

Chapter 21
Renewed Friendships; Renewed Grudges
Otohime Island
11:03pm

"Ara, here we are. Welcome to my home!"

The girls were stunned by the size of Natsumi's mansion, looking up at the roof and then towards the right, where scattered lights showed the rest of the home, stretching off into the night.

"I know it's a little small, but it's all we have..." Natsumi said, in an apologetic fashion. No one said anything, their jaws dropping more as they walked inside. The lavish entrance hall was gleaming, not that there was anything particularly valuable, but everything was so lovingly placed, the girls couldn't help but feel emotional at standing in that room. The aura given off was one of pure love and happiness.

"It's... so beautiful..." Shinobu sniffed, her strong emotions getting the better of her, a few tears sneaking down her cheeks.

"Suu feel happy here!" The Indian girl bounded up and down, settling besides Shinobu.

"Ara... Thank you... I hope this will be okay for you to stay here..." Natsumi began before being interrupted by Naru.

"This is too much! Are you sure we can stay here?" She asked incredulously.

"Yes, would you like me to show you your rooms?" She replied sweetly, smiling while leaning slightly to one side.

The girls nodded and followed Natsumi through the corridors of their home. It was deceptively large inside; the sense of space grew when they thought they were entering the smaller section of the house.

"Here we are now." Natsumi opened a door and they were led into a plain and simple room with twin beds. "We have a few rooms from this point on that we don't use anymore, you're more than welcome to use them." She looked down behind them to see one of her sons running towards her.

"Okaasan!" He cried out, "Tsutantai-oniichan has fallen over again!"

"Ara..." Putting one hand to her head she sighed, "He's always like that, tripping up on things and getting hurt. I'll see to him now and you can decide which rooms to sleep in."

Natsumi scampered off with her son in tow, leaving the Hinata residents alone once again.

"Right... Well... Any preferences?" Keitaro began, nervous from the awkward silence.

"Hmph! Well I'm not sleeping in the same room as you!" Naru said, folding her arms and turning around. "I guess I'll sleep in the same room as Kitsune."

"No." The fox lady replied.

"Huh!" Naru turned around, bemused, "Why not!"

"I..." She blushed, much to the shock and disbelief of everyone, "I want to be in the same room as Keitaro...-san."

Lightning flashed through the windows and a loud thunder boom echoed in the house.

"Please..." Naru began, edging closer to her in a jittery manner, "Repeat what you said, I think the thunder broke my eardrums."

"Oh I can't!" Mitsune angled away, covering her face, "I'm too embarrassed!" Amidst the confused emotions, she grinned beneath her hands.

Naru, quickly changing into her angry face, grew redder in the face. "Fine then! I'm going to stay in this room alone then!" She opened another door and found a double bed. "Goodnight!" She slammed the door before anyone could reply.

Mitsune opened her eyes and looked at the door. *Gomen Naru... I have to do this, or I won't know...* Closing them again, she smiled mischievously, "Come, come Keitaro-san! Let's sleep now!" She dragged him into the room next to Naru's, the one that was opened for them.

"W... Wait Kitsune! I... I don't..." He protested, unable to free himself from her grip.

"Hey, it's not like it's your first time... You'll be fine!" She grinned even further and she pulled him completely into the room.

"Someone, help me!" Looking at the remainder he didn't get much confidence that he would actually receive any help. Suu was giving a thumbs-up, Shinobu was lying on the floor foaming at the mouth with swirling eyes, Motoko stood with her eyes closed and arms folded, and finally Mutsumi with a hand on her cheek beaming at him.

The door slid shut and the girls outside could hear a lock being latched from the inside and the sound of male whimpering.

"Ara... Sounds like fun." Mutsumi spoke, only making Shinobu gurgle more.

"Shinobu!" Suu shouted energetically, picking up the younger girl and shaking her, "Let's stay in the same room together!"

Her head still lolling around, she nodded, "Okay then Suu..." She turned to Motoko and Mutsumi, her eyes becoming normal once more, "Goodnight Motoko-sempai, Mutsumi-san."

"Goodnight you two!" Mutsumi waved to them as she opened the door to the room on the other side of Naru's room.

"I think I too shall retire to a room, goodnight Mutsumi-san."

"Ara? Are you okay being alone Motoko-san?"

"Yes... I'll be fine..." Motoko paused for a second and spoke facing away from the anaemic woman, "Mutsumi-san, did Urashima... touch you... in any way?"

Not sensing the seriousness of her tone, Mutsumi replied in a happy manner, "Yes he did! Many times in fact!" Even Motoko at this time faltered off centre, her equivalent of a facefault. Mutsumi continued, "I fainted a lot but he always caught me." Moving closer she peered at the warrior's face, "Why so interested Motoko-san?" She grinned as the faint outlines of a blush took hold on the kendo expert, Mutsumi moved closer grinning with a child-like innocence.

Motoko jolted away and opened the nearest unoccupied room as her blush took on atomic proportions. Locking herself inside she could breathe again. Mutsumi smiled outside in the corridor. *What a cute girl... Oh well back to my room now...* She twisted around and then flopped onto the ground, chibi-angel versions of her hovering above her head as she fainted again.

**Half an hour later
Keitaro and Mitsune's room**

"Kitsune!" He cried, tears streaming, "Untie me!" He was wrapped up in his duvet with rope around him, Mitsune now straddling his waist holding more rope in her hands.

"Now I've got you, you can't get away now..." Her eyes glinted in the dark, and she moved closer to his face.

Keitaro winced and turned his face away. "I... I'm not ready for this Kitsune!"

She stopped a mere inch away from his lips, her breath caressing his cheeks. "Ready for what?" She asked seriously. Keitaro looked to her to see her eyes glinting, this time with tears.

"K... Kitsune..."

She rolled off him and lay by his side, facing away from him, sniffing quietly. "Why does everyone think that way of me? I'm just a girl..."

Keitaro rolled over so he could face her. "Kitsune, it's not like that!" He struggled to think of something, "It was just because you were on top of me and tied me up! What was I supposed to think?"

Mitsune turned to him, "You mean that? It wasn't because of... my reputation?"

Keitaro nodded, "I know you Kitsune, you wouldn't do anything like that."

She wiped her eyes and scoffed in a derisory manner, "You don't know me..." She sighed and then looked at him again, "But this isn't about me, I want to know what happened."

"What do you mean?" Keitaro asked, genuinely confused.

She got straight to the point, "Between you and Motoko."

He felt his heart skip a beat, "N... Nothing happened..."

"Oh come off it Keitaro!" Mitsune butted in, "We could all tell, the day your results were posted, she wasn't there to see you off." She stopped to let this sink in, "She's lived with us for a long while now, and she always saw you two out when you had exams." She paused, "It was strange when she didn't turn up that day."

Keitaro wasn't listening to her; he only remembered the last thing he said to Motoko before meeting her on the island.

"Leave before I say something I regret, Motoko!"

Keitaro was sweating, looking down at his guilty heart. *Why did I say that? How could I be so cruel...?*

"Are you listening to me!" Mitsune blared into his ear.

Wincing at his inability to massage his eardrums he glanced at the girl next to him, displaying a clearer expression.

"Well, what do you have to say?" She inquired.

Keitaro started, "I... I don't know what came over me..." He relayed the details of what happened that night, not stopping for a moment.

All this left Mitsune nodding with understanding, "And she felt hurt and didn't want to see you that day. This is beginning to make sense now..."

Keitaro sighed, "I never got to apologise to her about it, I left for Kyoto later and haven't seen her until now."

"That's why she was angry... Oh well..." She waved her hand at him, "It's all in the past now, how was your trip with that girl...?"

"Her name's Otohime Mutsumi. It was okay..." Keitaro didn't backup his comment with his expression. *Motoko-chan was angry? Well, I suppose I am a man... She does hate men, especially me most of all now...*

"Good that you had fun Keitaro." Mitsune got up and walked over to her bed, "You made us all worry about you though..." She yawned, "But now we have you back... Goodnight Keitaro..." Within seconds an unfeminine guttural snore could be heard from her.

"W... Wait! Don't leave me tied up here!" Keitaro shouted, though the snoring drowned him out. He gave up and decided to try to sleep, rolling over on his favourite side.

**Ten minutes ago
Naru's Room**

"What is that?"

Naru struggled with the glass pressed against the wall. She could hear signs of a struggle and pleading.

"Is he taking advantage of her?" She drew away from the wall as images of an oddly innocent Mitsune being pounced upon by an equally bizarre guise of a perverted Keitaro ran through her mind. "No, no, no!" She shook her head rapidly, "That can't be happening!" She began hitting herself in the head to clear her mind of those thoughts. *But... Why do I care what that pervert does? He annoys me all the time!*

Naru gave up trying to listen in, the neighbouring room suddenly becoming quiet. Stifling a yawn she moved into the centre of the bed and covered herself with the sheets, dropping off into a deep sleep half an hour later. Due to this, she didn't hear the door to her room open, a pair of eyes watching her.

Shinobu and Suu's room **11:40pm**

"Suu! We have to sleep...!" Shinobu said before being muffled by a pillow thrown in her face.

"Shinobu! Let's play!" Suu energetically bounced up and down on her bed.

"Auuu..." Shinobu surveyed the room, the mess from feathers was everywhere. She inwardly moaned. *This will take me hours to clean!* "Suu! Stop it!"

Suu began to pout and crawled up to Shinobu on her bed, "Shinobu doesn't want to play?" She said, her eyes welling up.

Shinobu took one look at her and her hard gaze melted, "Well... I'd like to... But we really need to sleep." She tried to cheer up the blonde girl, "Let's play tomorrow."

"Roger!" Suu backflipped into the other bed, having changed into her pyjamas in mid-air.

Shinobu sighed. *I'm glad that's over...* She yawned and turned on her side and began to think about everything that happened. She sniffed. *Why am I here? Sempai has Naru-sempai, Motoko-sempai and Kitsune-san. He was with Mutsumi-san as well...*

She sobbed, her tears moistening the pillow. "He doesn't need me here..."

She stiffened when she felt arms surrounding her from behind, peeking at the person she saw it was... *Suu!*

"Suu doesn't want Shinobu to cry." She said, her smile losing its shine. "Keitaro needs you, he needs all of us!" She continued, in a happier tone. To make sure Shinobu realised, Suu gripped her tighter.

Shinobu yelped, and wiped her tears away. "Thank you Suu..." Shinobu turned around and they fell asleep hugging each other face to face.

Motoko's Room Midnight

Why can I not sleep?

In the bedroom, where two beds lay, the sole occupant was lying on her back, facing the ceiling. Her hair was splayed in every direction, covering most of the pillows, her hands clasped above the sheets.

Motoko was troubled; her brow furrowed now and then, her eyes very much used to seeing the faint outlines of objects having not closed them once for sleep.

Why is my body not requiring sleep? It has been a long journey today... I should need sleep... Something must be stopping me from my rest. My mind must be clouded with thoughts... What of?

In front of her eyes, the television static of pale darkness morphed into the smiling visage of a certain ronin manager. Shocked, she rubbed her eyes but this time it was a laughing face. Infuriated, she leapt out of bed to her katana in a flash. She didn't unsheathe it due to the particles of light now flitting about randomly, only the outlines of the furniture could be seen. Her entire face in shadow, she gripped the handle firmer, so much so that the pain stretched up her arm. Tears started to pour down her cheeks, glistening with the ambient light from streetlamps outside. Frustrated with herself, she clenched her teeth tighter, making her jaw ache. Unwilling sounds of anger in her throat were heard.

Why do I keep thinking of him! He means nothing to me! Nothing! She pulled out the katana and swung it at the bed. A crack confirmed that it had struck something; it was embedded in the headboard. Sweating profusely, she pulled the katana from the wood and sheathed it again. *I mustn't lose my wits like that again, it is unbecoming of a warrior.* She rested the katana against the side of the bed, and went under the covers.

Calming down, she puzzled over events on the journey they had. *How did the Shinmeiryu know about Keitaro so quick?* Flashes of the time when the eagle arrived at her window appeared in her mind. *The time it took to process that request was beyond efficient. It was*

almost as if... as if he was already being tracked. She shook her head, dismissing the thought. *No, that can't be it... Surely not...?* Doubt forming in her mind, she left that issue for later. *That man... He displayed superior fighting skills than the normal human.* Another flash of the person in the alley passed by her. *Who was he? Why was he fighting? And that outfit... It couldn't be...* A still image of the legend of Kyoto, the fires in the background with a sole figure in front. *Is that clan still around from that time?*

Sighing deeply, she turned onto her side. *I see, these things are affecting me... and all thanks to Urashima...* Having expressed her thoughts and figuring out what had been stopping her, the waves of drowsiness washed over her, and her eyelids grew heavier by the second.

"Urashima..." She said underneath her breath, "I hate you..."

The gentle sound of deep breathing could be heard moments later.

Saturday 14th March
1:00am
Hinata-sou

A lone figure walked up the steps and outside the main entrance to Hinata-sou, where a light was on showering the area outside in a yellow halo. She was an average girl, were it not for her dark green hair and blue framed glasses. Her outfit was casual, but thick to reflect the cold around her.

"Can I help you?" A voice said from behind. Haruka walked up to the girl.

The girl turned around and smiled thinly, bowing first before replying, "Nothing, I was just taking a look at this building, I've heard it's very old."

Haruka, dubious by this apparent reason, answered cautiously, "Really? This isn't the time of day to see it from the outside though..." Haruka narrowed her eyes at the girl, focusing on the eyes. *Could it be...?*

Quickly averting her eyes, the girl bowed again, "Oh my! I didn't realise the time, I must be off now!" She skipped off down the stairs.

Haruka watched the girl leave from the top step, her cigarette ash falling to the ground. *It has to be her... I could see it in her eyes...*

At that moment
The bottom of the stairs

Haruka's thoughts could still be heard. *Kanako...*

Smirking, the girl took her glasses off and closing them in a case. She put her hand around her face and ripped it off, indeed revealing the enigmatic adopted sister of Keitaro. She rounded the corner out of sight from the stairs and pulled off the wig. She closed her eyes and sighed, reopening them a second later. *Haruka got too close. She knows I'm here now... This shouldn't interfere with my plans though...* She looked back up at the top of the hill where the inn lay. *I'll be coming back soon oniisan...*

She turned and held her arm out to a bush. After a small amount of rustling, a black cat appeared and went up her arm to her shoulder.

"There, there Kuro." She whispered, stroking the cat's head making her ears fold back, "Did you miss me?"

"I found some mice and chased them-nya." Kuro replied, her tail curling around Kanako's arm, the bell making a small noise, "They were too fast-nya." She settled into the shoulder more, purring more when Kanako held her close.

"Well, we just need to go back to the hotel now, I'll feed you there." Kanako said, looking up at the stars. "Soon we'll be living somewhere better..."

7:09am
Naru's room

The comfy double bed was warm. Naru nuzzled against something. Her brain hadn't quite figured out that there wasn't supposed to be something there. In fact her dreams were about her childhood, hugging her Liddo-kun; unconsciously she did so in real life, hugging the thing next to her.

What was bizarre was that the thing itself had dreams, and it also chose to rub Naru's head a lot, thinking it to be a large round object. This is what woke Naru up; she wasn't used to having her head probed by unknown fingers. She opened her eyes, and they nearly popped out of her skull.

Mu... Mutsumi-san! Why is she...? Why am I...? She could tell that Mutsumi was fast asleep, her relaxed face in a soft smile as she continued to rub Naru's head. Mutsumi was sweating slightly, and Naru realised it was because she tightened her hug seconds earlier. Immediately she released most of the hold, just having her arms loosely around Mutsumi, who was oblivious to everything.

Naru blushed. *Mutsumi-san is really warm...* Naru began to yawn more from the cosy hug, and she smiled before dozing off again, not fully conscious as to the unusual nature of it all.

Suu and Shinobu's room
7:44am

Shinobu woke up, the front was very cold, and she saw that Suu had somehow turned away from her in sleep, and was now on the edge of the bed. Shinobu could also hear the sniffing sounds from the girl she had got used to when travelling with her.

Smiling with loving affection, as a mother would her child, Shinobu shifted forwards on the bed, and brought Suu into a cradling hug, after placing the sheets back over the two of them. She whispered soothing tones into Suu's ear, stroked her hair and even tickled her under the chin. This calmed the princess down a little, and she relaxed further into Shinobu's embrace.

Keitaro and Mitsune's room
8:01am

Mitsune was now lying on her back, the sheet covering her now twisted up many times, only keeping her belly warm. She was still snoring, this time more quietly than before.

The only other presence in the room was wide-awake; Keitaro opened his eyes for what seemed like the umpteenth time. They were red rimmed; he hadn't been able to sleep. He groaned. *What time does everyone get up at...? I'm so tired...*

Otohime Household
9:00am

The birds were chirping away, the sunshine after the storm welcome on their feathers. However, the peace was soon to be disrupted.

The opening chimes of Big Ben could be heard around the mansion, before the following. "It's nine in the morning, and time for everyone to get up!" A collective groan from the family side could be heard, along with startled sounds and even screams from the visitor side, "Ara... What next...? Ah yes, breakfast will be served at half past nine in the kitchen area. I hope you all slept well!" A click and the voice vanished.

The family, being used to this got straight to getting dressed, whereas the Hinata-sou residents took a little more time to get ready...

Keitaro and Mitsune's room
9:01am

Keitaro was the one who screamed, and also fell off the bed. Mitsune merely sat up slowly, her eyes squinting around her as she rubbed them half-heartedly.

"Is it morning already?" She asked.

"Of course it is!" Keitaro shouted from the floor. "Didn't you hear the announcement?"

Mitsune remained neutral, "Announcement?"

"Yeah... Didn't that wake you up?" Keitaro said, picking himself up with difficulty.

"Nah, I finally got over all the drink I had yesterday in Suu's boat." She stretched her arms out.

"You didn't look drunk..." Keitaro pondered, thinking back to when they arrived.

"Well, alcohol always knocks me out, I have a nice sleep afterwards..." *Though the hangovers aren't nice.* "Right, guess I'd better go change now..." She got up and walked to her bag.

"At least untie me first!" Keitaro cried.

Naru and Mutsumi's room
9:01am

Naru bolted awake, not expecting the tannoy. She awoke facing Mutsumi, who casually opened her eyes.

"Ara... Naru-san...?" She asked, "What am I doing here?"

Naru held back the disbelief, "I'm not sure..." She began, "I think you sleepwalked into my bed..."

"Mmm," Mutsumi nodded, "I do that sometimes..." She sniffed Naru's hair, much to the latter's shock.

"What are you doing Mutsumi-san!" She asked, aghast.

"Heehee..." Mutsumi giggled, "You smell like sleep!"

Naru, curious, sniffed her own hair, and it did faintly remind her of what most people smell like after sleep. Nostalgia crept into her mind as she recalled something similar happening in her childhood. Closing her eyes, she peered into her cloudy past, only to be forcibly removed from it.

"Naru-san... We have to get dressed now..." Mutsumi whispered in her ear.

"Wha..." Naru complained, then gave up, "Okay, fine..."

They both got up, Naru blushing when she realised how sheer Mutsumi's clothing was. *I was hugging her like this? What kind of a pervert am I!* Naru looked at her hands in fear of what she had done. Soon, the weight of what had transpired filled her mind. *I slept with a woman... What am I! Does that make me...*

Mutsumi interrupted her thoughts by holding her hands, which were still in front of Naru in horror. "Ara... You have nice fingers..." She looked closer, "But the nails are bitten badly, you must've been stressed..."

Reacting finally, Naru drew back from Mutsumi, looking at her with alarm. She held onto her hands, and blanched. *What is happening to me! Why am I acting this way? It was an accident... She sleepwalked into my bed...* Mutsumi continued to smile at Naru with her eyes closed.

"I think I scared you, Naru-san. Gomen." She turned, "I'll leave you now."

Naru, forever irrational, felt that she had offended Mutsumi, and thus didn't want to leave things that way. She walked to the elder woman.

"Umm..." This caught her attention, and she faced Naru, who became shy quickly, her hands clutched behind her back, "Don't take this the wrong way... It shook me a little, but... it felt good..." Naru felt half the blood in her body reach her head as the innuendo in the words made their effect, "No...! I meant that... It was nice... At least you didn't walk off somewhere dangerous..."

Mutsumi smiled back, "I never go far... And it was nice staying with you last night..." She beamed, her smile radiant once more, "See you at breakfast."

Naru watched as she closed the door behind her. Her hands went to her chest as she lowered her head. She began to sob quietly, tears falling from her eyelids onto her pyjamas and the floor. *Why am I getting so emotional? Who are you, Mutsumi-san...?*

Motoko's Room

9:01am

The kendo warrior opened her eyes as she lay on her side. *Curses, I didn't get much sleep in the end.* The view panned out to show the sheets, all crumpled and twisted, as if someone had been moving about constantly. Motoko sat up quickly, and remained still as the dizzy spell passed her by. *I must get dressed for breakfast...*

She stood up and proceeded to peel off the clothes she slept in, as the view panned to the

doorway, where a dark gap was shown between the bottom of the door and the floor. Two star shaped objects twirled around for a second there, indicating that something was watching her.

Otohime Kitchen
9:32am

Everyone had arrived for breakfast. The family sat at one table while the Hinata-sou residents sat at another.

"Ara... Here you go, help yourself!" Mutsumi said as she laid down two trays with toast, butter, jam, various cereals with milk and fruit.

"Mmm! Bananas!" Suu leaped excitedly, and immediately grabbed three of them.

Mutsumi looked at Naru and smiled broader at her. Naru looked down and blushed again, her hands in her lap, under the table.

Keitaro noticed her shy demeanour, "Naru? You okay?"

Anger flaring up, she elbowed him in the ribs, "Course I am, and don't look at a girl's face if she's hiding it!"

Clutching his side, he could hear Mitsune snigger across the other side of Naru. Looking opposite, he was faced with a lethargic Motoko; her eyes were red, as were his but he couldn't tell.

"Couldn't sleep Motoko-chan?" He nervously opened the lines of communication.

She glared at him, "I see you weren't able to rest either..." She retorted.

"I guess you're right..." He put a hand behind his head, laughing weakly. "I couldn't thanks to a certain person tying me up." He narrowed his eyes off to his right, where Mitsune lay in its path. He picked up a piece of toast and spread butter on it thinly.

Motoko didn't continue the conversation, much to Keitaro's disappointment. Suu and Shinobu were talking among themselves, as were Naru and Mitsune. He lazily bit off pieces of the bread while looking about the kitchen. It was a large open-plan work area, very little clutter and plenty of counter space. A large patio was outside, and the French windows were open allowing a fresh sea breeze into the room as well as sunlight that warmed everyone.

