

Chapter 1

Alpha - The Beginning

One year ago

The end of summer, 1998

From Motoko's eyes

Summer. The time of happiness for most. Everyone enjoys the heat that permeates every facet of the place we live. I feel it is a hindrance due to increased tiredness levels thanks to the untold strain the sun places upon my body. I am happy that it is finally ending. Nevertheless, during my school holidays, I continued to practise my kendo skills at Hinata-sou. I only attempted basic skills on the grounds, since any of my attacks that use larger amounts of my ki will most likely damage parts of the dorm beyond repair. Occasionally I left Hinata for a few days to travel to rural places, letting Haruka-san know I was leaving beforehand, to practise some of my more destructive techniques. I also attempted the secret of the Shinmei School of Thought, the Shinmei-ryu "Zannma-ken Nino Tachi", Aneue's (sister's) forte. I hadn't tried to use any living creature when practising this, so I used two rocks, the smaller one placed in front of the larger one. Still I could not master it, the front rock being sliced in two all the time leaving the one at the back unscathed. However I never let my spirit falter, and continued to hone my skills in other forms of attack and defence, sometimes with my bokken (wooden sword) and almost daily with my katana (samurai sword).

I returned to Hinata-sou after one of these trips. It was soon to be the fall of 1998; another summer has passed me by. The 20th of October, a Tuesday, an ordinary day it had seemed, but then our lives were changed forever. I returned to my room and placed my bokken into my trunk where I kept all my other weapons of old, weapons that helped me to train and become the way I am now, yet obsolete due to their ineffectiveness in real battle. Tired and wanting to lie in the hot springs, I placed my katana on the rack, its place of honour, and was about to remove my clothing until I heard a scream. It came from someone in Hinata, it sounded like Narusegawa. I also heard her scream "Pervert!" which only incensed me further. I snatched up my katana and flew down the stairs to the origin of Naru's screams. I heard another scream louder from outside, undoubtedly Mitsune, so I assumed that the intruder was probably watching her in the hot springs. Shinobu then screamed, this person was going to feel my wrath for traumatising my fellow housemates. I ran outside to the hot springs, only to be met with Suu-chan, who seemed confused and pointed in the direction of the fleeing voyeur with Naru in close pursuit, across the hot springs. I caught up with him, the fool had ran onto the flat roof where we hung our laundry, obviously he wanted a final token of his stay here. When I first laid eyes on him, it was worse than I thought. He was wearing nothing but a towel, a *very* small towel at that, and what appeared to be a pair of girl's knickers on his head, apparently he already chose his token, the sign of a true pervert.

The imbecile had tried to slither his way out of this by saying that he came to ask his grandmother if he could stay at the inn. For over a year it had been a girls dormitory, since Nana left. Naru threw the first punch, straight in the face. While he was still reeling, I decided to strike. Despite being a pervert, peeking at someone, probably Naru, and not even fully clothed, I couldn't place a fatal blow upon him. Bound by the ancient rule of the Shinmei, which was to never kill anyone unarmed, or dishonourably. Keeping the katana

within its scabbard, I struck hard across his left cheek, enough force to knock him out. Suu-chan, who grew attached to me, literally, when I arrived here, felt a little left out, and watching what I did struck a blow underneath his chin, a powerful uppercut since he flew several metres across the ground, the first few in the air. I was shocked at the fact that he was still able to stand, since he had been hit three times, all fairly strong attacks. Mitsune just stood there, her arms crossed watching him with an angry expression on her face, whereas Shinobu-chan looked worried, for him or for her I didn't know. Then Haruka-san turned up, and all became clear.

So this man, Urashima Keitaro, was the grandson of Nana, and a Tokyo University student. Maybe I was too judgmental about his looks. Mitsune then suggested that he stay in Hinata-sou to help tutor them, I sensed that she had some ulterior motive to his staying here. Nevertheless I agreed with her and helped to convince Naru to let him stay, she was still upset that he saw her naked. We then left him alone for a short while until Naru and Suu-chan wanted to check up on him, I decided to follow, only to find Keitaro with a hand on Mitsune's breast. She then cried saying that he forced her. I then threatened him with pain by holding my katana under his chin, until he said sorry. I only saw him once more that day when he started blushing from a compliment from Shinobu-chan, implying he 'liked' her. I reminded him that I was still there, and left him that night. The next day he was hard at work, after what appeared to be an all night study period. Later we learned that he wasn't really from Toudai after all, he lied to us. That hurt me a lot. I then told him that lying was a serious crime, and after all of his shenanigans with members of Hinata-sou he would have to leave the inn. I felt a twinge of pity for him, since it looked like he did not mean it on purpose, so I gave him a chance to say something to ease his soul, and possibly ours as well.

