

The Capital of Kyoto was buzzing with busy people especially near Mibu Temple. In Keio first year, people started to live in fear. It was all due to the barbarians—Shinsengumi¹. It was known as a group of killers. They stayed within Maekawa, Yagi and Nanbu Residences all in Mibu area.

I hated them. My father was an ordinary merchant who sold tea leaves and he was accidentally killed because he happened to be in a tea house when Shinsengumi came for a raid. I knew it was an accident, but I just couldn't forgive what Shinsengumi had done to my father. I was sixteen that time and it had been two years.

People had been passing the residences to get a glimpse of how loathsome and supercilious Shinsengumi was. I was on an errand and I decided to stop by to peek into Yagi Residence among the crowd due to curiosity.

Sudden detonation sounded, startling the gathering people. *What was that?!* I crouched down

¹ Shinsengumi was a military organization formed under the sponsor of Aizu clan to protect the town of Kyoto. Most of them consisted of men of low caste (farmers, merchants, etc) dreaming of serving the Shogun.

with my hands pressing on my ears reflexively. Shortly after that a round of laughter was heard.

“Did you see how white their faces turned?” Asked a young man with a pony tail hanging by the back of his head. He had a grey kimono under a bright blue haori² with white mountain shapes on the sleeves. He chuckled teasingly at a man dressed in black kimono beside him.

“That’s enough. Several shoots of blank canon should suffice. We can have peace for now on.” The man smirked.

“Hijikata-san, you sure are a demon.”

“Shut up.” Growled the man called Hijikata whose hair was tied up in souhatsu style³. His hair was so black that it was similar to ink or to ‘a midnight sky without stars’ according to some women in town. He crossed his arms above his chest, staring at the effect of his order dully.

² Outer shirt or jacket. Usually worn for official or formal purposes.

³ Japanese top knot without shaving. The whole hair is tied into a knot.

“Ahahaha! But I’m right!” The young man named Souji made a bee line and disappeared.

Hijikata Toshizo was the vice-commander of Shinsengumi. He was renowned of being called a ‘demon’ for his cruel methods. It was rumored that he tortured a man for information in Maekawa Residence, across Yagi Residence. Being the total opposite to his personality, his features were well defined—sculptured. Pointed nose, sharp jaw lines, straight lips, deep black eyes even his eyebrows were neat like one of the oiran⁴ in the pleasure house—

“—ey! Hey! It’s not good to be peeping you know?” A voice shook me back to reality. The next thing I did was scanning around to see that no one was there except me who was peeking. *Oh no! they are going to have my head cut! I need to run! Huh? My feet are not...touching the ground?*

“You sure are small. How old are you, kid?”

“I’m not a kid!” I tilted my head to look at the one who grabbed me by the collar of my kimono and lifted me up. *Okita Souji, he is Shinsengumi’s First Unit’s captain. Oh no, I’m dead.* I could hear whispers

⁴ Prostitutes with classes. They dance, sing, play instrument, etc.

behind me. Certainly, they were talking about me being dead.

“Oh really? You have been staring at Hijikata-san for quite a while. Why don’t you meet him on your own?” Souji lifted me up on his shoulder, carrying me like a sack of sacrificial chicken to where the demon was. I struggled but his hand by my waist tickled me and it was uncomfortable. Still, I struggled. *If I died, I could meet my father again—but if I could get revenge—oh no what am I thinking?*

“Souji, stop giving me unnecessary trouble. What is this?” Hijikata frowned, looking me in disgusted way. He didn’t seem delighted by my appearance. He irked me a lot or rather we irked each other at our first glance.

“I am not a thing! Put me down!” I yelled, still struggling. Once I finished my sentence, Souji put me down right before those piercing eagle eyes of Hijikata to stare.

“She has been staring at you by the gate. I am sure you can put her to use.” Souji smiled. I had a bad feeling when I saw his smile. It was as if there was a devil behind it. I was already breaking cold sweat under the stare of the vice-commander. *Put me to use? As what?* Anxiety filled my body but there was nothing I could do. Everyone knew Hijikata was not to be joked with. As I waited for a respond from the

crow-like Vice-commander, I remembered my father. My life didn't seem long.

“How old are you, kid?” Hijikata questioned.

“O-older than your mother.” I replied with my eyes cast downward and I regretted that instant upon the spewed words. He didn't seem provoked, however, which made me more nervous for I wondered what kind of torture he would do on me. *Shinsengumi has built many tombs for the dead and I might be one of them!*

“Granny—“

“—I'm 18.” I couldn't believe I took his bait and gave him what he wanted on impulse. I could see a little tug by the corner of his lips. He held it back, keeping a stoic expression.

“Are you married?” Came Souji's question in playful tone.

“Not your business.” I replied without glancing to Souji.

“Oh, but you have yuiwata⁵ hair which means you are not married. You don’t seem to wear any clothes in dark color too. Well, you can be Hijikata-san’s candidate—“

“—lack of sexual appeal. Bring her to my room.” Hijikata interfered as he spun and walked his way. What he had said made Souji burst into a round of laughter as he led me by grabbing my arm.

Souji wouldn’t stop laughing the whole way so I thought I would pray for my chance to run away. *Now!* I shook off his arm and turned to run towards the gate. However, in an instant Souji was in front of me, smiling. In the end, he lifted me up to his shoulder again, ignoring my struggles and shouts. He brought me to Hijikata’s room.