As Keitaro appreciated the home, Motoko carried on thinking. *What is Urashima trying to do? Does he think that with mere words he can regain my trust? She bit into some toast. He is a fool.*

"Motoko-chan?" Keitaro tried to get her attention. Once Motoko looked in his direction, he went on. "You have some crumbs on your lips..."

Once he said those words, he knew he would feel pain again. The last time he said that to Motoko he recalled that the kettle had a new resting spot, embedded in his skull. Her blush only confirmed his fears. He grimaced, waiting for anything.

Yet there was no punishment, in fact it seemed that no one heard him. Motoko stood up and declared, "I'm done eating." She then stalked off to her room.

Naru stared at Keitaro, "What did you say to her?"

He became scared again, "No... Nothing! I just said there were crumbs on her lips!"

Naru cracked her knuckles and stood up, making Keitaro too stand up, "You think she likes perverts like you looking at her lips?" She pulled her fist back, "You IDIOT!"

The Naru-punch took him out into the patio and through the palm trees outside. Suu cheered. "Yay! Keitaro is normal again!" Shinobu looked worried, but given previous experience, she knew he would come back alive. Mitsune just ate more cereal.

"Ara... Naru-san is so violent..." Mutsumi said from the other table, hand on her mouth giggling.

Naru jumped at this, and relaxed once she sat down. *Mutsumi-san thinks I'm weird for acting like that to him...* Mitsune kept a close eye on this and wrote down something in a tiny book she kept in her back pocket, after flipping to a section entitled 'Naru'.

Motoko's room A minute later

The bed was neatly made; the bag Motoko carried was on it now, open with clothes and other objects. Folding her night clothing in it, she closed the bag, securing the strings to keep it all in. She wiped her lips furiously and was trying her best to hold back more anger. *Urashima... Again you have humiliated me...* She remembered his concerned face and his sadness when she was angry with him. *You act well for a pervert; you have everyone convinced except for Naru-sempai and I...*

She walked over to the side of the bed where her katana lay. She picked it up and latched it onto her belt. *I shall punish you...*

**Northern beach
15 minutes later**

Keitaro trudged out of the water; he was soaked thoroughly, making his clothes stick to him. Picking a starfish off his forehead he placed it on a rock near the water. Waving his arms about, he managed to get rid of most of the dampness. He sighed. *Naru is still the same way. This time I skimmed the sea four times...*

He lay down and pulled off his glasses, placing them next him to dry them in the morning sun. His hands behind his head, he allowed the warmth to flow through him. Closing his eyes he replayed the events of that meal. *Why did Motoko-chan act that way...? She's changed... The way she looks and talks to me... Like when I first arrived in Hinata-sou...*

He winced, scrunching his eyes up. He sat up and began rubbing his eyes. Opening them slowly, tears started to leak out. *Damn, now I have sand in my eyes... What else could go wrong...?*

**At that moment
Several metres away**

Motoko had her hand ready to remove her katana to strike him, but she stopped seeing his tears. She stood there, hidden in the shadow of the trees and bushes, in stunned silence. *Why cry now...? When I'm about to attack...* Motoko fell onto her knees. *What is it about you? Why do you affect me so...?* She heard a noise and saw Keitaro standing up, looking into the sky. Mesmerised for a short time Motoko kept staring at him, until she regained her senses. Clutching her katana close to her, she slipped away into the darkness of the trees.

**One second later
The beach edge**

Not knowing anyone was watching him, Keitaro wringed out the base of his T-shirt, from which only a little bit of water poured out. He sighed once more. *Guess I'd better change again...* He picked up his glasses and put them on, then taking them off to clean against the T-shirt. Finally adjusting them onto the bridge of his nose he turned in the direction of the house and started walking.

**Otohime household
10:20am**

The rest, having retired from breakfast earlier, were now in their respective rooms, packing up what little they had to leave. Suu and Shinobu were the first finished, leaving the rooms with their bags and putting them by the entrance doorway. Naru took a bit more time, making the bed neat again, and recalling the incident that morning. Mitsune took her time in putting all her things away. Motoko's bag was already at the exit. Keitaro had just arrived back at the house, and was panicking, throwing everything into the bag he had with him after changing into dry clothes.

The mood was one of happiness, Suu was jabbering on into the radio to the captain of the ship. Clicking off, she spoke loudly, "We can depart in fifteen minutes!"

Naru sighed. *Finally we can go...* She looked to the doorway where their bags lay. *Where's Keitaro? He's late...* A loud crash came from within the house. Running in, the residents saw Keitaro lying on the floor, eyes swirling, and his arms in front of him carrying a bag. Beneath his legs was the prone figure of Mutsumi.

"Mutsumi-san!" Naru shouted, dragging Keitaro off her by pulling his ears. Ignoring his cries of pain, she moved Mutsumi's body so that she lay on her back. Cradling Mutsumi's head in her arms, Naru looked concerned at the elder woman. "Mutsumi-san! Are you okay!"

She sounded overly anxious, getting the attention of Mitsune. Keitaro and Shinobu were distracted, the former crying with the pain, the latter giving him some help standing up. Mitsune brought out her book and quickly jotted down something in it. Suu just went 'Ooh'.

Mutsumi opened her eyes, "Ara... Naru-san... Did I faint again?"

Naru was close to tears, "F... Fainted?" *Of course... She told us that when we arrived!*

"Ara..." Mutsumi began, blushing slightly, "Naru-san, can I get up now?"

Naru grew redder, "S... Sure..." Pulling herself up, she helped Mutsumi to her feet.

Suu was puzzled. "Where's Motoko?" She started to rummage through the entrance room, in case she happened to be under the sofa or table.

"Kaorra!" Shinobu said, embarrassed, "Don't disturb the house!"

Yet it seemed that the Otohime children were joining in. Appearing from different places they began to run about the room, searching much in the same way as Suu.

"Auuu..." Shinobu cried, tears poured down her cheeks.

Suddenly Suu popped up in the middle of the chaos, wearing a military camouflage outfit with a helmet, much like when Keitaro first arrived. She pointed to the corridor where the rest of the house was.

"To the other rooms!" The children stood up and looked down the corridor.

"No Suu!" Shinobu began.

"Suu!" Naru shouted.

Keitaro gasped, as Suu took in a long breath, "CHARGE!"

Sure enough, the stampede started, the eight children screamed down the corridor, crashing into the rooms to search. The rest of the Hinata-sou residents ran after Suu, who followed her private army, now hidden in a cloud from their running.

Naru was last to go, before Mutsumi held onto her hand. "This looks like fun." Mutsumi laughed, "I'll join in too!" Dragging Naru, she went to find the others.

Meanwhile Northern beach

The person everyone was looking for was sitting in a tree on a low branch. Leaning against the trunk, her legs flat against the branch, she looked out to the sea. *It has been a while since I went away from Hinata-sou... The last time was the training for the kendo school... She stared off beyond the horizon. The year is going by so quickly. Ane-ue... Motoko's eyes narrowed. Her deadline is getting closer by the day... Looking to her katana, which was alone at the base of the tree, wedged in the roots her expression grew sterner. My duties at the dojo cannot be overlooked any more. They will be coming for me one day... I must train my hardest to repel them.*

A gust of wind made her hair whip about. Birds were chirping elsewhere in the surrounding shrubbery, singing their happy tunes. Relaxing into the tree, she nodded off, the distant sound of the sea lapping on the beach soothing her.

Five minutes later

Motoko was still napping, when the sound of rustling bushes brought her back to her senses. Fully alert, she jumped down and put her hand on her handle of her weapon. In an instant she was set upon.

"ATTACK!" Cried a familiar voice, and then eight children jumped on her. Confused, Motoko did nothing as they fell on her.

"Suu!" Keitaro scolded, finding the foreign girl on top of a tree, "Get them off her!"

Putting a mock sad face on, she complied, "Pull back!"

The children did as she said getting up and jumping back into formation. Motoko was flattened by their weight.

"Motoko-chan!" Keitaro cried, "Are you okay?"

He bent down to help her up, yet she rebuffed him with the back of her hand, and releasing her katana she slammed him into a tree opposite her, making the leaves fall from the harsh impact.

"Sensei..." Shinobu said in a distressed state. She picked his glasses up for him.

Mitsune saw he was out for the count, and hefted him to his feet. "Naru, help me carry him to the ship."

Reluctantly the new Toudai student agreed, pulling her hand free from Mutsumi's, who still held onto hers since the chase. She looked back once more at Mutsumi who smiled.

"I'd help," She said, "But I'm very weak, so I'd faint again..." She brightened up though, "I can still watch you go!"

"If you can..." Naru smiled back, "I'd like that."

Taking the other shoulder of Keitaro, so he was now resting on both of them, Naru and Mitsune dragged him off along the beach, with Shinobu tagging along closeby. Motoko watched them and closed her eyes, sealing away her katana. Suu meanwhile had instantly changed into her normal clothing, and was handing out medals to the children with a picture of Motoko on them. They saluted one last time to their commander and ran off into the forest. Suu jumped on Motoko's back

"Shall we go Motoko?" She asked eagerly.

"Yes." She answered, "Let's go."

The two of them walked to follow the others, Mutsumi tagged along.

10:38am
Armada Defender

The ship looked more gallant and lavish in the light. Suu smirked when saw it.

"That's the ship that protects my family!" She spoke out loud.

Everyone stopped to look at her and the same thought echoed in all their minds. *"Who IS her family!"*

Natsumi and her eldest daughter were there to say goodbye to the visitors. Natsumi had a summer hat on and was waving a hanky at them. Shinobu bowed politely, said many thanks and went into the ship. Suu bounced by and said she loved their house, saying it reminded her of home. Naru, Mitsune and a now conscious Keitaro were next. Mitsune winked and said it was fun, Keitaro thanked them for their hospitality, whilst Naru remained mute, blushing.

Mutsumi went up to Keitaro, who didn't have his glasses on. Moving in closer, much to the reddening of Keitaro's cheeks, she kissed him on the lips. Frozen by disbelief and fear from the others, he could say no more.

"Arigatou... You helped me get home safely Urashima-kun..." She turned to Naru, "Naru-san..."

She gave her a kiss on the lips too, resulting in the same reaction as Keitaro.

"That was for last night..." Mutsumi winked mischievously, Keitaro was able to nosebleed without anyone taking a blind bit of notice. Mitsune had to push the both of them away towards the ship; their legs still locked at the knees.

Motoko was last; she bowed down and said she was grateful for the stay and the hospitality. She moved off before Mutsumi gasped.

"What is it?" Motoko asked, curious.

"Ara... I forgot to give Urashima-kun a present..." She picked it up off the floor, "Could you give it to him when you get the time Motoko-san?"

Motoko looked at the gift, a cube with a large ribbon and minuscule holes in the sides. "Okay then, I shall do so later."

"Arigatou Motoko-san." Mutsumi smiled pleasantly, "Safe trip, and take care of Urashima-kun." Motoko paled at this, "He's insecure since he failed. Cheer him up." Mutsumi waved at her, "I'll probably see you soon..."

Motoko took her leave and walked briskly into the ship, the entrance hatch closing after she entered. A klaxon sounded on the ship.

"All crew to their seats, guests must remain in their seats during departure." The voice of the captain said.

Power could be heard surging through the hull of the ship, the front eyes glowing green. As if it was natural, two large arms moved out of the hull into the sand, and literally pushed the ship off. The arms kept pushing under the water, extending to reach the bed until the ship was in deep water, so that it could run under its own power. Mutsumi waved goodbye, beaming at them; Natsumi waved the hanky at them, crying for some reason. The residents waved back through the portholes, though they weren't sure if they could be seen outside. For a moment, Naru swore that Mutsumi looked straight at her and gave her a special smile, different to the one she gave all the others.

The captain's voice sounded again, "Initiating hydrofoil drive."

The ship gurgled, making the guests a tad nervy, Suu just laying back and enjoying the ride. Two large portions of the hull at the front broke off and landed in the water. After a minute, sure enough the ship now had hydrofoils needed for high-speed travel.

"Destination... Tokyo. ETA One hour."

"One hour...?" Keitaro wondered, "How does... AAAAH."

He wasn't alone, everyone else screamed and fell over, except Suu, who was snoozing away, the ship had now accelerated to full speed, hurtling along the sea at a stomach-churning rate. The island could no longer be seen after five minutes.

Meanwhile Hinata-sou

The sun was shining, and Haruka had just walked up to the inn to pick up mail. After standing up from getting it, she spoke.

"What are you doing here?" She growled beneath her breath.

The fog grew behind her; a voice came from within, "The chosen are returning." Another voice spoke up, "There are renewed friendships, and renewed grudges."

"That nice..." Haruka said in a bored voice, "Now go away." She flicked her cigarette into the fog, where it glimmered after hitting someone.

"Violence is not the answer." One voice in pain groaned. Another said, "The past is returning to you too." The fog dissipated as quickly as it came.

Haruka furrowed her brow. *My past...?* She opened her eyes further, understanding finally. *Could it be... him...?*

Author's Notes

My longest chapter to date, at 7043 words. Hope you enjoy it. I trust you will review this, as it has been a long time since Chapter 20 (January 31st).

Unfortunately things haven't been going too well with me, I've failed my university degree, thus I am repeating my final year again. My chance to prove myself is this coming year.

In other news, I'm off to Spain on the 6th, coming back on the 24th, thus no more updates until afterwards, where I shall hopefully have two chapters, one for the 28 Days Later crossover, and the other for the FLCL/NGE one. I believe this chapter will be enough to pacify you for that long.

PS, nice reviews are expected :D Of course, if you have any criticism, please let me know.

- Jason

Chapter 22
The Calm Before...
In the sea, south of Kyushu
Armada Defender
11:02am
From Motoko's eyes

Suu always seems to have a surprise waiting in store for us... First the limousine... And now this ship... Where is all this wealth coming from? I still don't know much about her, except that she has a brother. Regardless, we are on this ship home, and I'm still not accustomed to travelling by water, so I retired to my room as soon as we departed.

It was also helpful, since I now have an excuse to not sense Urashima snatching glimpses of me when he thought I wasn't looking. I was right... All men are perverts, weaklings and think only about themselves. They don't consider what effects their actions cause. Like when that... that bastard... married my sister, taking her away from the dojo... from me...

I became so weak without her guidance, her love. All that was left was an insurmountable pressure to inherit the dojo, to prove myself, to succeed. Yet I couldn't... I ran away, a coward's trait. I chose to run from my problems than to persevere and solve them there and then.

Now it has almost been a year since I left. Hina-obaachan was kind enough to let out a room for me. I've been using my savings to pay for rent, before and after she left. Urashima has been more lax in getting rent from us, but he does, and even lets us pay it late... I'm still in training, till I have the strength necessary to be worthy of becoming the new leader of the dojo. Though it has been slow, I'm making some progress...

Why am I reminiscing of the past now? I waste so much energy doing so... I'd better sleep now...

Motoko's Room

Closing her journal and concealing it inside her clothing, she lay flat and made herself comfortable on the bed. Placing her head on the satisfyingly plump pillow, Motoko closed her eyes, wiping them quickly to get rid of any stray tears that might've clung onto her eyelashes. Starting her rhythmic breaths, she was about to drop off before a shuffling could be heard, followed by some scratching sounds. As they stopped suddenly, Motoko didn't investigate further and continued her routine. What she wasn't prepared for was something landing on her chest area. Anger at that fact that she was being touched there, she shouted out the only person who could do that.

"Urashima... You...!" She sat up, staring at the perpetrator.

However, all that was there, was an upside down turtle on her lap (she accidentally threw it off her chest). Its fins waving about uselessly, it angled its head down staring into Motoko's

face, and held up a fin in a form of a wave.

"Myu!" It greeted happily.

A full ten seconds passed as Motoko kept her angry face. Then her eyes bugged out and as the view shifted to outside the ship, sailing through the waves, a tremendous scream could be heard throughout. Several explosions could be heard moments later. A patting of feet thundering down the corridor and a door was shown sliding open with a great deal of force.

"Motoko-chan!" Keitaro cried.

The room was a tip, most of the furniture was pulverised by her various attacks. Sawdust was mingled in the air of the room, and a panting Motoko stood, clutching her katana tightly, her demeanour was edgy, and she appeared ready to strike at a moments notice.

"Motoko-chan?" Naru squeezed herself into the room, past the others in the doorway. "What's wrong?"

I knew I was being observed, early this morning... The image of a Motoko changing out of her nightclothing was out of focus, as the two twirling stars from under the doors were seen in the background, very much in focus. *It must have been waiting for an opportunity to catch me unawares...*

Floating down from the ceiling, behind Motoko, the green and yellow turtle landed on her head, little hearts circling its tiny head as it stroked Motoko's hair.

"Hiken...!" She readied an attack but squealed as the turtle fell off her head into her uniform. "Someone help me!" She wailed, dropping her katana as she was fumbling around her body, as if trying to scratch an itch that would not stay still.

Naru walked up quickly. "Relax Motoko, it's just a turtle..."

"NO!" She yelled again. "I can't... I... HATE turtles..."

"I'll help you!" Throwing a metal ball over to Motoko, Suu controlled it with a remote. "Prototype Machine - Helping Hands Mark I. Turn on!" Tuning a large knob on the remote to 'Find' and typing in 'Turtle', it went about its task.

Suffice to say, the sight was not one for innocent eyes. The ball opened up in many places

and at least half a dozen hands grew out. They were big white gloves and attached to a metal pipe each. Immediately they wrapped themselves around Motoko and went about probing her. Two went under her clothes, making her shudder as the cold metal pressed against her skin.

"No Suu... This isn't - haha - helping me."

The request was denied as the fingers lost their memory and chose to tickle her. Soon her tears were joined up with her laughter.

Suu kept shaking the remote. "No good... It's gone haywire..." She sighed dismissively, tossing the remote over her shoulder.

"Can't you stop it Suu!" Tears flying out of Naru's eyes as she pointed at the machine, which now had Motoko writhing on the floor laughing to death.

Plop. Shinobu felt something land and felt her head. "Kyaa! It's on my head!" She shrieked.

Panicked, it flew up onto Keitaro and landed on his shoulder. He looked at it in a confused manner as it waved to him. "It looks friendly... We should help Motoko..."

Hearing him say those words angered her more. *I will not get help from a man...* Motoko thought. "Enough!" She picked up her katana and stabbed it through the ball, and the arms fell limp onto the carpeted floor.

"Aah, I've got to fix that bug..." Suu picked up the now flattened ball (it deflated upon being punctured by the katana). "It always seems to revert to that instruction after ten seconds..."

"But, where did this turtle come from?" Mitsune wondered out loud.

Motoko looked at her, still angry with Keitaro. "It was a present for Urashima from Mutsumi-san."

"A present? For me...?" Keitaro couldn't believe it. "But... Why a turtle...?"

"What does it matter?" Motoko growled. "Turtles are disgusting creatures..."

"Well... It looks okay to me..." His confidence shattered, Keitaro chose this time to leave

the room, the turtle still lying on his shoulder.

Shinobu held her hands up to her mouth, worried for him. Seeing him walk out she felt a burning pain in her chest. *Sempai... He looks like all his happiness evaporated left him... I should... help him...* She blushed as an image of her hugging him appeared before her. She looked down and saw that she was still holding onto his glasses. *That's right! I picked them up for him... I forgot to give them back to him.* She stood firm, glasses at her side, startling Naru who was next to her. *I'll give them back to him now!*

She walked out of the room, as Naru observed her behaviour. *Is she going to see Keitaro...? Why does she want to console that pervert!* Naru shook her head. *No good qualities... He even failed to get into Toudai for the third time!* Naru paused, and her eyes became out of focus, remembering a conversation they had together when they were studying together.

**Sometime during January
Hinata-sou
Naru's Room**

"What do you mean you don't understand this!"

Keitaro sighed and dropped his well-used pen, awaiting the usual tirade.

"I told you before! To find the gradient of any point of $y = 3x^2$, you need to differentiate it to get $6x$. God..." Naru too threw down her biro. "How can you apply to Tokyo University without knowing such basic stuff like this!"

Keitaro wasn't paying attention and was staring out of her window into the bright but chilly day. "It just seems so hard..."

"You know, your problem is that you don't remember the easy things like this. They form the core of the subject so that you can do more complicated things like parametric equations..."

The pangs of nerve ends firing up meant that another headache was coming on, and Keitaro groaned, clutching his head. Naru saw this and softened her harsh voice.

"Maybe it's time for a break..." She took off her circular reading glasses, folding them on the table. She filled up a glass of water from beside her and passed it over to Keitaro. "Here, drink that." She was intrigued by the pill he withdrew from a small pouch in his shirt pocket. "What's that Keitaro?" She asked, curious.

"Oh, just a pill to get rid of the pain I'm having right now." *She doesn't need to know that I*

got it off Motoko-chan...

"Hey, why do you want to get into Toudai anyway?" She inquired again.

He was surprised by her kind tone. *It's strange to see her like this... She's usually angry with me...* Picking up the pill he placed it in his mouth and swallowed it with a gulp of water. Once he finished, he spoke. "I just have a promise to keep..."

"Promise...?" She was puzzled.

His face lit up as he recalled the olden days. "To a girl I met fifteen years ago... That we'd meet up in Tokyo University when we're older..." He grew melancholic. "But I've failed twice, and she's probably already in, waiting for me..."

He then picked up his books and excused himself, leaving Naru's room via the hole. She could only stare at the hole separating their rooms with wonder.

Present Day

He's failed for the third time now... Poor Keitaro... She looked at her hands; her fingernails were indeed bitten as Mutsumi pointed out, from all the pressure of studying. *I haven't been nice to him at all these past few months...* Flashes of her punching him came back to her, especially when she made Suu cry. *Keitaro...*

Meanwhile Keitaro's Room

The man in question was sitting on the side of his bed, facing away from the closed door, out of the tiny porthole. *What am I going to do this year...? I've failed, and I'm spending more money going on holiday...* He squinted more as his eyes tried to compensate for his blurry vision. *And why can't I see!*

At that moment, someone knocked on his door. "Sensei, can I come in?"

"Sure, the door's open Shinobu-chan."

Pulling it aside, Shinobu stepped into the room shyly. "Sensei..." She bowed forwards, holding her arms out in front of her with the glasses. "I forgot to give you your glasses..."

Keitaro stumbled forward, but managed to find her hands. "Arigatou Shinobu-chan." He smiled, "I just noticed I wasn't wearing them..." He put them on as she straightened up. "Aah, that's better..." He peered at her face, and could tell she was anxious. "What's wrong?"

"Umm..." She put her hands behind her back. "W... Would you mind if I talk with you for a bit?"

"Err..." Keitaro looked around, as if expecting a fist from somewhere. "Sure, close the door and sit with me."

Doing as he said, she sunk into the comfy mattress next to Keitaro, as he breathed on his glasses, wiping them afterwards. She interlaced her fingers together, and felt hotter as the blood flowed to her cheeks. *I'm alone with sempai! It feels like it's been a long time...*

"So..." Keitaro spoke cheerfully, "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

"Well..." *What did I want to say...?* "Umm... Ah!" *Now I remember!* "It was nothing really... Motoko-sempai... You respect her more than you used to."

