

48 Hours 561

Chapter 561 Kiyomizu-dera

When Zhang Heng returned, he found Akane squatting by a wooden basin preparing nigiri sushi.

Nigiri sushi, hand-pressed sushi rice topped with sliced fresh fish, was considered a more luxurious dish. Legend had it that Tokugawa Ienari, the Tokugawa shogunate's eleventh shogun, was a greedy and lustful man. His favorite concubine's adopted father was a man named Sekio Nakano. Thanks to too many people wanting to become high-ranking officials through Sekio, many luxury shops were set up nearby his residence. A sushi restaurant owner had the idea of setting up a business selling nigiri sushi next door to Sekio. (Frankly, it was not really that high-end, but the trend soon caught on, and stalls were being set up on the streets).

"Is that tonight's dinner?" Zhang Heng asked, placing the soba noodles and roasted glutinous rice balls on the table. He had already finished the oden on the way back.

"No. I'll be visiting Kiyomizu-dera tomorrow. This is for tomorrow," answered Akane.

Zhang Heng heard of the famous temple located in the Otowa Mountain in the east of Kyoto before. Built in 778 AD, it was the oldest temple in Kyoto. Although the building had withstood fires and reconstructions, the scenery from there was no less stunning. Visitors ascended the mountainside to admire cherry blossoms in spring and maple leaves in autumn. In later generations, Kiyomizu-dera was included in the World Heritage site and has since been one of Kyoto's must-see attractions.

"Are you going to see the cherry blossoms? Can I come along?"

"Um, something like that." Akane nodded slowly. Somehow, the question made her blush a little. "Don't you need to do your translation work?"

"It's fine. My employer usually doesn't get up until midday. If you're going to be there for a while, I'll just leave first."

"Oh, okay. Then help me make more nigiri."

"Thank you."

Zhang Heng had been touring Kyoto with Gabriel a lot later, but the French merchant had a preference for places that offered food, drink, and play—he was not interested in shrines and temples at all. In contrast, Zhang Heng, who had never been to Kyoto, was very interested to see what the centuries-old Kiyomizu-dera looked like. Since Koyama Akane was going, he thought he might as well tag along

The next morning, before the sun rose, Akane knocked on the door to Zhang Heng's room.

When he opened the door, Akane was carrying a lantern and the nigiri sushi box they prepared the night before.

Since they were going to the temple, she was in a formal kimono with red, blue, yellow, and white, held together with a sash. On her feet, she wore white tabi* and zori*.

Because she spent most of her time in the dojo, she was always dressed in dogi* and hakama*. This was the first time Zhang Heng had seen Akane out of her uniform. She actually looked feminine, and he couldn't help but stare a little.

The gawking made Akane a little uneasy. "What?!"

She lowered the lantern, trying to hide her face in the darkness, and said sternly, "Hurry up and get ready. We'll leave soon." "Alright. I'll get changed."

Zhang Heng disappeared into his room again. Akane began to exhale, but Zhang Heng suddenly turned around again and asked, "Er... what should I wear to the temple?"

"Anything you like. Just don't bring your sword."

"Okay."

Akane watched Zhang Heng enter the room he had forgotten to close the door behind him, and for a minute, she did not know what to do. Even though she could not see anything from where she was, she could hear the rustling of the fabric as he put on his clothes. Her face flushed, and she wanted to get away from the door, but she was worried that doing so would make her look suspicious.

In fact, she was a little strange. Her mother had died young, so Akane grew up in the dojo; Apart from her father, she had always been surrounded by trainees in the dojo-most of them men. She trained together with them, inevitably, there had to be some physical contact, yet she was never bothered by it. But why would standing here at the door make her feel so nervous?

Was her outfit today a little too unusual?

But back when her father was still alive, when they visited Kiyomizu-dera together for the last time, she had the same outfit on, and she developed the habit of visiting Kiyomizu Temple at this time year.

This year, though, was different because someone else would be going with her.

Zhang Heng quickly changed into his clothes and washed his face with the cold well water. Compared to well-dressed Akane, he looked no different from what he usually did, really doing what she said and putting on his everyday clothes.

"Let's go."

Akane led the way, and Zhang Heng followed closely behind.

Since they were both martial artists, they were light on their feet, and before long, they were already at Niomon. Zhang Heng looked up and saw the vermilion lacquered gate. The first ray of sunlight in the morning fell on the corner of the gate's tower, and it gave off a solemn yet divine look.

From here, the winding stone path stretched upward to the west gate. Behind it was the three-storied pagoda and kaisan-do, and through a corridor, was the famous Kiyomizu Stage built on a cliff.

From there, one had a breathtaking view of the blooming cherry blossoms. Although there was one in the place Zhang Heng was living in, nothing could compare to the sight of the trees when grouped. From this point, Kyoto's imperial city with the hall behind it supported by 139 huge wooden pillars was clearly

visible, making it an extraordinary sight. “The view here is spectacular,” Zhang Heng said. “I’ve heard people talking about the cherry blossoms in Kiyomizu temple, and now that I’ve seen it, I have to say that it certainly lives up to its reputation.”

Akane muttered an agreement, but her body still seemed slightly stiff.

Their journey there had been an annoying one. Whenever both of them were walking side by side, she would feel awkward, and whenever she sped up her pace, she would wonder if Zhang Heng was watching her. When she turned around and saw him admiring the view, she would feel a little disappointed. She felt like she was going mad the whole way there.

Fortunately, they quickly arrived at the main hall where she could pray to Guan Yin, sorting out her chaotic emotions. Akane wondered what was wrong with herself today, even attempting to meditate to quieten the distracting thoughts in her mind.

After that, the two strolled across the stage, walked down the forest path to the valley below. Trudging through a maple forest, the two soon arrived at Otowa-no-taki, which literally translates to Sound of Feathers.

Although it was called a ‘taki,’ it was actually not a waterfall. Instead, there were only three small streams of water flowing down the rocks. It was only dawn, but a few people were already there, getting the water.

Translator’s footnote:

Tabi: Japanese socks worn with thonged footwear

Zori: a traditional Japanese style of flip-flops, originally made with a straw sole.

Dogi: uniform for training in Japanese martial arts

Hakama: a type of traditional Japanese clothing

Chapter 562 Okita Soki

Akane bent down and dipped her hand into the pool, its water chilly and invigorating.

The Otowa waterfall of Kiyomizu Temple was known throughout Japan. It was said that the spring water here had reiki or healing energy and was excellent for boiling tea. There was a tea house not far from here owned by a kind and pleasant elderly woman.

“Are you hungry? We’ve been walking for a long time. Let’s get something to eat,” Akane said, keeping as straight of a face as she could. “Good idea.”

Zhang Heng was baffled. What had he done wrong? Why was she so distant towards him throughout the walk up here? He mulled over it for a bit, then said, “Since you’re treating me to sushi, let me treat you to some tea.”

Akane gave no reply as the pair made their way to the tea house with blue noren curtains*.

A waiter came to greet them.

“What do you feel like having today?”

Zhang Heng was searching for a seat when Akane suddenly gasped. “What are you doing here?!” she could be heard asking.

Zhang Heng turned to look and saw that Akane was speaking to a young man.

Zhang Heng recognized him immediately. He was precisely as Akane had described him to be – he really did have a unique brightness and naivety about him. Considering his age and the blood on his hands, these qualities were even more precious, ones that were beyond logic and reason.

However, under Akane’s gaze, the young man looked flustered and embarrassed; his eyes begged her not to probe him any further.

Akane raised an eyebrow, oblivious to his plea. “Why is the Shinsengumi here? This is hallowed ground. You better not cause any trouble here.”

“No, no, no. You’re mistaken,” the young man waved his hand in denial, darting nervous glances at the entrance of the tea house. “This has nothing to do with the Shinsengumi. I came here on my own.”

