

Chapter 24

Eternal Ennui

A short recap...

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

Ten minutes later

Keitaro sighed contentedly, placing his bowl and chopsticks down.

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

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

“W... Would you like a drink?”

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

“I’m fine thank you.”

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

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

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

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

3:30pm

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

difference. Rinsing it, he took his cleaning materials and put them in their usual place, before deciding what else to do.

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

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

Meanwhile Upstairs

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

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

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

Meanwhile The living room

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you going back upstairs?" Keitaro asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both looking at each other, they spun away quick.

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

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

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

“Hey imouto-chan, how was school?”

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

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

“Does that mean you're hungry?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally reaching the top of the stairs, he didn't release his arm, but did loosen the hold slightly so she could walk better. Opening the door to her room, he helped her down onto the floor, giving her some space as she lay against the wall again. Moving away, Keitaro was about to leave before Motoko stopped him.

"Why are you helping me...?"

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

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

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

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

Motoko angled her head away and mumbled something.

"What was that?" He asked innocently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

6:11pm

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tokyo University is really important to you, isn't it?" She asked gently, receiving a nod as reply. "I've never seen you like this, Urashima."

He felt helpless and despondent, like the depression he felt at failing again. "I've been trying to get in... To keep a promise..."

Motoko nodded in understanding. *To him, promises are sacrosanct...* "Very well, I'll train your mind and your body, as a favour for you giving me another chance to restore my honour." She gave him a hard stare. "However, this can't be done overnight, this will take a while for your body to adjust to the changes. Do you want to go ahead with this?"

“Why not, it can’t hurt...” He said offhand.

“No!” She slammed her hand on the flooring. “You must be certain you want to do this, meditation requires a strong mind to prepare, and you must be ready to not lose yourself.”

I have to do this, there’s no other way I can relax when I study... Keitaro grew serious, and bowed. “Okay, I accept.”

“Good. Now sit cross-legged like me. Place your hands on your knees and breathe in deeply.” He was still looking at her. “Close your eyes.”

Doing so, he took a deep breath. “Breath out slowly after two seconds. Take another deep breath and do the same for one minute.”

Soon, the sounds of breathing filled the room, and after the time was up Motoko spoke quietly. “Reduce your breaths to one second now, and continue for two more minutes.”

Keitaro was doing okay, but losing track of time in his breathing. Able to tell whether or not he got the rhythm right, Motoko reminded him, and he adapted accordingly. This went on for around five minutes since he needed to repeat the process from the beginning.

“Okay, that’s enough for today. You’ve done well for your first try, but you’ll need to keep that up.”

He panted, apparently it was hard work. “How often?”

“No more than once a day... The best time would be before you sleep. Set your alarm so you don’t overdo it. Around fifteen minutes meditation will help you for the next stage.”

“When will that be?” He asked.

Motoko eyed him dubiously. “Don’t be impatient... Your mental self must be ready, so in two weeks I will help you, but only if you keep meditating on your own. Don’t even think about forgetting this though...” She moved closer in a mild threat. “I’ll be able to tell...”

He gulped and nodded. “I’ll do it...” Shinobu’s voice was heard throughout the inn. “How do you feel Motoko-chan? Do you think you’re strong enough to –”

“I’ll eat with everyone.” She hmped. “But...” She looked down. “I still need your help there...”

“I can do that.” He stood up and held a hand to her, and he half-pulled her up from the ground.

Ten minutes later

Dinner was another excellent meal, the residents of Hinata-sou were happy and full, patting their stomachs contentedly. Shinobu started collecting the plates up as the residents started to get up. Keitaro looked to his former cram school colleague and saw that she was in a good mood.

“Narusegawa,” She looked at him. “How was Toudai? Apart from all the perverts of course...” He added as an afterthought.

“Hmmm...” She glanced up, thinking. “It was okay, really busy today, but the societies were all out to get students to join them. They were really aggressive...” She smiled. “I met some nice people there, and the facilities look really new as well.”

He returned the smile. “I’m glad you’re happy, I’m not sure if I’ll have that feeling, I might never get in now...”

He looked at him suspiciously. “Well, if you keep fouling up your grades you’ll never do well in the entrance exams.” Seeing him flinch, she softened her tone. “You need to learn the basics, Keitaro. After that you can do some of the harder stuff...” She looked away. “You don’t want to be like me, all I did was study, study, study...” She removed her round long sighted glasses from their case. “Those books did this to my eyes, I can’t read without them...” She got up and yawned. “You have one more year to try again, I have to go back to studying there... You should use this year well.” She glowered at him. “But if you try to use that time for peeking at me... There’ll be hell to pay...”

She stomped off to lie on the couch, joining Mitsune. Keitaro boggled at her. *She was nice to me... That’s weird... Maybe being at Toudai is already affecting her somehow...*

Without thinking, Keitaro offered a hand to Motoko, which she accepted without word, and they both left the dining room to her room.

Motoko’s room

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I would like to be alone for now.” Seeing the worried look on his face she continued. “It is not because of you, Urashima. I will not be doing anything strenuous. I wish to read a book alone, and then I will sleep.” She saw his hesitation. “If you wish, you may wake me tomorrow morning at around nine, so that we may go down for breakfast.”

He agreed. “I’d like that.” He smiled. “I hope you feel a little bit better tomorrow, Motoko-chan.”

“As do I.”

Keitaro nodded, and left the room, closing the door in the process. Walking downstairs to his room, he sighed and looked at the time. *Still too early to sleep...*

“Ah!”

Moving into the centre of the room, he picked up his alarm, set it for twenty minutes from that moment on and sat cross-legged.

His first meditation of that week had begun.

Author's Notes

One year and two months ago, this story was last updated. I tried to carry this on, but my will was lost, work, life, moving, everything changed for me. My interests have also changed. However I plan on continuing this story, in the hope that my love for it will return.

If any of my original fans are still out there, waiting for an update, and have not lost faith in me, please review this chapter, to let me know that I have not failed so utterly in conveying the mood that was present in the story thus far. I'm aware that this chapter is short in comparison to the previous three, however, I need to start off small before I can return to my 20 pagers.

Sorry for the wait, I will endeavour to speed up my writing from now on.

- J