"Huh?" Keitaro was confused. "How do you mean?"

"How do I say it...?" Shinobu was thinking over how to phrase it, putting a finger to her chin. "You take everything she says deeply."

Keitaro didn't falter, "That's because Motoko-chan is a strong girl. She practises kendo and can make wind fly out from her katana!"

"But..." Shinobu wanted to go on, "That can't be why! Don't you take me seriously?" Shinobu's head drooped, her fringe wavering over her eyes.

Knowing that he'd put his foot in his mouth again, he put a hand on her shoulder. "Of course I do Shinobu-chan." He smiled wanly. "But you're not likely to blast me through walls or flying into the sky."

She looked up at him; a visible well of tears bubbling on her bottom eyelids. "So, if I start doing that..." She sniffed once, forcing the tears to flow down her cheeks. "Will you start respecting me more?"

Stunned, Keitaro could only open and close his mouth without any sound coming out for several tenuous seconds. "I... You... Why Shinobu-chan? Don't I do enough as it is?"

Immediately, he knew that he had fouled up. Shinobu started to sob more and put her hands to her face to keep him from seeing her. She pulled away, making his hand fall off her shoulder.

"Shinobu-chan..." He tentatively reached out to her, but was stopped by her standing up.

"No..." She juddered out between her lurches of sadness. "I... I have to go now..." She turned around quickly, one or two tears hovering in the air for milliseconds. "Auuuu..." Running out with her head in her hands, she said no more.

"Shinobu-chan..." Keitaro was flabbergasted. *Why...? Why did she leave like that? Does she think that I don't take her seriously?* He looked down to the turtle on his shoulder. It looked up to him.

It seemed to tell that there was something wrong, and it smiled with wisdom. "Myu?"

"Oh... I think I upset Shinobu-chan again..." He spoke to the turtle naturally, as if it were no different to a human. "I do that to all the girls here..."

Not being able to speak, it spouted its only word. "Myu?" However, this time it sounded like the turtle didn't believe him.

"The truth is..." Keitaro thought for a moment. "I don't know... Do they hate me now for running away? Are they annoyed at fetching me? Am I a bad kanrinrin?"

He looked out of the only porthole in his room to the sunny seas outside, and the turtle followed suit. "I don't know..." He repeated again.

Hinata-sou Sometime in the afternoon

The long journey is finally over, all the residents are back in their rooms going about their usual things, along with unpacking the few belongings they took with them. Since the time in the ship, not much was said or done. Motoko had locked her room after telling everyone else to leave, Keitaro and Shinobu had also done the same. Naru, Mitsune and Suu were the only ones having a snack in the bar, and they didn't talk about much, apart from Mitsune vomiting on the floor after a nasty bout of seasickness.

Back at Hinata-sou, it was still the same, Keitaro popped in to see Haruka, to apologise for everything, his failure, running away, and the hassle of the others leaving to find him. She waved it off in her same old way.

Room 204

"What next...?" He looked at his study area; textbooks, notepads, pens and pencils were strewn all around. "I've failed to get into Toudai... Okaasan wanted to know whether I passed or not this year..." He stood up with a sick feeling in his gut. "Guess I'd better tell her now..."

He left his room in silence, and didn't even stop himself from flying in the wall from Suu's welcome kick. "Not right now imouto-chan..." He smiled and patted her head. "I need to do something." Suu didn't even get a chance to complain before he dragged his lazy legs to the entrance hall.

Haruka was there picking up letters. "Anything interesting?" He asked.

"Nope." She took a puff on her cigarette. "Just bills for you, but there's a thick letter from Tokyo University for Naru."

"Must be her starter pack after she handed back her acceptance letter..." Keitaro mumbled as he made his way to the phone.

"Hmm... There's one for Motoko too..." Haruka mused, not remembering the kendo girl receiving any mail during her stay in the inn. "I'll leave these out here for them, make sure they get these letters Keitaro."

"Okay then Haruka-obasan." His forehead now bore a new battle wound from the cigarette she stubbed out into it.

"Haruka-san!" She said firmly.

Keitaro just stared at her, not caring that his burn now itched so badly. He picked up the receiver and began to dial.

"What's up with you Keitaro? You're out of it somehow..." She looked to the phone and put two and two together. "You're calling your parents aren't you?"

He just smiled grimly at her. "Don't let my sister boss you around, okay?" Haruka said before leaving. He was waiting for the phone to ring and then heard the fateful 'click' of someone picking up the other end.

A soft mumbling meant that someone was talking on the other end. "Okaasan..." Keitaro began. It all came out, that he didn't get into Toudai, went on a long trip to Kyoto and later Okinawa, and how he was now back at Hinata-sou.

The voice sounded lower, a tad angrier.

"I don't know in the long run, but I need to make money to keep running Hinata-sou, so I'm going to get a job here and continue living here."

It quickly changed to an inquisitive style. "No!" Keitaro raised his voice quickly. "I'm not working in the bakery again! I'm meant for better things..."

A slight pause, followed by an apologetic murmur. "Yes, yes... You always say that... It never works out." Keitaro sighed and looked to the ceiling, exasperated. "I'd better go and get some cleaning done, I haven't been here for a while and there's some work that needs doing."

Another murmur, this time glad. "Yeah, I know, until then, bye."

Keitaro hung up the phone and lifted his arm slowly. He felt drained talking to his parents; all the confidence had been sucked out of him. He turned around to go to the janitor's closet where he keeps all the cleaning tools and was surprised to see everyone standing there watching him.

"What is it?" He asked on seeing the look they had. Nodding with realisation, he continued. "How much did you hear?"

"Enough..." Naru said. "Are you going to leave?"

"No, I have to work to pay off the repair bills to Hinata-sou. Then... we'll see..."

"Aren't you going to try again for Toudai?" Mitsune inquired.

"For the fourth time?" He said in disbelief. "I've been thinking a lot about that, like my reason for getting into Toudai." He looked to the girls, and took a deep breath. *This is going to need a lot of explaining.* "When I was four, fifteen years ago, I made a promise with a girl that we would get into Toudai, due to the legend that if two people fall in love and go to Toudai, that they will live happily ever after. The problem is, I can't remember the girl in that promise, and now that I've failed for the third time again, she's probably not waiting there for me..." He stopped as he watched them grow more surprised by each statement he made. Naru was also listening, having only heard part of the story from him.

"I need to think more about the future later, but right now I need to get a job." He pointed to the table at the entrance. "You have a letter from Toudai, Narusegawa, and you have a letter also Motoko-ch..." He paused. "...Motoko."

Naru was concerned for Keitaro, as he laboriously walked by them up the stairs to his room. She reluctantly picked up the letter and found that it contained details of when to attend special seminars. Motoko ignored Keitaro completely, and wasn't fazed when he removed the suffix to her name, in fact she was happy. *Why should he call me that? Am I that friendly to him!* She opened her letter and froze. The first thing that caught her eye

was the signature at the bottom of the page. *Tsuruko... Ane-ue... Why?* She took the letter away from prying eyes (namely Suu who began jumping about her to read it) and went to her room, sliding the door shut behind her.

"Dear Motoko," She muttered. "As you are well aware, the time for you to return to the dojo is approaching every passing day. You are expected to inherit the ideals and the way of the Shinmeiryu, to teach it to others and for the future generations." She paused for a moment as she started the next paragraph. "However, as I am away from you at this time, I do not know how well your training is going. Therefore prior to my arrival, you shall face all five from the Gogyou." Motoko gasped with horror but went on in spite of the revelation. "The Gogyou shall test you in battle to see if you are worthy to receive the honour bestowed upon those who take control of the dojo. They will fight you one on one, using the full extent of their abilities, and they may or may not give you warning as to when they desire their duel. Of course, each of them cannot compare with my power, so only until you defeat them can you face me to choose your destiny. " Motoko blanched, remembering a time when she saw the Gogyou battle a group of demons years back and they already had advanced skills, which could only have grown given the time that has passed. She started the last paragraph. "Do your best Motoko. Prove to me how strong you have become. With love, Tsuruko."

Calmly folding the paper once again, she placed it in front of her mini shrine and lit two incense sticks. Putting her arms together, she began to pray for courage and strength needed to see off the forthcoming opponents. Opening her eyes after fifteen minutes, she tore the paper neatly into tiny pieces and promptly burned them in a candle, the flame flickering higher each time some more was added.

"So... Ane-ue has set the Five onto me... I cannot waste any more time here. This environment is not suitable for training purposes." She picked up her katana and opened her door. "I must gain power..."

Four hours later The woods behind Hinata-sou

"That should be enough for one day..." Panted a sweaty Motoko.

The landscape around her had been transformed from one of natural beauty to absolute destruction. Trees were sliced in two, both horizontally and vertically; rocks displayed clear incisions, displaying kanji of all sorts. One boulder had been sliced into two neatly whilst many others were broken roughly.

I think I have the strength to perform a true Zan Gan Ken... The ki is needed to convert the edge of the blade into a diamond-esque density. This should make it pass through any rock with ease. I can only do it perfectly for the tip of the blade; the rest of the blade is the problem... It takes a long time to gather up the ki, and to then pass it onto the whole blade... It also uses up a large amount of my energy to do so for such the desired effect. She stumbled, her knees giving way as they grew weak from all the exertion she had been doing. She planted the katana into the ground to ease her up. *This is not good enough!*

Even after intense training I can barely achieve one skill... How can I ever hope to defeat the Five, let alone ane-ue...? I must return to rest... I don't know when they will arrive... It might even be today! Stirring up the last reserves of her strength, she stretched up and sheathed the katana. Taking steady steps, she walked back towards the female dormitory.

8:03pm
The dining room

A fabulous spread was laid out as the resident chef placed more plates on the table. Dinner was later than the normal time as they were all quite tired from the trip, so they were happier for a longer time to wait for the meal as some took naps or other activities. Shinobu was also happy with this as she was still relaxing from the short holiday, so she needed more time to get back into the habit of cooking food.

Keitaro wondered in and looked around. Seeing no one there, he risked it and went into the kitchen where he found the happily humming chef.

His expression filled with regret. "Shinobu-chan..." He saw her stop chopping up some herbs, so he quickened his voice. "Gomen nasai! Gomen nasai!" He bent down onto his knees and placed his hands on the floor, bowing constantly. "I didn't mean to sound rude! I... I just can't get over what's been happening recently..." His head stayed bowed. "I failed to get into Toudai, I must've disappointed you. My future looks bleak..."

"Sempai..." He looked up to see Shinobu looking down on him with care. "Didn't you say to me, 'if you try hard enough, you can do anything'?" She knelt down in front of him, her hands on her knees. "You never give up... You're stronger than I am... I give up when it's too hard for me to go on. Don't give up sempai!" She smiled at him and looked behind her. "Could you help me bring in the rest of the food?"

"Sure Shinobu-chan." Keitaro felt better now, his entire dark mood lifted. He picked up the remaining dishes and walked with her into the dining room, where she then laid them out neatly on the table. Naru walked in with Mitsune and stared suspiciously at him.

"What are you up to alone with Shinobu-chan?" She glared at him, her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"I... uhh... I was helping her set the table..." He blushed uncontrollably.

"Then why are you blushing!" Smacking him, the Naru-punch allowed his body to feel every inch of the wall behind him, being embedded in it as he was.

"G... Gomen..." He wheezed, as Shinobu began to whimper, walking back into the kitchen.

Suu and Motoko had entered the kitchen, and Suu jumped about him. *Pervert...* Motoko thought as she sat down at the table. The others followed suit, after Suu peeled Keitaro from the wall, shaking him about till he regained his full weight. Motoko noticed that her arms were now incredibly heavy, and her eyelids wanting to close more. *I'm becoming drowsy... I've used too much ki...* Her fingers blanched as she used her willpower to keep herself awake. *It's impossible... I'm going to...* Her eyes rolled up into her skull as her hands slipped from the table edge. Falling slowly, she slumped to the ground.

"Motoko!" Suu cried.

"Motoko-chan!" Naru stood up and pulled back the chair. By this time everyone was focused on the unconscious girl. Naru put an arm underneath her head and felt her forehead. "She's got a fever of some kind..." She looked up. "Keitaro, help me take her to her room."

Keitaro was sullen and was torn between wanting to help Motoko and by wanting to ignore her plight.

"Keitaro..." Naru was getting angry again, "Aren't you supposed to look after the residents? Help Motoko-chan!"

Resigned to his fate, he lowered himself and picked her up. He and Naru then carried her to her room.

Room 302 Five minutes later

"Watch her while I get a cool towel." She said as she ran out of the room downstairs.

Keitaro, with nothing to do, kept finding his eyes straying to her troubled face. *She looks like she's in pain...* Placing a hand above her forehead he could sense the heat she was emitting, the beads of sweat pouring down her face making it more evident. *What has she been doing to get such a high fever?* He removed the katana from the sheath around her to put somewhere safe when he noticed it was dusty. He pulled it partway out and saw that it had tiny wood splinters and harder particles on it. *Has she been training...? Why did she train so hard to make herself ill?* He looked over her outfit and could see more wood chips and another layer of grey dust on her kendo uniform. *Rock and wood... What is she up to?*

"Keitaro, I have the..." Naru stopped upon seeing him examining her kendo uniform, holding her sword in the other hand. "K... Keitaro... What are you doing...?" She sounded nervous.

He looked up in panic, "N... Nothing! I swear! I was just..." He realised he was still holding the katana as he waved his arms about in front, he quickly placed it on the ground and

continued. "I was wondering how she got all dusty..."

Naru's fear turned to anger. "So you thought you'd check her body out, eh?"

"Yes!" He put his hands to his mouth when he uttered that momentous mistake. "I mean..." He was too late as the Naru-punch sent him flying out of Motoko's window, but he went on speaking. "No...!" His voice grew fainter as he vanished into the darkness outside.

"He can be such a pervert..." Naru mused as she placed the ice-cold towel on Motoko's forehead.

Later that evening Hinata Springs

Keitaro sighed. *I went a long way this time...* He looked up to the inn and saw some of the lights were still on. He began to walk up the steps limping, seeing as he had smashed into a lamppost on the way down to earth. He made it to the bottom of the steps and saw that Haruka's shop was still open and said owner was outside enjoying the warm breeze.

"Tough day huh, Keitaro?" She looked over his dishevelled appearance, as she flicked ash off her cigarette into the air.

"You could say that Haruka-obasan." He went to the door and took his slippers off (he was still wearing them in Hinata-sou), only to be kicked behind his knees, letting him fall face first into her shop.

"Haruka-san..."

"So, what brings you here Keitaro?" She poured some tea for him as he made his way to one of the tables.

"Nothing much... just..."

"Is there a problem in Hinata-sou? With one of the residents?" She spoke neutrally.

She saw through me again... "You could say that..." He chuckled half-heartedly.

"Well, it's not my business to meddle in your life..." Haruka took a final puff and stubbed it out in the ashtray in front of her. "But let me tell you this, from my experience, you need time to let things simmer down between the two of you. She's probably upset at you saying or doing something that you wouldn't normally do." She sighed and lowered her head a

tad, relaxing her eyelids. "A girl's heart is pure, but easily shattered when young. It'll take for her to fully trust you again, especially for Motoko."

"I see..." He mused to himself for a few seconds, sipping some tea, before a few pieces clicked into place. *Wait a minute...* "Haruka-san, how did you know about Motoko?"

His aunt was about to say something when she gasped and her eyes were once more aware of everything around her. She stared outside the doorway of the teashop, making Keitaro curious and turn to what she was looking at. Seeing nothing, he looked back to his aunt.

"Haruka-san, did you see someone?"

"N... No... It was nothing..." She began to heat up under her fringe, a bead of sweat snaking its way down over her cheek. She picked up her tea and Keitaro did the same, not able to sense her dread. *What was that huge ki? I've not felt one that that for years... It didn't feel like Kanako or Hina-obaasan...* Her eyes recalled seeing the faint flutter of dark brown hair in a long ponytail.

Unknown location Time unknown

The needle-like rain cut at her face, the wind only making things worse and forcing it straight into her eyes. She was drenched through; her red hakama was soaked with the rain from the tall grass around her. Holding her arm as one of the sleeves was torn badly, blood seeping through from the ruptured skin beneath, she grimaced as the pain surged through her body. She stared down the field at her enemy.

"You have broken through my defences." The creature telepathically spoke, its maw curled upwards in a gruesome form of a smile. "But now you have no weapon to maim me or..." The creature lunged at the young girl. *"To parry my final attack!"*

It was true; her katana had been flung away from the battlefield by the monster. Motoko closed her eyes as the bringer of death jolted towards her. A flash of lightning before her and the sound of thunder following milliseconds after flung her back. Staggering to her feet she opened one eye, and could sense that her head was bleeding, as a trickle went over her eyelid. The monster has been cut into two, shrieking as it let out its death cries across the valley. When the body made a wet thud on the damp ground, Motoko smiled wanly.

"Ane-ue..."

Behind the fallen demon stood another figure, completely in black save for the katana she wielded. It shone with the tendrils of lightning coursing through the metal, once or twice illuminating her body. Behind her were five more figures, each standing back with their

weapons drawn. All of them stepped forwards and conjured various powers to destroy the remnants the dead turtle. Soon it was in flames; its spirit being returned to hell as the ash was carried away in the wind. The six were now standing between Motoko and facing the fire.

"Ara Motoko-han..." The central person chuckled menacingly. "You couldn't handle a simple lower level demon like this one?" Focusing one glowing white eye on the younger girl, she smirked evilly. "I'll have to punish you!"

**Present Day
Room 302**

A yell and a pair of hands were holding her down.

"No ane-ue... Let me go!" She cried out again, tears on the brim of falling.

The person let her go. "Motoko-chan..." Motoko opened her eyes and saw that Naru was looking at her with concern. "Are you okay? It looks like you were having a nightmare."

"Yes... I was..." Motoko was breathing hard, as if she had run a marathon, her body spent from the battle in her dream. She rested her head against her pillow once more. *Perhaps the letter brought it on, and my fainting probably didn't help matters.* She was about to release a breath she didn't know she held, before the icy wind of horror caressed her already vulnerable body. She sat up, shivering, ignoring Naru's protests. *What is this? Why am I paralysed with terror?* She began to analyse herself quickly. *The only time I feel like this is when...* She held a hand to her mouth as her lower lip trembled. *It can't be... Not now...* She tried to determine the thick ki that was growing from below, snaking around her legs and creeping up towards her waist. However just she had begun analysing and studying it, it receded without leaving a trace, nor indication of who it was. Yet Motoko knew it could only belong to a select few. *One of the Five has arrived...* She strained to her feet.

"Motoko-chan!" Naru exclaimed, "You shouldn't put too much stress on your body!"

Once again, she was ignored as Motoko went to the window and looked out over the steps below. The night had set in but there was still a faint blue outline on the horizon. This was enough to outline the figure of a woman at the top of the steps. She was very tall, wearing kendo garb in a similar fashion to that of Motoko's. The only differences were in the colours used, the hakama was brown, and the gi a dull beige. While she couldn't make out much of the face, the lamppost behind cast it into permanent shadow, only parts visible were two glowing white eyes. Thin and sharp, the head tilted slightly to see Motoko, and they narrowed further.

Immediately the effect was felt as the ki ravaged Motoko's body, permeating her skin and through her very being. The dust that her ki disturbed surrounded the woman, and even a

small tremor was felt. Motoko held onto the barrier to stop herself from falling, but when she checked again, the person had gone.

Soon all of Hinata-sou, except for Motoko, had left the building wondering why there was a small earthquake; Keitaro and Haruka had also come running up the steps.

"What... What was that?" Naru asked nervously to everyone.

Only large cracks gave any indication that something was there, emanating from a small crater. Suu looked at it with great appreciation.

"Ooh, that looks interesting, something happened here..." She smiled gleefully, taking out a radar of sorts and started probing the indentation in the earth.

"Sempai..." Shinobu shuffled over to him, looking at the recess in the ground with mild fear. "Was that an earthquake?"

"No, it can't have been... It was too short..." He replied, looking at Suu's cheerful face to see any signs of imminent danger from aftershocks.

Shinobu look at him again before realising something. "Ah..." She grew quieter. "Did you land safely, sempai?"

Surprised by her pained look, he smiled, "Yeah, a little awkward, but I can still walk."

She perked up again; glad to hear he wasn't hurt. Silence returned only to be swept away by a loud bleeping sound, making everyone jump.

Suu looked pensive, holding her chin in deep thought. "Hmm, my two-in-one Earthquake Detector and Curry Sauce Maker says that it wasn't one, the telltale signs of fault stress and hotspots aren't present..." Everyone was baffled but kept listening, "It won't happen again according to the machine." Regaining her former animated self, she held up the device. "Anyone want some curry?"

"NO!" Was the general consensus, everyone present being a victim to Suu's overeager spicy food.

"Ahh, you're no fun..." Suu pouted, looking at her machine with a sulk.

Shinobu, seeing her friend's sadness, moved beside her and put a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay Suu." She spoke louder to everyone. "How about I make some curry tomorrow instead?"

This time there were several positive remarks, and the mood was one of 'Yes please'. Shinobu smiled at her friend. "See? They like curry, you just make it too hot for all of us..."

"I know!" Suu chirped, putting her hands behind her head and walking inside. "But I like to help out sometimes..." Shinobu grew concerned for her friend, and followed Suu into the house.

The others remained outside and talked to themselves. The turtle plopped itself on Keitaro's head and waved at the other women, who meekly waved back. Haruka's gaze tore away from the disturbed ground and faced Naru, folding her arms in the process.

"So Naru, are you all ready for Toudai?"

Naru put her hand behind her head and laughed nervously. "Hahaha... I'm not sure Haruka-san, I've read the pack they gave me but it's all a bit scary really..." She began to laugh again but saw the look on Keitaro's face, which displayed tones of disappointment. Haruka shook her head in a way that said, "he was going to hear about Toudai sooner or later, so don't worry".

Mitsune took this opportunity to speak, "Well, we still have to decide what you have to wear on your first day there. You need to dress as you mean to go on!" She said enthusiastically.

"Wh... What does that mean Kitsune?" Naru asked, unsure of her friend's meaning.

A glint appeared in Mitsune's eye, which only made Naru more uncomfortable. "Well, we'll see about that... Attractive to the opposite sex, but classy enough to say that 'I am better than you'. Or should I do the 'Innocent female needs help from a strong man' look?"

A pair of hand grabbed Naru and dragged her into the inn. "No! Don't do this to me Kitsune!"

"Aww come on Naru, it's only a bit of fun... For me."

"Nooo!" Her cries faded away as Haruka and Keitaro were left alone once more.

