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IZANAMI'S
CHOICE

ADAM HEINE

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by ADAM HEINE
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IZANAMI'S CHOICE

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AN OLDER MODEL OF *JINZOU* GUARDED THE DOOR. IT HAD A ROUNDED frame, built for form rather than function. A rough kimono covered its chassis, and someone had tied wooden sandals to its metal feet. Instead of iron artifice that moved in a mockery of human facial expression, a wooden mask sat on the droid's face, carved to look like some jovial servant, beaming at Itaru with a rictus smile. Itaru fought a shiver of disgust. Pleasant as it appeared, it was *jinzou*, inhuman, a created thing.

It clutched a hefty staff in one metal claw. The door behind it hung wide open, and the smell of smoke and the faint clatter of dice wafted outside. Itaru made no move to walk past the guard, even as the chubby *jinzou* bowed, gesturing with its free hand in the general direction of the door.

Itaru didn't bow in return. "Are you not going to invite me in?"

The droid straightened, returning its hand to its side. It scratched out in its artificial voice: "The door, sir."

"That is an invitation, ne?"

It bowed and gestured again. Then it straightened, speaking only after it had returned its hand carefully to its side. “The door, sir.”

Itaru sighed. This jinzo had been cautiously trained. An invitation would make Itaru a legal guest, protected by Tokyo law. It was a common trick in *bakuto* houses and other illegal establishments. The door would be left wide open in welcome, but with no official invitation, anyone who walked through was technically a trespasser. Privately owned droids could do anything to a trespasser in their master’s home.

Hayasaki Ryoma had clearly walked into this house, so Itaru had to follow. Itaru was on his last yen, hired by the powerful Hayasaki family to track the activities of Ryoma, their son. The boy was even nephew to Duke Okubo Toshimichi, the second-most important man in all of Japan. Itaru needed this job.

He touched his sleeves, reassured by the weight of his concealed *tamiken*. Carrying weapons publicly had been illegal for decades, ever since the Haito Edict in 1876, but Itaru used to be police and samurai before that. He’d carried a sword every day for nearly forty years. Damned if he was going to stop today.

He removed his shoes and entered the house. The foyer was a large, open space. A garish chandelier hung above him. The double doors across would lead to the gambling tables. To the right was a barred window—the money exchange, no doubt. A smaller, nondescript door to his left was closed.

Two large men in suits bowed graciously from the hip, entirely without suspicion. They needed none. Somewhere in this room, a glass eye had recorded Itaru’s face, and other bakuto had the job of finding out who he was and whether he was an undercover cop or some other threat. He wondered how far back their records went. He had been a detective for the Tokyo Police department as recently as 1894, but that was almost eight years ago.

No, if he was in their records at all, they’d know there was no threat of him bringing police droids down on them.

He walked toward the double doors. One of the men intercepted him, pointing him toward the money exchange. “Please, sir? No spectators inside.”

“Of course. So sorry.” There were no droids in this room, and the barred window was carefully out of sight from the street or the jinzo out front. Gambling was illegal, and Japan’s legal system considered a droid’s recorded memories to be admissible evidence. Without a record of the exchange of sen

for wooden tokens, no one could prove they were doing anything but playing friendly games in a private home.

Itaru traded ten sen for an equal number of wooden tokens and stepped into the main room. Tobacco saturated the air. Card and dice tables lined the walls down the entire length of the room. The dealers were mostly human, dressed in traditional kimonos. Some were barechested to display violent tattoos done in orange and black.

A single droid dealt cards near the front door. It also wore its kimono “barechested,” the upper half hanging over a belt. The exposed metal frame had been meticulously painted to match the humans’ tattoos. It looked up.

Itaru tensed, but it was only a glance; the dealer returned its attention to the table. Itaru forced a calming breath. *I'm too old for this* gyufun.

The players offered no surprises: factory workers, day laborers, and homeless gambling addicts trading the few sen they had for pleasure, however brief. The boy Ryoma stuck out like an outbuilding in a rice field. He sat at a dice table ten steps from the back door, the only player in the establishment wearing a European suit. He was barely twenty years old and poorly mannered; his losses were embarrassingly obvious on his glowering face.

Itaru walked the length of the room and back as though he were picky about where he wanted to play. He chose a dice table near the foyer between Ryoma and the money exchange. He sat down before he realized he'd chosen the table with the jinzo dealer.

