

# Devon Connell Patreon by Thomas Bell

## (04/July/2018 - 31/December/2019)

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[Love Interests](#)

[Jul 4, 2018](#)

Which character(s) is your main character interested in?

Junko/Jun

Kohaku

Masami/Masashi

Momoko

Toshio/Toshie

279 votes total

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[Jul 6, 2018](#)

This is my first time using discord, so please excuse the mess!

[Side Story #1: Hatch's Harem](#)

[Jul 7, 2018](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place shortly after the events of Book 3.>

Side Story 1: Hatch's Harem

■■ *Shima Barracks* ■■

The armored figure of General Shatao was imposing, even if the man inside the armor could barely keep himself awake. Hatch was stiff and sore, sweaty and exhausted from yet another day of bureaucracy. Signing edicts and decrees remained difficult even when you couldn't read them.

*\*bam\**

Hatch slammed Shatao's stamp across the last paper on his stack. "With this...it is done," he said as he imitated the general's voice. "Each regiment is to...clean and maintain their assigned...outhouses."

Kohaku took the paper and gestured to the few captains still in attendance. Most were out on patrols, or securing the Empress's retinue southward. "As our lord Shatao-sama wills it, it shall be done."

The captains murmured and bowed, taking their leave as quickly and respectfully as possible. They and the rest of the army had undergone significant changes in discipline. Rooting out the bad apples of the bunch was an ongoing and laborious process.

After they left, Hatch whispered to his personal aide. "I didn't put on this helmet...to keep our bathrooms from stinkin'."

"I know, my lord. We are still hunting for ex-captain Goro. Tanimura is secured, and all patrols around the region have been informed."

"Have there been any reports of...a samurai travelling alone?"

Hatch's question hit Kohaku like a punch to the gut. Or more accurately, several kicks to ribs. Kohaku and the ronin hardly left on the best of terms, but the soreness the samurai felt was more than just physical.

"No, my lord."

Hatch placed a gauntlet against his helmet, as if the metal cage had become too heavy for his neck to bear. He let out a sigh. "We should've been there...for the funeral. Still can't believe he's dead."



He was talking about Ige, whose name the Tanimura Champions had trouble speaking aloud. The boy had died during the battle against Goro and the other samurai. His funeral had taken place back in Tanimura, the village that had accepted the Tonogasha refugee as one of their own.

“A warm bath has been prepared in your quarters, my lord. Please relax for the night.”

Hatch heaved himself off his throne and lumbered over to his chambers. His quarters consisted of multiple rooms, including a bedroom, a parlor, bath chambers and even a personal library. The luxury was domestic and not foreign—like at the Baron’s—yet it was a new world to Hatch all the same.

His futon had silk sheets and silk pillows, and was soft enough to hold clear indentations of Shatao’s favorite sleeping position. What confused Hatch were all the additional indentations around his. He was also perplexed by how one man needed a bed large enough to sleep a dozen.

The first thing Hatch did was remove his cumbersome armor. Wearing it all day long was the greatest pain he had ever forced himself through—and it reminded him of that time he bought a suit of obsidian armor for his drinking buddy.

“Now I know why you...didn’t want to wear it,” Hatch grinned, “aside from it smellin’ like...soy sauce, of course.”

He laughed and let out a cough. After speaking with pauses...all day long...it was hard for Hatch to speak normally. But he always made sure to—only in private, of course—even if it was against Kohaku’s wishes. The streetfighter from Jijinto didn’t want to forget what he sounded like.

His helmet was the last to go. Hatch took in a breath as if he had been drowning all day; the cool air was tastier than any saké. Speaking of which, there was a bottle and a set of cups laid out beside his bathtub.

Both the bottle and the bathtub were made from quality porcelain; both were larger than they needed to be and both were steaming out with a pleasant warmth. Hatch hopped in the water as quickly as he dared without getting burned.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh,” he let out a moan. “No more sittin’ under waterfalls for me. Hachirobei, welcome to heaven.”

The sores, bumps and bruises across his body absorbed the warmth like a sponge as he submerged himself down to his chin. It may have cost Hatch the remainder of his energy, but being sapped of his strength was a fair exchange for the only warm touch the false general would ever know.

*“Downright depressing, if you think of it that way.”*

While the man was content to lie there in bliss, Hatch’s hand had a mind of its own. It darted towards the bottle of saké, and even managed to pour out a cup without spilling too much. It then picked up the cup and placed it right beside Hatch’s mouth.

*"No, I gotta take some responsibility here,"* Hatch gulped. He couldn't blame his hand or his mouth—his alcoholic habit was no one's fault but his own. He had promised Kuni-chan that he'd quit drinking, even though it had greatly upset his best buddy.

Not to mention Nishi as well. The yakuza was popular with the soldiers and would've made for a great drill sergeant. She excelled in giving orders...but taking them was another matter. She was wild and unprofessional, especially around Hatch. How his drinking buddy was able to get her to fight on a team was remarkable.

"You really did keep us all together, you know," Hatch spoke aloud and raised his cup before downing it in a single gulp. Guilt hit him yet again; this wasn't the first time he had betrayed his promise to Kuniko.

He drank the day Ige was buried—it was the only solace he had, alone in his quarters. Kohaku was a good friend and an even better adviser...but just looking at the samurai reminded him too much of work.

The alcohol burned in its own, pleasant way, all the way down Hatch's throat. He had never been a connoisseur of saké, but even he knew he was indulging on the expensive stuff. For it to retain this much crispness and flavor, even when heated, spoke volumes of its quality. It was a far cry from the watered-down spew he used to get drunk on back in Jijinto.

"I still owe you for that drink back at The Canary, you know," Hatch spoke aloud. "Wonder if ole Eguchi is still in business."

Thinking of the old days made one cup become two, then three and maybe four. No more than half a dozen, Hatch was certain, as if that cutoff point let him retain any honor. He sniffled as he gulped down his last cup. "Kuni-chan...I'm sorry. About this'an everythin' else. I should be with you."

It was then that Hatch noticed a heated towel had been placed by his saké. Fancy izakaya handed these out to their customers so that they could warm their hands on a cold day. Hatch decided to use it on his face, instead.

"Ahhhh, that's it," he moaned once more. The cut his buddy gave him across the face still stung at the touch, though a heated towel certainly couldn't hurt. The ronin had attacked him for defending the village boy from the opposing team—after Ige died, something within Hatch's buddy had died as well.

*"Blaming yourself for everything...the kid's right. You really are a baka."*

At this point in the bath Hatch had finished thinking. With the towel draped over his head, he was fully consumed in the blissful, soft and graceful embrace of the hot bath. The warmth was like a woman, so much so that Hatch could almost hear giggles. He fell into a dream—just as three slender and feminine figures slid into his tub.

"Shh...lord Shatao-sama is sleeping," one whispered to the others. "Let's give him a nice dream."

The water's embrace had become more intimate, with soft, gentle pressure now against Hatch's arms and legs. He had no idea that three of Shatao's courtesans now rubbed and pressed against him, stroking his arms.

Hatch's dream had taken him back to a street fight in the shadier parts of Jijinto. He was up against a group of thugs and was exhausted, or at least, his arms felt incredibly heavy. "Ah...uh," he grunted in his sleep.

"Look girls, our lord is already moaning in delight~"

The one who had spoken was the oldest—though none of them were old, and one of them was just barely of age for this line of work. The eldest was also the tallest, with slender, shapely legs that now wrapped around one of Hatch's. Her name was Haibīsukasu, though everyone called her Haibī-chan.

That wasn't her actual name, but the one her lord had given her. General Shatao had been a firm believer in the language of flowers, finding meanings in plants and speaking with unspoken words. He had named his courtesans after them: Haibīsukasu, the hibiscus, meant 'gentle'.

"Quit hoggin' him, Haibī-chan! You promised I'd be his first tonight," grumbled the youngest of the flowers. She was the shortest and had her hair up in pigtails, to accentuate her youth. That both her body and personality were perky went without saying. This was Furījia, called Furī-chan, named after the freesia, which meant 'childish'.

"Keep quiet. Don't wake him up before I give his dream a happy ending." The middle of the two licked her lips and planted her bountiful body against Hatch's, letting her butt fall dangerously low against his stomach. She was the bustiest and heaviest of the bunch.

Her name was Saboten, called Sabo-chan and named after the cactus of all things. It was an odd name that she thought fit her quite well, considering her fondness for pricks. In the language of flowers, her name—appropriately enough—meant 'lust'.

"That's not fair, you hussy," Furī-chan snapped. "You'll crush 'em under all that...that fat! I thought you said you were going on a diet."

Sabo-chan sneered while rubbing against her master. "I can't help it if I get hungry when I'm lonely. Besides, we can't all be as thin and flat as you are, Furī-chan."

"Stop it, you two. Isn't there something different about our lord?" Haibī-chan had served the general for years, and knew every muscle and curve and inch of her master. She had been the first to comfort the general after the tragic loss of his dear son, Isamu.

She knew the man had changed afterwards—in ways that scared her—but this time it seemed like her lord had changed once more. Into a younger body, free of whatever curse had scarred and hardened Shatao's skin. This man was warm to the touch, just as Shatao used to be before losing his son.

The other two courtesans had observations as well, though theirs were far more crude.

“Hey, touch his butt. It’s so firm~” Furī-chan giggled.

“G-girls...he’s um, a lot bigger than he used to be.” Sabo-chan’s voice came out a pitch higher as she let out a gasp. She gripped her hand around Hatch’s most sensitive spot and squeezed.

Hatch’s imaginary fight over in dreamland wasn’t going his way. He was getting punched, elbowed and kicked all across his body—and in places that made him feel very strange. After one particularly low blow the streetfighter woke up in shock.

“Wha-ahah?!?!” Hatch flailed against his assailants, shaking off the two that had pinned each of his arms. Warm water splashed all over the place, as Hatch—still covered in his towel—couldn’t see what was happening.

It was a testament to something that Sabo-chan remained firmly planted against Hatch’s chest, even while her master shook about wildly. Or maybe it was because he was shaking wildly that she didn’t dare stop. She loved getting rough when it came to foreplay, but not even she was prepared for Hatch’s special technique.

“Ken Raijingu-Ryū...palm strike!” Hatch slammed an open palm right between Sabo-chan’s bust, forcing her up and off him, slamming her to the backside of the tub. Only after he was freed from her vice did Hatch dare take a peek at his enemy.

All of her was bouncing, bare and exposed for Hatch to see. Sabo-chan stumbled back onto her feet, licked her lips and growled. “I love it when you get rough, my lord.”

Blood flowed down out of Hatch’s nose. By the time it passed his moustache and went into his mouth, he realized these weren’t the thugs in his dreams. They were real and—in some ways—far more dangerous.

“K-Kohaku! Help!”

In remarkable speed, the diligent samurai arrived on the scene. Kohaku opened the sliding door and nearly had a heart attack at the sight. “L-leave Shatao-sama alone! I’ve already told you ladies that he seeks solitude!”

Each of the three professional courtesans pouted in their own distinct ways. None of them liked Kohaku—who was a stickler for the rules and represented all of the dullest qualities a samurai could have.

“This is all your fault, Furī-chan!” Sabo-chan yelled as Kohaku pulled her out of the bath. “If you would’ve kept quiet, I...damn it I was so close!”

“Sabo got to play with him and I didn’t! I’m not leaving until I get a turn!” Furī-chan may have been the smallest, but removing her from Shatao’s quarters was perhaps the most difficult task Kohaku had ever

performed—outside of battle, anyway.

“Unhand me you brute! Shatao-sama, save meeeee!” she yelled as the samurai carried her away.

With her removed, only Hatch and Haibī-chan remained. The woman looked at her master longfully—not with the lust that had possessed the other two.

“My lord...please do not punish them. The idea to serve you as you took your bath was mine alone. I simply couldn’t bear the thought of you closing yourself off to the world once more!”

Hatch stood there with the towel across his face, dumbfounded. *“What the heck is goin’ on?”*

After Haibī-chan was escorted out, Kohaku returned to inspect Hatch’s chambers thoroughly, in case one of them had managed to slip back inside. When the coast was clear, the samurai removed the towel from the false general’s face.

“That was, um...a close one,” Kohaku gulped. Those girls had almost discovered that General Shatao was a fraud. If word spread, all of Shima would fall into chaos.

“More than close.” Hatch wiped his nose (which was still bleeding freely). Though he was drunk and lightheaded, there wasn’t a chance he’d ever be able to forget this encounter. “Let’s not tell anyone about this. Ever.”

“Very wise, my lord.”

■■■■■

[Which character should August's side story be about?](#)

[Jul 7, 2018](#)

This poll will close at the end of July.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll, so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet

2%

Borgia, the butler

0%

Daisuke, the servant

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter

2%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand

0%

Keiko, the maid

5%

Kohaku, the samurai

2%

Kuniko, the farmer

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja

50%

Momoko, the doctor

10%

Nishi, the yakuza

0%

Satsuma, the emperor

5%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja

21%

An obscure character nobody remembers!

2%

Poll ended Jul 31, 2018 · 42 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapter 1](#)

[Jul 15, 2018](#)

The 15th has finally arrived!

It blows my mind how we're already over \$200 a month. This patreon page hasn't even been up for two weeks yet! I can only conclude that you guys are awesome!

Thanks a ton. I hope you enjoy this first taste of Book 4!

[Attunement Changes](#)

[Jul 20, 2018](#)

How often do you check the stats screen for attunement changes?

After every choice!

Every so often.

Hardly if at all.

My device lets me see my stats all the time.

183 votes total

[Graphic Violence](#)

[Jul 25, 2018](#)

How graphic do you prefer the violence be in Samurai of Hyuga?

As gory as you can get away with!

A moderate amount is fine.

I'm not big on detailed violence.

172 votes total

### [Age Demographics](#)

[Aug 5, 2018](#)

At the risk of sounding creepy...how old are you?

Under 17

17-18

19-20

21-23

24-26

27-29

30-34

35-39

40+

191 votes total

[Side Story #2: Masami's First Day](#)



[Aug 7, 2018](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>

## Side Story 2: Masami's First Day

### ■ ■ The Academy ■ ■

"Oh, I simply cannot stand it! I refuse to part with my dear baby sister!"

The eldest daughter of the Hashimoto wore a hand-painted kimono in the color of peaches, with white lilies dancing across the front and down the sleeves. In one hand she clenched an oil-paper umbrella that matched her outfit both in color and design. In the other hand, she clenched the girl who was destined to become a shugenja.

"Onee-san...I'm not a baby anymore," Masami said, trying to sound stern and mature. It was hard to do with her stature, which—while standing—barely reached her sister's belly button. It was also hard to be taken seriously when you were being cuddled and swung about in one of her sister's notorious hugs.

"You must think our family horrid, to lock you up for a year only to cart you off to this...this *institution*!" The older sister yelled, paying no mind to the Headmaster of the Academy who stood at the entrance to Masami's dorm room.

"N-Now now, Lady Amaterasu, I assure you that the Academy provides both the safest and most productive learning environment in all of Hyuga. For gifted youngsters such as Masami-chan, this place can be considered a second home!"

Amaterasu released her clinch around her baby sister and glared at the interloper. The rest of the Hashimoto family and their retainers had already said their goodbyes, though she couldn't help but linger just a little longer.

"Just so we have an understanding, Headmaster, should any ill befall my sweet little Masa-chan, your funding shan't be the only only thing I cut to shreds! Do I make myself clear?"

The Headmaster assured Amaterasu through a series of bows, groveling and glorified begging. Masami had seen men act this way before back at her family's estate—usually when they wanted financial support for one reason or another.

"I suppose this is farewell, then." Amaterasu reached down to give Masami one final hug, and then whispered in her ear. "Never forget that you are a Hashimoto. It's not always easy to be better than

everyone else. Bye-bye, Masami.”

“Bye-bye, Onee-san...” Masami replied between sniffles. With her sister gone and the scent of the lavender perfume fading, the young shugenja-in-training now felt well and truly alone. As the Headmaster guided her down the hall she couldn’t help but get nervous.

Masami was well-versed in Shinto lore and had extraordinary magical energy, or so the head of the shugenja school insisted. It was hard to tell flattery from honesty, and being considered ‘special’ was the last thing Masami wanted. What she did want, above all else, was to make some friends.

As they reached a pair of shoji doors, a yelling could be heard from the other side. That was until the Headmaster cleared his throat and slid open the door. The instructor—a man with a monocle and a perpetual scowl—cut himself off mid-sentence.

“W-why, yes of course. Everyone! Stand and bow for Headmaster-sama.” Masami counted the heads of ten students that bowed—albeit reluctantly—to their superior.

“Ahem. It is my honor to introduce Masami Hashimoto, the newest student of our Academy. Her family has been very generous over the years, so I am certain you will all make her feel welcome.”

When they unbowed Masami saw that she was the youngest by a fair margin. She couldn’t bare the weight of their stares so she looked down at her sandals instead. *“Why is everyone so much bigger than me? It’s so embarrassing!”*

“Of course we will. Please, Hashimoto-san, take a seat.” The teacher pointed to the only seat in the front row, which was set apart from the others as if it were a place of honor. Masami however felt nothing but shame, as any attempt at blending in was now impossible. As she sat down she felt the glances and heard the whispering that came from behind her.

As soon as the Headmaster left, one of the students—an older girl—raised her hand. She stood up once the instructor permitted her to speak. Masami could only see her out of the corner of her eye, but she looked pretty even though her kimono was the plainest she had ever seen. Maybe she could be a potential friend.

“Um, Sensei? Shouldn’t she be with the first years? She looks like she’s ten!”

The whole classroom erupted into laughter, and it would take the better half of a minute for the teacher to bring them back to order. But that minute felt like several lifetimes to Masami, who sunk down into her chair wanting to be anywhere but here. *“Onee-san...help me...”*

“That’s enough! Your observation is duly noted. Hashimoto-san was tested before admittance, and both her aptitude and knowledge scores are among the best we’ve seen. Some of the instructors wanted her placed a grade higher,” the teacher sighed. “If only the rest of you had half her potential!”

Now everyone was giving her mean looks, or so Masami had to imagine. Amaterasu had warned her that those of the 'lower caste' would be jealous of her, and that she ought to embrace her natural superiority. But all Masami wanted was for them to like her, no matter what caste they were from.

Proceeding with the class, the teacher lectured upon talisman magic—specifically, how to imbue items with it so that non-shugenja could make use of it. It was absolutely fascinating, and while Masami had already read over the material during her year of isolation, hearing it from a real shugenja was far more interesting. It was also a good distraction from her prior embarrassment.

"This is an advanced spell infusion technique that even seasoned shugenja struggle with. Since you all have no doubt read the required readings for today, each of you should be able to explain what the ritual necessitates. Who would like to volunteer?"

There was a long silence in the classroom. Masami looked around as cautiously as she dared, to see if anyone had raised their hand. When no one did, and the teacher threatened the class with additional homework, Masami decided it was now or never.

She raised her hand.

"—hm? Oh yes, Hashimoto-san! Please stand and describe the ritual as best you can."

Masami gulped and stood. For once she was glad she couldn't see the other students. Her older sister had said that she was better than everyone else, and while Masami wasn't so sure about that, she had no intention of getting punished when she knew the answer by heart.

"Y-yes, Sensei. To...to imbue an item with magic requires two shugenjas acting concurrently. One must inscribe the talisman with the intended spell while the other instills their magical energy into the receiving item. If the wills of the shugenjas are properly linked, a successful transfer occurs. The item is then able to be activated at will—even by someone with no spiritual connection at all."

"Perfection! Thank you for enlightening the class, Hashimoto-san. Now then, as we see on page thirty-five..." the teacher trailed off, scratching markings against the board. Masami fell back into her seat.

*\*wham\**

Instead of her seat, Masami fell right down to the ground—one of the students had pulled her chair from under her. It prompted a series of snickers and giggles to break out from the others. Names like 'teacher's pet' and 'know-it-all' were among the whispers swirling behind her.

Masami sniffled and tried her best not to cry. She buried her face into her book, praying for this class—and her entire stay at the Academy—to end as quickly as possible. *"Everyone hates me...maybe I should just go home..."*

A knock on the shoji doors interrupted the lecture. Masami appreciated anything that took the attention away from her, and in this case it was six men armed with katanas, each more intimidating than the last.

"Now class, allow me to introduce the prospective samurai for the Emperor's elite task force. These gentlemen hope to soon become members of the renowned Shinsengumi!"

*"They're so cool!"* Masami was beside herself with excitement. While she had been around samurai for most of her life, she never considered her retainers to be like the swordsmen in her stories: brave and formidable men who rescued maidens and faced down entire armies.

Of the six, one of them seemed different than the others. He was a pale man with handsome features, who kept his hair long and wore red highlights beside his eyes. He was yawning and looked the least happy to be there.

"For the final part of their training, they must cooperate with you shugenja for a combat demonstration. The harmony of martial and magical arts is how Hyuga has become the perfect nation that it is today. It is how we defeated the barbaric Kondos and quelled invaders from both outside and within!"

"Hai!" The class replied in unison. The excitement was tangible—working together with some of the most elite samurai in the country was an opportunity of a lifetime! *"Maybe school isn't so bad afterall—yeah! You can do this, Masami!"*

"Now class, pair off into groups of two. Each group shall be assigned a samurai." The teacher's words shattered what little esteem Masami had managed to recover. The young student was beset with dread, the sinking sensation growing as the class broke off into pairs.

Both her popularity and the math wasn't on her side. Together with Masami there were eleven students, which made her the odd one out. She couldn't do anything but wait until the teacher noticed the problem. After the five groups were assigned their samurai, Masami timidly admitted her lack of a partner.

"Hm...oh, that's right. Hikiko-chan is absent today—as usual. You'll find her in her room, number forty-nine in the residence hall. It looks like you two will be paired up with Hamasaki-san today." The teacher gestured to the unique-looking samurai, and Masami bowed.

"H-hello, my name is Masami Hashimoto. Pleased to meet you."

Sadao Hamasaki scratched his chin. He was about to complain about getting paired up with a child, until he heard the girl's family name. As a Yamato city socialite, the samurai who moonlighted as a kabuki star couldn't help but be amused.

"With a name like that, maybe we can bribe ourselves to victory."

■■■■

Forty-Nine was the unluckiest number there was, as far as Masami was concerned. The numbers four and nine meant 'death' and 'suffering' respectively. Sure it was superstitious but shugenja were taught to be observant of omens. *"And this one looks particularly bad!"*

Masami walked down the residence hall with the reluctant samurai trailing behind her. When he wasn't covering his mouth for a yawn he was inspecting his nails; apparently he had plans for the evening where he needed to look at his best. As for what he was up to, he wouldn't say.

"My plans are none of your concern, Hashimoto. Let us focus on winning this farce of a competition, shall we?" Though even as Sadao said it, his focus was elsewhere. To him, being counted among the most elite samurai in the country was more than just an honor.

It was a marriage requirement. His parents had arranged for him to marry the daughter of a noble lord; her name was Kanae and she was above his station both in class and wealth. Their arrangement hinged entirely on his acceptance into the Shinsengumi.

A lot of pressure for a man who's true calling was the kabuki stage.

"I-I didn't mean to pry, Hamasaki-san. I just wondered what samurai did for fun, when they weren't working," Masami smiled with unease. Her attempt at making small talk to fill the silence had backfired—it seemed that making a friend was well and truly hopeless.

"Samurai are spectacularly dull. The Shinsengumi most of all...and yet," Sadao groaned, "I have no choice but to join them. Your instructor didn't mention this, but only one of us in my group will be accepted into the Shinsengumi this year. The losers earn themselves a one-way trip to the Shima barracks out east. Their idea of entertainment out there is watching pigs roll around in the mud! I cannot afford to lose!"

Masami gulped. A lot of pressure for a student on her first day of school.

"I-I will do my best, Hamasaki-san. And I'm certain Hikiko-senpai feels the same way!" After encouraging herself, Masami knocked on the door to room forty-nine where her partner was waiting. *"She's probably shy, just like me. I'm sure we'll have so much in common!"*

After knocking and waiting and then knocking and waiting some more, Masami was beginning to grow doubtful. She didn't want to let the samurai down nor come back to the classroom empty-handed, so she braced herself for what she had to do next.

"P-pardon me," Masami said as she slid open the door. She immediately became face-to-face with a disembodied head: a ghost in the form of a girl, with near translucent, sickly skin and a web of hair that stretched down to the floor. Her eyes were large and opened wide, and beneath them were dark shadows—no doubt a sign of fatigue from consuming spirits!

"Eiiiiiyah?!" Masami screamed, tripping backwards into the hallway.

When her heart started beating again, the young student recovered to her feet. She looked towards the samurai for help but Sadao simply gave her a shrug. Peering back into the room, Masami got a better look at the girl named Hikiko-chan.

She was less frightening from this angle, outside the shadows of her darkened room. She wasn't a disembodied head; Hikiko wore an oversized kimono that was as black as her hair, giving away that illusion.

"Strangers. Leave. Stop knocking." Hikiko's words were short and monotone, spoken with as little energy as possible. She proceeded to slid shut her door though to no avail—Sadao had stuck his foot into the doorway.

"Look, we're not here to police your sense of fashion. Though I'd say it's downright criminal."

"Hamasaki-san is right," Masami nodded, approaching the ghost once more. She then bowed respectfully and offered an apology. "Please forgive me for my outburst, Hikiko-senpai! My name is Masami Hashimoto, and I am your partner for a very important class project."

Hikiko breathed audibly through her mouth, as if trying to taste Masami's words. After a series of heaves, she stuck out her hand. Masami was confused but she had read about foreign customs before. Shaking hands upon greeting was one of them. *"Could Hikiko-chan be a foreigner?"*

But instead of shaking her hand, Hikiko used her fingers to trace Masami's palm. The older girl's fingers were frigid and left goosebumps in their wake. It was hardly a pleasant or even a ticklish experience, yet Masami endured it all the same. When her classmate was satisfied, she let out the faintest of smiles.

"Red Panda. Kawaii..." Hikiko mumbled with delight. Masami was happy to get her approval, even if the method was a little weird.

Hikiko then looked over at Sadao, who rolled his eyes and reluctantly held out his hand.

"Shrew. Disgusting...please leave."

"W-why you! The shrew is among the most formidable of moles in Hyuga! How dare you claim my spirit animal to be repulsive!"

While the two argued Masami took a peek inside the room. The walls were covered in some sort of black paint, making it look as if it was midnight instead of noon. Atop the wall across from Hikiko's futon was a poster, drawn in the flashy style that was used to advertise kabuki plays. This one depicted a man with most of his body exposed.

"You're interested in kabuki, Hikiko-senpai?"

Hikiko gasped and ran to the wall with her arms outstretched, as if to hide the poster with her body. As for the reason why, she offered but a single word: "Embarrassing."

"I'd say," Sadao chuckled. "A pin-up of Hanshirō the First...what era are we in again? He's an old geezer these days! Keeps forgetting his lines—impossible to work with!"

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"Hamasaki-san!" Masami yelled as the spell activated.

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A stream of black ink shot out from her hands, the same coating that covered her walls. It was thick and viscous, and was certain to be a pain to get off your kimono. The samurai was about to get covered in tar!

Or perhaps not. Sadao proved his mettle by evading the sludge, ducking under it and rolling across Hikiko's futon, using her blankets as a shield. When the stream stopped and only a puddle of ink remained, the tempers flared.

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"Sayonara," Hikiko said, bidding him an apathetic goodbye.

"H-hold on, you two! We're supposed to be working together!" Masami pleaded. She couldn't bear the thought of failing her first assignment. "To properly imbue an item for Hamasaki-san requires two shugenja working at once!"

Masami stomped her feet and puffed up her cheeks to form a menacing pout. It was childish but it was the only card she had left to play. Her eyes began to burn and her vision became blurry—but she wouldn't dare to let herself cry in front of her teammates.

Hikiko walked over and placed her hand atop Masami's head. She started rubbing it, as if her fellow student was a pet. "Shh...shh...Panda-chan. Will help after I get tickets."

Masami sniffled and wiped her welled-up tears with her sleeve. "Tickets? To what, Hikiko-senpai?"

"Kabuki. Need autograph. Saburo Honda...dreamy," Hikiko admitted, a slight blush coloring her otherwise colorless cheeks. It didn't help her embarrassment any when Sadao buckled over with laughter.

"Bwhahaha! And here I was, questioning your taste in star performers!" The samurai spoke with a loud, bellowing voice—one that could carry throughout a crowded theater. He wiped away his hair from his face and gave an assuring grin, his teeth somehow glistening even in the room's darkness.

"Girls, you get me into the Shinsengumi and I'll make sure that Saburo Honda gives you a performance that you'll never forget!"





Later that day at the Academy's reception hall, a large commotion was stirring. Samurai and shugenja of the highest ranks stood in attendance, everyone wearing their finest silk in preparation to receive His Imperial Majesty himself, Emperor Satsuma.

What had originally been intended as a routine examination had grown into something much more. The Emperor's sudden visit had turned the entire Academy on its face.

Both Hikiko and Sadao stood with the other groups, and every student and their samurai were visibly nervous. While no stranger to stage fright, for the examiner to be the Emperor himself was a surprise to everyone—Sadao included. The Headmaster was as alarmed as anyone, as he was drenched in sweat and unable to keep his voice steady.

"It—it is my, my greatest honor to welcome to our humble school, His Imperial Majesty and ruler of Hyuga! Satsuma-sama the Young Lion now graces our halls with his presence! Behold the..." the Headmaster trailed off, going over each of the Emperor's titles.

"Where's Hashimoto?" Sadao whispered, his eyes bloodshot and his fingers shaking.

"Sleeping. Used incredible amount of energy."

"And...you're certain these rings will work?" Failure was not an option here, not in front of his liege lord. Shipping off to Shima would be the least of the samurai's concerns if he disappointed the Emperor. He may very well have to take his own life here, should he bring his family shame.

"Of course they work, Shrew. Or should I say...Saburo?" Hikiko gave Sadao a knowing stare. She had found out Sadao's second identity, though not through any conventional means.

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"What a promising group of recruits I see," Satsuma said, addressing the samurai. "And these students, I am certain that each of you will become a talented shugenja one day. I look forward to being present during your graduations."

A kunoichi in blue garb appeared beside Satsuma, whispering into his ear. Afterwards the Emperor closed his eyes and nodded, and then proceeded with the judgements. As Hikiko and Sadao were at the back of the line, it stood to reason that the Emperor would get to them last.

But after inspecting a magical sheath that re-oiled the blade after each use, Satsuma took a direct route in their direction. Sadao and Hikiko bowed as low and respectfully as they could. Just being in his presence was awe-inspiring; to be the focus of his attention was nothing short of a spiritual experience.



"Please stand," the Emperor spoke. He then took a long look at Sadao and Hikiko, both of which were trembling under his scrutiny. "What stands before me is a samurai and a shugenja...and yet, neither appears to be the one I seek."

Sadao's blood vessels were close to bursting under the stress. Had he failed before he even began? Did the Emperor know of his hidden career as a kabuki actor? Was Sadao about to be asked to take his own life?

"Forgive me, that was quite rude of me to say." The Emperor began the motion to bow, until the ninja beside her placed a hand upon His Imperial Majesty's shoulder. Bowing was a habit the newly-anointed Emperor would have to break. And speaking of breaking, Sadao's heart nearly broke out of his chest at the idea of Satsuma-sama bowing to *him*.

"Right. Now then, without further ado, please provide a demonstration of your imbued item."

Sadao nodded before he realized who he was in the company of, and gave a series of deep bows instead. After he assured the Emperor that he was sufficiently humble, he slipped on the rings and wiggled his fingers.

He closed his eyes and thought long and hard, trying his hardest to think of nothing at all but the man several lengths across from him. That's when he heard the voice speak between his ears.

"A sword...which cuts the heavens?"

No sooner did Sadao finish his question that he was on his knees—forcibly, after the ninja kicked his legs from under him. Brought to the ground in the span of a single second, Sadao was now gasping for breath as the Emperor's top kunoichi locked his throat in a deadly chokehold.

*\*inhale\**

The entire populace of the reception hall breathed in all at once, a collective gasp at the unimaginable sight before them. It was in this moment of silence that the Emperor's voice would boom across the hall.

"At ease, Toshie! This one has a role to play. I'm sure of it."

■■■■

Masami laid in her bed, staring up at the ceiling and nursing a headache. She was exhausted but was too nervous to fall asleep. The shugenja-in-training had used every ounce of energy she had for Hikiko's spell; her desire to win—and to not let her companions down—had pushed her beyond her limits.

*"And now I've missed the competition itself! How big of a baka can I be?!"* Masami placed her pillow atop her face as if to hide from the world. She wouldn't be able to hide for long, as a knock on her door bolted her upright.

“C-come in.”

The dark mass that emerged from the hallway could be nobody else but Hikiko-chan. Before addressing Masami the girl walked over to the window and closed the blinds. Suitably comfortable, the visitor stood over Masami’s futon and stared. She kept staring until Masami finally asked the question.

“How did it go, Hikiko-senpai? Did Hamasaki-san win?”

“Young Lion was there.”

Masami nearly choked on her own spit. “His—His Imperial Majesty was in attendance?! Why would he...unless, could it be? Was he the judge for the prospective samurai?” It made sense of course, being that the Shinsengumi acted as his bodyguards, but for him to test them in person...*“I can’t believe I missed my chance to meet him! I’m such a baka!”*

“Over quickly,” Hikiko replied, her voice as emotionless as ever. “Took one look at the rings we made. Announced Shrew-san to be the winner.”

Masami jumped up from her futon and gave Hikiko a hug. “Isn’t it wondrous, Hikiko-senpai? We did it! I can’t believe we did it!” The girl’s excitement was contagious, and not even her ghostly peer was immune. The older student looked away while a blush lit her cheeks.

“The quickening spell you crafted must’ve been amazing,” Masami exclaimed, releasing her grasp. “You must tell me more!”

Hikiko shook her head. “Not quickening. You gave too much energy. Tried something new. Dangerous.”

Masami’s eyes went wide with surprise. “I didn’t even notice...what spell did we enchant the rings with, Hikiko-senpai?”

“Mind reading. I wanted to know what you were thinking.”

“Wh-wha-what did you say?! That’s so...so *humiliating!*” Masami grabbed her head as if to shield it. “I wasn’t thinking of anything weird, was I?”

There had been several thoughts going through the girl’s mind during the casting of that spell. Thoughts of victory and kabuki, of becoming a shugenja and of bringing honor to her family’s name. But there was one desire that surpassed all the others.

“Very weird,” Hikiko replied. “But I accept, Masami Hashimoto. I will be your friend.”

■■■■

[Aug 7, 2018](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>

## Side Story 2: Masashi's First Day

### ■ ■ The Academy ■ ■

"Oh, I simply cannot stand it! I refuse to part with my dear baby brother!"

The eldest daughter of the Hashimoto wore a hand-painted kimono in the color of peaches, with white lilies dancing across the front and down the sleeves. In one hand she clenched an oil-paper umbrella that matched her outfit both in color and design. In the other hand, she clenched the boy who was destined to become a shugenja.

"Onee-san...I'm not a baby anymore," Masashi said, trying to sound stern and mature. It was hard to do with his stature, which—while standing—barely reached his sister's belly button. It was also hard to be taken seriously when you were being cuddled and swung about in one of his sister's notorious hugs.

"You must think our family horrid, to lock you up for a year only to cart you off to this...this *institution*!" The older sister yelled, paying no mind to the Headmaster of the Academy who stood at the entrance to Masashi's dorm room.

"N-Now now, Lady Amaterasu, I assure you that the Academy provides both the safest and most productive learning environment in all of Hyuga. For gifted youngsters such as Masashi-kun, this place can be considered a second home!"

Amaterasu released her clinch around her baby brother and glared at the interloper. The rest of the Hashimoto family and their retainers had already said their goodbyes, though she couldn't help but linger just a little longer.

"Just so we have an understanding, Headmaster, should any ill befall my sweet little Masa-kun, your funding shan't be the only thing I cut to shreds! Do I make myself clear?"

The Headmaster assured Amaterasu through a series of bows, groveling and glorified begging. Masashi had seen men act this way before back at his family's estate—usually when they wanted financial support for one reason or another.

"I suppose this is farewell, then." Amaterasu reached down to give Masashi one final hug, and then whispered in his ear. "Never forget that you are a Hashimoto. It's not always easy to be better than everyone else. Bye-bye, Masashi."

"Bye-bye, Onee-san..." Masashi replied between snuffles. With his sister gone and the scent of the lavender perfume fading, the young shugenja-in-training now felt well and truly alone. As the Headmaster guided him down the hall he couldn't help but get nervous.

Masashi was well-versed in Shinto lore and had extraordinary magical energy, or so the head of the shugenja school insisted. It was hard to tell flattery from honesty, and being considered 'special' was the last thing Masashi wanted. What he did want, above all else, was to make some friends.

As they reached a pair of shoji doors, a yelling could be heard from the other side. That was until the Headmaster cleared his throat and slid open the door. The instructor—a man with a monocle and a perpetual scowl—cut himself off mid-sentence.

"W-why, yes of course. Everyone! Stand and bow for Headmaster-sama." Masashi counted the heads of ten students that bowed—albeit reluctantly—to their superior.

"Ahem. It is my honor to introduce Masashi Hashimoto, the newest student of our Academy. His family has been very generous over the years, so I am certain you will all make him feel welcome."

When they unbowed Masashi saw that he was the youngest by a fair margin. He couldn't bare the weight of their stares so he looked down at his sandals instead. "*Why is everyone so much bigger than me? It's so embarrassing!*"

"Of course we will. Please, Hashimoto-san, take a seat." The teacher pointed to the only seat in the front row, which was set apart from the others as if it were a place of honor. Masashi however felt nothing but shame, as any attempt at blending in was now impossible. As he sat down he felt the glances and heard the whispering that came from behind him.

As soon as the Headmaster left, one of the students—an older girl—raised her hand. She stood up once the instructor permitted her to speak. Masashi could only see her out of the corner of his eye, but she looked pretty even though her kimono was the plainest he had ever seen. Maybe she could be a potential friend.

"Um, Sensei? Shouldn't he be with the first years? He looks like he's ten!"

The whole classroom erupted into laughter, and it would take the better half of a minute for the teacher to bring them back to order. But that minute felt like several lifetimes to Masashi, who sunk down into his chair wanting to be anywhere but here. "*Onee-san...help me...*"

"That's enough! Your observation is duly noted. Hashimoto-san was tested before admittance, and both his aptitude and knowledge scores are among the best we've seen. Some of the instructors wanted him placed a grade higher," the teacher sighed. "If only the rest of you had half his potential!"

Now everyone was giving him mean looks, or so Masashi had to imagine. Amaterasu had warned him that those of the 'lower caste' would be jealous of him, and that he ought to embrace his natural superiority. But all Masashi wanted was for them to like him, no matter what caste they were from.

Proceeding with the class, the teacher lectured upon talisman magic—specifically, how to imbue items with it so that non-shugenja could make use of it. It was absolutely fascinating, and while Masashi had already read over the material during his year of isolation, hearing it from a real shugenja was far more interesting. It was also a good distraction from his prior embarrassment.

"This is an advanced spell infusion technique that even seasoned shugenja struggle with. Since you all have no doubt read the required readings for today, each of you should be able to explain what the ritual necessitates. Who would like to volunteer?"

There was a long silence in the classroom. Masashi looked around as cautiously as he dared, to see if anyone had raised their hand. When no one did, and the teacher threatened the class with additional homework, Masashi decided it was now or never.

He raised his hand.

"—hm? Oh yes, Hashimoto-san! Please stand and describe the ritual as best you can."

Masashi gulped and stood. For once he was glad he couldn't see the other students. His older sister had said that he was better than everyone else, and while Masashi wasn't so sure about that, he had no intention of getting punished when he knew the answer by heart.

"Y-yes, Sensei. To...to imbue an item with magic requires two shugenjas acting concurrently. One must inscribe the talisman with the intended spell while the other instills their magical energy into the receiving item. If the wills of the shugenjas are properly linked, a successful transfer occurs. The item is then able to be activated at will—even by someone with no spiritual connection at all."

"Perfection! Thank you for enlightening the class, Hashimoto-san. Now then, as we see on page thirty-five..." the teacher trailed off, scratching markings against the board. Masashi fell back into his seat.

*\*wham\**

Instead of his seat, Masashi fell right down to the ground—one of the students had pulled his chair from under him. It prompted a series of snickers and giggles to break out from the others. Names like 'teacher's pet' and 'know-it-all' were among the whispers swirling behind him.

Masashi sniffled and tried his best not to cry. He buried his face into his book, praying for this class—and his entire stay at the Academy—to end as quickly as possible. *"Everyone hates me...maybe I should just go home..."*

A knock on the shoji doors interrupted the lecture. Masashi appreciated anything that took the attention away from him, and in this case it was six men armed with katanas, each more intimidating than the

last.

“Now class, allow me to introduce the prospective samurai for the Emperor’s elite task force. These gentlemen hope to soon become members of the renowned Shinsengumi!”

*“They’re so cool!”* Masashi was beside himself with excitement. While he had been around samurai for most of his life, he never considered his retainers to be like the swordsmen in his stories: brave and formidable men who rescued maidens and faced down entire armies.

Of the six, one of them seemed different than the others. He was a pale man with handsome features, who kept his hair long and wore red highlights beside his eyes. He was yawning and looked the least happy to be there.

“For the final part of their training, they must cooperate with you shugenja for a combat demonstration. The harmony of martial and magical arts is how Hyuga has become the perfect nation that it is today. It is how we defeated the barbaric Kondos and quelled invaders from both outside and within!”

“Hai!” The class replied in unison. The excitement was tangible—working together with some of the most elite samurai in the country was an opportunity of a lifetime! *“Maybe school isn’t so bad after all—yeah! You can do this, Masashi!”*

“Now class, pair off into groups of two. Each group shall be assigned a samurai.” The teacher’s words shattered what little esteem Masashi had managed to recover. The young student was beset with dread, the sinking sensation growing as the class broke off into pairs.

Both his popularity and the math wasn’t on his side. Together with Masashi there were eleven students, which made him the odd one out. He couldn’t do anything but wait until the teacher noticed the problem. After the five groups were assigned their samurai, Masashi timidly admitted his lack of a partner.

“Hm...oh, that’s right. Hikiko-chan is absent today—as usual. You’ll find her in her room, number forty-nine in the residence hall. It looks like you two will be paired up with Hamasaki-san today.” The teacher gestured to the unique-looking samurai, and Masashi bowed.

“H-hello, my name is Masashi Hashimoto. Pleased to meet you.”

Sadao Hamasaki scratched his chin. He was about to complain about getting paired up with a child, until he heard the boy’s family name. As a Yamato city socialite, the samurai who moonlighted as a kabuki star couldn’t help but be amused.

“With a name like that, maybe we can bribe ourselves to victory.”

■■■■

Forty-Nine was the unluckiest number there was, as far as Masashi was concerned. The numbers four and nine meant ‘death’ and ‘suffering’ respectively. Sure it was superstitious but shugenja were taught to

be observant of omens. *“And this one looks particularly bad!”*

Masashi walked down the residence hall with the reluctant samurai trailing behind him. When he wasn't covering his mouth for a yawn he was inspecting his nails; apparently he had plans for the evening where he needed to look at his best. As for what he was up to, he wouldn't say.

“My plans are none of your concern, Hashimoto. Let us focus on winning this farce of a competition, shall we?” Though even as Sadao said it, his focus was elsewhere. To him, being counted among the most elite samurai in the country was more than just an honor.

It was a marriage requirement. His parents had arranged for him to marry the daughter of a noble lord; her name was Kanae and she was above his station both in class and wealth. Their arrangement hinged entirely on his acceptance into the Shinsengumi.

A lot of pressure for a man who's true calling was the kabuki stage.

“I-I didn't mean to pry, Hamasaki-san. I just wondered what samurai did for fun, when they weren't working,” Masashi smiled with unease. His attempt at making small talk to fill the silence had backfired—it seemed that making a friend was well and truly hopeless.

“Samurai are spectacularly dull. The Shinsengumi most of all...and yet,” Sadao groaned, “I have no choice but to join them. Your instructor didn't mention this, but only one of us in my group will be accepted into the Shinsengumi this year. The losers earn themselves a one-way trip to the Shima barracks out east. Their idea of entertainment out there is watching pigs roll around in the mud! I cannot afford to lose!”

Masashi gulped. A lot of pressure for a student on his first day of school.

“I-I will do my best, Hamasaki-san. And I'm certain Hikiko-senpai feels the same way!” After encouraging himself, Masashi knocked on the door to room forty-nine where his partner was waiting. *“She's probably shy, just like me. I'm sure we'll have so much in common!”*

After knocking and waiting and then knocking and waiting some more, Masashi was beginning to grow doubtful. He didn't want to let the samurai down nor come back to the classroom empty-handed, so he braced himself for what he had to do next.

“P-pardon me,” Masashi said as he slid open the door. He immediately became face-to-face with a disembodied head: a ghost in the form of a girl, with near translucent, sickly skin and a web of hair that stretched down to the floor. Her eyes were large and opened wide, and beneath them were dark shadows—no doubt a sign of fatigue from consuming spirits!

“Eiiiiiyah?!” Masashi screamed, tripping backwards into the hallway.

When his heart started beating again, the young student recovered to his feet. He looked towards the samurai for help but Sadao simply gave him a shrug. Peering back into the room, Masashi got a better

look at the girl named Hikiko-chan.

She was less frightening from this angle, outside the shadows of her darkened room. She wasn't a disembodied head; Hikiko wore an oversized kimono that was as black as her hair, giving away that illusion.