"Keitaro..." Haruka walked towards him. "I know it's hard... But you have to move on and look to the future, don't dwell on this failure." She sighed deeply, her breath visible in the cold air as the winter season still tried to clutch hold at the nights, and looked up to the sky, the first stars twinkling into existence in the dusk. Seeing them winking in and out made her remember a time not too long ago, and she smiled broadly. "Nephew, you'll get into Toudai, be positive about it and it will happen. Try harder next time." Hearing no reply she looked to him, and he was staring right back at her. "What?"

"You smiled." He stated dumbly.

"So what? Don't I smile every now and then?" She defensively waved it away.

"Yes, but there was always something lingering those times... Something almost bitter and sad..." Keitaro thought back to the few times he saw her smile. "This one seemed more genuine and happier... What were you thinking of?"

"Nothing! You'd better go before you catch your death." Haruka turned away and fumed, not facing him. "I'll see you soon..." She started down the stairs.

Keitaro scratched his head. "That's odd..." He contemplated her reaction. "She didn't hit me..." He looked up to the inn. *I wonder what happened to Motoko-ch... She didn't come down, is she okay?* He sighed in a way that relieved some of his pressure. *Well, guess I'd better eat...* Walking inside, he failed to see a pair of eyes watching him.

Meanwhile Room 302

Urashima... Motoko stood in her room, the light off as she spied on him walking indoors quietly. *You... You are the one who has made me like this... I have neglected my training due to you pestering me everyday, even making me leave to find you, and perving on the others constantly.* Keitaro vanished as he entered the building, but Motoko was still thinking to herself as she lay down in her futon. *Without me to protect them, who knows what you might do?* Flashbacks echoed in her mind as images of him being nice to her and the other residents, as well as his smile. She shook her head of these thoughts. Not wanting to confront the emotions welling up inside of her, she chose ignorance, labelling them as anger, before she settled into her futon.

9pm

Shinobu was clearing the plates away when she saw Motoko's seat. "Oh no..." She mumbled, "Motoko-san hasn't eaten..." She turned to her companion. "Suu, I'm going upstairs to leave Motoko-san some food."

"Roger!" She saluted back and carried on with the dishes.

Picking up some on the rice in one bowl, the rest in another and a glass of water on a tray, Shinobu walked up to Motoko's room. The light was off inside and Shinobu placed the tray on the floor outside. Rapping on the doorframe lightly, she received no reply.

"Motoko-san?" Shinobu shuffled nervously in her pink bunny slippers, remembering that Motoko was still angry with Keitaro since arriving at the Otohime home. She whimpered and knocked again. However, this time she was overcome with fear over a strange feeling coming from behind the door partition. It reminded her of how she felt when watching a documentary a while back about wolves pouncing on helpless creatures who weren't able to run fast enough. The predator now was inside Motoko's room, and Shinobu, the prey, outside of it. Back-peddalling, she breathed easier as the pressure on her decreased. Not wanting to try again, she half-ran away downstairs to continue helping Suu in the kitchen.

Meanwhile Room 302

In the evening glow of the room, a shadowed face was staring at the door. *I shouldn't have done that, especially at that level. Shinobu means no harm.* She felt her forehead and groaned inwardly. *I've still got a high temperature.* Her face was wet, as was her clothing. *I must rest if I am to duel with the Five... Now that one is here, she will set the date for sometime soon.* Lying back down, she uncovered the top part of the futon to cool her body off as she tried to sleep.

The food lay outside the room the entire night.

Sunday 15th March 7:37am Room 302

The soft flapping of wings couldn't wake the exhausted Motoko, who was still sleeping off her workout yesterday. The eagle glided down besides her and deposited a small capsule by her pillow. Walking towards the window, it took off again, leaving the room quiet once more.

9:34am The kitchen

A plain breakfast of rice with a dried plum in the centre was the main course. Shinobu, having had little sleep last night due to the tiredness from the trip, chose not to cook much. Thankfully the residents also felt the same way, everyone having got up later than their usual time of nine in the morning.

Keitaro yawned loudly, covering his mouth while doing so. He blearily scanned the table and wasn't surprised to see that once again Motoko hadn't shown up.

"Shinobu-chan... Did Motoko eat her dinner?" He asked.

She shook her head. "No, it was still outside her door. The food wasn't eaten..."

He guessed it correctly and hunched his shoulders, lowering his head in futility. *What is wrong with her? She fainted yesterday and we haven't seen her eating since... Narusegawa said she woke up for a short time before the tremor, but she was acting weird.* He glanced at everyone and saw tired expressions, as if no one had a proper night's sleep.

"Shinobu, make a portion out for Motoko and I'll leave it by her door." She did so, but faltering a little. *Why does he want to do it...?* She was a bit jealous that he was giving her special treatment, but paid it no heed. *He wants to please everyone...* She smiled as she handed the tray to him. "Arigatou." He smiled back.

Getting up, he walked out to the entrance and then up the staircase, eventually reaching the floor on which her room was. He knocked gently.

"Motoko...?" He called, to which no reply was forthcoming. He opened the door a crack and noticed the rhythmic breathing under her futon. *She's still asleep... I'll leave this here for her...* He closed the door and placed the food outside in the vain hope that she'll eat it.

He glanced back at the gloomy door, and shifted his eyes away. He reached the ground floor, but instead of returning to the kitchen to help Shinobu with the washing up, he walked outside. It was a sunny day, despite the fact that it was early Spring. He marvelled at the way the trees looked, they appeared to be greener and livelier.

"The seasons must be changing..." He mused as he walked around the back of Hinata-sou.

"I do not think that is the case... They are merely happy."

Keitaro jumped at the new voice and saw a woman lying on one of the branches of a tree.

"Did I scare you?" She jumped down and landed perfectly. "I apologise for that."

Keitaro half-bowed down to her before realising one thing. "Erm... Not to be rude but, who are you?"

The woman, still under cover of the trees seemed taken aback. "I'm surprised you haven't heard of me. Has Motoko-dono not mentioned me?"

"Motoko?" Keitaro was puzzled. *How does she know Motoko? I don't like this...* "She hasn't woken up since last night, she's ill."

The woman had mirth in her voice. "I see... Perhaps it is too soon for her if it frightens her this much..."

Keitaro couldn't take it any more. "Hey! I don't know who you are, but you can't talk about Motoko-chan like that!" He didn't even notice how he added the suffix to her name. "She's stronger than you can imagine... Whatever you've done to her you'll pay for..."

He stopped as the eerily familiar glint caught his eye. A sliver of sunlight reflected off a katana blade that the woman was holding. "Very well Keitaro-dono, I shall be waiting for Motoko-dono to meet me and to prove what you said." She moved back and melted into the black of the trees.

"Wh... What does she mean...?" Keitaro racked his brains to find out what happened as he walked back to Hinata-sou. "She received a letter from home, Haruka-obasan said that she never got a letter..." He'd already reached the front of the building, and he checked to see if she was up yet, but the lack of lighting inside made that unlikely to be true.

"I wonder what's going to happen?"

Room 302
11:26am

A pair of eyes lazily opened, the strain and sunlight being too much so that they had to close again. This time scrunching her eyelids, Motoko managed to see for the first time that day. Moving up in the futon, she sat up, holding her head as her vision grew clearer. Feeling a strange cool object under her right hand, she looked down and saw a capsule. Apprehension came back to her, as she unscrewed the lid and a small note fell out into her palm. She read what was written, her eyes skimming it quickly and seriously. Reaching the end of the document, she tore it up into pieces and threw it into the bin.

Making up her mind, she rose to her feet and put on her trademark kendo uniform. After going through her daily routine she directed her gaze to her trustworthy katana, still lying in wait in its holder on the shelf. Picking it up, her hand wavered as the weight was higher than she imagined. Ignoring it, she placed it against her hip tucked into her sash. Now prepared for battle, she opened the door to her room and walked out, leaving it ajar.

Hinata-sou
11:43am

"YAAAHH!"

Keitaro screamed as he ran away from Suu, another one of her inventions (an electrical

beam) was threatening to fry him.

"Leave her alone imouto-chan!" He cried out, running up another flight of stairs.

Suu only laughed more, "But she's fun, she keeps hiding from me. You must know where she is!"

He stopped and faced her. "I don't know where Tama-chan is, I swear!" Another bolt flew at him, "Uh-oh..."

A flash, a scream, and a thud, Keitaro now was lying on the floor in blackened clothing thanks to the high voltage. Still smoking he looked left and saw the door to Motoko's room was open, and that clearly no one was in. Suu noticed his stare and jumped on his back when he stood up.

Opening the door carefully, he made a prompt scan of the surroundings, and noticed nothing out of place, except for a piece of paper near the bin. Moving closer he picked it up and noticed part of a kanji on it, seeing only a few more pieces inside the bin, he put them together and found it read only three things:

Kodama: Hinata Forest

"What is this...?" He wondered.

"Hmm, looks important." Suu moved closer. "Could she have a date?"

Nearly face-faulting, if it weren't for Suu still being on his shoulders, Keitaro chuckled. "I don't think it's that, imouto-chan..." Losing the smiling face, he recalled the woman from earlier as he stared at the paper.

"I shall be waiting for Motoko-dono to meet me and to prove what you said."

"Oh no..." He looked to her shelf and saw the sword missing, though that was a natural occurrence it made him worry even more. "Suu," He put her down on the floor, "I'm going to Hinata forest... Stay here... Whatever you do don't follow me."

Off he ran, down the stairs to the entrance, leaving Suu in a confused state in Motoko's room.

Hinata Forest (behind Hinata-sou)

11:55am

A lone figure traipsed through the tall grass between the trees to reach the meeting point. It was hardly difficult for her to get lost; the ki of the opponent could be felt from the edge of the forest, all she had to do was to head for the source. Eventually the trees thinned out and a small clearing with tall grass was in wait. Walking into the middle of it, Motoko withdrew her blade. She felt the ki vanish as the wind rustled her hair from behind. Turning slowly, she looked up and spoke.

"It has been a while Miki-sama."

A woman walked out from the trees; she was half a head taller than Motoko, her brown shaded uniform blending in with the background. Having two sharp bangs falling over her face, a long ponytail out the back of her head, also breaking off into two smaller locks. It was black, but there were visible streaks of grey in all parts of it. Her face was a gentle peach and soft, belying her age, yet her pine-coloured eyes sharp as crystal as she peered at Motoko.

"That it has been Motoko-dono." She too removed her katana, the handle intricately carved.

Meanwhile
Outside the back of Hinata-sou

"Where could she be?"

Keitaro stared at the boundary of the forest but could see no sign of her. He was about to walk in when he heard a loud explosion, and saw white smoke and dust rising into the sky from another direction. Without a moment to lose, he ran there.

Motoko-chan...

Author's Notes

First, explanations of certain words:

Gogyou - The five Japanese elements: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water.

Kodama - Literally means 'Wood'.

Miki - Literally means 'Beautiful Tree'.

Secondly, the flames:

Yes I have gone against one of my main principles, and that was to not create any ACCs, however I decided to do this to progress the storyline with more of a focus on Motoko than Naru. By exposing more about the clan we get to see more about her own self. Incidentally, these characters are present. If you have the magna, look in Volume 9 and the scene where Motoko is having her nightmare (before her sister arrives). Miki-sama is the woman on the far left in the picture.

You may flame me on this, as I feel that some of you won't like the way this fic is turning.

Thirdly, apologies:

Well, it has only been something like seven months since the last update, so I'll understand if most of you have forgotten this story even existed. I'm trying to do well in my degree this year round, thus (As I have explained earlier) I'm studying more and writing less. Still, at least this chapter is 9000 word-ish. I'm sorry for the delay, but as you can imagine, sometimes priorities change, and when your future depends upon a small piece of paper, the two numbers you get on that paper affect your life forever (i.e. a 2:1 or 1:1, are the second highest/top results respectively), so naturally, other things like writing take a lower level of precedence.

Fourthly:

Reviews would be nice, these have kept me going these past few months, to let me know that every now and then, someone new is reading my fics and liking them. Regarding the last reviews, around 5 were missing as that was when had a major restructuring, and thus some were not registered (though I received the emails). Nothing I can do about that I'm afraid...

Till the next update, don't even dream of asking when that will be:-P

- Jason

Chapter 23

... The Storm

One second later

Inside Hinata Forest

"Argh!" Motoko fell backwards from the strike.

"Come now Motoko-dono..." Miki stood back from the fallen swordswoman. "Show me what you have learned... Hiken, Hayashi No Rekiemu!" She held her odachi loosely at her side. Gathering more ki, letting it cover the sword completely, the trees drew closer, drawn by the power.

I forgot... This is where Miki-sama is at her best... Getting to her feet with the help of her katana, she narrowed her eyes at her opponent's weapon. Her ki has a natural affinity to wood, hence her ability to control the trees and bark... Sensing another attack from behind her on the left, she leaped out of the way to the right, dodging as a long branch avoided lancing her side. Swinging towards her, she held up her katana and blocked the swipe, moving further back from the blow.

Oh no... She looked to her right and no longer saw Miki. Concentrating, she tried to find her by her ki, only to find it all around her. One of the trees nearby shook, and taking no chance, Motoko attacked.

"Zan Gan Ken!"

The wind attack rotated clockwise through the air, horizontally slicing through the tree across the trunk roughly, making it splinter badly and start to topple.

"A shame that you fell for that so easily... Hiken, Nekko Fukushuu!"

Gasping Motoko felt her legs get cut up as roots grew out of the ground to slice at her. Looking back, she saw Miki with her odachi half-embedded in the ground, the ki channelling down into the earth and controlling the subterranean weapons.

"Shit..." Motoko cursed to herself, the wounds feeling sore from the roughness of the roots. Taking aim, she neatly killed off the roots, but more kept coming from other areas. *I can't stay on the ground... I need to get away from these things.* Leaping up into the air,

she placed herself between Miki and the sun, forcing the elder fighter to look up into the bright sky. Indeed blinded, she couldn't see the downward strike nor the razor edged wind blades. "Zan Gan Ken!"

As they reached her target, Motoko saw that Miki felt the full force of them, falling to the ground. "Miki-sama!" She ran to her elder, and stopped short, seeing the battered image of an unevenly cut up log.

"That was a well placed attack Motoko-dono." Spinning around, Motoko was on her guard, but only saw Miki standing in the centre with an amused look on her cheerful face. "Were I not fast enough with my wooden clone, I would have been seriously injured, if not killed."

Motoko was panting now. *Guh... The pain is coming back... I still need more rest.* Her predominant sword hand began to twitch again, so she clutched the hilt with both hands, but still the trembling continued.

The thin eyes of Miki spotted this from earlier. "I see that you are not well, though the convalescence period should've been enough for you."

"I am still well enough to fight!" Motoko shouted back, even as her vision began to falter, Miki now splitting into two blurry versions of herself.

"If you believe so..." Miki began to rotate her odachi in the air above her head, and the leaves from the surrounding trees began to be pulled in to the vacuum she was creating. Soon her entire body was surrounded by the green and brown leaves, hiding her from sight.

Is she trying another trick, or is it an attack? Checking around for any roots or oddly moving trees, she took a chance, and ran straight for the mini tornado. Immediately, several dozen sharp leaves leaped out from the mass at her. Either evading or cutting them up without a thought, she ran faster and eventually reached there, sending a precise horizontal sweeping arc into the pillar of leaves.

It went straight through, and the leaves below fell to the ground whilst the others flew upwards. *Where is she!* There was no sign of Miki where she stood moments earlier.

"Hiken, Ha Kirite Kachuu!"

Oh sh-... "AAAAH!"

Motoko was fooled by the same style of attack she tried to pull on Miki, by jumping into the

light. She was bombarded by hundreds of leaves as they stopped circling the airborne Miki and were now aimed at the younger girl, lancing at her with deadly accuracy. Shredding her sleeves with their enhanced serrated edges, other smaller leaves, now with the same density as steel, had stabbed Motoko in various parts of her body, blood seeping through to her gi and hakama from where they had embedded themselves.

At that moment

Elsewhere in Hinata Forest

Keitaro panting, smacking away another branch that got in his way. *Where was she again?* As if answering his thought, Motoko's screams could be heard, and they weren't too far away, running faster, Keitaro finally reached the edge of the clearing, and saw leaves raining down on a prone body.

"MOTOKO-CHAN!" He shouted, running onto the battlefield.

Seeing him, Miki halted her attack, and let the leaves flutter in the wind gently, as she landed quietly on her feet.

"Motoko-chan!" Keitaro reached her and saw the dagger-like leaves sticking out of her, like she were a life-size pincushion. Staring in shock at the various wounds, he started to pull the leaves out slowly, as Miki watched with interest. The leaves, once removed, lost their tough exterior and dropped from the thickness of the blood on them, as Keitaro threw them away from the body.

Once all of them were out, Motoko lay there, passed out from the pain, with her clothing dotted with various splotches of red. Feeling her forehead, he could tell she was growing hotter by the second, so he took off his jumper, and placed it over her upper torso. Looking to her opponent, he was in shock, and quite angry.

"Why...?" He stood up and glared at her. "WHY!"

Miki stood there, not perturbed by his display. "It is her duty." She stated truthfully.

"Are you from her school?" Miki nodded. "Why attack her then?"

Miki walked closer, katana still out of its scabbard. "She has to fight for the future of the Shinmeiryu." She stopped a metre away from him, as he blocked her from Motoko. "If she cannot face this, then she has no right to inherit the dojo."

I see... She needs to prove herself to the school... His thoughts began to drift again, upon seeing that up close, Miki was once a great beauty, but age had taken away some of her smoother features, and her eyes were tired and slightly wrinkled. His heart almost fluttered, were it not for the fact this elegant woman caused pain to Motoko.

"One week."

Miki arched an eyebrow. "For what?"

"She'll face you in one week, no sooner, no later." He looked to Motoko's flushed face. "You're trained in recognising illness, so you fought her even though you knew she hadn't recovered." He faced her again, his sadness evident. "Where's the honour in that?"

Stunned, Miki felt as if a bolt had struck her, and she too looked at the still figure, and her eyes grew watery. "She wanted to accept the challenge, so I have to fight her... I knew though she was too ill to fight."

"You can still fight, if you must. One week will be enough recovery time for her." Keitaro saw the stains on her hakama. "Was the attack painful?"

Miki nodded with her eyes closed. "Yes, but only for a short moment. She stood up well against them. Few have remained conscious for that long." She looked up to Keitaro's determined eyes. "I accept your proposal. In one week, I shall fight Motoko-dono."

A shout was heard from the side of the clearing, and they both turned to see who caused the commotion. There stood Suu holding a small pocket watch, Naru, Mitsune and Shinobu. Even Haruka had appeared from the bushes to see what was happening.

A sudden wind caught stray leaves and blew them across the opening, taking with them the master of wood, Miki. Everyone ran to Keitaro and Motoko. A flurry of questions began to bombard him, each similar and yet different.

"Auuu, what happened to Motoko?"

"Did you touch her again you pervert?"

"Who was that gorgeous woman?"

"Who was that fighting Motoko?"

"My Keitaro-radar never fails me!"

"Okay." He held up a hand. "I'll answer them later..." He paused, realising Suu didn't ask a question, and almost facefaulted. "We need to get Motoko-chan inside and treat her injuries first."

He bent down and picked her up gently, not seeing the half-jealous looks from two of them present. Walking to the inn, he looked down at her face, on of pain and frustration still etched in it. *She must be hurting inside... This must be another big loss in her eyes, even though she'll be too proud to admit it... I'm going to try to stop her from training too much these next few days.* He saw the inn shining with all the glory of the midday sun. *Still, a little break won't do her much harm... He sighed in self-hatred. She'll probably hate me even more for doing this... Well, it's not as if I'm important to her any more after that time anyway...*

1:47pm

Room 302

The dull throbbing of a headache came back to her as she regained consciousness. The dampness of the towel above her forehead and the numerous little pricks of pain in her body gave her the impression that she was defeated due to fighting before she was cured. She sighed, and then realised she wasn't alone in the room. Though it pained her to use her ki senses, she heard the presence of someone next to her, through the rhythmic breathing. Opening her eyes, she saw that it belonged to the one man she despised at that moment in time, Keitaro.

"Urashima..." She croaked out. Apparently her voice didn't work as well as intended, and he didn't hear her from his slumber, sitting beside her. She tried to get up but her joints screamed under the strain, and she relinquished herself to lying there next to him. *If he tries anything, I'll...* She tried to clench her fist, but the force she usually possessed no longer existed, and all she could do was close her hand without tightening it further.

Fed up of her anger against Keitaro, she began to replay the match again in her mind. *She used her most powerful techniques against me...* Images of the tree branches taking swipes at her and roots growing out from the earth and finally leaves raining down came back to her. *They were all at full power from what I recall in the past, but it seemed they were toned down in their hostility... I don't understand this.*

Looking to her right, she saw the pile of bandages, plasters and other items to help her with healing, including her special ointment that she gave Keitaro a while back. Some of the things there were red with her own blood, and she grimaced. *Did Urashima do this? He must have seen me naked then...* Her fury grew once again, but finding no way of unleashing it, she settled down and closed her eyes. *I wonder if Miki-sama has already*

spoken with my sister about the battle, and how I am no longer of use to the Shinmeiryu. Her lips trembled slightly as she bit back a sob, drawing more blood from her lip. *I'm useless...*

"Motoko-chan?" She lazily opened her eyes to see Keitaro staring down at her with concern. "Are you alright? Your lip is bleeding."

"Urashima..." Her voice dripped with spite. "Get out of here..." She cleared her throat and the frog inside it vanished.

"But..."

"I SAID GET OUT!"

He jolted backwards, and awkwardly got to his feet, half-stumbling to the door, as he opened it, taking a quick glance back before finally shutting it, his footsteps quietly padding away from her room. There was a small conversation heard, before a panicked reply, and then subsequent crashing sounds. Another pair of feet came padding back and then Naru entered the room.

"Are you okay Motoko-chan? Did he harm you in any way?"

"Thank you, I was too weak to keep him away." She lied slightly, she knew he didn't do anything remotely perverted. *Unless...* "Naru-sempai, who bandaged my wounds?"

She remembered it quite vividly. "Keitaro put the plasters and bandages on your arms cleaning them." She then paused for a second. "He was about to open you gi, before he stopped, and told Haruka-san to do the rest of you. He left the room at that moment."

Motoko remained expressionless. *So... He didn't try to see my breasts...*

Naru continued. "I never knew how badly you were hurt, Shinobu started crying when she saw the blood. Keitaro used a strange pot of medicine to put on your cuts before he bandaged them; he gave it to us afterwards. When Haruka came out of the room, he came back in and changed your towel on your head." Naru then grew angrier.

"What is it Naru-sempai?"

"He wouldn't say what happened..." She sounded annoyed. "Even when he told us that you were hurt, he wouldn't say how or why." She created a fist with an anger cross on it. "I

got so mad that I punched him out the window."