“Huh?”

His reply only added to Akane’s suspicion. The way he acted told her that he was planning to ambush someone. Could the Shinsengumi have found out that some important Tobaku leader was visiting this place?

“Argh, it’s really not what you think it is,” the young man contested. Then the next minute, as if he had seen something outside the tea house, his cheeks flushed red, and he quickly averted his gaze. Akane wanted to question him further. She could not care less about the bad blood between the Shinsengumi and the anti-shogunate, but if they were going to clash swords, they better not do it here at the temple, or the ancient shrine would be caught in the crossfire.

But before she could throw any more questions at the poor lad, someone grabbed her by the arm.

“Let’s find a place to sit first. I don’t know what kind of tea we should have,” Zhang Heng interjected.

“Oh!” Akane nearly jumped out of her skin; her mind suddenly went blank, and the warmth in her palm caused all the confusing emotions she had tried so hard suppress to gush back in. Her head felt as if it was about to explode.

Dazed, she followed Zhang Heng to an unoccupied table. Just then, a young lady and an elderly woman walked in. If Akane’s resolution was like a sword that had been forged over centuries, then this young woman’s geniality was the sunshine of March. When she walked into the little tea house, the whole place lit up.

The Shinsengumi young man lowered his face, looking sozzled even though the tea house did not serve alcohol.

The young woman did not look around the establishment but ordered a rice cake, to-go, from the waiter. After that, she thanked him in a soft, gentle voice and left.

It wasn't until her figure disappeared outside the door that the young man sat upright again, staring blankly at the teacup before him, his expression despondent.

Akane was amused. "Who is she?"

"Ah?" The young man shook his head, looking embarrassed. "Er, er... I never asked. I saw her at Dr. Tezuka's."

In between, he covered his mouth and coughed. The redness on his face only deepened. He had heard that the girl was coming to the Ottawa waterfall, so he snuck up here and waited.

To his surprise, Akane did not criticize his actions.

After a minute, the young man asked her, "Is he your man?"

It was Akane's turn to be flustered.

"What nonsense are you talking about?!" she growled menacingly.

The young man was taken aback since Akane seemed as if she would tear him into pieces. He couldn't help comparing her to Ms. Saya, who was much gentler and sweeter.

"Okita Soki?" Someone suddenly called his name.

"Mm?" he answered instinctively. When he saw the man who came with Akane calling him, he asked, "How do you know my name?"

"The Shinsengumi's best swordsman. There's a lot of talk about you going around in Kyoto," Zhang Heng answered. Inwardly, he was sighing in relief.

OkitaSoki was probably the only reasonable person in the entire Shinsengumi. It wasn't to say that he killed fewer people, but in fact, those who died by his sword were no lesser than his comrades. Nonetheless, he was favored by commander Kondo Isami, willing to do anything his leader made him do with zero questions, and as a result, he was able to remain unaffected.

He was Kondo Isami's sharpest sword, and swords made no distinction between good and evil. And to quote Hijikata Toshizo, it saves one the trouble of agonizing over trivial matters.

Alas, this number one swordsman of the Shinsengumi dubbed 'Bakumatsu's divine sword' did not have many days left to live. There was no cure for his chronic cough (tuberculosis) during this era. If Zhang Heng remembered correctly, next year, on the 30th day of the fifth month, the lunar calendar, was the day of his passing.

But right now, he was just like every other young man, having secret crushes on girls and coming all the way to Kiyomizu temple just to sneak a look at her.

"I'm nowhere near the best swordsman... you're too kind. Kendo-sensei, Hijikata, and Oishi Kuwajiro—they are all better than I am," Okita said humbly.

"When are you free? Drop by the dojo, and we'll have a duel," said Zhang Heng.

Later generations painted Okita Soji as a gifted genius who died young. Although he was only in his early twenties, many believed that he was Shinsengumi's best swordsman and in the entire Kyoto. How could Zhang Heng forgo a chance to have a duel with a person such as Okita? On top of that, he was also interested in finding out what it meant to be the best swordsman during this era.

"Sure," Okita readily agreed. "But I'm afraid it won't be soon. I have some important matters to attend to. But once it is taken care of, I will come to see you at the dojo."

"Does it have anything to do with that woman just now?" Akane asked. "Ah, no, no. It was all business." Okita blushed.

Translator's notes:

Noren curtains: traditional Japanese fabric dividers hung between rooms, on walls, in doorways, or in windows.

Chapter 563 Gabriel's Secret

Okita Soki met the love of his life during his trip to Kiyomizu-dera, a more than pleasant surprise for him. As for the competition, Zhang Heng was in no hurry since an agreement had been made with the other party.

Although Okita Soki was suffering from a cough, he shouldn't have trouble getting through the day. Okita Soki, the samurai with the highest combat power, for now, was like a perfect main dish. Once Zhang Heng tasted it, he would probably not go for other appetizers.

Consequently, Zhang Heng did not mind the competition between the two getting pushed back. Besides, there was something for him to do now—the two katana he'd borrowed from the Suzaku Dojo and another dojo before seemed quite decent. Unfortunately, they were just like that wakizashi—their quality still falling far short of the legendary katana. Especially the Suzaku Dojo's katana that was supposedly crafted by Miike Tenta Mitsuyo. Later, Zhang Heng asked a particular collector to appraise it, unsure if this katana was Miike Tenta Mitsuyo's work.

This was also the most troublesome part of this quest. According to the information Scarlet gave him, the system wouldn't notify him when he got his hands on those katana. When Scarlet and her friend entered this quest, they had a clear goal—completing the mission within the time frame. However, when the quest called Bakumatsu Kyoto was assigned to Zhang Heng, the scenario was completely different. It could mean that he would need to make some tough choices by the end of this quest.

For now, it wasn't a problem to be too concerned about. All Zhang Heng needed to do right now was to challenge Kyoto's masters and collect famous katana.

Another week passed since the trip to Kiyomizu-dera Temple. The samurai from Choshu Domain did not come to look for him. Initially, Zhang Heng thought that it was a little weird. Judging from their character, it did not make sense that they did not make a move for so long. Not unless there was something more critical that required their immediate attention. And now Zhang Heng finally got to know the reason behind it. He was told that Shinsaku Takasugi, who had been recuperating at Sakurayama, had passed away due to an illness.

It was indeed a significant event.

Shinsaku Takasugi was the leader of the Choshu Domain. A hot-blooded leader in his youth, he assassinated Westerners, burned the British embassy, and forced Emperor Komei to pardon the barbarians. After that, he singlehandedly recruited and formed the kiheitai. During the Kinmon Incident, the Sonnō jōi was defeated. On behalf of the Choshu Domain, he was coerced into signing the Shimonoseki Treaty with Britain, the United States, France, and the Netherlands, forcing him to abandon the barbarians. When the Shinsaku Takasugi succumbed to the shogunate, he lived in exile for a period of time. Still, it did not take long for him to join forces with Ito Hirobumi to recapture the Choshu Domain's reins. Subsequently, he mulled a series of drastic westernized reforms, allowing the Choshu Domain to embark on the road of prosperity and strength. Then, not too long after that, he managed to defeat the shogunate fleet at Oshima and Ogura. It was a glorious moment for him. Unfortunately, the life of such a tremendous hero would ultimately be extinguished by a puny cough. He died on his sickbed on the eve of the new era's arrival. Understandably, Choshu Domain was now in great distress and grief, and it was no surprise that they weren't bothered to deal with the Koyama Dojo affair for the time being.

Shinsaku Takasugi's death didn't cause Zhang Heng to feel anything. After all, he picked no sides from the beginning, considered himself merely an observer. He was more concerned, though, about another issue—Juzumaru was coming to Kyoto.