Well he returned upon Nana's instructions. We tried to force him out by making him work incredibly hard, but he managed to pull through, even though any ordinary man would've left before then. This made me respect him a little more, but were dashed once more when he tried to ask me and two others out, although he didn't realise it was three of the residents of Hinata-sou. I then told him what I thought of him there and then, lowering his ego at the same time. Later whilst practising, I sensed a pair of watchful eyes behind me, and threw a small dagger near the enemy. Keitaro, I should've known, I told him that I did not want him at Hinata-sou, and informed him that I might take some drastic action to remove him. Turning to go inside, I was surprised by Suu-chan popping out from a tree branch above. Having let my guard down, I was caught totally unprepared for this and stumbled backwards. I awaited the impact of the floor, but instead was met with a gentle but firm hand on my back. Looking up I saw that it was Keitaro. Furious and embarrassed I quickly regained my senses and jumped to my feet. You know what happened from then onwards, we touched hands by accident, he pointed out some rice on my face, and even saw me unclothed in the hot springs. To vanquish any feelings for Keitaro, the only way I felt was to challenge him to a fight, bokken against bokken, since it wasn't to be a fight to the death. It ended up as a draw as we were both knocked out. It turned out that I spent too much time in the rain that I caught a cold.

Winter 1998

The next few weeks passed relatively quietly, I spent less time outside practising for fear of catching another cold. However it was finally time for me to leave Hinata-sou and go to the Kendo training camp. After finding Keitaro apparently going for Suu-chan, I let him know that I was going for three days. I warned Suu-chan to beware of Keitaro, and told him myself that I would be happy to see the back of him, I could see that he felt the same way,

but he didn't speak it. However once I left I realised that someone would need to be with Suu-chan, since she doesn't sleep alone. She feels lonely being so far away from home, her family living in India, she still wears her bindi upon her forehead. When she first arrived at Hinata-sou, she stuck with Mitsune, she couldn't speak a word of Japanese, and was crying for a while. However Mitsune persevered and helped her around Hinata, showing her attractions and regularly bathed with her in the hot springs, washing her hair and back. There was a sisterly bond between them. Over time Mitsune was able to teach Suu-chan to speak Japanese properly, since she had just started working part time after leaving senior high school, and so had more time on her hands. At night Suu-chan wouldn't leave her be, so she let her sleep in the same room as her, and then that's when she began to do her nightly rituals. At first Mitsune was shocked to say the least, but over time she grew accustomed to it.

The day came when I went to Hinata-sou, I was welcomed by the residents as usual, and went to my room and began to unpack my things one by one. I placed several scrolls on the walls, a rack to put my katana, and of course my futon and ancient samurai armour. That's when Suu-chan rapped lightly on my door, I let her in and invited her to join me in a cup of tea. She gladly accepted, and that's when our friendship began. Being much closer to her room than Mitsune, it was useful for her to transfer all her attention onto me. From that day, Suu-chan became attached to me constantly and literally at night. I must admit, it probably helped my training because it helped to tone my stomach muscles, due to the incredible pressure placed on them. She looks up to me everyday, and I appreciate that, she makes me feel wanted. Occasionally I express my emotions, instead of keeping them bottled up inside, by smiling, hugging her, or even a peck on her cheek. Each time she giggles and returns the favour, since she's aware of how rarely I do these things. However these days I seem to have been expressing them a little too often, and I don't doubt the fact that it was to do with Keitaro. Maybe it was a change for the better. I wonder who she chose to stay with, Mitsune would've stayed away after seeing Suu-chan looking lonely, and I doubt that Shinobu-chan would be able to handle it, so Mitsune might've warned her. The only two people I can think of would be Narusegawa and Urashima. If she chose Urashima and he rejects her, by Kami (God), I won't be responsible for my actions.

The kendo class was good practise if a little easy for me. I am by far the most experienced out of everyone in the class, the sensei (Teacher) included, but I don't let that cloud my feelings for this training trip. I remain focussed, because even the simplest move may trick me. Practising with a partner improves my training tenfold, since there are a many number of ways to attack an opponent, instead of an inanimate object like a tree or a leaf. I would also have to contend with counter attacks and defensive manoeuvres from my opponents, since trees cannot exactly fight back. Keitaro is the only person I have attacked for a very long while; firstly he seems to be indestructible, always getting up after every hit. Secondly, he seems to expect it after a while, so I constantly have to think of new ways to scare him (I never intend to harm him in any way whenever I drew my blade). Therefore he seems to have helped me in training more than anyone or anything else. I smirk inwardly, it seemed ironic that a man would be the person to test my skills now, even after my promise of many years ago to have nothing to do with them. However those times were long ago, and I try to clear my thoughts on the way up the staircase to Hinata-sou.