"Strangers. Leave. Stop knocking." Hikiko's words were short and monotone, spoken with as little energy as possible. She proceeded to slid shut her door though to no avail—Sadao had stuck his foot into the doorway.

"Look, we're not here to police your sense of fashion. Though I'd say it's downright criminal."

"Hamasaki-san is right," Masashi nodded, approaching the ghost once more. He then bowed respectfully and offered an apology. "Please forgive me for my outburst, Hikiko-senpai! My name is Masashi Hashimoto, and I am your partner for a very important class project."

Hikiko breathed audibly through her mouth, as if trying to taste Masashi's words. After a series of heaves, she stuck out her hand. Masashi was confused but he had read about foreign customs before. Shaking hands upon greeting was one of them. *"Could Hikiko-chan be a foreigner?"*

But instead of shaking his hand, Hikiko used her fingers to trace Masashi's palm. The older girl's fingers were frigid and left goosebumps in their wake. It was hardly a pleasant or even a ticklish experience, yet Masashi endured it all the same. When his classmate was satisfied, she let out the faintest of smiles.

"Red Panda. Kawaii..." Hikiko mumbled with delight. Masashi was happy to get her approval, even if the method was a little weird.

Hikiko then looked over at Sadao, who rolled his eyes and reluctantly held out his hand.

"Shrew. Disgusting...please leave."

"W-why you! The shrew is among the most formidable of moles in Hyuga! How dare you claim my spirit animal to be repulsive!"

While the two argued Masashi took a peek inside the room. The walls were covered in some sort of black paint, making it look as if it was midnight instead of noon. Atop the wall across from Hikiko's futon was a poster, drawn in the flashy style that was used to advertise kabuki plays. This one depicted a man with most of his body exposed.

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"Listen up, you two: get me into the Shinsengumi and I'll make sure that Saburo Honda gives you a performance that you'll never forget!"

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He closed his eyes and thought long and hard, trying his hardest to think of nothing at all but the man several lengths across from him. That's when he heard the voice speak between his ears.

“A sword...which cuts the heavens?”

No sooner did Sadao finish his question that he was on his knees—forcibly, after the ninja kicked his legs from under him. Brought to the ground in the span of a single second, Sadao was now gasping for breath as the Emperor's top shinobi locked his throat in a deadly chokehold.

*\*inhale\**

The entire populace of the reception hall breathed in all at once, a collective gasp at the unimaginable sight before them. It was in this moment of silence that the Emperor's voice would boom across the hall.

“At ease, Toshio! This one has a role to play. I'm sure of it.”

■■■■

Masashi laid in his bed, staring up at the ceiling and nursing a headache. He was exhausted but was too nervous to fall asleep. The shugenja-in-training had used every ounce of energy he had for Hikiko's spell; his desire to win—and to not let his companions down—had pushed him beyond his limits.

*"And now I've missed the competition itself! How big of a baka can I be?!"* Masashi placed his pillow atop his face as if to hide from the world. He wouldn't be able to hide for long, as a knock on his door bolted him upright.

"C-come in."

The dark mass that emerged from the hallway could be nobody else but Hikiko-chan. Before addressing Masashi the girl walked over to the window and closed the blinds. Suitably comfortable, the visitor stood over Masashi's futon and stared. She kept staring until Masashi finally asked the question.

"How did it go, Hikiko-senpai? Did Hamasaki-san win?"

"Young Lion was there."

Masashi nearly choked on his own spit. "His—His Imperial Majesty was in attendance?! Why would he...unless, could it be? Was he the judge for the prospective samurai?" It made sense of course, being that the Shinsengumi acted as his bodyguards, but for him to test them in person...*"I can't believe I missed my chance to meet him! I'm such a baka!"*

"Over quickly," Hikiko replied, her voice as emotionless as ever. "Took one look at the rings we made. Announced Shrew-san to be the winner."

Masashi jumped up from his futon and gave Hikiko a hug. "Isn't it wondrous, Hikiko-senpai? We did it! I can't believe we did it!" The boy's excitement was contagious, and not even his ghostly peer was immune. The older student looked away while a blush lit her cheeks.

"The quickening spell you crafted must've been amazing," Masashi exclaimed, releasing his grasp. "You must tell me more!"

Hikiko shook her head. "Not quickening. You gave too much energy. Tried something new. Dangerous."

Masashi's eyes went wide with surprise. "I didn't even notice...what spell did we enchant the rings with, Hikiko-senpai?"

"Mind reading. I wanted to know what you were thinking."

"Wh-wha-what did you say?! That's so...so *humiliating!*" Masashi grabbed his head as if to shield it. "I wasn't thinking of anything weird, was I?"

There had been several thoughts going through the boy's mind during the casting of that spell. Thoughts of victory and kabuki, of becoming a shugenja and of bringing honor to his family's name. But there was one desire that surpassed all the others.

"Very weird," Hikiko replied. "But I accept, Masashi Hashimoto. I will be your friend."



[Which character should September's side story be about?](#)

[Aug 7, 2018](#)

This poll will close at the end of August.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+1)

0%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+0)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+1)

2%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+0)

2%

Keiko, the maid (+2)

3%

Kohaku, the samurai (+1)

10%

Kuniko, the farmer (+0)

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+0)

5%

Momoko, the doctor (+4)

10%

Nishi, the yakuza (+0)

0%

Satsuma, the emperor (+2)

7%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+9)

57%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+1)

5%

Poll ended Aug 31, 2018 · 60 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapters 2 & 3](#)

[Aug 15, 2018](#)

Bonus chapter this month! (Chapter 2 is on the short side)

It's crazy that we've already managed to surpass the meme level of \$420 on the second month! You guys and your support have really blazed a trail of new possibilities for me.

Thanks, and please enjoy this pair of chapters!

[Text Input](#)

[Aug 20, 2018](#)

How do you feel about text-input sections?

(fill-in-the-blanks from Book 3)

They're great! I'd like to see more in future books.

They're a nice feature. I'd like to see a few more in future books.

They're meh. I'm fine with just choices.

160 votes total

### [Fight Scenes](#)

[Aug 25, 2018](#)

How much combat do you prefer in Samurai of Hyuga?

The more the merrier!

A moderate amount is fine.

I'm not big on combat sequences.

173 votes total

### [Gender & Attraction](#)

[Sep 5, 2018](#)

What is your main character(s)'s gender and orientation? (Select all that apply)

Male, attracted to women

Male, attracted to men

Female, attracted to men

214 votes total

Sep 7, 2018

\_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

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*\*AuRoooOOOH\**

The blast of an elephant's snout trumpeted through Toshie's ears as she entered the vast, circular tent kept at the outskirts of the city. The kunoichi couldn't be sure which was more exotic—the animals or the people. As for the latter, Toshie spotted a woman with two heads, a man as tall as three, and a gymnastic troupe of midgets.

"I take it you've never been to the circus before, Toshie-senpai. You look uneasy for a change."

The voice came from a woman named Tamaki Uesugi, Toshie's peer and partner for this particular assignment. She was a Northerner with good instincts and decent observational skills. Were it not for her habit of making small talk, Toshie would've liked her.

“Is that so. Let’s not waste any more time. The ringmaster’s office should be this way.” Toshie spoke and walked with a frigid sense of urgency, even amidst a sweltering summer such as this one. The humidity



didn't help with the smell—which around the animal cages was a pungent mix of hay and manure. Toshie braced her scarf against her nose and headed into the office.

The ringmaster and his wife were there; there was blood across the man's face and down his robes. Papers were scattered and the desk was overturned. The strangest detail to Toshie wasn't in this room at all—the performers outside were going about their business as if nothing had happened. They were oblivious to the fact that their boss had just been assaulted.

"Oh, no, no!" the ringmaster cried, then went on his knees and started to beg. "Please, there's no need for His Imperial Majesty to get involved. I would hate 'ah worry him over such 'ah silly incident!"

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This led the two kunoichi to the cage where the supposed culprit was waiting. Usuri-chan was resting on her stomach and yawning, paying the two ninja no attention at all. Her accommodations were particularly large and elaborate relative to the other animals. She had a bed made of hay and a large, cloth covering for use at night. The covering was embroidered with a blocky pattern that was distinctively Kondo in design.

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The woman was as heavy as her accent; she was short and well-thick with muscles. Her web of hair was done up in an elaborate braid, and her skin was about as dark as Toshie had ever seen. She had a motherly look, with her hands planted on her hips and a scowl just waiting to be used.

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"...it's that new wife of his, what's-her-name! She hates the circus and the rest of us, too! Usuri-chan is a good girl!"

"So we've heard," Tamaki butted in. The ninja was writing down the trainer's testimony as best she could. Not that it would be relevant, Toshie knew, as no court in Yamato would admit a statement from a Kondo as evidence. The reality was, both Ko-Ko and the bear were liable for the attack, and unless Toshie could prove otherwise the pair would face their final performance.

Proving their innocence would take time and resources, the former of which she was particularly short on. She was supposed to give Satsuma-sama a massage this evening. This was their weekly meeting, a sort of ritual Toshie always looked forward to. No bear was going to get in the way of that.

Toshie placed a hand on her chin as she came up with a scheme. "If you're so certain of Usuri-chan's innocence, then you won't mind helping me put it to the test. Do we have an agreement, Kondo?"

The trainer nodded with some enthusiasm, but she grew increasingly reluctant as the ninja's plan unfolded. Toshie grabbed a mackerel from out of a nearby container—no doubt Usuri-chan's supper. As soon as she did the bear's eyes lit open.

With a quick flick of her kunai, Toshie cut the fish down across its stomach. Grabbing a handful of its innards, the kunoichi then coated the trainer's shoulders with fish guts.

"Go in and see how the bear reacts."

“That’s crazy!” Tamaki yelled, tossing her quill and parchment to the ground. “I don’t care if she is a Kondo—she’s going to get mauled if she goes in there like that! I know around the palace they call you the Heartless Hound...but this is cruel, even for you, Toshie!”

Toshie let out a sigh and allowed the more novice ninja to vent her frustration. Tamaki was actually doing her a favor right now, even if she wasn’t aware of it. Though that nickname was tiresome, a reputation for being heartless was hardly a detriment.

“I’ll...I’ll do it! Just you watch, Usuri-chan won’t lay a paw on me!” Ko-Ko gathered her courage and approached the entrance to the cage. The bear was now on its feet and sniffing, eager for an afternoon snack. The trainer hesitated but to her credit, unlocked the cage and was about to step in.

That’s when Toshie stopped her. Ko-Ko was willing to risk her life to prove the bear’s innocence—and that was all the Heartless Hound needed to know.

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Toshie had sent Tamaki off to investigate a few clowns. Really, she just needed the Northerner out of her hair. She didn’t want any witnesses to see her among the other Kondos in the slums. For it was only here—in this destitute, overpopulated and undernourished neighborhood that she could get the information she needed.

She took off her scarf and untied her hair, then mimicked the mating call of the bush warbler. While she was still in makeup and looked every bit like a Hyugan, her signal proved her identity as one of the Wasure Rareta—the Forgotten People.

“Is dhat you, Toshie-sama? Everyone, come out and be polite!” Kondos in the Capital knew to keep clear from outsiders, particularly the patrols that would occasionally barge in from time-to-time. They were notoriously abusive, though Toshie tried her best to reduce conflict whenever possible.

After a crowd gathered, the kunoichi gave her report. “The guards have been instructed not to enter households without plausible cause. Their new schedule is...” the ninja went into detail about where and when the patrols were scheduled, so that the slum-goers could make themselves scarce when they arrived.

This also aided the smuggling of shipments and deliveries for food and medicinal supplies. Kondos were prohibited from the marketplaces, and getting so much as a fresh apple was a luxury around here. So long as the merchants didn’t know who was buying, they’d sell their stock in bulk and at reasonable prices.

Some of the group scattered to spread her information throughout the slums. Toshie asked those who remained about anyone with expertise in stitching together a bear suit. While there were many grandmas who were eager to volunteer for needlework, rumor had it that Hiroyuki had just made a sizeable sum for preparing a bear outfit and was on his way out of the city.

Toshie didn't know Hiroyuki personally, but he had a reputation as an artisan well-versed in the arts and crafts of his people. Since Kondos kept little to no written records, their history and culture rested heavily on the shoulders of men like him.

"Dhat Hiroyuki is Ume-Ume's son-in-law. Heard them hollerin' over at her place. Be happy to take you dhere, Toshie-sama!"

There was certainly some hollering going on at Ume's place when Toshie arrived. The sprightly Kondo grandmother was clutching the center column of her house. Hiroyuki was trying to pull her off while she kicked about with reckless abandon.

A pregnant woman looked on in despair. "Come now, mother! Hiroyuki and I have always dreamed of moving to Tonogasha. Don't you want to be there when your grandchild is born?"

"Quiet, girl! My husband made dhis house with his own two hands! Come back and visit me when you get knocked up again!" Ume-Ume landed a powerful donkey kick right into Hiroyuki's chest. It was enough for the man to give up his cause. Not than any man was particularly eager to live with his mother-in-law.

"Great, we've become a spectacle," Hiroyuki muttered, addressing the crowd and Toshie in particular. "You're Toshie-sama, aren't you? Thank you very much for the work you've done around here."

Hiroyuki and his wife Yori bowed in unison. They made for a cute couple, and if Toshie wasn't on business she would've been more cordial. But as it stood, time was of the essence.

"I hear that you've earned a sizeable sum from a client recently, for crafting a suit made of bear fur. Can you tell me more, Hiroyuki-san?" Toshie asked in a polite and friendly manner that contrasted her intent. She couldn't allow the couple to leave the city without learning the client's name.

Based on Hiroyuki's body language—looking down and away, shifting his weight from his left to his right foot, and scratching his nose—the soon-to-be-father wasn't eager to speak. Likely the client paid him handsomely in part for his silence.

"Where's your manners, boy?" Ume-Ume snapped. "Leaving a guest out in dhe cold...come in, I've got some tea boiling!"

Though reluctant, Toshie complied. While the thought of hot tea on a hot summer's day didn't have much appeal, the aged hostess was stubborn even by grandmotherly standards. The ninja kept both patience and a smile on her face, though it was at times painfully forced.

"So how about this heat we've been having?" Hiroyuki asked. "Ought to be cooler up in Tonogasha, though I hear they've been having trouble with floods in recent years. Let's hope the water dragon Suijin doesn't pay us a visit!"

"Dear, quit delaying," Yori insisted, "and tell Toshie-sama the name of your client. She has done so much for us here—we wouldn't have gotten those salted plums you love so much if it wasn't for her."

Toshie thought salted plums were disgustingly sour, but she'd consider them sweet if they helped end this investigation. Luckily, Hiroyuki was the type of husband to do whatever his pregnant wife requested. He only had one condition.

"Um, you'll promise not to...hurt him or anything, right?"

Toshie nodded. "I'll do nothing of the sort."

■■■■

*\*wham\* \*thud\* \*WHACK\**

Hiroyuki's instructions had led Toshie straight to Old Temple Town, to the flat of a visiting monk who had been seen stalking around the circus ever since it had arrived in Yamato. Hiroyuki implied that the monk was tight-lipped and wouldn't agree to talk. Unfortunately for the monk, the Heartless Hound knew how to bust a pair of lips open.

"It's all over, Masao! A certain someone over at the circus sold you out!" Toshie yelled while delivering another fist across the culprit's face. Of course the ninja couldn't be certain if this man was the culprit, and the claim that he had an accomplice was a complete guess.

But sometimes, good guesswork was just part of the job.

"That bitch stabbed me in the back?! This was all her idea in the first place!" Masao spat blood into the kunoichi's face. "The ringmaster's wife wanted the circus closed and I wanted my Koko-chan. That's what we agreed to, kuso!"

Toshie wiped the blood from her face and released her hold over the monk. The ringmaster's wife had put on quite the performance back at the crime scene. Her motivation seemed to match up with what the Kondo animal trainer suggested back at the cages. Only one detail didn't add up.

"Koko-chan? You assaulted a man while wearing a bear suit. Do you expect me to believe that you did it for the sake of a...*dirtskin*?"

Upon hearing the slur, Masao jumped to his feet and tried to rush Toshie down. She had seen it coming and managed to trip him, then pursued him down to the ground to pin his arm backwards in a very uncomfortable position.

"Don't...don't you dare call her a dirtskin! Koko-chan is my night sky to which I could wander endlessly! Her place is by my side—not in that freakshow of a circus! I just needed to separate her from that meddling bear...curse that beast for standing between our love!"

Toshie was in disbelief that a Hyugan man could be so enamored with a Kondo woman. The thought of marriage outside one's heritage had never once crossed her mind, though it was a possibility she now had to consider.

And speaking of night skies, Toshie would be late for Satsuma's massage if she didn't hurry.

"I will ask my superiors as to what punishment you shall receive. For your sake, I wouldn't recommend leaving the city for the time being."

■■■■

"Hm..." Satsuma murmured as Toshie kneaded the knots in his back. "I don't believe any punishment will be necessary. Thank you for settling this matter so quickly, Toshie. You are and always will be my most trusted assistant."

"Are you certain, Satsuma-sama? Shouldn't this man's crime be exposed and his guilt decided by the courts?"

"An act out of love...who can truly call that a crime?" Satsuma sighed. "As I understand it, the ringmaster doesn't wish to press charges. Both his wife and his assailant conspired out of love for their own, significant other...and of all things, a dancing bear was in their way. It's quite the tale!"

Toshie was so deep into thought that she wasn't minding her grip, which was deep into the folds of the Emperor's back. "My apologies, Satsuma-sama. Your words are wise, and yet...love is a motivation I simply cannot understand. It warps minds and twists morals—how can it be seen as anything but foolish?"

Satsuma flipped over on his back and grabbed Toshie by the hand. He gently traced his thumb across the ninja's bruised knuckles. "You've been trained and raised as my servant and shadow ever since we were children, Toshie-chan. Your dedication is not lost of me, and yet...I cannot help but think my presence has robbed you of life's many graces. Gomenasai."

Toshie's hand began to shake. The composure the Kondo had always tried to maintain faltered for but a moment. "Satsu-kun...my life has been rich beyond measure by your side. You shall never have a reason to apologize to me."

"Then shall I apologize to the 'Heartless Hound' instead?" Satsuma chuckled. "I would worry about you, Toshie-chan, if I didn't already know that there would be someone who softens your heart."

Toshie shook her head. "No one will get between me and my service to you, my lord. I would stake my life on that promise."

All the Emperor could do was smile.

“This person, the one I dream of...they will help you in ways that I could not. And for that I am forever jealous.”

### [Side Story #3: Toshio's Dancing Bear](#)

[Sep 7, 2018](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>



#### Side Story 3: Toshio's Dancing Bear



■■ Yamato ■■

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But he had never once been to the circus.

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“I take it you've never been to the circus before, Toshio-senpai. You look uneasy for a change.”

The voice came from a man named Tamaki Uesugi, Toshio's peer and partner for this particular assignment. He was a Northerner with good instincts and decent observational skills. Were it not for his habit of making small talk, Toshio would've liked him.

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didn't help with the smell—which around the animal cages was a pungent mix of hay and manure. Toshio braced his scarf against his nose and headed into the office.

The ringmaster and his wife were there; there was blood across the man's face and down his robes. Papers were scattered and the desk was overturned. The strangest detail to Toshio wasn't in this room at all—the performers outside were going about their business as if nothing had happened. They were oblivious to the fact that their boss had just been assaulted.

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He took off his scarf and untied his hair, then mimicked the mating call of the bush warbler. While he was still in makeup and looked every bit like a Hyugan, his signal proved his identity as one of the Wasure Rareta—the Forgotten People.

“Is dhat you, Toshio-sama? Everyone, come out and be polite!” Kondos in the Capital knew to keep clear from outsiders, particularly the patrols that would occasionally barge in from time-to-time. They were notoriously abusive, though Toshio tried his best to reduce conflict whenever possible.

After a crowd gathered, the shinobi gave his report. “The guards have been instructed not to enter households without plausible cause. Their new schedule is...” the ninja went into detail about where and when the patrols were scheduled, so that the slum-goers could make themselves scarce when they arrived.

This also aided the smuggling of shipments and deliveries for food and medicinal supplies. Kondos were prohibited from the marketplaces, and getting so much as a fresh apple was a luxury around here. So long as the merchants didn’t know who was buying, they’d sell their stock in bulk and at reasonable prices.

Some of the group scattered to spread his information throughout the slums. Toshio asked those who remained about anyone with expertise in stitching together a bear suit. While there were many grandmas who were eager to volunteer for needlework, rumor had it that Hiroyuki had just made a sizeable sum for preparing a bear outfit and was on his way out of the city.

Toshio didn't know Hiroyuki personally, but he had a reputation as an artisan well-versed in the arts and crafts of his people. Since Kondos kept little to no written records, their history and culture rested heavily on the shoulders of men like him.

"Dhat Hiroyuki is Ume-Ume's son-in-law. Heard them hollerin' over at her place. Be happy to take you dhere, Toshio-sama!"

There was certainly some hollering going on at Ume's place when Toshio arrived. The sprightly Kondo grandmother was clutching the center column of her house. Hiroyuki was trying to pull her off while she kicked about with reckless abandon.

A pregnant woman looked on in despair. "Come now, mother! Hiroyuki and I have always dreamed of moving to Tonogasha. Don't you want to be there when your grandchild is born?"

"Quiet, girl! My husband made dhis house with his own two hands! Come back and visit me when you get knocked up again!" Ume-Ume landed a powerful donkey kick right into Hiroyuki's chest. It was enough for the man to give up his cause. Not than any man was particularly eager to live with his mother-in-law.

"Great, we've become a spectacle," Hiroyuki muttered, addressing the crowd and Toshio in particular. "You're Toshio-sama, aren't you? Thank you very much for the work you've done around here."

Hiroyuki and his wife Yori bowed in unison. They made for a cute couple, and if Toshio wasn't on business he would've been more cordial. But as it stood, time was of the essence.

"I hear that you've earned a sizeable sum from a client recently, for crafting a suit made of bear fur. Can you tell me more, Hiroyuki-san?" Toshio asked in a polite and friendly manner that contrasted his intent. He couldn't allow the couple to leave the city without learning the client's name.

Based on Hiroyuki's body language—looking down and away, shifting his weight from his left to his right foot, and scratching his nose—the soon-to-be-father wasn't eager to speak. Likely the client paid him handsomely in part for his silence.

"Where's your manners, boy?" Ume-Ume snapped. "Leaving a guest out in dhe cold...come in, I've got some tea boiling!"

Though reluctant, Toshio complied. While the thought of hot tea on a hot summer's day didn't have much appeal, the aged hostess was stubborn even by grandmotherly standards. The ninja kept both patience and a smile on his face, though it was at times painfully forced.

"So how about this heat we've been having?" Hiroyuki asked. "Ought to be cooler up in Tonogasha, though I hear they've been having trouble with floods in recent years. Let's hope the water dragon Suijin doesn't pay us a visit!"

"Dear, quit delaying," Yori insisted, "and tell Toshio-sama the name of your client. He has done so much for us here—we wouldn't have gotten those salted plums you love so much if it wasn't for him."

Toshio thought salted plums were disgustingly sour, but he'd consider them sweet if they helped end this investigation. Luckily, Hiroyuki was the type of husband to do whatever his pregnant wife requested. He only had one condition.

"Um, you'll promise not to...hurt him or anything, right?"

Toshio nodded. "I'll do nothing of the sort."

■■■■

*\*wham\* \*thud\* \*WHACK\**

Hiroyuki's instructions had led Toshio straight to Old Temple Town, to the flat of a visiting monk who had been seen stalking around the circus ever since it had arrived in Yamato. Hiroyuki implied that the monk was tight-lipped and wouldn't agree to talk. Unfortunately for the monk, the Heartless Hound knew how to bust a pair of lips open.

"It's all over, Masao! A certain someone over at the circus sold you out!" Toshio yelled while delivering another fist across the culprit's face. Of course the ninja couldn't be certain if this man was the culprit, and the claim that he had an accomplice was a complete guess.

But sometimes, good guesswork was just part of the job.

"That bitch stabbed me in the back?! This was all her idea in the first place!" Masao spat blood into the shinobi's face. "The ringmaster's wife wanted the circus closed and I wanted my Koko-chan. That's what we agreed to, kuso!"

Toshio wiped the blood from his face and released his hold over the monk. The ringmaster's wife had put on quite the performance back at the crime scene. Her motivation seemed to match up with what the Kondo animal trainer suggested back at the cages. Only one detail didn't add up.

"Koko-chan? You assaulted a man while wearing a bear suit. Do you expect me to believe that you did it for the sake of a...*dirtskin*?"

Upon hearing the slur, Masao jumped to his feet and tried to rush Toshio down. He had seen it coming and managed to trip him, then pursued him down to the ground to pin his arm backwards in a very uncomfortable position.

"Don't...don't you dare call her a dirtskin! Koko-chan is my night sky to which I could wander endlessly! Her place is by my side—not in that freakshow of a circus! I just needed to separate her from that meddling bear...curse that beast for standing between our love!"

Toshio was in disbelief that a Hyugan man could be so enamored with a Kondo woman. The thought of marriage outside one's heritage had never once crossed his mind, though it was a possibility he now had to consider.

And speaking of night skies, Toshio would be late for Satsuma's massage if he didn't hurry.

"I will ask my superiors as to what punishment you shall receive. For your sake, I wouldn't recommend leaving the city for the time being."

■■■■

"Hm..." Satsuma murmured as Toshio kneaded the knots in his back. "I don't believe any punishment will be necessary. Thank you for settling this matter so quickly, Toshio. You are and always will be my most trusted assistant."

"Are you certain, Satsuma-sama? Shouldn't this man's crime be exposed and his guilt decided by the courts?"

"An act out of love...who can truly call that a crime?" Satsuma sighed. "As I understand it, the ringmaster doesn't wish to press charges. Both his wife and his assailant conspired out of love for their own, significant other...and of all things, a dancing bear was in their way. It's quite the tale!"

Toshio was so deep into thought that he wasn't minding his grip, which was deep into the folds of the Emperor's back. "My apologies, Satsuma-sama. Your words are wise, and yet...love is a motivation I simply cannot understand. It warps minds and twists morals—how can it be seen as anything but foolish?"

Satsuma flipped over on his back and grabbed Toshio by the hand. He gently traced his thumb across the ninja's bruised knuckles. "You've been trained and raised as my servant and shadow ever since we were children, Toshio-kun. Your dedication is not lost of me, and yet...I cannot help but think my presence has robbed you of life's many graces. Gomenasai."

Toshio's hand began to shake. The composure the Kondo had always tried to maintain faltered for but a moment. "Satsu-kun...my life has been rich beyond measure by your side. You shall never have a reason to apologize to me."

"Then shall I apologize to the 'Heartless Hound' instead?" Satsuma chuckled. "I would worry about you, Toshio-kun, if I didn't already know that there would be someone who softens your heart."

Toshio shook his head. "No one will get between me and my service to you, my lord. I would stake my life on that promise."

All the Emperor could do was smile.

"This person, the one I dream of...they will help you in ways that I could not. And for that I am forever jealous."

### [Which character should October's side story be about?](#)

[Sep 7, 2018](#)

This poll will close at the end of September.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+1)

Borgia, the butler (+0)

Daisuke, the servant (+0)

Hatch, the streetfighter (+2)

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+1)

Keiko, the maid (+4)

Kohaku, the samurai (+7)

Kuniko, the farmer (+0)

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+3)

Momoko, the doctor (+10)

Nishi, the yakuza (+0)

Satsuma, the emperor (+6)

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+0)

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+4)

91 votes total

## [Book 4 Early Access: Chapter 4](#)

[Sep 15, 2018](#)

Here I thought \$420 was crazy. Now you all have doubled that I don't know what to think anymore!

Looks like I'll have to hunt down an artist for illustrations! If you guys know of one or are an artist who does commissions, please leave a link in the comment section. Also, if there's a particular scene in the book you'd like illustrated, please let me know about that too! The only limitation is that it must work for both male/female MC's and male/female RO's.

Now, as far as Chapter 4 goes, it pains me to admit that something is missing! There will eventually be an aside at the start of this chapter, from a different character's perspective. But this aside has so many implications into how Book 5 (and the rest of the series) goes that I haven't been able to write it yet. But once I get a better grip over how I want Book 5 to go, I'll write it out and update you guys so you'll know!

Without further ado:

### [On Attunement](#)

[Sep 20, 2018](#)

At the end of a book, how much attunement would you be satisfied with?

Only 100% will do!

>90%

>80%

>70%

>60%

>50%

I don't care about attunement.

183 votes total

[Stats, please!](#)

[Sep 25, 2018](#)

What are the stats for your “main” main character? (Select all that apply)

Impulsive

Calculated

Perverted

Chivalrous

Charming

Stoic

Drifter

Protective

Brutal

Finesse

756 votes total

[SoH Artwork!](#)

[Sep 29, 2018](#)



The day has finally come, Hyuga fans! Thanks to your support, I'm happy to announce that Book 4 will have illustrations! Now in each chapter you'll be able to see my words brought to life by our very own Dana Sanguir (@TunnelSnake in our discord)!

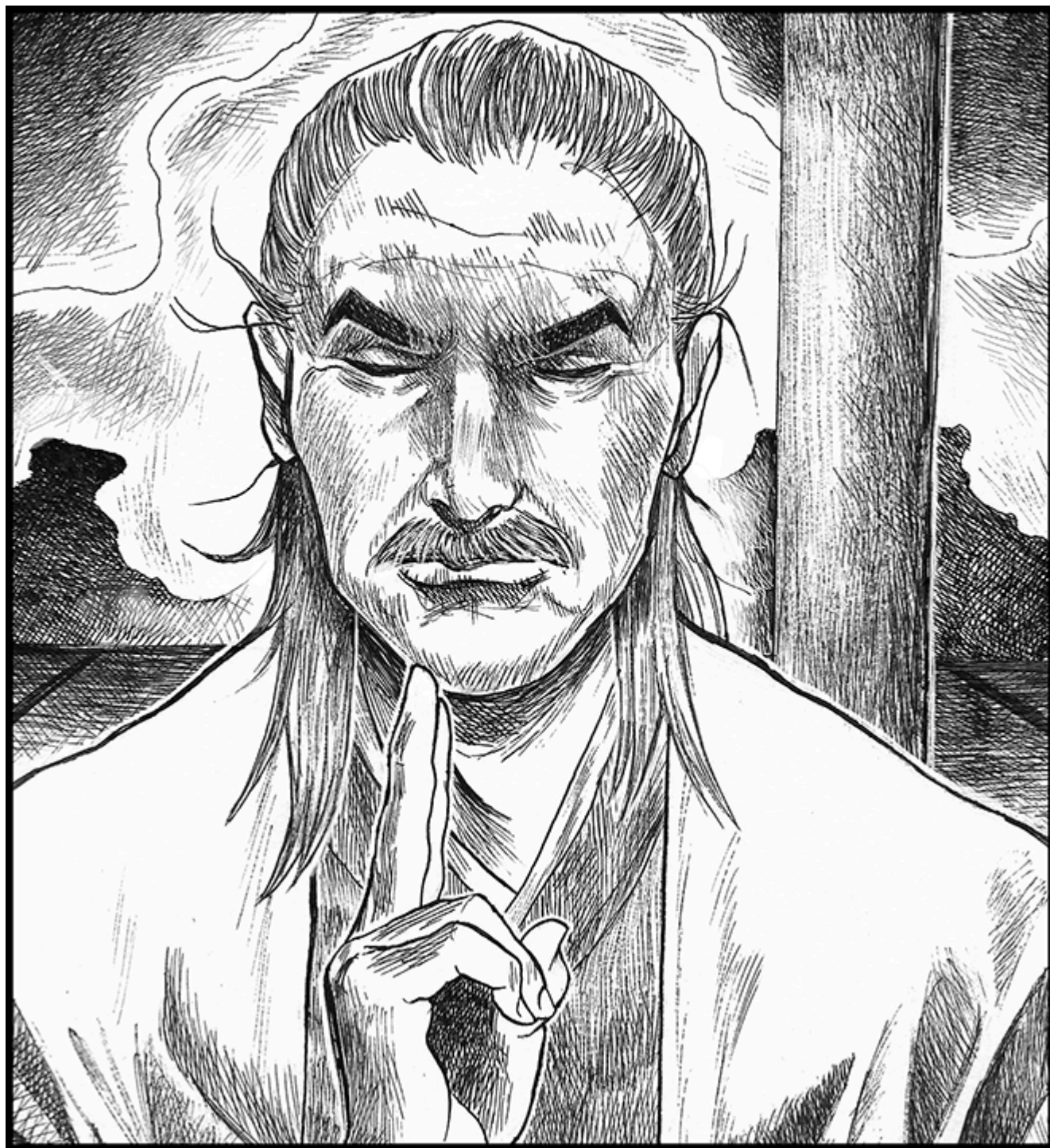
Her website: <https://danasanguir.wixsite.com/thetunnelsnakes>

Her instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/thetunnelsnakes>

Every month on the 29th I'll unload all of Dana's awesome work for you patrons to enjoy. Adding artwork into my stories is something I've always wanted to do, but never quite had the means.

Until you guys showed up! Thanks again for your support and making SoH the best it can be. For Early Access folk, expect to see these implemented into chapters next month on the 15th!

**Chapter 1 Art: "Gensai"**



Chapter 2 Art: "Clanfields"





Chapter 3 Art: "Ichiro"





[Playthrough Count](#)

[Oct 5, 2018](#)

How many times do you play through an SoH Book, on average?

Just the once!

2 times

3 times

4-6 times

7-9 times

10+ times

165 votes total

### Side Story #4: Kohaku's Ranch (Female Version).

Oct 7, 2018

*<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>*

### Side Story 4: Kohaku's Ranch (Female Version)

■■ *Western Hyuga* ■■

It was high noon on the prairie, with the heat of the summer sun slowing life to a crawl. All life save for a lone samurai and her steed—the latter of which galloped atop the dusty roads like thunder. Kohaku and Tatsuya had traveled from one end of Hyuga to the other, from east to west, from Shima to the place they once called home.

“How long has it been, Tatsu-kun?” the samurai whispered to her horse. “The Westlands...these plains are just as I remember. Keep up the pace a bit longer, now. I hope to be at Mother’s side before her passing.”

Kohaku's mother was the matriarch of not just her family, but of the entire Nanbu clan. Or at least what remained of it. The Golden Era of Samurai had not ended well for the families on the western frontier, who had faced enemies of every color and under every flag. Were it not for the gallant forces out of Shima led by General Shatao, a once-rival of her father, there would be no home to return to.

*"And for that I swear to uphold my service to you, Lord Shatao."* Kohaku re-affirmed her oath, the same oath her father and uncles had taken. Their loyalty was the least they could offer, yet it wasn't always easy for the frontiersmen to keep away from home. Trouble in the Westlands was more common than a tumbleweed.

"Woah now," Kohaku pulled up on the reins to slow Tatsuya down. There was a mare ahead—a pale-coated Nanbu breed, grazing just off the side of the road. It didn't look the least bit wild, with its saddle and stirrups on, which meant someone must have misplaced it.

Kohaku gave a look of disapproval from inside her helmet. Not towards the horse but the rancher she belonged to. If you were taking off to a watering hole, the least you could do was to find a tree to hitch her to. *"Any odd snake in the grass or swooping falcon would send her a-running, sure as sunshine."*

The samurai scowled once more, this time at herself for thinking in the local dialect. Kohaku was all too aware of how ranchers spoke in a certain tongue, using language the rest of Hyuga deemed uncivilized. It was a negative stereotype that some ranchers embodied more than others.

"Well now ain't this just a bag of nails! Here I am, a-sittin' in ambush—layin' in wait and all—and I finds me a sam'rai, suit and all!" Out of some nearby shrubbery came a short and stubby man with a curly moustache, who sported the typical rancher fashion: a farmer's hat made of straw and a rancher's coat made of cotton.

The coat was western Hyuga's interpretation of the haori: it was more a blanket than a coat, with a hole through the middle to fit your head through. They were made of exceptionally light cloth, better to shade you from the sun than to keep you warm. His was dyed blue and decorated with white designs that were all too familiar to Kohaku.

"It's been a long time, Deputy Susumu." Kohaku spoke and detached her helmet, freeing her sweaty face from its confines. "I trust you are as well as always?"

"Well I'll be darn-diddly damned! If it ain't Koha-chan! You're looking mighty, well, mighty all caged up in that there iron, yessiree." Susumu looked the samurai over from top to bottom, whistling all the while. "Yep, spittin' image of your father! Oh and keep a mind—I'm the sheriff around these parts now, you hear?"

Susumu pointed to his necklace, evidence of his office. The medallion was a wado: a centuries old coin used well before ryō. It had a hole in the center where the string went through, and was made from copper which had long-since turned green. The Westlands had been slow to adopt the ryō, so you were certain to find a few of those relics here and there.

"That's...great," Kohaku replied in a flat tone. That a buffoon like Susumu was in charge of enforcing law in the Westlands brought little comfort to the homecoming samurai. After the last era, the frontier clans agreed upon an independent system of law enforcement. It was crude and still a work in progress, as evidenced by the rancher who had trouble getting atop his horse.



After several attempts the rancher finally mounted it. “Ornery one, ain’t she? Should’ve seen her when she was in heat, couple of months back. Hot and bothered is one thing, but trying break through my new fence is quite another!”

“She’s thirsty,” Kohaku replied, pinching the skin between the mare’s shoulders to confirm. It drooped back slowly after she released her fingers, confirming the samurai’s suspicions. “Get her some water when you can. And you’re lucky she didn’t buck you off—you mounted her from the right.”

“Gosh darnit, did I really? Well mud my face and send me a hollerin’, you’d think I was one of them savages!” Sheriff Susumu was referring to Kondos, namely the Kondos Who Don’t Bow, a group of free and wild folk who Hyugans had driven to the inhospitable Westland deserts. It was the responsibility of the frontiersmen to keep them there.

Kohaku was in a hurry, yet her curiosity made her linger a little longer. “There a reason you were hiding in a bush, Sheriff?”

Susumu let out an exaggerated sigh. “Word’s bound to reach your ears sooner or later. Got us a horse thief about, and here’in I was layin’ in wait. Sittin’ two hours on your bum in this sun—heck if it ain’t melted right off!”

“Oh, and er,” the sheriff continued, “mighty sorry about missing your party.”

“Come again?” Kohaku asked, tightening the grip on her horse’s reins.

Susumu took off his hat, a gesture ranchers used for both greetings and apologies. In this case it was the latter. “A birthday comes but once a year, and twenty-and-five’s a nice even number, far as I figure. Wish I could make it, really I do.”

Kohaku sat frozen still beneath the summer sun. The realization had hit her all at once: the letter of her mother’s illness, the urgency in it, and how her arrival oddly correlated with her own birthday. This was no mere coincidence.

“Giddy up, Tatsuya!” Kohaku commanded her steed. *“If you’re not dying, Mother, you’ll soon wish you were!”*

■■■■

Lady Nanbu wasn’t on her deathbed when her daughter arrived that late afternoon. She was at the races, or rather, out on the race track inspecting the horses. Their family estate was quite large and—by Westlander standards—quite luxurious, hosting the finest and perhaps only racetrack in Hyuga.

It was certainly the only track of land so meticulously paved and maintained. While Kohaku’s father had bred horses for war, her mother bred them for sport. It was little wonder that combined, Nanbu steeds were the finest in the land.

The lady herself was of a short and skinny build, a natural jockey for racing. Kohaku didn't inherit her stature, instead favoring her father's features. Few women would find it complementary to be tall and broad-shouldered, though few women were so determined to follow in their father's footsteps as Kohaku was.

"Who's that over there, dusting up my track? You'll dirty up the lines we just put in!" Lady Nanbu yelled out at figure galloping towards her. She didn't know who it was, but the picture drew clearer the closer the samurai came. Lady Nanbu was growing nearsighted in her old age, yet no amount of cataracts could hide her long-lost daughter from her.

"Goodness me, it's you! My little Koha-chan has returned!" The old lady fell to her knees and prayed, as if Kohaku had been sent to her by some higher power. The reality behind the samurai's return was a bit less holy.

"Odd. You don't appear to be at the verge of death to me, Mother." Kohaku pulled out a letter from her sash and ripped it to pieces. "I don't appreciate being lied to! I travelled across the entire country, abandoned my liege lord—and for what? A birthday party?!"

The samurai's yell echoed across the quiet track, startling the horses and her mother most of all. Lady Nanbu gasped and tumbled backwards, clutching her heart as if it would burst. "Now I know you're mad as a hornet—every right to be, but a mother's got a right to see her girl! Come on down and give this ole gal a hug."

Kohaku was determined to pout for a while longer, and had even entertained the idea of turning around, but in the end she dropped from her saddle and into her mother's embrace. There was a saying that you couldn't stay mad at the woman who birthed you, though the two hadn't departed on the best of terms.

"The way you up and left me, up and takin' your daddy's sword, headin' off to who-knows-where, why...I thought I'd never see you again, my little Koha-chan!" Lady Nanbu wept, "This old widow can't run the ranch by herself anymore. Not a rancher alive who takes to horses like you do. So why don't you hunker down and take off that outfit?"

"This *outfit* is a gusoku, Mother!" Kohaku yelled, pounding her gauntleted fist into her chestpiece. "It's what Father wore into battle. I do so as well with great pride. But you never understood that—you never even tried!"

Kohaku felt as if she had become a teenager again, when she had spent most of her time lashing out at her mother or mourning her deceased father. Most of her frustrations she vented out through rigorous training, but this prairie dug up angers long-buried.

Lady Nanbu's back straightened and the rest of her features grew more rigid; her voice had become stern, sounding every bit like the leader of one of the Golden Era's great clans. "You're not between the hay and grass anymore, Koha-chan. You're a woman now—not the rascal who left home with nothing but her knapsack and father's sword."



"Hate me to your heart's content," she continued, "but you can never hate the Westlands. These are the fields my husband settled. I was at his side as he grew and civilized these untamed wilds. We are the heart of the frontier. Make no mistake: he would've wanted you here, Kohaku."

As a samurai, it wasn't only her gender that Kohaku tried so hard to hide. She had also tried to mask the Westlander in her, the rancher who longed to ride on the golden plains. She was ashamed—of the dialect, the traditions, even the blankets they wore over their heads. It was uncivilized and crass, lacking the glory and honor true samurai had. And yet it was part of who she was.

"I wish Father was here to tell me what he wanted," Kohaku said with a dejected sigh. "But he isn't. So I'll stay—but only for a week. You hear?"

Lady Nanbu jumped with joy, and soon had all the farmhands doing the same. Kohaku shook her head, and spoke to the only friend she had. "What sort of trouble have we gotten ourselves into this time, Tatsu-kun?"

■■■■

Trouble looked like a silk kimono with ridiculous, hanging sleeves that nearly touched the ground. It was green—Kohaku's favorite color—and decorated with butterflies and flowers down the legs and arms. Overall it was a tad short for her, and the chest was a bit tight, but otherwise it was a perfect fit for the girl who had left the Westlands all those years ago.

She couldn't help but wonder how long her mother had stored this away, or how expensive it must've been to find silk this far west. This was Kohaku's first time wearing silk though she was too embarrassed to enjoy it; she felt naked without her heavy armor weighing her down. Just walking felt weird to the woman accustomed to being encased in iron.

"Prettier than a peach! Sight alone made the journey worth it," said a man who took off his hat and bowed. He introduced himself and carried on with the festivities. Kohaku's birthday party had begun the day after she arrived, and every ranch within seeing distance and beyond had hurried over for a hoedown.

Kohaku didn't have experience playing the role of a hostess—especially considering she was the outsider here. She recognized most faces and recalled more than half of their names, yet everyone seemed so different. Most of the girls around her age had children clinging to their legs or babies held in their arms. Most of the men had large guts, wore mustaches and smoked tobacco.

"A stranger in my own home," the samurai sighed aloud. Though she was constantly approached and greeted by guests, she couldn't help but feel lonely. More lonely than she ever felt in General Shatao's army, marching and drilling and learning the way of the sword.

"All by yourself? Now that won't do at all," said a man with a white mane of hair. His name was Etsuji, whose hair used to make him look older than he was. But now it seemed to fit the aging doctor quite

well. “How have you been keepin’ on, Koha-chan? Not getting into too many fights over there in Shima, I hope!”

“Just a few,” Kohaku smiled. “Practice duels mostly. But you’d be surprised what sort of welts you can get from a wooden katana. Some men don’t know how to hold back.”

Etsuji’s stare fell down to the samurai’s hands, one of which he grabbed and looked over. “Clipped nails and calluses a-plenty. Now I know you’ve got too much of Lord Nanbu in you to fuss over bumps and bruises, but...” the doctor shook his head. “You’re a woman, still. Body ain’t made to take a beating fer as long as it has. Might be you oughta consider—”

“Thank you for your concern, Doctor,” Kohaku said curtly and bowed just the same. “But if you’ll excuse me, I must see to the other guests.”

The samurai forced herself into a group of acquaintances who were giggling and having a good ole time. These women welcomed her as one of their own, and unlike the doctor they didn’t worry over her gender and occupation.

“Quiet up that gossip gals, we’ve got ourselves a sam’rai in our midst! Just lovely havin’ you back, Koha-chan. And that kimono looks absolutely delightful.” The ladies all giggled and nodded. One held a baby who was sleeping while the other was nursing hers. The remaining ladies were in various stages of pregnancy. What made matters even worse was that Kohaku was among the oldest in the group.

“I see you’ve all settled in,” Kohaku said with a smile. “Maho-chan, how’s the horse racing? You still the best in the west?”