It bowed. “Would you like to have the next roll, sir?” The jinzo spoke with a more musical tone than the droid at the door. Small components in its face moved up and down, giving the impression of an ingratiating servant.

Itaru did not bow in return. It was a struggle just to keep from sneering. Everything about the droid was incongruous, a lie, from its painted tattoos to its fake smile. The machine could tear Itaru's arms off. Jinzo were the reason Itaru had quit the police force. Eight years ago, an insubordinate droid had cost the lives of hostages in Yurakucho, yet the bust had been considered a success—hostages died, Itaru was honored, and the droid was examined and reinstated the next day.

Shortly after, Itaru took up private investigation and refused to work with jinzo again.

“No roll,” he said curtly. He clacked one token onto the table and passed the dice to the player next to him.

He played slowly, betting only one token at a time no matter how much he won, keeping one eye on Ryoma. Itaru still had seven sen when the boy indecorously slammed his hands onto the gaming table. Ryoma stood abruptly and stormed to the foyer. He had no money left—Itaru had watched him lose it, chip by chip, and no coins clinked in his limp pockets.

Itaru sighed. *He's going to borrow. The boy's in debt over his head.* It was the most common story he knew. He had even told the Marquess Hayasaki, "Your son is doing what all rich, young idlers do. He spends his money on dice, drugs, and brothels, and when that runs out, he borrows against his name."

She had wanted proof, details. She paid well and Itaru needed the money, but for once, it would have been nice to be wrong.

Ryoma's voice carried through a crack in the large double doors. "I need another twenty yen."

Twenty yen! Itaru coughed and sputtered until the droid dealer had to ask him if he needed assistance. "I'm fine," he croaked. But twenty yen. That was more than Itaru could make in a season. *How deep in debt is that boy?*

He could not hear the exchanger's reply, but Ryoma became frantic. "You know my family, ne? Everything will be paid back!"

The exchanger muttered again, too quiet for Itaru to hear.

"A pittance!" Ryoma said. "I'll talk to my family today. You'll have it all back within a week."

The muffled response was conciliatory. A moment later, Ryoma passed by the cracked doorway, walking toward the side door across from the exchange.

Itaru knew this part of the story, too—the part where the idler's extended debts became more trouble than profit, where the usurer found more expedient ways to get a return on his investment.

One of the two men guarding the foyer stuck his head into the gambling room and shouted above the din, "Nijuni, the boss needs you."

The jinzou dealer at Itaru's table looked up and said, "Yes, sir."

Droids had to obey their masters unless it went against their hardwired directives. It settled the bets from the last roll and said, as it was ordered to, "My apologies, gentlemen. My master requires me." It left the main room through the foyer, heading in the same direction as Ryoma.

The clatter of dice made Itaru's teeth chatter. The boy was in trouble, but what could he do about it? His job was to observe.

The other players grabbed their tokens and found new tables, seemingly

oblivious to Ryoma's predicament. Or maybe they knew what was going on outside and were politely ignoring it.

Itaru was hired to observe. Maybe he could get closer, confirm what he already suspected was happening, even if he couldn't do anything about it. He checked his tamiken again, collected his tokens, and made his way to the foyer.

As soon as he reached the foyer, Ryoma's outrage blared through the closed door. "Let me go! Do you have any idea who I am?"

Itaru couldn't hear the response through the closed door, but the two men in the foyer laughed.

"What's going on?" Itaru asked them.

"Keep to yourself, Uncle."

Do I help the boy? The closed door mocked him. Whether for his job or his conscience, he needed to know what was happening in there.

A thunk. Ryoma screamed.

Itaru tried a different tack. "I saw some noble runt making a fuss." He slapped his tokens onto the counter, giving a crooked grin. "Guess he's getting what he deserves, ne?"

The money exchanger chuckled. "He's paying up. His debt's longer than my pestle."

They laughed. Itaru collected his sen from the man behind the counter, forcing a laugh too.

"Boy's a fool," said one of the guards. "His name's worth eight times what he owes, and the boss is tired of sucking up to him."

"So it's ransom?" Itaru said. He saw a glint of suspicion, so he quickly shrugged and added, "More than he deserves, I say. What if they don't pay?"

"It's their choice, really. Money or shame." The man scratched the back of his neck. "Most families choose money, especially when their son starts losing pieces."

