

## **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 handholding 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's 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 place 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.

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## OMAKE

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"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**

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"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.

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"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.
- 2.
3. Profit

Get

Keitaro

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.

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### Author's Notes

Translations:

Odachi: A very long katana.

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

Hayashi No Rekuitemu: Requiem of the Forest.

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

Ha Kirite Kachuu: Leaf Cutting Vortex.

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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...

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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.