The Juzumaru, one among five world-famous katana, was nearly as revered as the Mikazuki Munechika. It was Honkoji's precious treasure, and its current owner, Kirino Toshiaki, was also known as the Four Hitokiri of the Bakumatsu.

This man was Satsuma domain's leader, Saigo Takamori—one that was willing to abandon the honor of a samurai to become a killer specializing in assassinating shogunate minions. As of now, countless shogunate officials had died in his hands, and after Shinsaku Takasugi's passing, Saigo Takamori happened to want to come to Kyoto. It made the imaginations of many run wild.

Was the Satsuma Domain planning to take advantage of his ally's death, Shinsaku Takasugi, to make a big move?

Something huge might befall Kyoto. The Shinsengumi and Kyoto Mimawarigumi patrolled the streets with their katana every day. Nonetheless, they failed to locate Kirino Toshiaki. This caused great distress to the residents that lived in that area. The emperor and the kuge watched the whole thing unfold before them in the imperial city, while the shogunate sect was in danger.

Zhang Heng paid attention to the situation's development as well. It was rare that he got the exact whereabouts of the five great katana in this world. Of course, he wanted to take this opportunity to get his hand on Juzumaru. This meant he needed to locate Kirino Toshiaki before the Shinsengumi—this would prove more than challenging as Tobaku had many supporters in Kyoto. Despite all that, they still failed to figure out where Kirino Toshiaki was hiding now. And Gabriel, on the other side, was still putting up a great act, successfully driving away from his pursuers, which had been following him for days. Since Kirino Toshiaki was in town now, no one had the time to keep following him around.

So Gabriel found Zhang Heng that afternoon and asked secretly, "Are you available tomorrow night?"

"Huh?" Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows.

“I’m attending a significant banquet tomorrow night, and I need you to be there to help me with translation. Don’t worry, if it is done well, I will pay you ten koban, all at once,” Gabriel added.

The translation work asked of him was easy and comfortable so far, and it did not match the generous pay Gabriel showered on him. Zhang Heng knew that good things such as this had the nick of not lasting forever. Now, Gabriel was about to ask Zhang Heng to do what he was supposed to do after taking all those koban from him. He believed as long as he said yes to Gabriel, he would know what was hiding inside his sleeve tomorrow night.

It seemed like it was not easy money, after all.

No matter what Gabriel intended to do, it was obviously not something that could be revealed. Zhang Heng was not naive enough to think that Gabriel believed he’d keep the secret from him. Hence, it was not hard to predict what Gabriel would do to him after the whole thing was over.

Zhang Heng needed to make a quick decision if he should risk it or not. If it were purely for the reward of the ten koban, then he would turn around and leave—he had made a lot of money during this period anyway, and Akane Koyama had mentioned she wanted to exempt his rent. However, Zhang Heng rejected her offer. No matter what, he could continue being a translator for Gabriel, except he might not receive as much money as he did.

But what interested Zhang Heng was the people Gabriel worked with.

Now, he knew that it was the shogunate who’d been following Gabriel all this while. It could only mean that Gabriel was most likely siding with Tobaku. And it happened that Zhang Heng was looking for Juzumaru, and Kirino Toshiaki might fall in the hand of Tobaku supporters.

Zhang Heng found it hard to say no to Gabriel. This was the only useful clue he had at the moment. Since he was confident in his swordsmanship, Zhang Heng said yes to Gabriel after a short while considering. The latter seemed relieved.

“Excellent, let’s meet at our old spot tomorrow night.”

Chapter 564 Ukichi

Akane had no idea what Zhang Heng was up to tonight.

Before he left, all he said to her was, “Going to work. Don’t leave any food for me,” before he walked out of the dojo with his sword.

Akane thought it was just the regular affair since Zhang Heng had gone out for work a couple of times before, though not often, so this time should not be any different.

The fact was, she did not have the capacity to worry about such things right now. Ever since their trip to the temple, her feelings towards Zhang Heng had changed. She did not know what it was, or perhaps she had an inkling of what it was, yet unwilling to admit it. Women’s minds were as murky as the reflection of the full moon on the water.

Other than her relationship with Zhang Heng, Akane had other worries too—the most important one being Koyama dojo’s survival and development. Because they needed students, she was forced to offer

free training and meals to attract poor parents in sending their kids to the dojo. However, it also meant that her funds would be sorely strained.

Even though Zhang Heng rejected her offer to let him lease the yard for free, the rental alone was insufficient to feed that many mouths. Akane had been agonizing over ways to increase the dojo's source of income but to no avail.

As she racked her brain, she noticed a stranger standing outside the dojo looking in. Pointing sternly at the bokuto on his chest, she barked, "Who sent you here?!"

"Huh?!" the frightened stranger stumbled backward.

"Is this Koyama dojo?"

"Can't you see read what's written on the plaque above the door?" Akane did not let her guard down.

"I... I saw it. It's just that I didn't expect it to be so... direct," said the stranger. "Have you come to be beaten up?!" Akane almost shouted. How dare this shifty-looking bugger criticize the dojo! "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" The stranger quickly apologized. "I know that Koyama doesn't like chasing fame and fortune. This is just the right place... To tell you the truth, I actually came here to be an apprentice."

"Huh?" Akane withdrew her bokuto and looked at the stranger with suspicion. "Why have you come to Koyama dojo to be an apprentice?"

The stranger was surprised by the question and Akane's skepticism.

"Because... I want to be the best samurai in the world?" answered the stranger cautiously.

That expression combined with his seemingly wretched appearance was hilarious; even more so, the solution to his ambition to become the world's number one swordsman was to come to the impoverished and starving Koyama dojo. Akane was convinced the stranger in front of her was just tugging her chains. So, she raised her book again and growled, "You arrogant bastard, prepare to die!" "What?!" The stranger shouted. He could not understand why he had to be punished for telling her the truth. Could this be part of an entrance test? No wonder the people of this school were so fierce.

Zhang Heng had gone to the meeting place to meet up with the French merchant. Today, Gabriel was dressed in a tuxedo, and his hair meticulously combed, and he looked refreshed. When Gabriel saw Zhang Heng arrive, he waved and announced their destination. "Hi, Mr. Yuta. We'll be going to Gion tonight." Gion was located to the east of the Kamo River. Originally, it was just a street in front of Yasaka Shrine. Then in 1665, the Edo Shogunate allowed the establishment of tea houses, before being eventually developed into a famous hanamachi or geisha district. Gion saw its golden age around the Edo period. It was said that there were three thousand geishas here and was the preferred spot for all men to satisfy their desires.

The person who invited Gabriel to this place clearly knew of the French merchant's hobbies.

But Gabriel was in no hurry to get there. He brought Zhang Heng to a stall for food and only left when the sky turned dark. They made their way slowly to Gion, confirming Zhang Heng's theory. Obviously, it was inconvenient for the person the Frenchman was meeting to be seen in public, which was why the banquet was delayed to this hour. Anybody wanting to join the meeting would have the cover of night,

thus avoid being seen by anyone. Could the person be Kirino Toshiaki, the one everyone in Kyoto was looking for?

Even though Zhang Heng hoped this was the answer, he knew that the cunning French merchant only contacted the anti-shogunates to discuss business. Moreover, an executioner like Kirino Toshiaki knew nothing about business at all. Of course, it did not mean that he wouldn't want to tonight. Even if he wasn't the host of tonight's banquet, there was a chance he could be bodyguard, so Zhang Heng did not completely give up hope.

Zhang Heng followed Gabriel into a tea house named Ukichi, and immediately, he could sense that something was different. From the waiters at the entrance, the dancers they passed in the corridor, to the smiling lady boss, Zhang Heng could sense that all of them had martial arts training before.

Zhang Heng realized that his theory was flawed. The host had chosen this place not to satisfy Gabriel's manly needs but because this was the secret meeting place of anti-shogunates. Zhang Heng was even more curious about the host of the banquet tonight. Taking such measures to maintain confidentiality and security could only mean that this person was someone big. But Zhang Heng pretended to be indifferent.

