I know you don’t trust me fully, but it doesn’t matter. One day, you will realize who cares about you... Finally, you have to remember that I am your solid backup. No matter what happens in the future, you can always ask me for help. Tsk, if you want, you can write the sentence in a notebook. Okay, I’ve said what I wanted to say. We can relax now. The journey is still long. What song do you want to listen to?”

The old man in the Tang suit turned on the stereo. “I remember there was a song called ‘Learning how to Meow.’ Have you heard it before? It’s trendy! “Seaweed Dance” is quite good as well. Earlier, I saw a female streamer on TikTok, and I have to say that her body is nothing short of a masterpiece created by

God himself. I'm not sure if she used filters while she was recording the clip, which is why I'm planning to get her contact and ask her about it..

Chapter 542 Presumption

After Zhang Heng returned to school, he sent Shen Xixi a WeChat message to make sure she was safe.

Shen Xixi replied with a "Negotiating" after a quarter of an hour. "Thank you, don't worry," she added after a pause.

Zhang Heng knew that Shen Xixi was no longer in danger but he didn't know what her discussion with Arc of Light was all about. With her personality, it was obviously impossible to make her hand over her people to them just like that. Otherwise, the war wouldn't have even happened in the first place.

Zhang Heng was wrong this time. Shen Xixi and Arc of Light had completed negotiations quicker than expected. Before the war even began, Arc of Light have achieved its goal. After the union's collapse, they no longer cared about the four "murderers," the excuse they used to start the war. They had to make sure that they put a good ending to the show, on the surface at least.

Zhang Heng killed heaps of enemies last night. He intended increase the price that Arc of Light had to pay-everything he had done was to force Arc of Light and Eryue Weichang to sit down and negotiate with Shen Xixi. Amid the war, he crossed paths with Justitia, and amid the battle, the old man in the Tang suit pulled him to a random grassland. But since Justitia started the war between the union and the Arc of Light, she should also clean up the mess after that.

Zhang Heng was right. The ending, however, wasn't something Justitia expected. "You don't want to be my agent? But last night, you mentioned The Scales of Justice, proof that you and I chose the same path," Justitia frowned, "Don't you want to expand and spread this path to others? The reason why you formed the union was to help more ordinary people, right? Together, not only can we rebuild it, but we can also expel evil and rekindle the torch of justice!"

"Do you want to light the torch of justice, or do you want more people to worship you?" Shen Xixi asked calmly. "You want me to be your agent just to help you win this game." "Is there any difference between the two?" Justitia's frown got deeper. "If more people believe in justice, more of them will fight for justice! I have countless lawyers and judges working with me, but I didn't choose any of them as my agent. I chose you because I see myself within you."

Shen Xixi shook her head. "You are wrong. We believe in justice itself, not you. Even if you are gone one day, justice will still be here."

Those words threw Justitia into silence. After a while, she looked up. "Let's put my matter aside first. The final reward for this game is amazing. It's great that even the gods are jealous. No one can refuse how tempting this is. Only players chosen as agents will be eligible to participate in the final game. I really need you to help me win this round, and you need me to appoint you as an agent." Shen Xixi remained unmoved. "If you have been observing me for that long as you have claimed, you should know that I never care about rewards."

"No, you can make good use of that reward. Even if it's not for yourself," said Justitia with adamance, but after a short pause, there was a smile on her face. Cronos thought I didn't know he was the one who

saved the kid, right before my Sword of Judgement landed on him. He looks down, patronizes me... by the way, I haven't seen him for half a year, and it seems he's getting weaker and weaker. He was still forced to use his time-stopping skill to rescue that kid, though. This shows that an unprecedented evil must be hidden in that child! Interesting. I couldn't feel the existence of evil at all when I spoke to that kid. Why did Cronos, the god of time, choose him as his agent?" Justitia muttered to herself.

After a while, she looked at Shen Xixi again, "Anyway, the kid came last night. He risked his life to fight Arc of Light for you. He should be your friend, right? In that case, can you bear to watch evil swallow him one day? And now, you have an opportunity to save him right in front of you."

Shen Xixi raised her eyebrows, this time, seemingly moved.

Zhang Heng had gone through numerous battles tonight. He drove from the grasslands for the whole night back to his city. And he did not expect that he actually made it in time to attend the accounting principles class at 9:45 in the morning. Having no time to wash up, he rinsed his mouth quickly, headed to the cafeteria for some steamed buns, and walked into the classroom half a minute before class started.

The bell rang right after he sat down, and Chen Huadong, who had already occupied the golden seat at the third row at the back by the window, gave him a thumbs-up, an indication he admired Zhang Heng's guts to enter class right on time. Zhang Heng then quickly walked to Chen Huadong and sat beside him. The latter moved the book on the seat and whispered in a low voice.

"I thought you are not coming. Everyone said that you were sitting on Han Lu's thigh, and you have disregarded your credits."

On the other hand, Wei Jiangyang shook his head and said, "After experiencing the previous Level 6 incident, I think the young master, Zhang Heng, just doesn't want his usual grades anymore. Anyway, with his wittiness and knowledge, as long as he gets more than 90 points in the final exam, he can still proceed with his study."

The accounting lecturer coughed twice, and he glared at them with hawk's eyes. The two students stopped talking immediately. After they made sure that the teacher forgot about them, one started to look at an NBA match, and the other used his mobile phone to read light novels.

Zhang Heng opened the textbook in front of him, but his thoughts weren't on it. He noticed that the old man in the Tang suit was still pretending to be innocent. However, he looked much older than when he met him last time. In just six months, he already had more wrinkles on his face and grey hair on his head, but he was still in good spirits, even hooking up with the female streamer on TikTok. When he bid farewell, Zhang Heng noticed that his back was now a lot more hunched than the last time they met.

Zhang Heng didn't know what he had gone through during that period, but it was obvious he wasn't in good health. Zhang Heng was reminded of the weak ancient Celtic god he encountered in the Black Sail dungeon and now knew that even deities would die, be forgotten, or even getting killed. However, the difference was that Zhang Heng did not think that the old man in the Tang suit would allow himself to be forgotten by others. There was no doubt that he'd been executing some plan all along. Zhang Heng did not know his role in this plan and what role he'd play in the future. Would the two become enemies eventually?

Chapter 543 Set Item?

The war between the union and the Arc of Light started without warning and ended just as abruptly. However, everything was settled now. Arc of Light announced that it had reached a settlement with the union and promised to stop hunting for the four murderers. Everyone knew how they had managed to bring the union down, and even if Shen Xixi managed to keep the four ‘murderers’ alive, the union couldn’t return to its previous state. Arc of Light was clearly the winner in this war, and the union, the obvious loser.

The union was now less than a tenth of its original size and dominated by independent player groups. The large and small guilds working with the union had left before midnight and were too embarrassed to ask to rejoin. After the war, everyone was well aware of Arc of Light’s goal—they would not allow anyone to form the third-largest faction or union in this city. Hence, no one in their right mind would go against their will.

Zhang Heng met Shen Xixi in the cafeteria that night. She sat in the corner alone, eating a bowl of barbecued-meat rice. Thanks to the rumors, no one would eat with her anymore. Even her own dorm’s residents refused to befriend her, where everyone deliberately avoided her. It was as if she was carrying some kind of plague.

