

Chapter 5

A very merry Christmas?

Christmas Eve

With Keitaro's last comment they left the grounds of Toudai, on their way back to Hinata-sou. Not much was said between the two, except a few remarks about the snow and late Christmas shoppers. At one point when the falling snow became a small blizzard, Keitaro clutched Motoko's hand so that they wouldn't get separated. She blushed a little at this, but found Keitaro smiling at her, and she held his hand securely. Upon reaching Hinata-sou, they walked slowly up the many steps towards the dorm, since they had travelled far. A few minutes later, they entered the inn and walked into the dining room, where they found the party just beginning. Everyone was happy to see the both of them alive and well, since the weather had become very cold for anyone to stay out longer than necessary. Keitaro then proceeded to apologise to them, explaining his poor result and subsequent decision to leave Hinata-sou, were it not for Motoko's intervention. All the girls except for Naru thanked Motoko for finding him. Motoko wondered why Naru didn't thank her until she found Keitaro talking to Naru, giving her his present. She then asked him to close his eyes, which he did, and she punched him hard in the face, making him skid across the ground for several metres. She smiled after he got up, saying that they were now even.

Everyone sat at the table and picked up the ritual crackers in front of them. They interlocked their arms, holding their own cracker in their right hand, meaning that it was on their left side, whilst grabbing onto their neighbours cracker with their left hand. Keitaro was sitting between Motoko and Naru, the former having placed her gift under the table. After a short countdown they pulled their arms. Keitaro succeeded in getting the larger portions of both crackers. However his feat was countered by the fact that he pulled too hard and triumphed in smacking both Motoko and Naru in the face with the cracker ends he held. This led to him being punched by Naru and a katana swipe from Motoko. He returned from the kitchen (after being hit into that direction), a double plaster on his head, with some bottles of wine, sake and champagne. He also had plasters for Naru and Motoko, whose noses were red from where he hit them, they were grateful for this.

After everyone put on their party hats from the crackers, they looked at their presents from the crackers. Since Keitaro had both ends of the crackers, he returned Naru's one to her, and for a moment their hands touched. Naru seemed to freeze and blush at the same time. They lingered there too long, but were able to break it before anyone noticed, though it was mostly Mitsune they feared. Strangely enough they got presents that in some way fit with the person. Suu-chan got a small monkey with a peeled banana in its hand, all limbs could be posed in any which way they wanted. Mitsune somehow had a miniature bottle of sake in her cracker, which delighted her to no end. Shinobu-chan had a light pink handkerchief with a yellow floral design on the edge, the initials 'M.S' written in one corner. Naru had a keyring with two small boxing gloves on one end. Motoko had a metal toothpick and holder that looked like a samurai sword in its sheath. Finally Keitaro had a portable first aid kit in his. Everyone looked amazed at how these presents seemed to be so personal, but it was all revealed at Haruka-san walked in. She explained that she had been closely monitoring what everyone's habits were and then she placed the ideal gifts in the crackers.

They then read out the awful jokes that came with the crackers, and after a few cringes and groans, they started to open the champagne. Suu-chan was eager to do it and shook

the bottle before slightly. Before she could react, the cork popped out of the bottle, straight into Keitaro's face.

"Aargh!"

He chased Suu-chan around the room as his nose turned red. She giggled mischievously. When he caught up with the much more energetic girl, he was too tired to do anything apart from wheeze, his head bowed down away from view. Suu-chan became worried and walked up to Keitaro and stooped lower to look at his face.

"Gotcha!"

She turned to run away but he caught her, grabbing her from under her arms, lifting her up slightly. She was quite scared, waving her arms and legs rapidly so that it was all a blur, she even called out for Motoko, who watched her carefully, but making no move at all to help her. He moved his head closer to her.

"Hehe, don't worry, I'm only kidding, I won't hurt you." He slowly placed her down and stroked her hair playfully.