They walked through a corridor and came to the middle of the courtyard, where a hostess blocked Zhang Heng's path.

She bowed politely and said, "Sir, Ukichi is a place for pleasure. Please, leave your katana behind."

"But I'm not here to seek pleasure," answered Zhang Heng.

The hostess merely smiled in reply but did not move away.

Seeing the tension build up between his translator and the hostess, Gabriel quickly interjected. "It's alright, you can leave your sword with them for safekeeping. It's just a banquet. There won't be any danger. You can come back and collect it after dinner."

"This is a relic from my ancestors. I cannot part with it," Zhang Heng insisted. The truth was, he had simply borrowed it a few days before, and it happened to be the sharpest and sturdiest one. He brought it with him for the battle that might take place tonight.

Chapter 565 Bushi

Gabriel could not help but bemoan these samurais for being so clueless. He did not understand why they would dwell on something meaningless. It was just katana, and they could have only deposited their weapons here first. Maybe they were afraid that their precious swords would be stolen. It was unnecessary to get into a stalemate for such a trivial matter.

As he wiped the sweat off his brow, Gabriel attempted to persuade Zhang Heng again. On the other hand, someone walked up to the maid and whispered a few words to her.

In the end, the maid said, "You can bring your wakizashi with you, but you must leave your katana here."

Zhang Heng knew that it was the most significant compromise the other party was willing to make. He did not want to ruin this trip tonight because of this incident—his goal—to meet the person behind this whole thing. So he nodded and agreed to the opposing party's request. However, instead of handing

over the katana to the maid, Zhang Heng planted it in the courtyard. “Don’t move it. I will retrieve it when I leave.”

The maid did not object to Zhang Heng’s instruction, merely bowing again. “A very warm welcome, to our distinguished guests of Ukichi. Please, allow me to make up for the disrespect.”

Without so much as waiting for Zhang Heng’s reply, she pulled out a tanto from her waist and turned to stab her chest. It happened so quickly that Gabriel did not even realize what was going on. The tip of the tanto had pierced the maid’s delicate skin and was on its way to her heart. However, at this critical moment, a scabbard blocked the tanto.

“Don’t do it. I have forgiven you,” replied Zhang Heng earnestly.

And Gabriel, standing beside Zhang Heng, was taken aback by what he saw. To him, they were a bunch of lunatics that were about to commit an inconceivable act in front of him. While he was persuading Zhang Heng earlier, he thought that the maid should have minded her own business. Now, he was even more horrified by the maid’s inordinate method to redeem herself.

It was just a small mistake. No, it was not even a mistake. The maid was only performing her duty and was following the rules. Stabbing herself was unnecessary. In utter disbelief, Gabriel shook his head repeatedly.

Zhang Heng knew very well that the people in this tea house were probably not just samurai. They could be bushi. Only men like them could be so cavalier towards life—not only the lives of others but also their own lives. “Please come with me.” Although an unpleasant incident had happened earlier, the lady boss still kept her expression unchanged and led them. By then, Zhang Heng had already put away his wakizashi and followed behind the boss as if nothing had happened between them. Gabriel was bewildered, but he trailed them anyway after a while.

The lady boss then opened the shoji for them, where, already, some people were sitting in there. Most of them were samurai, and some geishas were accompanying them. One was playing the shamisen, a traditional Japanese instrument, another two danced, and the rest poured wine for the guests.

Seeing Gabriel walking into the room, one of the older samurai and some other samurais stood up to welcome him, and at the same time, took the opportunity to introduce him to the rest of the room. On the other hand, Zhang Heng took a quick look at the many samurai sitting in the room, and it seemed Kirino Toshiaki wasn’t present. To his surprise, he met someone he knew there.

It was Shinji Takeuchi.

The latter had gone to Akane’s dojo with Yamada to challenge her. After Yamada’s hand was cut off, Zhang Heng thought Takeuchi would stand up and avenge his companion, but he did not expect that Takeuchi would claim that he was weaker than him. So, he carried Yamada and left the dojo—the reason why Zhang Heng remembered him.

Takeuchi’s expression suddenly changed upon seeing Zhang Heng. He seemed to be taken by surprise that the latter would appear here tonight. But in the end, he managed to squeeze a smile and a nod at Zhang Heng.

“Takeuchi, do you know each other?” the older samurai asked as they curiously witnessed the scene.

“We met once.” The smile on Takeuchi’s face was somewhat forced. The Koyama Dojo incident was so embarrassing that he wanted to tell nobody about it. After the brief introduction, Zhang Heng roughly figured the identities of the group of people in the room. Most samurai were from the Choshu and Satsuma domains, but Matsuo and Takahashi weren’t among them. Zhang Heng guessed that their clearance level was probably not high enough; hence they could not participate in the banquet.

Zhang Heng did not forget the task he was supposed to be doing here. After taking a seat, he translated the samurai’s questions to Gabriel, and in return, each of Gabriel’s answers to them. However, at this point, both parties were discussing pointless niceties, including Gabriel’s impression of Kyoto, France’s current situation, and that of other European countries. The elder samurai apologized to Gabriel, saying that he would have to wait a while before the important person arrived. Gabriel nodded to express his understanding.

Many Japanese of that era had begun to study the West and had put more effort into understanding the world. The shogunate was no longer as hostile to Westerners as the early emperors and barbarian sects. Instead, they were starting to compete with the shogunate for the support of the western powers. This also caused the shogunate led by Tokugawa Yoshinobu to become more and more anxious.

But these things had nothing to do with Zhang Heng. The two parties chatted for a while, and the dishes were served at the table one after another.

During the Edo period, the only meat available in Japan was fish and poultry. However, the ruling class valued fish with little fat. The shogunate also issued regulations that no one was allowed to consume any living beings with four legs. Hence, the people began dumping their sick cows and horses in the wasteland-it was no absolute law, though. Pregnant women and patients were allowed some venison and pork.

Unfortunately, the law did little stop the food connoisseurs from eating the meat. Although the law was in place, people from all over the country were secretly eating and enjoying the contraband. The place where meat was sold was called the ‘monster house,’ where meat sellers typically announced they were selling medicine. It was said that the shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, had a serious liking toward pork.

Most samurai here tonight were individuals keen to learn from the West. Hence, they did mind those taboos, and to welcome Gabriel, a visitor from the distant west, the tea house prepared a red-leaf pot for him.

The so-called red-leaf pot’ was a secret code for venison-meat pot. Normally served with tofu, meatballs, and green vegetables, it was prevalent in Kyoto, and the dish looked so good that it made many drool over it. Coupled with the beautiful ladies around him, Gabriel felt that his presence was immensely valued.

The older samurai stretched out his hand and smiled. “Please, enjoy!”

Gabriel grabbed the chopsticks awkwardly. He then asked a question before eating, “Should we not wait for the master to come first?”

“It’s okay; I was told that we could start eating first,” the older samurai replied with a smile. “As for that business, it’s not too late to talk about it later.”

“If that’s the case, I shall help myself then.”

Chapter 566 Gion Blood War

The geisha sat on the ground, placed the shamisen on her lap, and clutching the strings with her left hand, she held the ginkgo leaf-shaped ivory pick with her right hand. She started plucking, playing a sprightly tune. It was said that most geishas in the Edo period began to receive rigorous training from the age of ten. Unlike sex workers, the appearance wasn’t the only requirement for geishas—the women needed to master ikebana, tea ceremony, etiquette, dance, musical instruments, and have knowledge about different cultures. The effort and energy invested were no less than that of a samurai mastering his sword.