"I see..." Motoko really became confused now. *When did Urashima find me? Was it during the battle? Did he speak to Miki-sama?*

"Anyway, I'm going to leave you now, Haruka-san and Keitaro said you needed lots of rest." Naru got up and smiled at her. "Take care and relax Motoko-chan." She left the room quickly, leaving Motoko to her musings.

So, now I'm alone... I suppose I can relax now, there's no more strife with regards to the school, I no longer have to practise and train myself day in day out to fight. She started to cry. Ane-ue must be disappointed in me...

An hour later

The steps of Hinata-sou

"Mmm, nice onigiri!" Keitaro was munching on some rice cakes he picked up earlier; he missed lunch thanks to Naru punching him away. He recalled earlier. *Motoko-chan must've been mad at me still... Narusegawa thought I touched her in a strange place.* He felt his jaw; it managed to set itself back into place when he landed from the lower stratosphere. *I wonder if I can get her to agree to not train -*

He stopped in his thoughts as he saw her window was closed. *Has she gone out?* He ran inside, scoffing the rest of his rice cake and bounded into her room (not without knocking first though). He was right. *Where would she have gone?* He tried to see anything out of place there, and found one thing that was different. *The casket is open...* Recalling giving her the dagger for Christmas, he looked inside and his dread grew. *It's missing...* A thought struck him, and though the warrior's code was legendary in Japan, it wasn't practised as often, if ever. He ran from Hinata-sou, to the place of the battle.

Meanwhile

The clearing in Hinata Forest

Motoko stood there, the wind chilling her to the bones; her fever made her vulnerable to the elements. She stared at the place she fought Miki. Some leaves were still there with her dried on blood. Picking up one or two, she grimaced. *It was a humiliating defeat... I didn't even get a scratch on her...* She crushed the leaves in her hands, letting them crumble between her fingers. She walked over to the wooden clone. *My Zan Gan Ken still didn't work as planned; it's not cut neatly. I should've practised harder...* Her mood darkened as she knelt down in the place where she blacked out. *This is where I lost...*

This is where I must die...

Withdrawing the ebony sheathed weapon, she looked at its surface, and pulled out the blade. Seeing her name engraved in the metal made her eyes prickle, but with what she couldn't clarify. Opening her gi to show her front, her navel exposed to the open air she held the blade perpendicular to her stomach, gripping the handle tightly with both hands. *Ane-ue... I'm sorry for failing you...* While she was trying to concentrate, she didn't hear the rapid sound of someone running towards her. She said a final prayer and then thrust the blade towards her abdomen.

The view changed to a white background, as a spray of blood flew through the air over it, along with the sound of flesh making contact with steel.

She still had her eyes shut, but never imagined that death was so peaceful, she felt no pain at all. *No pain? This can't be, unless...* She felt blood drip onto her hakama, and she opened one eyelid downwards to see a hand holding the metal, the sharp edge cutting into the skin. Shocked, she looked up to see Keitaro, his expression that of pure horror, mingled with a great deal of pain.

"Urashima!" She cried out in the fear of being discovered, then she seethed through her teeth. "What are you doing? Unhand my blade this instant!"

"No!" His hand was leaking more blood as they struggled against one another. "I can't let you do this!" He placed his other hand over hers, and pried them away from the hilt. It was easy thanks to her lack of strength, and he then threw away the blade far behind them.

Motoko slumped to the ground, her fever making a comeback, but she managed to speak to him. "You vile male... You even keep me from leaving my honour intact... I'll never forgive you..." Her eyes possessed only hatred for the person in front of her.

"You didn't lose the battle..." Keitaro started, looking at her with pity. "Miki-san agreed to continue the fight in one week."

The young kendo girl lay there in a mute daze. "She did what?" She shook her head. "No, there's no way she could agree to something like that."

"She accepted that you were ill, and that you couldn't fight as you were." Keitaro stood up and held out a hand for her

Motoko slapped his hand away and tried to get up herself. "That means nothing -"

"I told her that there's no honour in fighting someone who's ill." He shrugged. "That what it seemed to me, and she thought so too."

Motoko stood up but her legs gave way, Keitaro jumped in time to stop her from falling, looping and arm around her shoulders. She tried to get away punching and kicking him. "Why must you persist in holding me!" She asked exasperated.

"You're too weak to stand Motoko-chan." He let her go for a second, "Show me that you can walk." He folded his arms.

Not one to be dismissed. Motoko made a brave effort to walk several steps, however on the fourth she stumbled. Keitaro knew this would happen, but had followed her carefully so he caught her in time.

"You see?" He smiled good-naturedly. "Can you walk with my help?"

"Urashima..." Motoko wanted to bark some other insult at him for ridiculing her, but she found she couldn't stay standing for much longer. "I'm losing my balance, my legs are getting too weak..."

Keitaro stooped down in front of her, his back facing her. "Climb on Motoko-chan. I'll take you home." He sensed she was dubious of his intentions. "Your pride won't be dented if you admit you're ill. There's no shame in saying that."

Without a word, Motoko walked onto his back, and she felt the warmth from his back, and soon settled in, letting the tiredness take her. "Miki-sama really said she'd wait for me to get better?"

He got up, staggering to the bloody blade, picking it up and sheathing it again. "Yes, she did. But you need to rest for now Motoko-chan, you can't do anything in your state..."

She didn't reply to this, and chose to remain solemn, thinking about the battle.

Meanwhile

Back at Hinata-sou

"Where is he?" Naru snarled. "He should be back by now."

"Why what'd he do this time?" Asked Mitsune, walking into the hot springs with a towel.

"He did something to Motoko." She began to lecture. "He begged for forgiveness, so I did."

"Uh-huh..." Mitsune replied sarcastically. "So, how hard did you punch him?"

"About half-stre -" She caught herself. "Hehe, oops."

Mitsune sighed, and dipped herself into the water, "You know Naru, you're harsh on him. He was probably making sure she was okay after whatever the hell happened to her." She opened one eye and grinned at her friend. "Or maybe you were just jealous because he carried her in."

"WHAT!"

The sound of a 'kadong' from the doorway signalled the entry of a now in shock Shinobu, her small tub of washing products on the ground. "Naru-sempai was jealous of Motoko-sempai?"

"N... No! It wasn't like that Shinobu-chan!" Naru back-pedalled unsuccessfully.

"Auuu!" The shy girl ran inside, leaving Naru fuming at Mitsune.

"Kitsune! How could you say that?"

The elder girl just smiled further and lay back more, stretching her body. "It's fine, Shinobu's just embarrassed because she felt the same way."

"I... I wasn't jealous!" Her reddening face belied her feelings.

"Sure Naru, whatever you say..." Mitsune mumbled knowingly, looking away with a hidden snigger. Naru, still with a face like a tomato, merely lowered herself into the water so only her hair floated on the surface.

Meanwhile

In the entrance

Shinobu walked in, having changed into her normal clothes. She sniffed once, blobs of tears present in the corner of each eye. *Naru-sempai... She was jealous... Keitaro-sempai looked so manly when he carried Motoko back.* She stopped, a shocked expression passing over her features as the upper half of her face transformed into black lines. *What am I thinking! He's too old, and he doesn't notice me anyway!*

"Shinobu-chan?"

"Mmm?" She wiped her tears away and moved to the entrance, seeing Keitaro there with Motoko on his back.

"Why're you crying Shinobu-chan?" He asked, concerned.

"It's... It's..." She saw Motoko with a faint smile on her sleeping face, and finally cracked. "AUUUU!" She ran off to her room, covering her blushing face up as she went.

"W... Wait Shinobu-chan!" He cried, a hand out in protest to deaf ears.

After she ran upstairs, he sighed once more. *I upset Shinobu-chan again...* Going up one flight of stairs, he took a few seconds to take a breather, then continued upwards until he finally reached Motoko's room. Laying her in the futon, he went out to change her water and towel, reapplying it to her forehead. Giving her a sad smile, he got up and was about to leave, before he took the risk and removed her katana from its holder on the wall.

An hour later

Keitaro looked at his watch. *Hmm... 4:30pm...* "Motoko-chan hasn't got up yet..."

"What's up Keitaro?"

Unfazed, he looked up to see Suu hanging off one of the wooden ceiling beams.

"Oh, nothing..." He looked down at his watch.

"Thinking about Motoko, huh?" Mitsune popped her head out around the corner.

"Gaah!" He flopped backwards into Suu's hug.

"You were?" Suu remarked innocently, then grinned herself silly. "You must've been thinking perverted things Keitaro!"

"It's not that imouto-chan!" He pleaded back.

"Oh, then what Keitaro?" Mitsune walked off to the reception to see if there was any loose change, just in case.

"Not much... I may upset her slightly..."

They then began to experience the creepy sensation similar to that of drinking fizzy drinks tingling behind their necks, spreading down their spines to their lower torsos, as they unknowingly fell into the hold of the huge ki from a weak person upstairs.

"URASHIMAAAAA!" The whole building rocked from her maddening cry. Even Haruka could hear it from the teashop, as did most of Hinata Springs.

The power of her anger managed to fuel her body for dealing damage to the manager, as even the walls began to shake due to the ki. She was down the stairs in a flash, her struggle evident with the sweat pouring down her face.

"What... have... you done... with... my sword...?" She panted out, clearly the ki had evaporated, leaving her standing out of pure will. On the stairs were Naru and Shinobu, who had just come from their rooms.

"Motoko-chan... You -" Keitaro began, before Mitsune, who was closer to her, saw her legs shaking under her hakama, and stepped closer, giving her a shoulder to hang on to. "You should rest... I took your katana away because I'd knew you'd want to train..." He smiled, "You're a strong minded person."

Motoko glared at him, her eyes wincing with her own weakness. "You removed my only form of protection. I have to save Hinata-sou from you and your perversions..."

Keitaro walked up to her and took her other spare arm. "You're strong without your sword, you know? Remember, determination is your other power." He put a hand behind his head. "Besides, Naru can hit me if I'm too weird..."

"You can bet on that..." Naru cracked her knuckles, making Shinobu nervous.

Mitsune and Keitaro walked Motoko back to her room, and the elder girl watched as he

helped the kendo expert into the futon.

"Promise me you'll not train for at least two or three days, you need to relax or else you'll never be able to beat Miki-san."

Motoko had a stern face.

"Please? Shinobu-chan will make you healthy food and we'll give you medicine, so don't get too angry."

She mellowed for a moment before speaking. "I still don't trust you..."

Keitaro stood up, satisfied that his job was done. "I'll take that as a yes then."

As he closed the door, Motoko unconsciously moved her hand to her hip where her katana should lie, instead finding nothing there. *Will I be able to live without my katana...?* Trying not to think too much, she shut her eyes and drifted off to a restful sleep.

6:34pm

The dining room

Shinobu had prepared another feast for the residents. Keitaro sat down between Naru and Mitsune, Suu and Shinobu opposite. They began to tuck in, when Tama flew in and sat next to Suu.

"Look Shinobu! More food!" She grabbed Tama and was about to dip her into the large tub of steaming miso soup, before everyone screamed.

"NO!" Keitaro snatched Tama away, and looked to her face to see a relieved expression pass over it. *Relieved? Can turtles have emotions?*

Suu pouted. "No turtle additives then?"

"No imouto-chan, Tama-chan isn't to be eaten..." He sighed, and placed the yellow and green creature on his shoulder as he began to eat his meal, occasionally passing some bit of meat to the turtle, who munched on them happily.

Naru could see that Tama was enjoying it, and she gave a small chuckle. "Hey, Keitaro? How's Motoko-chan?"

"I guess she's sleeping soundly..." He didn't really know for sure. "Shinobu," He looked to her. "Could you save some of this food for her so we can give it to her later?"

"I've already done that sempai." She gave a shy grin. "I thought she wouldn't make it, so I made her a portion."

"Thank you, I'll give it to her later."

An hour later

Room 302

Someone knocked on the door.

"Come in."

It slid open to reveal Keitaro holding a tray with a bowl of warm miso soup, with a few more light snacks.

He plopped himself down next to her as she sat up. "Hope you're hungry -" He glanced down at the tray and saw that the snacks were gone, and then looked to her face to see some crumbs on her lips. "Erm... Did you just -"

She gave him one of her patented 'say anything strange or embarrassing and you die' glares, as she politely took the bowl and began to sip gently, letting it warm her insides. Keitaro picked up her towel and felt her head, to which she jumped slightly at his cold hand.

"Sorry... Just checking your fever." He pulled out an electric thermometer. "Can you put this in your mouth?"

"What?" Her first words of the evening weren't too pleasant.

"I need to see how hot you are..." He began to regret this.

"I'll put it under my arm instead..." Taking the small rod, she placed it inside her gi and under the armpit.

She continued to have some of the soup quietly, when the three beeps indicated that her temperature was found. Pulling it out, she looked at it and frowned. "40C... That's quite high..."

Taking it from her, Keitaro confirmed it. "You can't be up and about right now, Motoko-chan. Just stay here for a day at least." He pulled out a medical book. "I think that you need plenty of water, and light clothing, as overheating yourself is bad for the fever." He put it down. "Do you have any hobbies?"

"I am a warrior, the way of the sword is enough for me." She replied defiantly.

He sweatdropped and moved back a tad. "Well, you don't have that right now..."

She automatically went for her side, forgetting that she no longer possessed her weapon. She kept her angry gaze. "Why do you care if I have hobbies?"

He gave a pained smile. "Just wondering, that's all, so you won't be bored here..." He left her alone in her room as she dolefully watched the door.

Does he really care that much about my wellbeing? She shook her head. *No, he's a man, and thus should be treated as a pervert... He's not worthy of my attention...* Even as she thought this, she realised that boredom could come quickly when you thought about it.

Her room gave everyone no doubt that she was a warrior, the old samurai armour standing in one corner scrutinised her closely. She hadn't worn it in years, and that was only once when there was a formal event back in the dojo. There was little else to denote that it was a woman living in this room, the swords and shrine would indicate a devoted male samurai, but other than that, nothing of Motoko shone through. This got her down. *What am I?* She knew the answer immediately. *I am a warrior, trained to fight demons...* She stopped to see her feminine hands, despite the calluses from holding her bokken and katana most of the time. *Am I not a woman though? Should I not have something in this room that proves that?*

Dismayed by these thoughts, she moved slowly to her drawers, and found nothing of interest, other than the usual generic underwear and bandages she uses to hide her femininity, and a few identical gi and hakama for when her current one is dirty. She found her books and notes she uses for school, then pulled out a small notebook and pen. Feeling a chill, she went back into her futon, and opened the notebook up. She had just started writing some maths notes. *Ugh, trigonometry... Never really understood it...* She skipped that page and realised the rest of the book was empty. Not having anything else to

do, she did something naturally for the first time.

She began to write.

Meanwhile

Elsewhere in Hinata Springs

A lone figure was jotting down some details. "Fight prolonged until a week from now. Motoko was ill and could not continue the fight." Folding the piece of paper into a golden cylinder, she blew into a whistle, making no sounds, then flicked the container into the air, whereupon an eagle caught it, flying off to deliver it.

"Interesting use of an eagle..." Remarked someone sitting on a nearby bench.

Miki focused her vision on this person to find a handsome man sitting there, packing something into his bag.

"What's so interesting about it?" She replied nonchalantly, getting up to avoid a conversation. As she walked off, the person replied.

"Few clans use an eagle to transport things to one another, from your outfit I'd say you were probably from the Shinmeiryu..."

She gasped and turned around only to find that he disappeared. Scanning the area for ki, she couldn't find any above normal human levels. *He can mask his ki... Who was he?*

Meanwhile, in the next street, the man in question got into his vehicle, and started driving, much to his passengers horror, straight through the middle of the road, causing all the cars around it to serve away. Skidding around a corner, he collided sideways into a lamppost, sending it flying into a nearby building.

Meanwhile

At that corner

The van clipped the lamppost, and it almost hit a young, were it not for her deft skills at jumping and dodging it, and the subsequent window breaking from the building. Getting up and dusting herself off, patting her hair, a single antenna bounced back up.

"Who was that-nya?" Her small black cat asked as she floated down onto her shoulder.

"I don't know Kuro. It was annoying though..." Kanako cracked her knuckles, only to find that they hurt afterwards. "Ouch..."

"What about your plan-nya?"

"It's on hold for now..." She glanced at her top pocket wherein lay a folded piece of paper.

Kuro purred once, stroking her ear against Kanako's face, the girl seemed to like to feeling. "Why-nya?"

"I think there'll be a big fight soon..." Staring down the street, she saw the sheathed odachi of Miki as she held it in her hand, walking naturally away from Kanako.

"Fight? With who-nya?" Kuro inquired.

"Someone with oniichan... In Hinata-sou."

Kanako narrowed her eyes and ran into a nearby alleyway and then out of sight. Haruka had just popped out of the local grocer's shop with some items for the teashop. *Hmm, I thought I felt someone familiar...* She shrugged once, making the loose ash fall off into the air. *Must be my imagination...* She stared into the alley, knowing already who it was, but chose to ignore it for now. She too saw the odachi above the heads of the people. *I wondered who was fighting with Motoko; it must've been her. I hope she's alright...*

An hour later

Hinata-sou

A stomach rumbled somewhere, and it wasn't a normal one that had experienced many of these sensations before. The owner was confused, then finally realised what it was, placing a hand over it to feel the vibrations. Motoko turned onto her back to relax for a moment before sitting up, her hair falling in loosely in front of her face. Peering through the individual strands, she could see what she had written.

It wasn't like her usual diary entries, and she didn't even write much. Around five pages were filled with writing, and rather concentrated with her formal calligraphy style she used rarely. Reading over the first page again after her unique trance, she began to cringe at the number of grammatical mistakes she made, with the occasional misspelt word. Moving

further, she noticed that it was a story about a young boy playing on some swings. How she came about this story she did not know, nor how she would even make such an odd subject for a story. She hadn't even been on a swing before.

Motoko sighed, and threw the notebook away from her, but thought better of it and hid it underneath the futon, getting up in the process. Moving to the door, she remembered what Keitaro said regarding the light clothing, and chose to wear her summer gi and hakama, which was made of a lighter material than with the winter one. After she dressed, she felt a weakness in her knees again.

"Curses, how am I to eat now?"

The small pitter-patter of feet could be heard as the soft footsteps of fluffy bunny slippers made their way to Motoko's room. Someone rapped on the doorframe.

"Motoko? Are you okay?" Shinobu asked in a sweet voice.

"Come in Shinobu." Motoko sat back onto the futon as Shinobu shyly entered.

"Umm..."

Images of Keitaro carrying Motoko back to the inn ran through her mind, then the image grew pinker with a flowery border as her imagination ran away in tears, leaving behind the face of Keitaro moving closer and closer to Motoko's lips. Going all swirly-eyed she moved side to side, unable to cope.

"Auuu..." She shook her head of these thoughts. *Keitaro wouldn't do that; he's not that perverted!* "Ummm..." Motoko watched all this with bemusement, but didn't say a word. I heard you walking about and I was wondering if you were hungry."

"Now that you mention it..." A loud growl from her abdomen replied for her. Growing redder in the face by the lack of shame from her own body, she almost missed the giggles coming from Shinobu, holding a hand to her mouth trying to keep her laughs in.

"It's okay Motoko..." She said, much happier now. "I'll fetch you some more, since I knew you might need some since you fainted." She went off to the door. "I'll grab a bowl of rice for you now!"

Motoko tried to sit on her knees, but the pain got too much in them. She tried cross-legged (not a tenable position for a woman to take given the fact that dresses tend to open out) but her hips began to ache. Giving up for now, she rested her legs by sitting with a pillow

against the wall, her legs flat out in front of her. It was at this point that Shinobu returned with the food.

"I'm sorry I can't get up, it's just that -"

"I'll walk to you Motoko, it's okay." She did so and kneeled down in front of her, handing her the bowl of rice with a few plums and other types of fruit in them, mostly to build up her defences again.

"How are you feeling Motoko?" She gave her a kind smile. "You seem happier since this morning..."

Motoko paused in her eating to give her a calm look, not one tinted with anger, but just that of mute surprise. *Happier... Me? Why?* A thought unrelated to this came to her. "I'm glad you called me Motoko..."

"It's nothing..." Shinobu meekly bowed her head slightly and remained that way. "It... It's hard for me to make friends... So I can't get too close to people in case I get hurt..."

Motoko could sense a deeper and hidden emotion here. "You're bullied at school?"

"N... No!" She waved her hands a tad too frantically. "They... They aren't bullying me... Just, laughing and ignoring me..." She looked a little down. "Taichi was the only one to speak to me, now they treat her worse than me..."

"Taichi? I have not heard of this person before now." Motoko put down her bowl onto the bare floor. "Why do you not invite her round here?"

"It's just..." She tensed up a little, rubbing her hands together with jitters. "Well..."

"You're afraid of what the others might think of her?" Motoko interrupted.

"Maybe..." She replied.

"Or is it that you're afraid of what she might think of us?" Motoko gave her a knowing smile.

"Well, she knows Suu from school, but she's really... active here. Everyone else is really nice too and Keitaro... I just thought that maybe she would try and judge me and the

people I live with..." Shinobu sniffed once, her indicator that she was about to let loose some tears.

Motoko cleared her throat. "Shinobu, I've seen how you are with everyone here. You're always nice and kind, and try to get on everyone's good side. I'm sure you would try to find someone like yourself to have as a friend, and this Taichi person sounds like the right type." She then patted the younger girl's head. "If she can't accept the people you live with, then maybe she isn't the one."

Shinobu let a stream flow down her cheeks, before rubbing them furiously, leaving a bright flush and beaming smile. "Thank you Motoko..." She went in for a hug, to which Motoko returned it, albeit gently as she wasn't used to hugging Shinobu, nor did she have much strength for anything else. Shinobu pulled back. "I'll bring her round soon, maybe you can even meet her! I'm sure you'd like the company."

Motoko gave a quaint smile, and picked up her bowl to finish off the remainder. "I'd like that, besides, too much time with Suu would probably tire me out quicker than any battle."

Shinobu, without losing her smile, replied quickly. "Battle?"

Motoko caught herself too late, pausing with the chopsticks and bowl by her mouth. "Ah, it's nothing. Anyway, thank you for the food, it was most nutritious." She placed the bowl neatly on the ground, empty save for a few flecks of rice.

"Un!" She nodded back, glad that her meal was appreciated. She took the empty dish and got up. "I'll be back tomorrow, I have to finish off some homework before I go to sleep."

"Okay, sleep well Shinobu."

"Night Motoko!" Shinobu waved as she closed the door.

Glancing at her watch Motoko saw that it was now past nine, and that she too should be retiring for the night. Shifting herself back into her futon, she tried to get some more rest, and finally, after several minutes fell asleep.