Shen Xixi, however, took it all in lightly. After all, there were too many things that required her attention. This wasn’t the time to spend energy on such trivial matters. She ate and read a book at the same time, her face showing not the slightest concern.

Suddenly, a plate was placed opposite her. Shen Xixi looked a little surprised. She raised her head to see that the person was Zhang Heng. “Are you reading a book about self-cultivation?” Zhang Heng pointed to the book she was reading.

“Yeah! I’ve been missing out a lot, and I read it when I’ve got the time,” said Shen Xixi, adding, “This game will end one day, and we will return to normal life, right?”

“I hope so,” Zhang Heng looked at Shen Xixi and signaled with his eyes to ask if he could sit facing her.

She nodded.

“If and when this matter comes to an end, what do you want to do after graduation?”

“Me?”

It was rare to see a spot of embarrassment on Shen Xixi’s face. “I... want to open a pet store. It’s a dream I’ve had since I was ten. I’ve told nobody about it, not even Rabbit or Li Bai. You are the first to know. Remember to visit my shop when my dream comes true.”

“Definitely. Inform me when your pet shop is open for business.”

“What about you?” Shen Xixi asked after a sip of her millet porridge.

“I don’t know, I have never thought about these. The old me wanted to live life according to the way he likes... Nothing has changed. Maybe I will go on a trip first. There are so many places in the world that we haven’t been to and the life we’ve never seen before. I wish I could experience it all if possible.”

Zhang Heng said.

“I wish you a smooth journey in advance then.” Shen Xixi picked up the bowl of millet porridge.

“I also wish your pet shop a prosperous business,” responded Zhang Heng as he picked his bowl of seaweed soup.

The two did not talk too much about the game because it was a public place, after all. All kinds of people would pass them from time to time. Nobody would understand or believe what they had been through so far.

Five minutes later, Shen Xixi finished the barbecued-meat rice in the bowl, wiped her mouth, and looked at Zhang Heng. Zhang Heng has almost finished his food as well. Maybe he had been with Holmes for too long, that his eating speed had slowed down a lot since finishing the last game. Quote from Sherlock Holmes—This was the way a gentleman should be eating. It was actually not that bad. Eating slowly enable the person to chew the food more thoroughly and made it easier to digest. And now Zhang Heng has developed a rhythm in eating. Shen Xixi saw the way Zhang Heng ate, and she was fascinated by it. Secretly, she hoped that he could eat a little longer.

It was not until Zhang Heng put down the chopsticks that Shen Xixi realized that she had been staring at him for some time. Suddenly, she felt embarrassed to ask the questions that she wanted to ask.

After that, Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows at Shen Xixi, “I have finished eating, and there is still an elective course that I have to attend in the evening. I will take off. Take care!”

“You too.” Shen Xixi watched Zhang Heng stood up and walked to the counter to return his food tray. She had indeed suspected that the mysterious sniper who caused a lot of trouble to Arc of Light last night was Zhang Heng. After forming the union, she had made a lot of friends. However, none of them was outstanding in marksmanship and close-quarters combat. Zhang Heng’s strength had always been a mystery to her. Shen Xixi and Zhang Heng had not been through the same quest together. The only time when they worked together was during Han Lu’s case, where they entered her dream to end the Dreamland of Death’s curse.

However, the situation was quite special at that time. After entering the dream state, everyone was separated. Zhang Heng was with Hypnos, and in the end, Shen Xixi did not know why Hypnos gave up and left. It must have had something to do with Zhang Heng-In other words, among so many players, only Zhang Heng had successfully solved the Dreamland of Death’s curse. Not even the three major guilds could deal with it.

However, Shen Xixi was a little shaken during the meal just now. Justitia mentioned that the mysterious sniper had unimaginable evil in his body. After knowing Zhang Heng for so long, she was sure that Zhang Heng might not do everything out of justice. However, the latter did have its own rules of conduct, with a bottom line and principles, far from evil.

Therefore, Shen Xixi decided not to ask him about it and watched him leave instead.

Since the time between afternoon and evening class wasn’t long, so Zhang Heng went directly to the classroom after eating. He did not want to tell Shen Xixi that he was the mysterious sniper last night. Firstly, he did not do it to her gratitude. Secondly, his plan was executed halfway through and was interrupted by the old man. Technically speaking, he did not help much. Hence, it did not matter to him whether Shen Xixi knew about it.

After evening class was over, Zhang Heng ran to the parking lot outside the school and opened his Polo's trunk. He risked his life to help Shen Xixi and the union to go against Arc of Light, working hard through night, but it wasn't without gain. During that time, he killed several of Arc of Light's assault team and collected some game items.

Since he was in the real world, he did not receive any notification from the system. Hence, he did not know whether the items that he took from them was game item. Besides, the Arc of light did not leave him too much time to take care of his enemies. Hence, he must end the fight as fast as possible. And he could only make use of his experience to collect those game items.

But there was one thing that Zhang Heng sure of. The necklace pattern that he acquired from the man with wings was very familiar to Zhang Heng's Shadow Moment. The crow's image, coupled with the Shadow Key that he had, these three things were obviously from the same set of items that remind Zhang Heng of the concept of set items in this game. Now, he just needed to figure out how to put these three things together.

Chapter 544 Katana Hunting

It would be better to hand over the matter to the professionals.

Zhang Heng took photos of the three items one by one and sent them to the bartender.

About a quarter of an hour later, he received a reply.

[Interesting, have you found the three items needed for this set?]

Instead of answering the questions, Zhang Heng asked rhetorically, (Will I receive a massive boost if I put them together?)

(A boost? Oh... You are talking about the set effect. No. No. No. That's now how it works. After you gather all the necessary parts, pass a test and you will be able to inherit part of the original owner's power from it.)

[A power similar to an agent?]

[Similar abilities as an agent, and you are not required to sign any contract. It will be considered as your ability. Such items are very rare and can only be used when they are all collected. At the same time, once you used the set items, they will be rendered useless. So, I personally suggest that you use up the remaining uses before combining them. As for how much power you can get, it depends on the affinity between you and the original owner.] The bartender explained everything to Zhang Heng patiently. (I remember I appraised Shadow Moment for you. There should be four items in this set. You need one more item to complete it. Once you collect it all, come to me and spend a hundred points. I can help you activate the set's effect.)

After Zhang Heng contacted the bartender, he called Ding Si from Fulou and asked for his help to keep an eye on the fourth item's whereabouts and inform that his Portable Mighty River Crab had been sold for 122 game points. After deducting the 2% handling fee, Zhang Heng could get 120 points.

The remaining items in the trunk were challenging to deal with. If Zhang Heng sent them all for identification, it would cost him a great fortune. Besides, it wasn't like he could sell game items acquired from Arc of Light through legal channels.

After the end of last night's war, Arc of Light shook hands with the union. Nonetheless, they did not give up finding the mysterious sniper, mainly because Zhang Heng had killed many of their players. Other than that, three Seven Lords of the Sea level master-players had also been taken out by Zhang Heng, an incident Arc wouldn't be forgetting anytime soon.

