

Chapter 3

Try your best, don't give up!

The day before the Toudai practice test

Wednesday, December 9th

From Motoko's eyes

It was almost time for the Western celebration of Christmas. Not being Christian I didn't feel the need to partake in the festivities. However Shinobu-chan informed me of the basic meaning of Christmas Day, that a holy man known as Jesus was born on this day, and that he was the Son of God. Suu-chan told me that she wasn't Christian either but that it is always nice to commemorate other religions, as a sign of respect to both the people and culture. I went along with it, so long as it didn't interrupt my training. One of the first rituals was to place some decorations onto a tree that grows on the grounds of Hinata-sou. I didn't hear any mention of these types of trees being present at the birth of this holy man; nevertheless I helped with the decorations. Since the tree was so tall, we could only put a few bits of tinsel and baubles on the lower branches, but it was enough. I offered to slice the top of the tree off to make a smaller replicate that was easier to decorate. Shinobu-chan then started going crazy, waving her hands about and her eyes going around in circles, saying that it would kill the larger tree and that it was not necessary. After a while it looked rather pretty, and that was when Keitaro appeared with Naru. He told us that the Toudai practise test was on the next day, and that if he got a good grade in it he would be able to pass the real exam and get into Toudai. We all wished him luck, although Mitsune felt that he was an idiot for being filled with hope. I sincerely hoped that that he would pass this obstacle, he deserved it really after failing for two years.

I didn't see him until dinner, since he went back to his room to study immediately after he spoke to his kassan (mother) on the phone. He had a bruise on his face, which looked rather suspect since he didn't have it the last time I saw him. Mitsune thought that it must've been from him peeping in on Naru. I snatched a glance at Naru, and she seemed rather angry, so I took it upon myself to caution Keitaro, a verbal warning. He took in what I said and understood me. To ease the tensions between the two, I inquired Naru as to why she doesn't go and fix the hole herself. She asked Keitaro to do it seeing as how he's the manager of the dorms.

Later that night I awaited Suu-chan to enter my room to sleep, and surely enough she did so. However she didn't latch onto me. This was very peculiar since she usually did it immediately. I turned around and saw her smiling at me.

The Revelation

"What are doing Suu-chan?" Motoko asked, "Why have you not attached yourself to me as yet?"

Suu-chan giggled. She sat up and asked,

"Can I talk to you seriously for a moment?"

"Erm, if you insist," Motoko sat up and faced Suu-chan, turning on the light, "we cannot stay up for long, we will need to get some sleep soon."

"Do you like Keitaro?" Suu-chan asked, very bluntly.

"Wh... wh... what did you say!" blushed Motoko, her face turning a bright red and her eyes wide with shock.

"I asked if you have feelings for Keitaro, Motoko-chan?" giggled Suu-chan.

"Why are you asking such trivial questions at a time like this?" Motoko tried to brush it off, "My feelings for him are non-existent."

"I don't think so Motoko-chan, lately it seems that you are becoming more lenient to his actions." She moved closer and spoke more quietly, as if prying ears could hear what she was about to say. "I saw you that morning when Keitaro welcomed you home and you smiled. You've never done that with anyone except to me on occasion."

Motoko's heartbeat slowed down a notch, as she realised she was discovered. "I... I just was accepting his apology, even though it was entirely my fault."

"What is wrong with Keitaro? You would make an ideal couple, he seems to like you, although he still fears you and your katana. I mean I like him!" She beamed at Motoko then.

"I cannot have relationship with Keitaro, Suu-chan," Motoko looked downwards, as if crest-fallen, her hair covering her face, "he still has exams coming up, and it appears that he and Naru are destined to be together, the way that their lives seemed to be linked to one another."

Unbeknownst to Motoko, a single tear appeared from one of her eyes. Suu-chan knelt down further to look at Motoko, and saw the tear fall from her eye onto her own hand. Suu-chan hugged her as soon as she saw this.

"I'm sorry Motoko-chan, I didn't mean to make you upset, please forgive me!" She started to cry a little as she was holding her.

"There, there now little one, don't cry." Motoko pulled Suu-chan back and kissed her on the forehead wiping her eyes at the same time, "You have not saddened me. Such is life; Fate seems to have brought those two together, and who am I to tempt Fate. Allow them to live out their own lives and only time will tell. Now, to sleep, we must get up early to wish them luck tomorrow, and do not breathe a word of what has just been spoken here."