She liked this a lot, and immediately jumped onto his back as he walked back to the main party area. The rest of the party went on well into the night, everyone becoming a little drunk and a lot of fun overall. Suu-chan and Shinobu-chan drank very little, being quite young, they were only allowed one or two glasses of wine each, and plenty of food to soften the impact of the alcohol on their bodies. Motoko made sure that Suu-chan didn't drink too much, and Keitaro subtly kept an eye out for Shinobu-chan, the youngest at Hinata-sou. The cake was finished in no time at all, and the other snacks and treats were to last the night. Mitsune obviously drank the most, she managed to polish off a bottle of sake and two of red wine. The others finished off the rest of the bottles, Haruka-san having several glasses as well. Mitsune had fallen asleep from drinking too much, so Keitaro took it upon himself to carry her back to her room, picking her up gently in both arms. Everyone looked suspiciously at him.

"What?" he asked warily, "What have I done?"

Naru walked up to him, arms folded with a suggestive look on her face. "What do you plan on doing to her, hmm?"

He started to panic a little, sweatdrop appearing on his head. "Wha... I don't understand..."

He looked a little at the situation realising what made the others think that way. Yet, at that moment Mitsune woke up, "Hey there, handsome, taking me to your room, eh?" She winked at him, whilst trying to loosen his top.

"Kitsune, please..." Keitaro began to blush, but felt daggers in his back, as he saw the others looking at him. Suu-chan looked curious, Shinobu chan looked tearful, a red aura seemed to surround Naru and Motoko as they looked at him accusingly. *A red aura!* He blinked but it didn't seem to go away.

"Wait!" He cried, "I'm not going to do anything dodgy! I am only taking her back to her room, nothing more, okay?" He breathed a sigh of relief as the others seemed to calm down. "I'll see you all later..."

With that he carried her to Room 205, the room next to his, and opened the door, carefully walking in sideways so that he didn't catch his head on the edge of the partition. He lifted his leg and slid the door closed, maintaining his balance only barely. He lowered himself and placed Mitsune on top of her futon. The light in the corridor illuminated the room, but he sought out another source of light, and turned on a small lamp in her room. She scrunched her eyes when it was turned on, Keitaro angled the beam of the lamp away from her so that it reflected off the rest of the room, and she then relaxed her eyes slightly. He left the room for a few minutes, picking up a small empty glass and a large jug filled with water. He poured some water into the glass.

"Kitsune," he said, gently rousing her, "here drink some of this." He tilted her head upwards slightly as she opened her mouth to drink. She slowly gulped it down and finished the glass in a few minutes.

Keitaro felt that she should go to sleep soon and helped her into her futon fully clothed, removing her slippers at the same time.

"Mmmm," she moaned at the warmth of the futon, and hugged Keitaro closer to her, "so are you going to stay with me the whole night then?"

"Waaaah!" he cried out, being crushed by her vice-like grip, "Kitsune let go of me!" He managed to struggle out of her arms, and sat up watching her.

"I feel like another glass of water Keitaro," she said, clearing her throat, "my tongue feels like sandpaper."

He did as he was told, and handed the glass to her, she was able to sit up herself and Keitaro helped her place some pillows to do so. "You really shouldn't drink so much, it's not healthy for you. When you get the chance during the night, drink as much water as possible, I've left this jug here for you so that you don't have to leave the room."

She sipped the glass thoughtfully, hugging the futon close to her to keep warm, while Keitaro sat there watching her and taking in her room.

"You have an interesting hobby of collecting bottles, Mitsune," he said whilst looking at one wall, where it was covered by shelves and shelves of bottles.

"Some of them are full," she said, indicating a few with one hand, "but I tend to keep the empty bottles of the wines, sakes, and champagnes that I liked, to remind me. Do you mind if we have a chat?"

Keitaro looked at his watch, "Yeah, okay then, but not too late, I have a feeling that I'll be sleeping with Suu-chan tonight, she's been hanging around me since I chased her."