Earlier, they had put up a reward on the forum, soliciting the whereabouts and related information of the mysterious sniper. If anybody managed to capture him, Arc of Light would give out a Grade-C game item as a reward. Many players on the forum were eager to try their luck, but after they witnessed Zhang Heng's true strength, a vast majority decided against it. Besides, one Grade-C game item was not nearly attractive enough to a master player.

Arc of Light would definitely not distribute highly practical Grade-C items like an Escape Dagger for the reward. In fact, there was a good chance it would turn out to be something useless. So, for now, Zhang Heng was still safe. Meanwhile, the rest of the game items obtained from Arc of Light would have to be kept in the trunk for a while.

After a few moments, Zhang Heng received a new message.

(I have come up with a solution to our problem.)

The sender of the message was Scarlet.

[Do enlighten me.] [If I can find another decent katana for you, will you return my broken one?

(Where is the katana now?)

Zhang Heng wasn't like Scarlet. He didn't have specific requirements when it came to choosing a katana. If there was one of similar quality, he wouldn't insist on holding on to the Mikazuki Munechika. Of course, he had to look at the new katana before any decisions could be made.

[It's is not with me now.]

Scarlet paused and continued,

[I am afraid that you will have to get it yourself, or more precisely, I'm allowing you to get the sword.]

Scarlet was worried that Zhang Heng might not have understood her. So, she explained the whole thing again. [I have a game item that allows me to spawn a special quest after using it. Only one person is allowed to complete this quest. It is like a knife mound. You can pick a katana from the quest and bring it back to reality.]

Zhang Heng was no stranger to such special quests. His Infinite Building Block was obtained from one of those, and after listening to Scarlet's explanation, it seemed this was different from Fan Meinan's Lego quest.

[A player can only enter once?]

Zhang Heng asked.

[Yes, otherwise, I would have gone in again and tried to get you a new katana.]

Scarlet continued typing,

[And I must tell you in advance-I can't guarantee that the katana you bring out from the quest will be of the same quality as the Mikazuki Munechika. But you can rest assured that all katana in the quest are well-known swords in history, and you will quickly recognize them. However, getting your hands on them won't be easy.)

(How difficult would it be?)

(This item can only be used three times. My friend and I each entered once, so there are only one attempt remains. What I experienced was a quest called 'Eiroku no Hen.' Rebels surrounded Ashikaga Yoshiteru's mansion, and I protected his mother and wife. For that, I got this Mikazuki Munechika as a reward. My friend, on the other hand, experienced was a quest related to Masaru Demon Sword Village. She failed to complete the quest, and in the end, she only managed to bring out a Grade-E katana...

Scarlet paused again.

[...the following are just conjectures and are not necessarily accurate. When we choose our katana, it chooses us as well. But beware. Everyone using this item receives different quests that are tailored specifically for you. There will be a katana that suits you best, but all lies in your ability, whether you can acquire it or not. Other than that, these quests have another advantage, and that is you can improve your skills on the katana. Ashikaga Yoshiteru is a very famous katana master in Japan. I stayed with him for fifteen days, but my techniques while wielding the sword improved a lot.

Zhang Heng's reply was quick this time, leaving Scarlet a little surprised.

[I agree to the deal.]

Discounting standing a chance to get a famous sword with the same quality as the Mikazuki Munechika, the fact that he could improve his katana technique was enough to make Zhang Heng accept the deal. He had spent ten years in the Black Sail quest to improve his swordsmanship skill to Lv.3. Daily practice was no longer enough to upgrade to another level. He, however, had not given up the possibility of further improvement. If what Scarlet said was true, then this was an excellent opportunity for him to achieve his goal-Not to mention he had the extra hours, allowing him to stay longer in the dungeons. Scarlet was still concerned that Zhang Heng did not understand the trading conditions, yet again, she reminded him.

(Let me tell you the truth here: The game item itself is very valuable. Whether you get an excellent katana or not after you use my game item, you'll have to return the upper half of the Mikazuki Munechika to me. Of course, it shouldn't be a problem for you to complete the quest.) [I'm fine with that.]

Zhang Heng chirped.

(Before that, though, I need to make sure this ain't a trap.)

Chapter 545 Bakumatsu Kyoto

Zhang Heng and Scarlet agreed to meet at the checkpoint where both their identities would be revealed. It was a safe zone, so neither had to worry about being ambushed.

Zhang Heng used his Oath Ring to authenticate Scarlet's words, then exchanged the upper part of the Mikazuki Munechika for Scarlet's scabbard.

Scarlet checked the hilt she received to confirm that it was genuine before slipping it into its satchel. She then instructed Zhang Heng on how to use the scabbard. "Cut the flesh of your palm and let your blood drip onto it, about two milliliters. After three minutes, you will find yourself in the special quest."

The transaction was complete, at this point, and eager to reforge her Mikazuki Munechika, Scarlet didn't linger around the checkpoint, leaving hastily after a handshake with Zhang Heng.

Both enemies in the Whistleblower quest, Scarlet attacked Zhang Heng on the Dodge Tomahawk, and Zhang Heng almost killed Scarlet in the subsequent fight. But their few meetings outside the game had been pretty pleasant. Scarlet even said that if given another opportunity, she would work with him again.

After Scarlet left, Zhang Heng checked his watch. It was forty minutes to midnight, and since he wasn't in a hurry, he ordered a drink and asked the bartender for a knife. Five minutes to midnight, he cut his left palm and let some blood drip into the scabbard.

When the blood looked to be enough, Zhang Heng wrapped the cut on his hand with some gauze.

Two minutes later, that familiar dizziness struck, and he could hear the system prompts in his ear.

[Verifying player's identity]

Verification complete. Player 07958 has the scabbard in possession. Connecting player to the quest...

[Extraction completed—Your quest is Bakumatsu Kyoto (Special Edition)]

"The Battle of Sekigahara in 1600 paved the way for the Edo period. The Tokugawa clan ruled the country and instituted a policy isolating the country for more than two hundred years. At the end of the Shogunate, finances were tight, exploitation was rising, commoners could no longer stand the oppression, and riots became rampant. During the Black Ship incident, an East India Company's warship had broken through the country's gates with artillery, forcing the Shogunate to sign a series of unfair treaties, forfeiting their sovereignty and humiliating the country. This infuriated the locals. With internal and external troubles on the rise, the philosophy "Revere the Emperor, expel the barbarians" became the slogan that kickstarted the movement to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate. The rebellion was led by Satsuma and Choshu provinces, where a secret meeting took place in Kyoto—leaders conspired to launch a coup against Tokugawa Yoshinobu, leaving the country in a precarious state...

This game will not be included in your stats, and you will be unable to reenter the quest once you exit."

[Mission Objective: Find the sword]

[Mode: Single-player]

[Time flow rate: 240] (One hour in the real world is equivalent to 10 days in this quest. The quest ends in 30 days. Players can terminate the game at any time and return to the real world)

Friendly reminder: the game will begin in 5 seconds. Players, ready yourselves!

Unlike previous quests, before Zhang Heng entered this one, Scarlet had given him a treasure trove of information, and he could prepare well ahead of time. He spent one night (plus the extra twenty hours) skimming through Japan's history and had become relatively familiar with the Bakumatsu period.