Generally, they were tasked to serve essential guests. As for those geisha who was more famous in this industry, they were allowed to choose their guests. If they did not like a person, they would not catch a glimpse of them even if they had a lot of money. Most of the geishas were only asked to perform their talents. Their circumstance was definitely better than sex workers.

The steaming-hot red-leaf pot, coupled with the beautiful Kyoto dance, entertained the guests and hosts in the tea house to the fullest. The older samurai was good at making someone happy. In addition to the sake, he had specially prepared some French wine for Gabriel, which was also where he originated from. He could not help but persuade Gabriel to drink a few more glasses.

When everyone had their fill of food and drink, someone clapped their hands twice outside the house. It wasn’t loud, but the geishas stopped playing their shamisen once they heard it, hurriedly lowering their heads and cleaning up the place. After that, they bowed and left the house with their heads hung low. At the same time, the Choshu and Satsuma domain samurai returned to their positions immediately. A hint of excitement was especially evident in the eyes of the Choshu domain samurai.

At that time, Zhang Heng knew that the man he had been waiting for was about to make an appearance. Gabriel, too resumed his original sitting position, obviously not accustomed to sitting on his heels. When he first came to Japan, he often complained about the anti-ergonomic sitting method. After sitting in this position for a while, his legs would become numb, and he would cross his legs instead. But now, he decided he needed to show respect to the man he was about to meet.

The shoji door was pushed open from the outside, and the man who walked in first was a samurai with a squarish face. As soon as this person showed up, all the samurai in the house felt an invisible force descending over their shoulders, as if a ferocious beast was glaring at them. The two samurai at the front could not help but move back a little.

“Kirino Toshiaki!” Someone exclaimed in a low voice, “Is he here too?”

Kirino Toshiaki looked unusually tall for a Japanese of this era—he was almost as tall as Zhang Heng, and his shoulders were vast. On top of that, he also had a pair of long arms, and his hands were covered in calluses.

In his youth, it was said that Toshiaki Family was relatively poor, and his father was seriously ill. Thus, to pay for his father’s treatment, he misappropriated domain funds. However, the authorities soon found out, and he was exiled from the domain. At one time, the family could only make money from farming. But Kirino Toshiaki did not give up on becoming a samurai. At the age of 15, he first trained at the

Yakitori Dojo located at Ijuin, before he switched to the Jigen-ryu. When he was 18, his brother died, and his death hit him hard-he had to go home to help with farming.

However, what he had learned in the previous three years laid the foundation for finding his direction. While working as a farmer, he continued to train hard. At the age of 25, he finally mastered his sword. It was at that time that he met Saigo Takamori, the most crucial nobleman in his life. Eventually, he became Kirino Toshiaki, the person powerful enough to terrify the shogunate. No one knew how many people he had killed so far. A glance from him was enough to put fear into a person. Zhang Heng had a different focus, though, paying his attention to the katana that hung on Kirino Toshiaki's waist this goal tonight.

The Juzumaru-one of the five greatest katana in this world, forged by Aoe Tsunetsugu! The monk Nichiren owned it during the Kamakura period, and it was named Juzumaru because the handle was wrapped around by a rosary. As Zhang Heng looked at this famous sword, Kirino Toshiaki was also looking at him. Perhaps it was because Zhang Heng was someone that he had never seen before.

But eventually, he stopped staring at him and bowed to the person behind. "It's cleared. Please come in."

Although most in the room already knew who the person behind Kirino Toshiaki was, it still caused a great commotion when the man showed up.

"Master Togyō! Master Tōgyo! It's really you." "You look fine! This is really great!!!" When they saw the man, many Choshu Domain samurai started to cry.

Although Zhang Heng had guessed that the person who came to Ukichi tonight to discuss business with Gabriel would be influential, he was surprised when he heard the man's name. He was the most influential and powerful person in the Choshu Domain. Shinsaku Takasugi was his real name, and he was supposed to have passed away recently. Master Tōgyo was his other name.

It was no wonder that the sect hired Kirino Toshiaki as his personal bodyguard.

If others knew that the lord of Choshu, who should have been dead, suddenly appeared in a tea house in Kyoto, it would probably cause a great stir and unleash a series of unpredictable changes. But on the other hand, Shinsaku Takasugi risked such a significant risk of entering Kyoto and meeting Gabriel personally. Something big must be going on.

"Mr. Gabriel, we meet again." Shinsaku Takasugi let out a hearty laugh before entering the room.

Although he still looked a little weak, his eyes were filled with vitality. And he seemed fine like any other healthy adult. This sparked a glimmer of hope in the samurai's hearts. In this period of significant change, Shinsaku Takasugi played a great role. Whether it is his political career, military capabilities, or influence in the Choshu Domain, it was difficult to be replaced.

As a result, when news of his death broke out, it was an ultimate nightmare for the Choshu and Tobaku Domain supporters. Gabriel also laughed when he saw Shinsaku Takasugi.

"Well played! You fooled even your old friend."

"A special method must be taken during this special time," said Shinsaku Takasugi.

“Special method? It seems you have made up your mind.” Gabriel felt excited, and he instantly sobered up. “Yes, you have been in Japan for so long. I’m pretty sure you know exactly what’s going on right now. It’s time for the world to change. Instead of delaying and continuing with pointless fixing, it is better to break it and rebuild the world again.”

Shinsaku Takasugi wrote, “我曹の快死果たして何の日で笑って待つ四隣に炮声を回くを!” He singlehandedly fought off the shogunate fleet. Even Gabriel had to admit from the depths of his heart that this short Eastern man before him was destined to do great things. It was no wonder that so many people from the Choshu Domain and even the whole of Japan were willing to follow him and serve him.

However, he did not forget his identity just because he was admired. Gabriel finished his wine and smiled slyly, “Then, what do you want from me? And what will I get in the new world?”

Translator’s footnote

我曹の快死果たして何の日で笑って待つ四隣に炮声を回くをA famous poem written by Shinsaku Takasugi.

Chapter 567 Gion Blood War (II)

Shinsaku Takasugi and Gabriel were attempting to work out a major deal.

While the feudal lords were still bickering if they should make Tokugawa Yoshinobu carry out the Taisei Hokan and hold him responsible for the series of mistakes he committed before, Shinsaku Takasugi had made a decision to overthrow the shogunate in Kyoto. His main purpose was to come to Kyoto to meet up with Okubo Toshimichi and Saigo Nakamori and cook up a plan to overthrow the shogunate.

To travel from Edo to Kyoto, they first needed to deceive Tokugawa Yoshinobu. After that, they would use force to detain him. Be that as it may, Tokugawa Yoshinobu had always been very cautious, and he might just see through their plan. If he traveled to Kyoto, he would be protected by his soldiers all the time, not to mention how influential and powerful the Shogunate was in Kyoto. Forces like Gosanke, Sesisanke, Shinsengumi, Kyoto Mimawarigumi and various ronin groups took the shogunate’s side. And if Choshu and Satsuma Domain soldiers came to Kyoto, Tokugawa Yoshinobu would certainly be alerted. There was a high chance a fierce battle would break out between them.

This was not what Shinsaku Takasugi and Okubo Toshimichi wanted to see. The two still hoped to complete the exchange of power through a court coup. This was to protect and preserve Japan’s Genki. However, the feat would require more manpower to be achieved, which meant they needed to send these people into Kyoto without the shogunate’s knowledge.

So, in the end, they decided to place their hopes on Gabriel, a French businessman.

Shinsaku Takasugi had started to contact and cooperate with Gabriel as early as the time Choshu Domain were reforming and strengthening their military—he knew Gabriel had a lot of connections—his hands deep in the business of cotton yarn, iron cannons, and matchlock guns. Even the two new battleships, one being the infamous Heishin-maru that Shinsaku Takasugi bought was made possible by Gabriel. Since he was French, few dared to inspect the cargo on his vessels.