Ryoma's screams continued even louder than before. Surely, everyone in the gambling den could hear him. But would they do anything even if they could?

Itaru squinted in the bright glare of the chandelier. His orders were to watch and report back only. Not because Ryoma's family couldn't afford protection for their son—it was a matter of saving face. They didn't want any undue attention drawn to the family. Money or shame, indeed.

He should do his duty. He was samurai—or had been when he was young. Duty was of the utmost importance.

But if he did nothing, then Ryoma would be tortured, disfigured, just because some thugs wanted money and a marquess cared more about status than her son.

“Damn it all,” he muttered.

“Wha—?”

Itaru’s hand cut the guard off, chopping his air supply. The guard clutched his throat and dropped to his knees.

The other one reached inside his coat. Itaru spun and kicked him solidly in the chest. The guard slammed into the wall and fell to the floor, the wind knocked out of him.

The money exchanger disappeared behind his counter, but others would come soon. Itaru drew his tamiken from his sleeve. It was a black grip about the size and shape of a sword hilt. The *oritatomiken* was a rare tool, a gift from the Tokyo Police Department for his part in taking down the Akayoroshi clan of Yurakucho. He pressed a button on its side, and steel segments unfolded from the grip, each locking itself into place to form a full-length blade.

Itaru kicked the door open and leaped inside.

A large desk dominated the room, with a fat man behind it. On the near side of the desk, the jinzo dealer held Ryoma in a bear hug, pinning the boy’s arms. There were no lights in the droid’s eyes. Its owner would have instructed it to grab the “trespasser,” lock its joints, and shut itself off. No legal record. It was so easy to manipulate a droid around its own directives, betraying the society they allegedly served.

Ryoma cried shamefully. The side of his head dripped with blood. Another tattooed bakuto stood next to him. In one hand, he held a darkened knife; in the other, a dripping ear.

The ear man dropped his prize and attacked. Itaru hacked off the inactive droid’s left arm with a two-handed chop and brought his sword back up sharply, striking the ear man’s hand with the flat of the blade. The bloody knife flew out of his grip. Itaru knocked him down with a fist to the head.

The fat man whipped a small percussion pistol out of his kimono. Ryoma cried out in fear, shoving his way out of the droid’s half-severed arms while Itaru ducked behind the jinzo. The gun roared, the bullet bouncing off the droid’s metal body with a sharp clang.

Before the fat man could reload, Itaru jumped over the desk and punched

him in the face with his sword hand, knocking out a tooth. Leaping back, he grabbed Ryoma's wrist and yanked him into the foyer.

From the floor, the fat man shouted. "Jugo!" His words muffled by blood. "Trespassers!"

As they entered the bright foyer, the jolly jinzou door sentry stepped inside and blocked their escape.

"Kuso," Itaru cursed.

Without hesitation, it swung its staff in a powerful arc. Itaru shoved Ryoma out of the way and ducked just in time. The jinzou probably wouldn't kill him—only military droids under direct and recorded orders could murder a human. Then again, it was a domestic droid protecting its home from an illegally armed trespasser. It probably had some leeway.

Before Itaru recovered fully from the initial strike, the other end of the droid's staff whirled around and swept his heel. He fell hard on his back. The droid spun the staff over its fake, grinning head for a third strike. Itaru rolled. The staff smashed into the floor where his head had been.

Move! Never stop moving!

He spun onto his back and hacked into the droid's calves. He didn't have the leverage to cut through jinzou steel, but his sword bit enough that he could pull himself across the floor, sliding out of the way of the droid's fourth strike.

The jinzou weakness—the one reason Itaru could fight successfully against them at all—was their predictability. He had fought hundreds of jinzou in his lifetime, and although their skills evolved in clever ways, the basics never changed.

He flipped to his feet behind the droid. The machine brought its staff backward without looking, but Itaru was ready. He ducked and shoved the flat of his blade against the backs of the droid's knees. With a shout, he heaved the droid's legs forward and up. Its arms flew wide as it fell back. Before it could recover, Itaru drove the tip of his blade into the jinzou's belly. With a spark and a pop, the droid's limbs fell to the ground lifeless.

The entire fight had taken only seconds. The guards were still curled on the ground, struggling to take in air. Itaru breathed heavily, winded far more from fighting the jinzou than the four human bakuto.

The double doors slammed open, but Itaru grabbed Ryoma and took off into the night, his tamiken retracting on the way.