II

The room was clean and neat with piles of books and papers well-arranged above the desk. A wooden set of drawers stood at a corner along with a wooden box commonly used by traveling merchants. It looked out of place but the room certainly smelled slightly of herbs. The window was open, welcoming the sun rays and here I was, sitting at the center of the

⁵ A type of shimada hair style. Usually worn by unmarried girls.

room in front of a very hateful person who was the famous Hijikata Toshizo.

The kidnapper, Okita Souji, sat down and leaned by the sliding door which seemed to be a preventive action in case I decided to flee again. Hijikata sat in front of me, dealing with a few leaves of paper. I was oblivious of what he was doing with the papers. He was staring intently as if he could make a hole out of the papers.

Is this man fond of making people wait—huh? A mosquito. I eyed the mosquito which seemed to be mocking my situation. Without thinking even further, I swiftly switched to crouching stance and reached both arms out to clasp the mosquito in my palms, however, I wasn't aware of another's movement coming from behind me. Souji dashed forward in a flash with both hands stretched forward and he clasped his palms together in unity with my movement. What was different was the target. I was aiming for the mosquito in front of me around the papers Hijikata had in hand while Souji was after somewhere around Hijikata's head.

“What the hell are you two doing?” Hijikata growled. His eyebrows were twitching as he glared at both of us. He put the papers down and looked at me and Souji intently.

“Mosquito.” Souji and I replied together. At this moment, we glanced at each other.

“Prove it.” Hijikata demanded.

I showed my palms to him where the mosquito had bled and died.

“Souji.” Hijikata called for his turn.

“It ran away.” Souji avoided Hijikata’s eyes, whistling a little.

“You are clearly lying! Do you think I can’t look through that? Stop fooling around!” Hijikata barked, slamming his palm on the tatami floor so that it made a low ‘bang’ sound.

“I have no intention of hiding it anyway.” Souji chuckled.

“You—!”

“Bye Hijikata-san! I’ll tell Kondo-san about you having a personal servant! For now, have her pour you a cup of tea!” Souji fled away, laughing. ‘Kondo-san’ that Souji mentioned was Kondo Isami, the commander of Shinsengumi. The giant of Shinsengumi whose mouth could fit his whole fist.

“Souji! Hey!” Hijikata stood up, shouting. He rolled his eyes and sighed. Then he sat back down.

“Let me go.” I said. I was certain that he would have no use for someone like me. I was just a woman and no more. The Headquarters would be full of rude men unworthy of my service, staying here would only be a danger to me. As a mere woman, my euphoria was at stake and I would never sacrifice my happiness—my marriage to Shinsengumi.

“What is your name?” He asked.

“I don’t have obligation to tell.” I refused.

“No problem, I can search your family for it.” He shrugged.

“S-Sayo.” I reluctantly answered. “My name is Sayo.”

“Good. Pour me a cup of tea.” Hijikata said. He sat before his desk and started writing with his brush, probably writing my name for a post called ‘servant’.

“I refuse. I am not a servant.” As if I would pour this demon a cup of tea. I still had my pride as a free person; at least until my marriage. Although an arranged marriage didn’t seem romantic to me as what people described.

“Don’t misunderstand me. I am not talking to a servant.” Hijikata peered at me in a way of looking down. “I’m talking to my dog.”

Huh?! I looked at the demonic Hijikata with my mouth agape. He was not serious about letting me work in Shinsengumi, right? He was not serious about involving a mere civilian in Shinsengumi’s work right? He was not serious about putting a woman in an organization of men right?

“Yamazaki! Are you here?” Hijikata spoke, looking towards the entrance. That moment, a shadowy figure appeared from behind the sliding door. The door opened, revealing a man dressed in black with half of his face covered. He was Yamazaki Susumu, Shinsengumi’s investigator or also known as spy. I knew because I had seen someone with similar demeanor. He crouched down, bowing to Hijikata who passed him a piece of paper.

He didn’t call me a dog...right?

“Find out about her relatives and tell them that she will be working for Shinsengumi. Ask Souji to show this woman around and teach her about her duties. Put her to the room next to my room.” Hijikata ordered.

“Yes sir.” Yamazaki confirmed and exited. The way he moved was very well-refined that no sound was produced.

“A cup of tea.” Hijikata demanded as he looked at me, smirking.

“Demon!” I exclaimed, standing up in anger. I clenched my fists together, irritated that he did not mind being called a demon. *My life is at stake. I will never let this go according to his whim!*

“And you’re a demon’s dog. Know your place, woman.” Hijikata proceeded, his smirk was completely gone. What he said after that seemed like a huge lie to me that I couldn’t believe or rather, I didn’t want to believe it. One thing for sure—Hijikata Toshizo was a jerk.

“While you work here, refrain from wearing conspicuous clothes. Wear Iro-muji ⁶ instead.” He said. “Also, be careful not to fall for me. Do you understand?”

What?

⁶ Iro-muji is a semi-formal kimono with no conspicuous patterns. It stays plain with one color.

II

That day, there was a rumor about Hijikata Toshizou having a woman. With such commotion going on, I refused to step out of my room. Men dropped by Hijikata's room, asking for my appearance. They seemed to know where I stayed since they attempted knocking on my door a few times and offered to show me around the headquarters which I responded with silence.