If memory served him right, the Black Ship or Kurofune incident took place in 1854. By 1865, Saigo Takamori and Okubo Toshimichi of the Satsuma Domain had taken over. In 1867, Emperor Takamori, who suppressed the movement, passed away. Emperor Meiji, who was only fourteen at the time, succeeded the throne. Meiji sided with the movement.

That year was also probably Kyoto's most tumultuous period. In fact, most daimyopowerful Japanese feudal lords—took the wait-and-see approach. It wasn't until the Toba Fushimi battle the following year that the Satsuma Rebellion took complete control of Gyeonggi-do and gained the majority's support.

During the subsequent Meiji Restoration, Japan underwent rapid advancement, making it the first country in Asia to embark on industrialization. In contrast, China, which had been in contact with the West, was still under the rule of the Qing dynasty. After the Opium War, the semi-colonial and semi-feudal countries continued to decline. Although Lin Zexu, Wei Yuan, and their likes, whose eyes were opened to the world, worked hard to promote reforms, they struggled under the existing system. The irony was that Wei Yuan compiled the "Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms" in hopes that his compatriots would be able to recognize a world-renowned force. To his surprise, the book sold poorly in China-Qing Dynasty scholars were probably busy memorizing stereotypes at that time. Consequently, the publishing house lost a lot of money. An ocean away, in Japan, the book sold out and had dozens of reprints.

In addition, after the Meiji Restoration, the military, especially the navy, became increasingly powerful, and Japan began embarking on a path of brutal expansion. Most people were already familiar with subsequent events that followed.

Now that the dust had settled, and while missed opportunities to make history could be made up with hard work, the deep wounds and scars it left behind could never be restored no matter how hard the future generations worked.

Zhang Heng briefly recalled the related historical events during the countdown, and when he opened his eyes, he found himself standing in a town, most likely Kyoto. It seemed a very prosperous area; its streets were flanked with tea houses, bathhouses, and shops, and lining them were dozens of street peddlers.

The atmosphere was crowded, festival-like and abuzz-young women in kimonos, geishas, samurai with large and small swords on their waists, and even Western faces were walking about. It had been thirteen years since the Black Ship Incident. In addition to the "Japan-US Peace Treaty," the Shogun signed a series of trade treaties with Britain, Russia, France, and other powers. In the early days, only a small handful of Dutch (the Netherlands was the only country that could trade in Japan before the Black Ship Incident), but now, the western population in the city had grown substantially.

On top of that, there were many more foreign products available for purchase. Zhang Heng's first stop was a shop selling mirrors. His reflection showed that he was dressed like the typical ronin*-a straw hat

and a worn-out Haori that had not been washed for god-knows-how-long-the sword on his waist indicated his status as a samurai. The Edo society had a strict and elaborate social structure, and samurais were members of the ruling class. All feudal lords owned these warriors' large armies, where their masters would pay them salaries and provide food and lodging. Of course, whenever there was war, these warriors would have to sacrifice their own lives. Both parties had their own rights and obligations, but ronin or wanderers like Zhang Heng's had no master and had no income. In fact, there was practically no money in his pocket.

Regardless of the time period, filling your stomach would always be the most crucial thing. What was more, Zhang Heng was going to stay here for a long time. He would have to solve the issue of food and accommodation first and foremost.

*Ronin: A samurai without a lord or master during Japan's feudal period

Chapter 546 Who Are You?

Japan was going through troubled times, where peace and order were absent throughout the country. The choppy waters gave birth to many job opportunities, especially for the samurai. Because of the uncertainty of the country's situation, the clans changed their ways, recruited troops, and bought horses, actively saving as much as they could as they awaited the future. It was still a far better period than the time after the Meiji Restoration when the Sword Abolishment Edict was issued. The move caused the samurai to lose their jobs overnight and their swords confiscated from them.

Especially for those who were very skillful, they had the luxury of choosing their employers, which was whoever offered the highest pay-Both shogunate and Tobaku supporters were all actively seeking manpower.

Zhang Heng, however, wasn't interested in going down that path. Once he joined a particular establishment, food and clothing wouldn't be a problem, but for that, he would have to give up his freedom. This era strongly emphasized Kashindan's* absolute obedience to their landlords. If he was assigned a task, he was unwilling to do, he could never refuse. If he did, he would be sent to the frontlines.

Zhang Heng's other mission objective for this quest was to find a sword that suited him and could challenge a skilled samurai. It would be an excellent opportunity to break through his sword skills. So, be it the Tokugawa Shogunate or Satsuma Domain, he didn't want to get tied up to either side. For now, the best course of action was to play by ear.

In fact, he did not have to solely rely on his samurai status to make a living. Many foreign merchants in Kyoto now, and Zhang Heng had mastered quite a number of foreign languages. In any given period, translators were always a scarce resource. He could make money doing translations for foreign merchants, and it also would not hurt that he would be able to travel around Kyoto for free.

Having made up his mind, Zhang Heng decided to head for the pier. It was getting late, and if he failed to find a job before sundown, he could be spending the night sleeping rough on the streets. Zhang Heng was about to leave when he heard someone calling out, "Excuse me, my lord, would like to have some grilled eels?"

Zhang Heng looked down and saw a timid little face looking back at him. It was a girl of about twelve years of age carrying a tiffin box. Even though she had mustered every last bit of courage she had, she still looked a little nervous. Those tiny hands holding the food container trembled.

But before Zhang Heng could say anything, her companion, looking to be slightly older than her, pulled her away.

The latter whispered, but Zhang Heng could still make out a few words.

“Psst. Chiyo, don’t provoke the ronin. They are dangerous!”

The girl named Chiyo stole a glance at Zhang Heng. As the two girls were busy trying to escape Zhang Heng, the “dangerous man,” they ran into a passer-by.

Chiyo’s companion looked up, and the color drained from her face as he stammered, “S... Sorry, I didn’t see you.” “Delinquent little rascal!”

The person they ran into was also dressed like a warrior, except he carried a far more intimidating demeanor than a ronin. This warrior had two companions with him, looking like they had a little too much to drink—they had probably been drinking at some nearby pleasure quarters. The man shoved the tiffin the girls were holding, rudely tipping them over, then bellowed, “It is thanks to you idiots that those Westerners bully and humiliate this country!”

“Brother Yamada, watch your tongue. You wouldn’t want those guys from the Shinsengumi* to hear you,” advised a companion of his.

“What is there to be afraid of, Matsuo? Times have changed...”

The warrior named Yamada didn’t seem worried. “In fact, I’ve meant to ask Kondo Isami to teach me his Tennen Rishin-ryū.”

Yamada bellowed, and his companions were terror-stricken when the word ‘Shinsengumi’ was mentioned. They glanced nervously at Zhang Heng. After the Ikedaya incident, Kondo and his ronin group, the Shinsengumi, rose to fame, earning themselves the moniker ‘Wolves of Mibu.’ They were staunch supporters of the shogunate and helped it maintain law and order in Kyoto. On top of that, they also dealt with Tobaku supporters. Ruthless and vile, they made for excellent assassins, and an immense multitude feared the Shinsengumi.

Matsuo did not know why Yamada would suddenly mention the Shinsengumi. He shot Takahashi a dirty look as if blaming him for letting Yamada drink that much.