A woman who Kohaku once knew like a younger sister smiled and shook her head. She pointed to her stomach, or just below. “Can’t be racin’ when I’m expecting, you see. Asides, hubby don’t think I oughta spend hours on the track. Lots of work around the house an all, you see.”

Kohaku didn’t have a reply to give her. She didn’t know whether to give a fake smile or an honest frown, and so she kept her face blank.

“Speaking of hubbies, looks like you’ve got quite the lot to pick from, Koha-chan! Just look at them fellers over there—I know you’ve seen their glances. Heck if I’m not gettin’ jealous, spirits forgive!”

True enough, there were a group of fellers—several groups, actually—eying Kohaku while trying not to look too obvious about it. But Westlander men weren’t known for their subtlety, and when they weren’t drinking from a shared bottle they were winking over in her direction.

“Well don’t leave them waitin’, now!” A rancher’s wife pushed Kohaku off in their direction. Actually it took several of them to budge the samurai from her spot. “Oh and ‘uh, stay clear of them Oshiro brothers. Neither of ‘em right in the head, spirits bless ‘em.”

Kohaku forced herself right past the group of suitors who attempted to chat with her. She was angry that it had taken her this long notice how much the men outnumbered the ladies, and how most of those men just so happened to be unmarried and in the market to settle down. This wasn't a birthday party at all.

One of the ranchers—a particularly drunk one, grabbed at her lengthy sleeve and tugged her close. Without hesitation, Kohaku turned around and whipped out a powerful slap against the man's face, except she used a fist instead of an open palm. The punch sent the man rolling and sent the guests into silence.

"Enjoy the party," the samurai ordered before making her exit. It took everything in her not to run, not to flee the scene and the Westlands entirely. Right now Kohaku needed a friend, and there was only one of those around.

Of course, that friend was a horse. Tatsuya was in the stables—were a disgruntled Kohaku was headed next. She was done pretending to be a hostess, and if Tatsu-kun was up to it, a night stroll on the trails might be just what she needed.

The stables were packed with all manner of stallions, mares and mules from the guests. While the building itself was perhaps the most impressive on the estate, Kohaku still worried if Tatsuya had enough room. It wasn't that the warhorse was the private type, but he had trouble getting comfortable around strangers.

*"In that regard we're just the same, aren't we?"*

The stables weren't manned, which seemed odd. It was nowhere late enough to retire for the evening, yet there wasn't a single light to be seen from inside. As Kohaku approached, she gripped her hands around the katana that wasn't there. Cursing silently, she peeked into the darkness to see what was amiss.

Scurrying about from inside was a tall figure who looked shady, though in the darkness anyone would be. Not being the sneaky type, Kohaku marched in and addressed the stranger head-on.

"Show yourself! What are you doing, lurking about?"

The figure jumped out of surprise, hopped on a horse then galloped right through the stables, right in Kohaku's direction. The movement spooked the horses, and it certainly didn't help when the rider started screaming out in a Kondo cry.

"Aiiiiiiiiiiiiiiyeh! Aiiii!" He roared right past Kohaku, who had to jump to get out of the way. The savage was a good rider and had a good eye for horses—that mare he was riding was one of Lady Nanbu's finest. Kohaku hurried in to find Tatsuya, only to find him and the rest of the faster horses double-hitched with ropes tied in knots.

By the time she undid them to give chase, the horse-thief was long gone.



who had faced enemies of every color and under every flag. Were it not for the gallant forces out of Shima led by General Shatao, a once-rival of his father, there would be no home to return to.

*“And for that I swear to uphold my service to you, Lord Shatao.”* Kohaku re-affirmed his oath, the same oath his father and uncles had taken. Their loyalty was the least they could offer, yet it wasn’t always easy for the frontiersmen to keep away from home. Trouble in the Westlands was more common than a tumbleweed.

“Woah now,” Kohaku pulled up on the reins to slow Tatsuya down. There was a mare ahead—a pale-coated Nanbu breed, grazing just off the side of the road. It didn’t look the least bit wild, with its saddle and stirrups on, which meant someone must have misplaced it.

Kohaku gave a look of disapproval from inside his helmet. Not towards the horse but the rancher she belonged to. If you were taking off to a watering hole, the least you could do was to find a tree to hitch her to. *“Any odd snake in the grass or swooping falcon would send her a-running, sure as sunshine.”*

The samurai scowled once more, this time at himself for thinking in the local dialect. Kohaku was all too aware of how ranchers spoke in a certain tongue, using language the rest of Hyuga deemed uncivilized. It was a negative stereotype that some ranchers embodied more than others.

“Well now ain’t this just a bag of nails! Here I am, a-sittin’ in ambush—layin’ in wait and all—and I finds me a sam’rai, suit and all!” Out of some nearby shrubbery came a short and stubby man with a curly moustache, who sported the typical rancher fashion: a farmer’s hat made of straw and a rancher’s coat made of cotton.

The coat was western Hyuga’s interpretation of the haori: it was more a blanket than a coat, with a hole through the middle to fit your head through. They were made of exceptionally light cloth, better to shade you from the sun than to keep you warm. His was dyed blue and decorated with white designs that were all too familiar to Kohaku.

“It’s been a long time, Deputy Susumu.” Kohaku spoke and detached his helmet, freeing his sweaty face from its confines. “I trust you are as well as always?”

“Well I’ll be darn-diddly damned! If it ain’t Koha-kun! You’re looking mighty, well, mighty all caged up in that there iron, yessiree.” Susumu looked the samurai over from top to bottom, whistling all the while. “Yep, spittin’ image of your father! Oh and keep a mind—I’m the sheriff around these parts now, you hear?”

Susumu pointed to his necklace, evidence of his office. The medallion was a wado: a centuries old coin used well before ryō. It had a hole in the center where the string went through, and was made from copper which had long-since turned green. The Westlands had been slow to adopt the ryō, so you were certain to find a few of those relics here and there.

“That’s...great,” Kohaku replied in a flat tone. That a buffoon like Susumu was in charge of enforcing law in the Westlands brought little comfort to the homecoming samurai. After the last era, the frontier clans

agreed upon an independent system of law enforcement. It was crude and still a work in progress, as evidenced by the rancher who had trouble getting atop his horse.

After several attempts the rancher finally mounted it. “Ornery one, ain’t she? Should’ve seen her when she was in heat, couple of months back. Hot and bothered is one thing, but trying break through my new fence is quite another!”

“She’s thirsty,” Kohaku replied, pinching the skin between the mare’s shoulders to confirm. It drooped back slowly after he released his fingers, confirming the samurai’s suspicions. “Get her some water when you can. And you’re lucky she didn’t buck you off—you mounted her from the right.”

“Gosh darnit, did I really? Well mud my face and send me a hollerin’, you’d think I was one of them savages!” Sheriff Susumu was referring to Kondos, namely the Kondos Who Don’t Bow, a group of free and wild folk who Hyugans had driven to the inhospitable Westland deserts. It was the responsibility of the frontiersmen to keep them there.

Kohaku was in a hurry, yet his curiosity made him linger a little longer. “There a reason you were hiding in a bush, Sheriff?”

Susumu let out an exaggerated sigh. “Word’s bound to reach your ears sooner or later. Got us a horse thief about, and here’in I was layin’ in wait. Sittin’ two hours on your bum in this sun—heck if it ain’t melted right off!”

“Oh, and er,” the sheriff continued, “mighty sorry about missing your party.”

“Come again?” Kohaku asked, tightening the grip on his horse’s reins.

Susumu took off his hat, a gesture ranchers used for both greetings and apologies. In this case it was the latter. “A birthday comes but once a year, and twenty-and-five’s a nice even number, far as I figure. Wish I could make it, really I do.”

Kohaku sat frozen still beneath the summer sun. The realization had hit him all at once: the letter of his mother’s illness, the urgency in it, and how his arrival oddly correlated with his own birthday. This was no mere coincidence.

“Giddy up, Tatsuya!” Kohaku commanded his steed. *“If you’re not dying, Mother, you’ll soon wish you were!”*

■■■■■

Lady Nanbu wasn’t on her deathbed when his son arrived that late afternoon. He was at the races, or rather, out on the race track inspecting the horses. Their family estate was quite large and—by Westlander standards—quite luxurious, hosting the finest and perhaps only racetrack in Hyuga.

It was certainly the only track of land so meticulously paved and maintained. While Kohaku's father had bred horses for war, her mother bred them for sport. It was little wonder that combined, Nanbu steeds were the finest in the land.

The lady herself was of a short and skinny build, a natural jockey for racing. Kohaku's father had been tall and burly, so between the two the samurai had turned out rather average. Or rather, 'below average' if you considered his heart condition. A younger, hot-headed Kohaku certainly did—one the reasons he had left to become a samurai in the first place.

"Who's that over there, dusting up my track? You'll dirty up the lines we just put in!" Lady Nanbu yelled out at figure galloping towards her. She didn't know who it was, but the picture drew clearer the closer the samurai came. Lady Nanbu was growing nearsighted in her old age, yet no amount of cataracts could hide her long-lost son from her.

"Goodness me, it's you! My little Koha-kun has returned!" The old lady fell to her knees and prayed, as if Kohaku had been sent to her by some higher power. The reality behind the samurai's return was a bit less holy.

"Odd. You don't appear to be at the verge of death to me, Mother." Kohaku pulled out a letter from his sash and ripped it to pieces. "I don't appreciate being lied to! I travelled across the entire country, abandoned my liege lord—and for what? A birthday party?!"

The samurai's yell echoed across the quiet track, startling the horses and his mother most of all. Lady Nanbu gasped and tumbled backwards, clutching her heart as if it would burst. "Now I know you're mad as a hornet—every right to be, but a mother's got a right to see her boy! Come on down and give this ole gal a hug."

Kohaku was determined to pout for a while longer, and had even entertained the idea of turning around, but in the end he dropped from his saddle and into his mother's embrace. There was a saying that you couldn't stay mad at the woman who birthed you, though the two hadn't departed on the best of terms.

"The way you up and left me, up and takin' your daddy's sword, headin' off to who-knows-where, why...I thought I'd never see you again, my little Koha-kun!" Lady Nanbu weeped, "This old widow can't run the ranch by herself anymore. Not a rancher alive who takes to horses like you do. So why don't you hunker down and take off that outfit?"

"This *outfit* is a gusoku, Mother!" Kohaku yelled, pounding his gauntleted fist into his chestpiece. "It's what Father wore into battle. I do so as well with great pride. But you never understood that—you never even tried!"

Kohaku felt as if he had become a teenager again, when he had spent most of his time lashing out at his mother or mourning his deceased father. Most of his frustrations he vented out through rigorous training, but this prairie dug up angers long-buried.



Lady Nanbu's back straightened and the rest of her features grew more rigid; her voice had become stern, sounding every bit like the leader of one of the Golden Era's great clans. "You're not between the hay and grass anymore, Koha-kun. You're a man now—not the rascal who left home with nothing but his knapsack and father's sword."

"Hate me to your heart's content," she continued, "but you can never hate the Westlands. These are the fields my husband settled. I was at his side as he grew and civilized these untamed wilds. We are the heart of the frontier. Make no mistake: he would've wanted you here, Kohaku."

As a samurai, it wasn't only his heart condition that Kohaku tried so hard to hide. He had also tried to mask the Westlander in him, the rancher who longed to ride on the golden plains. He was ashamed—of the dialect, the traditions, even the blankets they wore over their heads. It was uncivilized and crass, lacking the glory and honor true samurai had. And yet it was part of who he was.

"I wish Father was here to tell me what he wanted," Kohaku said with a dejected sigh. "But he isn't. So I'll stay—but only for a week. You hear?"

Lady Nanbu jumped with joy, and soon had all the farmhands doing the same. Kohaku shook his head, and spoke to the only friend he had. "What sort of trouble have we gotten ourselves into this time, Tatsu-kun?"

■■■■

Trouble looked like a silk kimono. It was dyed a dark green—Kohaku's favorite color—and decorated with flowers and butterflies down the legs and arms. It was a tad tight around Kohaku's well-developed shoulders and chest, but aside from that it was the perfect fit for the lad who left the Westlands all those years ago.

He couldn't help but wonder how long his mother had stored this away, or how expensive it must've been to find silk this far west. This was Kohaku's first time wearing silk though he was too embarrassed to enjoy it; he felt naked without his heavy armor weighing him down. Just walking felt weird to the man accustomed to being encased in iron.

"Well ain't you a strapping fellow? Girls, reckon we came to the right ranch!" said a woman who giggled along with several others. They each bowed and introduced themselves before carrying on with the festivities. Kohaku's birthday party had begun the day after he arrived, and every ranch within seeing distance and beyond had hurried over for a hoedown.

Kohaku didn't have experience playing the role of a host—especially considering he was the outsider here. He recognized most faces and recalled more than half of their names, yet everyone seemed so different. Most of the girls around his age had children clinging to their legs or babies held in their arms. Most of the men had large guts, wore mustaches and smoked tobacco.

"A stranger in my own home," the samurai sighed aloud. Though he was constantly approached and greeted by guests, he couldn't help but feel lonely. More lonely than he ever felt in General Shatao's



army, marching and drilling and learning the way of the sword.

“All by yourself? Now that won’t do at all,” said a man with a white mane of hair. His name was Etsuji, whose hair used to make him look older than he was. But now it seemed to fit the aging doctor quite well. “How have you been keepin’ on, Koha-kun? Not getting into too many fights over there in Shima, I hope!”

“Just a few,” Kohaku smiled. “Practice duels mostly. But you’d be surprised what sort of welts you can get from a wooden katana. Some men don’t know how to hold back.”

Etsuji’s stare fell down to the samurai’s chest. “I pray you aren’t one of them, son. Your mother worries about your heart, and I can’t say I’m no different. May not be as much honor to wranglin’ broncos but—”

“Thank you for your concern, Doctor,” Kohaku said curtly and bowed just the same. “But if you’ll excuse me, I must see to the other guests.”

The samurai forced himself into a group of acquaintances who were hollering and having a good ole time. These men welcomed him as one of their own, and unlike the doctor they didn’t know about his heart condition. His hidden weakness.

“Manner-up boys, we’ve got ourselves a sam’rai in our midst!” The ranchers chuckled, one of them passing over a bottle of saké. Kohaku accepted it with some reluctance. In the West they drank straight from the bottle instead of using cups, passing it around to whoever looked like they needed a swig the most.

It was unhygienic, but the samurai raised it and poured the liquor into his mouth all the same. The moment he did, one of the ranchers pushed up the bottle, pouring the stuff into and all over Kohaku’s mouth. He nearly gagged before spitting it out and pushing the idiot off him. Everyone was laughing but him.

“That your idea of a joke?!” Kohaku spat. “You lot are no more mature than the boys I left way back when. What’s next—cow tipping?”

“Awh, don’t be like that Koha-kun! We were just boozin’ you up, figured you needed a little liquid courage before you rounded up a few of them lassies over there.” The overly friendly rancher gestured behind the samurai, and whipped his hand around in the air as if it held an invisible lasso.

True enough, there were a group of lassies—several groups, actually—eying Kohaku while trying not to look too obvious about it. But Westlander women weren’t known for their subtlety, and when they weren’t fanning themselves off they trying to present their best sides over in his direction.

“Go off and git’em, now!” A rancher pushed Kohaku off towards the women. Actually it took several of them to budge the samurai from his spot. “Oh and ‘uh, stay clear of them Fujioka sisters. Them been ridden more than a discounted mule! Huah-haha!”

Kohaku forced himself right past the group of spinsters who attempted to chat with him. He was angry that it had taken him this long notice how much the ladies outnumbered the men, and how most of those girls just so happened to be unmarried and in the market to settle down. This wasn't a birthday party at all.

One of the women—a particularly bold one, swooned right in front of Kohaku, forcing him to grab her in his arms. "Oh goodness me, I'm going to blush! Your swordsman arms are so strong and thick, I—wah?!"

*\*thud\**

Kohaku dropped her and marched on. The commotion had silenced the guests and so he turned around to address them. "Enjoy the party," he said, more as an order than a salutation. It took everything in him not to run, not flee the scene and the Westlands entirely. Right now Kohaku needed a friend, and there was only one of those around.

Of course, that friend was a horse. Tatsuya was in the stables—were a disgruntled Kohaku was headed next. He was done pretending to be a host, and if Tatsu-kun was up to it, a night stroll on the trails might be just what he needed.

The stables were packed with all manner of stallions, mares and mules from the guests. While the building itself was perhaps the most impressive on the estate, Kohaku still worried if Tatsuya had enough room. It wasn't that the warhorse was the private type, but he had trouble getting comfortable around strangers.

*"In that regard we're just the same, aren't we?"*

The stables weren't manned, which seemed odd. It was nowhere late enough to retire for the evening, yet there wasn't a single light to be seen from inside. As Kohaku approached, he gripped his hands around the katana that wasn't there. Cursing silently, he peeked into the darkness to see what was amiss.

Scurrying about from inside was a tall figure who looked shady, though in the darkness anyone would be. Not being the sneaky type, Kohaku marched in and addressed the stranger head-on.

"Show yourself! What are you doing, lurking about?"

The figure jumped out of surprise, hopped on a horse then galloped right through the stables, right in Kohaku's direction. The movement spooked the horses, and it certainly didn't help when the rider started screaming out in a Kondo cry.

"Aiiiiiiiiiiiiiiyyeh! Aiiii!" He roared right past Kohaku, who had to jump to get out of the way. The savage was a good rider and had a good eye for horses—that mare he was riding was one of Lady Nanbu's finest. Kohaku hurried in to find Tatsuya, only to find him and the rest of the faster horses double-hitched with ropes tied in knots.

By the time he undid them to give chase, the horse-thief was long gone.

“Kuso! I’m too late!” Kohaku scolded himself. He wasn’t even certain he could’ve stopped him, not without his katana by his side. And without his armor he never felt more vulnerable and weak. “Have I changed at all, Tatsu? Am I really a samurai, or am I just a boy playing pretend?”

Tatsuya nuzzled his snout against his owner and pawed against the ground, letting out a soft sigh as he did so. At least one of them was in a good mood. Kohaku would’ve been fine to stay that way but a flicker of something metallic drew his attention to the ground.

“Did the Kondo drop this?” he asked aloud, bending over and bringing it to the light. It was a copper coin with a hole through it, a wado just like the one he had seen from before.

Rubbing it between his fingers, the samurai grinned. “Tatsuya. What say we catch ourselves a horse thief before heading back east?”

[Which character should November's side story be about?](#)

[Oct 7, 2018](#)

This poll will close at the end of October.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+2)

0%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+0)

3%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+6)

3%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+2)

6%

Keiko, the maid (+6)

1%

Kohaku, the samurai (+0)

4%

Kuniko, the farmer (+1)

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+12)

17%

Momoko, the doctor (+29)

31%

Nishi, the yakuza (+4)

6%

Satsuma, the emperor (+16)

15%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+5)

8%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+9)

6%

Poll ended Oct 31, 2018 · 71 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapter 5](#)

[Oct 15, 2018](#)

Another month, another chapter! This time it's Chapter 5, featuring the confrontation many have been waiting for!

In case you didn't catch the artwork post from last month, our very own Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#)) is doing the illustrations! All of her hard work has now been added into the game—so if you haven't replayed the beginning chapters to death yet, I highly recommend another playthrough. There's something about seeing the art inside the pages that makes everything better!

And of course, that art wouldn't exist if it wasn't for you guys! Thank you and please enjoy:

[Skill Count](#)

[Oct 20, 2018](#)

With the addition of Observation and Deduction, there are now seven skills in SoH. How many skills do you prefer?

Seven isn't enough. I want more skills!

I think seven skills is a good number.

I don't need those many. Take away every skill but Perverted!

158 votes total

[Favorite Choices](#)

[Oct 25, 2018](#)

What do your favorite choices tend to be?

"Dialogue"

[Action]

I don't have a favorite type

179 votes total

[SoH Artwork: Book 4, Part 2](#)

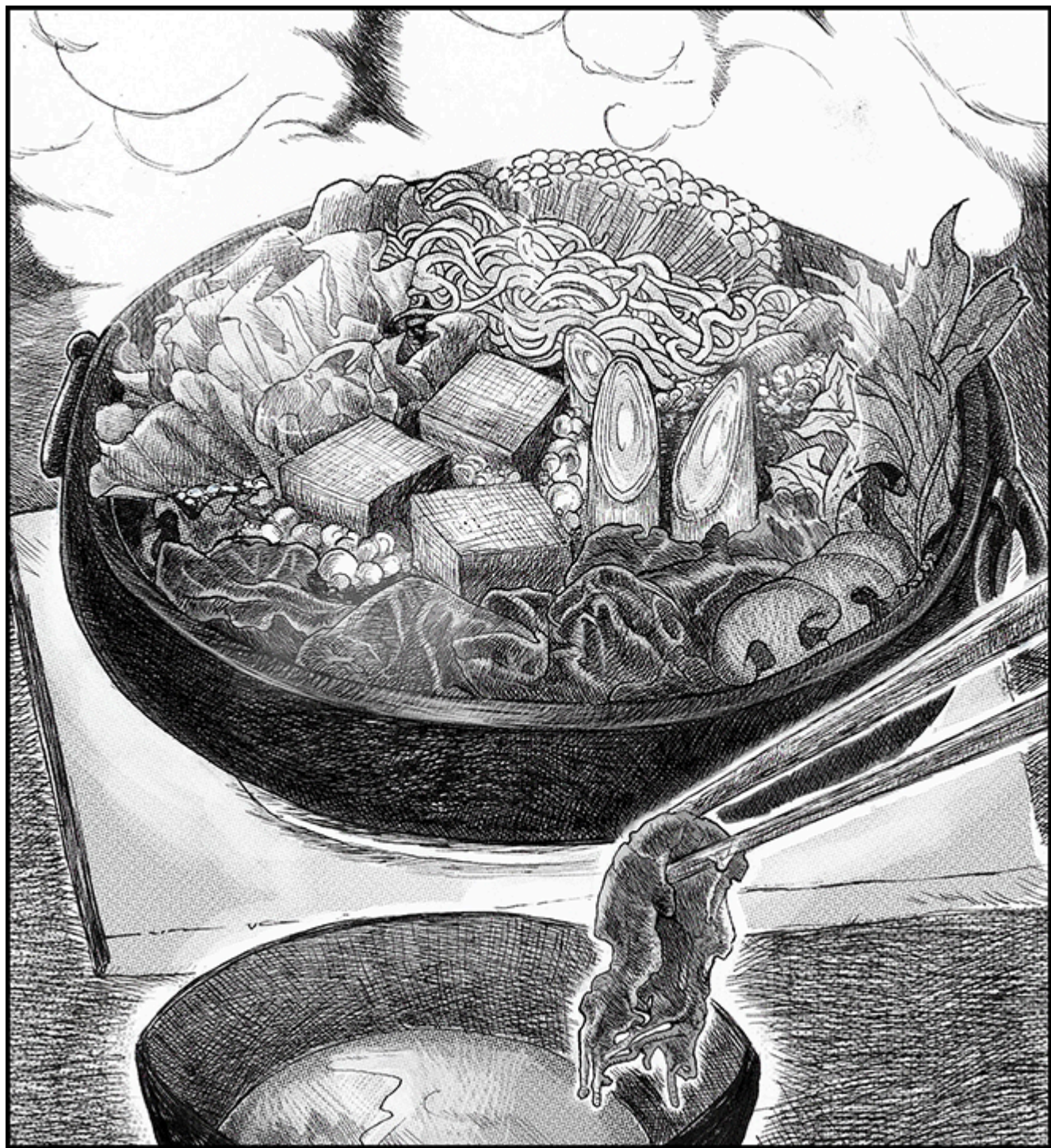
[Oct 29, 2018](#)

Food porn and...Adonis belts?! (\*° ɹ° \*)

Hello all and welcome to another art appreciation post! Our illustrious illustrator, Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#)) has some more work to show off! This month it's sukiyaki with a side of yandere. Please enjoy!

**Chapter 4 Art: "Sukiyaki"**



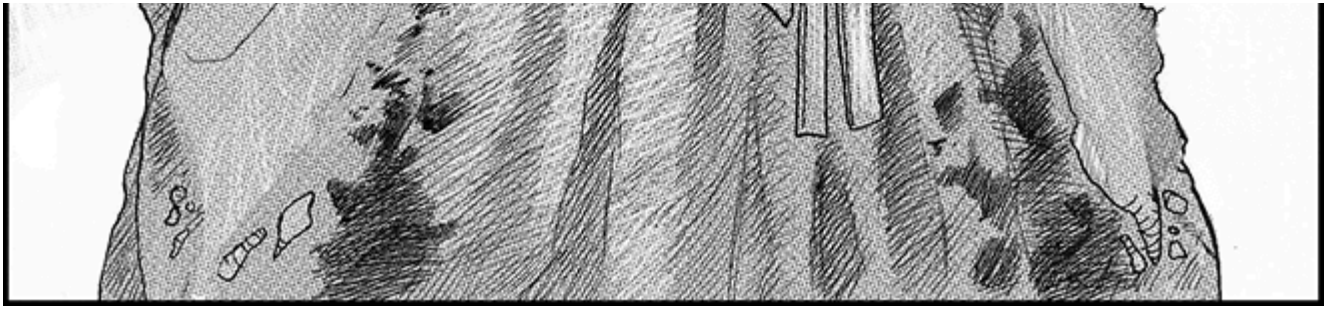


Chapter 5 Art: "Jun"





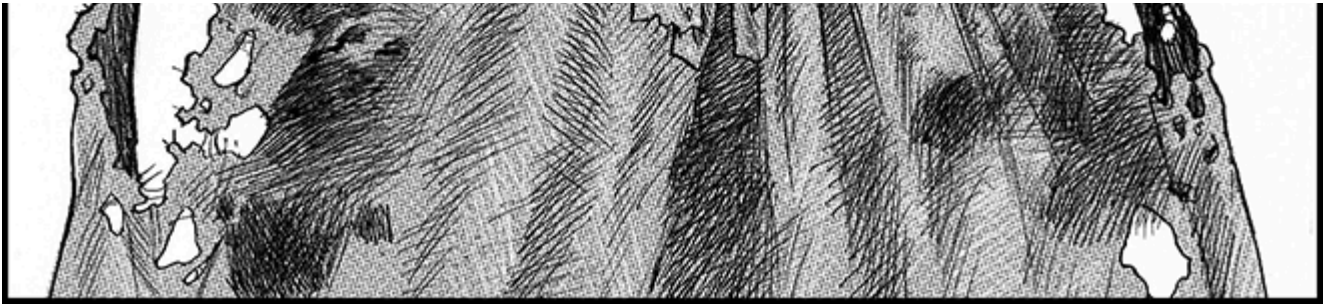




Chapter 5 Art: "Junko"







## [The Age-Old Question](#)

[Nov 5, 2018](#)

How old do you imagine your main character in SoH to be?

20-23 years old

24-26 years old

27-29 years old

30-33 years old

34-36 years old

37-39 years old

40+ years old

207 votes total

## [Side Story #5: Momoko's Clinic](#)

[Nov 7, 2018](#)

*<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>*



## Side Story 5: Momoko's Clinic



### ■■ Jijinto ■■

"Momo-chan, have you seen my spectacles? I seem to have misplaced them!"

It was early morning in Hyuga's largest city. The day had yet to break when Doctor Matsuyo Fujii and his apprentice began to set up shop in their little corner of the Eastside slums. They weren't selling merchandise, but conducting a medical practice: a clinic, one of the first of its kind and certainly the only one that the poverty-stricken of Jijinto could afford.

"They're on your head, Fujii-sama," Momoko giggled as she handed the doctor a list of papers concerning today's appointments. "Let's see, aside from walk-ins...we have a dozen checkups, two bloodletting sessions to relieve high blood pressure, and several persistent cases of worms."

"They wouldn't be so persistent if our patients learned how to cook their fish!" Doctor Fujii grumbled, lowering his goggles—custom, experimental eyewear. It helped him read yet gave the appearance of magnifying his eyes, which led this little clinic to be dubbed 'Fish-Eye Hospital' by its patrons. Oddly fitting considering many of them could only afford to pay in salmon and mackerel.

Momoko opened the door after finishing the necessary clerical work, welcoming patients new and old with a warm smile. The business-end of keeping the clinic running was among the more mundane aspects of being a doctor's apprentice, but Momoko considered herself fortunate to have such a job at all.

Sadly, the most unfortunate aspect of the job decided to make itself known first thing in the morning.

"Came down with somethin' real bad—*cough*\*—might just be, uh, fatal," said a male client at the front of the line. He was little more than a teenager, and looked like one of the street toughs who came in with cuts, bruises and broken noses. Most were either too stupid or stubborn to ask for help, but that didn't stop them from trying to flirt with her.

"My heart just can't stop beatin' around you, Miss. So how's about I take you out to dinner after your shift?"

Momoko gave a complimentary smile for the young man's courage. She could spot his friends from outside the window, anxiously awaiting their buddy's fate. She used to shut down these advances far more harshly than she did now. Her new technique helped the line move along much quicker, she found.

"The treatment for heart palpitations is leeches across the sternum. We'll have some particularly large ones coming in next week, if you'd like to set up an appointment."

The love-struck streetfighter declined Momoko's offer and promptly fled. Without missing a beat, the doctor-in-training called upon the next patient.

"The burdens of being a beautiful woman! How are you, Momoko-san?" This patient was one she already knew. It was Eguchi, a barkeeper from a local izakaya who suffered from tendonitis in his right hand.

"I am well, and pleased to meet you again, Eguchi-san. Is your hand bothering you still?"

Momoko took Eguchi into a nearby room. She often took over minor cases that didn't require Fujii's expertise, especially when the clinic got busy. Some patrons even preferred her care over the aged doctor's—her bedside manner and beauty being the chief reasons why.

Momoko only wished that her expertise was just as desirable. To be taken seriously in the medical field was all but impossible for a woman like her. She must've spoken her frustrations aloud, because Eguchi felt it necessary to comfort her.

"Now now, you're nothin' short of a professional, young lady! Not your fault these dirty bums think with their...well, you know how men can be," Eguchi shrugged. "But you might do well to stop being single one of these days. Even this lot would hesitate flirting with a married woman."

"Marriage?" Momoko spoke the word as if she didn't know the meaning of it. She shook her head and starting applying an antiseptic ointment to the patient's wrist. "I've honestly never had those sort of feelings, towards anyone I'm afraid. Now then: have you been keeping up with your wrist exercises every day?"

Eguchi let out a nod and a grunt. "Think I'm more worried about you than me! The Canary may not be a Yamato teahouse, but we serve all types. Why, there's even a samurai came by yesterday. In town for a job. Send 'em your way for a checkup, if you'd like."

Momoko replied as she inspected her patient's mouth and teeth, eyelids and pulse. "I recommend adding more broccoli and leafy greens into your diet, Eguchi-san. That should ease the swelling in your joints. As for samurai...most do not interest me. But thank you for the offer."

Eguchi couldn't help but grin. "This one isn't like most samurai."

■■■■

"I understand your circumstances, Chisato-san, but our records show that you are several months delinquent in your payments..." Momoko let out a tired sigh. Getting patients to pay on time or at all wasn't just difficult, but it took a lot of energy she couldn't afford to waste. Thankfully this old lady was the clinic's last customer.

"Are you calling me a liar? Why I—I'll take my business elsewhere if that's the treatment I can expect! You act as if asking for a little extra pain medication is downright robbery!"

Momoko's practiced smile faded for but a moment. Chisato-san had a hip injury that never fully healed. Aching bones were not uncommon among the elderly, yet she couldn't fault the woman for wanting to be able to move about without pain.

Pain relief was by and large the most demanded medication they had, yet the numbing agents currently available were expensive to obtain and results weren't always reproducible. This was why Momoko and the doctor were researching an alternative involving poppy flowers.

Doctor Masuyo Fujii came out from a backroom, carrying a parcel and forcing out a rare smile. "How does the evening find you, Chisato-san? I have your herbal extracts prepared. The same as usual, correct?"

The old lady was positively charmed by the old doctor, and only left after several exchanges of pleasantries. Momoko all but ran to close shut the clinic's doors behind her. A smile—an honest one—crept on her lips. The day-to-day affairs were finally done. Research could resume.

"Now...where did we leave off last night, Momo-chan?"

"The seeds should be finished soaking by now, Fujii-sama!"

The two were an odd pair, both giggling with delight as they looked upon their creations in their sanitized lab. Every countertop was filled with papers and plants, test tubes and diagrams pertaining to experimental ideas. The most recent one also held the most promise: extracting the milky fluid from out of poppy seeds.

Dozens of methods had been attempted, each of which Momoko documented to the utmost detail. She took notes as Fujii took measurements, and the pair discussed at length the merits to different approaches, experimental variables and possible applications. In their excitement they didn't hear the knocking at the door.

"Get the hell out of the way, Daisuke! These bastards will open up one way or another!"

A well-muscled and foul-mouthed woman pushed aside her large comrade. This was the yakuza captain, Nishi, who knocked on the door with a swing of her spiked kanabō: a large club that crumpled the shoji door and sent it flying off its hinges. Before Momoko and Fujii could make sense of it, three yakuza carrying a body rushed inside.

For a second Momoko feared the clinic was late on its protection payments. This area of the city belonged to the Yamagata-gumi: a criminal syndicate with brutal methods and fearsome enforcers. But these three each had tears in their eyes or close to it—the bald giant called Daisuke was openly weeping as he carried a body in a blood-soaked cloth.

"Please help! An assassin came and—\*sniff\*—you must save Yama-sama!" That plea came from Keiko, a yakuza with cherry blossoms inked up her neck and across her cheek. She was short and her head

only made it up to Momoko's chest, which she used to bury her face into and start crying uncontrollably. Nishi had to yank her off.

"Get off her tits!" Nishi yelled, pointing her kanabō at Doctor Fujii. "And get to work, damn it! This is some kind of hospital, isn't it?!"

Momoko and Fujii recomposed themselves and exchanged nods, and the emergency protocol for blood loss victims began. A table was cleared up and soon bandages, cloths, stitches and antiseptic would be applied. The skin that wasn't slashed apart was inked in tattoos. The designs were evidence enough that this really was Yamagata-sama, the yakuza boss who owned half of Jijinto. The most prestigious man that 'Fisheye Hospital' had ever operated on.

He was middle-aged, and though he had a gut the rest of him was well-muscled. The elaborate designs on the yakuza's skin were as impressive as they were distracting: elaborate dragons, naked women and blossoms adorned his arms, back and shoulders. But the design across his chest was what kept Momoko's attention the longest:

起死回生

*"Wake from death and return to life,"* Momoko said to herself. It was a timely phrase which meant to 'turn a dire situation into a success'. She wondered if the yakuza ever imagined just how dire a situation he was in.

"Momo-chan! Bandages!" Doctor Fujii's yell snapped her back into the present. She assisted her mentor just as she always did, but never before had she seen a body so...well carved. Yamagata was in shock and a quarter of his blood was already gone; the cuts across his body were too deep and done with such precision that Momoko doubted her eyes.

Doctor Fujii also admired the assassin's handiwork. "Remarkable...these cuts each follow a major systemic vein...cut in half with surgical precision! Was this truly done with a katana?"

"Shut the hell up and save our boss!" Nishi yelled, thrashing about the lab and sending papers and glass scattering about. Momoko bit her lip and looked to Doctor Fujii with concern, but her mentor and his magnified eyes remained focused and determined. He wasn't ready to give this one up to the spirits just yet.

"Momo-chan, calm down and hand me my sewing kit. I'll then need you to apply the experimental anesthetic."

Momoko hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath until now. She had never been under such pressure before in her life, yet Doctor Fujii—a man as old as even their oldest patients—didn't have a single bead of sweat across his forehead. If he was nervous he certainly didn't let it show.

You wouldn't know it from looking at him, but this grumpy, wrinkled doctor once served the Imperial Family during the Golden Era. They say he stitched together men with more limbs missing than not, and

was either a shugenja or a saint: the samurai he saved couldn't decide.

But right now, at least, Momoko was happy to work by his side.

"Yes, Fujii-sama!"

The bald giant was squeamish at the sight of blood and had to be excused, while Keiko mostly kept to herself in some sort of prayer. Seeing a yakuza act like a shrine maiden would've been funny were circumstances less grim. Nishi was the only one of them fit to speak, though her words were mostly mumbled regrets.

"...I should've been there. Ever since he married that Shiroyama woman, there's been hits damn near every week. Yama-sama would laugh them off, play it off like he didn't give a shit...maybe he didn't," Nishi sniffled, "but I sure did. Kuso!"

"I'll cut both my fingers off for this!" she yelled, snatching a scalpel from right under Momoko. Keiko cried out to stop her, but the stronger woman shook her off like a wild horse. The doctor-in-training knew what was going on, as some of their patients were members of crime syndicates.

'Finger shortening' was a yakuza ritual for atonement, where the atoner amputated their little finger right above the knuckle. Dismemberment was all too common among the people of Jijinto, with infection adding insult to self-inflicted injury.

Momoko hated violence in general but especially in her operating room, where mixing even just a drop of blood could poison another. So for the sake of her patient, she dampened a cloth with opium and forced it against the yakuza's nose and mouth. Even before Nishi could push away, the yakuza began to stagger like a drunkard before collapsing to the floor.

"What in the...hell is...that?" she asked before slipping into unconsciousness.

Momoko took the scalpel from Nishi's grip and proceeded to sanitize it before placing it back where it belonged. Keiko—the only conscious yakuza in the room—gulped, with a newfound fear for the doctor's assistant.

With peace and quiet returned, Doctor Fujii and Momoko began a long and tireless night of work.

■■■■■

"My...spectacles, where are they...Momo-chan?" Though he was something of a living legend, Masuyo Fujii was also an old man up well past his bedtime. Momoko smiled as she tucked him in. The doctor began snoring the moment his head hit the futon.

"Sleep well, Fujii-sama. Your patient might just make it through the night. The opiate is more effective than we ever imagined."



The hours spent in surgery had not been wasted. The experimental anesthetic lowered Yamagata's heart rate to give the two of them enough time to patch the yakuza boss back together. It wasn't their cleanest work—as evidenced by Momoko's blood-stained kimono—but it seemed to do the job.

Momoko slid closed the door to the doctor's room and sighed. She had already consigned herself to a sleepless night, as Yamagata still required constant monitoring. She started boiling up some tea to keep up her energy while her thoughts remained on flowers.

Poppy flowers, to be exact. The months of research into them had borne fruit—or more accurately, a distilled milk to relax and numb the body. This had tremendous potential, and the excitement lended a spring to her step as the doctor-in-training carried a tea set into the operating room.

There beside Yamagata was a shadowy figure who Momoko assumed was a yakuza. But no yakuza she knew of carried a katana that gleamed in the darkness along with a pair of eyes that did just the same. Except these eyes gleamed in gold—like some magical, feral beast.

"First time...I've had to kill a man twice," it said. Man or woman or animal, Momoko wouldn't find out before it plunged its blade right down into Yamagata's heart, spraying a mist of blood all across its face and chest.

*\*BAm\* \*crAck\**

Momoko shrieked and dropped her tea set, the porcelain kettle and cups shattering against the floor. The figure turned and glared those golden eyes at her. It was the predator and she was the prey. Her legs gave out from fear and so she scuttled backwards as far as she could. But when she hit against the wall and when her eyes couldn't look away, Momoko knew she was its captive.

"W-who, who are you? The assassin?!" she gasped.

There wasn't a reply. The beast that was now bathed in blood watched her for moments more, heaving in deep and heavy breaths. Fear had consumed Momoko but even still, her hands felt around the floor in a frantic search for a tool or a weapon. She found both after pricking her finger on a fallen scalpel. She was quick to hide it behind her in a clenched and shaky grip.

"You...you got what you came for. N-now leave!" she yelled, her voice wavering.

The figure curled up before pouncing forward, the assassin's katana held out and aimed at the nape of her neck. Momoko found out then that she was paralyzed; all of her was frozen save for her heart that felt as if it would break out from the confines of her chest.

"No!" she gasped as the katana pierced her, as it plunged into her neck and through it. She felt tremors of pain burn up every nerve inside her body. Her face was but an inch away from the bloody, golden-eyed glare of a monster. Of a beast in human form. Reflected in those eyes she saw herself: trembling yet stiff, horrified yet oddly serene

But beside her reflection there were other horrors, too, held within the dilated pupils of her killer. The longer she peered into those eyes the less she understood and the harder it was to look away.

As the seconds lingered on Momoko realized she wasn't dead or even dying. The katana had missed her neck and cut through the wall just one hair's width beside her jaw. No, it wasn't that it missed—the beast had chosen not to kill her. She wanted to ask why but couldn't get a word out before the assassin placed its bloody palm against her mouth.

The taste of bitter iron should've disgusted her. But for some reason or another, she couldn't help but savor it. It meant she was alive.

"The words...what do they say?"

It asked her just once, yet the question repeated endlessly inside Momoko's mind. Every word was rough and savage, yet every one made her body quiver just a little more. She was so focused on the voice she nearly didn't think about the words. The beast wanted to know what was written on the man it had just turned into a corpse.

"Wa-wake from death and return to life. That's what it—" Momoko was cut off when the assassin returned its hand against her lips. She didn't mind being silenced, for beneath the coat of blood across her face, her cheeks were flushed a crimson red.

"Why would you ever want to wake up to this?" The figure asked, not to Momoko but to itself. She didn't have any answers though she wished she did. She also wished she could move her fingers. If only she had the strength, she could send her scalpel through this monster's heart. But she couldn't move.

Or maybe, deep down, she didn't want to. Whichever it was, the bloodied, golden-eyed beast stood up and looked away from her. It would never look at her again.

"Forget you ever saw me, doctor."

The figure left as quickly and quietly as it came. Momoko's heart still raced and her legs remained numb as she sat there in heated silence for minutes, even hours more. Her mouth was covered in blood from the man she and her mentor had tried so desperately to save.

Yet all she could think of now was the emptiness that had been, for just a moment, filled. The fear, the smell and the weight of that tortured beast against her, the intensity and sadness held in its stare—it unlocked within the woman passions she thought she could never have. A feeling that she believed no one would help her find, much less bring to bear.

"I won't forget you...whoever you are."

[Which character should December's side story be about?](#)

[Nov 7, 2018](#)

This poll will close at the end of November.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+2)

1%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+2)

3%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+8)

0%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+6)

3%

Keiko, the maid (+7)

3%

Kohaku, the samurai (+3)

6%

Kuniko, the farmer (+1)

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+24)

34%

Momoko, the doctor (+0)

3%

Nishi, the yakuza (+8)

6%

Satsuma, the emperor (+27)

26%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+11)

14%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+13)

1%

Poll ended Nov 30, 2018 · 70 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapter 6](#)

[Nov 15, 2018](#)

The ides of November are upon us! This is one of my favorite months of the year: bit of snow on the ground, as well as the start of the holiday season. Us Americans have our Thanksgiving, with all the family, food and football that comes with it!

Speaking of words that start with 'F', Chapter 6 has a sex scene in it. This scene is entirely optional. Chapter 6 also brings us to the Catalyst of the story, which—while not quite as enticing as Junko/Jun—is going to be what propels our protagonist forward into the events of Book 4.

I hope you enjoy it!

[Repeat Playthroughs](#)

[Nov 20, 2018](#)

In your repeat playthroughs of SoH, what choices do you make?

Radically different ones than before!

About an equal mix of old and new choices.

I make mostly the same choices, with a few differences.

169 votes total

## [BAD ENDS](#)

[Nov 25, 2018](#)

How do you feel about bad endings in SoH? A "Bad End" is like a Game Over screen, with a few paragraphs detailing the fate of the main character. The only real "Bad End"s in SoH (so far) were back in Book 1, where (if your attunement was really low) you'd give into your greed or lust for battle.

I think they're neat! Throw some in there!

They're okay...so long as they're easy to avoid.

Restarting after a bad ending would be a pain.

I'm just not a fan of bad endings.