The next day

Monday 16th March

It was a school day, so both Suu and Shinobu went off early in the morning, the others

remained home. Mitsune, after losing money on some more races, decided to go out an hour later to do some odd jobs. Naru was finalising her entry to Toudai, and thus needed to go off to the campus in order to give her details and sign up for other things. Therefore, by 10 o'clock, Motoko and Keitaro were alone in Hinata-sou.

Keitaro was downstairs, taking advantage of the place being empty by doing some chores, namely cleaning the hot springs. *Phew... This is really dirty... I'm glad I have the chance to clean it...* He recalled the numerous Naru-punches and katana strikes from Motoko. *I won't get hit today at least for doing my job.* He sighed happily, and continued to scrub the bottom of the springs (having drained the water) using the broom.

Meanwhile

Room 302

Another resident was not so happy. Motoko drummed her fingers on the floor. Laying in her futon was not something she did often, and, unhappy as she was to admit it. Keitaro was right, she was bored.

I was never bored when I had my sword... I could just practise and be satisfied that I have worked up a good sweat, and toned my body further... She looked at her bare hands again. The calluses were still there. She realised with a tinge of sadness that they may never go away. She remembered what she did yesterday, feeling under the futon, she found the lump that she felt during the night, and pulled out the notebook.

Why am I bringing this out again? She saw the mistakes she supposedly made and her corrections to them all over the page. She shook her head and moved to a new page. *Hmm... What to write about...* She thought back to one topic which was pertinent to her. *My sister... And that pathetic excuse for a husband...*

She wrote quite a lot on that subject...

Midday

The living room

A very satisfied Keitaro sat down and turned on the television. *I've done a lot so far; the hot springs are really gleaming now... Just have to do some of the floorboards and that should be it.* He looked at his watch. *Hmm, about time for lunch then... I wonder if Motoko's hungry...?*

He walked up to her room and knocked on the doorframe. "Motoko-chan? Are you hungry yet?" Hearing no reply he cautiously opened the door, in case she was still sleeping. He spoke in a quieter tone. "Motoko-chan?"

Instead of what he expected, he didn't believe he'd seen her with such a determined face, and also rather angry. She was writing something that made her sweat even more.

"Motoko-chan!" He ran in. "Don't overexert yourself!" She stopped and looked up at him, her face transforming into one of even more anger as she sat up.

"How dare you burst into my room without so much as a warning!" She dropped the pen, forgetting everything she had just written.

"But... I did... Twice." He was awkward, as he knew he was right. "You didn't hear me because you were so into your writing."

"My writing?" She stared down at her paper to see that many pages were newly written in. She flicked through them to see what she had done. "I apologise Urashima..." She sighed and closed the book. "You are right, I shouldn't get too stressed out. What is your reason for being here?" She asked politely.

He smiled. "I'm about to have lunch, do you want me to make something for you?"

"I would like something light, Shinobu made me two meals last night." Her stomach still felt full from the rice.

"Okay, I can do light. I'll bring it up for you soon."

He returned with two small bowls of ramen. "Why two Urashima, I said light."

He nodded back with a sweatdrop. "I know... I just wanted to eat with you, that's all, everyone's gone out"

"Oh?" *Why... To be alone with me? Will he try something?*

She began to slurp up her ramen, watching him slyly to see if he would try to touch her or leap at her. However, true to his word, he began to eat, occasionally looking in her direction, but mostly at the sky, which somehow opened up, allowing sunlight into the room.

OMAKE

"Argh!" Motoko fell backwards from the strike.

"Come now Motoko-dono..." Miki stood back from the fallen swordswoman. "Show me what you have learned... Hiken, Nekko Fukushuu!" She dug it into the ground as roots grew to attack Motoko.

I forgot... Miki-sama is the real pervert... The roots had managed to remove most of her clothing by tearing it off. The roots slapped her blade away, as Miki gave a sly 'Ho ho ho' laugh. Securing her arms and legs, lifting her up, she began to cry as more roots, this time with dubious intentions approached her.

"NOOOO -" **SCENE DELETED**

"One week."

Miki arched an eyebrow. "For what?"

"She'll face you in one week, no sooner, no later."

"So..." Miki rubbed her hands together. "One week until I can finally use my ultimate technique..."

Keitaro didn't like the sounds of this. "What's that then?"

"Well, my Hentai Tentacle Root Attack of course!"

"GYAAAAH!" Picking Motoko up, he ran far, far away from the strange woman.

"What about your plan-nya?"

"It's on hold for now..." She pulled out a folded piece of paper from her top pocket. She looked at it.

1.	Get	Keitaro
2.		
3. Profit		

Kuro sweatdropped and fell of her shoulder onto the ground.

"Kuro? What's wrong? Kuro!" She was shaking the small cat, who now had swirly eyes.

Author's Notes

Translations:

Odachi: A very long katana.

Hiken: 'Secret Sword', but you all knew that already.

Hayashi No Rekuiemu: Requiem of the Forest.

Nekko Fukushuu: Root Revenge (sounds corny in English, I must admit).

Ha Kirite Kachuu: Leaf Cutting Vortex.

Okay slight delay in this chapter, have moved house into a lovely apartment with my girlfriend, and now I work 8am-5pm, hence the lack of time available. Please review this to boost my confidence (and of course send some emails on the 13th, as it will be my 23rd birthday!).

I've realised that I've been 'writing' this story since October 2001, so it is officially three

years old, yay, go me... Of course, having three stories on the go and another four in the pipeline... Well, I have too many ideas at times.

Okay, now here's the trailer...

Mutsumi, one of the most enigmatic characters in the series, always knowing more than she lets on. What if she knew more about this life than the others, what if she made the series as we know it?

What if, she changed the past, to **make** this happen?

Having suffered blackouts, she figures out a way to be awake during those times, and indeed have the ability to change the way things were, into the way things are now.

Coming soon...

Love Hina - The Butterfly Effect.

Chapter 24

Eternal Ennui

A short recap...

Motoko fought with Miki-sama, one of the Five from the Shinmeiryu, and subsequently lost due to her fever. Keitaro vowed that she would fight in a week. Currently bedridden, without her katana, nor means of alleviating boredom, she sits while she and Keitaro eat lunch.

Ten minutes later

Keitaro sighed contentedly, placing his bowl and chopsticks down.

“Ahh... That hits the spot.” He looked over to Motoko. “How’s your meal Motoko-chan?”

“It’s satisfactory.” Truthfully, it felt good, but her body was ill, so her taste buds were on the blink for the time being. She too finished with her bowl.

“W... Would you like a drink?”

Motoko turned to stare at him, her deep suspicious eyes boring into him. *What is he doing? Can't he just leave me alone?*

“I’m fine thank you.”

She looked away and struggled to find something to do, her legs tingling with the fever and general aches and pains. She could tell by the sounds of fidgeting and awkward silence that Keitaro was trying to say something.

“Why are you here Urashima? You’ve eaten your meal with me, so you can leave.”

“I...” He started, then gave up, sighing. Picking up the bowls he left her room, shutting her door with his foot.

Letting out the breath that she’d been holding, Motoko leaned further into the wall, enjoying the cool wood against her back. *I must do something or I will go insane...* Looking at the wall, she saw her small collection of books, mostly related to the samurai way of life. Naturally she had read all of them several times. *Maybe I’ll just sleep for now...*

3:30pm

Keitaro panted, wiping his forehead on his sleeves. Since the girls were all out, he took the rare opportunity to clean the hot springs. Putting signs up on the changing room door, and the door before the hot springs, he scrubbed the rocks with his broom, glad at the scum being scraped off. This was that last bit of the springs, so at least the girls would notice the difference. Rinsing it, he took his cleaning materials and put them in their usual place,

before decided what else to do.

I'm not sure if I want to reapply to Toudai... Studying isn't worth it right now, so maybe I should do something else. I've done the hot springs and the corridors...

Sitting in the living area, he turned the TV on, casually flicking through all the channels before switching it off, nothing interesting there. Sighing, he put his arms behind his head and lay back.

Meanwhile Upstairs

Motoko stirred, her eyes glazing over before blinking hard, the afternoon sun lay lazily across her floor, dust particles hovering in the air with a care in the world. For a moment, she imagined what it would be like to be one of them, a part of someone yet no longer, without a real purpose in life except to be disturbed by everyday changes.

Sitting up, she realised that she was not like them. She was heir to the Shinmeiryu, to achieve the pinnacle of kendo mastery, and strong of will, not easily swayed.

Feeling her head thump a little, she tested her feet and decided to walk out downstairs to get something to drink.

Meanwhile The living room

Hearing the footsteps shuffle against the steps, Keitaro looked towards the staircase and saw Motoko coming down slowly, holding onto the banister.

"Motoko-chan!" He got up quickly and was about to help her before her cold glare stopped him.

"I can make my way down, Urashima. I'm not a weak girl."

Reaching the bottom, she walked slowly past Keitaro, losing her balance only slightly. He winced at seeing her pain.

"At least sit at the table while I get you something..." He began to grow interested in the wooden grain of the floorboards as she glanced back. "I only want to help you heal faster so you can train a little before your fight."

Giving in, she agreed. "Fine." She pulled up a chair and sat at the dining table, her legs shaking slightly as her forehead shone with beads of sweat. "I was thirsty... May I have a glass of water..." She shook, not looking forward to what she was about to say. "... please?"

Keitaro was struck out of his guilt and self-loathing. "S... Sure!" He walked and half-ran into the kitchen enthusiastically, tripping on his own slippers and clattering pots and pans,

the sounds reverberating out into the dining room.

“Klutz...” Motoko muttered, angling her head at the living room.

Keitaro returned a minute later with a glass of water, his hands shaking as he steadily put it on the table, glad he didn't spill it on her. Taking a sip, Motoko tensed up and lay back as the cold fluid soothed her angry stomach. Feeling her body lower its temperature only slightly, she got up again.

“Are you going back upstairs?” Keitaro asked.

“No, I'll stay down here for now.” Taking her water, she sat in the armchair while Keitaro sat nearby on the sofa. Wordlessly passing her the remote, she accepted it, their fingers touching only briefly.

Flushing a little, she ignored the sensation, knowing that she couldn't smash him away without her katana. She started to change channels, but not finding anything interesting, settled for a documentary.

Keitaro too decided that out of all the other choices, this one was the least likely to make him fall into a coma. Motoko was watching the screen, but spoke to him.

“Urashima, when will you release my katana?” Her eyes narrowed. “If you keep it away from me for too long, you will suffer the consequences.”

Gulping once, he waved his hands at her. “Not long, honest!” Meeting her disbelieving gaze he continued. “It's only for two or three days, so you get over this fever.” He wringed his hands together anxiously. “I know that you have to fight that woman, for honour, and I'm just trying to help you get better...”

Motoko's harshness softened as she closed her eyes. “I suppose you are right, I can only rest for now and practise later...” She looked back at the television, a scene of animals on the savannah appearing.

“And so, the male struts around the females, trying to find a suitable one at his level...” The male narrator began. “Soon he picks one and they have a short fight, to which the female loses spectacularly.” Both viewers were growing redder. “So, the female dominated, the male straddles her and –”

Blinking off, Motoko was panting, her fever and embarrassment levels getting to a danger point. She lay back and closed her eyes, breathing in and out through her nose to calm her nerves. *It's just a documentary, about nature, not about humans or anything like that...*

Keitaro was bright red too, but managed to keep his eyes averted to the small table in front, never really noticing the rings of dried on coffee, juice and other drinks. *I must clean that at one point. Naru'd probably smack me for leaving it dirty...*

Both looking at each other, they spun away quick.

“W... W... Would you like some more water Motoko-chan?”

Noticing her glass was empty, and not trusting her voice yet, she nodded sharply, still

ignoring the boy next to her. Picking it up, he went off to refill it as the ambient heat levels reduced, the atmosphere evaporating suddenly. Motoko opened her eyes, the discomfort from earlier gone. *It seems that... with those matters, I still have trouble...* Keitaro was back and passed the full glass to her. *However, I won't be weak like my sister... I will hold my head up high...*

The sounds of the front door sliding open were heard as Suu and Shinobu came back from school. The princess was quite loud and active as usual, so Keitaro got up to lay off the pressure that he imagine Shinobu must be feeling.

“Hey imouto-chan, how was school?”

As expected, she crushed him in a bear hug, and then climbed up onto his back. “It was fun, very learned something to do with hyper pies!”

Hyper... what? Keitaro looked to Shinobu who rubbed her head, her brain fizzling out from her friend’s mangling of the language. “Suu... It’s Pythagoras’ Theorem, about the hypotenuse...” She gave an amused glint at Keitaro who returned it.

“Does that mean you’re hungry?”

Hearing the panting of a dog, he smiled and walked into the kitchen, before Shinobu stopped him. “I-It’s okay sempai, I can make something that will last her until dinner.”

“Really Shinobu-chan?” He was thankful. “That’d be a help to me... I’m not really that good a cook...”

“I’m sure if you try you can make anything taste good.” She blushed.

I guess that’s true, my chocolate cakes are great... “Okay, I’ll be with Suu until you finish making the snack then.”

“Thank you sempai.” She ran upstairs to drop off her school bags, and came down in her house clothing, humming a little song to herself as she walked into the kitchen.

Going back to the living area, Keitaro plopped Suu down next to him on the sofa. Naturally, the hyperactive foreigner couldn’t sit still for longer than ten minutes and began jumping about a bit and generally being a bit of a nuisance. He glanced at Motoko who was struggling to cope, her headache getting worse.

“Imouto-chan...” Suu stopped climbing the wall and looked at him. “Could you calm down a little? Motoko-chan is still sick, and...”

Not waiting for him to finish, she flipped down and pouted at the raven haired girl. “I’m sorry Motoko!” Her eyes began to water. “I didn’t mean to...”

“It’s alright...” Motoko patted her blonde hair. “You should play outside, I know you can’t sit still for a while. It’s just that I can’t move much now, nor take anything big...”

“Okay Motoko...” Suu hugged the elder girl’s neck lightly and bounded off outside to pester some pigeons.

Satisfied that she could relax more, she talked gently. "Thank you Urashima." His shocked expression almost put her off. "While Suu is very happy and energetic, she can be a handful at times. I admit that I didn't want to disappoint her."

He smiled good-naturedly. "Motoko-chan, Suu-chan's not sad, she just wants you to get better. I think she may miss you a little, guess I'm not as cuddly at night..."

Again, the red faces returned as he indirectly called her that. The renewed tension was broken by Naru and Mitsune entering.

"Gees... All those people..." Naru was miffed again. "All crowded together to get into some society..."

"Well, I heard you were popular..." Mitsune winked. "Looks like your clothing attracted the right sort of men..."

"No way!" She berated the chuckling girl. "Because of this..." She pulled at her tight top and short skirt. "Perverts were asking me out on dates, and I got approached by some talent scouts."

Mitsune waved her off, walking to where Motoko and Keitaro were sat. "Come on, it wasn't that bad, you should be glad that men would fall over to be near you." She looked at Keitaro when she said this, who dutifully glanced away.

"Still, I'm not happy!" She stormed off upstairs, her indoor slippers somehow still making loud thumping sounds on the steps and floor.

Lounging about next to Keitaro, her legs draped over his, she stretched back, making her breasts seem more voluminous. He had to hold his nose immediately to prevent any blood loss. Motoko saw the scene, but chose not to say anything, even she was put off by Mitsune, and Keitaro's typically male reaction.

"So..." Mitsune yawned. "How was the day, you two? Didn't get up to anything naughty while we were all out?"

He sat up straight, the look of fear in his eyes. "N... No, nothing like that!"

Mitsune was in a rare good mood, and didn't want to see him in orbit just yet. She grinned. "Only kidding, Keitaro." Her bare legs were moving against his thighs slowly. "How are you feeling Motoko? Did Keitaro take care of you?"

Her fringe had become moist from heat, and she blew on it. "I'm feeling a little better, but I'll be happy once today is over. Tomorrow should be better, as I'm still quite..." She struggled over the choice of words. "...weak right now." She looked over to the manager. "Keitaro brought me lunch and did not attempt any perverted acts on me."

Mitsune sighed, lying back into the cushy material. "That's good, you worried us all when Keitaro brought you back like that..." She made herself comfortable. "Just take after me and you'll back to yourself in no time..."

Motoko doubted that she could remain so blasé and rested, knowing that in Hinata-sou, anything could happen. *Keitaro would inevitably do something perverted...*

Naru's voice was heard from the floor above. "Keitaro, did you clean the hot springs?" She sounded annoyed.

"Yeees..." He replied, half-bored, half-fearful.

Motoko felt a spike of ki, anger fuelled. "Don't take that tone with me..." She retorted.

Mitsune opened her eyes, having heard everything and feeling his legs tense up, ready to be beaten again. Shaking her head slightly, she got up and strode by them. She whispered to the manager. "Don't worry, I'll calm her down..." She looked up and shouted. "Hey! Wait for me Naru!"

Winking at Keitaro, she took the steps two at a time, her footsteps receding. *Thank God... I'm too tired to do anything now...*

"Suu! Your snack's ready!" Shinobu called out, placing a nice dish on the table.

"Wheee!" Suu swung in from the entrance, flipping a few times in mid air. Tucking straight in to the meal, she grinned. "Mmm, it's good!"

Shinobu brightened up. "I'm glad you like it..." She placed now some juice for the girl knowing that she'd need some after stuffing her mouth to the brim.

Motoko sat up, her body feeling slightly sluggish from slouching in the chair, standing up, she was about walk away before she asked a favour, without turning.

"Urashima, could you help me up to my room... I do not trust my legs quite yet..."

Snapping his head to attention, he got up awkwardly. "O... Okay, Motoko-chan!"

Standing next to her, trying not to touch her voluntarily, he let her place an arm around his shoulders as they reached the stairs.

"Shinobu-chan, I'm taking Motoko upstairs, I think I left some glasses on the coffee table..."

"That's okay sempai!" She went over and picked them up. "I hope you get well soon Motoko..."

The warrior nodded silently in reply. Taking the wooden steps one at a time, Motoko held on to the banister with her other hand. Moving forwards too suddenly, she over-adjusted by leaning back too far. Keitaro managed to loop his left arm quickly around her waist, simultaneously biting hard into his lower lip to avoid blushing. Thankfully, the blood instead rushed to the now bursting capillaries there, leaving his face normal.

Motoko did glare at him, but saw that it wasn't meant as a perverted act, he didn't grip her further, nor make any sleazy motions with where his hand was placed. Looking ahead, she focused on reaching her room for the time being.

Finally reaching the top of the stairs, he didn't release his arm, but did loosen the hold slightly so she could walk better. Opening the door to her room, he helped her down onto

the floor, giving her some space as she lay against the wall again. Moving away, Keitaro was about to leave before Motoko stopped him.

“Why are you helping me...?”

Keitaro tilted his head. *I'm sure I've answered this already...* He gave a wan smile. “I told you why, Motoko-chan.” He sat down next to her. “I know you value your honour... Maybe a little too much...” He unconsciously rubbed his arms from when he blocked her attacks in the past. “If you fight her like this, and lose...” He shook his head. “I can't let that happen, because next time, I may not be there to stop you...”

Motoko paled, recalling the moment when he ran in and saved her from committing seppuku. She looked down, the bangs covering her eyes. “But why...? Why should you care so much...?” *For me...?*

Keitaro smiled again at opposite wall, the cracks at the edge of the lips returning his sense of insecurity about friends, female ones in particular.

“I don't like to see other people sad, or in pain.” He laughed to himself. “I don't know why...” He shifted to face her. “Right now, you're the one in most pain. And the saddest...”

Motoko angled her head away and mumbled something.

“What was that?” He asked innocently.

“I'm... not in pain...” Her body started to heat up as if to counter this.

“I know you're not, you're really strong.” He had cheered up again. “Not like me... I'm a weakling, as you say...” She was about to interrupt before he went on. “You'll win this fight, but you have to beat this fever, Motoko-chan, otherwise you'll be too tired to stand...”

She nodded in reply. Gazing over her tidy room, she spoke. “Urashima, do you know how to play shougi?”

“Umm... A little... I played with my dad when I was younger, but not very well.” He blushed. “I don't remember the rules though...”

“It's okay...” She pulled out a shougi set from behind her in the wall closet. “I'll teach you.” Taking in his shocked reaction she gave a thin smile. “Unless you want me to be bored...”

“N... No! I've done enough for today. He sat facing her and bowed over the board lightly. “Thank you, in advance for teaching me.”

6:11pm

“Well, at least you're learning it...” Motoko said.

Keitaro's tears kept flowing. *My twentieth defeat?!* The board was dominated by Motoko's pieces, having captured most of his own.

“Don’t be disheartened, it’s only a game after all...” She began to collect the pieces up. “Another go?”

Keitaro shook his head. “No way... I think my ego needs a day to recover from that...” He helped Motoko pick the pieces up and then placed the board away.

“So, what do you want to do now?” He asked.

“I don’t know...” She glanced at the clock on her wall. “Shinobu will probably start on dinner soon, so in about an hour it’ll be ready...”

Keitaro stared at her samurai armour. “I know that I said you couldn’t practise with your sword until you’re better, but isn’t there something else you can do in the meantime?” She looked at him as if he were mad. “I mean, to prepare for the fight?”

Her eyes widened. “Of course! Why didn’t I think of it before?” She looked to the empty sword holder. *Probably because I only thought of enhancing my fighting skills in a miniscule amount of time, leading to my current state...*

Shifting her legs, crossed under her body, she began to relax as Keitaro looked at her face, her expression becoming very calm.

“I...” She opened one eye at his interruption. “This may be weird, coming from me, but could you teach me that?”

“Teach you?” Both eyes were open now with mild scrutiny.

“I... I’m still not sure if I want to apply to Toudai again, but I thought about how I study. I’m a nervous wreck...” He clenched his fists. “I try so hard, but I can’t seem to learn anything because I’m so tense, and my mind closed.” He shook his head. “I’m babbling... I don’t even know what I’m saying...” He stood up suddenly and was at the door in an instant. “I’ll see you at dinner, Motoko-chan.”

“Wait!” She called out, making him pause. “Come back here for a second.”

Like a lost child seeking his mother, he slumped in front of her, his entire good mood evaporated. He looked up at her, his eyes watery behind the thick lenses.

“Tokyo University is really important to you, isn’t it?” She asked gently, receiving a nod as reply. “I’ve never seen you like this, Urashima.”

He felt helpless and despondent, like the depression he felt at failing again. “I’ve been trying to get in... To keep a promise...”

Motoko nodded in understanding. *To him, promises are sacrosanct...* “Very well, I’ll train your mind and your body, as a favour for you giving me another chance to restore my honour.” She gave him a hard stare. “However, this can’t be done overnight, this will take a while for your body to adjust to the changes. Do you want to go ahead with this?”

“Why not, it can’t hurt...” He said offhand.

“No!” She slammed her hand on the flooring. “You must be certain you want to do this,

meditation requires a strong mind to prepare, and you must be ready to not lose yourself.”