The pair wanted to drag Yamada away before he made a scene, but he was already getting out of control.

It was a mistake mentioning those westerners. It made him reenact the anger he harbored against them for all those years, and in a fit of fury, he grabbed the Tachi at his waist.

Matsuo and Takahashi shrunk away from their companion. Yamada was furious, and he was quite the swordsman—he wasn’t just the best out of the three, but he was relatively well-known among the samurai community. Matsuo and Takahashi were not about to compromise their own safety.

The little girls were so terrified that they forgot to run for their lives. Instead, their legs were cemented to the ground as they watched Yamada draw his sword.

Yamada's brows furrowed. He wanted to scare the two little rascals and watch them pee in their pants, but he interpreted it as silent opposition when the girls did not move. Combined with the intoxication, the scene brought up some unpleasant memories.

Of course, he had every reason to be resentful. Three years ago, he followed the radical Kusaka Genzui to save the emperor as a samurai of the Choshu domain. At that time, he was a high-spirited warrior, but the Hamaguri Gate Rebellion did not defeat the Kyoto defenders. Kusaka Genzui committed suicide to avoid capture. The shogunate joined forces with Britain, the United States, France, and the Netherlands to attack Shimonoseki, forcing the Choshu Domain to concede. Shinsaku Takasugi, one of the leaders of the shogunate, was forced to rove the streets. Things did not pan out well for the samurai who participated in the Hamaguri Gate Rebellion.

Yamada had drawn his sword because he was sloshed, but mostly because of his rancor for his unfulfilled aspiration. Seeing the two undaunted little girls "resisting" him, he was overwhelmed with hatred. Yamada raised his sword above his head.

Even though the little girls selling grilled ill were just strangers to him, and he had no interest in improving Kyoto's security, they had only got into trouble because they were trying to get away from the "dangerous man" Zhang Heng. He wasn't just going to stand on the sidelines and watch the kids getting hacked to death by a madman in a drunken rage.

But as Zhang Heng was about to draw his sword, something at the corner of his eyes made him stop. On the other side, Yamada yelled at the top of his lungs, his sword raised above his head. As he swung the blade downward, a wooden sword met it, subsequently blocking the attack. "WHO ARE YOU?!" Yamada roared, his nostrils flaring, eyes wide, and chest heaving vigorously. "Koyama-dojo, Akane Koyama," said the rescuer in a clear, crisp voice.

To everyone's surprise, the person who stepped in was a young girl, holding off the attacker with a wooden sword with one hand and carrying some tuna she bought from the market in the other.

Footnote:

Kashindan: a Japanese feudal Daimyo's band of retainers, something similar to a small elite military company or a unit of faithful bodyguards
Shinsengumi: a special police force organized by the Bakufu during Japan's Bakumatsu period in 1863

Chapter 547 Fight

When Yamada drew his sword, everyone scrambled to get away; but when Akane Koyama stepped in and blocked Yamada's sword, the people stayed on, and watching from afar.

Unable to finish what he started, Yamada's mood worsened. Worse still, the person who stood in his way was a woman. He barked, "Are dojos in such a slump now that they accept just about anyone?! A bloody disgrace!"

The young girl held her ground. “In my opinion, it’s the Choshu Domain that is going downhill — their samurai are experts at bullying little girls on the street.” Yamada’s face darkened, his voice quivering. He was so mad that he could literally kill her at any moment.

“Hey, woman... did you just insult our Choshu samurai?”

Contrary to what most believed, the Shogunate had imposed numerous samurai restrictions during the Edo period— They weren’t allowed to kill civilians simply because they were unhappy. According to Article 71 of Tokugawa Yoshimune’s “Kujikata Osadamegaki, a book of rules for public officials, samurai had the right to strike any individual of a lower class with the sword (and avoid punishment) when their reputation had b by rude behavior.

The rules for disrespect-killing were described in detail in the book. First of all, in most cases, the samurai were only allowed to kill civilians in their own daimyo territory (and the daimyo did not like having their own civilians hacked to death). The chances of civilians being killed in Edo* and Kyoto were high (There were even Edo civilians keen on extreme sports who deliberately provoked the samurais). Secondly, samurais were not allowed to bring up old scores. If they were insulted yesterday, killing the perpetrator today was forbidden. Thirdly, if the opposing party apologized, the samurai were also prohibited from killing that person. Then, after a kill had been made, samurai were expected to undergo thorough investigation and inquiry. Should the samurai’s report be false, he would immediately be deprived of the samurai status. Of course, if there were no witnesses or if the crime was committed by a fast-running Ronin, that was a whole other problem.

So, strictly speaking, Yamada’s attempt to kill the little girls was poorly substantiated. If he hadn’t drunk so much tonight, he would not have drawn his Tachi, especially not in broad daylight.

But the situation had now taken a turn.

This young woman who had appeared out of nowhere was impudent. Yamada might have been drunk as a lord, but his brain still functioned reasonably. As soon as the woman had spoken, however, he began playing the “insulted a Chosun samurai” card. That way, when he terminated her, he would have something to attest to his actions even if he were to be investigated.

It dawned on Akane Koyama that she might have expressed herself too insolently, but before she could say anything, the girl standing next to Chiyo burst into tears.

She was so terrified that she froze for a good while, not showing any reaction.

“Scram!” Now that Yamada had a new target, he could not be bothered to deal with the two little brats. He shoved the crying girl, pushing her down to the ground. Immediately Chiyo ran to her friend’s aid. After making sure that her friend wasn’t injured other than a scrape on her palm, Chiyo turned her pretty, big eyes to Akane Koyama, looking concerned.

Yamada raised his weapon again. Even though he spoke condescendingly towards the dojo girl, he dared not underestimate her because she could block his attack.

Akane Koyama’s swordsmanship had been passed on to her by her father, the owner of Koyama Dojo, a place she practically grew up in. During its heyday, people often visited to compare notes; hence Akane developed a pair of keen eyes and could tell if someone was the real deal by merely holding their sword.

Even though this Choshu warrior appeared to be brusque and ruthless, he was not just all hat no cattle. Not to mention Koyama Akane had only brought a wooden sword, so this fight was not going to be easy for her. More onlookers had started crowding the area. Matsuo and Takahashi were beginning to feel the heat. The Shinsengumi could be nearby and could show up at any time, and it would be pointless even if Yamada won the fight because his opponent was just a lowly woman. In any case, if he lost, it would not only be him, but the entire Chosu Domain would be put to shame.

Matsuo and Takahashi glanced nervously at each other, both wondering if they should just knock down Akane, then drag Yamada away with them. However, a pair of eyes suddenly fell on Matsuo. Sensing danger, Matsuo looked up to meet the gaze of the person. He was dressed like a ronin; he saw Matsuo looking back at him and twisted the sword in his hand as he gripped it tighter. The warning was obvious.

Matsuo cursed his bad luck. He was not as skilled a fighter as Yamada. It was all thanks to not getting accepted in his previous workplace that he reluctantly joined the Tobaku, thinking that when the shogunate was overthrown, a veteran like him would at least be made an official of some kind. It was about the same case for Takahashi-Usually, the pair would just tag behind Yamada and take advantage of whatever they came across with. When they actually had to roll up their sleeves and fight, there was no guarantee that they would win, even if it was a two-to-one.