Shinsaku Takasugi hoped to order a batch of weapons from Gabriel and secretly transport them to Kyoto aboard a cotton vessel. At the same time, a three-hundred-man samurai squad would serve as the

secret weapon against Tokugawa Yoshinobu—these would be transported to Kyoto through the cargo ship as well. To make it possible, Satsuma and Choshu Domain were willing to fork out ten thousand koban.

Gabriel, however, did not immediately agree. It was a businessman's nature to go after more profits, and there were no exceptions when it came to that. Unfortunately, Gabriel turned out to be the stereotypical industrialist with voracious greed. His business in Japan over the years had made him a lot of money—the reason why he was inclined to give careful thought before accepting Shinsaku Takasugi's proposition.

At the same time, Gabriel and other Western businessmen silently observed the civil war in Japan. To protect themselves from the barbarians, the United Kingdom, America, France, and the Netherlands launched a retaliatory attack on Shimonoseki. That said, most foreigners still tried their best to avoid getting involved in a Japanese civil war.

A good example would be when Shinsaku Takasugi defeated the shogunate during the second Choshu expedition—Western nations merely observed them from the beginning to end. Judging by the current situation, both the shogunate and the Tobaku had an equal chance to claim victory. Tobaku supporters were known for their assassinations of westerners, but they had changed over time, and they were the ones that opened up Japan for westerners to do business. Meanwhile, the shogunate led by Tokugawa Yoshinobu was just the opposite. Having previously cooperated with westerners, they now wanted to lock down the country, preventing them from entering Japan. For these reasons, the Western countries had no intention to support either of the two.

Such a political investment was precarious. If it failed, the next ruler would treat the investors as the enemy. On the other hand, it could also be extremely profitable. Although Gabriel didn't say yes to the deal, he didn't explicitly refuse it as well—an indication that Shinsaku Takasugi should increase the amount of koban offered.

The samurai in the room began cursing Gabriel for his insatiable greed. Gabriel, nonetheless, had the power to make the call right now. If he said no to the deal, soldiers from Choshu and Satsū would not travel to Kyoto. In other words, their plan would fall apart.

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Zhang Heng was actually a little surprised. Historically, Ōkubo Toshimichi and Saigo Takamori were the main forces that brought down Tobaku. It was simply that it wouldn't happen so soon—in fact, the Tobaku supporters could afford to drag on a little longer. Hence, Tokugawa Yoshinobu initiated Taisei Hokan and took the initiative to return the shogunate's power to Emperor Meiji in exchange for position and rights in the newly formed government. He first pushed himself to the end of the road, then forcing himself to figure a way to get out of this sticky situation, which was no less an impressive feat.

Now, not only did Ōkubo Toshimichi and Saigo Takamori run out of excuses to execute a coup, they even managed to successfully divide the Tobaku forces. After completing the move to restore Emperor Meiji's return to power, people started to side with Tokugawa Yoshinobu. More and more people wanted him to join the new government. In retrospect, Ōkubo Toshimichi and Saigo Takamori were only becoming more and more isolated.

Forced into desperation, they transferred troops to Kyoto as a last resort. At that time, the Satsuma Domain had no advantage over the shogunate, but Saigo Takamori triumphed over the shogunate army three times larger than his own. The battle of Toba Fushimi had determined the course of the time.

Compared with history, Shinsaku Takasugi was still alive and kicking. This was undoubtedly a significant variable. He came to Kyoto before he was fully recovered and talked happily in front of everyone. He might hide from the samurai in the tea house but Zhang Heng's improved observation skills acquired from the Deductive Reasoning quest allowed him to see that Shinsaku Takasugi was living on borrowed time.

It might also be the reason why he could not wait to do something big. He wanted to catch a glimpse of the new era that he created before he died. But before that, he still needed to negotiate the current deal with Gabriel. The French businessmen had a ravenous appetite, and the ten thousand koban they offered wasn't about to satisfy him. The Shinsaku Takasugi, however, had their bottom line too. Although keen to learn from the West, many were reluctant to allow westerners to interfere in their country's affairs.

Among those was Saigo Takamori.

The Convention of Kanagawa caused the shogunate to lose its reputation among the people. It was a mistake that the new government vowed to never make again. Therefore, according to the agreement made by Shinsaku Takasugi and his group, Gabriel could negotiate for more money, but that would be all. If he wanted something else, he had to find another way, even if it meant postponing their plan.

The negotiation had entered a stalemate, and to prevent miscommunication due to the nuances of different languages, both sides brought their own translators. Simultaneously, they could also correct the other's translation errors to ensure that their intentions were made known to the other party.

But Zhang Heng's mind was not on this business meeting. He had been thinking about how to get the Juzumaru hanging around Kirino Toshiaki's waist. And the most important thing was how to get out of hanamachi alive. Since the person who came here tonight was Takasugi Shinsaku, they couldn't let a temporary translator like him walk out of this tea house alive. Once the two parties agreed on the deal, he would be no longer useful for them.

Chapter 568 Gion Blood War (III)

There were more than twenty samurai in the room, but Kirino Toshiaki, one of the four Hitokiri, was also present.

With only a wakizashi, even an excellent swordsman like Zhang Heng would not be able to take them all on his own. Zhang Heng also considered the option of taking a hostage. The person with the highest value was obviously Choshu leader Shinsaku Takasugi, who happened to be one anti-Bafuku movement's most important members. His days might be numbered, but once Zhang Heng put a knife around his throat, not a single soul in the room would move a muscle.

That said, standing right beside Shinsaku Takasugi was Kirino Toshiaki, clearly here tonight to deal with situations like that. The man was silent as a rock, but Zhang Heng could sense his eyes following his every move.

Although unpleasant, it was expected, since Zhang Heng and Gabriel were the only ones not part of the anti-Bafuku group. And compared to Zhang Heng, who brought a sword with him, the French businessman looked completely harmless. Even an idiot could tell who was more of a threat.

Of course, Zhang Heng was extremely swift with his sword, a lot faster than most people thought.

If Zhang Heng suddenly attacked Shinsaku Takasugi, Kirino Toshiaki might just be unable to protect him. But Zhang Heng's goal wasn't to terminate Shinsaku. If he did, it would be like shaking the hornet's nest. There was no way Zhang Heng would get out of there alive.

If it were a one-on-one fight, Zhang Heng had nothing to worry about. But in such a tight space, if everyone were to lunge at him all at once, the whole situation would become really dangerous. If threatening to kill Shinsaku Takasugi turned out to be unsuccessful, then Zhang Heng would have to settle for the next best thing and use the French merchant as his shield. The anti-Bakufu clearly needed Gabriel alive. Diplomatic issues aside, if Zhang Heng were to kill him, there would be no one to help them transport weapons and troops into Kyoto.

On the other hand, they had to contemplate one possibility—news that Shinsaku Takasugi was alive might get leaked if they let Zhang Heng escape.

Once Tokugawa Yoshinobu heard of the news, he would be able to surmise that the anti-Bakufu was cooking up a plan to overthrow him. Even if he was half-witted, he wouldn't risk his life by coming to Kyoto. Moreover, the Kyoto Mimawarigumi and Shinsengumi would most probably gird up their loins—who was to say that the Ikedaya incident would not repeat itself?

Zhang Heng was never the kind to allow anyone to decide his fate. It would not surprise him if these anti-Bafuku warriors chose to sacrifice Gabriel's life just so they could get their hands on him.

After all, while it might be difficult to find another shipper, losing a partner was better than risking the whole plan being exposed.

So, Zhang Heng decided that in any case, he had to retreat to an open space outside so that whether he chose to fire or flee, he would still be in control. Halfway through the transaction, after both sides had agreed on a framework and were further refining the contract details, Zhang Heng asked to be excused to use the facilities.

Shinsaku Takasugi gave his consent with a nod, even joking that the sky was dark outside and he should be careful not to stumble into the latrine.