Mitsune put down the glass and scratched her chin, "Hmm, so you have a relationship with Suu-chan then?"

"Wha... WHAT!" he shut his eyes, his tears flying out from the sides of his glasses, "It's not like that and you know it Kitsune!"

Mitsune chuckled to herself, putting a hand to her mouth, since she knew he would have this reaction. She put her hand on his cheek softly, "Hehe, I'm only jesting with you." She then pinched his cheek.

"Itee!" Mitsune let go and Keitaro smiled at her, "Good, because you knew of Suu-chan and the way she likes to stay with someone throughout the night."

Mitsune sat up, and opened her eyes. Keitaro blinked, since it was very rarely that she opened those wise, brown eyes. "You have been thinking about a relationship with one of our fellow housemates thought, haven't you?"

Keitaro didn't even look shocked, he just accepted that it would become plainly obvious after a while. "You've noticed then..."

"Yes," interrupted Mitsune, "you've been studying with Naru for a while now, and I've noticed that you have grown closer since the day you came here."

Keitaro looked away. "I can't tell if she feels the same way for me, she always seems to be angry at me, and we are both competing for the same place in Toudai, so that makes matters worse for us." He sighed sadly.

"Mind you, you do realise that you have been influencing Motoko as well, she was concerned for you when you didn't return after you picked up your results. Much more than the rest of us." Keitaro raised an eyebrow, curious as to why Motoko would do that, "She even volunteered to go out to look for you, alone, without any help."

"Well I have been spending more time with her recently, it's not nice to have a martial artist against you all the time. Out of all of them, I don't know a lot about her. Besides, I do want to be friends with my fellow housemates."

"Is that why you're helping me to bed then?" asked a curious Mitsune.

"Yes, and as I'm the kanrinrin it's my responsibility to look out for the people under my care, and that includes you Mitsune."

She closed her eyes again, resuming her usual foxy look, "Is that really the reason? Or do you really 'want' me secretly?" She grinned wide whilst saying this.

Keitaro sighed. "I think you should sleep now, you're obviously still drunk. Remember that you should drink as much water as you can to reduce the impact of the next day. Sleep well."

Keitaro smiled at her, got up and left her room, sliding her door shut on his way out. Mitsune looked at the looked for a few minutes, opening her eyes in disbelief. This was the first time he didn't overreact to her teasing. He was obviously still feeling down from Naru rejecting him constantly. Or maybe there was some outside force at work.

"He really is someone special, I hope that he picks the right one..."

She finished off her glass and let it settle in her stomach before lying down and falling asleep.

Keitaro returned to the party, receiving many a stare from the girls as to why he stayed so long with Mitsune. He was slightly worried but managed to wave them off without any repercussions. Sure enough Suu-chan stayed close to him when he returned leaving Motoko more or less alone. When the girls appeared tired, Haruka declared the party to be over, and that the next day they would have the Christmas turkey. Suu-chan jumped on Keitaro's back as he waved goodnight to the others, saying that Suu-chan had to go to sleep, and they spent the night together in their usual fashion.

Christmas Day

The next day was mostly a day of rest for all those who drank too much. Keitaro though woke up relatively early, at around ten in the morning. Suu-chan also woke up when he did. They both got changed into their casual indoor clothes on either sides of the central partition, which he closed for privacy for the both of them. They padded around the quiet inn, brushing their teeth in relative silence. Keitaro then went to wash up some of the dishes and trays that were left from the party last night, and Suu-chan helped a little. Haruka arrived at around eleven with the turkey. Keitaro helped to remove the innards and Suu-chan had fun stuffing it with... well stuffing! They then put it in the oven, since it would take a while to cook fully all the way through. The potatoes were put in the oven as well, but Haruka elected not to get sprouts, since nobody ever ate them.