186 votes total

## [SoH Artwork: Book 4, Part 3](#)

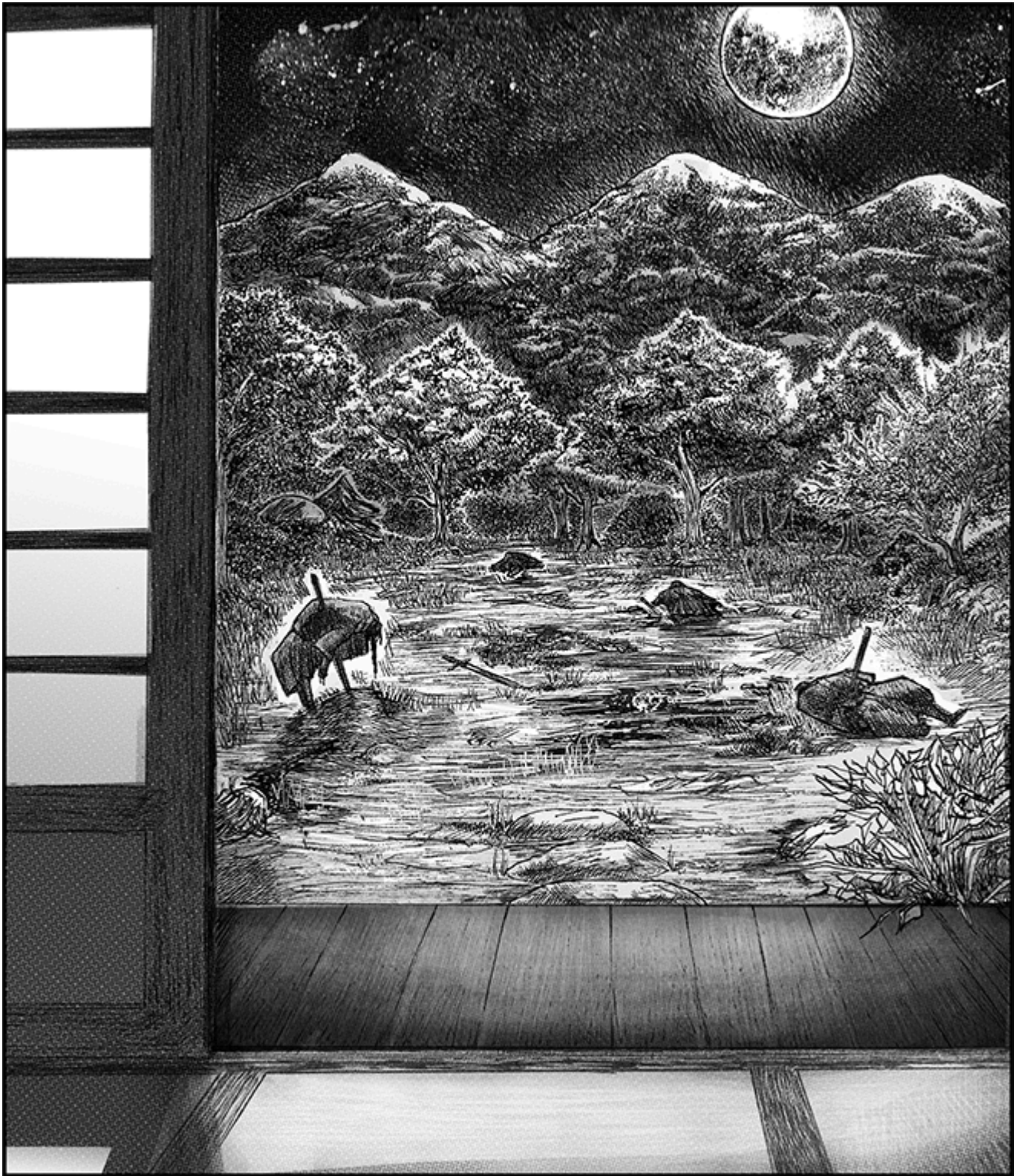
[Nov 29, 2018](#)

Front yards, chains, priests and...**memes**?!

Hope everyone had a great November! Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#)) spent some of hers creating more fantastic illustrations for Book 4! Please enjoy them!



Chapter 6 Art: "Aftermath"



Chapter 7 Art: "Chains"





Chapter 8 Art: "Kiyoshi"





Memes



you vs the artist she tells you not to worry about

[Spirit Animal](#)

[Dec 5, 2018](#)

What is your main character(s)'s spirit animal? (Select all that apply)

Barn Swallow

Alligator

Snow Monkey

Akita Inu

Firefly

Giant Salamander

Spider Crab

Chipmunk

Wild Boar

Striped Snake

264 votes total

[Side Story #6: Masami's Extracurricular Activity](#)

[Dec 7, 2018](#)

*<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>*



Side Story 6: Masami's Extracurricular Activity



■■ The Academy ■■

“...yes, thank you Hashimoto-san. The first division of the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism is Shoken—the Righteous View. As you explained in scholarly detail, it is the understanding that all actions have consequences and that death is not the end. Our stay in this world is temporary, and our spirits are sent to the realms of heaven or hell based upon our actions here. Any questions?”



When there weren't any, Masami raised her hand once more. "In the supplemental material, it's written that we shugenja access our magical powers from the spirit realm located between heaven and hell. Some monks have claimed to be able to enter this world through meditation. Has there ever been a case where—"

A bell rang from outside the room, and every student but Masami joined in on a collective sigh of relief. The teacher also seemed eager to avoid the girl's line of questioning. "Class is dismissed! Hashimoto-san, I would like to have a word with you."

Beads of sweat formed atop Masami's brow. "*Am I in trouble for answering too many questions?*" She had tried to force the habit of waiting at least a few seconds before raising her hand, so as to give the other students a chance to respond. But more often than not, the young genius was too eager to wait long.

As the class filtered out, Masami did her best to ignore the sneers of the other students and pretend that she couldn't hear their whispers. Winning the item-imbuing competition with Hikiko and Sadao last week earned her newfound respect among her classmates. But with that respect came jealousy, too. "*I'll never make friends this way!*"

"How are you handling the material, Hashimoto-san? You seem to be...several chapters ahead of the rest of the class." The instructor scratched his chin as Masami stumbled over a reply. The truth was that the young student had already finished this book as well as several others, though she admitted to far less. "As I thought. Hm, have you considered joining a club?"

"A...club, Sensei?" Masami had no idea what a wooden cudgel had to do with anything.

"Yes, an extracurricular activity would do well to round out your education here at the Academy! Our students enjoy and excel in the Arts of Battle, Refinement and Intellect. There are a total of nine clubs to choose from, all of which are located in the hall opposite of the residences. In fact...Hikiko-chan here will show you the clubs, and join one herself!"

Hikiko, the pasty white ghost of a girl, had tried and failed to sneak out of the classroom unnoticed. She winced at the sound of her own name, and grabbed at her lengthy hair to try and conceal her face. "I'm...already in a club, Sensei."

"The 'Sleep Until Dinner' club doesn't count! If Hashimoto-san can get you to go to class, perhaps she can get you to join a club as well. Consider this an assignment you do not wish to fail!"

Hikiko responded with a prolonged groan, before turning to give her younger classmate an even longer, vacant stare. The shadows beneath her sleep-deprived eyes seem to grow.

Masami put on a painful smile. "H-How bad can it be, Hikiko-chan?"

■■■■

\*cough\* \*cough\* \*cough\*

Opening the room to the Incense Appreciation Club had been a mistake. The two girls were met by a giant puff of smoke that smelled somewhere between moldy cheese and burning oak. They were quick to close the door, heaving in deep breaths to recover.

“Let’s...try the next one, Hikiko-chan,” Masami huffed. They weren’t off to a good start, but she was optimistic that she’d find a place to call her own. “Here! This sign says ‘shogi’—my favorite board game!”

Masami was beside herself with glee as she stood outside the Shogi Club’s door. The gentle clattering of wooden tiles awaited her, along with all the stimulating tactics, openings and endgames. *“This is where I belong!”* she thought to herself as she opened the door.

But as soon as she did, a pair of large men wearing nothing but loincloths came tumbling through. They barely made it through the doorway, barreling through and only stopping after slamming against the wall. Masami was paralyzed; were it not for Hikiko to pull her out of the way, the young shugenja-in-training would’ve been crushed under several hundred pounds of sumo fat.

“Hai! Your point, Kajinosuke!” One of the wrestlers laughed and smacked his stomach. Noticing the two students, he explained. “Shogi is canceled this week. The Sumo Club has this room for our tournament. You should stick around and watch me win! Hohoho!”

Masami and Hikiko watched on in stunned silence as the sumo wrestlers squeezed back through the door frame. Aside from her near-death experience, Masami was shocked that there were enough shugenja into sumo to form a club around it.

“I prefer my men in makeup and kabuki attire, not...loincloths,” Hikiko sighed. Masami replied with a nervous giggle, and the two of them went on to the next club. The sounds of clashing bamboo met their ears. If the sign was true, this would be the Kendo Club.

Masami’s favorite stories always had samurai in them, brave men whose loyalty to their lords was as unquestioned as their swordsmanship. Stalwart warriors, romantic and brave, defending what was right and rescuing damsels in distress. Oh, and they also fought dragons and demons too, of course.

Reality had a lot more to do with yelling and the smell of sweat. Instead of the flashy, silk kimonos Masami imagined, the students here wore large helmets with their faces caged behind iron bars. They wore large, bulgy and black padded armor that was nowhere near as ornate or interesting as what real samurai used.

Hikiko also wasn’t impressed. “Behold...sons of samurai who spend hours swinging their bamboo swords at each other. As if the military would ever put us priceless shugenja into the front lines. Wasted effort.”

“Who dares speak such words unkind in this sacred hall of martial combat?! Prithiee, identify yourself at once!” A young man arrived to greet them, though he appeared far from welcoming. He was in training

armor and carried his helmet in one hand and his bamboo training sword in the other. He had a powerful chin and wore his hair in a traditional chonmage—that was to say, he had the back half of his hair tied in a topknot and the front half shaved down.

He raised his hand to silence Masami just as she was about to answer him. “How rude of me for not having introduced myself first. Ahem.”

“I am Fumihiko of House Morita, a clan of renowned warriors and defenders of the Emperor. Martial matters aside, we’re also known for our poetics and koi fish gardens,” he grinned and squinted his eyes at Masami. “By your pardon, thy face familiar but thy name alludes.”

It took a moment for the shugenja to make sense of what the warrior-poet was saying, but once she did she gave a respectful bow. “My name is Masami Hashimoto. We’re in the same class, Fumihiko-senpai.”

“Oh, fortunes be that I should meet the daughter of Hashimoto this day. Our newest class member, for which I now...” Fumihiko’s words trailed off, as he spotted the girl lurking behind Masami. “Egads! What is that tall and gruesome shadow casted behind thee?! Begone, unsightly devil!”

Masami could feel the spiritual energy swell up from behind her. This had happened before, and so it was little surprise when Hikiko pulled out a talisman and pointed a wicked finger out in Fumihiko’s direction.

*\*speeeew\**

The would-be samurai was nowhere near as agile as Sadao had been, resulting in a splash of sludgy, black ink all over his armor and practice sword. Fumihiko tripped backwards in a vain attempt to escape it. Now half his face was coated in ink. To add insult to injury, the rest of the Kendo Club started laughing at him.

“What wicked humor my fellows have! Har, har!” Fumihiko forced out a laugh. Masami handed him a handkerchief to help wipe off his face. “What a damnable cantrip...well-worthy the work of the witch known as Hikiko! A black stain upon an otherwise brilliant tapestry!”

Hikiko grabbed Masami by the sleeve and mumbled, “Let’s check out the other clubs, Panda-chan. Not worth wasting time with...Koi Fish-Boy.”

Masami bowed and apologized on Hikiko’s behalf, though the warrior-poet wasn’t so quick to forgive. Especially when the potential for blackmail presented itself. “The use of spellcraft outside classes is an expellable offense, and the Morita doth hold sway with ears above. Perhaps I may be inclined to forget this incident, for but a token fee.”

Hikiko paused and Masami gasped. The idea of losing her one and only friend was too much for the young shugenja to bear. So she pulled out her coin pouch—only a portion of the hefty allowance left to her by her family—and proceeded to pull out some coins. “I’ll pay the fee. How much ryō will it be, Fumihiko-senpai?”

The innocence of the young girl tugged at Fumihiro's heartstrings tightly enough for him to buckle over. The rest of the Kendo Club glared at him. "No that's...I shan't require monetary compensation, Daughter of Hashimoto. Rather be, I would have thee tasked with the delivery of a letter. I heard you two were visiting clubs. Perchance you may visit the Flower Arrangement Club next?"

Masami took the letter Fumihiro handed out to her and gave it a good look. It was made of expensive paper, though stained in sweat and wrinkled for having it on him during sword practice. More importantly, it was addressed to someone. "Hitomi-senpai? Is this a...a..."

Masami couldn't finish the sentence aloud. *"...a love letter?! For me to hold such a thing—it's so embarrassing!"*

"A tiger in battle I may be, yet in the presence of such beauty I am but a kitten. Words do speak what the heart withholds. Her eyes enrapture the beholder, like clouded pearls of the forbidden clam." Fumihiro clenched his fist and eyes, shaking the former with raw emotion. "Go forth, Daughter of Hashimoto, and deliver my heart's confessions to the girl known as Hitomi-chan!"

■■■■

"I can't believe we got roped into delivering Fumihiro's poetry verses. How degrading," Hikiko mumbled as she pulled her hair and as the two of them approached the door to the Flower Arrangement Club. Masami had always been fond of flowers, and found the meanings behind particular arrangements to be fascinating.

"He's being very brave, putting his emotions into words! To admit one's love is..." Masami shook her head, which had taken to a shade of red ever since she got the letter. "I'm sure Hitomi-senpai will be pleased when she reads them."

Hikiko put on a knowing grin. "I highly doubt it."

After a few passing moments to bolster her courage, Masami slid open the door. There was a jingle just as she did so. As for the room it was dark—not at all that different from Hikiko's room, really. It seemed empty, which made the voice from within scare Masami even more.

"Greetings and welcome to the Flower Arrange Club! I am Hitomi-chan. Please forgive the darkness, Wisteria bloom best at night."

Stepping inside, Masami's eyes soon adjusted to the darkness. She could spot a young woman sitting alone amidst many flowers, who rose from her seiza—the traditional sitting position—to bow low and politely to her guests. Though she couldn't make out details Masami knew at once that the girl was beautiful: she was dressed in shrine maiden attire, with a white haori tucked inside her red hakama pants.

She had an aura of elegance that was intensified by the beautiful, purple flowers that surrounded her. She seemed older, more mature than any other student Masami had seen. It was no surprise that



Fumihiko was so taken by her.

Remembering her manners, Masami mimicked the bow and began to introduce herself. “Um, hello, my name is—”

“Oh, Hashimoto-san! We’re in the same class. I never got a chance to congratulate you for winning the competition last week. The Emperor sounded genuinely impressed. It was quite the commotion!”

“Arigato!” Masami bowed once more. She then turned to her fellow classmate, who had yet to step foot inside the room. “We tried our best, didn’t we?”

“Is there someone with you?” Hitomi asked.

Hikiko shrugged and reluctantly stepped inside. She had her arms crossed and didn’t look at all happy to be there. “Maybe.”

“Hikiko-chan. I haven’t heard your voice for some time. I...see that you are leaving your room these days,” Hitomi put a hand to her lips and giggled. “Have we Masami-chan to blame for that? Huhuhu.”

The witchy student didn’t voice a reply, instead she pulled down her eyelid and stuck out her tongue in a rude gesture. Hitomi seemed to pay it no mind. “*She really is mature,*” Masami thought to herself.

Remembering why she was there, Masami entered the garden and approached Hitomi, handing the love letter to her. After telling her who it was from, Masami watched as the older girl touched the envelop and felt around the corners, smiling as she did so. “May I have you read it for me?”

“M-me?! But...isn’t it private? It’d be embarrassing for me to read it!”

Only then did Hitomi open her eyes, and only then did Masami realize they had—until this moment—been closed. Fumihiko was right: her eyes looked like beautiful, clouded pearls. They were white and hazed over in a dull, faint glow.

“Unfortunately I am blind, Masami-chan.”

■■■■

“...but alas, I find this parchment filled. My rambles shalt be put to an end, for my quivering hand cannot keep still. I beseech thee, as humbly as a man in my station allows, that I might have you join me on the morrow to view the newly-opened art gallery in town. Though no man-made beauty compares to yours, please do consider and respond post-haste.”

Masami let out a gasp of air after she was done. She had never had to recite such a lengthy and wordy essay out before. It didn’t help that every other word was spoken in an old and outdated Hyugan tongue.

Hitomi, the subject of the paragraphs upon paragraphs of praise, brought a hand to her mouth and giggled. "Thank you, Masami-chan. I never knew you felt so strongly about me."

"Na-nani?!" Masami proceeded to passionately deny it, her embarrassment peaking. The protesting only caused Hitomi to laugh some more.

"Still, it is much more pleasant to be serenaded by your voice over Fumihiro-kun's. That boy...he does not seem aware that I am blind. I am, after all, an itako—a blind maiden. We are trained to master our spiritual connection, with the spirits and those who are deceased most of all."

Hikiko replied with a grunt. "Talking to dead people...and they call me the creepy one. Just tell us your reply so we can shut Fumihiro up next time we see him."

There was a long pause as the shrine maiden fell deep into thought. Her cheerful smile had inverted into a frown. She shook her head. "Please tell him that I am sorry but that I have already made arrangements for tomorrow. I'm sure he'll understand."

Masami was skeptical of that, judging from what little she knew of Fumihiro. Even so she was determined to deliver the message. Hitomi had great friendship potential, and reminded Masami of her older sister, besides. The young shugenja-in-training handed back the letter to Hitomi, though when their fingers touched Masami noticed the shrine maiden's were ice cold.

"You're hands are freezing! Are you sick, Hitomi-senpai? Do you want a warm towel?"

Hitomi was quick to pull her hands away. Her voice remained pleasant, though her words were terse. "No, I'm fine. Thank you for your visit. Now if you'll excuse me I must continue to prune these perennials."

■■■■

"Already made arrangements?! What vulgar man doth encroach upon my flower-of-flowers, my pearly-eyed maiden fair? Who seeks to steal the dame I hath confessed my adolescent love?!"

Masami winced as Fumihiro's spittle flew out from his yell. He had, in his anger, lifted the Hashimoto heir up by the collar, shaking her as if that would provide further explanation. It made for quite the scene during breakfast in the mess hall.

*\*WHACK\**

Hikiko came to Masami's defense, conking the would-be samurai on the head with a freshly-emptied bowl of miso soup. Fumihiro released his grasp and proceeded to cradle his head as he was scolded. "Quit being so dramatic! So Hitomi is busy today. Find someone else to bother."

Masami nodded. "I-I'm sure whatever is keeping her must be very important."

Fumihiro brought his sleeve up across his eyes and began to snifle. “How unbecoming of I, to take the rage my unrequited love doth birth upon you, Daughter of Hashimoto. Truly, ‘tis nobler to respect Lady Hitomi’s wishes.”

“Yep! Her business is her business,” Masami concluded as the trio resumed eating breakfast. It was a quiet and tense table, but the young shugenja was happy enough not to be eating alone. They were all sipping on green tea when a certain shrine maiden happened to walk by.

Hitomi was in a hurry, and was accompanied by a pair of older shrine maidens at either side of her. Masami, Hikiko and Fumihiro looked at each other in absolute silence. They all nodded in unison.

■■■■

“Ouch! Thou hip is crushing my leg! Adjust your position, witch!”

“Why’d you bring your bamboo stick, you idiot?”

“Shh! You two will give us away!” Masami shushed her fellow companions, all of which were crammed into some shrubbery overlooking a small, flat field in back of the Academy. It was tucked away and difficult to notice, making it all the more suspicious.

Aside from Hitomi and the other two shrine maidens, there was a Shinto priest in the clearing along with dozens of buckets. They were filled to the brim with water, and encircled a larger bucket fit for bathing. That one sat at the center on a raised platform.

“A ritual of sorts...though for what, pray tell? Mayhaps a—ah?!” Fumihiro’s whisper came out like a shout when Hitomi started to undress. Hikiko placed her hands over Fumihiro’s eyes as the boy’s nose began bleeding. Masami looked away as well out of consideration for her classmate.

Looking again, Masami saw that Hitomi wasn’t naked but was in her undergarments, and was sitting inside the large bucket as if to take a bath. The shrine maidens on either side of her began pouring out the buckets.

Seeing the girl wince and hold back a cry, Masami realized that the water was far from lukewarm. There were shards of ice in there! *“So this is why your hands were so cold, Hitomi-senpai! What terrible ritual is this?”*

“They’re preparing for a séance,” Hikiko whispered as if reading her mind. “Hitomi is an itako. She’s going to speak to the dead.”

The sounds of a dozen footsteps foretold the arrival of a group of men with katanas and white kimonos. The leader of them was a short, pudgy and ugly woman with brown hair. The backs of their haori jackets bore the emblem of two swallows kissing with their wings outstretched.

Fumihiro scratched his chin. “Uesugi samurai...what business have Northerners with Lady Hitomi?”

The priest outstretched his hands and welcomed the samurai as the maidens continued to submerge Hitomi. "Greetings and good tidings, samurai of the North. The service is about to begin. Is the offering prepared?"

The fat samurai grumbled while fiddling with her belt. She loosened up a pouch full of coins and tossed it over to the priest. It scattered at the holy man's feet. "A generous donation and then some, priest! Now tell me of the words my father, the great Lord Uesugi, has to say! I would have him come down from the heavens above if only for a moment. What wisdom does he have to impart on his one true daughter and heir?"

*"She wants to talk to her deceased father...Hitomi's job is really important,"* Masami concluded as she watched on. Though she watched with increasing unease, as the chanting began and the skies above began to darken with clouds. A sudden rainstorm started to pour as the shrine maidens chanted louder and louder, pushing and holding Hitomi down beneath the water.

Fumihiro was restless and ready to rush down to save her, and to be honest Masami wouldn't be far behind. But of the three of them Hikiko remained calm. "Keep still. Hitomi knows what she's doing. Watch."

There was silence and more silence as the trio as well as the samurai began to grow restless. Masami didn't know how long Hitomi could hold her breath, but every passing second felt like a minute. Thunder and lightning began to build, far away at first but clamoring and striking closer each and every time.

After the chanting had finished, the priest spoke to Hitomi though addressed her by a different name. "Arise and speak, Lord Uesugi, true ruler of the North! Come down to us from your rightful, heavenly seat and join us—join your beloved daughter once more!"

Something was wrong. Hitomi's body began to shake, the water inside her bucket starting to boil and steam. The shrine maidens holding her down released her along with cries of pain as their hands and arms seared from heat. The priest presiding over the ritual stepped back, his face contorted with fear.

"What's wrong?" said the leader of the Uesugi. "Is this supposed to happen? Is my father in anguish or pain? Tell me!"

When the chubby samurai didn't get an answer she rushed over to the bucket. Just as she arrived, Hitomi stood up from her bath, or rather, she was pulled up by some unseen force. Her eyes shot open and her voice contorted into something raw and inhuman. She spoke in a pitch far lower than any girl was capable of.

"WHo dAReS SUMmoN ME?"

"I-it is I, Father. Your daughter, Junko! There is so much I wish to speak to you about. I'm so pleased to have this chance to talk to the man I hold so dear." The samurai began to snifle, her eyes watering up.

Hitomi looked at the samurai for a long moment. Then her whole body started to contort, her bones cracking as she did so. “YoU? My JUnKO? BwhAhAAHAHAha!”

The laughter continued and echoed, as if the world was inside a cavern. It cut through the ears and rang inside the skulls of all who listened, and seemed to go on for hours more. Only when it quieted did the daughter dare to speak.

“F-father...Lord Uesugi, is there anything you wish say?”

“YES. I pReFeR HeLL tO THis SiGHt beFORe mE.”

And then the skies opened, the clouds parted and took the rain and thunder with them. Hitomi fell backwards with a loud splash, and the world seemed to return anew. Everyone was stunned, dumbfounded by what had just occurred.

“That was...this is...a mockery! Untrue and unreal! A shugenja trick—and one in poor taste at that!” The fat samurai snatched the pouch of coins from the priest. “I would cut you down for this farce were it not for your ties to the Academy! Remember this!”

The leader of the Uesugi punched the priest across the face, grasped her hand in pain, and hurried off with the rest of the samurai in tow.

“Hitomi-chan!” Masami yelled and the trio of students hurried over to check on their friend. It was worse than they feared: the young shrine maiden’s eyes were closed, her body covered in burns and her arms bent in ways they shouldn’t bend. “Please! Please be okay, Hitomi!”

■■■■

The three students paced about outside the medical ward, each waiting impatiently as the Academy’s nurse attended to Hitomi. Fumihiro spent the time punching the walls while Hikiko—who was usually stoic—wiped tears from her eyes. As for Masami, she was deep in prayer.

When the nurse slid open the door she was assaulted by their questions. A professional, the older woman raised her hand and went over what she knew. Masami noticed that her voice cracked as she did so. “Hitomi-chan has suffered several burns across her legs, arms and chest. Her left arm is broken as are several fingers in her right hand. I suspect she has several broken ribs as well.”

That sounded terrible and horrendous, though not fatal enough to warrant such a somber tone. Masami feared there was something more. And her fears were confirmed.

“Unfortunately...it seems as if she has fallen into a coma.”

Fumihiro shook his head along with the rest of him. “A *coma*?! What terminology is this?!”

“Her spirit has separated from her body,” Hikiko explained between sniffles. She placed her hands to her face and sobbed. “This is bad.”

Unable to eat and drink, a body separated from its spirit became a breathing corpse that slowly faded away. Masami knew that much from her books, but to have it happen in reality was too much. The young shugenja-in-training fought back tears as she rushed into the medical ward.

“You shouldn’t go in there!” the nurse yelled behind her.

Hitomi’s futon was beside the window. The girl was covered in bandages, heaving slow and painful breaths. The smell of boiled flesh was pungent and unfitting for a girl who spent most of her time around flowers.

Fumihiro stood beside Masami, peering down at their classmate with watery eyes. “That so innocent a maiden be so defaced, possessed by evils unbelonging to this realm...how wicked can this life be, Lady Hitomi?”

Hikiko stood opposite of Masami, holding the shrine maiden’s hand in hers. “Hitomi is an itako...to commune with spirits has always been her fate. I didn’t like her...I was jealous, but...” Hikiko’s voice quieted as she tried not to cry. “No one should have to wander around in the world of spirits. I hear it is a vast and lonely place.”

It was then that Masami’s eyes caught glimpse of something on the nightstand beside Hitomi. It was a flower arrangement, with the purple Wisteria that Hitomi had toiled about in the darkness to grow. The young shugenja-in-training’s tears ceased. She imagined being alone and scared, being away from her friends and family—everyone who loved her.

Masami clenched her fists and blew up her cheeks in a pout. “I’m not going to let Hitomi-chan wander alone. I’m going to find her.”

“I’m going to the spirit world.”

■■■■

[Side Story #6: Masashi's Extracurricular Activity](#)

[Dec 7, 2018](#)

<Author’s note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>



## Side Story 6: Masashi's Extracurricular Activity

### ■ ■ The Academy ■ ■

“...yes, thank you Hashimoto-san. The first division of the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism is Shoken—the Righteous View. As you explained in scholarly detail, it is the understanding that all actions have consequences and that death is not the end. Our stay in this world is temporary, and our spirits are sent to the realms of heaven or hell based upon our actions here. Any questions?”

When there weren't any, Masashi raised his hand once more. “In the supplemental material, it's written that we shugenja access our magical powers from the spirit realm located between heaven and hell. Some monks have claimed to be able to enter this world through meditation. Has there ever been a case where—”

A bell rang from outside the room, and every student but Masashi joined in on a collective sigh of relief. The teacher also seemed eager to avoid the boy's line of questioning. “Class is dismissed! Hashimoto-san, I would like to have a word with you.”

Beads of sweat formed atop Masashi's brow. *“Am I in trouble for answering too many questions?”* He had tried to force the habit of waiting at least a few seconds before raising his hand, so as to give the other students a chance to respond. But more often than not, the young genius was too eager to wait long.

As the class filtered out, Masashi did his best to ignore the sneers of the other students and pretend that he couldn't hear their whispers. Winning the item-imbuing competition with Hikiko and Sadao last week earned him newfound respect among his classmates. But with that respect came jealousy, too. *“I'll never make friends this way!”*

“How are you handling the material, Hashimoto-san? You seem to be...several chapters ahead of the rest of the class.” The instructor scratched his chin as Masashi stumbled over a reply. The truth was that the young student had already finished this book as well as several others, though he admitted to far less. “As I thought. Hm, have you considered joining a club?”

“A...club, Sensei?” Masashi had no idea what a wooden cudgel had to do with anything.

“Yes, an extracurricular activity would do well to round out your education here at the Academy! Our students enjoy and excel in the Arts of Battle, Refinement and Intellect. There are a total of nine clubs to choose from, all of which are located in the hall opposite of the residences. In fact...Hikiko-chan here will show you the clubs, and join one herself!”

Hikiko, the pasty white ghost of a girl, had tried and failed to sneak out of the classroom unnoticed. She winced at the sound of her own name, and grabbed at her lengthy hair to try and conceal her face.

"I'm...already in a club, Sensei."

"The 'Sleep Until Dinner' club doesn't count! If Hashimoto-san can get you to go to class, perhaps he can get you to join a club as well. Consider this an assignment you do not wish to fail!"

Hikiko responded with a prolonged groan, before turning to give her younger classmate an even longer, vacant stare. The shadows beneath her sleep-deprived eyes seem to grow.

Masashi put on a painful smile. "H-How bad can it be, Hikiko-chan?"

■■■■

*\*cough\* \*cough\* \*cough\**

Opening the room to the Incense Appreciation Club had been a mistake. The two students were met by a giant puff of smoke that smelled somewhere between moldy cheese and burning oak. They were quick to close the door, heaving in deep breaths to recover.

"Let's...try the next one, Hikiko-chan," Masashi huffed. They weren't off to a good start, but he was optimistic that he'd find a place to call his own. "Here! This sign says 'shogi'—my favorite board game!"

Masashi was beside himself with glee as he stood outside the Shogi Club's door. The gentle clattering of wooden tiles awaited him, along with all the stimulating tactics, openings and endgames. "*This is where I belong!*" he thought to himself as he opened the door.

But as soon as he did, a pair of large men wearing nothing but loincloths came tumbling through. They barely made it through the doorway, barreling through and only stopping after slamming against the wall. Masashi was paralyzed; were it not for Hikiko to pull him out of the way, the young shugenja-in-training would've been crushed under several hundred pounds of sumo fat.

"Hai! Your point, Kajinosuke!" One of the wrestlers laughed and smacked his stomach. Noticing the two students, he explained. "Shogi is canceled this week. The Sumo Club has this room for our tournament. You should stick around and watch me win! Hohoho!"

Masashi and Hikiko watched on in stunned silence as the sumo wrestlers squeezed back through the door frame. Aside from his near-death experience, Masashi was shocked that there were enough shugenja into sumo to form a club around it.

"I prefer my men in makeup and kabuki attire, not...loincloths," Hikiko sighed. Masashi replied with a nervous giggle, and the two of them went on to the next club. The sounds of clashing bamboo met their ears. If the sign was true, this would be the Kendo Club.

Masashi's favorite stories always had samurai in them, brave men whose loyalty to their lords was as unquestioned as their swordsmanship. Stalwart warriors, romantic and brave, defending what was right and rescuing damsels in distress. Oh, and they also fought dragons and demons too, of course.

Reality had a lot more to do with yelling and the smell of sweat. Instead of the flashy, silk kimonos Masashi imagined, the students here wore large helmets with their faces caged behind iron bars. They wore large, bulgy and black padded armor that was nowhere near as ornate or interesting as what real samurai used.

Hikiko also wasn't impressed. "Behold...sons of samurai who spend hours swinging their bamboo swords at each other. As if the military would ever put us priceless shugenja into the front lines. A waste of time.."

"Who dares speak such words unkind in this sacred hall of martial combat?! Prithee, identify yourself at once!" A young man arrived to greet them, though he appeared far from welcoming. He was in training armor and carried his helmet in one hand and his bamboo training sword in the other. He had a powerful chin and wore his hair in a traditional chonmage—that was to say, he had the back half of his hair tied in a topknot and the front half shaved down.

He raised his hand to silence Masashi just as he was about to answer him. "How rude of me for not having introduced myself first. Ahem."

"I am Fumihiko of House Morita, a clan of renowned warriors and defenders of the Emperor. Martial matters aside, we're also known for our poetics and koi fish gardens," he grinned and squinted his eyes at Masashi. "By your pardon, thy face familiar but thy name alludes."

It took a moment for the shugenja to make sense of what the warrior-poet was saying, but once he did he gave a respectful bow. "My name is Masashi Hashimoto. We're in the same class, Fumihiko-senpai."

"Oh, fortunes be that I should meet the son of Hashimoto this day. Our newest class member, for which I now..." Fumihiko's words trailed off, as he spotted the girl lurking behind Masashi. "Egads! What is that tall and gruesome shadow casted behind thee?! Begone, unsightly devil!"

Masashi could feel the spiritual energy swell up from behind him. This had happened before, and so it was little surprise when Hikiko pulled out a talisman and pointed a wicked finger out in Fumihiko's direction.

*\*spewew\**

The would-be samurai was nowhere near as agile as Sadao had been, resulting in a splash of sludgy, black ink all over his armor and practice sword. Fumihiko tripped backwards in a vain attempt to escape it. Now half his face was coated in ink. To add insult to injury, the rest of the Kendo Club started laughing at him.

“What wicked humor my fellows have! Har, har!” Fumihiro forced out a laugh. Masashi handed him a handkerchief to help wipe off his face. “What a damnable cantrip...well-worthy the work of the witch known as Hikiko! A black stain upon an otherwise brilliant tapestry!”

Hikiko grabbed Masashi by the sleeve and mumbled, “Let’s check out the other clubs, Panda-kun. Not worth wasting time with...Koi Fish-Boy.”

Masashi bowed and apologized on Hikiko’s behalf, though the warrior-poet wasn’t so quick to forgive. Especially when the potential for blackmail had presented itself. “The use of spellcraft outside classes is an expellable offense, and the Morita doth hold sway with ears above. Perhaps I may be inclined to forget this incident, for but a token fee.”

Hikiko paused and Masashi gasped. The idea of losing his one and only friend was too much for the young shugenja to bear. So he pulled out his coin pouch—only a portion of the hefty allowance left to him by his family—and proceeded to pull out some coins. “I’ll pay the fee. How much ryō will it be, Fumihiro-senpai?”

The innocence of the young boy tugged at Fumihiro’s heartstrings tightly enough for him to buckle over. The rest of the Kendo Club glared at him. “No that’s...I shan’t require monetary compensation, Son of Hashimoto. Rather be, I would have thee tasked with the delivery of a letter. I heard you two were visiting clubs. Perchance you may visit the Flower Arrangement Club next?”

Masashi took the letter Fumihiro handed out to him and gave it a good look. It was made of expensive paper, though stained in sweat and wrinkled for having it on him during sword practice. More importantly, it was addressed to someone. “Hitomi-senpai? Is this a...a...”

Masashi couldn’t finish the sentence aloud. “...*a love letter?! For me to hold such a thing—it’s so embarrassing!*”

“A tiger in battle I may be, yet in the presence of such beauty I am but a kitten. Words do speak what the heart withholds. Her eyes enrapture the beholder, like clouded pearls of the forbidden clam.” Fumihiro clenched his fist and eyes, shaking the former with raw emotion. “Go forth, Son of Hashimoto, and deliver my heart’s confessions to the girl known as Hitomi-chan!”

■■■■

“I can’t believe we got roped into delivering Fumihiro’s poetry verses. How degrading,” Hikiko mumbled as she pulled her hair and as the two of them approached the door to the Flower Arrangement Club. Masashi had always been fond of flowers, and found the meanings behind particular arrangements to be fascinating.

“He’s being very brave, putting his emotions into words! To admit one’s love is...” Masashi shook his head, which had taken to a shade of red ever since he got the letter. “I’m sure Hitomi-senpai will be pleased when she reads them.”

Hikiko put on a knowing grin. “I highly doubt it.”

After a few passing moments to bolster his courage, Masashi slid open the door. There was a jingle just as he did so. As for the room it was dark—not at all that different from Hikiko’s room, really. It seemed empty, which made the voice from within scare Masashi even more.

“Greetings and welcome to the Flower Arrange Club! I am Hitomi-chan. Please forgive the darkness, Wisteria bloom best at night.”

Stepping inside, Masashi’s eyes soon adjusted to the darkness. He could spot a young woman sitting alone amidst many flowers, who rose from her seiza—the traditional sitting position—to bow low and politely to her guests. Though he couldn’t make out details Masashi knew at once that the girl was beautiful: she was dressed in shrine maiden attire, with a white haori tucked inside her red hakama pants.

She had an aura of elegance that was intensified by the beautiful, purple flowers that surrounded her. She seemed older, more mature than any other student Masashi had seen. It was no surprise that Fumihiro was so taken by her.

Remembering his manners, Masashi mimicked the bow and began to introduce himself. “Um, hello, my name is—”

“Oh, Hashimoto-san! We’re in the same class. I never got a chance to congratulate you for winning the competition last week. The Emperor sounded genuinely impressed. It was quite the commotion!”

“Arigato!” Masashi bowed once more. He then turned to his fellow classmate, who had yet to step foot inside the room. “We tried our best, didn’t we?”

“Is there someone with you?” Hitomi asked.

Hikiko shrugged and reluctantly stepped inside. She had her arms crossed and didn’t look at all happy to be there. “Maybe.”

“Hikiko-chan. I haven’t heard your voice for some time. I...see that you are leaving your room these days,” Hitomi put a hand to her lips and giggled. “Have we Masashi-kun to blame for that? Huhuhu.”

The witchy student didn’t voice a reply, instead she pulled down her eyelid and stuck out her tongue in a rude gesture. Hitomi seemed to pay it no mind. “*She really is mature,*” Masashi thought to himself.

Remembering why he was there, Masashi entered the garden and approached Hitomi, handing the love letter to her. After telling her who it was from, Masashi watched as the older girl touched the envelop and felt around the corners, smiling as she did so. “May I have you read it for me?”

“M-me?! But...isn’t it private? It’d be embarrassing for me to read it!”

Only then did Hitomi open her eyes, and only then did Masashi realize they had—until this moment—been closed. Fumihiro was right: her eyes looked like beautiful, clouded pearls. They were white and hazed over in a dull, faint glow.

“Unfortunately I am blind, Masashi-kun.”

■■■■

“...but alas, I find this parchment filled. My rambles shalt be put to an end, for my quivering hand cannot keep still. I beseech thee, as humbly as a man in my station allows, that I might have you join me on the morrow to view the newly-opened art gallery in town. Though no man-made beauty compares to yours, please do consider and respond post-haste.”

Masashi let out a gasp of air after he was done. He had never had to recite such a lengthy and wordy essay out before. It didn't help that every other word was spoken in an old and outdated Hyugan tongue.

Hitomi, the subject of the paragraphs upon paragraphs of praise, brought a hand to her mouth and giggled. “Thank you, Masashi-kun. I never knew you felt so strongly about me.”

“Na-nani?!” Masashi proceeded to passionately deny it, his embarrassment peaking. The protesting only caused Hitomi to laugh some more.

“Still, it is much more pleasant to be serenaded by your voice over Fumihiro-kun's. That boy...he does not seem aware that I am blind. I am, after all, an itako—a blind maiden. We are trained to master our spiritual connection, with the spirits and those who are deceased most of all.”

Hikiko replied with a grunt. “Talking to dead people...and they call me the creepy one. Just tell us your reply so we can shut Fumihiro up next time we see him.”

There was a long pause as the shrine maiden fell deep into thought. Her cheerful smile had inverted into a frown. She shook her head. “Please tell him that I am sorry but that I have already made arrangements for tomorrow. I'm sure he'll understand.”

Masashi was skeptical of that, judging from what little he knew of Fumihiro. Even so he was determined to deliver the message. Hitomi had great friendship potential, and reminded Masashi of his older sister, besides. The young shugenja-in-training handed back the letter to Hitomi, though when their fingers touched Masashi noticed the shrine maiden's were ice cold.

“You're hands are freezing! Are you sick, Hitomi-senpai? Do you want a warm towel?”

Hitomi was quick to pull her hands away. Her voice remained pleasant, though her words were terse. “No, I'm fine. Thank you for your visit. Now if you'll excuse me I must continue to prune these perennials.”



■■■■

“Already made arrangements?! What vulgar man doth encroach upon my flower-of-flowers, my pearled-eyed maiden fair? Who seeks to steal the dame I hath confessed my adolescent love?!”

Masashi winced as Fumihiro’s spittle flew out from his yell. He had, in his anger, lifted the Hashimoto heir up by the collar, shaking him as if that would provide further explanation. It made for quite the scene during breakfast in the mess hall.

*\*WHACK\**

Hikiko came to Masashi’s defense, conking the would-be samurai on the head with a freshly-emptied bowl of miso soup. Fumihiro released his grasp and proceeded to cradle his head as he was scolded. “Quit being so dramatic! So Hitomi is busy today. Find someone else to bother.”

Masashi nodded. “I-I’m sure whatever is keeping her must be very important.”

Fumihiro brought his sleeve up across his eyes and began to sniffle. “How unbecoming of I, to take the rage my unrequited love doth birth upon you, Son of Hashimoto. Truly, ‘tis nobler to respect Lady Hitomi’s wishes.”

“Yep! Her business is her business,” Masashi concluded as the trio resumed eating breakfast. It was a quiet and tense table, but the young shugenja was happy enough not to be eating alone. They were all sipping on green tea when a certain shrine maiden happened to walk by.

Hitomi was in a hurry, and was accompanied by a pair of older shrine maidens at either side of her. Masashi, Hikiko and Fumihiro looked at each other in absolute silence. They all nodded in unison.

■■■■

“Ouch! Thou hip is crushing my leg! Adjust your position, witch!”

“Why’d you bring your bamboo stick, you idiot?”

“Shh! You two will give us away!” Masashi shushed his fellow companions, all of which were crammed into some shrubbery overlooking a small, flat field in back of the Academy. It was tucked away and difficult to notice, making it all the more suspicious.

Aside from Hitomi and the other two shrine maidens, there was a Shinto priest in the clearing along with dozens of buckets. They were filled to the brim with water, and encircled a larger bucket fit for bathing. That one sat at the center on a raised platform.

“A ritual of sorts...though for what, pray tell? Mayhaps a—ah?!” Fumihiro’s whisper came out like a shout when Hitomi started to undress. Hikiko placed her hands over Fumihiro’s eyes as the boy’s nose began bleeding. Masashi looked away as well out of consideration for his classmate.

Looking again, Masashi saw that Hitomi wasn't naked but was in her undergarments, and was sitting inside the large bucket as if to take a bath. The shrine maidens on either side of her began pouring out the buckets.

Seeing the girl wince and hold back a cry, Masashi realized that the water was far from lukewarm. There were shards of ice in there! *"So this is why your hands were so cold, Hitomi-senpai! What terrible ritual is this?"*

"They're preparing for a séance," Hikiko whispered as if reading his mind. "Hitomi is an itako. She's going to speak to the dead."

The sounds of a dozen footsteps foretold the arrival of a group of men with katanas and white kimonos. The leader of them was a short, pudgy and ugly man with brown hair. The backs of their haori jackets bore the emblem of two swallows kissing with their wings outstretched.

Fumihiro scratched his chin. "Uesugi samurai...what business have Northerners with Lady Hitomi?"

The priest outstretched his hands and welcomed the samurai as the maidens continued to submerge Hitomi. "Greetings and good tidings, samurai of the North. The service is about to begin. Is the offering prepared?"

The fat samurai grumbled while fiddling with his belt. He loosened up a pouch full of coins and tossed it over to the priest. It scattered at the holy man's feet. "A generous donation and then some, priest! Now tell me of the words my father, the great Lord Uesugi, has to say! I would have him come down from the heavens above if only for a moment. What wisdom does he have to impart on his one true son and heir?"

*"He wants to talk to his deceased father...Hitomi's job is really important,"* Masashi concluded as he watched on. Though he watched with increasing unease, as the chanting began and the skies above began to darken with clouds. A sudden rainstorm started to pour as the shrine maidens chanted louder and louder, pushing and holding Hitomi down beneath the water.

Fumihiro was restless and ready to rush down to save her, and to be honest Masashi wouldn't be far behind. But of the three of them Hikiko remained calm. "Keep still. Hitomi knows what she's doing. Watch."

There was silence and more silence as the trio as well as the samurai began to grow restless. Masashi didn't know how long Hitomi could hold her breath, but every passing second felt like a minute. Thunder and lightning began to build, far away at first but clamoring and striking closer each and every time.

After the chanting had finished, the priest spoke to Hitomi though addressed her by a different name. "Arise and speak, Lord Uesugi, true ruler of the North! Come down to us from your rightful, heavenly seat and join us—join your beloved son once more!"

Something was wrong. Hitomi's body began to shake, the water inside her bucket starting to boil and steam. The shrine maidens holding her down released her along with cries of pain as their hands and arms seared from heat. The priest presiding over the ritual stepped back, his face contorted with fear.

"What's wrong?" said the leader of the Uesugi. "Is this supposed to happen? Is my father in anguish or pain? Tell me!"

When the chubby samurai didn't get an answer he rushed over to the bucket. Just as he arrived, Hitomi stood up from her bath, or rather, she was pulled up by some unseen force. Her eyes shot open and her voice contorted into something raw and inhuman. She spoke in a pitch far lower than any girl was capable of.

"WHo dAReS SUMmoN ME?"

"I-it is I, Father. Your son, Jun! There is so much I wish to speak to you about. I'm so pleased to have this chance to talk to the man I hold so dear." The samurai began to snifle, his eyes watering up.

Hitomi looked at the samurai for a long moment. Then her whole body started to contort, her bones cracking as she did so. "YoU? My JUn? BwhAhAAHAHAha!"

The laughter continued and echoed, as if the world was inside a cavern. It cut through the ears and rang inside the skulls of all who listened, and seemed to go on for hours more. Only when it quieted did the son dare to speak.

"F-father...Lord Uesugi, is there anything you wish say?"

"YES. I pReFeR HeLL tO THis SiGHt beFORe mE."

And then the skies opened, the clouds parted and took the rain and thunder with them. Hitomi fell backwards with a loud splash, and the world seemed to return anew. Everyone was stunned, dumbfounded by what had just occurred.

"That was...this is...a mockery! Untrue and unreal! A shugenja trick—and one in poor taste at that!" The fat samurai snatched the pouch of coins from the priest. "I would cut you down for this farce were it not for your ties to the Academy! Remember this!"

The leader of the Uesugi punched the priest across the face, grasped his hand in pain, and hurried off with the rest of the samurai in tow.

"Hitomi-chan!" Masashi yelled and the trio of students hurried over to check on their friend. It was worse than they feared: the young shrine maiden's eyes were closed, her body covered in burns and her arms bent in ways they shouldn't bend. "Please! Please be okay, Hitomi!"