I have to do this, there's no other way I can relax when I study... Keitaro grew serious, and bowed. “Okay, I accept.”

“Good. Now sit cross-legged like me. Place your hands on your knees and breathe in deeply.” He was still looking at her. “Close your eyes.”

Doing so, he took a deep breath. “Breath out slowly after two seconds. Take another deep breath and do the same for one minute.”

Soon, the sounds of breathing filled the room, and after the time was up Motoko spoke quietly. “Reduce your breaths to one second now, and continue for two more minutes.”

Keitaro was doing okay, but losing track of time in his breathing. Able to tell whether or not he got the rhythm right, Motoko reminded him, and he adapted accordingly. This went on for around five minutes since he needed to repeat the process from the beginning.

“Okay, that’s enough for today. You’ve done well for your first try, but you’ll need to keep that up.”

He panted, apparently it was hard work. “How often?”

“No more than once a day... The best time would be before you sleep. Set your alarm so you don’t overdo it. Around fifteen minutes meditation will help you for the next stage.”

“When will that be?” He asked.

Motoko eyed him dubiously. “Don’t be impatient... Your mental self must be ready, so in two weeks I will help you, but only if you keep meditating on your own. Don’t even think about forgetting this though...” She moved closer in a mild threat. “I’ll be able to tell...”

He gulped and nodded. “I’ll do it...” Shinobu’s voice was heard throughout the inn. “How do you feel Motoko-chan? Do you think you’re strong enough to –”

“I’ll eat with everyone.” She hmped. “But...” She looked down. “I still need your help there...”

“I can do that.” He stood up and held a hand to her, and he half-pulled her up from the ground.

Ten minutes later

Dinner was another excellent meal, the residents of Hinata-sou were happy and full, patting their stomachs contentedly. Shinobu started collecting the plates up as the residents started to get up. Keitaro looked to his former cram school colleague and saw that she was in a good mood.

“Narusegawa,” She looked at him. “How was Toudai? Apart from all the perverts of course...” He added as an afterthought.

“Hmmm...” She glanced up, thinking. “It was okay, really busy today, but the societies were all out to get students to join them. They were really aggressive...” She smiled. “I met some nice people there, and the facilities look really new as well.”

He returned the smile. “I’m glad you’re happy, I’m not sure if I’ll have that feeling, I might never get in now...”

He looked at him suspiciously. “Well, if you keep fouling up your grades you’ll never do well in the entrance exams.” Seeing him flinch, she softened her tone. “You need to learn the basics, Keitaro. After that you can do some of the harder stuff...” She looked away. “You don’t want to be like me, all I did was study, study, study...” She removed her round long sighted glasses from their case. “Those books did this to my eyes, I can’t read without them...” She got up and yawned. “You have one more year to try again, I have to go back to studying there... You should use this year well.” She glowered at him. “But if you try to use that time for peeking at me... There’ll be hell to pay...”

She stomped off to lie on the couch, joining Mitsune. Keitaro boggled at her. *She was nice to me... That’s weird... Maybe being at Toudai is already affecting her somehow...*

Without thinking, Keitaro offered a hand to Motoko, which she accepted without word, and they both left the dining room to her room.

Motoko’s room

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I would like to be alone for now.” Seeing the worried look on his face she continued. “It is not because of you, Urashima. I will not be doing anything strenuous. I wish to read a book alone, and then I will sleep.” She saw his hesitation. “If you wish, you may wake me tomorrow morning at around nine, so that we may go down for breakfast.”

He agreed. “I’d like that.” He smiled. “I hope you feel a little bit better tomorrow, Motoko-chan.”

“As do I.”

Keitaro nodded, and left the room, closing the door in the process. Walking downstairs to his room, he sighed and looked at the time. *Still too early to sleep...*

“Ah!”

Moving into the centre of the room, he picked up his alarm, set it for twenty minutes from that moment on and sat cross-legged.

His first meditation of that week had begun.

Author’s Notes

One year and two months ago, this story was last updated. I tried to carry this on, but my will was lost, work, life, moving, everything changed for me. My interests have also changed. However I plan on continuing this story, in the hope that my love for it will return.

If any of my original fans are still out there, waiting for an update, and have not lost faith in me, please review this chapter, to let me know that I have not failed so utterly in conveying the mood that was present in the story thus far. I'm aware that this chapter is short in comparison to the previous three, however, I need to start off small before I can return to my 20 pagers.

Sorry for the wait, I will endeavour to speed up my writing from now on.

- J

Chapter 25

Trust and Training

**Two days later
Wednesday 17th March**

The schedule remained the same, Keitaro woke Motoko up on time, and ensured that she was helped to mealtimes and back, without too much effort on her side.

She begrudgingly accepted this.

Meanwhile, the residents were living normally, going to school, lazing about, inventing, cooking and resting.

All this time, Keitaro checked up on Motoko occasionally, not wanting to crowd and upset her any more than necessary. Both were meditating separately, Keitaro only doing his own for the allotted twenty minutes, whilst Motoko spent every moment she had doing it.

This was the day she could finally walk unaided.

**11:15am
Manager's Room**

"Come in!"

The door slid open and a figure padded in quietly. Closing it behind, the person sat opposite him at the low table.

"What can I do for you Motoko-chan?" He smiled at her, happy to see that she no longer reacted to him adding the suffix.

Motoko was looking much better, the colour in her cheeks having faded, and her fever was reduced to a dull throbbing in her head. However her limbs still felt slightly heavier than normal. She bowed her head forwards and placed her hands on the floor, a respectful bow.

"I am here to request permission to have my sword returned to me." She did not remove herself from the bow, making Keitaro flustered.

"Umm... Errr..." *She didn't try to kill me?! It's strange to see her being so courteous to me...* "O-of course Motoko-chan!"

He got up, Motoko resuming her sitting position. Keitaro walked over to his wall closet and opened the door. Finding the sword lying against the wall in the corner he reached in and brought it out gently. He sat back down and handed over the sword, resting safely over his upturned open palms. Motoko, with her left hand, gripped around the centre, and lifted it up from Keitaro's hold. Bringing it close to her, as he brought his hands back to his side, she unsheathed it with her right hand.

Frowning slightly, she examined the blade, noticing the sheen to be a tad brighter than she had expected. Keitaro grew more nervous.

“Urashima, have you been maintaining my sword?”

He snapped his head to the window. “Hey! Imouto-chan is chasing Tama-chan again!”

Motoko wasn’t fooled. “Don’t try to avoid the subject, I am merely asking you if you oiled my sword.”

The guilty look spoke volumes, though he didn’t speak up. Motoko took another look at the gleaming blade and returned it to the scabbard, and sensed him draw back and recoil. “I’m not upset, Urashima. I find it commendable that you even knew that swords had to be cared for. Although it has been three weeks since I last oiled it, one week early won’t make any difference.” She smiled sincerely. “Next time, I’d appreciate less oil, though ironically it’ll make the sword last for another five and a half weeks.” She peered curiously at him. “How did you find out about the oil?”

“Heh, it’s kind of funny really...” He placed a hand behind his head, a sweatdrop growing. “I was just chatting with Haruka-obasan and told her about your sword. She mentioned the whole thing to me, apparently she had to take care of some old and new swords a while ago. She lent me a bottle of some special oil. I did the job and gave it back to her.”

Motoko was mildly impressed that he even thought that far, but she chose not to let her feelings be known. “Thank you, Urashima, though the gesture was meaningless.” She almost regretted her words at seeing his eyes shift from embarrassed to hurt and downcast. She stood up.

“Now that I have my sword, I will retire for training.” She raised an eyebrow when Keitaro stood up also. “What is it?”

“I-I’m going to watch you train.”

“Why?” She intoned dangerously, her eyes narrowing.

“Because you’re still sick...” Keitaro sighed. “I can’t keep your sword from you forever, I know you need to train...” He looked up at her. “But let me at least help you by saying when you’re working too hard, if you get sick again then you won’t win...”

Motoko ground her teeth. *How dare he force his decisions on me?!* “Why should you care if I get tired, sick, or even lose to Miki-sama?”

Keitaro turned away and started walking to the door, opening it with one hand, looking back at her with a smile on his face, eyes closed from emotional pain. “I just do, Motoko-chan...”

He walked out, leaving Motoko dumbfounded and alone. Shaking her head of the cobwebs she stalked out. *Annoying male... Always lying to me...* As she thought that, her heart refuted the claim, beating rapidly in response.

The roof

“49! 50!” Motoko huffed, taking a short break after going through the basics again. *This is harder... My arms are getting tired already! I must still be...* She wiped the sweat beading on her forehead with her nearby towel and continued her strikes.

Sitting against the banister, Keitaro was watching Motoko's movements idly, also looking at the view of Hinata Springs from time to time. *I was right, she's moving oddly. The strikes aren't fluid as they used to be...*

He realised that his presence may also be affecting her performance, but he tried to ignore that. *I have no choice, I don't want Motoko-chan to lose again... This is for her honour.*

Leaning back, he saw the lazy clouds saunter across the bright blue sky, and then drifted his sight back onto Motoko. *Still she does move gracefully...* Even though her strikes were slowing and becoming unfocussed, he admired her determination and strength. Her hair was bound up in a ponytail to prevent it from getting in the way, though her bangs still hung free. The repetitive movements served to illustrate her athletic figure beneath the kendo garb. Keitaro recalled the time he first noticed her that way, when she left his room with the dagger he gave her for a Christmas present. He smiled at the memories of happier times, a time before his failure to get into Toudai, and for his worsening relationship with the girl in front of him.

Snapped out of his reverie, he could see Motoko having trouble keeping up the pace of her strikes, so he stood up and walked over softly.

“Motoko-chan...”

“What is it?!” She wasn't happy at the interruption, since she already knew what was coming.

“You should rest now, your body can't handle so much stress now.” Sensing her malice at being ordered, he smiled and placated her by raising his hands, like you would at gunpoint. “Just for a few hours at least.” He lowered his arms and spoke kindly. “Please?”

Motoko sighed regretfully, knowing that seeing his chocolate eyes, with their permanent melancholy and gentleness broke down her own defences. “Fine... But only for two hours.” She sheathed her katana and breathed out, calming her heart from the workout. *I suppose he is right, I was unable to maintain my form...* She looked over at Keitaro, but her glare wasn't as powerful as before. “What time is it Urashima?”

He checked his watch. “Umm, around half twelve, you've been practising for over an hour. Why?”

Motoko turned away and started walking down. “I am hungry, and was merely curious, as Shinobu generally cooks around this time.”

Keitaro joined her in walking down the stairs. “Yeah, I'm a bit peckish too... Watching you put all that aside, when you stopped my stomach began to work again...”

He blushed at his words. *Great, now it sounds like she stops my body from functioning*

normally... He gazed at her casually, but was happy inside at her lack of reaction. Choosing to be friendly, he asked a question.

“How was your training? Did you get anywhere?”

Motoko grit her teeth at the veiled insult. “No, I did not.” *My body was still too weak.* “I’m trying to restore my body to a fit state, which should take about a day, then I can practise some techniques which require more power.”

“Sounds about right...” Keitaro commented.

What would you know, you’re no martial artist. Motoko couldn’t understand why she was still walking with him and was about to speed up until he spoke again.

“Have you thought of a way to beat her?” Keitaro asked, again curious. “She looked really strong, and her leaf attack, whatever it was, left you pretty bloody...”

“Yes... That was a powerful attack of hers...” Motoko mused over the battle in her mind. “She didn’t hold back at all in the strength, but...”

“What, you thought of something?” He seemed happy.

She snapped. “Why do you care, Urashima? Why all these pointless questions?”

Looking hurt, he flinched backwards and laughed to himself. “Sorry, I shouldn’t get involved, it’s your battle after all...”

They’d reached the bottom of the stairs and were now facing the dining area. “Ahh, I forgot... something... Tell Shinobu I won’t be able to make lunch today...”

“Very well...” *What is he up to?* Paying it no heed, she walked on to the table and sat as Shinobu served meals to everyone.

Meanwhile Manager’s Room

Keitaro sat down at his kotatsu, and felt a slight chill. Reaching underneath the cover he switched the heater on. *As long as it’s for a short time only...* He looked at the clock. *Oh well, I suppose I could last until dinner without food...* He sighed at looked down at his empty table. *Motoko-chan is mad at me again, I think it’s best if I avoid her for a short time...*

Grabbing his book from his side, he began to read to pass the time.

Ten minutes later The dining room

The meal was quiet, given that the cause for outbursts, teasing and fun wasn’t joining

them. For once it was as if they were all back in time before their manager changed hands. However, the main topic of conversation revolved around the missing person.

“What did sempai say he was doing Motoko?” Shinobu asked, the care evident in her voice.

Motoko sighed, as the others had already asked this in some form or other. “He didn’t explicitly state what, but he said ‘he forgot something’. What that is, I do not know.” She returned to her eating, forcing the conversation to end there.

“Maybe he’s sick...” Shinobu wondered out loud. “I’ll bring him some food later.”

“What, that pervert, sick?!” Naru half-shouted. “That’ll be the day! Trust him to get sick after failing Toudai...”

“Naru-sempai...” Shinobu began to respond.

“Hey, now come on Naru, there’s no need to be so down on him.” Mitsune grinned. “He’s a grown man, but even he has his limits... Don’t gloat about Toudai, or rub it in any more...”

“Suu wants Keitaro to be happy too!” The Molmol princess jumped in.

“I have to agree with Mitsune on this one Naru-san.” Motoko conceded. “Urashima is in a delicate state of mind at this time, his failure is playing up on his mind a great deal, and he does not wish to be reminded of it every day...” She recalled the conversation they had a few days ago about how much the university meant to him. “He may even consider leaving if his guilt continues to grow.”

“S-sempai wants to leave?!” Shinobu cried out. “Auuu...” Her eyes swirled around and she fainted into her chair, causing a concerned Motoko to check if she was okay. Suu joined in too.

“K-Keitaro wouldn’t leave, would he?” Naru hesitantly asked.

Motoko remained tight lipped as she carried the young cook to the living room and lay her down on the sofa. Suu came from the kitchen with a small damp towel and placed it delicately on her classmate.

“What do you think Mitsune?”

“Well...” She opened her eyes, looking over the other three people. “It’s possible, if everyone keeps reminding him about the exams... No, if we talk about how he failed, that’s what affects him.” She closed her eyes and smiled at her friend. “He was glad you got in, and wished the best for you, but don’t say he was useless, he’s not too fond of that...”

She grinned at how Naru flushed. “But... I...”

“I know, you don’t really mean it, but Keitaro’s a bit dense, and he wears his heart on his sleeve more than our little Shinobu.” She got up and slapped her heartily on the back, causing the new university student to lurch forwards. “Just be careful of what you say around him, ‘kay?”

"S-sure thing..." Naru was still stunned from the back slap, and nursed it slowly. *Well, if I failed, I'd've been sad too if everyone kept mentioning it. Maybe I should be more considerate...*

She saw Mitsune go over and gaze at Shinobu for a few moments, before switching the television on and splashing on the armchair. Suu had run upstairs to work on another invention. Motoko continued to tend to the blue haired girl, and gently woke her up.

"Wha...? Where am I?"

"You fainted at the table, I brought you here to make you more comfortable." She removed the towel from the head as she sat up. "How are you feeling?"

"Umm, just a little dizzy..." She shook her head quickly, remembering what made her faint. "I-Is sempai really going to leave us?"

"Now, now, don't get all stressed again." Motoko spoke softly. "He's not going to leave if there are people who care for him here, but if we constantly remind him of how he failed, then he will lose all hope..."

"I know, I'll never say that to him. I have faith in him!" Shinobu brightened up considerably.

"I know you do." Motoko patted her head tenderly. "Make sure he knows that, as you have more impact on him than you imagine."

"R-Really?" She stammered, blushing profusely. Motoko only chuckled inwardly at seeing the crush displayed once again.

"Do you feel up to finishing your meal?" Motoko changed the subject.

"Not really, I'm quite full anyway." She got up and started walking back to the table. "Oh, maybe I should take up sempai's meal." She stared at the untouched plate on the table.

Motoko bit her lip for a few moments. "It's okay, I'll take it up to him..."

"You will?" Shinobu was mildly surprised. "I can do the washing up quicker than..."

"I'll see you later Shinobu." Motoko smiled. "Take it easy for today..."

"I will!" She picked up some glasses and walked into the kitchen as Motoko took the plate full of food and the nearby glass of water.

One minute later Manager's Room

Motoko stared at the door, frowning at her full hands. *Damn...* Balancing on one foot was an easy task for her, as her school required full control over their state during battle, especially when in midair. While on one foot, she kicked lightly at the door frame a few times.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me... Can you open the door?”

“Umm, sure...” The door slid back revealing a bemused Keitaro. “What’re you doing here Motoko-chan?”

“Shinobu was worried for you, and saved some food for you. I took the liberty in bringing it up here.”

She walked inside without invitation and carefully lowered the plate and glass onto his small table. He followed her from a distance. Feeling a warm breeze from beneath the cloth she raised an eyebrow.

“You switched on the heater?”

Keitaro laughed to himself. “Yeah, well, I’m a little cold, and I think it helps a little.”

“I suppose you are right.” Motoko made a mental note to turn on her own heater when she returned to her room. Looking deep into his eyes she came straight to the point. “Why weren’t you at lunch, you said you forgot something...” She looked around and saw nothing different, except the book on his kotatsu was open.

“I did forget something!” He replied too quickly. This earned him a dark glare from Motoko.

She turned away and walked up to the door, not facing him. “Fine, whatever you say.” She opened the door and took a step out, but paused and turned back slightly, still keeping her face away from his view. “I will be training later today, I will inform you so you may observe me further, if you so desire.”

“O-Of course!” Keitaro smiled back. Motoko paid it no heed and left, closing the door behind her.

4:00pm Manager’s Room

“Okay, I’ll be out in a moment!”

Keitaro gathered up his fleece and zipped up the front until just under his chin. Taking his socks and slippers, he opened the door.

“I’m ready Motoko-chan. Let’s go.”

Raising an eyebrow at his appearance, Motoko walked on upstairs onto the roof. Keitaro settled down in the same place as before and began to oversee her training.

Motoko shivered a little beneath her outfit. *Better warm up quick...* Peeking at Keitaro from the corner of her eye, and seeing him smile at her, she darkened and bit her lip away from his line of sight. *Pervert... Why must he look at me like that...?* The rational part of her

mind kept repeating to itself that he was only smiling, not leering at her, however she was able to ignore that voice of reason as her strikes began.

After twenty one head attacks, varying between the three vital areas, she realised her body was already healing much faster, as she wasn't as tired as her earlier session. The small exercise had already heated her up considerably, and she felt better with the new course of adrenaline flooding her body.

Keeping to the same fast pace, she changed her warm up to torso hits, or those aimed at hands. *In the unlikely chance I knock away Miki-sama's weapon, I will have an opportunity to win...* Sixty more strokes, again alternating between the torso and hand, then from both sides.

Lowering her katana she took a deep breath and stood up straighter. *I feel stronger somehow...* She looked over to Keitaro who was puzzled at why she stopped. She flicked her eyes back to the horizon, still thinking to herself. *Why? I have trained a lot less now than I did practising the Zan Gan Ken... These are merely the basics...* Looking at her hands, she noted that they weren't shaking. *As I'm not tired yet, I shall continue, until I find reason to stop...*

Motoko performed her kata, using only the basic attacks that she first learned in the world of kendo. Having warmed up her body moved faster than it had for the past few days, and she was able to fight off imaginary opponents every step of the way. Pacing around on the roof brought her battle lust back, and she began to grin, uncannily similar to her sister.

I see... Is this what power feels like? To dominate the battlefield without any weakness?

Even after thinking that, she was shocked to note that she had not made a single mistake so far, playing back her previous performance while still going through the moments. So caught up in her memory she was shocked when she heard a pitiful squeal.

What the...? As the life returned to her eyes, she looked down and saw Keitaro cowering on the floor beneath her feet, arms above his head to protect himself. She glanced up and saw that her blade had neatly embedded itself in the wooden railing, almost cutting all the way through.

Dear God... Using both hands to pull it out, a few splinters sprayed in the air, some sawdust falling on Keitaro. Blowing off the dust from her blade, she wiped it clean with the cloth she had prepared, and sheathed her katana away from harm.

"I apologise greatly, Urashima." She bowed to him. "I wasn't concentrating fully on my actions." She placed a hand on his upper wrist. "Are you injured anywhere?"

Keitaro looked up, his eyes still fearful as his head shook in the negative. Sighing in relief, mostly to herself, Motoko felt tired but invigorated at the same time. She sat down next to him.

"I did not mean to attack you, my kata must have brought me to this point." She looked down then closed her eyes, the tiredness finally reaching her. "I apologise, Urashima."

She felt a tentative pressure on her left arm. She saw that he was painfully smiling. "I-It's okay, Motoko-chan, I'm fine as you can see." He looked up to the sky for a moment and

said in sotto. "Though my life flashed before my eyes... It was one relentless collage of grey..." He shook his head of such thoughts. "I accept your apology, no harm done." She beamed at her, and the girl next to him felt a tiny bit better about herself.

Keitaro frowned. "Why were you so preoccupied? I've never seen you practise like that before, with such..." He didn't know how to put and he paused, then clicked his finger after a minute. "I know! Emotion! You hide your feelings when you practise, but now I saw anger, joy, frustrations, and a load of others..."

"Is that so?" Her eyebrows now were midway across her forehead. *Were my barriers lowered that much by the fever? I doubt that an illness would affect me this much. Perhaps then it was due to something else...* She pondered further, tapping her chin to no particular beat. *Well, in any case, that has nothing to do with the battle, I have to come up with ways to defeat Miki-sama...*

"You seem much better." Keitaro remarked. "Do you think that will beat her?"

Motoko looked at Keitaro dubiously, but realised he had no idea, so she decided to explain. "That wasn't a technique, when I practise I do kata. These are pre-prepared sequences of moves designed to improve movement, naturally I have become very fast at them. However, Miki-sama was also taught this kata, as have the rest of the Shinmeiryu, so it is not a viable option against her."

Keitaro scratched his head. "Then why do it if it won't help?"

"It helps me to focus, by placing all my awareness in that I achieve a peace, which may help me to find an answer. To me it is similar to meditation."

"And, have you figured out a way?"

Motoko didn't reply verbally, choosing to shake her head. Keitaro looked at her fully and noted the smell of sweat was strong.

"How was your body? Do you think you could do some more?"

"Yes, my muscles have revived and the pain in my head is only slight now." She felt a breeze tickle her nose, and it twitched. She sneezed into her hands.

"Oh no! Are you cold Motoko-chan?" Keitaro almost stood up, forgetting that the wind had picked up.

"I-I'm fine, Urashima..." Her teeth chattered involuntarily, but she wasn't about to run because of nature.