Later that night

From Motoko's eyes

I smiled at Suu-chan, turned off the light and lay down. Suu-chan latched onto my back and promptly fell asleep. I however felt restless, not physically, since I was used to Suu-chan by now, but mentally. I had just confessed, indirectly mind, that I possessed some feelings for Keitaro. I couldn't understand it; he was a weak man, unworthy of my attention, a pervert, and a failure. However there was something about him that was obviously

making me attracted to him, perhaps his ability to survive all of my attacks without a scratch? No, I was sure that it was due to his kindness. Despite the fact that he gets put into some awkward positions, he always picks himself up and says sorry. He helps out around the house; sometimes he even offers to take Suu-chan off my hands for a few nights when he feels I had a hard training session. I never had a truly tiring session, but Keitaro insisted. I always asked Suu-chan if she wanted to swap me for Keitaro, and she gladly accepted each time, saying that he was fun. Even all the times that I lost my temper with him, he still considered me to be a friend.

I cried again before I fell into a dreamless sleep and remembered no more until the next day.

Toudai practice test

Thursday, December 10th

I felt my body returning to a state of consciousness, and slowly regained my senses, and stirred slightly in my futon. I opened one eye and noticed that it was around eight in the morning. A warrior like me who has control over her muscles and bodily functions can also control their body clock. I placed an 'urge' to be awake at eight o'clock in my body, and sure enough it worked, to the nearest five minutes. This was why I did not require an alarm in my room. I looked at Suu-chan and slowly woke her up. She was slightly confused as to why we were getting up this early, I then informed her that we had to wish them luck on their tests, praying beforehand. She nodded seriously, knowing that I always took prayer solemnly and with sincerity. I dressed myself with my usual Shinmei garb, and Suu-chan wore her school uniform.

I then lit up two sticks of incense and place them in a pot on a small table. We kneeled down facing each other, the table in between us, and I said a few words to wish luck upon Naru and Keitaro, which cannot be repeated for fear of imposing bad luck upon the prayer. Suu-chan did the same as I, but in her own unique way. We then sat there in quiet contemplation for around ten minutes, the smell of the incense filling the room. Afterwards we felt more at peace, and happier.

We left the room for breakfast, leaving the incense burning. Mistune and Shinobu-chan were already downstairs, Shinobu cooking some breakfast and Mitsune helping her a little. We said our good mornings and sat down to eat. Narusegawa entered the kitchen wearing her usual 'study' outfit, the Salem hooded top, the short (but respectable) skirt, and glasses, which she uses due to her near-sightedness. Her hair was done up in its ponytails again, useful since unbound it would get in her way when writing out the answers to her exam. Shinobu-chan handed her a bowl of rice, and some soup, and Naru accepted it graciously. She ate it quietly, but quickly, returning to her flashcards when she had finished. When she got up to leave, Mitsune asked her if she was going to wait for Keitaro, and Naru answered in the negative rather too abruptly. Though she tried to hide it I knew that something bad had happened between them, worse than all the other times. Mitsune and Shinobu wished her luck and Suu-chan and I struck two pieces of flint against each other, whilst saying "Way of the warriors". This was a tradition in which 'starting a fire', when the spark appeared between the flint, helped to boost the morale of the recipient. A few minutes later a rather sombre Urashima arrived at the kitchen. He accepted a bowl of soup only from Shinobu-chan, and sipped it slowly and pensively. Afterwards he was on his way out of the door, and we repeated the flint striking. He asked us where Naru was, and Mitsune replied saying that she left a while ago. She further questioned him as to

whether he did something to her again and he said that nothing happened. I knew that he was lying, but it must have been bad. The other times he would say that it was not his fault, yet this time he did not try to protest his innocence, meaning that he was at fault for whatever he did to her. This dismayed me slightly.

The winter of discontent

(Well, two weeks of it at least)

Since the Toudai practice test, I had noticed that Naru and Keitaro were not on speaking terms. Naru appeared to be ignoring everything that Keitaro said, as if he didn't exist, dodging his questions and conversational talk. She didn't even hit him once, which, for Naru, was very out of character. He seemed to be very dispirited after each of his attempts, and gradually stopped talking to her, out of guilt, shame, embarrassment, and rejection. The slamming of Naru's door partition stopped as well, meaning that he stopped visiting her room to try to explain. No one could lighten his spirits, Mitsune tried using her body, Shinobu-chan cooked some of her best meals, and Suu-chan even stayed with him one night (she was gentle). It was less than a week before the test results would come out. I felt that it was time I spoke to him...