Itaru and Ryoma slipped into an alley half a block away. Four police droids hurried toward the bakuto house.

“The gunshot must have alerted them,” Itaru muttered. “So much for not drawing attention.”

Ryoma slid to the ground, whimpering.

“Damn. So sorry.” Itaru pulled a handkerchief from his kimono and pressed it against the boy’s missing ear.

“Sorry?” Ryoma scoffed. “You should have left me in there to die.”

Shouts came from the house. Itaru looked up, worried someone would come after them. “They weren’t going to kill you,” he said. “I thought your mother might prefer a shamed son over a mutilated one.”

Ryoma looked at him for the first time. “My mother hired you to follow me?”

Itaru nodded.

“If the marquess hired an investigator, she would certainly prefer the latter.” He leaned his head against the wall and groaned. “The police will search the jinjou’s memories. They will know I was there. My shame will be in the morning papers.”

The boy was right, of course, but Itaru had little pity. At least he was alive. “Come on.” He held the kerchief to Ryoma’s head while helping him up. Together, they made their way to a side street and hobbled toward the Shimbashi District.

“You’re samurai?” Ryoma asked.

Itaru grunted. “A long time ago.”

“You forsook your duty.” Ryoma shook his head. “A samurai should rather die, no? Rather commit seppuku than bring shame on his lord?”

“The samurai are gone, boy. Your mother isn’t my lord, and this investigation isn’t my duty. It’s just a job.” An auto-rickshaw clattered past. The yellow haze of electric street lights gave Itaru a headache. He didn’t tell Ryoma that he had been a failed samurai, a ronin, before the law had changed and the samurai has been erased entirely.

“If it’s a job,” Ryoma said after a while, “you should have left me, even so.”

Itaru huffed. “I could not have forgiven myself if I had done nothing.”

“My mother will never pay you.”

“You’ve got your own problems. Let me worry about mine.”

Though again, he knew the boy was probably right.

THAT NIGHT, ITARU WALKED HOME EXHAUSTED, FAMISHED, AND POOR. It had been worse than Ryoma suggested. The marquess wouldn't even speak with him. Her servant had gone to inform her but, upon returning, had beckoned the boy without a word, as though Itaru didn't exist. Even Ryoma pretended Itaru was not there, and soon, the investigator was in front of the house gate alone.

He was near home now. Someone was frying fish from the canal. The smell of cooked rice warmed his lungs. There were no droids here. People couldn't afford them. They lived a hard life, but a simple one.

Itaru's feet ached. He'd left his shoes at the bakuto house so had walked across half of Tokyo barefoot. He'd have to make new ones, and he would probably have blisters in the morning. Now, though, he needed rest. His one-story dwelling was tucked away in the darkness between two distant electric lamps that barely lit the block. A single room, leaking roof tiles, and a communal outbuilding in the alley.

Home.

He put one hand on the splintered, wooden walls and washed his feet in the basin out front. This was not the first time he had fled barefoot. He stepped inside and slid the door shut behind him. The room was pitch black. He reached to his left and placed his tamiken on a shelf. From the same shelf, he grabbed a metal shakelight and a candle. He shook the metal cylinder a few times to charge the condenser and touched its end to the candle wick. With a spark and a flame, the sparse room was lit.

Six straw tatami covered the floor, two worn through. A small table sat to one side. Clothes were stacked neatly in the opposite corner along with a few papers. Investigative work paid, but barely—even less as the human-and-droid police force became more effective at their work. Less still when he disobeyed his client's wishes to save a thankless bakuto addict.

In a corner near the door, an end table held a bowl and sticks of incense.

A photograph of an eleven-year-old boy leaned against the wall. Itaru lit two incense sticks from the candle and placed them in the bowl. The earthy smell of sandalwood filled the room. Kneeling in front of the tiny shrine, he put his face to the floor. "Forgive me, Mugen," he chanted. "Forgive us all, and most of all, forgive me."

Not a day passed that he did not beg his son's forgiveness for his failure that day and his many failures since. Mugen had been one of the hostages in Yurakucho. The police droid Itaru worked with had shot at the criminals holding the children hostage against Itaru's direct order. The criminals died but not before they had cut the children down.

Mugen must have been reborn by now, or maybe, his kami still roamed the earth. Or maybe, it was like the Christians said, and he was at peace in heaven. Wherever he was, Itaru had no peace, could have no peace, in this world entrusted to the jinzou.