Other than Kirino Toshiaki, the entire room was filled with laughter and excited chatter, and the atmosphere seemed harmonious. The French businessman even patted Zhang Heng on the shoulder, commending him for his service tonight. He even said that he would raise Zhang Heng's salary. Nonetheless, Takeuchi, who was sitting at the corner, seemed distracted.

Zhang Heng got up, opened the shutter door, and walked out. When the doors behind him closed, he saw the maid who had previously stopped him in the courtyard.

She was carrying a lantern, and against the darkness, it made her look like a wandering soul.

"The outhouse is the other way."

“Thanks, but I want to stretch my legs for a bit,” Zhang Heng answered.

But the maid merely repeated in a monotone: “The outhouse is the other way. If, however, you had a sudden change of mind, then please return to the house. It’s cold here in April, and you should be careful not to catch a cold.”

Zhang Heng smiled back at her and set one foot on the courtyard, ignoring her warning,

The maid drew a deep long sigh. A convoluted look flashed across her icy face. “I’m afraid you don’t understand the significance of your step.”

“No, it’s the first I’ve heard of a teahouse that doesn’t allow its customers to leave,” replied Zhang Heng as he walked towards the woman.

“That is really... such a pity,” said the maid, shaking her head, her slender hand gripping the hilt of her sword. Then she looked Zhang Heng in the eyes. “Forgive me, but I have a duty to fulfill.”

As soon as she said that, a fierce blade of wind hit the nape of Zhang Heng’s neck.

The attacker was standing on the roof of the tea house, waiting quietly like a black cat. It was not until he took the step that represented death that he suddenly jumped down from the sky, taking a swipe at Zhang Heng.

It was a stealth technique used by assassins silent and deadly, just like death itself. Perhaps ninjutsu from Kai province was interwoven between its moves, making it difficult to guard against.

The blade was seconds away from Zhang Heng’s neck, but suddenly, a wakizashi appeared out of nowhere and pierced through the assailant’s jaw. The tip of the weapon reemerged at the top of his head, mottled with warm, red blood.

This gift from Chiyo’s parents turned out to be a fine sword—its sharpness was in no way inferior to some of the more famous swords. The assailant’s veil fell, and Zhang Heng recognized her.

It was one of the geisha who performed for the guests.

This really was the anti-Bafuku’s base in Kyoto, and the seemingly tender geishas and maidservants were actually Bushi-trained by the sect.

“This is going to be a problem.”

Zhang Heng drew a deep breath. Ukichi tea house covered a vast area, and so were its numerous geisha and maidservants. If they were really all the anti-Bafuku’s bushi, then Zhang Heng would be very busy tonight. But it was too late to turn back and return to the house. Now packed with warriors, including Kirino Toshiaki, the outdoors gave him more space to move around.

The maid who had just witnessed the tragic death of her colleague gave off an indifferent disposition. Perhaps she didn’t draw her sword immediately to repay Zhang Heng for saving her from suicide. Instead, she just stood there, waiting for him to pick the sword he’d buried into the ground earlier that evening.

“I’ve heard of the famous Gion long before I came. Who would have thought that I’ve to kill my way out on my first visit here,” said Zhang Heng as he drew his sword. “Now, whoever wishes death can come here!”

Chapter 569 Gion Blood War (IV)

In the courtyard shrouded in darkness, enemies were waiting to land a critical hit on Zhang Heng. Zhang Heng’s words were like a chant that opened the doors of hell, breaking loose minions of bloodthirsty evil spirits. They charged at Zhang Heng like moths attracted by the fire. The maid carrying the lantern adjacent to them finally drew her tachi. At the same time, at least three knives slashed at different parts of Zhang Heng’s body.

In a moment of life and death, Zhang Heng did not lose his calm, firmly holding the katana with one hand and his wakizashi in the other.

He had challenged many dojos in Kyoto, and besides the fact that he was looking for legendary katana, he wanted to observe the swordsmanship of different sects and learn from the best. Although his swordsmanship was still at Lv.3, Zhang Heng felt that he had made some progress. Unlike when he first came here and got defeated by relying solely on his basic attributes, he now had learned many combos. Although he could not incorporate all these combinations into one, he could use different combos according to the situation.

For example, since Zhang Heng was surrounded right now, the Niten Ichi-ryū would be the best method to deal with them. Holding the wakizashi in his left hand and holding the katana in his right, he managed to block the two Tachi that slashed at his left leg and lower waist. The attacker was a woman even though she was skillful on the Tachi, she would still possess less strength than men no matter what. The moment her Tachi collided with Zhang Heng’s katana, he exerted all his might into blocking her attack, managing to force her to drop her Tachi.

Zhang Heng quickly utilized this small gap, swinging the wakizashi to the front of his forehead. And he managed to block the incoming third slash. At the same time, he swung his katana and sliced off one of her arms before she could land another strike on him! The blood splattering on the ground further intensified the courtyard’s atmosphere.

Zhang Heng did not stand there and wait for his enemies to surround him. Instead, he retreated while defending himself. At the same time, he was looking for weakness in the encirclement—this allowed him to showcase the quintessence of the Niten Ichi-ryū. Miyamoto Musashi was not only a samurai but also a master of war. In the famous duel at Ganryu Island, Musashi defeated the most powerful samurai, Sasaki Kojiro, with a unique strategy.

Musashi’s swordsmanship was flawless, and he defeated his opponent with his masterful skills. Besides, he did not limit his creativity on his attacks. When it came to Zhang Heng, he became even more imaginative. Since Zhang Heng was holding two weapons of different lengths, his moves were extremely unpredictable. It caused many of his enemies to be seriously injured.

These samurai really lived up to their name. Even if their companions were dying nonstop, their eyes held not the slightest hint of fear, and even if their limbs were severed, they would charge at their enemies.

Who cared if Zhang Heng were to chop off their heads—they would still charge at him with no hesitation, all to create opportunities for their companions. This was how they fought. All they knew was to continue attacking their enemies, even if it meant certain death. Retreating was never an option for them!

Many of them were adopted by powerful and influential sect members since they were still a child. Some of their family members received great help during their most difficult times. So, they were willing to offer themselves to those who help their families. The ancient training method allowed them to abandon all the emotions. They were also taught to fear nothing. In other words, their purpose of living was to complete the tasks given to them. Often, it could help them to burst out terrifying combat power.

Under such a violent offense, no matter how powerful the person, it was impossible for them to leave the battlefield unharmed. Zhang Heng's left arm, calf, and waist were slashed one after another. Fortunately, they were just light injuries. Two of the injuries were caused by his underestimation of his opponent's decisiveness. He made sure that his wakizashi was penetrated the opponent's heart, but the enemy could still rely on his amazing willpower to slash Zhang Heng with his Tachi. There was even an enemy who left a row of teeth marks on his wrist.

However, Zhang Heng was not polite. The battle of life and death was not a time to pity and cherish jade. In a short period, he had cut over more than a dozen people, including the maid he had rescued before. The deepest cut in his waist was the last gift the other party gave him.

Zhang Heng's heart remained calm, and he did not feel regret for saving the woman earlier. He did not want to watch her kill herself because of a small mistake. It had nothing to do with her trying to kill him right now. Just like the other party said, they were trying to fulfill their responsibility.

All those attackers that wanted to kill Zhang Heng could no longer be considered as a whole human. They had abandoned their lives and feelings. Now, they lived their lives for others and were willing to die for others.

Zhang Heng used his wakizashi to block a sudden attack, and then he aimed for the right timing and used his katana to pick up the burning lantern that had fallen to the ground and threw it at the room where the firewood was stored. He retreated to the burning room and stood there to prevent others from putting off the fire.