Even though the guy looking at him looked penurious and unruly, his gaze was fierce and intense. Matsuo was absolutely certain that those who had never spilled blood before would never have such a look in their eyes.

Could he be a thug who had escaped to Kyoto after murdering someone?

To be safe, Matsuo and Takahashi decided to stay where they were and not make a move.

On the other side, Yamada and Akane were focused on the fight, no longer paying attention to anything around them. One of Yamada's specialties was a sword technique called Oishi Shinkage-ryū, which originated from Shinkage-ryū and was devised by Oishi Susumu. It was said that Oishi once challenged all the dojos in Edo using a bamboo sword and came out undefeated. The main feature of the Oishi Shinkage-Ryu was a high-speed attack with the left hand.

Yamada's left-hand was lightning-fast and persuasive. On the other hand, Akane Koyama's area of expertise was handed down by her father, mainly defensive stances. There wasn't a strike she couldn't block with her wooden sword.

This was Zhang Heng's first time witnessing a samurai sword fight. Both Akane and Yamada's sword fighting skills were inferior to his. According to his calculations, Yamada was at about the start of level 2, and Akane should be at the peak of level 1.

But because one of them was inebriated, and the other had a wooden sword, neither could put their skills to full use. In comparison, Yamada was slightly more affected. Even though Zhang Heng did not know which school of swordsmanship technique he employed, he could tell that Yamada was an expert in speed attacks, something that required great agility and masterful precision. Right now, he could barely walk in a straight line.

In contrast, Akane Koyama's circumstances were slightly better. Her weapon was a disadvantage, and her swordsmanship lacked versatility, but because she was the type to take the safer route. In Zhang Heng's opinion as an expert swordsman, the fight was actually not as dangerous as it appeared.

Footnote:

Daimyo: (in feudal Japan) one of the great lords who were vassals of the shogun

Edo: the former name of Tokyo

Chapter 548 Akane Koyama

In the blink of an eye, more than a dozen slashes were exchanged between the two. Akane Koyama stumbled five steps backward, and although her face showed no fear, Chiyo was getting more worried as each second ticked by. Immediately, she looked around, hunting for the likes of anyone that could offer some help. Unfortunately, most bystanders were unarmed civilians, and even if they were willing to lend a hand, there was nothing much they could really do. In the end, her gaze fell on Zhang Heng, the ronin.

However, Zhang Heng had no intention to get involved in this matter.

He could envision that in about ten moves, Yamada was bound to lose the battle. Unable to attack for some time now, he had become more and more frustrated. Perhaps he felt it embarrassing to lose to a woman. Those who specialized in quick melee attacks knew how taboo it was to get anxious and impatient during a battle. His form was beginning to show signs of deterioration. To explain in gaming terms, although his APM (action per minute) was improving, his EAPM (effective action per minute) fell simultaneously.

Zhang Heng would not want to be nosy at a time like this. Hence, he decided that he would ignore Chiyo for now. He stood there and turned his attention to Matsuo and Takahashi.

Although Akane Koyama and Yamada's swordsmanship were not as good as his, there was still something to be learned from their battle. The Japanese katana-fighting skill was founded relatively late. The Tang Dao also inspired the Tachi, but they were both crafted differently. A Tachi would be made using a high-temperature carbon removal technique, where the blacksmith would carburize it at the end of the forging process. Japan had always lacked high-quality coal; hence the Tachi could only be smelted at low temperatures.

On the other hand, the Tang Dao forging technique was lost, causing the sabers that were forged during the Song and Ming Dynasties to drop drastically in quality. Usually, a Tang Dao was a thicker and heavier weapon, while the Tachi was lighter and thinner.

Speaking of sword-fighting skills, scholars in the Spring and Autumn Warring States Period were required to study martial arts. Among the Ancient Six Arts were riding and shooting. As they traveled through the country, words didn't always bide well, and when that didn't work, the fist was typically the other method to resolve the problem. Confucian scholars were forced to abandon some of their principles for the emperor's convenience in ruling the country. The quintessence of Ancient Six Arts was changed as well, where it was later translated as something along the lines of "a gentleman would use his tongue to deal with his problems instead of the fist." Back to the Japanese side, the prevalence of warrior culture

upheld the samurai as part of the ruling class. During that time, many were very willing to spend their time honing their katana-fighting skills, and before the Haito Edict, numerous dojos dotted the land, and Japanese katana-manship schools flourished as well.

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These Japanese katana-manship schools each had signature teachings. These were all very new things to Zhang Heng, and whether learning from them would yield anything valuable was still unknown. That said, Zhang Heng yearned to visit all these schools.

Scarlet once said that the quest was generated according to the characteristics of the player.

Zhang Heng entered the quest, Bakumatsu Kyoto, for a reason. When he saw Yamada and Akane Koyama fighting each other, he felt he learned something, and although it was only a small gain, it was valuable enough since he hadn't improved in a long time. Masters of all disciplines gathered in Kyoto, and it gave him an excellent opportunity to learn from them.

When Zhang Heng was thinking about where to start, the battle between Yamada and Koyama Akane had already ended. Koyama Akane took advantage of Yamada's rush, attacking him. When Yamada could not retrieve his katana after going for Koyama Akane, she sprouted from her defensive position and used her katana to slash Yamada's hand. The latter was in such intense pain that he had to let go of his Tachi.

Koyama Akane did not continue attacking him. "You are defeated," she proclaimed.

"What nonsense are you talking about? How could I be defeated!" Yamada became furious. Although he had dropped his Tachi, he still had a wakizashi at his waist. Except for those practicing the dual-wield technique, the samurai of the Edo period would only use their wakizashi after they lost their primary weapon.

Yamada prepared himself to draw his wakizashi to fight Koyama Akane. After he lost the, he looked like a disgrace to his kind. He always thought his opponent was nowhere nearly as good as him, not to mention how he engaged in battle after getting drunk. At least, that was how he felt after losing. This battle was all about the honor of the Choshu Domain's samurai, and he had to win by hook or crook.

Koyama Akane put away the wooden katana. She shook her head, lamenting, "I don't want to fight anymore. I fought you to save others. If you really want to fight me, go to the dojo, and I will be there waiting for you." After a short pause, she added, "And now you have a weapon. I only have a wooden katana, which is exceptionally unfair." Yamada's rage overwhelmed him that he almost fainted. He was amazed by the fact that she had the kahunas to mention impartiality. If not for his drunken haze, he would have won the battle.

Yamada only felt a flow of heat rushing to his head, and he almost had a cerebral hemorrhage. Both of his nostrils were breathing out hot air. A few seconds later, someone grabbed his arm. It was Matsuo and Takahashi. After seeing Yamada dropped his weapon, they finally dared to move forward to talk him out of it.

"My friend is drunk today. This battle doesn't count. We will head to your dojo and challenge you another day," shouted Matsuo. And the three of them subsequently left before patrollers could arrive.