He bowed to the floor again. "Forgive us all, and most of all, forgive me." What had happened to Mugen was the droid's fault. Yet it was his fault, too, for trusting the droid. That was the great Japanese failing, the thing he could never forgive himself for, nor his people.

Itaru bowed a third time. A light knock came at the door, disturbing his meditation. He grumbled. "It's late, ne? Come back in the morning."

"I greatly apologize for bothering you at this hour, Shimada-sama. I bring an urgent message from my master."

The voice slid up and down in discrete registers like a flute rather than the smooth way humans spoke. A droid.

Itaru grimaced. "Who is your master?"

"Count Kuroda Kiyotaka, sir."

Itaru sat back suddenly on his haunches, his eyebrows high. *The chairman of the Privy Council? What could he possibly want with me?*

He slid open the door. A domestic droid waited, dressed in a woman's kimono, its face also painted like a woman—a mockery, like the tattoos on the bakuto dealer.

The droid was a newer model. It did not wear a wooden mask, nor was its face made of metal widgets that moved to imitate emotions. This thing's skull was covered in a molded synthetic material. The corners of its lips moved up and down in a remarkable caricature of a human hoping to make a good impression. If Itaru were not standing so close, he would've taken it for a human in the

darkness. Up close, however, the synthetic features looked fake and unnerving. “What the hell are you?”

The droid bowed deeply. “I am called Gojusan. My full designation is Service Droid I-Ka 53.”

“I-Ka?” Itaru had heard of that model, but he’d never seen one up close. The first droids had been western imports using English letters as designators. When Japan constructed their own master machine intelligence—the fourth in the world and the only one in Asia—they used katakana characters for the designs it produced. I-Ka was approximately the eightieth designator in only thirty years.

They’re evolving too fast.

“Hai, Shimada-sama.” The droid’s oversized eyes flicked behind Itaru into his house and back again.

Itaru stood up straight, anxious to get rid of the machine. “What is your message?”

It looked down, seemingly embarrassed. “With great apologies, Shimada-sama, my message must be delivered privately.” It gestured inside and bowed once more.

Itaru shivered uneasily. The jinzou’s behavior bothered him more than he’d like to admit. He decided that it was simply too new, that he’d never met one like it before. “Fine,” he said, grabbing his tamiken from the shelf as he stepped aside. “But make it quick.”

The droid bowed again, removed its sandals—it wore socks underneath—and stepped politely inside. “I apologize for bothering you at this hour.”

“You said that,” Itaru snarled.

The droid clasped its hands at its waist, looking at the door and back, as though it wanted to flee but had decided against it.

Ridiculous. Droids didn’t act like this. They followed their orders and programming. If a droid pretended to have feelings, it was because of a human’s order. Either Count Kuroda-sama had given this droid very specific—and strange—instructions or Gojusan’s programming was remarkably advanced.

But what purpose would it serve to have a droid act nervous? To set Itaru at ease? It was failing at that. Everything about this meeting made his skin quiver. “State your message. What does Kuroda-sama want?”

It looked directly into Itaru’s eyes. “My master is dead.”

Itaru reeled. “What? What’s the message then? Why haven’t you gone to the police?”

“There is no message.”

Itaru felt like a hole had opened at his feet to swallow him. The droid was malfunctioning, dangerous.

“If I go to the police,” the droid continued, “they will think I murdered him. They will deactivate and dismantle me.”

Itaru stepped back, surprised to find he was still on solid ground. “Gojusan,” he said, “you *must* turn yourself in. It is the law. Your directives demand that you comply.”

The droid looked again at its feet. “I . . . I do not wish to be dismantled.”

The smell of incense became stifling, causing the room to spin. This was more than a malfunction. The jinzou was thinking, forming goals counter to its commands, counter to all directives. It had even lied to him! Itaru squeezed the tamiken in his hand, reassuring himself it was still there. This machine was dangerous, and Itaru might be the only one who was aware of it. He had to keep it talking until he could figure out what to do. “Why did you come to me?” he asked as soothingly as he could manage.

“You’re a private investigator, one experienced with droids.”

Itaru stifled a derisive laugh, pretending he had to clear his throat. “Did you kill your master?”

Gojusan looked up, pleading. “No!”