Zhang Heng took out the might he gained from the Black Sail quest and started to swing both of his weapons to make sure no one could get close to him. And in that short time, no one could get into one foot within his range.

After Zhang Heng did some calculations, he found out that the people he just killed or injured were probably less than a third of the tea house's manpower. If this went on, he might use up his stamina and die here. That was why Zhang Heng set the room on fire. He was preparing his escape route. The main entrance and the side entrance of the tea house were heavily guarded. It was probably going to be difficult to break through them. However, Zhang Heng still had his Ivi rock climbing skill to climb up the roof and flee from this place. It was also the weakest spot of the encirclement. Although some men knew ninjutsu standing on the roof, most of them had jumped down from the roof when the fight broke out. They were trying to sneak an attack on Zhang Heng, but Zhang Heng eventually killed most of them.

Once the fire got bigger, Zhang Heng would leave the tea house. But at this moment, he suddenly heard the faint shouting from outside the gate, and at the same time, he could feel that the pressure around him had reduced. Did something change? While trying to figure it out, he heard a familiar voice shouting, "The captain of the Shinsengumi first strike team is here! Listen up! Put down your weapons for us to inspect the place! Our director is en route as well!"

After he shouted, his enemies had no intention to do what he ordered. Instead, it only made his enemies fight more fiercely. The tea house people seemed to be planning to get rid of the captain before Kondo Isami arrived here. But what they did not expect was that tonight was going to get worse for them. Before they could defeat Zhang Heng, their sworn enemies were here to assault them without warning.

Okita Soki started to charge into the tea house after he voiced out his intention. The katana in his hand bloomed in the dark, like a butterfly. However, this beautiful butterfly was extremely deadly. His katana cut down anyone who stood in his path.

And he was all alone.

Chapter 570 Gion Blood War (V)

"Don't attack! It's me!"

Zhang Heng heard someone suddenly talking to him.

With the assistance of the dim light, Zhang Heng saw Okita Soki. The latter coughed twice and slashed an enemy in front of him. He stood with Zhang Heng and comforted him, "Don't worry, our people will be here soon."

"Don't lie." Zhang Heng snapped. "You shouted so loudly in front of the door earlier, afraid that they might not know that Kondo Isami is en-route. Do you think they will believe that?"

Okita Soki scratched his head, "Will they believe that?"

"If they did, they wouldn't have allowed you to enter the tea house so easily."

Zhang Heng patiently analyzed the situation for Okita Soki, "Now, they obviously want to surround us here."

"I'm so sorry. Lying has never been my forte," confessed Okita. "I received intel that a mysterious man is here to meet somebody in secret. Then I saw you are inside the tea house as well, and I was worried about your safety. So, I rushed in to help you! There was no time to call the cavalry."

As the two chatted, Zhang Heng saw the lady boss not far away from them, holding something in her hand. The expression on his face changed, and he shouted to Okita, "Run!"

"What?"

Okita Soki couldn't understand why Zhang Heng would run from his enemies. They might not be able to kill every single one of them, but they could at least exert more pressure. There was no reason to flee right now. After seeing Zhang Heng dropping and rolling on the ground, Okita's keen perception of danger as the first master of the Shinsengumi saved his life. He quickly leaned over and dodged a bullet

from the lady boss's gun. When she filled up her gun with gunpowder and bullets, Zhang Heng got up from the ground and lunged at the lady boss. It seemed that the lady boss was an essential person in this tea house, seeing how several geisha and samurai scurried to protect her upon Zhang Heng's attack.

Zhang Heng knew that it was a life and death moment for him. He had allowed the boss to reload and fire a second shot at him. Thus, he abandoned his defense and attacked her with all his might, employing the most potent skill from Niten Ichi-ryū, Mindless Slash, to wipe out the opponents in front of him. He had no intention to leave any of them alive.

In a critical moment as such, courage and determination were all he needed.

The two geishas along the way had their necks severed as soon as they approached their lady boss. They swayed like drunkards and fell into the flower bed beside them. But soon, others took their place, refusing to let Zhang Heng kill the lady boss. He made every step under tremendous pressure. The blood of his victims in front of him had now streamed into a river, and the fire burning in the storeroom had only raged in intensity.

The amalgamation of fire and blood literally transformed the small courtyard into a living hell. During this period, what remained unchanged was Zhang Heng's pace. He was like death, waiting to harvest each soul that was unfortunate enough to cross his path.

In the end, the lady boss started to shake in fear. Indeed, the samurai around her felt nothing, not knowing what fear was, but the lady boss was just an ordinary person. She knew how to fear for her life. When she saw Zhang Heng getting closer, she started to panic and spilled the gunpowder on the ground. What really made her want to retreat was Okita Soki, now rushing towards her from the other side.

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The lady boss finally made up her mind to move to a safe place before completing the reloading process. However, her dismissal caused a loophole in the originally perfect defensive formation. Although it only lasted a split second, in the eyes of masters like Zhang Heng and Okita Soki, it was enough for them to change the battle's tide. Without any warning, Zhang Heng tossed his wakizashi at the samurai that stood beside the lady boss, pinning him to the ground. At the same time, Okita slew the enemies in front of him without any hesitation. Seeing how things had turned for the worst, the lady boss decided to change her escape route, but unfortunately, Zhang Heng had caught up to her. Although the samurai and geisha who feared no death were trying their best to protect the lady boss, there was nothing they could not when faced with opponents like Zhang Heng and Okita Soki. The gap between them was too huge. Zhang Heng could not care less about two katana aiming straight for his chest since their master got killed only a second later. Due to the inertia, the blade did not penetrate deep into his flesh-it looked bloody on the surface, only adding to his unhinged persona. Then, Zhang Heng finally stood in front of the lady boss.

The fear had caused the lady boss to forget that she did not fill any gunpowder and bullet into her gun. She then raised the iron cannon in her hand as if it was her final hurrah, desperately pulling the trigger. Nonetheless, only white smoke came out from the muzzle. After that, her head was detached from her body. No amount of foundation could conceal the fear on her face.

"Excellent! Let's get out from here!!!" Okita, Soki shouted.

Although there were still many samurai in the tea house, there was nobody to command them anymore with the lady boss's death. Hence, their combat power had significantly reduced -a good time for them to break through the encirclement.

However, Zhang Heng's gaze was on the other side. After hearing the names of Shinsengumi and Kondo Isami, the Tobaku supporters who gathered here tonight begun evacuating in an orderly manner. They left through the side entrance-among them, the most important members were Shinsaku Takasugi and Gabriel. Some samurai stayed behind, raising their katana above their heads with the intention of killing Zhang Heng and Okita Soki.

Zhang Heng knew that tonight was the best chance to get his hands on the Juzumaru. Shinsaku Takasugi and Kirino Toshiaki were not going about to appear that often anymore. Especially after what happened tonight, Shinsaku Takasugi might even leave Kyoto. If Kirino Toshiaki were to escort him back to Choshu Domain, Zhang Heng would never acquire the famous sword.

However, Zhang Heng did not act recklessly. He quickly evaluated his current physical state and the success rate and risk of seizing the katana. Okita Soki wiped the blood off his face and followed Zhang Heng's gaze. He then put on a strange look on his face, "Is there any grievance between you and the Choshu Domain?"

"There is no grudge between them and me. I just want the Juzumaru." Zhang Heng said without concealing his intention.

Okita Soki was surprised to hear that. Earlier, he hadn't finished what he wanted to say to Zhang Heng. When he rushed in to save Zhang Heng, he did suspect the relationship between Zhang Heng and the Tobaku supporters. After all, the two had only met once at Kiyomizu-dera. One could never be too careful even if they talked to someone close to them, let alone the two barely knew each other. But this doubt was cleared when he rushed in and saw Zhang Heng embroiled in a fierce battle with the samurai. However, Okita Soki did not expect Zhang Heng to come here tonight just for the katana.