■■■■

The three students paced about outside the medical ward, each waiting impatiently as the Academy's nurse attended to Hitomi. Fumihiro spent the time punching the walls while Hikiko—who was usually stoic—wiped tears from her eyes. As for Masashi, he was deep in prayer.

When the nurse slid open the door she was assaulted by their questions. A professional, the older woman raised her hand and went over what she knew. Masashi noticed that her voice cracked as she did so. "Hitomi-chan has suffered several burns across her legs, arms and chest. Her left arm is broken as are several fingers in her right hand. I suspect she has several broken ribs as well."

That sounded terrible and horrendous, though not fatal enough to warrant such a somber tone. Masashi feared there was something more. And his fears were confirmed.

"Unfortunately...it seems as if she has fallen into a coma."

Fumihiro shook his head along with the rest of him. "A *coma*?! What terminology is this?!"

"Her spirit has separated from her body," Hikiko explained between snuffles. She placed her hands to her face and sobbed. "This is bad."

Unable to eat and drink, a body separated from its spirit became a breathing corpse that slowly faded away. Masashi knew that much from his books, but to have it happen in reality was too much. The young shugenja-in-training fought back tears as he rushed into the medical ward.

"You shouldn't go in there!" the nurse yelled behind him.

Hitomi's futon was beside the window. The girl was covered in bandages, heaving slow and painful breaths. The smell of boiled flesh was pungent and unfitting for a girl who spent most of her time around flowers.

Fumihiro stood beside Masashi, peering down at their classmate with watery eyes. "That so innocent a maiden be so defaced, possessed by evils unbelonging to this realm...how wicked can this life be, Lady Hitomi?"

Hikiko stood opposite of Masashi, holding the shrine maiden's hand in hers. "Hitomi is an itako...to commune with spirits has always been her fate. I didn't like her...I was jealous, but..." Hikiko's voice quieted as she tried not to cry. "No one should have to wander around in the world of spirits. I hear it is a vast and lonely place."

It was then that Masashi's eyes caught glimpse of something on the nightstand beside Hitomi. It was a flower arrangement, with the purple Wisteria that Hitomi had toiled about in the darkness to grow. The young shugenja-in-training's tears ceased. He imagined being alone and scared, being away from his friends and family—everyone who loved him.

Masashi clenched his fists and blew up his cheeks in a pout. "I'm not going to let Hitomi-chan wander alone. I'm going to find her."

"I'm going to the spirit world."

■■■■

[Which character should January's side story be about?](#)

[Dec 7, 2018](#)

This poll will close at the end of December.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+3)

0%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+4)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+8)

3%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+8)

1%

Keiko, the maid (+9)

3%

Kohaku, the samurai (+7)

7%

Kuniko, the farmer (+1)

4%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+0)

4%

Momoko, the doctor (+2)

6%

Nishi, the yakuza (+12)

4%

Satsuma, the emperor (+45)

31%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+21)

33%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+14)

1%

Poll ended Dec 31, 2018 · 67 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapters 7 & 8](#)

[Dec 15, 2018](#)

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, patrons!

Possessed by the Holiday Spirit™, I've managed to summon a bonus chapter for you guys as a little something extra! I hope you enjoy the last early access chapters of the year, and are looking forward to the future as much as I am!

I wouldn't dare get sentimental, but please be aware that this year has ended a whole lot better for me than it started. Doing this Patreon is easily the best decision I've made in 2018. I appreciate everything



you guys do for me, from the numbers in my paypal account to the banter in the discord—thanks for everything!

[SoH Artwork: Book 4, Part 4](#)

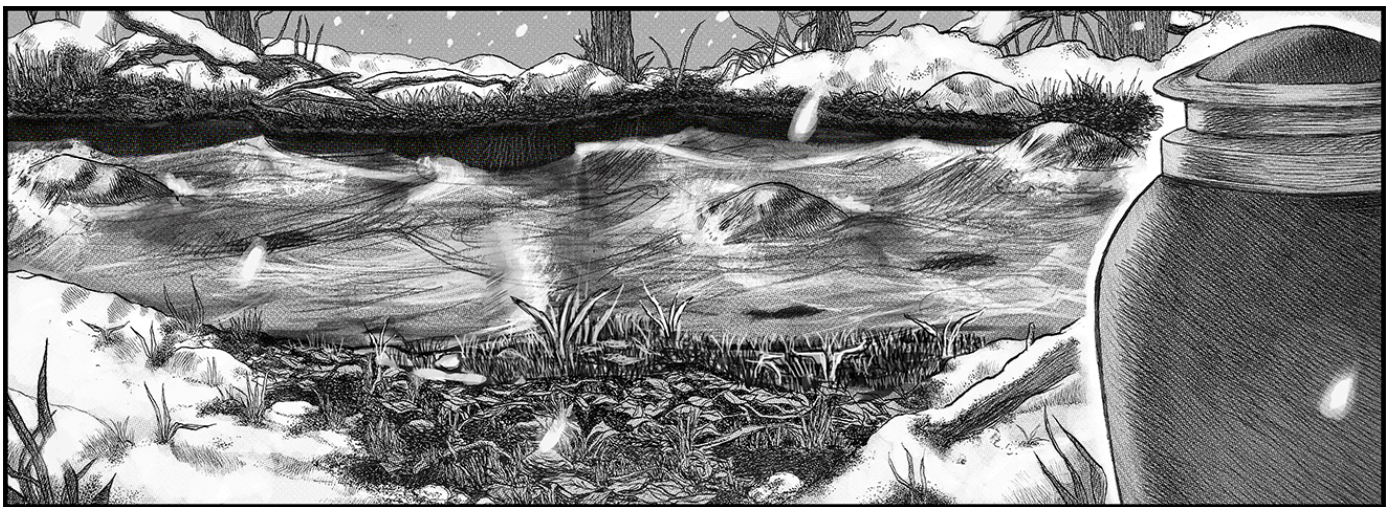
[Dec 30, 2018](#)

Creeks, Kondo grandmothers and...**Hatch T-posing?!**

Hope everybody had a great holiday season this year! I know I'm a day late with the art post, which I blame on me having too much Christmas cheer. Rest assured, I made certain Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#)) was kept busy toiling away and making more of her awesome illustrations!

Enjoy!

**Chapter 9 Art: "Creek"**



**Chapter 10 Art: "Ume-Ume"**





Chapter 11 Art: "Hatch Flashback"



### Saving Daisuke/Keiko

Jan 5, 2019

In Book 3, were you able to save Daisuke/Keiko from dying in your first playthrough?

Yes!

No...thanks for bringing that up.

I can't remember.

158 votes total

## Side Story #7: Satsuma's Farewell

Jan 7, 2019

*<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>*

## Side Story 7: Satsuma's Farewell

■■ *Yamato* ■■

It was the last day of a week-long wedding here at the newly-appointed capital city. Yamato was a modern marvel in Hyugan architecture and design: houses were laid out in even, square plots of land, and every street turned at a perfect angle. Gardens of roses and irises were placed at every intersection and were meticulously maintained, especially now that the farewell parade would be marching past.

“Why’s Aunt Sakiko got to leave, anyway? Do her and Father not get along?” A young boy asked his mother, with an odd amount of insight for a six-year-old. Satsuma had a habit of asking questions that were difficult to answer—which only added to his mother’s stress.



“Stay still, Satsu-kun! I need to wrap up your obi,” his mother replied. She proceeded to fold, twist and curl the silken sash around the boy. “And she isn’t your aunt. *Lady Sakiko* is leaving with her new husband, Toshiaki Mukai. They’re going to live on an estate in Tonogasha...far away from us.”

Satsuma pouted as he was ordered to suck in his stomach. He had learned from his instructors that the sister of his father was his aunt, though Mother disagreed. Whatever her title was, Sakiko was a beautiful woman but one Satsuma had only seen from afar. They had never once met—the same went for his cousins and the rest of the Imperial Family.

It prompted the boy to ask a question he had asked a hundred times before. “How come we don’t get to live in the palace with Father?” Satsuma was concerned that the Emperor was upset with him, or didn’t like him anymore. It was the only reasonable explanation that came to the six-year-old’s mind as to why his father hadn’t visited in months.

“This is about your birthday, isn’t it?” The woman who went by the name of Azusa knelt down and held her son by the shoulders. “You know how busy he is, Satsu...besides, he gave you that spinning top you enjoy so much.”

Satsuma grinned and giggled. That toy was only the first gift. His father had also given him a wood carving set in secret, that his mother didn’t know about. Determined to impress him, the boy whittled away at wooden blocks deep into the night. He had no skill but plenty of determination, and had come up with a figurine depicting a man and a child holding hands. It was a crude depiction of himself and the Emperor, and Satsuma wanted nothing more than to show it off to him.

“When did you scrape your finger? That’s the second cut this week,” Azusa shook her head as she inspected Satsuma’s hands. The scrutiny continued up to his face. “And you’ve gotten bags under your eyes as well...are you staying up past your bedtime? Do I need to find us a new maid?”

Satsuma shook his head and himself free of his mother’s embrace. He assured her that all was well, though in truth the boy hadn’t slept well for a week. The same dream came to him every night: one of being chased by a lioness, guided by a sea eagle and then carried away by a herd of bears. It made no sense and only worried his mother when he talked about it, so he no longer mentioned it.

Little did he know that the ‘Lioness’ was the title of Lady Sakiko. She was ambitious and in line to the Imperial throne, which made her as much a danger to her family as her political rivals. Just the thought of that foul woman and what she would do to a lion cub such as Satsuma made Azusa clench her necklace.

It was made of ivory and sparkled with an array of beautiful jewels. It was Seijirō’s—her husband’s wedding gift, though the two had been married in secret. She wished nothing more than to one day be free of the shadow they lived under, to join him with Satsuma as a real family.

“Let’s hurry to the parade, Satsu-kun. After we see Lady Sakiko off, I’ll buy you some taiyaki!”



“Even after all the ceremony, it’s difficult to imagine my sister as somebody’s wife. I pray she’ll find peace...though I know she will resent me for this. For the rest of her life and beyond,” Seijirō sighed. The Emperor of Hyuga sat atop a platform built solely for this occasion, in the middle of the main street out of Yamato.

Standing beside him were two men that couldn’t look more different: the one on his left was a short, stocky fellow encased in blue armor. He was a samurai and young for his rank; at just under forty, Hizen was Head General of the Imperial Army. Though he hadn’t a single hair of grey in his beard, to mistake his relative youth for inexperience was a mistake—he was a master tactician and one of the Emperor’s most trusted advisors.

“My lord, Toshiaki Mukai served with great distinction during the Kondo War. He was instrumental in quelling the barbarian threat. Lady Sakiko is certain to find happiness married to such a war hero.”

A chuckle came out from the other man—the one on the Emperor’s right.

“You’d do well to pay attention to her ladyship’s face as she passes by, Hize-kun. You will see the face of a woman who is far from amused. War hero or otherwise, she is marrying a Southerner with no connections nor a notable family line. In truth, the Lioness is getting her claws clipped.”

The man who spoke was tall and lean and old, and wore a peppered, grey beard as well as a ninja’s shozoku. It was the ceremonial version of the garb, colored white and trimmed in gold—not meant for stealth or any practical purpose. Though Fujibayashi was so skilled that he could blend in with the clouds. Or so he would have your believe.

The trio watched on as the drums grew nearer and as the crowd grew denser. The Emperor smiled and waved at the attendees, though most actively avoided his gaze. Many of the samurai sobering from the week-long festivities were from the South, from Genfu where the old capital was but a few years ago. Men of common birth were forbidden to look upon the Emperor back then, and a few had been blinded after doing so during his father’s reign.

“But the times are changing. And for the better, I hope,” Seijirō whispered to himself. What scholars were calling the Golden Era of Samurai was beginning to end, and—through no small effort of himself, Hizen and Fujibayashi—the great, warring clans of Hyuga were broken up in all regions save for the North. Hyuga had never been more united than now.

Yet you couldn’t tell it by looking at the crowd. The Southern samurai were at one end and the local nobility were at another. Neither was fond of the other’s company, and squabbles about lodgings, curfews and cultural differences had grown throughout the week. It didn’t help that Sakiko had agents in her employ actively trying to sabotage the event.

Seijirō could do nothing but pray everything went smoothly for just a few minutes more. His sister’s carriage would pass through and Yamato would be rid of the Lioness for once and for all. He would be able to spend time with Azusa and Satsuma once again. He prayed that he could be more involved in Satsu’s life than his father was for his.

But not all prayers were meant to be answered.

When the carriage approached and the entourage passed, a ruckus from the crowd broke out. A fistfight soon turned into a brawl, and soon everything from banners to festival treats were being thrown every which way. To make matters worse, someone rang a gong just as Sakiko's carriage came by, startling the horses.

In their path was a boy, his gaze too focused on the Emperor to see the danger. He was six years old, had long hair tied in a top knot, and looked just like his father. He was holding up a wooden figurine and smiling. Seijirō shouted out his name in fear—and there was little doubt that Sakiko had seen and overheard him. But before the Emperor could make sense of the scene any longer, his top ninja jumped on him just as an arrow whizzed by overhead. Soon all the men of his Imperial guard surrounded him.

It had been yet another assassination attempt. Hardly the first and the last Seijirō would face. Even so, the Emperor's concern wasn't for himself but for his son. The most wicked woman he ever knew would not let Satsuma live. He pulled the old shinobi close and gave him the last order Fujibayashi would ever hear.

"Fuji-san! Your service to me has ended. Go—protect and serve the Young Lion at any cost!"

■■■■

"Satsuma! What were you thinking?! Going out in the middle of the street...do you have any idea how frightened I was?!"

Azusa paced and shouted and did everything to release the anxious dread that now filled her to the brim. Yet it was all futile: she had locked eyes upon Sakiko's when she pulled Satsuma to safety. The Lioness had a cold and haunting glare that stayed with her even now.

"I just...I jus'wanted, to show'em..." Satsuma sniffled and slurred his words as tears and snot trickled down his face. He could tell how scared his mother was and that made him scared, too. But what really brought him to tears was the figurine he had dropped and lost within the chaos. He would never get to show his father what he had worked so hard on.

Azusa braced a hand against her head. She had a pulsing headache which only worsened upon hearing a knock at the door. But as a proper lady, she held back her grimace and put on her usual smile. Her voice was soft and calm, just the opposite as it had been just mere seconds ago.

"Please, come in."

A woman slid open the door and bowed. She was middle-aged and dressed in a grey kimono and white apron, the typical uniform for a maid. Azusa and Satsuma had several to help around the house. The two were—on paper, at least—the daughter and grandson of a dead daimyo out East. It was an identity they had lived under for years.



“Lady Azusa, the young master is requested at the school. His instructors wish to see him about his studies. They’re concerned over his...missing assignments...”

The boy’s eyes went wide as he quickly pleaded his innocence, yet his mother already determined that he was guilty. And even if he wasn’t, his schoolwork would help keep his mind off the Emperor. On that measure she was jealous.

“Hurry along, Satsu-kun. Make sure to pack all your papers and ink quills.”

Satsuma pouted but did as he was told, and shortly had his knapsack tied to his back and was ready to walk out the door. Nothing made sense to him: he had turned in every assignment he was ever given, and he was ahead of all the other students in writing and reading, besides.

Not to mention he was still reeling from the loss of his figurine. Yet even as upset as he was, he still had the good manners to pause and wave goodbye. The maid—she must’ve been new, since Satsuma didn’t recognize her—put on a wide grin while Azusa nodded and sighed.

With her son gone, Azusa proceeded to start preparing for dinner while the maid began cleaning. Though unlike the other maids she was used to seeing, this one didn’t have so much as a duster let alone a broom. All she seemed to have was a pair of shears, which she used to start trimming the main room’s bonsai.

“Are you new?” Azusa asked. “I hope everything is fine with Haruno-chan and Maki-san.”

*\*snip\* \*snip\**

“I have always been a fan of bonsai,” said the maid with no name. “To care for such a tiny tree, to watch it grow before your eyes...to shape them in subtle, beautiful ways...are they not so different than children?”

The snipping grew quicker, and soon an entire branch was without leaves, sticking out oddly from the main trunk of the tree. Azusa didn’t understand the maid’s metaphor but certainly understood that she was ruining the living room’s centerpiece.

“Cease your cutting at once! Tell me your name—I shall need to report you for this! You’re obviously unqualified,” the Emperor’s hidden bride yelled. She was angry but also afraid. No maid should’ve been so skilled with shears. Watching her now, she was well-muscled beneath the ill-fitting uniform. The look of focus in her eyes was well beyond that of a house cleaner.

*\*snip\* \*snip\* \*SNAP\**

The branch of the bonsai tree was cut cleanly from the trunk; it fell from the table to the floor, rolling towards Azusa’s feet. When she looked back up she came face-to-face with not a maid, but a kunoichi. An assassin in maid’s attire.

"I'm here to trim off an unsightly branch, Lady Azusa. For the Lioness and for the future of Hyuga: you need to die!"

Azusa screamed as the assassin charged at her, with her scissors aimed right at her heart. She stumbled back onto the floor and scrambled helplessly, screaming all the while. In her last moment, before the shears pierced her chest, she closed her eyes as a single regret came to mind: *"Seijirō...I only wish I could have been the wife you deserved."*

"GuAHuck?!" came a blood-spurting cry. Not from Azusa but from her would-be assassin, for behind the kunoichi was an aged shinobi wielding a kunai now jammed into her neck. The false maid hadn't heard him coming, though few ever did. Fujibayashi was known as the 'Warrior of the Wind'—a deadly breeze to all enemies of the Emperor.

"You're lucky Sakiko sent a gardener instead of an assassin after you. But she won't make that mistake twice," Fujibayashi grabbed a hold of Azusa and pulled her up to her feet. "Hurry and pack. We must leave here at once...where is Satsuma-kun?!"

■■■■

Satsuma was in the middle of humming a Shinto prayer when a clash of thunder broke out overhead. It was a cue for rain to burst out from the dark grey clouds above. The boy bit his lip as he braced the straps of his knapsack and started to run. Though few had ever outpaced a sudden, summer storm, Satsuma certainly tried.

Even as distracted as he was, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being followed. The street to the school was empty—which itself was strange, considering a wedding parade had just passed through here. The evidence was on the ground: litter and half-eaten foodstuffs were blown about in an ever-growing wind.

Were it not for the rain, the city's pigeons would be having a feast. Instead, there was only a single bird out, who didn't seemed bothered by the downpour in the slightest. It was hardly a pigeon: it was many sizes larger, with a mighty beak and sharp talons. Its feathers were black and brown, though its tail was distinctively white.

"A sea eagle!" Satsuma shouted, recalling the bird from his dreams. As if hearing its name, the eagle looked at the boy and flew off into a side alley. The Emperor's son decided to follow it, much to the dismay of the ninja waiting ahead in ambush. Satsuma hurried his pace and tried not to trip as he went from one alley to another, to a side-street that led to several more, down twists and turns and parts of Yamato he never knew existed.

"Eagle-san...where are...you going?" Satsuma was out of breath and his legs were sore. Looking around he recognized nothing, and the fear of being lost began to seep into him as deeply as the pouring rain. Satsuma was drenched; his top knot was undone and his long hair kept covering his eyes. Were the sea eagle any less giant the boy would've lost him several streets ago.

*\*ArrahRah\**

It didn't chirp so much as it roared, before flying up through the rafters of what looked to be a shrine. The wooden building looked old—from before the capital was moved here—and the sign atop it read 'Lion Temple'. It was as good excuse as any to get out of the rain.

Satsuma collapsed on the floor shortly after he entered. He quickly recovered when he remembered his manners and bowed. "I'm sorry for interrupting," he said out of habit. Though looking up there was no one in the room, and no one in the ceiling, either—the sea eagle that had led him here had vanished.

"There must be a feather around here somewhere...nobody's gonna believe me, otherwise!"

It was dimly lit inside the shrine, which had an upstairs loft with stairs leading up to it on either side of an offering table. There was a bit of incense burning but only a single ryō was offered as a donation. It made Satsuma feel sad, as the shrines he and his mother visited were always filled with coins and jewelry.

"I bet you'd get more donations if you had a lion sculpture," the boy wondered aloud. He was determined to make one, though more determined to seek out Eagle-san or at the very least, a feather to show off to his mother and classmates. It sent him upstairs, where it was dark and scary. But he steeled his courage and just in time, too.

Down below the doors slid open, and a peculiar looking monk made his entrance. He was peculiar because he was holding a pair of kama—hand scythes—that farmers used to harvest crops. But as far as Satsuma knew, there wasn't a single rice paddy anywhere near Yamato.

"Hey! Anybody in here? Say somethin'!" yelled the monk in a voice that hardly sounded saintly. Still, he was an adult and Satsuma was a good boy and decided to answer him. Though just as he opened his mouth—a hand closed over top it!

"Shh, dhat one looks like trouble," whispered a voice from the shadows. It was an accent Satsuma had never heard before. The hand across his mouth was leathery and wrinkled, and when he turned around to see who it belonged to he could hardly make out a face at all. This person was brown, more tanned than anyone he had ever seen before.

Only after the monk left did the stranger introduce herself.

"Sorry about keepin' you quiet, little one. Dhe name's Ume-Ume. You see, dhat husband of mine been takin' his sweet ole dh'ime building our house, so we've been stayin' up 'er for dwo or dhree weeks."

Satsuma's mouth went agape. He could only make out every other word the older lady was saying. She had almond-shaped eyes and a large lower lip, and her nose was longer than any he had seen. Were it not for her motherly smile Satsuma would've been terrified.

"M-my name is, Satsuma. I'm—" the Emperor's son couldn't finish his introduction before sneezing. He started to shiver as his adrenaline faded and as his soaked robes brought down his temperature to a chill.

Ume's motherly instincts kicked in. "You look like you've been out swimming with dhe fishes! Let me get you a spare change of clothes—got a kimono for my girl she never wants to wear."

Satsuma would soon discover why Ume's daughter never wanted to wear these robes. They were heavier and uglier than any other kimono the Emperor's son had ever worn. In fact, to call it a kimono at all was misleading, as it bore more resemblance to a hempen sack. It was itchy, too, but minding his manners Satsuma thanked Ume-Ume all the same.

"Arigato, Ume-san," Satsuma bowed. "Did you, perchance, see a sea eagle fly in here? I followed it to this temple, but it seems to have vanished..."

"Dhe sea eagle? White tail?" Ume asked and scratched her chin as Satsuma nodded. "Silliest dhing I ever heard. Dhe sea eagle only lives up North, 'til dhey were hunted to extinction long before you were born, rest dheir souls. It's my spirit animal, in fact!"

"Spirit...animal?" Satsuma asked, never hearing of the subject before. His Shinto studies had only just begun, but the idea of having a spirit animal had far more appeal to the young boy than memorizing chants. He wondered what his was.

As if she could hear the boy's thoughts, Ume went ahead and traced Satsuma's palm. Since Ume's mother had been a wise woman for the tribe back West, she had inherited some of her techniques. Fortune telling and spirit reading were among them: the latter of which she was doing now.

Until, that is, she identified the animal of this little boy: a lion, with creases deeper than any young boy should have. They signified strength and royalty, and spiritual attunement at a level that made the Kondo's fingers tremble. Ume leapt backwards in fear before bowing low in respect. She placed her forehead to the floor and begged for forgiveness.

"Y-your Highness! Please, don't take my eyes out! I still need dhem a few years longer! Oh, oh great Lion, please forgive dhis humble servant!"

To the six-year-old who had no perspective on what it meant to be the Emperor's son, Ume was acting very strange. He assured her everything was okay, but the Kondo mother now acted as a servant.

"If dhere's anything you ever need, Your Highness, I'll help at once! My husband and his brothers—dhey helped build half of dhis city. You just tell 'em Ume sent you, you hear? Just tell those bears Ume says you're a lion cub!"

Satsuma nodded but didn't understand. But a look out the window and he knew night was falling, and that Mother would be finished with supper soon. He knew he was in for a scolding, but braced his courage and left after saying his goodbyes to Ume-Ume.

As a boy with an overactive imagination, he imagined himself like a lion charging through the fields. It helped him feel less lost—and eventually he arrived at the main street that he had recognized from the parade. He was able to retrace his steps from there.

Though even a lion had poachers to worry about, and a few suspicious looking samurai gave long stares his way. Though after seeing his peasant's kimono they turned to each other and shook their heads. Satsuma may have been a royal lion but he was in a common cat's fur—and it had just saved his life.

The distinctive smell of wood burning met Satsuma's nose before he saw the smoke rise above the hill their house was on. The boy thought nothing of it until he got closer and saw the flames and heard the ruckus. Dozens of spectators looked on as men from the city guard ran up with buckets in an attempt to quell the raging flame.

"That's...our house?" Satsuma asked, no longer feeling like a brave lion. As he approached closer he looked around for his mother, and was about to cry out for her when he spotted another familiar woman looking on at the house-turned-bonfire.

Lady Sakiko brought her war fan to her face in a vain attempt to cover her laughter. Her lips were twisted in a wicked smile. "Now *this* is a wedding gift, Seiji-kun. Have you any other whores you're keeping hidden from me?"

Part of Satsuma wanted to reach out to her for help. The boy had always wanted to know the rest of his family: all the cousins and distant relatives who he had seen walking through the palace grounds. Yet something deep within him roared out, compelling him to walk away.

But before he did, he looked at his aunt once more, who had buckled over with laughter and now the crowd and her servants joined in. "*Everything is burning...how can she find it funny?*"

If there was any harsh truth for the boy to learn this day it was voiced aloud by the man behind him.

"Not all lions are good, Satsu-kun." The ninja known as Fujibayashi put a hand atop the boy's shoulder. "Let's hurry...I must get you and your mother out of the city at once. Spirits help us if the Lioness doesn't have every gate out of Yamato closed."

"Fuji-sama!" Satsuma hugged the old ninja, who picked him up and carried him away. Mother was safe though his home was gone. He was about to leave the city, the palace, and his father behind.

Though he should've been beside himself in despair, something within him kept his tears at bay. He was sad but determined, more than he had ever been in his life. "The bear people...the Kondos, they'll help us get out of the city. I know they will," the boy spoke, with words so confident they caused Fujibayashi to pause.

It was an outlandish request, trusting dirtskins with the well-being of the Imperial Family, but something in the boy's voice sounded familiar. He sounded just like Seijirō did, and that brought a smile to the old



ninja's lips.

"Alright...we'll trust the Kondos, young master. Or should I say, Young Lion?"

[Which character should February's side story be about?](#)

[Jan 7, 2019](#)

This poll will close at the end of January.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+3)

2%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+4)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+10)

2%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+9)

0%

Keiko, the maid (+11)

5%

Kohaku, the samurai (+12)

17%

Kuniko, the farmer (+4)

3%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+3)

17%

Momoko, the doctor (+6)

2%

Nishi, the yakuza (+15)

5%

Satsuma, the emperor (+0)

3%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+43)

33%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+15)

14%

Poll ended Jan 31, 2019 · 66 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapter 9](#)

[Jan 15, 2019](#)

It's the start of a new year, patrons!

The timing really couldn't be better for where I am in the story. Typically I'm writing about summer in the midst of winter or fall at the start of spring. But right now it's freezing out and there's snow on the ground. No doubt MC is as troubled about having to clear out driveways as much as I am!

Oh, and there's a special treat for you this month: the work-in-progress cover art! It isn't done yet but it's already my favorite cover for any of my games, and I'll talk about it more at the end of this month.

Now then! Please enjoy:

### [One Sitting](#)

[Jan 25, 2019](#)

How much of a new SoH Book do you read in one sitting?

I read all of it! Yes, I'm aware that this is unhealthy!

I read about an hour's worth each sitting.

I'll take a break every couple of chapters or so.

I only read a few pages at a time.

179 votes total

### [SoH Artwork: Book 4, Part 5](#)

[Jan 29, 2019](#)

Cities, doggos and...**rough draft Cover Art?!**

The first month of 2019 is over, and I think it's been a real productive one as far as Hyuga is concerned! For this month's art post we get a glimpse at a couple of Dana's brilliant illustrations ([website](#), [instagram](#)) as well as the rough-draft version of Book 4's cover by Kanitama Corokke ([twitter](#)).

Kanitama probably isn't her real name, but she is Japanese and she's very good at what she does. She did the cover art for Book 2 and 3, after all! She doesn't speak English but we do communicate through a translation service. I mostly give her instructions by using images, colors, and a lot of arrows! I found her on [Fast Manga](#), which has some quality artists on there for all your Anime Needs™.

Anywho, please enjoy!

**Chapter 12 Art: "Hokusei"**



Chapter 13 Art: "Emi the Spitz"





Book 4 Cover Art: Rough Draft





### [To Harem, Or Not To Harem](#)

[Feb 5, 2019](#)

In regards to your main character and romances...

He/She is loyal to one and only one.

He/She is pursuing a few options at once.

He/She is going for that harem ending.



He/She isn't interested in anybody.

203 votes total

### [Side Story #8: Toshie's Survival Test](#)

[Feb 7, 2019](#)

*<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>*



#### Side Story 8: Toshie's Survival Test



##### ■■ Undisclosed Location ■■

Toshie was alone—to the unobservant eye—in a temperate forest you wouldn't find on any official map. It had once been home to several tribes of Kondos until the army chased many of them out. The ones that didn't run were smoked out and burned alive by shugenja, resulting in the greatest wildfire the country had ever seen.

Many Hyugans lost their lives in that fire, though history wouldn't remember them: the whole event went unwritten and to speak of it warranted a hefty fine. What remained of the forest was forbidden to enter without official cause. The untouched wilds made it perfect for training ninjas in the art of survival.

Though for babysitting the offspring of nobles, it was far from ideal.

Toshie let out a sigh before picking up three pebbles from the ground. She tossed them every which way: one up into a tree, another into a pile of ferns, and the last into a fleshy mound attempting to hide behind a rock that was smaller than he was.

"Ippei, Hatsue, Morio! Each of you fail."

Groans came out from the three ninja-in-training, who had the misfortune of having the Heartless Hound as their temporary instructor. Their new bruises were also temporary, though you wouldn't know it from how much they whined.

"Itai...it hurts, Toshie-sensei! Look—it's bleeding!" cried Morio, who was probably the most overweight ninja in the force. That he was able to get this far into the program with such poor conditioning spoke volumes of the current state of Imperial shinobi. Aristocratic families were sending their sons and daughters to become ninjas instead of samurai, as a way around mandatory enlistment.

"Shut up, Morio! Your face was already ugly to begin with," came a sharp reply from the group's kunoichi. The female ninja, Hatsue, was the most spoiled among them and particularly vain—her ninja outfit was a flashy silk yukata which she couldn't stand to get stained.

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One such legend was Toshie's own master, Fujibayashi, called the Warrior of the Wind, who's last act was to teach a Kondo child to be worthy of the future Emperor's service. It was no small task, and certainly not an easy one for a young girl to undergo. *"You passed on all you knew to me, Fuji-sama. For that I am forever grateful."*

"That looks to be a sizeable gash," Toshie remarked after inspecting Morio's forehead. "How would you go about healing such a wound, and preventing infection?"

"Um well uh, we'd use disinfectant balm and bandages. We've got plenty back at camp," Ippei answered. He wasn't wrong but when Toshie asked him what he'd do without them, the young ninja was at a loss.

Toshie pointed to a nearby plant, with leaves both green and purple. "That's shiso: a mint leaf you'll often find wrapped around sushi. It can serve as a disinfectant in a pinch. And for sealing wounds, pine sap is among the best you can find."

*\*KkaKRah\* \*KraKah\**

The call of a bird broke out into the distance. Of course Toshie knew at once what the bird was—or more specifically, *who* it was. "What did the message say? Do any of you know?"

They looked at their instructor as if she was joking, before realizing she wasn't. Ippei was the first to admit defeat. "I um, well I don't speak bird. I don't think anybody does, Toshie-sensei."

Their instructor feared as much, and rushed into a quick lecture on how ninjas often used bird calls to give messages over long distances without arousing suspicion. "This particular call comes from the red-crowned crane, which hails from the North. Our guest does too, for that matter."

*\*growl\**

That call came from Morio's stomach. He grabbed it and groaned, and asked about dinner. The group had been away from camp since this morning, doing exercises and getting scolded all the while. It brought up an important subject Toshie had been wanting to discuss: fasting.

"Fasting?" Morio asked, unable to understand Toshie's question. "That's just something monks do for religious reasons. Right?"

Toshie shook her head. "The human body can go weeks without food. Fasting for a few days at a time often has a cleansing effect and increases energy. In a survival situation, food is never your priority. Shelter, water and fire are."

"Survival situation? Like, we're ninjas, not a bunch of backwater hermits! I'm only going to be stationed in cities—like Jijinto or Hokusei," Hatsue declared with a knowing grin. Given her family's connections, the girl was accustomed to getting what she wanted. That was about to change sooner rather than later.

"Ninja must be prepared for anything and everything. Do not underestimate what nature can throw at you."

"I suppose you can predict the weather, too?"

Toshie was taken aback by the reply. Not because it was particularly snarky, but because the kunoichi had assumed forecasting the weather was an obvious skill. "Let me ask you this: was there any dew on the ground this morning?" The group shrugged in unison. "Then how about the fire back at the campsite—during breakfast, did the smoke go straight up or curl off to the side?"

Again there were shrugs. Their instructor was at her limit.

"Start paying attention to your surroundings! A ninja in service to His Imperial Majesty can't afford to be empty-headed!"

After scolding them and recovering her composure, Toshie decided it was time to head back to camp. Morio was still bleeding and lagging behind the others—even more so than usual. He was lightheaded, Toshie guessed, more due to the lack of lunch than blood loss. Even so, this presented a good opportunity. She gave Hatsue the order.

"You're serious?! He weighs like, twice as much as me!" Hatsue snapped, her face scrunched in disgust. "No woman can carry such an overstuffed pig! Not even you, Toshie-sensei!"

Toshie proceeded to grab hold of Morio's hand, before bending down and wrapping her other arm behind the fat ninja's leg, heaving him up over her shoulders. "After getting the injured person across your shoulders, lift with your legs and hips—not your back. You may have to adjust his body to maintain balance. Keep your core engaged to help maintain a straight back."

“Wow! Toshie-sensei is amazing!” Ippei cheered.

“Being carried by my kunoichi senpai...it feels nice,” Morio said, still bleeding. Though this time out of his nose.

“Yeah, we get it—you’re amazing. The Heartless Hound is the perfect ninja,” Hatsue grumbled with a healthy amount of sarcasm. That irksome nickname had spread even to the younger students, it seemed, as Toshie’s reputation in the capital grew. The idea of a ninja with any reputation at all was...disconcerting.

When the four of them made their way back to camp they saw a fire going and a woman waiting for them. This was Tamaki Uesugi, the Northerner Toshie had worked with in the past. She was more easygoing and friendly than Toshie was—though that applied to just about anybody.

“I was wondering if Toshie-san would have you back before nightfall,” Tamaki said with a smile. It turned into a frown after inspecting the students, especially Morio’s forehead. “I just came in from Yamato—the higher ups want to make sure the fresh recruits aren’t getting pushed too hard. And looking at those bruises, I’d have to say they were right to worry.”

“Oh, and I brought some supplies, too. How does a dinner of fresh yakitori and udon sound?”

Cheers erupted from the students. Morio was close to tears. The three were quickly enamored with Tamaki, who was playing her role as the cool older sister a bit too well. But what caught Toshie’s attention was the bracelet of white beads around her fellow ninja’s arm.

“Buddhist prayer beads? That’s very modern for a Northerner,” Toshie said, with more than a little skepticism.

Tamaki gave a sheepish, nervous laugh. “I know you’re all about worshipping animal spirits. But there’s nothing wrong about changing it up once in awhile. And speaking of changing,” she sniffed, “you all smell terrible! Take a bath over in the stream while I get dinner ready!”

“Yes, Tamaki-senpai!”

Toshie gave her counterpart a prolonged stare. After a silence that spoke volumes, the two nodded and parted ways.

■■■■

As the three students enjoyed themselves in the cool springs, Toshie was off behind a tree making subtle adjustments to her makeup. Her disguise to mask her Kondo heritage was like a second skin to her, yet like any skin in had a tendency to shed.

The difficulties of maintaining the disguise was one of the reasons she was against going on this excursion in the first place. But she was the most qualified as a replacement instructor, and Satsuma

thought it was healthy to get her out of Yamato for once. The irony of the Emperor's request was about to make itself known.

*\*BhaENNNNNNNNNNG\**

A giant horn sounded and didn't stop. It paralyzed all who heard it for the first time—giving those who had heard a second a head start to flee in fear. That was the power of the henyudo pipes, an instrument that Toshie was well familiar with.

"Kondo savages!" Toshie yelled at the students. "Get back to camp—hurry!"

The three shot out from the water, with hardly time to put on their clothes as they rushed to the campsite. Instead of Tamaki and dinner, they were greeted with war cries and smoke, and dark-skinned men wielding spears and bows.

"Aii-YaYaYa-YAH!"

"WhaLa-LaLa-LA!"

*"These barbarians need to work on their ululations,"* Toshie criticized before an arrow whizzed by her face. She started barking orders at the students to find cover, though Hatsue hesitated and remained out in the open. Worst still she was in a terrible spot—*her* spot—with a clear line of fire from a Kondo with their bow outstretched.

Toshie sprinted over and pushed the kunoichi aside. And not a second too soon, because right after she did an arrow flew right through her leg.

The Kondo ninja grunted but didn't yell. Though grit alone didn't ease the pain, and try as she might Toshie collapsed from the agony in her right thigh. Putting weight on it only served to sink the arrowhead in deeper.

"Guys! Let's get out of here!" Ippei yelled. Morio was already on his way out, sprinting at a speed Toshie hadn't thought him capable of. As for Hatsue, she looked down at her teacher and paused for the longest second of her life.

"Shit! I can't believe I'm doing this!"

She grabbed hold of Toshie's arm, kneeled and hefted the kunoichi over her shoulders just as she had seen earlier. Gritting her teeth as she ran, she both cursed and prayed that the savages wouldn't give chase.

Toshie knew there was little risk of that.

■■■■

"Hey, hey—*\*inhale\**—guys, wait up!"



Morio was huffing and puffing, struggling to keep up with Ippei and Hatsue. Though he had gotten a head start on his run his endurance quickly failed him, and he clutched the side of his large-yet-empty stomach in pain.

“You’re tired?! We’re the ones carrying Toshie-sensei!” Hatsue barked. She and Ippei were on either side of their instructor, keeping her moving and her right leg off the ground.

“Um, speaking of which...she doesn’t look too well,” Ippei gulped. “From what I heard about Kondos, back in the war they tipped their arrowheads with poison. I think it was called uh, zakur...zaka...zakara —”

“Zakarashi,” Toshie grunted, gasping for air. “Symptoms include...difficulty breathing, seizures, and loss of...of conscious...” she drifted off into a medically induced slumber.

Morio scratched his head. “Loss of conscious—what?”

“Quit being so stupid! Like, what the hell?!” Hatsue bit her nail clean off and spat it out. “I thought those dirtskin barbarians were all dead! What’s a tribe of them doing out in our training grounds?”

“Well, I mean, we just need to find a place to rest for now. Luckily it’s not—” Ippei paused at the sound of thunder. “Raining...”

■■■■

When the Kondo ninja awoke, she did with a groan and to the sound of torrential rain. Though she was damp and cold she was inside what looked to be a cave. A dark one, hopefully uninhabited by anything other than shinobi.

“She doesn’t look right. Her skin is turning darker—aren’t sick folk supposed to go pale?”

Toshie brought a finger across her chin and inspected it. A faint white smudge could be seen against her thumb, which meant her disguise was failing. *“This will all be for nothing if they discover what I am.”*

“Look! Toshie-sensei is waking up!” said Morio in a loud yell.

“Urusai! Shut up, fatso. Do you want to wake whatever else is in this cave, too?!” Hatsue scolded him as Ippei struggled with two sticks, rubbing them together frantically. When they finally caught fire, he cheered.

“Yes! It worked!” Ippei blew the fire and fed it a handful of leaves to help it grow. “Oh, but it’s a shame we didn’t pick up more tinder. Won’t find any more out there in this downpour.”

The weather was just as bad as Toshie had hoped for and predicted. It wasn’t that she was a fan of monsoons, but rather, this storm was just what she had been waiting for.

“Please don’t move your leg, Toshie-sensei. We haven’t removed the arrowhead yet.”

She had nearly forgotten the injury until she tried to get up. That had been a grave mistake, which sent a sharp pain from her right thigh to every other nerve in her body. As far as the condition of her leg, it was several shades paler than it usually was—though not because of the wound. She had thoroughly applied a skin lightening balm across her entire body.

“Not a barbed arrow, or a particularly sharp one,” Toshie inspected the wound. It hadn’t gone but a couple inches deep and didn’t seem to have pierced bone, which would make it blissfully easier to remove. “I’m lucky these Kondos are as uncivilized as they say.”

Morio presented a piece of bark to the head kunoichi, proudly displaying the fruit of his labor. Though it was more of a syrup than a fruit, the gesture was just as sweet. “Look here, I tapped some sap off a pine tree! Think my fingers will be sticky for weeks, though.”

“Don’t seal it until like, after we disinfect it. We’ve got to apply the shiso first. Toshie-sensei has a bad fever...not to mention she’s gasping for breath,” Hatsue said with a hint of concern.

Toshie felt something akin to admiration upon seeing the three busy at work on her behalf. The ninja trainees weren’t that much younger than she was, but even so, she felt a parental urge to protect them. Even while she was the one poisoned and on her potential deathbed.

“Morio, Ippei and Hatsue...thank you all. But we can’t stay here long,” Toshie said, pausing to take in a haggard breath. “Kondo savages are known to...sacrifice their captives at every full moon,” she said before drifting back into a deep slumber.

“Oh no! Tamaki-senpai!”

“When’s the next full moon?!”

“Toshie-sensei, please stay with us!”

■■■■

The full moon would arise three days after this one, which greeted the ninjas with a mostly clear sky. The worst of the storm had passed, though Toshie remained feeble and unable to put any weight on her right leg. Holding Morio for support, she hobbled behind the others as they returned to their campsite, looking for clues as to Tamaki’s whereabouts.

“Oh geez guys, they took everything! Our clothes, weapons and tools...this is bad,” Ippei said as he surveyed the site. “Toshie-sensei, we need to report back to headquarters at once!”

“That would be akin to sentencing Tamaki-san to death. The other ninja wouldn’t be able to reach the Kondos in time. Her only chance is us. Assuming we can follow their tracks,” Toshie said, clenching her teeth in pain as she staggered to take a seat beneath a tree.

She closed her eyes and nodded off into sleep once more.

Or rather, she pretended to. She feigned unconsciousness as the three students bemoaned their lost belongings, cursing the Kondos and grumbling for lack of food. They were leaving themselves completely open to an ambush without keeping a watch out—not that Toshie would warn them. They also needed to be suspicious of any belongings they *did* find, in case they were tampered with.

“Hey guys!” Morio gasped, holding out a skewer. “I found some of the yakitori! Those stupid dirtskins forgot to take them!”

Toshie shut her eyes a little tighter. “*You idiots.*”

■■■■

“Hey guys,” Morio groaned, “I think I’m gonna hurl! Bargh—arck!”

The ninja trainees were in various stages of sick, with stops for diarrhea becoming more and more frequent. Progress was slow, but they were moving in the direction of the barbarians who had taken their senpai. Toshie was impressed they were able to follow their trail after such heavy rainfall.

“Ew! Barf somewhere else, fatso!” Hatsue yelled, before directing her anger at Ippei. “So are we lost or what? If you’ve got us going in circles I swear...”

“Geez um, well the prayer beads took us in this direction. Thank the spirits Tamaki had the cunning to drop them without her captors noticing!”

Toshie broke out into a cough. “*Tamaki...I’ll have words with you later.*”

Ippei’s eyes went wide at the sign of consciousness from his teacher. It had been the first in nearly a day. “Toshie-sensei! You’re up, what a relief! We’ve been meaning to ask you how—”

Toshie yawned, shut her eyes and fell back to sleep.

■■■■

There was only one day left before the full moon and the ceremony that would brutally end Tamaki’s life. The young ninjas were tired, hungry and damp. A combination of the humidity and their loose bowels made dehydration a lethal concern.

Patrols of Kondo barbarians roamed the area, their howling making their presence obvious yet also making sleeping impossible. Not that many could sleep in fear of an arrow or a spear point waking you.

Toshie was an exception and had to hold back a yawn. She had been getting plenty of sleep during this ordeal, though too much rest had the odd effect of making one more tired. It didn’t help that she had sores all across her back for when her students placed her over rocky ground.

It was an inconvenience, but nothing she would penalize them for. “Have you found their location, Ippei?”

"Toshie-sensei! We're close," the young ninja replied in an eager whisper. "There's a stream ahead. They'll probably stay there for the ceremony tomorrow."

"How's my camouflage, Toshie-sensei?" Hatsue asked. Toshie turned and didn't see the kunoichi, but a bush. She had coated her silk garbs in dirt—either intentionally or otherwise—making her far more difficult to spot.

"Much better than before. It should get you close without suspicion. Though the bush is never the ideal hiding spot among ninja."

"What do you mean? What's wrong with it?"

Toshie smirked. "Men have a tendency to urinate in them."