Koyama Akane did not stop them from leaving. She then bent down and picked up the tuna that dropped on the ground earlier. After that, she walked to Chiyo and her friends and asked, "Are you all right?". The two little girls shook their heads. After thanking Koyama Akane, they bent down and picked up the grilled eel skewers that had fallen to the ground. Both children of fishermen and artisans, they learned how to save money from young and were no strangers to thrift. Although the skewers couldn't be sold anymore since they had fallen to the ground, they could still be eaten after a bit of washing.

Zhang Heng sensed Koyama Akane glaring at him. She then touched her pocket, took out about fifteen cents, and handed it to the two girls.

"I went out in a hurry today. This is all I have today, but it should be enough to make up for your loss."

Chiyo and her companions did not take the money. The only reason they were still breathing right now was thanks to Koyama Akane. In fact, they were thinking about ways they could repay her. To them, it would be inappropriate if they took her money.

Koyama Akane then gave Zhang Heng another death-stare. She could be heard muttering under her breath.

"They almost died because of you! You didn't even help them, and now you are not going to give them some money to make up for their losses?"

Koyama Akane didn't have to speak any louder than that, but Zhang Heng heard what she said, albeit not too clearly. When he finally realized what she was talking about, Koyama Akane was already leaving after giving the two girls pats on their heads.

Zhang Heng was dumbfounded.

This wasn't the last time the two would cross paths with each other, though. In fact, not long after that, they would meet yet again.

Chapter 549 Choosing A House For Rent

After the Perry Expedition, the Edo Shogunate concluded the Kanagawa Treaty with the U.S and was forced to open the two trading ports of Shimoda and Hakodate. However, after the five years of Emperor Komei's reign, the two sides signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce on the Puritan Ship. The ports of Kanagawa, Nagasaki, Niigata, and Hyogo were added to the treaty. At the same time, foreigners were allowed to stay for business in the Edo and Osaka areas.

Although Kyoto wasn't on the list, it took only one day to get there from Osaka. Ten years had passed since the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, and after the Kinmon incident, Sonnō jōi rethought their strategy. Since the emperor was the only one in charge now, he focused on bakumatsu. The barbarian was no longer mentioned anymore, and they started to cooperate with the West actively. Hence, Westerners could move around even more freely now.

As the most important river in the Kansai region, the Yodo River originated from Lake Biwa and connected the Kyoto Basin with the Osaka Plain. It was an important transportation channel for Kyoto during the Edo period. Many foreign merchants from Osaka had also come to Kyoto by traveling on this river.

Zhang Heng asked around about the nearest pier, and he arrived at the spot before sunset.

The place was no less lively than the city. The riverbank was lined with machiya, where tiles were neatly arranged on their roofs, and signboards and curtains swayed in the gentle breeze. The window's first layer was a thin convex lattice followed by a mosquito net—a classic example of traditional Japanese architecture.

The building's main structure was made of wood, its entrance narrow, but the walkway long. Under normal circumstances, the part facing the street would be used as a shop, and the back was used as lodging. The advantage of this layout saw all the shops clustered up, and they were close to each other.

There were boatmen unloading goods at the pier, and there were also ladies preparing to get on the boats. A shrine was not too far away from Zhang Heng, where dozens of devotees gathered outside for the daily blessings and protection. It wasn't long before Zhang Heng found a Western businessman interested in hiring a translator.

The latter's name was Gabriel, a Frenchman. He had come to Kyoto with a business group to discuss selling a batch of cotton yarn with a local businessman. It seemed he was dissatisfied with the cotton yarn business, and he had other plans in his mind. However, it was inappropriate for him to announce his plans to the business group—it meant he would not be able to use the assigned translator in the group. Just when he wondered where to find a Japanese that could understand French, Zhang Heng delivered himself to him. Gabriel was delighted. He quickly waved his hand, eventually agreeing to pay Zhang Heng a koban each day as his salary. Koban was a general currency used during the Edo period and was a gold coin of sorts.

A koban was equivalent to one tael of gold, and one tael of gold was equivalent to a small sentence of one or two gold—one or two gold was approximately 60 mace or four strings of coins. In this era, the daily income of a craftsman in Kyoto was about 70 coins. In other words, Zhang Heng's current daily income had almost caught up with a craftsman's two-month salary.

Zhang Heng knew one or two things about translation jobs of the era. He had consulted the people at the pier before he came here and discovered a huge demand for professional translators in Japan right now. However, those who could communicate with foreign businessmen were no longer lacking as they did before the Perry Expedition. In fact, even when the country was shut down during the bakumatsu, Satsuma, Choshu, and others had been secretly doing business with other countries.

The tanegashima (actually the matchlock gun) originated from Satsuma. When a Portuguese merchant ship was blown to Tanegashima Island south of Satsuma by a typhoon, they named this Japanese iron gun as Tanegashima. Now that the shogunate had opened for trade for over ten years, many Japanese had traveled to Europe to study, and a translation job wasn't as valuable as it used to be.

Gabriel's paid more than double the market price. And he did not even know Zhang Heng well. Zhang Heng also asked for an advance payment, and despite that, Gabriel didn't hesitate to hire him. From there, he knew that this French businessman's plan in Kyoto might not be as simple as he thought it was.

With Zhang Heng's Lv.3 sword-fighting skills and the experience accumulated in the previous few quests, he was not too worried about the dangers he encountered. Moreover, it was sundown, and it might be too late to find the next employer. So, in the end, an agreement was reached between both sides.

After paying Zhang Heng a koban, Gabriel asked him to meet tomorrow morning at the tea house next to the pier. When Zhang Heng left the pier after talking to him, the sky had fallen into complete darkness. Thanks to a meal before the quest, he wasn't very hungry, and as of now, his top priority would be to find a place to stay.

During the Edo period, the shogunate set up a Sankin-kōtai system to control various domains' lords. These were required to go to Edo every once in a while to carry out government affairs for the shoguns. In fact, it was just an excuse to make them spend less time in their territory and prevent them from fooling around when they were there. If they disobeyed, they could be taken down the next time.

However, Tokugawa was kind enough to fix all the dojo along the way. Later, he even started to develop hatagoya, a somewhat similar concept to capsule hotels of later generations. Not only did they include two meals for every night you stayed, but many hatagoya had maids to take care of their customers. During the bakumatsu, more and more travelers poured into Japan, and the hatagoya started to deteriorate. Criminals began providing gambling equipment and prostitutes to their customers, and some hatagoya even forced their maids to become sex workers.

After that, Osaka's businessmen banded up, discussing a plan to open chain hotels and unified the service standards, so travelers could stay at ease in the hotel with the guild's sign hanging outside the door.

Whether it was a hatagoya or an ordinary inn, they were temporary solutions for Zhang Heng. Considering the time that he needed to stay in this quest, Zhang Heng still preferred to rent his a house. Seeing that there was still some time, instead of going to the hotel in a hurry, he found a middleman nearby and asked the latter to show him the houses around this area available for rent.

The middleman was a fourteen or fifteen-year-old boy who looked brilliant and was also born in this area. He was well informed and knew everything about every household. Zhang Heng first paid him 100 coins and promised to give him another 100 after that. Immediately, he became more energetic than before. He did not care if he had not eaten dinner. His priority was to take Zhang Heng to walk around the streets.

However, Zhang Heng was not interested in the several houses located in the prime spots. The two of them went further and further and had to light up their lanterns in the end. Zhang Heng had already planned to give up and wanted to do it again tomorrow. However, the last place triggered Zhang Heng's interest.