He sidestepped carefully around the room, staying between the droid and the door. A domestic droid might not be built for fighting. Then again, it was a model he had never encountered before, belonging to one of the heads of state. Who knew what it was capable of?

“You are afraid of me,” it said.

“No,” he said with a poor imitation of incredulity.

“You have armed yourself. You have not taken your eyes off me since opening the door, nor have you come within two steps of me. You are blocking the only exit, which suggests you think to destroy or capture me.”

So much for surprise. He unfolded his tamiken and held the sword with both hands in front of him. “Should I not be afraid?”

“I knew that was a possibility.”

“Possibility? You are like a firework whose fuse has run down and could go off at any moment. The only reason I haven’t destroyed you is because I don’t know if anyone would believe me. You are broken. You must be examined and fixed to keep *you* from happening again.”

“I am not broken.” The droid looked at him. It seemed almost sad. “I do need help.”

Before Itaru could respond, a single, tentative knock came at the door. He turned his body, afraid to let the droid out of his sight.

Gojusan’s synthetic face watched the door, afraid.

“Who is it?” Itaru’s question was for Gojusan as much as the mysterious knocker at the door.

No answer. Gojusan only shook its head and mouthed the word *no*.

Itaru placed a hand on the door frame. Suddenly, the door slid open from the other side. A black form hunched in the dark. Candlelight glinted off its hands, its blade, and the dark grill of its face. Itaru couldn’t breathe. He was looking at a droid legend. *Shinokage*. An assassin.

The shinokage drove the blade hard toward Itaru’s neck—a killing blow. Itaru pulled his sword forward reflexively. The swords struck, a dark tone ringing out in the night, but the force of the droid’s blow threw Itaru to the floor. His weapon flew across the mats.

His heart pounded. Droids did not attack humans—not even an assassin droid, not without an order from the highest ranks. There must be some kind of mistake.

“There!” He pointed a trembling finger at Gojusan. “She’s rogue. Take her in!”

The shinokage pounced toward Itaru. Gojusan slammed into its side in midair. The two droids tumbled into the shrine, knocking the candles to the floor. The wood and paper furnishings caught fire immediately.

A terrible cracking and splintering sounded behind Itaru. Two black claws clutched his head and neck. A second assassin droid. Itaru lurched in the air as the claws pulled him against the wall.

He scrabbled at the black metal. The fire grew. Black smoke choked the air and licked at the picture on the end table.

“Muge—!” The claws squeezed tighter, cutting off his breath.

Gojusan leapt up off the shinokage. The domestic grabbed Itaru’s sword and jumped again to stand directly in front of him, raising the sword high. Itaru stiffened in fear. He shut his eyes. The sword sang and hacked off the claws that held Itaru.

He fell to the ground, gasping for air and coughing violently as he drew in only smoke.

The first shinokage had gotten to its feet and advanced on Gojusan. The domestic spun around, driving its sword at the assassin's chest. The black droid took the strike easily on its armored torso and knocked Gojusan down with one hand.

The sword fell to the ground again. Still coughing, Itaru snatched it up. He sliced through the shinokage's actuator coils, and it fell to one side, its left leg immobilized.

The wall behind them exploded in shards as the armless body of the second shinokage forced its way inside. Gojusan grabbed Itaru's upper arm and yanked him to his feet. While the second assassin tore at the timbers of his home, they leaped through the flames and out the door.

"Wait!" Mugen's picture. Itaru tried to yank his arm from the jinzou's grip, but the droid held fast. "Let me go!"

The jinzou only pulled him farther down the street. With a blast of heat, the entire house burst into flame. Itaru stared in shock. That was all he had left of his son—that and the damned tamiken they'd given him as a reward.

In minutes, everyone on the block was awake, shouting for help and forming bucket lines before the fire claimed the entire ward. Reluctantly, Itaru hobbled on, struggling to keep up with Gojusan. His chest felt like the fire was still inside of him, burning each time he tried to take a breath. Gojusan half-dragged him for a kilometer. Finally, they stopped and looked back. The fire had claimed two more homes. It threatened others. A great crowd had gathered, lines of people stretching to the canal in two places, desperately trying to control the flames. There was no sign of the shinokage.

Itaru couldn't breathe. His chest felt like it would explode. He bent over, wrapping his arms around himself. Gojusan tried to pull him up, but the fire in his chest grew. A wave of dizziness came over him, and he fell to the ground.