Hatsue shrieked as much as a whisper allowed, shedding her disguise as quickly as she could. The boys had a laugh and even Toshie joined in with a chuckle. She was glad she could lighten their spirits. *"Perhaps too glad. Attachments only breed mistakes."*

Toshie refocused her thoughts. "I am too slow to be of any use in Tamaki's rescue. If she is to be saved it must be tonight. You'll have to—"

"We already got a plan, Toshie-sensei! Nothin' to worry about!" Morio returned, his arms holding a cloth with probably a hundred or more burs stuck atop it. Burs were small and pointy seed carriers. An effective defense against herbivores, they were also affectionately referred to as 'hitchhikers' by their tendency to stick themselves into your clothes during a hike.

"Turns out nature makes its own caltrops," Morio boasted. "We'll teach those barefoot natives a lesson they won't soon forget!"

Toshie hid a grin by placing her hand against her mouth. *"Their upperclassmen are in for quite the surprise, it seems."*

■■■■

The operation to rescue Tamaki wasn't all that exciting, and ended not long after it began. The three students—Hatsue, Ippei and Morio—approached the camp and signalled to each other using bird calls, until Ippei made a ruckus and started running off on his own.

The 'Kondo savages' took the bait, up until they wedged their feet over a field of spiky burs, causing them to curse, speak Hyugan, and break character. When Ippei recognized one of the voices as his older brother the deception had well and truly ended.

Toshie staggered towards the camp, towards an apologetic Tamaki surrounded by three very angry shinobi.

"What do you mean, it was all a test?!"

"So they were never any savages at all?!"

"I haven't slept and ate in days because of this!"

Tamaki cleared her throat. "Ah-ahem, just consider this a rite of passage. The senior ninjas love giving trainees a tough time. Partying and dressing up as savages helps let off some steam. Well, in most cases anyway. You should've seen the looks on their faces when they tried it on Toshie-san."

The Northerner nodded in her direction. "You had them tied up for days before we convinced you to let them go. Several of them pissed themselves before rescue came, if I recall."

"It would seem that sticking their feet with burs would've been far more efficient," Toshie sighed, before addressing the three students who were clearly frustrated. "Hatsue, Morio and Ippei. You were able to put my teachings into practice as well as implement your own methods. Ingenuity and resolve are among the two most important aspects of a ninja."

"Though your performance was far from perfect...you have passed your field examination. Congratulations."

After the initial shock subsided, the three hugged and cheered. All was well, yet before the victory party began, Morio had one question remaining. "You weren't actually poisoned, right Toshie-sensei? I mean...what if we didn't come up with a cure?"

"I may have died," Toshie said flatly and without expression. She then patted a hand against her left upper hip, where a hidden fold in her kimono contained an antidote for the very poison she had spent the past few days suffering from.

*"Satsu-kun...when I die it will be by your side. I swore as much to Fuji-sama. His teachings live on through me,"* Toshie thought to herself, as her gaze drifted over to the three ninjas currently laughing and stuffing themselves with treats. It was an indulgence they had earned, and the sight of their unrestrained joy made even the coldhearted kunoichi smile.

*"Is it selfish, I wonder, to hope a part of me will live on through these three?"*

[Side Story #8: Toshio's Survival Test](#)

[Feb 7, 2019](#)



<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>

## Side Story 8: Toshio's Survival Test

### ■■ Undisclosed Location ■■

Toshio was alone—to the unobservant eye—in a temperate forest you wouldn't find on any official map. It had once been home to several tribes of Kondos until the army chased many of them out. The ones that didn't run were smoked out and burned alive by shugenja, resulting in the greatest wildfire the country had ever seen.

Many Hyugans lost their lives in that fire, though history wouldn't remember them: the whole event went unwritten and to speak of it warranted a hefty fine. What remained of the forest was forbidden to enter without official cause. The untouched wilds made it perfect for training ninjas in the art of survival.

Though for babysitting the offspring of nobles, it was far from ideal.

Toshio let out a sigh before picking up three pebbles from the ground. He tossed them every which way: one up into a tree, another into a pile of ferns, and the last into a fleshy mound attempting to hide behind a rock that was smaller than he was.

"Ippei, Hatsue, Morio! Each of you fail."

Groans came out from the three ninja-in-training, who had the misfortune of having the Heartless Hound as their temporary instructor. Their new bruises were also temporary, though you wouldn't know it from how much they whined.

"Itai...it hurts, Toshio-sensei! Look—it's bleeding!" cried Morio, who was probably the most overweight ninja in the force. That he was able to get this far into the program with such poor conditioning spoke volumes of the current state of Imperial shinobi. Aristocratic families were sending their sons and daughters to become ninjas instead of samurai, as a way around mandatory enlistment.

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“They can if they carry the person properly. Allow me to demonstrate.”

Toshio proceeded to grab hold of Morio’s hand, before bending down and wrapping his other arm behind the fat ninja’s leg, heaving him up over his shoulders. “After getting the injured person across your shoulders, lift with your legs and hips—not your back. You may have to adjust his body to maintain balance. Keep your core engaged to help maintain a straight back.”

“Wow! Toshio-sensei makes Morio look light!” Ippei cheered.

“I feel like I’m flying! Please carry me the rest of the way, Toshio-sensei!”

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“Kondo savages!” Toshio yelled at the students. “Get back to camp—hurry!”

The three shot out from the water, with hardly time to put on their clothes as they rushed to the campsite. Instead of Tamaki and dinner, they were greeted with war cries and smoke, and dark-skinned men wielding spears and bows.

“Aii-YaYaYa-YAH!”

“WhaLa-LaLa-LA!”

*“These barbarians need to work on their ululations,”* Toshio criticized before an arrow whizzed by his face. He started barking orders at the students to find cover, though Hatsue hesitated and remained out in the open. Worst still she was in a terrible spot—*his* spot—with a clear line of fire from a Kondo with their bow outstretched.

Toshio sprinted over and pushed the kunoichi aside. And not a second too soon, because right after he did an arrow flew right through his leg.

The Kondo ninja grunted but didn’t yell. Though grit alone didn’t ease the pain, and try as he might Toshio collapsed from the agony in his right thigh. Putting weight on it only served to sink the arrowhead in deeper.

“Guys! Let’s get out of here!” Ippei yelled. Morio was already on his way out, sprinting at a speed Toshio hadn’t thought him capable of. As for Hatsue, she looked down at her teacher and paused for the longest second of her life.

“Shit! I can’t believe I’m doing this!”

She grabbed hold of Toshio’s arm, kneeled and hefted the shinobi over her shoulders just as she had seen earlier. Gritting her teeth as she ran, she both cursed and prayed that the savages wouldn’t give chase.

Toshio knew there was little risk of that.

■■■■

“Hey, hey—*\*inhale\**—guys, wait up!”

Morio was huffing and puffing, struggling to keep up with Ippei and Hatsue. Though he had gotten a head start on his run his endurance quickly failed him, and he clutched the side of his large-yet-empty stomach in pain.

“*You’re* tired?! We’re the ones carrying Toshio-sensei!” Hatsue barked. She and Ippei were on either side of their instructor, keeping his moving and his right leg off the ground.

“Um, speaking of which...he doesn’t look too well,” Ippei gulped. “From what I heard about Kondos, back in the war they tipped their arrowheads with poison. I think it was called uh, zakur...zaka...zakara



—”

“Zakarashi,” Toshio grunted, gasping for air. “Symptoms include...difficulty breathing, seizures, and loss of...of conscious...” he drifted off into a medically induced slumber.

Morio scratched his head. “Loss of conscious—what?”

“Quit being so stupid! Like, what the hell?!” Hatsue bit her nail clean off and spat it out. “I thought those dirtskin barbarians were all dead! What’s a tribe of them doing out in our training grounds?”

“Well, I mean, we just need to find a place to rest for now. Luckily it’s not—” Ippei paused at the sound of thunder. “Raining...”

■■■■

When the Kondo ninja awoke, he did with a groan and to the sound of torrential rain. Though he was damp and cold he was inside what looked to be a cave. A dark one, hopefully uninhabited by anything other than shinobi.

“He doesn’t look right. His skin is turning darker—aren’t sick folk supposed to go pale?”

Toshio brought a finger across his chin and inspected it. A faint white smudge could be seen against his thumb, which meant his disguise was failing. *“This will all be for nothing if they discover what I am.”*

“Look! Toshio-sensei is waking up!” said Morio in a loud yell.

“Urusai! Shut up, fatso. Do you want to wake whatever else is in this cave, too?!” Hatsue scolded him as Ippei struggled with two sticks, rubbing them together frantically. When they finally caught fire, he cheered.

“Yes! It worked!” Ippei blew the fire and fed it a handful of leaves to help it grow. “Oh, but it’s a shame we didn’t pick up more tinder. Won’t find any more out there in this downpour.”

The weather was just as bad as Toshio had hoped for and predicted. It wasn’t that he was a fan of monsoons, but rather, this storm was just what he had been waiting for.

“Please don’t move your leg, Toshio-sensei. We haven’t removed the arrowhead yet.”

He had nearly forgotten the injury until he tried to get up. That had been a grave mistake, which sent a sharp pain from his right thigh to every other nerve in his body. As far as the condition of his leg, it was several shades paler than it usually was—though not because of the wound. He had thoroughly applied a skin lightening balm across his entire body.

“Not a barbed arrow, or a particularly sharp one,” Toshio inspected the wound. It hadn’t gone but a couple inches deep and didn’t seem to have pierced bone, which would make it blissfully easier to remove. “I’m lucky these Kondos are as uncivilized as they say.”

Morio presented a piece of bark to the head shinobi, proudly displaying the fruit of his labor. Though it was more of a syrup than a fruit, the gesture was just as sweet. “Look here, I tapped some sap off a pine tree! Think my fingers will be sticky for weeks, though.”

“Don’t seal it until like, after we disinfect it. We’ve got to apply the shiso first. Toshio-sensei has a bad fever...not to mention he’s gasping for breath,” Hatsue said with a hint of concern.

Toshio felt something akin to admiration upon seeing the three busy at work on his behalf. The ninja trainees weren’t that much younger than he was, but even so, he felt a parental urge to protect them. Even while he was the one poisoned and on his potential deathbed.

“Morio, Ippei and Hatsue...thank you all. But we can’t stay here long,” Toshio said, pausing to take in a haggard breath. “Kondo savages are known to...sacrifice their captives at every full moon,” he said before drifting back into a deep slumber.

“Oh no! Tamaki-senpai!”

“When’s the next full moon?!”

“Toshio-sensei, please stay with us!”

■■■■

The full moon would arise three days after this one, which greeted the ninjas with a mostly clear sky. The worst of the storm had passed, though Toshio remained feeble and unable to put any weight on his right leg. Holding Morio for support, he hobbled behind the others as they returned to their campsite, looking for clues as to Tamaki’s whereabouts.

“Oh geez guys, they took everything! Our clothes, weapons and tools...this is bad,” Ippei said as he surveyed the site. “Toshio-sensei, we need to report back to headquarters at once!”

“That would be akin to sentencing Tamaki-san to death. The other ninja wouldn’t be able to reach the Kondos in time. His only chance is us. Assuming we can follow their tracks,” Toshio said, clenching his teeth in pain as he staggered to take a seat beneath a tree.

He closed his eyes and nodded off into sleep once more.

Or rather, he pretended to. He feigned unconsciousness as the three students bemoaned their lost belongings, cursing the Kondos and grumbling for lack of food. They were leaving themselves completely open to an ambush without keeping a watch out—not that Toshio would warn them. They also needed to be suspicious of any belongings they *did* find, in case they were tampered with.

“Hey guys!” Morio gasped, holding out a skewer. “I found some of the yakitori! Those stupid dirtskins forgot to take them!”

Toshio shut his eyes a little tighter. *"You idiots."*

■■■■

"Hey guys," Morio groaned, "I think I'm gonna hurl! Bargh—arck!"

The ninja trainees where in various stages of sick, with stops for diarrhea becoming more and more frequent. Progress was slow, but they were moving in the direction of the barbarians who had taken their senpai. Toshio was impressed they were able to follow their trail after such heavy rainfall.

"Ew! Barf somewhere else, fatso!" Hatsue yelled, before directing her anger at Ippei. "So are we lost or what? If you've got us going in circles I swear..."

"Geez um, well the prayer beads took us in this direction. Thank the spirits Tamaki had the cunning to drop them without his captors noticing!"

Toshio broke out into a cough. *"Tamaki...I'll have words with you later."*

Ippei's eyes went wide at the sign of consciousness from his teacher. It had been the first in nearly a day. "Toshio-sensei! You're up, what a relief! We've been meaning to ask you how—"

Toshio yawned, shut his eyes and fell back to sleep.

■■■■

There was only one day left before the full moon and the ceremony that would brutally end Tamaki's life. The young ninjas were tired, hungry and damp. A combination of the humidity and their loose bowels made dehydration a lethal concern.

Patrols of Kondo barbarians roamed the area, their howling making their presence obvious yet also making sleeping impossible. Not that many could sleep in fear of an arrow or a spear point waking you.

Toshio was an exception and had to hold back a yawn. He had been getting plenty of sleep during this ordeal, though too much rest had the odd effect of making one more tired. It didn't help that he had sores all across his back for when his students placed him over rocky ground.

It was an inconvenience, but nothing he would penalize them for. "Have you found their location, Ippei?"

"Toshio-sensei! We're close," the young ninja replied in an eager whisper. "There's a stream ahead. They'll probably stay there for the ceremony tomorrow."

"How's my camouflage, Toshio-sensei?" Hatsue asked. Toshio turned and didn't see the kunoichi, but a bush. She had coated her silk garbs in dirt—either intentionally or otherwise—making her far more difficult to spot.

“Much better than before. It should get you close without suspicion. Though the bush is never the ideal hiding spot among ninja.”

“What do you mean? What’s wrong with it?”

Toshio smirked. “Men have a tendency to urinate in them.”

Hatsue shrieked as much as a whisper allowed, shedding her disguise as quickly as she could. The boys had a laugh and even Toshio joined in with a chuckle. He was glad he could lighten their spirits. *“Perhaps too glad. Attachments only breed mistakes.”*

Toshio refocused his thoughts. “I am too slow to be of any use in Tamaki’s rescue. If he is to be saved it must be tonight. You’ll have to—”

“We already got a plan, Toshio-sensei! Nothin’ to worry about!” Morio returned, his arms holding a cloth with probably a hundred or more burs stuck atop it. Burs were small and pointy seed carriers. An effective defense against herbivores, they were also affectionately referred to as ‘hitchhikers’ by their tendency to stick themselves into your clothes during a hike.

“Turns out nature makes its own caltrops,” Morio boasted. “We’ll teach those barefoot natives a lesson they won’t soon forget!”

Toshio hid a grin by placing his hand against his mouth. *“Their upperclassmen are in for quite the surprise, it seems.”*

■■■■

The operation to rescue Tamaki wasn’t all that exciting, and ended not long after it began. The three students—Hatsue, Ippei and Morio—approached the camp and signalled to each other using bird calls, until Ippei made a ruckus and started running off on his own.

The ‘Kondo savages’ took the bait, up until they wedged their feet over a field of spiky burs, causing them to curse, speak Hyugan, and break character. When Ippei recognized one of the voices as his older brother the deception had well and truly ended.

Toshio staggered towards the camp, towards an apologetic Tamaki surrounded by three very angry shinobi.

“What do you mean, it was all a test?!”

“So they were never any savages at all?!”

“I haven’t slept and ate in days because of this!”

Tamaki cleared his throat. “Ah-ahem, just consider this a rite of passage. The senior ninjas love giving trainees a tough time. Partying and dressing up as savages helps let off some steam. Well, in most

cases anyway. You should've seen the looks on their faces when they tried it on Toshio-san."

The Northerner nodded in his direction. "You had them tied up for days before we convinced you to let them go. Several of them pissed themselves before rescue came, if I recall."

"It would seem that sticking their feet with burs would've been far more efficient," Toshio sighed, before addressing the three students who were clearly frustrated. "Hatsue, Morio and Ippei. You were able to put my teachings into practice as well as implement your own methods. Ingenuity and resolve are among the two most important aspects of a ninja."

"Though your performance was far from perfect...you have passed your field examination. Congratulations."

After the initial shock subsided, the three hugged and cheered. All was well, yet before the victory party began, Morio had one question remaining. "You weren't actually poisoned, right Toshio-sensei? I mean...what if we didn't come up with a cure?"

"I may have died," Toshio said flatly and without expression. He then patted a hand against his left upper hip, where a hidden fold in his kimono contained an antidote for the very poison he had spent the past few days suffering from.

*"Satsu-kun...when I die it will be by your side. I swore as much to Fuji-sama. His teachings live on through me,"* Toshio thought to himself, as his gaze drifted over to the three ninjas currently laughing and stuffing themselves with treats. It was an indulgence they had earned, and the sight of their unrestrained joy made even the coldhearted shinobi smile.

*"Is it selfish, I wonder, to hope a part of me will live on through these three?"*

[Which character should March's side story be about?](#)

[Feb 7, 2019](#)

This poll will close at the end of February.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+4)

0%



Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+4)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+11)

6%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+9)

0%

Keiko, the maid (+14)

5%

Kohaku, the samurai (+23)

27%

Kuniko, the farmer (+6)

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+14)

17%

Momoko, the doctor (+7)

2%

Nishi, the yakuza (+18)

6%

Satsuma, the emperor (+2)

3%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+0)

3%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+24)

30%

Poll ended Feb 28, 2019 · 63 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapter 10](#)

[Feb 15, 2019](#)

Special bonus this month!

Chapter 4 has been updated with an aside at the start of the chapter. I highly recommend diving in there just to give it a look. It has some big story implications, which was why I wasn't able to release it until now. Hope you enjoy it!

Now onto Chapter 10, which has my favorite chapter name in the book: Ronin on Ice!

[Jacket Color](#)

[Feb 25, 2019](#)

In Book 3, what color did you pick for the Tanimura Champion's haori?

Red

Blue

Green

Black

Golden-Brown (I let Masami/Masashi decide)

179 votes total

[SoH Artwork: Book 4, Part 6](#)

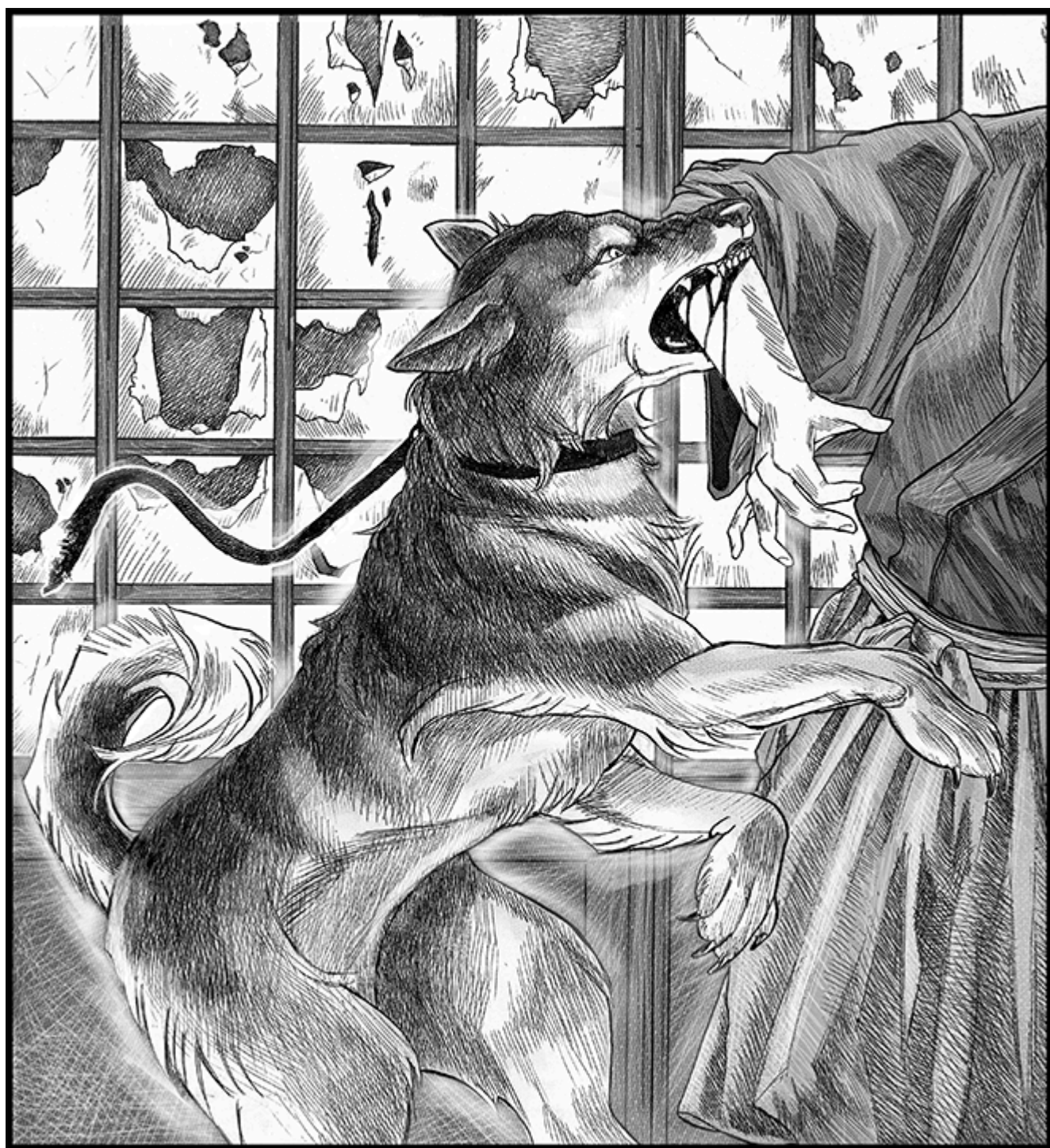
[Feb 28, 2019](#)

Doggos, mikos, and...**fa-fanservice??**

As usual, we've got some great illustrations this month courtesy of Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#)). I can't tell which is scarier: the wolf-dog or the shrine maidens! As for the fanservice, well, we get a tease at the fate of Momoko and what happened to her after her encounter with Junko/Jun back in Book 3.

Spoiler alert: it's not good! But I have a hunch we haven't seen the last of our favorite doctor!

**Chapter 14 Art: "Shikoku Wolf-Dog"**



Chapter 15 Art: "Mikos"





Chapter 4 Art: "Momoko in the Rain"





[Hairstyles](#)

[Mar 5, 2019](#)

What's your main character's hairstyle?

Short. [Pointy, spiky, or otherwise!]



Long. [No shampoo required!]

Ponytail. [No nonsense!]

Chonmage. [Don't call it a man bun!]

Long bangs. [For the perfect, emo antagonist!]

195 votes total

### [Side Story #9: Tanjiro's Big Break](#)

[Mar 7, 2019](#)

*<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>*



#### Side Story 9: Tanjiro's Big Break



■■ *Jijinto* ■■

“Alright Tanji, look over the ‘justments we made to the prototype. We ‘cided to fit an iron shell ‘cross the starboard side. The ‘Tekkōsen’ will revolutionize naval warfare and put Shibuya & Sons on the map!”

That was Shibuya himself talking, a man with only one actual son—Tanjiro—and two dozen adopted ones, as he considered himself a father to every shipwright who worked under him. Tanjiro's adopted brothers were much like his old man: illiterate, rowdy, and usually came into work drunk. It meant all the numbers, calculations and paperwork fell onto him.

“But Fa...Shibuya,” Tanjiro corrected himself, “that’ll throw off balance from portside! There’s no way to redistribute enough weight evenly to account for—”

“Just ‘member to turn the lanterns off when you’re done. We got them inspectors ‘morrow, don’t forget. Lot ridin’ on that contract!” Shibuya left the offices without saying goodbye, as Tanjiro was left to a stack of papers piled up to his chin. With the sun already setting, this wouldn’t be a late night.

*"It'll be a sleepless one,"* the disgruntled shipwright thought to himself. His words might as well have been thoughts, too, considering that nobody ever listened to him. His father and 'brothers' just did as they wished, and it was his job to clean up their messes. S&S was overly ambitious, taking on too many contracts all at once: from as far east as Shima to as south as Genfu. Knowing Shibuya, he'd accept a contract with the Kondo savages out west if the price was right.

And it didn't help that it was unbearably humid, as Jijinto sweltered in the hottest summer of recent memory. Tanjiro was parched and tired. Lonely, too, though all three problems were addressed at once by way of a grinning streetfighter at the front door.

"Yo, Tan-kun! Workin' hard or hardly working?"

"Hatchi-kun!" Tanjiro smiled, happy to see his childhood friend Hachirobei once more. The two had grown up on the same street, bonding together through cuts and bruises against sons of seahorses and other juvenile delinquents. The fighting never left Hatch as it had Tanjiro, and the young man now lived alone in his grandfather's run-down dojo.

Though Hatch was poor he was free and in high spirits—and speaking of spirits, he had a bottle of cheap saké and a couple of cups with him. Tanjiro put the stack of papers aside, and the two friends enjoyed a drink of the best, watered-down swill Hatch could afford.

"I reckoned you needed some liquid encouragement before your big day tomorrow. I sure would be stressed if I were you, Tan-kun!"

Tanjiro gave a nod and then a grimace, after he downed the bitter brew. "You mean the inspection for our new flagship vessel? I can already predict it'll go poorly. Assuming I can correct the balancing issues, we don't know the effect the iron plating will have on the haul. That's not even to mention that the shipment of lacquer is late. If she takes on water she'll be nothing but an expensive stone!"

Hatch scratched the back of his head. "Well, er, I was actually talkin' about that date your folks are setting you up with. A geisha, or something, right? What was her name?"

"Oh yes," Tanjiro sighed and stared into his cup. "Keiko, I believe it was. And it's not a date...it's a marriage interview. My father has already forgotten about it, but Mother will insist I go. But I don't want to," the shipwright downed his cup and held it out for another. "I don't want to get married, Hatchi-kun. I don't want to work on this ship, either...I just...I just want leave Jijinto!"

"Le-leave the city?!" Hatch gasped while pouring Tanjiro another cup; the result was a splash of watered-down saké all over his kimono and papers. "You've got to be pullin' my leg! I know what'cha need, old pal: a night on the town!" The streetfighter raised his fist and shook it, as he often did when he was particularly determined. "We'll throw some dice, talk up some ladies, and see if Eguchi has some discounted stock for his most loyal customers!"

Though Tanjiro knew there had to be more to life than gambling at Chō-Han and drinking at The Canary, it certainly seemed better than the alternative. He looked over at the stack of papers and thought about

Shibuya—the father who only let his son call him by his last name.

“Yeah, Hatchi. I’m ready to go.”

■■■■

Hatch was practicing the Ken Raijingu-Ryū’s Ishiheddo technique by pounding his head against the wall. This was the third gambling den that had been closed, for reasons unknown. There was only one place left to check, and it was owned by the Yamagata-gumi. Gambling at one of their joints was akin to funding the yakuza, which left a bad taste in the mouths of the two Jijinto locals.

“Guess we’ll just have to steal our supper from the yakuza! I’m feelin’ lucky tonight, Tan-kun!”

Tanjiro smiled and nodded. Hatch was nowhere near as good or as lucky a gambler as he thought he was, but so long as the shipwright was there to check for cheating, they usually pulled in a decent haul. At least when Tanjiro was able to get him to quit while he was ahead.

The mark of the Yamagata-gumi was cherry blossoms, and you knew you were in their territory by their decorative, floral designs across posters and walls. Tanjiro noticed the streets were oddly vacant—usually there were men, single or otherwise, heading towards or out of the yakuza-owned brothels.

*“Maybe the heat kept them away,”* Tanjiro thought to himself, as he swiped his sleeve against his sweaty face. *“Or maybe the prostitutes don’t look so good with their makeup running.”* In either case it was unusually quiet, as the two made their evening stroll into the gambling den.

“Evenin’ fellows, how are the bones rolling?” Hatch asked after sliding open the door. He then winced backwards and choked, as a powerful spew of smoke flew out from inside the chamber. Peering into the den, the two found a considerably less rowdy crowd than they were accustomed to. It was also packed: you couldn’t take a step in without stepping over somebody, especially considering that most of the occupants were laying around in a daze.

Coughs and murmurs came out like a chorus. “Shut the damn door!” was the consensus among them. Seeing that no gambling was taking place, the two obliged and left with the lingering scent of sweet, burning flowers on their clothes.

“I think that was opium they were burning in there, Hatchi-kun.”

“Opi-what? Man, so much for a night on the town!” The streetfighter gave the air an uppercut, followed by a knee and a pair of jabs. Tanjiro thought it was amusing—not his shadowboxing, but his innocence. Somehow Hatch knew little to nothing about drugs or even whores, though the streets they lived on had plenty of both. The girls he liked to chat up were working girls, whose profession Hatch never fully understood.

*“Are you going to be okay without me, Hatchi?”* It was a question Tanjiro wouldn’t speak aloud.

With newfound determination out of seemingly nowhere, Hatch was on a mission to find something for them to do even if it killed him. And it very well might, considering he was barging through yakuza-owned businesses. The man couldn't read, which meant signs were futile at stopping him from opening doors at random.

One such door had a voice from within: a loud, beautiful tenor that was amplified well beyond natural means. It was an angelic yet haunting voice, as from out here it only came as a murmur. Looking at the sign, Tanjiro read this to be the 'Gangaku Guild'. These were upscale music halls, hosting musicians both local and from around Hyuga. They were almost exclusively found in Yamato and Tonogasha; to have one here within the slums of Jijinto was something of a diamond in the rough.

As the two headed in their heads were assaulted with beads hanging in strings from the ceiling, and beneath their sandals—feet in Hatch's case—were ornate, silk carpets. It was like a different world in there, one that Tanjiro was well aware that they didn't belong in. He was nervous and ready to leave.

"Tan-kun! Get a load of this guy!" Hatch, however, had no such restraint. He was peering down into a lowered stage, that must've been dug well beneath the ground. It was an odd choice for a theatre but it was blissfully cool amid the hot summer night. Rich folk wearing silk sat in rows atop pillows, enjoying the show.

It was dark inside aside from the stage, which was lit with torches all around. Tanjiro motioned his loud friend to quiet as they gazed upon the performer: a man holding a fan to his lips. He was painted in white makeup with red around his eyes, and wore a flowing, white kimono with elaborate designs. No doubt it was kabuki attire.

"Arigato, thank you very much," he bowed with one arm outstretched. "For my next act, I would like to perform the art of *shigin*. For those in attendance who may not be aware, shigin is a modern expression of poetry with the verses not spoken, but sung. It is my hope that, through the power of my voice, I can bring new depths and life to these timeless pieces."

Tanjiro stood—or rather, knelt—in awe, as he was mesmerized by the performer's stage presence and charisma. For a young man who was a chronic mumblor and accustomed to being talked over and his opinions discarded, this man in makeup was a captivating hero.

"This next verse is written by the poet called Bashō. It is titled, 'Weather-Beaten Bones'. I know it's out of season but...it's important to remember, even amidst a burning summer, just how cold and cruel winter can be."

The performer brought the paper fan to his lips, and through the use of shugenja magic, it amplified his words throughout the underground music hall.

"Weatherrrr-beaten bonesss,

I will leeEeave your-ur heart exposed

to coooold, piercing winds.”

The way he extended the vowels and shifted his pitch was unlike anything Tanjiro had ever heard before. It was both eerie and calming, and so interesting that the shipwright could listen to it for hours on end. His companion, however, felt quite differently.

“Jeez, this guy’s lame. You wanna go check on Eguchi and The Canary?”

Hatch didn’t get a reply. Tanjiro didn’t even hear him—he could only hear the man on the stage, with the lights around him and his voice echoing throughout the hall.

“Poor little monkeeeey,

Sooooon, your crieeeeeess, will blend,

into this autumn wind.”

Tanjiro felt everything, everything from cold chills to cool melancholy as he was swept up by the speaker’s words. Jijinto and the summer heat no longer existed. For the shipwright born in the slums of the big city, he was, at that moment, high atop the Suijin Mountains, beside a crisp and flowing stream.

It was beautiful, but it wouldn’t last long.

“Hamasaki! We know you’re in there!” came a yell that needed no amplification to resonate throughout the hall. A samurai in a kimono of light blue with white, mountain trim entered through the doors, followed by several others in matching attire. These were the Shinsengumi: the elite forces of His Imperial Majesty. What they were doing in a Jijinto slum like this one was a question that went unanswered.

*\*THUD\**

A magically intensified thump sounded off as the performer tossed down his fan. He hurried to get off stage, though stumbled over his unorthodox attire. It was obvious that he wasn’t going to make it out in time. Seeing this and knowing that he was all there was between Hamasaki and certain death, the shipwright steeled his courage and stuck out a leg, tripping the lead samurai into a tumble down the dark staircase.

Chaos ensued among the wealthy spectators, all fighting to get out from their seats and evacuate as disorderly as possible. Those that weren’t yakuza were closely affiliated with them, and had little desire to be held and questioned by Hyuga’s premiere law enforcement agents.

Pain coursed through Tanjiro’s leg as he fell to a knee. Seeing what he had done to one of their own, a Shinsengumi unsheathed his katana and held it overhead. “Jijinto sewer rats! How dare you interfere!”

*\*clap\**



Hatch appeared in front of his friend, his hands held up together as if in prayer. Though he wasn't praying, he was holding back the blade with nothing but the palms of his hands. He fought back a cry as the blade's wicked edge rested atop his head. Half an inch lower and it would've cut his red headband into two. As it was, red of another sort came trailing down his face.

"Behold...the Ken Raijingu-Ryū secret technique! *Aianpāmu Bōei*—Iron Palm Defense!"

"Catching a blade with your hands? What are you, insane?!" the Shinsengumi stood paralyzed after watching such a display. This was a new technique even for Tanjiro, who was accustomed to the streetfighter's unconventional style. It was enough of a distraction to give the performer time to make his escape; the samurai had no choice but to leave the Jijinto locals or risk losing their prey altogether.

The adrenaline still remained after the men in light blue ran away, and the risk of death by means of a katana slash waned. Tanjiro rushed to Hatch's side, his childhood friend bleeding at the palms and forehead, too. He looked light-headed, which was a bad sign considering he was the most hard-headed man Tanjiro knew.

"Hatchi-kun! What were you thinking?! You almost died!"

"That technique still...needs 'ah bit of work. But I'm just glad you're okay, Tan-kun. Couldn't have your face gettin' ugly before your date tomorrow," Hatch said with a boyish grin. Few men could smile like that, let alone while tasting their own blood.

Tanjiro shook away the tears that welled in his eyes. "You've got to start looking after yourself! What if I'm not around?!"

"Tan...kun?" Hatch staggered and fell into Tanjiro's arms, his consciousness all but gone. Luckily they were in the Eastside slums, where there was clinic nearby. Hatch would never go to such a place willingly, but he needed help and fast.

That said, there was something on stage that beckoned out to the shipwright. As much as he cared for his friend, the paper fan infused with magical power called out to him. He thought of the strength, courage and charisma that the performer had. Tanjiro wanted it, too. More than anything, he had to have it for himself.

He snatched up the paper fan and in doing so, changed his life forever.

■■■■

"A clinic? Come on, Tan-kun, I'm not goin' in there. Just...take me to Eguchi's and...pour some saké on it."

Hatch had shifted into and out of consciousness all the way to Fish-Eye Hospital, as Tanjiro strained beneath the weight of his lanky friend he carried atop his back. It was past midnight and unlikely that the clinic was even open, but he didn't have any other options.

"I hear the nurse there is quite a beauty. Just your type, if you know what I mean," Tanjiro laughed or at least tried to. It was hard to be in good humor when you were carrying your dying friend in the sweltering heat.

The streetfighter must've been fully unconscious by now, as he made no reaction. Tanjiro hurried his pace as he came upon an odd spectacle: a crowd as big as one you'd find in an afternoon market, surrounding the corner-side clinic. Seeing these many people gathered this late at night was strange, even more so when you factored in who was among them: there was everyone from street toughs to grannies, from sailors to monks down from the temple.

Though the crowd was diverse, their chants were united. "We want more, we want more!"

Whatever they wanted, they were in Tanjiro's way. With his bleeding friend on his back, the shipwright gritted his teeth and waded on through the mass of people. Or at least he tried to. They wouldn't give way and when Tanjiro tried squeezing through one pushed him back and made him fall to a knee. But a scraped knee cap was nothing compared to Hatch's pain.

"Move! This is an emergency! My friend's dying! I need to get in there!" Tanjiro yelled and yet no one listened. He was powerless, just as before, just as he had been all his life. As a child he was bullied and picked on, except for one boy who always stood up for him. And now that boy was on his back and dying, and needed Tanjiro to—for the first time—stand up for himself.

"Not just stand. I have to speak up for myself, too," Tanjiro mumbled as he had a habit of doing, though this time he swore it would be his last. He stared at the paper fan he now held in his white-knuckled grip. *"The power of my voice...I'll let him hear me! I'll speak until I've nothing left to say!"*

Tanjiro took in a deep breath, and by the time he released it, the man known as Tan-kun the shipwright from the slums had died. In his place was...well, somebody very different.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please!" the announcer spoke in a grand, amplified voice. The crowd quieted all at once, with all their stares now on him. "This clinic isn't going anywhere—unless it grows a pair of legs, it'll still be here tomorrow morning! Hahahaha!" He laughed at his own joke, and to his shock the crowd followed suit.

Empowered, he raised his hand out high. "It's time to break this party up and go home! Get some sleep, and when the sun rises, I expect everyone to get into an orderly line!" The crowd looked among themselves, hesitated for a bit, and then dispersed. The path to the clinic was made clear for him and Hatch. The man with the fan was experiencing a high unlike any he had felt before.

"Good night, good citizens!"

With the way cleared and with newfound strength, Tanjiro hurried over to the clinic doors and convinced the old man barred behind them to open up. The aged fellow turned out to be the doctor, called Fujii, who thanked him for diffusing the riot.

"Thank goodness you arrived when you did. What a troublesome ruckus, and this late at night! We've had a sudden surge in demand for our pain relievers...not quite sure why, but our patients can't seem to have enough of them. Now then, where did I put my spectacles?"

After the doctor found them on his head, he proceeded to clean and stitch up Hatch's. Tanjiro stood by with a supportive hand atop his friend's shoulder. The other held the magical fan: his voice and the source of his power.

"Nurse...beauty...where?" Hatch mumbled. He must've been more conscious than Tanjiro realized, to recall what he had mentioned earlier. He wondered if the streetfighter had heard his new voice, too—though it was more than just that. Tanjiro had, for that moment, adopted a different personality. A stronger, friendlier one that everyone listened to and nobody ignored.

"Oh yes, my apprentice," Doctor Fujii readjusted his glasses. "She's sick today, I'm afraid. We lost a very important patient just last night. The death shook her very deeply. She's all but locked herself up in the lab...now what was I doing again?"

Tanjiro reminded the forgetful doctor to patch up Hatch, though after he did so the shipwright's attention drifted. He thought of the crowd that had built up outside, their apparent need for pain medication, and the gambling hall that had become an opium den.

And then he saw it, right there on the counter: poppies. Lots of them—ready to be made into that addictive drug. Someone at this clinic had found a way to make it and to do so quickly and cheaply, cheap enough for it to thrive even amongst the poorest in the Jijinto slums.

From what Tanjiro knew, it was possible to overdose from it. And that's when a plan formed inside his head. A way out of Jijinto. A new life, a new *him*.

"I sure am sorry, Tan-kun. We'll have a better outing next time, I promise!"

"Don't you worry about it, Hatchi," Tanjiro replied. It would be the last words he ever spoke to his old friend. After this night his new personality would take over. His life as a shipwright was at an end.

And his life as an announcer had just begun.

[Which character should April's\\* side story be about?](#)

[Mar 7, 2019](#)

**\*ATTENTION:** Unfortunately, I won't be doing a side story for the month of April. With the writing for Book 4 as close to being done as it is, I really need to devote my attention to these final few chapters.

Votes in this poll will still carry over.

This poll will close at the end of March.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+4)

5%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+4)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+15)

7%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+9)

0%

Keiko, the maid (+17)

12%

Kohaku, the samurai (+40)

30%

Kuniko, the farmer (+6)

2%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+25)

12%

Momoko, the doctor (+8)

5%

Nishi, the yakuza (+22)

14%

Satsuma, the emperor (+4)

2%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+2)

7%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+0)

5%

Poll ended Mar 31, 2019 · 43 votes total

[No Side Story for April](#)

[Mar 7, 2019](#)

Well, nine short stories in a row isn't too bad! Unfortunately I won't be able to make it ten: the writing for Book 4 is at the final chapters, and I really need to focus on them before everything else. I want to make sure they turn out 100%!

The side stories will continue in May. If you are an intermediate patron, I'd recommend going down to a dollar in the meanwhile. I want to make sure you're getting your money's worth, after all!

Anyway, thanks everybody for the support. Really looking forward to writing 'END OF BOOK FOUR' and getting this thing published!

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapter 11](#)

[Mar 15, 2019](#)



Chapter 11 may feel a little short (that's what she said ಠ\_ಠ), but trust me under the hood its not. Half or more of the chapter changes based on whether MC is attracted to men or women—yep, it's one of *those* kind of chapters!

Though there's a bit of romance it's really more of a comfort scene for both MC and Junko/Jun. This chapter also introduces the first <Author's Warning> of Book 4. Though I may add more later, there's only two planned in the Book and the other occurs in a much later chapter. I felt this warning was very appropriate, given the nature of Junko/Jun's horrific childhood.

For those who decide to read the more mature/uncomfortable passages, please let me know either in the comments or on discord how it made you feel! Whether it was too much or right on the money, I'd like to know!

Thanks and please enjoy:

[Choicescript Games](#)

[Mar 26, 2019](#)

Besides SoH, how many other choicescript games do you play? (Games by Choice of Games and Hosted Games)

SoH is the only one!

There's one or two more I play.

I play a few others.

I play a lot of choicegames!

193 votes total

[SoH Artwork: Book 4, Part 7](#)

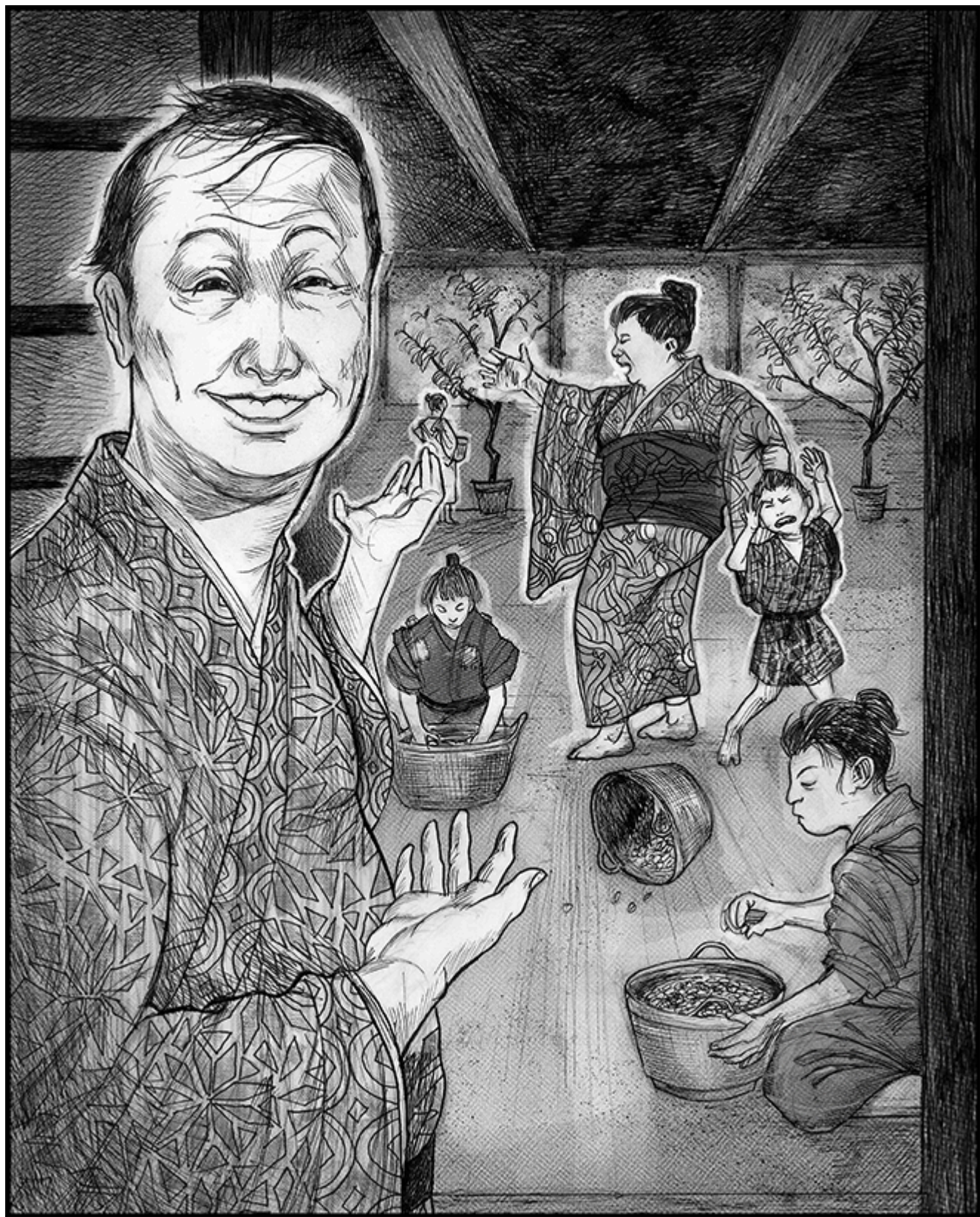
[Mar 30, 2019](#)

Child labor, a poet, and...**a collage**?!