The sun began to set beyond the horizon, casting golden and purple colours across the roof. "Here..." Motoko saw that Keitaro was holding out his fleece to her. "You need this more than I do."

She stared at it for a long time.

If I take, will there be some catch to it? Will he try to take advantage of me? Does he mean anything by me needing it more?

“Come on, please? You look cold Motoko-chan, and I don’t want you to get worse in your recovery...”

“If you say so...”

She accepted it reluctantly, and threw it over her gi, tucking her arms in.

“No, put it on, your arms will still be cold that way.”

“But...” She wasn’t in denial, the smell of two hours of training was obvious, it will get dirty.”

Keitaro waved it off. “It’s okay, it was an old one of mine, and I can just wash it afterwards.”

Keeping her lips sealed, she hooked her arms inside properly and zipped it up, not needing to go all the way as it was baggy, the high collar reached up beyond her ears. Instantly she began to feel warmer and crossed her arms, actually liking the feel of the soft material against her skin.

“Is that better?” He asked kindly.

Motoko smiled beside herself. “Yes, thank you, Urashima.” She looked over at him and saw a bandage on his hand. “What’s that?” She indicated with her head.

Keitaro followed where she was looking at and blushed. “I-It’s nothing...”

“Show me.” The command was impossible to disobey.

Holding out his hand, Keitaro unwrapped the bandage to expose what was beneath. “This is...” She looked up at him seriously. “I did not realise that the blade cut you that deeply...”

“Well, I was holding onto it rather tightly.” He said in a self-mocking voice. “You were kinda determined to use it on yourself.”

“Why did you not use the cream I gave you a while ago?”

“I used it all on you, after I pulled those leaves out...” His eyes winced. “It looked really painful, and I couldn’t have you suffering from that as well as the fever...”

“I will supply you with more, though I am surprised that your own healing hasn’t fixed that.” She frowned as reasons were analysed.

“Tell me about it...” He put the wrap back on his hand, hiding it from view once again. “It was hard enough cleaning the hot springs with a hand that hurt each time I used it.”

Motoko remembered a statement he made a few months ago. “Perhaps the blade itself is to blame. You told me of a legend associated with it...”

“Oh... That could be it...” Keitaro smiled and put his injured hand behind his head, laughing all the way. “Oops... Haruka-obasan told me that once it was in motion, nothing could stop it... I don’t know much more, but she told me it was used all the way back in the

Meiji era.”

“You’re telling me that its powers also stop the healing process?!” Motoko was outraged and impressed at the same time. “This makes it a supremely deadly weapon!”

Keitaro shrugged it off. “I’m glad it’s away from me, I might get clumsy and drop it, or lose a couple of fingers...” He breathed out and saw his breath in the air with the twilight remaining in the sky. He stood up and held his uninjured hand out. “Shall we go inside? The weatherman said it would be very cold outside tonight, and I don’t want to risk your health any more...”

Blushing, Motoko took up his offer and accepted his help up. “Th-thanks...”

Side-by-side, they left the roof as the winds picked up.

One minute later Motoko’s room

“A-are you sure it’s okay for me to go in?” Keitaro knew better than to burst into another girl’s room without permission, after the nightmare over the diary incident.

“Yes, I’ll permit it just this once...”

Stepping in, Keitaro hovered near the entrance, unsure as to why he was there.

“Come, sit here.” Motoko was sat at a table. After a few moments she grew impatient, “Well? What are you waiting for? Get over here.”

“Umm...” She sat where she indicated. “Why?”

“Were you just born stupid or did you need to learn to become this way?” She angled her head to one side and bit her tongue. *Damn, I have to keep my calm... I just insulted his intelligence, just what I told the others not to do...* “The roof, your hand, I’m going to apply the cream and some powder to your wound.”

“C-can’t I just do it?” He asked nervously.

Motoko sent her dark eyes flicking at his own. “No, the powder is a family secret. While I am happy for you to possess the cream and use it, only I alone can use or apply the powder.”

“What’s in it?” Seeing her somewhat patronising look, he chuckled meekly. “Ah yeah... Family secret. I forgot.” Motoko rolled her eyes. “Can you at least tell me what it does?”

Motoko withdrew it from her sleeve and held it up to his face. It looked like a black cylindrical sachet of sugar, but possessed no markings of any kind.

“It contains a strong painkiller, ten times that of the cream, along with advanced healing powers. While the cream ‘encourages’ the body to heal faster, the powder instead orders the body to accelerate this healing. Once I apply this, half of your body’s biochemical

energy is diverted onto the area in particular. With all that power it then can heal much more rapidly thanks to an increased metabolism, to the point where you can see it making a difference by the naked eye. The cream is necessary to hold it in and to let the skin grow back normally.”

“Wow...” Keitaro shook his head of the usefulness of the drug. “Why are you giving it to me then?”

“If what you say is true about the blade, then it either holds some sort of anti-coagulant in it to prevent clotting, or it has some form of magical input to stop your body from trying to heal that cut.” She paused for thought. “I would wager that it has both, thus adding to its lethal qualities.”

Keitaro gulped loudly and eyed the blade, which was on her shelf behind her. “D-don’t try to use it on me, please?”

“I’ll try not to...” She smiled wryly, feeling the mood lighten at Keitaro’s paler complexion.

“Okay...” He looked at the sachet again. “What’s the problem with the powder, if it’s so useful, why not use it all the time?”

Motoko coughed to clear her airway. *Despite this nuisance questioning everything, it’s the most talking I’ve done in days. It’s also quite relaxing talking about things I know about...*

“As with every drug there are side effects, use it too often and your tolerance level with grow to an extent where it will no longer have an effect. The withdrawal symptoms are also something to avoid... The pain relief is the best, but it is only temporary for the healing to take place. The amount of energy it uses from your body also tires you out greatly for the time being, and prevents you from doing much more than walking, eating and sleeping.”

“I see...” Keitaro nodded. “So it’s best to use it rarely.”

Motoko nodded as well. “Correct. The Shinmeiryu only use it in cases after a heavy battle, where wounds are too large or dangerous to leave open and unattended for long.”

“Battles?” He raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Yes, against demons.”

“D-demons?!”

“Never you mind, their incursions into this realm are growing lesser by the year.” She closed her eyes and spoke soothingly. “Do not worry about a thing, my clan is here to protect the people of Japan.”

Keitaro grew more reassured by her sincere words. “I believe you Motoko-chan...”

“Good, now hold out your hand.”

He did so, and Motoko held it with her left hand whilst removing the bindings with her right. Her cheeks grew hotter at the contact, though Keitaro failed to notice. As the cut unveiled she pursed her lips. *It does look serious, my assumptions about that blade seem to be*

correct, as it hasn't healed at all...

She picked up the sachet and tore the top off. Pouring it slowly around his wound, she began to push it inside. Seeing Keitaro flinch instinctively she calmed him down. "I know, the pain will hurt for a few seconds, but it'll soon go once it's deep inside." True to her words, his visage relaxed immediately as it began to take effect. *Good, he's responding to the chemicals.* Once the powder was inside the cut and around it, she withdrew the cream and began to massage it into the skin.

This required a lot of pressure, which she could now do thanks to the lack of pain receptors. Another blush crossed her features, one which was mirrored by Keitaro this time. *She's really good with her hands... They're so soft but powerful...*

Motoko tried to keep herself focused on the job, but her thoughts drifted. *His hands are surprisingly young, the skin is still tender for his age.* She noticed a similarity between her own. *His thumb, index and middle fingers have thick calluses...* She tried to figure out why that was, until the obvious came to mind. *His studying...* She inwardly gasped. *These are the marks of his pen...* She looked up, her expression both sympathetic and impressed. *This will be his third year repeating... His dedication to learning and trying to get into Toudai must have carried through his very being for most of his life...* She recalled that her own callused hands came from eight years of training in the arts. For Keitaro's hands to have suffered in the same way meant that he also did practice tests, exams and essays for the same amount of time.

She finished off the massage by creating a high friction, heating his hand up remarkably. "This is to remove any of the stickiness of the cream." Once she was done, she wiped her own hands clean with a nearby tissue. "There, all done..." She looked up at him and saw his eyes lull over a bit. "Yes, the feeling is strange. For the first half hour you'll feel extremely drained and sleepy, as your body is changing priorities to your injury. However, as with any other new interference, you will adapt to being a little bit weaker and slower than usual."

"Yeah, if I took this every time I hurt myself it would get annoying..." Keitaro was beginning to understand why it was not used often.

"Have you changed your bindings?" She asked.

"N-no, I haven't got round to it yet..."

"Well, I'll change them now, it's better to keep the area clean and covered for the healing to take place."

Picking out a new roll from her medical kit, she cut off a long piece and proceeded to protect the hand again. Tying it up securely, she nodded to herself. "It's done... It should be about a day for the healing to be completed, but don't be afraid if it takes longer."

"Th-thank you Motoko-chan..." Keitaro was touched. "Th-this means so much to me... I had no idea that my hand might never have healed. Without your help I would have a big scar..."

"It was nothing..." She interrupted. *I nearly killed you just a few short minutes ago...* "Don't do anything stressful for now, until you get used to being sluggish. Be safe as well, your

pain tolerance has increased a hundred-fold, so you may not even feel it if you burn your hand against a kettle.”

“Heh...” Keitaro sweatdropped. “Tread carefully in other words...” *Let’s hope my feet don’t trip me up...* “Thanks again Motoko-chan. I owe you for this.”

As he opened the door, she spoke up. “No, you do not.” She opened her eyes, wisdom and hindsight now providing clarity. “Your acts in providing me with a week’s reprieve against Miki-sama, and the life debt as evidenced by that cut, are worth much more than a simple healing potion. I thank you for all you’ve done for me.” She turned towards him by shuffling her knees on the floor and lowered herself to the ground, her arms in complete contact with the tatami mat, her deepest bow.

Keitaro grew redder and more flustered. “Ah... But...” She wasn’t getting up from it any time soon. He shut the door fast and knelt in front of her. “Motoko-chan, please sit up!”

She did so, but the look of veneration did not dissipate from her expression. Keitaro again blushed. “P-please, I didn’t do much, okay? I didn’t even know how much it meant to you. If...” He paused as his brain kicked in. *Perhaps I shouldn’t say that I would do it for anyone... That might get her mad at me...* “If you were in trouble, I would do my best to help. I promise, that if you need me any time in the future, just say the word and I’ll be there!” *Oh no, what am I saying?! She might use me as a training dummy!*

He smiled good naturedly. “So, don’t bow for me, I’m no one special, just another ronin...” He clouded over for a second before pushing it away, reforming the upwards tilt of his lips. “But... You’re welcome. I did what I thought was right, and I’m happy you see it that way too. It’s nice to feel appreciated sometimes.”

He reopened the door and looked back, his outlook never brighter. “I’ll see you at dinner Motoko-chan.”

Leaving swiftly, both had smiles on their faces, happy that the air was cleared between them. While Motoko still felt irritated at the intrusion into her life by him, she also felt relief. *Truly, without Keitaro, I would not be on this plane...* Her eyes filled with tears. *My life would have ended that day, by my own hands...*

Cupping her face with both hands, Motoko wept.

7:45pm Dining room

“Everyone! Dinner’s ready!” Shinobu cried.

She giggled at hearing the stampede of footsteps, which heralded the arrival of Suu, cart wheeling in. She was soon followed by Mitsune, grumbling about headaches and sake. Naru was third, Motoko and Keitaro appeared soon after.

“Ah, sempai...” Shinobu held her hands together on her legs, the oven mitts keeping them warm. “D-did you find what you were looking for?”

“Looking for?” He scratched his head for a second before he remembered. “Ah, y-yes, I did, thanks for asking.”

“Did Motoko bring up your lunch?”

“Yes she did, it was really tasty.” He rubbed his stomach for emphasis.

Shinobu beamed back, even if she knew her cooking was good, it always sounded better coming from Keitaro. “I’m glad you liked it sempai...” *Motoko said we should make sempai wanted...* “I hope you can help try out some new dishes one day. I have the recipes but never made them before -”

“Say no more.” He put a hand on her shoulder, making her heart speed up. “I’m looking forward to them. You make the best meals ever.” This time her blush at his praise was unmistakable. “Come to think of it...” He looked up at the ceiling, as if consulting the sky for help. “Yeah, why not, I’m going to give you a wage.”

“Wh-what?!” This she did not expect. “W-why?”

“You go out of your way for all of us.” He smiled as she sat down in his chair. “You cook, you clean and hang the laundry. Even though technically they’re not my jobs, you do them for all of us.” He playfully messed up her hair. “You deserve it...”

“B-but...” She looked around the table and saw the rest of the residents smiling back at her. She turned to her current female role model, and stammered out. “M-Motoko, there’s no way I -”

Motoko shook her head. “You underestimate yourself in this household. You are very important, though the role you play is small in comparison to Urashima repairing, polishing and cleaning the hot springs, you keep us fed and in clean clothes.”

Naru nodded in assent. “She’s right Shinobu-chan, without you we’d struggle to do our own things while doing what you do.”

“Yeah, you’re a real help, I can’t cook to save my life, and you know the best cures for hangovers!” Mitsune raised her non-alcoholic drink in toast to her.

“Suu likes it when Shinobu cooks!” She raised her hand enthusiastically. “And what’s laundry, does it taste good?”

Shinobu was beyond flattered and endorsed with all the praise she received from the others. Her mouth was hidden behind her giant oven mitts, tear globules on the extremities of her eyes.

“I... I...”

“See? Everyone feels the same as me. We all know how hard it is to live independently, but when our youngest member mothers us with great food and clean laundry, we all feel a bit guilty.” He put his hand behind his head and laughed to himself. “I don’t know how else to repay you. I hope you accept...”

He went on laughing lightly, waiting for Shinobu’s reply. She was still in shock.

"I..." She began looking at everyone in turn faster and faster until her head began to spin, and her eyes turn to swirls. "I... Auuu!"

Surprising all present with her agility, she darted out of the room, still crying, into the kitchen, whereupon sobs and sniffles could be heard. Keitaro, now fully stunned, could barely speak. "Did I... say something wrong?" He glanced at Naru and Motoko, and cringed, thinking that they would inflict more pain on him. He began to run through the conversation in his head, trying to figure what went wrong. *I don't think I insulted her... Wait, maybe it was because I said she was mothering us...*

A hand rested on his shoulder and he looked up.

"N-Narusegawa..." His eyes conveyed confusion, as hers didn't show any hostility.

"It's okay Keitaro, I'll go see her. She's just a bit overcome with emotion." *I must admit, he does have a good heart inside him...* Naru walked off into the kitchen, and the sounds of sobbing became muffled.

Motoko was in the seat next to him. "That was good of you Urashima, it is true, she does deserve some form of compensation for her work." *Perhaps I should give him another chance...*

"Yeah! No one here would bother to do all that!"

Tears flew out of Keitaro's eyes with indignation. "Kitsune, just because you're like that, doesn't mean we all are."

"Shinobu should wear a uniform too!" Suu joined in.

"Erm..." Keitaro sweatdropped. "I don't think that would be fair..."

Meanwhile The kitchen

"Are you okay now?" Naru asked. *My blouse is soaked through now... Oh well...*

Shinobu pulled out of the big hug and looked up, her eyes red with emotion. "I-I think so..." She choked up a bit, but swallowed it down so she could speak better. "I shouldn't get money just for doing what my mum said...."

This was news to the older girl. "What did she tell you to do?"

She wiped her eyes with some kitchen roll. "She said I shouldn't get in the way and to do my own chores."

Naru chuckled. "I think you're doing a little bit more than 'your own chores'. You're doing all of ours as well!"

"Ah... Auu, maybe I should leave if I bother sempai -"

“Whoa, hold it right there. Where did you get that idea from?”

“I... I don't want to be a burden to him... He'll have to pay me money, which means less for the inn, and -”

Naru rolled her eyes at the poor turn of logic, and brought Shinobu into another engulfing hug. “Listen, Shinobu-chan. If you say it like that, then we must be a burden to you, for having you cook all our meals and do our laundry. Then we should leave Hinata-sou too.” She felt the girl struggle to get out and presumably protest. “But you don't see us as that, I know...” Shinobu relaxed, and after a few seconds Naru pulled her out, gently cupping her head with both hands, staring into each other's eyes. “And so, that means that Keitaro doesn't see you as a burden. He never has, and never will. He wants you to stay so much that he's willing to pay you for what you're doing.”

Shinobu took everything in and began to doubt herself. “But... I'd stay anyway, it's not like I can't go home, it's too... busy there...” Naru nodded, already understanding of how things were with her parents. “I'll still cook and clean, even if I wasn't paid.”

“Then just accept.” Naru smiled. “He may be a complete pervert, clumsy, stupid and lots of other bad things, but if there's one thing he has, it's honest determination. When he wants to do something, he lets everyone know about it, and won't stop until he does it.” She winked. “How else could he retake his entrance exams three times to get into Toudai? He promised someone he'd get in, and he'll do it, no matter how long it takes...”

“W-will he be angry if say no?”

Naru kept her tone even. “No, I doubt he'll ever make you sad, let alone shout at you. But he's right, you mean so much to us, and...” She nudged the smaller girl suggestively. “Since you'll be a paid employee, you'll be helping run the inn alongside Keitaro, an ‘assistant’ for the manager...”

“As-Assistant...?”

Her eyes swirled a bit. Fantasies about illicit meetings behind closed doors, accidentally bumping into each other while both working somewhere alone, and having him help her out flashed by. All were pure innocence though, as each hallucination ended up with Keitaro about to kiss her before something or someone interrupted them.

Naru giggled at the dazed girl, recognising the milliard of emotions present in those faraway eyes. “So, what are you going to do?”

“I... I'm going to say yes...” Shinobu spoke, her trance still in effect.

“Good, shall we go back in?” Naru patted her back.

“O-okay...” Her eyes returned to the present, her shyness returning.

The dining room

Keitaro was still talking with the others when Naru and Shinobu entered. The young girl tiptoed up meekly.

“Umm, sempai...?” Keitaro said nothing, waiting for her to go on. “I... I accept...”

He smiled back, very happy with himself. “That’s great news!” He stood up and placed a hand on her head. “Shall I help you carry out the dinner?”

Her heart had already skipped a few beats from his proximity, and her blush was receding fast. “Ah... Y-yes!”

They both walked off into the kitchen and carried out the dishes, plates and cutlery.

The meal went by with its usual peace.

OMAKE 1

Frowning slightly, she examined the blade, noticing how dull it looked, with lots of rust on the length of it. Keitaro grew more nervous.

“Urashima, what have you done to my sword?” Her eyes narrowed. “Tell me now...”

He swallowed hard. “I asked Haruka-obasan and she said something about oil, so...” He trailed off.

“So?” Motoko’s eyes were glowing now, power exuding from her body.

“So... I asked Shinobu-chan, and I borrowed some of her cooking oil.” He backpedalled into the wall at her shadow covered face. “I only poured a little!”

“Yes... But in doing so, YOU HAVE RUINED MY ONLY WEAPON!” She raised the corroded weapons above her head. “DIE URASHIMA!”

The squeals of a battered ronin was heard throughout Hinata Springs. The subsequent property damage that day equalled the Japanese defence budget...

OMAKE 2

“Okay...” He looked at the sachet again. “What’s the problem with the powder, if it’s so useful, why not use it all the time?”

Motoko coughed to clear her airway. *This might be hard for him to grasp... I need to explain slowly.*

“As with every drug there are side effects. For some reason, the healing works better when there is a large amount of testosterone present in the bloodstream... If you use it often, then bad things will happen.”

“I see...” Keitaro nodded, then shook his head. “No I don’t. What happens?”

Motoko gritted her teeth. "The testosterone dissipates after awhile, but its effects linger permanently." She closed her eyes from the shame and pulled out something from behind her. *My darkest secret...*

"Huh? A razor?" Keitaro scratched his head. "What does that...?" Realisation dawned. "Y-you mean...!"

"Yes." She nodded.

"You have to..."

"I know, Urashima..."

"You use that down there?!" He stood up, in near outrage.

"Ye-NO!" She stood up, her face now purple in embarrassment and rage. "You imbecile! I NEED TO SHAVE MY FACE EACH DAY!" She was huffing at her yell, which the residents heard and sweatdropped at the same time.

Keitaro was laughing to himself. "Y-you get stubble?!"

"Do not try my humour today, Urashima..." She growled.

No wonder you act like a man so much... "So, if you use it often, then..."

"Then the effects are much, much worse..."

Earlier that day Kyoto

Two people were curled up in bed.

"Mmm, good morning... Sleep well?" The woman asked.

"Yeah." The man yawned. "Umm, honey...?" His eyes were worried.

"What is it, husband?" Tsuruko cracked her neck.

Shin stuttered. "C-could you please get rid of that...? It's not very feminine..."

She hmphed. "Only when I see fit!"

Tear streamed down his face. "I... I understand." He covered himself up again in the quilt, as Tsuruko walked into the en-suite.

"What's wrong with it?"

The mirror stared with a beautiful ivory skin, raven colour hair and a humongous beard and handlebar moustache.

“Doesn’t it give me some character?”

She admired herself for an hour.

OMAKE 3

She finished off the massage by creating a high friction, heating his hand up remarkably. “This is to remove any of the stickiness of the cream.” Once she was done, she wiped her own hands clean with a nearby tissue. “There, all done...”

She looked up at him and saw his eyes lull over a bit. “Yes, the feeling is strange. For the first half hour you’ll feel extremely drained and sleepy, as your body is changing priorities to your injury. However, as with any other new interference, you will adapt to being a little bit weaker and slower than usual.”

She began to worry when his face reddened, and his eyes glazed over while staring at her. A small line of drool poured from one side of his mouth, and a thin stream of blood poured from his nose.

“Oh shit...”

She blushed even more when ‘other’ parts of Keitaro’s body began to react, and expand, in a typically male fashion.

I didn’t realise it... What happens when you give a man more testosterone? The Shinmeiryu are all women...!

She was caught unawares when Keitaro lunged out and grabbed Motoko’s arms, his tongue approaching her neck slowly.

NOOO! – SCENE DELETED -

Author’s Notes

The title sets the feeling for this story, the meaning of trust between two people, and the constant training to become better. Let’s just say that I’ve found my muse for this story once again. A small trip away to our summer home did wonders, and I managed to include a good scene with Shinobu in it, a spur of the moment type of deal.

If you’re curious as to why it took me so long, see the forum for why I couldn’t write. I have to thank A.C.C here as his comments helped me to forge onwards and to realise that I am too critical of my own early writings. Thanks to him I kept a positive outlook on the story, and was able to get more inspiration.

I hope some of you Brits will catch the Bottom quote, I think GlazedandConfused will see it and laugh, just as I did when I saw it on the show.

I think you will all enjoy this one. Reviews will be warmly received.

