

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. "Sempai, can I come in?"

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

Pulling it aside, Shinobu stepped into the room shyly. "Sempai..." 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.

"Sensei..." 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, sensei?"

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 beeping 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