We've got some more illustrations this month, thanks to Dana Sanguir! ([website](#), [instagram](#)) Chapter 16's art really gives me the creeps, and I hope it has the same effect on you readers! Prepare yourselves: a certain Genfu couple from Book 1 is making their (unfortunate) return!

I love the photo Dana took because it's so neat to see the artwork in their physical form. Looking back at all the work she's done, it's amazing to see all the shots, characters and shading done for each. I get her to draw some pretty weird stuff—a trend that'll only continue as we reach the remaining chapters!

### **Chapter 16 Art: "The Oyamas"**



Chapter 17 Art: "Bashō"





Art Collage





## [Memory Challenges](#)

[Apr 6, 2019](#)

How do you feel about the memory challenge questions in SoH?

My memory's no good, so I'm not a fan!

My memory is fine, I just don't like them.

I don't feel strongly one way or the other.

They're good at keeping me on my toes.

I love them! Keep 'em coming!



194 votes total

[Which character should May's side story be about?](#)

[Apr 7, 2019](#)

Side stories are returning next month! Thanks everybody for being so understanding about the break. With the writing for Book 4 finished and demo released, we're back to our regular scheduled programming!

This poll will close at the end of April.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+6)

6%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+4)

1%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+18)

3%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+9)

1%

Keiko, the maid (+22)

6%

Kohaku, the samurai (+53)

33%

Kuniko, the farmer (+7)

1%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+30)

18%

Momoko, the doctor (+10)

3%

Nishi, the yakuza (+28)

8%

Satsuma, the emperor (+5)

3%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+5)

12%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+2)

4%

Poll ended Apr 30, 2019 · 90 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapter 12](#)

[Apr 15, 2019](#)

It's a rough day for the self-employed here in the US (Tax Day), but at least we've got a new early access chapter to soften the blow! Speaking of taxes though, the amount I owed the IRS this year was the nearly the same amount this Patreon made me in 2018. That's how important and thankful I am to all you patrons! Trust me: owing the IRS money is NOT a situation you want to be in!



As for Chapter 12, if you're following along on the [beat sheet](#) you'll notice that we're entering into the B story of Book 4. In this case, it's political! Regardless of how you feel about politics, I think everyone will be able to enjoy it. Look forward to the Fun and Games in the next few chapters as well!

Now please enjoy:



[Enjoy Responsibly!](#)

[Apr 20, 2019](#)

A new path into the spirit world presents itself!

[Preferred Platform](#)

[Apr 25, 2019](#)

What do you play SoH (and other choicegames) on?

Phone (Android)

Phone (Apple)

Tablet (Android)

Tablet (Apple)

Computer (via Steam)

Computer (via Other)

Something else!

215 votes total

[SoH Artwork: Book 4, Part 8](#)

[Apr 29, 2019](#)

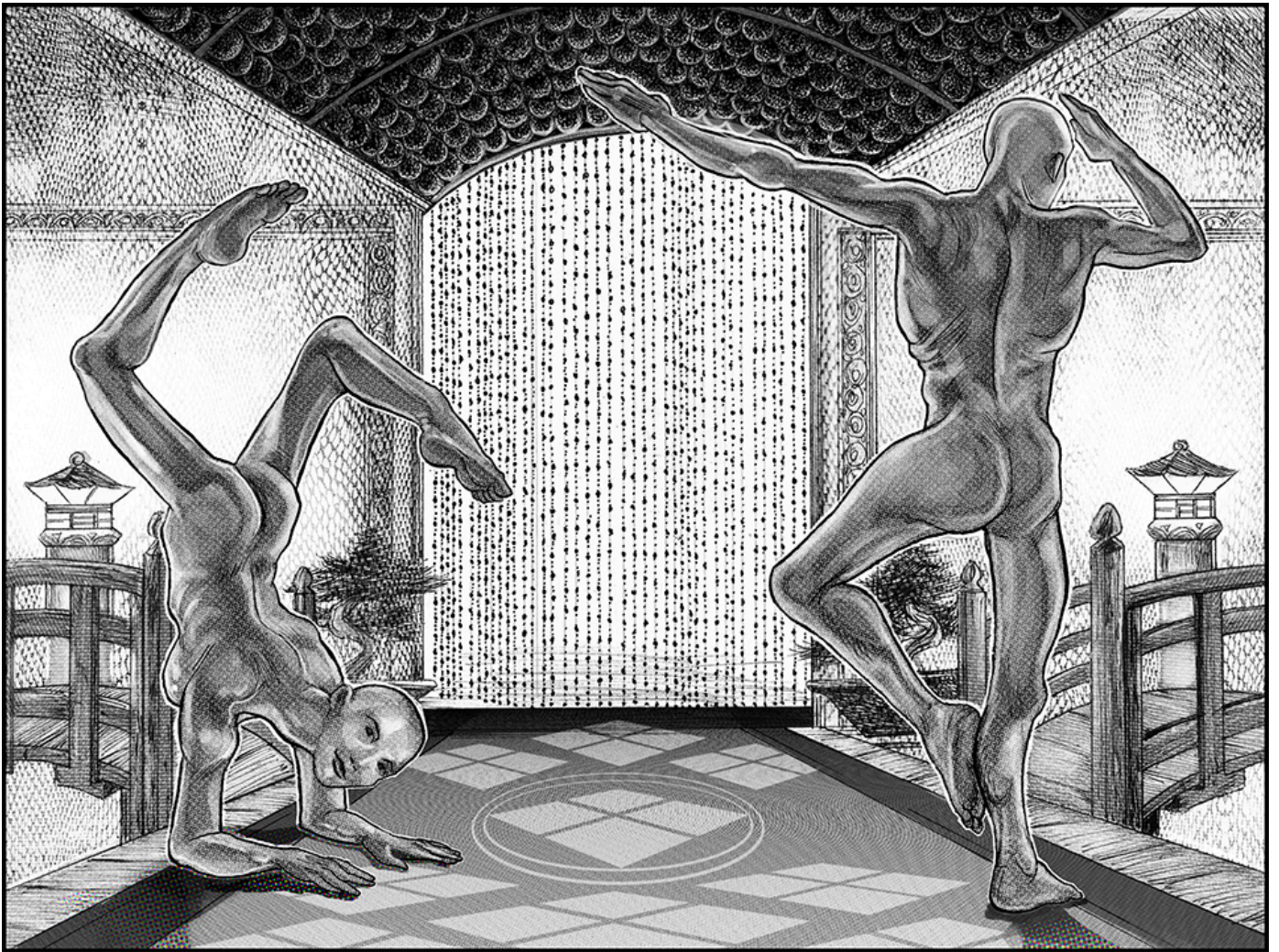
Dabbing and...**Teddy Roosevelt in a birdcage?!**

Things have taken a turn for the weird in Hyuga, and we have Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#)) to thank and/or blame for it! I love getting the atmospheric stuff illustrated, like we see in Chapter 18's art. It really hammers down a scene's tone to readers! In this case, that tone is: WTF?

And Chapter 19's art shows us some very...interesting characters to say the least!

**Chapter 18 Art: "Masquerade Greeters"**





Chapter 19 Art: "Cultists"





## [Visual Novels](#)

[May 5, 2019](#)

Do you play any Visual Novels?

Nope.

I used to.

I've enjoyed a few recently.

I'm addicted to them! Help me!

What the heck are visual novels?

168 votes total

### [Side Story #10: Kohaku's Rodeo \(Female Version\)](#)

[May 7, 2019](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>



#### Side Story 10: Kohaku's Rodeo (Female Version)



##### ■■ Western Hyuga ■■

Kohaku had always been among the first to rise and start her morning duties back in Shima, but here on her family's ranch in the Westlands she was the last one up. The horses were already grazing and the cows were getting milked by the time Kohaku had finished her first kata.

Kata was a pattern of swordsmanship footwork and strikes, memorized and drilled to the point of perfection. The samurai preferred doing hers early—when the day was still quiet—but finding quiet on a ranch was like finding a chopstick in a barrel of hay. Even so, Kohaku took comfort in having the weight of her armor against her shoulders and the feel of stingray skin in her hands.

*"If only I wasn't unarmed and wearing that silly silk kimono,"* Kohaku grumbled, *"I would've put an end to that horsethief there and then!"* The samurai funneled her frustration through her katana, which she swung with enough force to make a loud whistle as it cut through the air.

Last night had been Kohaku's birthday party, an event her mother had used to find her a suitor and settle her down on the ranch. When the wayward daughter pieced it all together she stormed off, leaving her old friends-turned-strangers to their merriment, seeking the only true friend she had: a warhorse named Tatsuya.

She had found him but also someone else, too: a Kondo savage making off with one of the ranch's prized horses. With Tatsuya's reigns tied in knots, the samurai was unable to give chase. That feeling of helplessness did not put Kohaku in an agreeable mood. But theft was a matter for the law, not her. She was a samurai and she had to train like one.

"Mornin' Koha-kun," said one of the older ranchers. "We're down a hand since that Yuuta boy never showed. Wonderin' if you could help us herd this next batch of steers."

Kohaku wiped the sweat from her brow. Even this early in the morning the heat was immense. "I'm sorry...but I'm not a rancher any longer. I have to focus on my training."

The older ranch hand shrugged. "Ain't no shame in gettin' your hands dirty. Even for a sam'rai, I reckon!"

Kohaku's mood went sour as the rancher went on his way. She had trouble focusing on her kata with all the distractions both outside her head and otherwise. *"It's not sam'rai it's samurai! You people can't even talk correctly!"* She was so upset she didn't hear Susumu approach, and after a backswing of her katana she sliced the sheriff into pieces!

*\*rip\**

Or at least, his hat. The sheriff jumped back well too late and stumbled, ending with a thump on the ground. After catching her breath Kohaku lowered her hand to help him up.

"Awh gosh darnit," Susumu mumbled, "just bought me this hat last week! You've got to watch where you swing that knife o' yours, Koha-chan."

The sheriff was here to ask questions about the horsethief to help identify him. Kohaku gave all the information she could: that it was a tall, Kondo male. Though the detail of him dropping a wado—an old-style coin—was one Kohaku kept to herself. It didn't feel relevant at the time.

"Gotta say that don't help much: one dirtskin looks the same as any," Susumu chuckled. "Where's Lady Nanbu? Like to ask a few questions about the horse if I could."

Kohaku looked around and saw her mother in the distance, carrying a couple buckets of feed for the calves. Even from afar she didn't steady on her feet. After calling out to her, the older woman staggered and then finally, collapsed.

"Mother!"

■■■■

Kohaku was standing at her mother's bedside. The irony was that this was where the samurai had expected to find her, at least according to the letter that brought her to the Westlands in the first place.

Etsuji, the family's doctor, made the final diagnosis. "Doesn't look like heatstroke to me, Ai-chan. Even still, I'd take it easy out there all the same. Might be from stress? I know you're hosting that big race come next week, could that be—"

Lady Nanbu waved the white-haired doctor off. "Much obliged for you comin' out here for a house call, Etsu-kun. But I'll be fine...just had me a trip is all. Go get yourself home before it becomes an oven out there, you hear?"

The doctor heard and bowed before letting himself out. Etsuji was rarely wrong in his examinations, and her mother's curt dismissal was enough for Kohaku to be concerned.

"Are you worried about the stolen horse, Mother? I am certain Susumu will—"

"That was no simple stallion that dirtskin hooked, Koha-chan. That was a racehorse, one of the finest I ever raised. Quick enough to give Bullseye a run for her money back in her prime," Lady Nanbu shook her head and looked outside the window where the race track was.

"The 'Westland Races' is what we're calling it. Lords from all 'round Hyuga will be coming here, gambling and havin' a good ol' time. My hope was to peak their interest in investing in the Westlands again, but..." she shook her head. "That horse was bought by a wealthy Northern lord for the race. I haven't ran the financials but if we don't get that horse back..."

Lady Nanbu didn't finish her sentence. She didn't have too—Kohaku understood that maintaining a ranch out here wasn't easy nor was it cheap, and that there were as many ups and downs as tumbleweeds on the prairie. But this wasn't just an issue of funding. Kohaku caught her gaze going towards the rancher's jacket and hat that hung against the wall.

"It would dishonor Father's name. The pride of the Nanbu clan is at stake here," the samurai closed her eyes and nodded. While she didn't know the appeal of being a rancher, she had a firm grasp on honor and pride. What she had to do next was clear. "What's the name of the ranch hand who was supposed to be guarding the stables?"

Her mother grinned. "Goes by Yuuta. You'll find his like over at ole' Salty's. But be careful out there...the Westlands ain't quite the way you left her, you hear?"

"Likewise."

■■■■

"Salty's? Oh you mean the Salt Lick Saloon," Susumu grunted, adjusting his seat in the saddle. The two were off on the only lead they had, towards the closest bar around. "Yeah that joint ain't ran by him no more. Shame really, old codger kept rough crowd out. Now it ain't a place to bring your youngins. Same could be said for all Ojika if I'm honest."



Ojika was a town—a *frontier* town—which meant it was really little more than a pitstop for merchants passing through. Kohaku had fond memories of getting sweets after visiting the barber, and listening to her father tell stories at Salty's about his battles in the Golden Era.

"You're the sheriff, aren't you? What's keeping you from bringing law to this town?" Kohaku asked while looking the place over. Many of the buildings were run-down and in disrepair, while plenty of men sat about and gave the two of them stares. Though the sun was fully out Ojita never looked shadier.

"It ain't my fault! Gettin' a deputy to stick around these parts is like pullin' teeth. Sure I work 'em hard but it's honest work. Pay ain't great but it's pay all the same."

"When given the choice, folks will always seek easier means of employment," Kohaku replied coldly, shooting an even colder glance at the woman beckoning out to her. "It don't—it *doesn't* make it right. Would if only Bushido could be imported from the East and not just their silk."

"Silk? Cotton is king out here, Koha-chan. That's a sayin' you better get used to hearing!"

It wasn't until then that Kohaku noticed that everybody was wearing cotton, many in styles the samurai had never seen before. The men wore tight vests and pants while the women wore draping fabric over their legs that fluffed outwards.

"Them's called skirts, all the rage now'a'days," Susumu whistled and tilted his hat at a lady nearby. "I ain't got the ryō to keep up with local fashions none, but it's a boomin' industry 'round here."

To Kohaku they looked like foreigners, not that the samurai had ever seen any. But it made her feel even more like a stranger in her own home. "*Though I suppose this isn't my home any longer.*"

"Well here we are," Susumu said as he hobbled off his horse. "Hitch 'er up and we'll go on in. And don't you worry about them takin' off with your horse: these lads shape up when I'm around. Those that know any better, anyway!"

Kohaku was the opposite of relieved as she hitched up Tatsuya. She whispered a few comforting words before parting. "I won't be gone long, Tatsu-kun."

Bars in the Westlands were called 'saloons' and aside from the wooden posts outside to hitch your horse, there was another key difference: the door. Saloon doors were nothing like their shoji counterparts: they made out of wood for starters, and had the top and bottom cut out with a crease in the middle that you had to walk into to open. The benefit was that it allowed sunlight and a crossbreeze in; the downside was that it allowed sound to pass by freely.

"Heads up—Law's in town!"

"I ain't 'fraid of the sheriff. He's a pushover."

"That ain't no sheriff. Don't know nobody who steps so loudly."

Kohaku rolled her eyes. She was a heavy stepper because under her rancher's jacket—a blanket with a hole for your head to go through—was a suit of samurai armor. She didn't wear the helmet due to the heat but couldn't bring herself to wear the conical rancher's hat, either. A bit of sunburn on her neck was a small price to pay for her dignity.

*\*creak\**

The room went silent as the samurai pushed through the doors. All eyes were on her—there had to be a dozen pairs at least, which was a good many for a bar this time of day. These types must not have had jobs. Or at least not the honest sort.

Judging by their body language, this group of misfits was led by a pair of twins. Two boys that were men now, at least in age: the Oshiro brothers. Kohaku hadn't seen them since they were knee-high to a grasshopper. They had certainly changed. A shame it was for the worse.

"Susu-chan, who the hell is this broad?" one of the twins jeered. "She's the fattest one you've brought here yet! Hehehe!"

The rest of the lot laughed and that included Susumu, too. The sheriff scratched his head and looked like a pushover instead of a member of law enforcement. It was little wonder Ojita had turned into a cesspool of villainy.

"Yuuta. Where is he?" Kohaku asked, unamused.

"Oh, she wants Yuuta-san? Sorry, don't think you're his...wait..." the other Oshiro brother quieted, squinting his eyes as he began to recall who he was speaking to. "Is that you, Koha-chan?"

An outlaw who was especially drunk staggered over to the samurai. He had his fists raised, and after spitting a wad of chewing tobacco into a spittoon—a jar on the floor that was as sanitary as it sounded—he demanded a fight. "You rice paddie-pickin' outsider! Get them gloves up—I'mma wallop you back the way you came!"

Kohaku didn't do anything except give the nuisance a look of disdain. She didn't even try to dodge the punch that came right for her gut. When you wore a full samurai gosoku, you didn't have to.

*\*thump\**

"Itai! It hurts! My hand!" the outlaw clutched his now broken fist. It was a rough way to learn that Kohaku—or her armor at least—was made of tougher stuff than the cotton these lowlifes were used to.

The samurai undid the clasps of her jacket, the wool fabric falling off her armored shoulders. Turning to the right, she let the whole saloon catch a glimpse at what she was carrying. "I am only going to ask you once more: where is Yuuta?"

Murmurs of “sam’ri” broke out from the group. There wasn’t a more definitive symbol of her station than the katana at her hip. It was what separated her from their ilk. Had she not left for Shima when she did, she could very well have been among them. Just the thought of it made her reaffirm her devotion to General Shatao. *“My true service remains with you, Shatao-sama.”*

One twin looked to the other and they both nodded in unison. “Alright, we’ll take you to him. Yuuta is somethin’ of a local rodeo star. Got his own gang of fans—more than even that oversized kitchen knife can handle.”

*“A rodeo? How long has it been since I went to one of those?”*

■■■■

The rodeo was an exhibition for ranchers to show off their skills, and was as good an excuse as any to drink, gamble and holler out here in the Westlands. Whereas horses were only used as beasts of burden or tools of war out East, here on the prairie they had far more utility: including those that were bred to toss off their riders.

If it didn’t make sense to you, well, you weren’t a Westlander.

“Yeehaw! A whole twenty seconds that time!” one of the members of the crowd shouted. He was holding a pair of buckets along with a measuring stick: a water clock, which was a crude but mostly effective means of measuring time. Very important for scoring your performance on a wild buck.

The man at the center of the fenced-in field of dirt jumped from the ground and took a bow to the small group of onlookers. This must’ve been practice for an upcoming show. By the time the rancher had recovered his hat and dusted himself off Kohaku was at the gates, sitting upon Tatsuya with her arms crossed as she waited.

“Well if this don’t take the rag off the bush. Never thought I’d see the Oshiro brothers pallin’ around with the Law. Then again, never thought I’d see a deputy suited up like a sam’rai, neither,” the rancher said, eyeing Kohaku from top to bottom.

Yuuta spat on the ground. “Got sick n’ tired of Lady Nanbu going off on me. Pay was worse than cow feed, too. Had me a better offer...even got me Blondie over there as part of the deal. He’s a wild Palomino. A much funner ride than that old Nanbu breed you’re sittin’ on.”

Tatsuya snorted as if he understood he was being insulted. The Palomino was a pretty boy, even Kohaku would admit, with it’s golden coat and light, cream-colored mane. It was sure to be the favorite of the show, but flashiness was hardly the only aspect of a steed. Tatsuya was a warhorse: the far stronger of the two and trained for endurance. Not to mention he had a warm temperament and was good around people—an important aspect when part of Kohaku’s job in Shima was conducting inspections on the local farming villages.

"I wouldn't recommend angering Tatsuya-kun. Or me," Kohaku threatened. "I want to know who paid you off. That Palomino couldn't have been cheap."

Yuuta let out a whistle to signal for his rodeo roadies to come on in. The Oshiro brothers and their group parted as they approached. Apparently they were lower on the pecking order, and it wasn't hard to see why: most of these rodeo watchers had an extended kama—a hand scythe—strapped to their backs. Westlander scythes were longer than the ones out East as they were used to cut hay, not rice.

"Yuuta-san is trainin' hard for the show tonight. Don't need distractions, 'specially not from out of a tin can. You hear?"

Susumu gulped as the group surrounded them. Kohaku placed a hand on her katana as she tallied up her opponents. They were twenty and too many, especially since she could hardly expect aid from the brothers. Or the sheriff either, for that matter.

"N-now now, hold your horses!" Susumu said, taking off his hat and wiping the sweat from his brow. "We're just havin' a friendly talkin' is all. A winsome conversation, ain't that right Koha-chan?"

Kohaku took Tatsuya by the reigns and made off like she was retreating. That got plenty of laughter and hollers from the crowd. But they quieted up when she spurred Tatsuya forth, jumping over the fence and into the arena. She had him gallop a quick lap around before returning to the gates.

"My name is Kohaku Nanbu. As a samurai I have the right to kirisute gomen. Do not make me strike you down for the shame you have brought upon my family."

Yuuta looked around to his buddies who had each taken a step back. Apparently they didn't like their chances against a mounted samurai who knew how to ride a steed.

The rancher spat to hide his nerves. "Kohaku Nanbu...the wayward daughter herself. See you mean business. Then how's about we settle this the Westlander way. If you can ride on Blondie longer than I can ride your Tatsuya, I'll tell 'ya all you need to know. If you can't, then I ain't ever want to see your face 'round these parts again. Sound good, sam'ri?"

It *didn't* sound good. Tatsuya wasn't a bucking horse and the Palomino was all but wild. The logical side of Kohaku was telling her not to take this bet, but the rest of her felt like her pride was being challenged. Not her pride as a samurai, but as something else.

Something she had tried to bury under Bushido years ago.

■■■■■

"*Tatsu-kun...you really are too polite, you know?*" Kohaku let out a sigh as Yuuta rode the warhorse without much difficulty at all. If there was any issue it was that the rancher had trouble reining in Tatsu's speed—the horse was accustomed to a heavier, armored rider. Yuuta was little more than skin, bones and attitude.

"You sure this thing has seen battle? He was so gentle I was about to take a nap up there!"

Susumu placed a hand on Kohaku's shoulder and brought her aside, whispering in a worried tone. "Now if this ain't a hair in the butter, Koha-chan. Why don't we call this farce for what it is and high tail it home. No need to look like a fool out there. Drawin' quite the crowd as it is."

The sheriff didn't need to remind her. Kohaku grimaced as half of Ojita came in for a midday showdown. Bets were being made and not in the samurai's favor.

"Woah now, woah!" Kohaku had difficult even mounting the Palomino. As soon as the samurai had a foot on the left stirrup the buck reared up. The crowd had a good laugh as the samurai struggled to even sit sturdy on the saddle.

Buck riding at rodeos were done with only one hand on the reins. Two would get you disqualified. Kohaku held up her left hand and gave the flankman—the rancher holding Blondie behind the gate—a nod.

*\*NEEeeiiGH\**

Kohaku immediately regretted not wearing her helmet, for the way this buck bucked it wasn't a matter of it but when the samurai was going to get tossed. She couldn't recall the last time she had fallen from a saddle—she hadn't done any foolish stunts on horseback since the incident with General Shatao's son all those years ago.

*"Now's not the time to be thinking of Isamu-kun!"*

Blondie shook left and low then right and high, spinning around and bucking even harder than he had with Yuuta. From the way his ears flicked Kohaku knew this wasn't an act: the steed was scared. His tail also flipped about wildly, a certain sign of stress. Though the fact that Kohaku—the rider—could see the horse's tail at all was a poor sign for her chances. She was hardly on the saddle at all!

"Woah! Wo—AH!" The samurai let out a yell as she was yanked off with a sudden twist. She landed face up, with the raging horse still above her. It was the most dangerous spot you could be in, and she couldn't roll out before a hoof and several hundred pounds of equine muscle came down on her.

*\*THUMP\**

Kohaku's body convulsed. Blondie's hoof had landed right at the center of her chest piece—at her heart. Were she not wearing her armor, she'd be lucky to walk away at all. As it was, she got to her knees and gasped for breath. The dent in her armor was larger than any arrow could cause.

"Say that tin can saved your hide, sam'rai. That rhymed didn't it?" Yuuta asked and his goons chuckled. "Looks like I win this bet. Now get gaited."



Kohaku gulped. Not out of fear but because the dent in her armor made it difficult to breathe. She wanted nothing more than to leave these lowlives and the Westlands entirely. She was a samurai, not some horse jockey with a deathwish. This wasn't what she trained for.

Though just as she was about to turn in, she spotted a rider up the hill overlooking the arena. She couldn't tell who the rider was from this distance, but she didn't have to, because Kohaku could've recognized Lady Nanbu's black and white-spotted mare "Bullseye" anywhere.

The samurai took another look at Blondie. Though they had only spent several seconds together, the rider had learned more than a little about the golden coated steed. Though whether or not it was enough remained to be seen.

"I want another chance," Kohaku declared. "This time, I want us to take the horses out at the same time. Unless of course you're scared, Yuu-chan."

"Don't you 'Yuu-chan' me! You want a second chance? Fine! But you fall off again and I'm gettin' a new warhorse. An old Nanbu stock. Got it?"

Kohaku gulped. She looked at Tatsuya, who didn't seem interested in the conversation in the slightest. To wager her best friend in a bet like this...

"...all right, rancher. Got yourself a deal. Saddle up."

The crowd—which had grown to the point of vendors showing up—let out a collective gasp and began to cheer. Betting your horse on a race or a rodeo was like gambling your farm on a game of Chō-Han: it wasn't smart but it was always entertaining.

Sheriff Susumu was sweating several buckets worth down his forehead, all of it collecting into his curly moustache. "Koha-chan, you've gotta back out!"

"This isn't my first rodeo, Susumu-san. Now if you would be so kind," she turned her back to the sheriff, though not out of contempt. "Please untie the clasps of my armor. I need to take it off."

"Y-you sure about that? Reckon you had one foot in the grave when that hoof came down! You don't know what Lady Nanbu'll do to me if I let her girl get hurt!"

Kohaku repeated her request. She had faced and killed armed warriors before on request of her lord General Shatao. Compared to fighting bandits and Kondo savages, this was nothing.

"My weight was too much for you, wasn't it boy?" the samurai patted the stallion who neighed wildly in response. "But it's more than just that. You're in pain—let me see if this helps."

With a quick undoing of a few buckles, Kohaku freed the saddle from the stallion and tossed it aside.

“Bareback?! You’re gonna ride it without a saddle?!” Susumu yelled and the crowd repeated the sentiment. It did sound like a terrible idea, but Kohaku could already tell that Blondie was settling down. That saddle wasn’t the proper fit: it had been pinching it’s sides, and if Kohaku’s suspicions were correct...

“You want to be mounted from the right and not the left, don’t you?” the samurai petted the Palomino and hopped on from its right side—the way Kondos did. It turned out this wasn’t a bucking horse at all: instead, he had been raised by the Kondos Who Don’t Bow. They rode bareback, and though doing so made the samurai feel like a savage, it had practically turned the stallion into a docile pony.

“Begin!” the flankman shouted after the two ranchers gave them the signal. Blondie came out first—with a steady trot, not a wild jerk. Kohaku kept one hand on its mane of cream-colored hair and rose the other high, showing full control over the steed.

The same could not be said for Yuuta.

“Woah! Hey! Slow down, kuso!”

There was something Yuuta didn’t know about Tatsuya: he was extremely jealous. Seeing his owner riding another horse made his attitude shift from friendly to hostile, and the jerking motions only grew wilder as Kohaku petted and praised the other steed. When Tatsuya saw her reach in her sash for a carrot—the warhorse’s favorite treat—the show was over.

“Ahhh!” Yuuta screamed as he fell behind Tatsuya who sprinted ahead to get at the carrot. Kohaku grinned and tossed the treat high into the air, which the horse jumped for and engulfed in a single bite.

The crowd loved it.

■■■■

“Kuso...so I got paid off with a dirtskin’s steed. Well he’s still a looker at least,” Yuuta sighed and took off his hat. Then he bowed—or rather, gave a stiff head nod. “Ridin’ a buck bareback...never knew a sam’rai could get her hands dirty like that.”

“She ain’t no typical swordslinger,” Susumu grinned and gave Kohaku a pat on the back. “She’s a Westlander samurai, yesiree.”

The talking then turned to business, and business was apparently soft, white and fluffy.

“I was paid off by the Cotton King,” Yuuta admitted. He elaborated when Kohaku gave him a blank stare. “You know, the new farmer ‘round buyin’ up plots of land from wranglers. More than a few ranchers have turned in their stirrups ‘cause of him.”

“Not this one,” Kohaku replied, looking back up at the hill though no one was there. With nothing more than a nod and a pull on the reigns, the samurai headed out to the farms where cotton was king.

“Giddyup, Tatsu-kun! We’ve got a horse to find.”

## [Side Story #10: Kohaku's Rodeo \(Male Version\)](#)

[May 7, 2019](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>

### Side Story 10: Kohaku's Rodeo (Male Version)

#### ■■ Western Hyuga ■■

Kohaku had always been among the first to rise and start his morning duties back in Shima, but here on his family's ranch in the Westlands he was the last one up. The horses were already grazing and the cows were getting milked by the time Kohaku had finished his first kata.

Kata was a pattern of swordsmanship footwork and strikes, memorized and drilled to the point of perfection. The samurai preferred doing his early—when the day was still quiet—but finding quiet on a ranch was like finding a chopstick in a barrel of hay. Even so, Kohaku took comfort in having the weight of his armor against his shoulders and the feel of stingray skin in his hands.

*“If only I wasn't unarmed and wearing that silly silk kimono,”* Kohaku grumbled, *“I would've put an end to that horsethief there and then!”* The samurai funneled his frustration through his katana, which he swung with enough force to make a loud whistle as it cut through the air.

Last night had been Kohaku's birthday party, an event his mother had used to find him a suitor and settle him down on the ranch. When the wayward son pieced it all together he stormed off, leaving her old friends-turned-strangers to their merriment, seeking the only true friend he had: a warhorse named Tatsuya.

He had found him but also someone else, too: a Kondo savage making off with one of the ranch's prized horses. With Tatsuya's reigns tied in knots, the samurai was unable to give chase. That feeling of helplessness did not put Kohaku in an agreeable mood. But theft was a matter for the law, not him. He was a samurai and he had to train like one.

"Mornin' Koha-kun," said one of the older ranchers. "We're down a hand since that Yuuta boy never showed. Wonderin' if you could help us herd this next batch of steers."

Kohaku wiped the sweat from his brow. Even this early in the morning the heat was immense. "I'm sorry...but I'm not a rancher any longer. I have to focus on my training."

The older ranch hand shrugged. "Ain't no shame in gettin' your hands dirty. Even for a sam'rai, I reckon!"

Kohaku's mood went sour as the rancher went on his way. He had trouble focusing on his kata with all the distractions both outside his head and otherwise. *"It's not sam'rai it's samurai! You people can't even talk correctly!"* He was so upset he didn't hear Susumu approach, and after a backswing of his katana he sliced the sheriff into pieces!

*\*rip\**

Or at least, his hat. The sheriff jumped back well too late and stumbled, ending with a thump on the ground. After catching his breath Kohaku lowered his hand to help him up.

"Awh gosh darnit," Susumu mumbled, "just bought me this hat last week! You've got to watch where you swing that knife o' yours, Koha-kun."

The sheriff was here to ask questions about the horsethief to help identify him. Kohaku gave all the information he could: that it was a tall, Kondo male. Though the detail of him dropping a wado—an old-style coin—was one Kohaku kept to himself. It didn't feel relevant at the time.

"Gotta say that don't help much: one dirtskin looks the same as any," Susumu chuckled. "Where's Lady Nanbu? Like to ask a few questions about the horse if I could."

Kohaku looked around and saw his mother in the distance, carrying a couple buckets of feed for the calves. Even from afar she didn't steady on her feet. After calling out to her, the older woman staggered and then finally, collapsed.

"Mother!"

■■■■

Kohaku was standing at his mother's bedside. The irony was that this was where the samurai had expected to find her, at least according to the letter that brought him to the Westlands in the first place.

Etsuji, the family's doctor, made the final diagnosis. "Doesn't look like heatstroke to me, Ai-chan. Even still, I'd take it easy out there all the same. Might be from stress? I know you're hosting that big race come next week, could that be—"

Lady Nanbu waved the white-haired doctor off. “Much obliged for you comin’ out here for a house call, Etsu-kun. But I’ll be fine...just had me a trip is all. Go get yourself home before it becomes an oven out there, you hear?”

The doctor heard and bowed before letting himself out. Etsuji was rarely wrong in his examinations, and his mother’s curt dismissal was enough for Kohaku to be concerned.

“Are you worried about the stolen horse, Mother? I am certain Susumu will—”

“That was no simple stallion that dirtskin hooked, Koha-kun. That was a racehorse, one of the finest I ever raised. Quick enough to give Bullseye a run for her money back in her prime,” Lady Nanbu shook her head and looked outside the window where the race track was.

“The ‘Westland Races’ is what we’re calling it. Lords from all ‘round Hyuga will be coming here, gambling and havin’ a good ol’ time. My hope was to peak their interest in investing in the Westlands again, but...” she shook her head. “That horse was bought by a wealthy Northern lord for the race. I haven’t ran the financials but if we don’t get that horse back...”

Lady Nanbu didn’t finish her sentence. She didn’t have too—Kohaku understood that maintaining a ranch out here wasn’t easy nor was it cheap, and that there were as many ups and downs as tumbleweeds on the prairie. But this wasn’t just an issue of funding. Kohaku caught his gaze going towards the rancher’s jacket and hat that hung against the wall.

“It would dishonor Father’s name. The pride of the Nanbu clan is at stake here,” the samurai closed his eyes and nodded. While he didn’t know the appeal of being a rancher, he had a firm grasp on honor and pride. What he had to do next was clear. “What’s the name of the ranch hand who was supposed to be guarding the stables?”

His mother grinned. “Goes by Yuuta. You’ll find his like over at old Salty’s. But be careful out there...the Westlands ain’t quite the way you left her, you hear?”

“Likewise.”

■■■■

“Salty’s? Oh you mean the Salt Lick Saloon,” Susumu grunted, adjusting his seat in the saddle. The two were off on the only lead they had, towards the closest bar around. “Yeah that joint ain’t ran by him no more. Shame really, old codger kept rough crowd out. Now it ain’t a place to bring your youngins. Same could be said for all Ojika if I’m honest.”

Ojika was a town—a *frontier* town—which meant it was really little more than a pitstop for merchants passing through. Kohaku had fond memories of getting sweets after visiting the barber, and listening to his father tell stories at Salty’s about his battles in the Golden Era.



"You're the sheriff, aren't you? What's keeping you from bringing law to this town?" Kohaku asked while looking the place over. Many of the buildings were run-down and in disrepair, while plenty of men sat about and gave the two of them stares. Though the sun was fully out Ojita never looked shadier.

"It ain't my fault! Gettin' a deputy to stick around these parts is like pullin' teeth. Sure I work 'em hard but it's honest work. Pay ain't great but it's pay all the same."

"When given the choice, folks will always seek easier means of employment," Kohaku replied coldly, shooting an even colder glance at the woman beckoning out to him. "It don'—it *doesn't* make it right. Would if only Bushido could be imported from the East and not just their silk."

"Silk? Cotton is king out here, Koha-kun. That's a sayin' you better get used to hearing!"

It wasn't until then that Kohaku noticed that everybody was wearing cotton, many in styles the samurai had never seen before. The men wore tight vests and pants while the women wore draping fabric over their legs that fluffed outwards.

"Them's called skirts, all the rage now'a'days," Susumu whistled and tilted his hat at a lady nearby. "I ain't got the ryō to keep up with local fashions none, but it's a boomin' industry 'round here."

To Kohaku they looked like foreigners, not that the samurai had ever seen any. But it made him feel even more like a stranger in his own home. "*Though I suppose this isn't my home any longer.*"

"Well here we are," Susumu said as he hobbled off his horse. "Hitch 'er up and we'll go on in. And don't you worry about them takin' off with your horse: these lads shape up when I'm around. Those that know any better, anyway!"

Kohaku was the opposite of relieved as he hitched up Tatsuya. He whispered a few comforting words before parting. "I won't be gone long, Tatsu-kun."

Bars in the Westlands were called 'saloons' and aside from the wooden posts outside to hitch your horse, there was another key difference: the door. Saloon doors were nothing like their shoji counterparts: they made out of wood for starters, and had the top and bottom cut out with a crease in the middle that you had to walk into to open. The benefit was that it allowed sunlight and a crossbreeze in; the downside was that is allowed sound to pass by freely.

"Heads up—Law's in town!"

"I ain't 'fraid of the sheriff. He's a pushover."

"That ain't no sheriff. Don't know nobody who steps so loudly."

Kohaku rolled his eyes. He was a heavy stepper because under his rancher's jacket—a blanket with a hole for your head to go through—was a suit of samurai armor. He didn't wear the helmet due to the

heat but couldn't bring himself to wear the conical rancher's hat, either. A bit of sunburn on his neck was a small price to pay for his dignity.

*\*creak\**

The room went silent as the samurai pushed through the doors. All eyes were on him—there had to be a dozen pairs at least, which was a good many for a bar this time of day. These types must not have had jobs. Or at least not the honest sort.

Judging by their body language, this group of misfits was led by a pair of twins. Two girls that were women now, at least in age: the Fujioka sisters. Kohaku hadn't seen them since they were knee-high to a grasshopper. They had certainly changed. A shame it was for the worse.

"Susu-chan, who the hell is this bastard?" one of the twins jeered. "He's the plumpest sap you've duped into being deputy yet! Huhuhu!"

The rest of the lot laughed and that included Susumu, too. The sheriff scratched his head and looked like a pushover instead of a member of law enforcement. It was little wonder Ojita had turned into a cesspool of villainy.

"Yuuta. Where is he?" Kohaku asked, unamused.

"Oh, he wants Yuuta-san? Sorry, he's busy. Why don't you...wait..." the other Fujioka sister quieted, squinting her eyes as she began to recall who she was speaking to. "Is that you, Koha-kun?"

An outlaw who was especially drunk staggered over to the samurai. He had his fists raised, and after spitting a wad of chewing tobacco into a spittoon—a jar on the floor that was as sanitary as it sounded—he demanded a fight. "You rice paddie-pickin' outsider! Get them gloves up—I'mma wallop you back the way you came!"

Kohaku didn't do anything except give the nuisance a look of disdain. He didn't even try to dodge the punch that came right for his gut. When you wore a full samurai gosoku, you didn't have to.

*\*thump\**

"Itai! It hurts! My hand!" the outlaw clutched his now broken fist. It was a rough way to learn that Kohaku—or his armor at least—was made of tougher stuff than the cotton these lowlifes were used to.

The samurai undid the clasps of his jacket, the wool fabric falling off his armored shoulders. Turning to the right, he let the whole saloon catch a glimpse at what he was carrying. "I am only going to ask you once more: where is Yuuta?"

Murmurs of "sam'ri" broke out from the group. There wasn't a more definitive symbol of his station than the katana at his hip. It was what separated him from their ilk. Had he not left for Shima when he did, he

could very well have been among them. Just the thought of it made him reaffirm his devotion to General Shatao. *"My true service remains with you, Shatao-sama."*

One twin looked to the other and they both nodded in unison. "Alright, we'll take you to him. Yuuta is somethin' of a local rodeo star. Got his own gang of fans—more than even that oversized kitchen knife can handle."

*"A rodeo? How long has it been since I went to one of those?"*

■■■■

The rodeo was an exhibition for ranchers to show off their skills, and was as good an excuse as any to drink, gamble and holler out here in the Westlands. Whereas horses were only used as beasts of burden or tools of war out East, here on the prairie they had far more utility: including those that were bred to toss off their riders.

If it didn't make sense to you, well, you weren't a Westlander.

"Yeehaw! A whole twenty seconds that time!" one of the members of the crowd shouted. He was holding a pair of buckets along with a measuring stick: a water clock, which was a crude but mostly effective means of measuring time. Very important for scoring your performance on a wild buck.

The man at the center of the fenced-in field of dirt jumped from the ground and took a bow to the small group of onlookers. This must've been practice for an upcoming show. By the time the rancher had recovered his hat and dusted himself off Kohaku was at the gates, sitting upon Tatsuya with his arms crossed as he waited.

"Well if this don't take the rag off the bush. Never thought I'd see the Fujioka sisters pallin' around with the Law. Then again, never thought I'd see a deputy suited up like a sam'rai, neither," the rancher said, eyeing Kohaku from top to bottom.

"Yuuta, I assume. You were responsible for guarding the Nanbu Ranch's stables last night. A horse was stolen while you were nowhere to be found."

Yuuta spat on the ground. "Got sick n' tired of Lady Nanbu going off on me. Pay was worse than cow feed, too. Had me a better offer...even got me Blondie over there as part of the deal. He's a wild Palomino. A much funner ride than that old Nanbu breed you're sittin' on."

Tatsuya snorted as if he understood he was being insulted. The Palomino was a pretty boy, even Kohaku would admit, with it's golden coat and light, cream-colored mane. It was sure to be the favorite of the show, but flashiness was hardly the only aspect of a steed. Tatsuya was a warhorse: the far stronger of the two and trained for endurance. Not to mention he had a warm temperament and was good around people—an important aspect when part of Kohaku's job in Shima was conducting inspections on the local farming villages.

"I wouldn't recommend angering Tatsuya-kun. Or me," Kohaku threatened. "I want to know who paid you off. That Palomino couldn't have been cheap."

Yuuta let out a whistle to signal for his rodeo roadies to come on in. The Fujioka sisters and their group parted as they approached. Apparently they were lower on the pecking order, and it wasn't hard to see why: most of these rodeo watchers had an extended kama—a hand scythe—strapped to their backs. Westlander scythes were longer than the ones out East as they were used to cut hay, not rice.

"Yuuta-san is trainin' hard for the show tonight. Don't need distractions, 'specially not from out of a tin can. You hear?"

Susumu gulped as the group surrounded them. Kohaku placed a hand on his katana as he tallied up his opponents. They were twenty and too many, especially since he could hardly expect aid from the sisters. Or the sheriff either, for that matter.

"N-now now, hold your horses!" Susumu said, taking off his hat and wiping the sweat from his brow. "We're just havin' a friendly talkin' is all. A winsome conversation, ain't that right Koha-kun?"

Kohaku took Tatsuya by the reigns and made off like he was retreating. That got plenty of laughter and hollers from the crowd. But they quieted up when he spurred Tatsuya forth, jumping over the fence and into the arena. He had him gallop a quick lap around before returning to the gates.

"My name is Kohaku Nanbu. As a samurai I have the right to kirisute gomen. Do not make me strike you down for the shame you have brought upon my family."

Yuuta looked around to his buddies who had each taken a step back. Apparently they didn't like their chances against a mounted samurai who knew how to ride a steed.

The rancher spat to hide his nerves. "Kohaku Nanbu...the wayward son himself. See you mean business. Then how's about we settle this the Westlander way. If you can ride on Blondie longer than I can ride your Tatsuya, I'll tell 'ya all you need to know. If you can't, then I ain't ever want to see your face 'round these parts again. Sound good, sam'ri?"

It *didn't* sound good. Tatsuya wasn't a bucking horse and the Palomino was all but wild. The logical side of Kohaku was telling him not to take this bet, but the rest of him felt like his pride was being challenged. Not his pride as a samurai, but as something else.

Something he had tried to bury under Bushido years ago.

■■■■■

"*Tatsu-kun...you really are too polite, you know?*" Kohaku let out a sigh as Yuuta rode the warhorse without much difficulty at all. If there was any issue it was that the rancher had trouble reining in Tatsu's speed—the horse was accustomed to a heavier, armored rider. Yuuta was little more than skin, bones and attitude.

"You sure this thing has seen battle? He was so gentle I was about to take a nap up there!"

Susumu placed a hand on Kohaku's shoulder and brought him aside, whispering in a worried tone. "Now if this ain't a hair in the butter, Koha-kun. Why don't we call this farce for what it is and high tail it home. No need to look like a fool out there. Drawin' quite the crowd as it is."

The sheriff didn't need to remind him. Kohaku grimaced as half of Ojita came in for a midday showdown. Bets were being made and not in the samurai's favor.

"Woah now, woah!" Kohaku had difficult even mounting the Palomino. As soon as the samurai had a foot on the left stirrup the buck reared up. The crowd had a good laugh as the samurai struggled to even sit sturdy on the saddle.

Buck riding at rodeos were done with only one hand on the reins. Two would get you disqualified. Kohaku held up his left hand and gave the flankman—the rancher holding Blondie behind the gate—a nod.

*\*NEEeeiiGH\**

Kohaku immediately regretted not wearing his helmet, for the way this buck bucked it wasn't a matter of it but when the samurai was going to get tossed. He couldn't recall the last time he had fallen from a saddle—he hadn't done any foolish stunts on horseback since the incident with General Shatao's son all those years ago.

*"Now's not the time to be thinking of Isamu-kun!"*

Blondie shook left and low then right and high, spinning around and bucking even harder than he had with Yuuta. From the way his ears flicked Kohaku knew this wasn't an act: the steed was scared. His tail also flipped about wildly, a certain sign of stress. Though the fact that Kohaku—the rider—could see the horse's tail at all was a poor sign for his chances. He was hardly on the saddle at all!