The smell wafted throughout the house, and brought out the sleeping, who were enticed into the kitchen. Shinobu-chan was the first to do so, walking in with her teddy bear and her pink nightgown. Bleary-eyed she looked around rubbing her eyes.

"Good morning Shinobu-chan!" Keitaro said as he walked up to her with the oven gloves still on, "How are you feeling from last night?"

"Oh I'm fine thank you sempai, I didn't drink too..." she stopped suddenly realising that she was wearing very little. She squealed and ran off to her room.

"Shinobu-chan!" cried Keitaro, only to be met with her teddy bear in his face.

Motoko was the next one to enter, she was wearing her usual garments. She looked around, and praised Haruka and Keitaro for what smells like a good meal.

"I helped too!" Suu-chan cried out putting her hand up enthusiastically.

"Yes she did, she helped Haruka-san with the stuffing," Keitaro agreed, and Haruka nodded, still smoking her cigarette.

"Well done Suu-chan." Motoko patted her on the head in a friendly manner, and Suu-chan giggled and held her hand.

People who were in the kitchen started laying out the table in anticipation. First the tablecloth, then the mats to place the bowls and trays with meals on them. Plates and cutlery were then laid out. At that moment Shinobu-chan came in, her face a bright shade of red, and she walked slowly up to Keitaro to apologise. He didn't mind, since he said that got worse from Naru and Motoko, and accepted her apology. He returned her teddy to her, and she thanked him, turning even redder. By midday everyone had turned up, Naru and Shinobu-chan were talking, Motoko was involved with Suu-chan, and Haruka was still smoking and drinking a bottle of sake. Keitaro was talking to Mitsune, who made it through

the night without incident, though she did feel queasy in the morning, hence her being the last to enter the kitchen.

Eventually it was time for the turkey, and everyone ate in a joyful manner, Keitaro, being the only man in the house was chosen to cut the turkey for everyone. However Motoko asked him to hold it up in the air, which he did, eyes clenched fearing the worst. Motoko's katana rang through his ears and was dumbfounded to see the turkey in neat slices so that everyone could take a piece they wanted. The meal went by peacefully without any notable events. Afterwards they all helped to clear up after themselves, and cleaned the table and kitchen. Everyone retired to their rooms for a nap after their large lunch.

This is the time in which Naru opened her present from Keitaro. The card said 'Gomen (Sorry) Naru-chan'. She ripped off the wrapping paper to find a slender box with a catch on one side of it. She opened it to find a watch, analogue, not like all of those similar digital watches. The strap was made from leather; the watch casing silver coloured, with the numbers from the West engraved in it. She smiled at this gift, and stuck her head down the hole in her room to thank Keitaro; he smiled back at her.

Motoko could finally open the present that had been puzzling her since Keitaro gave it to her. She slowly pulled the ribbon off and opened the wrapping paper carefully, to reveal a container made from a dark wood, similar to old oak. It was engraved with various patterns, including 'Urashima' engraved along the centre of it in Kanji. There was a very old latch along one of the longest sides, and Motoko unhitched it, opening it to what was a beautiful sight. Inside was a dark red, almost maroon like coloured material lining the inside of the box. On one diagonal was a sheath containing a small dagger-like weapon. The sheath was made of a fairly thick wood, ebony most likely due to its colour. The handle was made of a dark, soft spongy like material made from tightly wound string that hid a wooden base underneath. Motoko removed it from the box, unhooking the ancient wooden rack inside that held it in its place. She held it up to the light, marvelling at its sleekness. She then drew the blade, amazed to find it in perfect condition, a brilliant silver gleam reflecting off the metal as she angled it into the light. Upon doing so she noticed that there were some subtle indentations in the length of the blade. It was Kanji, and translated as 'Aoyama Motoko'. She gasped in disbelief, placed the dagger in the box and immediately got up and left her room with the box in hand.