Once they entered the house, they saw a small courtyard. At its center was a cherry blossom tree, and the smells it emitted were nothing short of phenomenal. There was a well under the tree as well, and the water was crystal clear. The layout of the small courtyard was square, simple, and beautiful. Once Zhang Heng pulled open the shoji door, he saw that the house was spacious and there was also a tea room. Other than that, the furniture was complete. In a modern-world context, Zhang Heng could just bring his luggage in and stay here for good.

Chapter 550 It's You?

"I like this place."

Zhang Heng turned to the middleman who brought him to the house and asked, "How much is the rent?"

"The rent is really not that high. It only costs two strings of coins a month."

The middleman scratched his head. Seemingly, he was reluctant to elaborate.

Zhang Heng walked around the house with a lantern, not paying too much attention to the brooding expressions of the middleman behind.

"When can I sign the contract? It's a bit late now. Uh, I might have something to do tomorrow. How about early in the morning? Can the owners come and meet me here really early?" asked Zhang Heng.

"No, no, no, there's no need for all that trouble. The owner happens to be living right next door! My lord, if you have made up your mind, I can call her over now."

"She stays so close to this house?"

Zhang Heng was a little astonished. When he thought about it, he slowly rationalized the whole thing. The family's mansion appeared relatively large, and it was customary to rent out a part of it to make some extra money. As it happened, the wall on his left looked rather new. However, Zhang Heng did not think much about it. "Sorry for the trouble," he nodded.

After a while, the middleman brought the landlord to meet Zhang Heng.

Before the two arrived at the door, the middleman's voice could be heard.

"I'm doing you a huge favor now... I have found you a generous tenant. He didn't even frown when I told him that the rent is two strings of coins every month. Now, you must not drive away another potential tenant. Otherwise, no one in this area will dare to rent your house in the future!"

Another voice snorted coldly, "What kind of tenant are you introducing this time? The man asking to rent my place previously had his hands all over me. I had to teach him a lesson."

The middleman rolled his eyes when he heard what she said. "That is what a man likes! That guy drank too much and he simply wanted to take advantage of you. There was no need for such a fuss."

"How is this a fuss? Just talking about it pisses me off! I ran into three samurai warriors from the Changzhou Domain at the market today. They drew their katana in the street and was about to bully the two children! But the worst part was that no men dared to stop them..."

The woman's voice sounded uncannily familiar. After noticing that she was talking about what happened at the market earlier, Zhang Heng immediately knew who she was. She was none other than the female warrior named Akane Koyama, the one who defeated Yamada with a wooden katana. Zhang Heng wasn't expecting to meet her again so soon after they parted ways. Now, it so happened that he was about to rent her house.

As they were talking, the two had already walked into the courtyard, and Zhang Heng's sole opportunity to make an escape vanished. The moment they saw each other, the atmosphere became extremely awkward.

"It's you?!" Akane Koyama raised her eyebrows. Just when she was going to say something else, something important appeared to have crossed her mind, abruptly swallowing the words about to escape her mouth. On the other hand, the middleman was proud to seal the deal, "Well, as soon as I saw this man, I knew he was destined for great things! If he becomes famous in the future, maybe your little courtyard will be recorded in history!" "How is that even possible? Let's find some clean clothes to wear first," replied Akane Koyama with a distinct irritation in her voice. The way Zhang Heng dressed right now was far from the generous tenant that the middleman mentioned to her earlier. Akane Koyama even suspected that he might not be able to pay the rent.

Zhang Heng could understand Akane Koyama's concern, but he did not expect that she mentioned nothing about raising the rent. With a straight face, she said, "Since you will be living with me, you must abide by my rules. First of all, it is strictly forbidden to destroy the plants and trees here. Secondly, you are forbidden to drink and get drunk here. If you want to drink, there's always a restaurant for that. Finally, the most important thing is not to be like the three Changzhou samurai warriors today. They use their martial arts to do evil and terrorize our residents..." she paused, "...well, disregard the last rule. You look like haven't learned any martial arts before. Otherwise, you wouldn't have just stood there and not help the girls."

III

Zhang Heng was speechless.

"If there are no other questions, let's enter the house and sign the contract." Akane Koyama urged.

Zhang Heng considered the deal for a while, and he was fine with the rules she stated. They were all very reasonable, and although previous residents had been violently driven away by Akane Koyama, he wasn't too concerned. He realized that he was too choosy when it came to picking a house to rent. It wasn't like he didn't walk around the area for some time, and he had also seen a few houses. Nevertheless, he was not interested in renting any of them. If he carried on searching, he might just find nothing better, so he decided to settle for this one.

Thus, Zhang Heng and Akane Koyama quickly signed the lease contract. He had already exchanged the koban with silver and copper coins, and once the contract was signed, he immediately paid off the middleman and the rent.

Akane Koyama, the owner, was a little surprised to see him take out the money.

"I didn't have much money at that time. I earned these after that," explained Zhang Heng and the two whose mouths were ajar.

"You earned this money?" Koyama Akane looked suspicious. "Is Kyoto a good place to earn easy money now? How did you make such a large amount in such a short time?"

"I've traveled to various western countries and I have a good understanding of their languages, so I just got myself a job as a translator."

“You can understand Western languages? Well, your Japanese is a bit weird...is it because you have been in Western countries for too long?” Akane Koyama asked suddenly. She instantly saw Zhang Heng in a different light. During that time, it was unimaginable to leave home and travel thousands of miles to the west, and those who did make it abroad already had the idea of finding a way out of Japan for a long time.

This made Akane Koyama change the way she looked at Zhang Heng. She thought for a while and said, “I live in the dojo next door. If you want to practice with the sword, you can find me there.”

Zhang Heng thanked her politely. He had finally found a house for rent that he liked. After that, Ayane Koyama and the middleman left together. Zhang Heng could not do any cooking since there was no time to buy ingredients, so he settled for nearby a roadside food stall to ease the hunger. When he returned to the house, he did a simple wash-up, lay on the stack, and listened to the sound of the wind swaying the branches outside. This was how he spent his first night here.

Since he accepted a koban from Gabriel, Zhang Heng decided to take up the responsibility and rushed to the tea house between the piers early the next morning. However, by the time Gabriel woke up, it was noon. When he arrived at the tea house, he seemed relieved when he saw Zhang Heng.

Last night, Gabriel was worried that Zhang Heng might not stick to the plan after taking the money. After all, certain patriots of Japan were trained to assassinate westerners a long time ago, thinking it would help them defend home and the country. Fortunately, such crimes had dropped drastically in recent years.

Gabriel squeezed a smile on his face and said, “What we need to do today is very relaxing. Let’s have a taste of Kyoto cuisine first. After that, we will go and watch sumo wrestling. In the evening, the local merchants will hold a banquet for us. I’ll just go there by myself. That’s what you need to for the day. How does that sound? Easy money, right?”

Zhang Heng did not comment about it. He knew that Gabriel’s choice to act alone was intended. He had something conspired up his sleeve. His activities today were only a cover-up, but Zhang Heng did not expose him. Just as Gabriel said, at least the money that he earned today was easy money.