She walked swiftly along the corridors of Hinata-sou until she reached the Kanrinrin's Room. She rapped urgently on the door.

"Who is it?" shouted Keitaro from within.

"Motoko," she replied, "can I come in Urashima?"

"Sure, come on in."

She opened the door to find him sitting at his table, pawing at his portable first aid kit he got from the cracker the day before, looking through it to see what exactly was inside it. Motoko sat down opposite him, and placed down the box in front of him.

"I'm sorry but I cannot accept this gift Urashima." She said sincerely.

"Why all the formality Motoko-chan?" He looked puzzled as he asked her, "Call me Keitaro." He then smiled at her.

She began to fume slightly. "Keitaro," she said between clenched teeth and fists, "I cannot accept this gift."

"Why not?" He seemed to be genuinely confused, "I thought it would appeal to you."

"It is too much Keitaro, much did this cost you?" indicating the box.

"I can't say, it's not right to tell someone how much their present was."

"Well I want to know!" Motoko slammed her hands down onto the table, scaring Keitaro, but calmed down immediately, sitting back down. "Gomen, I'm just a little on edge since seeing this gift."

"Well, if you must know," Keitaro pointed at the Kanji on the top on the box, "did you remember seeing this?"

Something 'clicked' inside Motoko, "So you're telling me that..."

"Yes Motoko-chan," Keitaro interrupted, "this used to be in my family. Therefore your present cost nothing!"

He said this a little too enthusiastically, until he thought he'd better phrase it better. He coughed, "What I meant to say was that the container and the dagger were passed from generations of the Urashima clan. I went to a specialist store to change it to your name, but the wood could not be changed without scarring the surface of it. However he did say that the blade could be engraved, since it hadn't been touched already. That cost around 3500 yen (£21, \$35 approximately). Well, it was supposed to cost that, but he said the blade was incredibly durable, and that he had to use more complex machinery to engrave it." He scratched the back of his head, remembering how he began to panic in the shop at the fact that it cost too much, "Thankfully, he only charged me an extra 500 yen (£3, \$5 approximately), since he was delighted to work with such a magnificent piece." Keitaro also neglected to mention to Motoko that he also begged the man that was a rather poor student and couldn't afford any more than 4000 yen on such a present.

"Well... that's very touching of you..." Motoko wasn't sure of what to say, "but surely, this must be a valuable antique..."

Keitaro waved her off, "Don't worry about it, the dagger is old, that's for certain. However, we won't have any use for it nowadays apart for selling it. This way I feel better if I give it to someone who I know would respect it and take care of it. Haruka-san said that I could give it to you, since we still have some more of the ancient arsenal at hand."

"A... Arigatou Keitaro," she began to blush, since it seemed like such a small thing to him, insignificant even, "I will give it its pride of place in my room and my heart."

Keitaro smiled, "I knew I could trust it with you Motoko-chan, you have a pure heart, I hope you put that blade to good use at one point. Allegedly, the legend passed down to me states that nothing has stopped that blade once it was in motion, but that will be for you find out one day..." A glint appeared in his eye as he said this, and Motoko was uncertain as to what this meant.

"Ja ne (See you later) Keitaro." Motoko stood up and bowed slightly, he returned the bow with a small nod. She then picked up the container, opened the door and left his room to return to hers, shutting the door with her left foot. Keitaro watched her leave, mesmerised by the way she moved, her demure elegance that she kept under wraps almost invariably under her indifferent, vigilant front, instilled in her since childhood due to her background. Even Naru knew of what she was capable of, saying that her family was a group of nameless assassins, although she did joke about that part. It made him think. All lies contain a sliver of the truth, so it shouldn't be automatically thought that Motoko was an exception, maybe her entire family was into martial arts. Nevertheless, he was still happy to see this side of her, where she lowers her guard for a few moments to accept compliments without killing the person who flattered her. He kept thinking happy thoughts, mostly about Motoko, through dinner and well into the night.