"Woah! Wo—AH!" The samurai let out a yell as he was yanked off with a sudden twist. He landed face up, with the raging horse still above him. It was the most dangerous spot you could be in, and he couldn't roll out before a hoof and several hundred pounds of equine muscle came down on him.

*\*THUMP\**

Kohaku's body convulsed. Blondie's hoof had landed right at the center of his chest piece—at his heart. He felt a sharp numbness go down and across the left side of his body as he gasped out for breath. His heart being weak at it was certainly didn't enjoy the added pressure. Were he not wearing his armor, it was more than likely he'd not walk away from this at all.

As it was, he got to his knees and panted, trying to refocus and regain feeling in his limbs. The dent in his armor was larger than any arrow could cause.



"Say that tin can saved your hide, sam'rai. That rhymed didn't it?" Yuuta asked and his goons chuckled. "Looks like I win this bet. Now get gaited."

Kohaku gulped. Not out of fear but because the dent in his armor made it difficult to breathe. He wanted nothing more than to leave these lowlifes and the Westlands entirely. He was a samurai, not some horse jockey with a deathwish. This wasn't what he trained for.

Though just as he was about to turn in, he spotted a rider up the hill overlooking the arena. He couldn't tell who the rider was from this distance, but he didn't have to, because Kohaku could've recognized Lady Nanbu's black and white-spotted mare "Bullseye" anywhere.

The samurai took another look at Blondie. Though they had only spent several seconds together, the rider had learned more than a little about the golden coated steed. Though whether or not it was enough remained to be seen.

"I want another chance," Kohaku declared. "This time, I want us to take the horses out at the same time. Unless of course you're scared, Yuu-chan."

"Don't you 'Yuu-chan' me! You want a second chance? Fine! But you fall off again and I'm gettin' a new warhorse. An old Nanbu stock. Got it?"

Kohaku gulped. He looked at Tatsuya, who didn't seem interested in the conversation in the slightest. To wager his best friend in a bet like this...

"...all right, rancher. Got yourself a deal. Saddle up."

The crowd—which had grown to the point of vendors showing up—let out a collective gasp and began to cheer. Betting your horse on a race or a rodeo was like gambling your farm on a game of Chō-Han: it wasn't smart but it was always entertaining.

Sheriff Susumu was sweating several buckets worth down his forehead, all of it collecting into his curly moustache. "Koha-kun, you've gotta back out!"

"This isn't my first rodeo, Susumu-san. Now if you would be so kind," he turned his back to the sheriff, though not out of contempt. "Please untie the clasps of my armor. I need to take it off."

"Y-you sure about that? Reckon you had one foot in the grave when that hoof came down! You don't know what Lady Nanbu'll do to me if I let her boy get hurt!"

Kohaku repeated his request. He had faced and killed armed warriors before on request of his lord General Shatao. Compared to fighting bandits and Kondo savages, this was nothing.

"My weight was too much for you, wasn't it boy?" the samurai patted the stallion who neighed wildly in response. "But it's more than just that. You're in pain—let me see if this helps."

With a quick undoing of a few buckles, Kohaku freed the saddle from the stallion and tossed it aside.

“Bareback?! You’re gonna ride it without a saddle?!” Susumu yelled and the crowd repeated the sentiment. It did sound like a terrible idea, but Kohaku could already tell that Blondie was settling down. That saddle wasn’t the proper fit: it had been pinching its sides, and if Kohaku’s suspicions were correct...

“You want to be mounted from the right and not the left, don’t you?” the samurai petted the Palomino and hopped on from its right side—the way Kondos did. It turned out this wasn’t a bucking horse at all: instead, he had been raised by the Kondos Who Don’t Bow. They rode bareback, and though doing so made the samurai feel like a savage, it had practically turned the stallion into a docile pony.

“Begin!” the flankman shouted after the two ranchers gave them the signal. Blondie came out first—with a steady trot, not a wild jerk. Kohaku kept one hand on its mane of cream-colored hair and rose the other high, showing full control over the steed.

The same could not be said for Yuuta.

“Woah! Hey! Slow down, kuso!”

There was something Yuuta didn’t know about Tatsuya: he was extremely jealous. Seeing his owner riding another horse made his attitude shift from friendly to hostile, and the jerking motions only grew wilder as Kohaku petted and praised the other steed. When Tatsuya saw him reach in his sash for a carrot—the warhorse’s favorite treat—the show was over.

“Ahhh!” Yuuta screamed as he fell behind Tatsuya who sprinted ahead to get at the carrot. Kohaku grinned and tossed the treat high into the air, which the horse jumped for and engulfed in a single bite.

The crowd loved it.

■■■■

“Kuso...so I got paid off with a dirtskin’s steed. Well he’s still a looker at least,” Yuuta sighed and took off his hat. Then he bowed—or rather, gave a stiff head nod. “Ridin’ a buck bareback...never knew a sam’rai could get his hands dirty like that.”

“He ain’t no typical swordslinger,” Susumu grinned and gave Kohaku a pat on the back. “He’s a Westlander samurai, yesiree.”

The talking then turned to business, and business was apparently soft, white and fluffy.

“I was paid off by the Cotton King,” Yuuta admitted. He elaborated when Kohaku gave him a blank stare. “You know, the new farmer ‘round buyin’ up plots of land from wranglers. More than a few ranchers have turned in their stirrups ‘cause of him.”

“Not this one,” Kohaku replied, looking back up at the hill though no one was there. With nothing more than a nod and a pull on the reigns, the samurai headed out to the farms where cotton was king.

“Giddyup, Tatsu-kun! We’ve got a horse to find.”

[Which character should June's side story be about?](#)

[May 7, 2019](#)

This poll will close at the end of May.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+11)

7%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+5)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+21)

9%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+10)

2%

Keiko, the maid (+27)

4%

Kohaku, the samurai (+0)

4%

Kuniko, the farmer (+8)

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+46)

41%

Momoko, the doctor (+13)

1%

Nishi, the yakuza (+35)

10%

Satsuma, the emperor (+8)

2%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+15)

16%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+6)

4%

Poll ended May 31, 2019 · 81 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapter 13](#)

[May 15, 2019](#)

It's time for some Fun & Games! There's a lot I like about Chapter 13, but what I enjoyed the most was (finally) being able to implement a choice made waaaay back in Book 1. It really makes the scene feel different. This goes likewise for a choice made in Book 2, where the survival of a certain character changes things!

See, **Choices Matter™**!

## [Achievements](#)

[May 25, 2019](#)

When it comes to unlocking achievements in SoH...

I don't care about achievements.

I enjoy unlocking them, but I don't go out of my way to.

I must have ALL OF THEM!

157 votes total

[SoH Artwork: Book 4, Part 9](#)

[May 29, 2019](#)

Tombs and...**trees**?!

Things are getting lit (and unlit) up in here, thanks to the wonderful illustrations by Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#))! There's not a whole lot I can say about these pictures without spoiling everything, but I can say that they fit very well in their scenes! There's definitely a skill involved when it comes to knowing when and where illustrations work best. One day I might learn it! ^o^)>

**Chapter 20 Art: "Tomb (Lit)"**



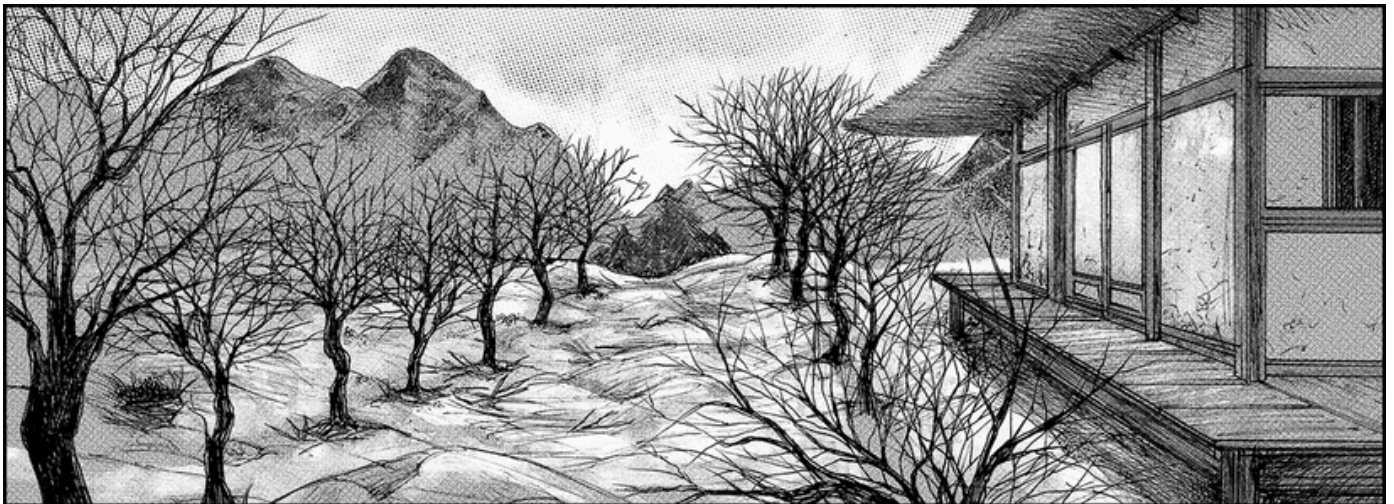


Chapter 20 Art: "Tomb (Unlit)"





Chapter 21 Art: "Orchard"



[CoG Forums](#)

[Jun 5, 2019](#)

“Quit with the monologue, already! Hitomi doesn’t have time for your speeches,” replied Hikiko, the ghostly shugenja who was typically dour and detached. At this moment however she was anything but: the pale girl paced around the medical ward while pulling at her hair, cursing and biting her nails all the while. “I’ll bring her back myself. You’d only make matters worse.”



“The railing of a witch doth burns my ears; such foulness—”

“How about you take that bamboo stick of yours and—”

“St-stop it, you two!”

The last yell was Masami’s, the youngest of the trio who was all but ignored. Both Hikiko and Fumihiko had their own ideas on how to enter the spirit world, and neither of them bothered to listen to what she had to say. Masami couldn’t get a word in edgewise before she was conscripted as the referee in a competition to save Hitomi.

*“We ought to be working together, you...you bakas!”*

■■■■

“Such...mundane labor is...beneath my station! What misfortune we find ourselves in...Daughter of Hashimoto!”

Fumihiko and Masami grunted and groaned as they carried a bamboo lawn ornament from outside into Hikiko’s chambers. It was large and heavy, and was called a shishi-odoshi: a deer-scarer, known for its loud, rhythmic clapping. Somehow it was going to help Hikiko enter the spirit world.

“Place it over there, by the buckets,” Hikiko instructed. “You’ll have to fill it with water manually, at least until I’m unconscious. Try to be consistent, otherwise it won’t help my meditation.”

It took the two of them several long seconds to adjust to the darkness. Masami knew better than to touch the walls: they were coated in ink, turning Hikiko’s room into a dark void for which no light escaped. This was, according to the gloomy girl, a requirement for sensory deprivation: a key aspect of shifting between realms.

“The very walls bleed with vile ooze!” Fumihiko gasped as he inspected ink on his finger. “You will not find my Lady-of-Flowers, the pure Hitomi-chan, in the hells of which you frequent, witch!”

“G-give her a chance, Fumihiko-senpai,” Masami intervened before another fight started. “She’s trying her best. Now we must keep quiet while Hikiko-chan meditates.”

Hikiko gave the small shugenja a smile before returning to her regular scowl. She downed a cup of tea made from a variety of herbal ingredients to promote relaxation. After doing so, she lit a bowl of incense—lavender and jasmine—before taking a blindfold and wrapping it around her eyes. She then buried herself beneath a pile of blankets and gave the two the signal to start.

*\*swoosh\* \*THUNK\* \*swoosh\* \*THUNK\**

Masami collected the water from beneath the shishi-odoshi in one bucket before handing it over to Fumihiko who poured it down again. It was back-breaking work, picking up a full bucket and passing it

off in near-complete darkness. The two didn't even have the luxury of panting for breath as that would disturb Hikiko's trance.

*\*swoosh\* \*THUNK\* \*swoosh\* \*th-wAH\**

Fumihiko missed his pour, spilling the water everywhere but the bamboo chute. Masami got the worst of it, her red silk robes getting drenched. The walls behind her streaked as the ink dissolved upon the water's touch. Fumihiko then scrambled for the spare bucket, but in this complete darkness he couldn't see his own hand in front of him. The two collided in their panic, breaking the bamboo device and ruining the meditative atmosphere.

Yet Hikiko didn't stir. The two exchanged glances. *"She must already be in the spirit world! That was quicker than I thought,"* Masami mused. The young shugenja was quite impressed by her fellow student, at least until she inspected her further.

*"Gususu-susu...gususu-su—\*snore\*..."*

Masami smacked her palm to her forehead. While Hikiko *had* managed to enter a different realm, the dream world was hardly the spiritual one!

■■■■

"Fumihiko-senpai...I don't believe this is a very good idea!" Masami cried out as she struggled to hold up her shinai: a bamboo practice sword. The two were in the Kendo Club's training hall, and during this time of day they had the place to themselves. While that spared the young shugenja some embarrassment, she was the last person suited for Fumihiko's request.

"Hasten and do not waver, Daughter of Hashimoto! Common is the myth of the samurai who enters the spirit realm in the midst of battle, upon assault by many a foe! Strike me forthrightly for the sake of Hitomi-chan!"

Masami grit her teeth. Fumihiko wanted her to smack him, and though this wasn't a real sword...hurting someone on purpose was something the shugenja just couldn't do. When she did swing it was without any force, and Fumihiko interpreted that as an insult.

"Very well then! Seeing as one doth value my valor so lowly...I shall have to do it myself!"

"What are you—" Masami gasped. The warrior-poet began pounding his bamboo sword against his forehead, causing it to bruise and then bleed. He laughed like a madman all the while.

"These tremors that pierce my skull are but taps compared to the beat of my brazen heart!" Fumihiko declared, slamming his skull. He fell to a knee and bit his tongue, determined to give to give a soliloquy even amidst a concussion. "Forsooth! Bear witness to one so noble as I, who embraces such pain that I may embrace my pearly-eyed maiden in the world thereafter! GAH!"



The bamboo sword splintered, and after it did and the captain of the Kendo Club was a bloody mess, Masami rushed over to his side. Though he was dazed and out of it that was more due to blunt trauma than spiritual awakening. Masami let out a sigh as she carried her friend to the infirmary.

■■■■

"If only you two would have listened to me from the start...none of this would've happened!"

Masami pouted, placing her hands at her hips as she berated her friends for being foolish. Of course they couldn't respond: the two of them now joined Hitomi in the medical ward, each of them laid out on a futon unconscious.

If anyone was going to make it into the spirit realm to search for their friend, it would have to be her. And though she knew this it was hardly a comfort, as Masami had read enough to know the many dangers involved in traveling between realms.

She took one last look at her companions before taking a seat at Hitomi's bedside. *"I must enter a state of complete calm, like Hikiko-chan, yet I must also exhaust my energy, like Fumihiko-senpai."*

But of course, that energy wasn't physical.

"It's spiritual. I need to exhaust all reserves of my magical power...it's the only way to lighten my spirit enough to move to the realms beyond." Masami spoke as she looked over Hitomi, the older girl known for her serenity and grace. She was graceful even now, wrapped in bandages and heaving breaths at an ever slowing pace.

Across from her and against the window was a Wisteria—Hitomi's favorite flower—though it wasn't blooming. If Masami recalled the itako correctly, it would only bloom at night. Looking outside it was just past midday. And judging by how quickly it was wilting, the purple flower would never get a chance to bloom.

Masami shook her head. She clapped her hands together, and within them was a talisman. Staring out into the sky, into the afternoon sun, Masami squinted and prayed.

"I'll make it bloom, Hitomi-senpai. I won't let either of you wither away!"

A surge of energy unseen by all but felt by every shugenja in the Academy emitted from out of Masami. With her intentions pure and her pursuit noble, the magical girl pleaded upon her powers within. She started chanting a prayer and was determined not to stop until either her vision blacked out or the sun did.

One minute passed and then another, as the sun's rays went from a harsh white to a gentle yellow, until becoming a dull red all while remaining high in the sky. As the world dimmed and as night came early, the Wisteria drew open just as Masami's eyes took to a close.

*"I'll find you...I won't...lose...a friend."*

■■■■

Masami awoke the next morning on her futon. After wiping the sleep from her eyes, she tried to recall what it was she was doing the day before. Everything was a blur, and before she had time to collect her thoughts the bell for the morning classes rang.

"Oh no, I'm late!"

She sprang up and nearly stumbled while doing so: her legs didn't move the way she was accustomed to. They seemed to go further and stretch longer. It didn't make any sense but it did help Masami run down the hall faster. Her classroom was right ahead, though everyone was already seated and to make matters worse, the Headmaster himself was there waiting.

*"I'm going to get into big trouble! I could get expelled!"* Masami choked down her fears as she approached the open doorway. She bowed low and respectfully, prepared to apologize and accept any punishment for the sin of being tardy.

And though she expected to be scolded, all she got was praise, instead.

"There you are, Hashimoto-dono! Your presence honors us. Class, stand and bow before the most accomplished instructor this Academy has ever employed!"

Masami looked around until the realization hit her: *she* was the instructor, and everyone in this class—her fellow students—were bowing to *her*. They were also each a foot or so shorter than before. *"This doesn't make sense...was I always a teacher?!"*

The Headmaster bowed several times more before letting himself out. He made Masami feel as if she was an accomplished shugenja already, and judging by the wide eyes and large smiles of her students they seemed to agree. Masami was embarrassed from all the attention.

"Well then uh, does anyone have any questions?"

It turned out they did, as evidenced by the wave of hands that shot up all at once. Masami was assaulted by questions from anxious students, eager to learn more about the spirit world, the magical arts and herself most of all. Many members of the shogi club wished her to join them in a match, what with her being among the top-ranked kishi in the country.

"Well perhaps I could oversee a game or two, haha," Masami laughed while scratching her chin. "But as for now, let us open our books to page forty-seven. The following is a passage by the renowned Shinto priest Saichō—also known as Dengyō Daishi—who is known for writing the first ever account of a person entering the spiritual realm in a conscious capacity."

Masami went on at length upon the insights of the centuries-old monk, interweaving a variety of topics both practical and philosophical. Her audience was captivated by her speech, many taking notes. "...it is the manifestation of these unseen waves of energy that our spiritual animals take form. Many scholars suggest they are the past incarnations of our prior selves. Coexisting without regards to time or place...it is quite fascinating, isn't it?"

"W-why I couldn't agree more, dearest Sensei!" said Fumihiro, whose face was blushing red. He seemed strange—stranger than usual, anyway—speaking to Masami as if she was some sort of goddess. "Pray forgive me, Lady of Hashimoto, but I must humbly inquire: how doth one know if one were in the spirit world?"

"Good question. The spirit world shapes around the visitor's own memories and desires, though this is often distorted by the subconscious mind. These distortions can come in the form of symbolism, so if you...pay...attention..." Masami said ironically, getting distracted by a vase of purple flowers on her desk. *"Wisteria? Where those always there? And why are they blooming in the middle of the day?"*

Masami winced upon a sudden headache, but she had a lecture to give and couldn't stop now. The class wanted to know how to enter the spirit world and their instructor was more than happy to oblige. "You must first have a profound desire to do so, to reach out beyond your natural plane of existence. It cannot be forced. It requires a goal...a reason...*ah!*"

This time the ache was so great that it caused Masami to fall. The entire student body gasped in unison, hurrying over to her side. By the time she returned to her feet and regained control of her senses, the bell rang.

"For tomorrow, please read chapters five and six! There will be a quiz on the Lotus Sutra," Masami grinned. She was already formulating the questions in her head. "Hikiko-chan and Fumihiro-kun, please stay. I would like to have a word with you."

The sullen, sickly girl and the prideful warrior poet stayed behind, though both seemed to twitch and cower in fear as if expecting to be scolded. It wasn't like her friends to be so intimidated by her.

"Have either of you seen Hitomi-san? Is she still in a coma?"

The two students looked at each other and shrugged.

"We don't know anyone by that name, Sensei."

■■■■

Masami rushed around the school: first to the medical ward, which was empty, then to the cafeteria, the gymnasium, and the outside recreational areas. Hitomi was nowhere in sight. Everyone she asked didn't recognize the name—it was as if she had never existed.

“That’s not right! I know you’re real, Hitomi-san!” Masami yelled out into the barren hallway with tears welling up in her eyes. She pleaded for an answer, and got one in the form of a very gentle, ladylike laugh.

It echoed across the hall and grew louder as Masami approached. These were the rooms where the club activities took place, including the Shogi and Kendo clubs. But this voice came out from one room in particular: the Flower Arrangement Club.

“Hitomi-san, are you in there?!” Masami yelled out as she slid open the shoji door. She expected to see the room in darkness like before, but instead it lit up like a beacon of warm, glowing light. Dancing amidst this light was a girl in shrine maiden’s clothes, who was overwhelmed with glee.

Hitomi stopped her dance when she heard the short shugenja approach. Though Masami was hardly short anymore—Hitomi had to look up to meet her face-to-face. “Is...is that you, Masami-chan? You...you don’t look at all as I imagined you would!” The girl blushed, her cheeks matching the shade of the roses in her hand. “You’re very beautiful.”

“W-well I uh, um,” Masami stuttered out in embarrassment. “Wait just a moment! Your eyes! You can see, Hitomi-san?”

Sure enough, the once cloudy pearls were no more: in their place were large, black orbs so clear that Masami could see her own reflection in them. *“Wait...do I really look like that?”*

“It is amazing, Masami-chan! All the brilliant colors, oh you’ll have to tell me the names of each and every one! And simply moving around is so easy, and I don’t have to worry about bumping into anything! I’m free! I’m finally—iyah!”

Hitomi—in her excitement—tripped over an empty flower pot. Masami reached out to grab her by instinct, sparing her a quick trip into the floor. With the girl in her arms, it was easy for an onlooker to get the wrong idea. Especially when Hitomi squeezed her.

“It seems that even with eyes I’m still clumsy! Hehe,” Hitomi grinned. “If...if it suits you, I would like to visit the art gallery Fumihiro spoke of in his letter. Would you accompany me, Masami-chan?”

The young shugenja was overwhelmed with emotions, but seeing Hitomi’s genuine smile put all uncertainties to rest. Being able to see was a blessing that she herself had taken for granted. Masami was determined to show the itako as much as there was to see.

“Of course, Hitomi-san! Let’s get go—ing?” Masami gulped as her companion wrapped her arm beneath hers. She was no longer blind, but this was a habit for her even still. The problem was...

*“...it really looks like the two of us are going on a date!”*



"I dares not think what horrors the Daughter of Hashimoto faces in the realm beyond!" said Fumihiro, clutching his heart as well as his forehead, the later still stinging after his self-inflicted trauma. "Wouldest only my battle ritual bore fruit, 'twould be myself at peril in her place."

Masami's two companions stood beside her unconscious body, which had fallen over atop of Hitomi's in the medical ward. The magical girl appeared to be sleeping soundly, but any shugenja would know otherwise: the spiritual energy the girl once emitted was no more. She had left this realm for another.

"I can't believe I fell asleep," Hikiko grumbled, looking outside. "It's dark out already...I don't like it." Shugenja were taught to pay close attention to possible omens, and a black sky before evening was hardly a good one.

"We have naught to do now but wait patiently," Fumihiro declared, crossing his arms and taking a seat on the floor. "Indeed, 'tis a test of endurance I intend to see through!"

At that moment, a voice murmured out from within the ceiling. The Academy had a series of talismans lined in the roofing tiles, an extensive series of papers allowing voice transmission from out of the Headmaster's office. It was only used for announcements and the most pressing matters.

"Masami Hashimoto, please report to the Academy's stables at once. The head of the Shinsengumi requests your presence. This is a matter of the utmost urgency."

Fumihiro and Hikiko looked at each other.

"Failure to comply will result in your immediate expulsion. That is all."

"Aaaah! Curse the spirits, wake up Masami-chan!"

■■■■

Masami couldn't believe her eyes, for on the exhibit before her was the first shogi board ever made. The pieces were crude and uneven, the board cracked, but many of the tiles were just like their modern counterparts: the silver generals, the knights and the lances. But there were others, too, like the elephant and chariot!

"So that is what a shogi board looks like. You shall have to teach me how to play sometime, Masa-chan~" Hitomi giggled and squeezed Masami's arm tighter. It was both an uncomfortable and pleasant sensation at the same time. Yet Masami couldn't help but think the itako was acting strangely.

"Teaching...right, for some reason I'm a sensei now?" Masami clutched her head as it began to beat with a pulsating pain. "How can that be...and why weren't you in class, Hitomi-san?"

Her companion only giggled in reply. "None of that matters. Oh—look at this!"



Hitomi pointed out to the next exhibit, this one being a series of outrageous outfits and masks: kabuki attire belonging to none other than Okuni-sama, the founder of the first kabuki troupe to ever exist. It was an all-female group of mikos renowned for bringing hope and laughter to the people during the chaotic decades of the Golden Era.

"So this is the kabuki Hikiko-chan is so interested in. We ought to watch a play sometime, Masa-chan! I'm certain it will be fun!"

While Masami wanted to agree with her, a sharp pain deep in her gut told her otherwise. Something felt deeply wrong—a sensation that was only confirmed when Masami looked around to see no one else in the museum but them. "Hitomi-san...how did we get here in the first place? I don't recall leaving the school..."

Hitomi grabbed Masami's hand and squeezed. "Those details don't matter. Come, let's enjoy our date, unless...you'd rather leave."

"Oh no, it's not that!" Masami assured her, not wanting to upset her friend. This was Hitomi's first day of being able to see, and the shugenja was determined to make it a good one.

So the couple moved on to exhibits of armor and katanas, of banners used by clans that no longer existed. These didn't hold much interest to Hitomi, who was more interested in the colorful designs of the porcelain and jade sculptures. She wanted to feel them—an old habit—but didn't realize just how delicate centuries-old pottery could be. Masami tried to stop her but before she could get close, the damage had been done.

*\*shatter\**

The handle of the ancient tea kettle broke and the bottom fell out. Masami gasped before looking around fearfully to see if anyone had noticed. No one had because there was no one else there. Letting out a sigh of relief, Masami knelt down to pick up the shards of porcelain. With the proper spell, it was possible to meld the pieces back together with minimal signs of damage.

"Wait...it's not even scratched," Masami blinked once and then twice as she couldn't believe her eyes. The porcelain tea kettle was in perfect condition. *"Am I going insane? Was this not broken just one second ago?!"*

"Goodness, look over there Masa-chan! It's the wardrobe of Lady Sakiko, the Lioness of the Golden Era! Those kimonos are so pretty!"

Masami nodded and assured Hitomi that she would be right there, and that she just needed a moment to collect her thoughts. Looking over the exhibits—the shogi board, the kabuki clothes and the ancient tea kettles—it seemed as if each and every one held special appeal to *her*.

This entire museum seemed too perfectly suited for the shugenja. It brought her own lecture back to mind. *"The spirit world shapes around the visitor's own memories and desires...none of this is real, is it?"*

*I'm in the spirit world, and all of this is nothing more than an illusion!"*

The walls began to rattle as Masami started to run, to try and escape this museum that wasn't real. Yet one hallway only ever led to several more. She was lost within a labyrinth of her own mind, seeing exhibits of paintings, bonsai trees and sculptures that she knew belonged to the Hashimoto family estate.

*"Everything here is a projection of my own memories, of things I've seen or read about,"* Masami concluded, trying to make sense of the insensible. Though just as she did, a contradiction appeared in the form of an odd, wooden sculpture.

It was, upon closer inspection, a red panda. It was a baby one, and crudely made—the work of an amateur. It didn't belong in this museum, which made it all the more interesting. Masami felt a tremor of spiritual energy from inside it, with each step closer causing it to grow exponentially. The vibrations of energy became so great that it felt as the shugenja was amidst an earthquake just standing within arm's reach.

"I've never seen you before. Could it be, are you..." Masami reached out to touch it. It was solid and felt like wood, yet it was especially warm to the touch. She stroked the panda's mane gently as if it were real. She smiled and wished that it was—red pandas were awfully cute.

Some wishes did come true, at least the spirit world. Light pierced from out of the sculpture's eyes, breaking the wood like a baby bird through its egg. From within the wooden sculpture came a miniature red panda, which stretched out on its hind legs and tilted its head to give Masami a curious look.

The kid's dimples were showing as she beamed out a large smile. She had to struggle to resist the urge to hug it, out of fear of scaring it away. "You're real, aren't you little fellow? Could it be...are you my spirit animal?"

Masami offered her hand to pet the little guy, but the furry critter took to her arm like a branch, climbing inside her kimono sleeve, tickling her all over before finding its way up her collar and perching on her shoulder.

"D-don't get too familiar! Goodness," Masami said amidst a series of giggles. "I think I shall call you Pan-kun. Will that name suffice?"

Pan-kun affirmed the choice by licking Masami's cheek. He then jumped off, scurrying to the ground and beckoning her to follow. Just as the shugenja was about to, however, Hitomi arrived.

"What's kept you, Masa-chan? I just got us tickets to a kabuki show! Oh, it shall be absolutely wondrous, don't you agree?" Hitomi asked, wrapping her arm once more beneath Masami's.

"I, uh..."

"Let us hurry before it's too late!" the once-blind girl pulled, determined to lead the way. Part of Masami wanted to follow her, to go on a date that lasted forever. But deep down she knew that was wrong. *This world* was wrong.

"Masa-chan? Please, come with me," Hitomi pulled, her voice cracking in a plea.

The young shugenja shook her head, and finally acted as mature as she appeared. With a sadness met with determination, Masami made her next words clear. "I'm sorry. But I have to follow my spirit."

She hurried off after Pan-kun, through one hallway into the next, all while the walls and floor tiles disappeared around her. As for the exhibits—they each made less sense the further she went in. The first was a tall, wooden device with a hole and a bucket at the bottom and giant blade overhead.

After that was a kabuki mask covered in shogi tiles, then a garden of red flowers being burned, and then finally: a duck sleeping upon the largest koi fish Masami had ever seen! *"These aren't my memories...are they something else?"*

The shugenja couldn't make sense of it. She just kept on following Pan-kun, who finally stopped running in front of a familiar door: the door to the medical ward in the Academy. Somehow they had left the museum and returned to the school.

Bracing her courage, Masami puffed out her cheeks and opened the door. What she saw was herself: she was resting atop a futon beside Hitomi, with a very concerned Hikiko and Fumihiko pacing around and arguing. The two were pleading for her to wake up.

"Hey, you two, I'm over here!" Masami yelled out but to no avail. Inside this room was the physical world, she knew, and it was where she and Hitomi had to return to.

"Look at me," said a voice from behind. It was Hitomi, though she was gesturing to her other self on the sickbed. "I'm covered in burns and bruises...what reason do I have to return to that life, Masami? It is only filled with pain and darkness!"

"But you'll die if you stay here!" Masami exclaimed. "And what good is it to see if you live alone? Don't you miss your friends?"

Hitomi wiped her tears with her sleeve, but they were falling too freely. So instead she put her head against Masami's chest and mumbled. "I have you, don't I? Don't you like being older and more mature? You're a teacher...respected by all your students. Everyone listens to you."

Masami hugged Hitomi and patted her head, comforting her like a mother would a daughter. "There, there. I don't mind being underestimated because of how I look. It's part of who I am. It's not always easy, being different...but it sure beats being alone. I know I can make friends and be happy by just being myself. Do you understand, Hitomi-san?"

She didn't reply with a yes or a no, but with a loud and lengthy sob that made Masami's red kimono grow damp. Even still, the teacher held the student tightly, allowing the fear and pain the time it needed to settle. Hitomi was born without the ability to see. To be able to give up such a gift, to return to blindness willingly, took a will beyond that of an ordinary shugenja.

"Alright, I'll go back," Hitomi sniffled, "but if you could indulge me just this once...would you accompany me to the Flower Arrangement Club, just one more time?"

Masami nodded and smiled. Hitomi was far from ordinary.

■■■■

"*You're Masami Hashimoto?*" asked the captain of the Shinsengumi. "I was made to believe you were shorter, and favored red silk kimonos."

Hikiko pulled at her hair and gave a painful smile in reply. "Uh...it's a phase. Now um, what was it you wanted, Captain-dono?"

The witch was taking one for the team and for Masami in particular. She pretended to be the pint-sized shugenja, and found herself interrogated by half a dozen armed men. The best half a dozen in the country, judging by their light blue kimonos and white mountain trim. These were the Emperor's personal task force: the Shinsengumi.

"You are familiar with a man by the name of Sadao Hamasaki, are you not? We have an urgent need to find out his whereabouts. We were told you imbued an item of magical power for him during a classroom competition. Have you any way of locating this item through magical means?"

Hikiko shook her head. "*How did you mess up this time, Sadao? I'll cover for you this once, but only because you're my type.*"

"My apologies, good sirs, but what you ask for is impossible."

■■■■

Masami and Hitomi sat side-by-side, amidst the itako's carefully curated garden. The two took in the majestic sight of morning glories, lotuses, bellflowers and irises, roses, carnations, camellias and cherry blossoms, too. There was so much beauty to be had in the arrangements, that you never would've guessed that a blind girl had made them.

"They're so pretty. I knew they were, but I never knew how brilliant colors could be. I'm glad they make others happy," Hitomi said with a wistful sigh. She leaned up against Masami and said that it was time.

"Are you certain? Is there nothing else you would like to see before we return? Perhaps—ah!"

Masami shot out a gasp as Hitomi cupped the shugenja's face in her hands. She stared into her eyes intensely, looking deeply into Masami's soul. She smiled at what she saw.

"You're the last person I'll ever see. That makes me very happy, Masa-chan. You really will grow up into quite the looker, hehe!"

Masami blushed, not sure how to take such a compliment. She could only nod and begin the incantation to return, to send their consciousness and spirits back to the realm below: where their friends and the rest of Hyuga waited for them.

Just as the light was about to take them in, she saw Pan-kun waving goodbye. She waved back, at least until a large fowl flew in from the sky. It wasn't a duck but a swan, though it was colored black instead of white. It spoke directly into Masami's mind.

"Study well and learn quickly, Hashimoto-san. For you do not have the luxury of time."

#### [Side Story #11: Masashi's Field Trip](#)

[Jun 7, 2019](#)

*<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>*



#### Side Story 11: Masashi's Field Trip



#### ■■ The Academy ■■

"Forswear thy claim, Son of Hashimoto, for I, Fumihiro of House Morita, shall be the one who rescues the pearly-eyed maiden! No spiritual realm shall separate me from the token of my adolescent love!"

The captain of the Academy's Kendo Club was as emotional as ever, as were they all: the sight of their fellow student covered in burns troubled them deeply. Hitomi was a blind seer known in Hyuga as an itako, with the ability to commune with the dead. Yet after a traumatic séance with an evil spirit the girl had fallen deep into a coma. Her spirit was no longer in its earthly vessel.

"Quit with the monologue, already! Hitomi doesn't have time for your speeches," replied Hikiko, the ghostly shugenja who was typically dour and detached. At this moment however she was anything but:



the pale girl paced around the medical ward while pulling at her hair, cursing and biting her nails all the while. "I'll bring her back myself. You'd only make matters worse."

"The railing of a witch doth burns my ears; such foulness—"

"How about you take that bamboo stick of yours and—"

"St-stop it, you two!"

The last yell was Masashi's, the youngest of the trio who was all but ignored. Both Hikiko and Fumihiro had their own ideas on how to enter the spirit world, and neither of them bothered to listen to what he had to say. Masashi couldn't get a word in edgewise before he was conscripted as the referee in a competition to save Hitomi.

*"We ought to be working together, you...you bakas!"*

■■■■

"Such...mundane labor is...beneath my station! What misfortune we find ourselves in...Son of Hashimoto!"

Fumihiro and Masashi grunted and groaned as they carried a bamboo lawn ornament from outside into Hikiko's chambers. It was large and heavy, and was called a shishi-odoshi: a deer-scarer, known for its loud, rhythmic clapping. Somehow it was going to help Hikiko enter the spirit world.

"Place it over there, by the buckets," Hikiko instructed. "You'll have to fill it with water manually, at least until I'm unconscious. Try to be consistent, otherwise it won't help my meditation."

It took the two of them several long seconds to adjust to the darkness. Masashi knew better than to touch the walls: they were coated in ink, turning Hikiko's room into a dark void for which no light escaped. This was, according to the gloomy girl, a requirement for sensory deprivation: a key aspect of shifting between realms.

"The very walls bleed with vile ooze!" Fumihiro gasped as he inspected ink on his finger. "You will not find my Lady-of-Flowers, the pure Hitomi-chan, in the hells of which you frequent, witch!"

"G-give her a chance, Fumihiro-senpai," Masashi intervened before another fight started. "She's trying her best. Now we must keep quiet while Hikiko-chan meditates."

Hikiko gave the small shugenja a smile before returning to her regular scowl. She downed a cup of tea made from a variety of herbal ingredients to promote relaxation. After doing so, she lit a bowl of incense—lavender and jasmine—before taking a blindfold and wrapping it around her eyes. She then buried herself beneath a pile of blankets and gave the two the signal to start.

*\*swoosh\* \*THUNK\* \*swoosh\* \*THUNK\**

Masashi collected the water from beneath the shishi-odoshi in one bucket before handing it over to Fumihiko who poured it down again. It was back-breaking work, picking up a full bucket and passing it off in near-complete darkness. The two didn't even have the luxury of panting for breath as that would disturb Hikiko's trance.

*\*swoosh\* \*THUNK\* \*swoosh\* \*th-wAH\**

Fumihiko missed his pour, spilling the water everywhere but the bamboo chute. Masashi got the worst of it, his red silk robes getting drenched. The walls behind him streaked as the ink dissolved upon the water's touch. Fumihiko then scrambled for the spare bucket, but in this complete darkness he couldn't see his own hand in front of him. The two collided in their panic, breaking the bamboo device and ruining the meditative atmosphere.

Yet Hikiko didn't stir. The two exchanged glances. *"She must already be in the spirit world! That was quicker than I thought,"* Masashi mused. The young shugenja was quite impressed by his fellow student, at least until he inspected her further.

*"Gususu-susu...gususu-su—\*snore\*..."*

Masashi smacked his palm to his forehead. While Hikiko *had* managed to enter a different realm, the dream world was hardly the spiritual one!

■■■■

"Fumihiko-senpai...I don't believe this is a very good idea!" Masashi cried out as he struggled to hold up his shinai: a bamboo practice sword. The two were in the Kendo Club's training hall, and during this time of day they had the place to themselves. While that spared the young shugenja some embarrassment, he was the last person suited for Fumihiko's request.

"Hasten and do not waver, Son of Hashimoto! Common is the myth of the samurai who enters the spirit realm in the midst of battle, upon assault by many a foe! Strike me forthrightly for the sake of Hitomi-chan!"

Masashi grit his teeth. Fumihiko wanted him to smack him, and though this wasn't a real sword...hurting someone on purpose was something the shugenja just couldn't do. When he did swing it was without any force, and Fumihiko interpreted that as an insult.

"Very well then! Seeing as one doth value my valor so lowly...I shall have to do it myself!"

"What are you—" Masashi gasped. The warrior-poet began pounding his bamboo sword against his forehead, causing it to bruise and then bleed. He laughed like a madman all the while.

"These tremors that pierce my skull are but taps compared to the beat of my brazen heart!" Fumihiko declared, slamming his skull. He fell to a knee and bit his tongue, determined to give to give a soliloquy

even amidst a concussion. “Forsooth! Bear witness to one so noble as I, who embraces such pain that I may embrace my pearly-eyed maiden in the world thereafter! GAH!”

The bamboo sword splintered, and after it did and the captain of the Kendo Club was a bloody mess, Masashi rushed over to his side. Though he was dazed and out of it that was more due to blunt trauma than spiritual awakening. Masashi let out a sigh as he carried his friend to the infirmary.

■■■■

“If only you two would have listened to me from the start...none of this would’ve happened!”

Masashi pouted, placing his hands at his hips as he berated his friends for being foolish. Of course they couldn’t respond: the two of them now joined Hitomi in the medical ward, each of them laid out on a futon unconscious.

If anyone was going to make it into the spirit realm to search for their friend, it would have to be him. And though he knew this it was hardly a comfort, as Masashi had read enough to know the many dangers involved in traveling between realms.

He took one last look at his companions before taking a seat at Hitomi’s bedside. *“I must enter a state of complete calm, like Hikiko-chan, yet I must also exhaust my energy, like Fumihiko-senpai.”*

But of course, that energy wasn’t physical.

“It’s spiritual. I need to exhaust all reserves of my magical power...it’s the only way to lighten my spirit enough to move to the realms beyond.” Masashi spoke as she looked over Hitomi, the older girl known for her serenity and grace. She was graceful even now, wrapped in bandages and heaving breaths at an ever slowing pace.

Across from her and against the window was a Wisteria—Hitomi’s favorite flower—though it wasn’t blooming. If Masashi recalled the itako correctly, it would only bloom at night. Looking outside it was just past midday. And judging by how quickly it was wilting, the purple flower would never get a chance to bloom.

Masashi shook his head. He clapped his hands together, and within them was a talisman. Staring out into the sky, into the afternoon sun, Masashi squinted and prayed.

“I’ll make it bloom, Hitomi-senpai. I won’t let either of you wither away!”

A surge of energy unseen by all but felt by every shugenja in the Academy emitted from out of Masashi. With his intentions pure and his pursuit noble, the magical boy pleaded upon his powers within. He started chanting a prayer and was determined not to stop until either his vision blacked out or the sun did.

One minute passed and then another, as the sun's rays went from a harsh white to a gentle yellow, until becoming a dull red all while remaining high in the sky. As the world dimmed and as night came early, the Wisteria drew open just as Masashi's eyes took to a close.

*"I'll find you...I won't...lose...a friend."*

■■■■

Masashi awoke the next morning on his futon. After wiping the sleep from his eyes, he tried to recall what it was he was doing the day before. Everything was a blur, and before he had time to collect his thoughts the bell for the morning classes rang.

"Oh no, I'm late!"

He sprang up and nearly stumbled while doing so: his legs didn't move the way he was accustomed to. They seemed to go further and stretch longer. It didn't make any sense but it did help Masashi run down the hall faster. His classroom was right ahead, though everyone was already seated and to make matters worse, the Headmaster himself was there waiting.

*"I'm going to get into big trouble! I could get expelled!"* Masashi choked down his fears as he approached the open doorway. He bowed low and respectfully, prepared to apologize and accept any punishment for the sin of being tardy.

And though he expected to be scolded, all he got was praise, instead.

"There you are, Hashimoto-dono! Your presence honors us. Class, stand and bow before the most accomplished instructor this Academy has ever employed!"

Masashi looked around until the realization hit him: *he* was the instructor, and everyone in this class—his fellow students—were bowing to *him*. They were also each a foot or so shorter than before. *"This doesn't make sense...was I always a teacher?!"*

The Headmaster bowed several times more before letting himself out. He made Masashi feel as if he was an accomplished shugenja already, and judging by the wide eyes and large smiles of his students they seemed to agree. Masashi was embarrassed from all the attention.

"Well then uh, does anyone have any questions?"

It turned out they did, as evidenced by the wave of hands that shot up all at once. Masashi was assaulted by questions from anxious students, eager to learn more about the spirit world, the magical arts and himself most of all. Many members of the shogi club wished him to join them in a match, what with him being among the top-ranked kishi in the country.

"Well perhaps I could oversee a game or two, haha," Masashi laughed while scratching his chin. But instead of smooth skin beneath his fingers there was something coarse instead, almost like...hair? The

shugenja shook away the thought, focusing instead on his lecture.

“Ahem. As for now, let us open our books to page forty-seven. The following is a passage by the renowned Shinto priest Saichō—also known as Dengyō Daishi—who is famous for writing the first ever account of a person entering the spiritual realm in a conscious capacity.”

Masashi went on at length upon the insights of the centuries-old monk, interweaving a variety of topics both practical and philosophical. His audience was captivated by his speech, many taking notes. “...it is the manifestation of these unseen waves of energy that our spiritual animals take form. Many scholars suggest they are the past incarnations of our prior selves. Coexisting without regards to time or place...it is quite fascinating, isn’t it?”

“Y-yes it is, Masashi-sensei!” said Hikiko, who usually never spoke up in class. But she was different now, her pale skin blushing red as she seemed both eager to speak up yet reluctant at the same time. She fiddled with her hair before finding the courage to speak. “May I ask, Sensei...how it is one would know if they were in the spirit world?”

“Good question. The spirit world shapes around the visitor’s own memories and desires, though this is often distorted by the subconscious mind. These distortions can come in the form of symbolism, so if you...pay...attention...” Masashi said ironically, getting distracted by a vase of purple flowers on his desk. “*Wisteria? Where those always there? And why are they blooming in the middle of the day?*”

Masashi winced upon a sudden headache, but he had a lecture to give and couldn’t stop now. The class wanted to know how to enter the spirit world and their instructor was more than happy to oblige. “You must first have a profound desire to do so, to reach out beyond your natural plane of existence. It cannot be forced. It requires a goal...a reason...*ah!*”

This time the ache was so great that it caused Masashi to fall. The entire student body gasped in unison, hurrying over to his side. By the time he returned to his feet and regained control of his senses, the bell rang.

“For tomorrow, please read chapters five and six! There will be a quiz on the Lotus Sutra,” Masashi grinned. He was already formulating the questions in his head. “Hikiko-chan and Fumihiro-kun, please stay. I would like to have a word with you.”

The sullen, sickly girl and the prideful warrior poet stayed behind, though both seemed to twitch and cower in fear as if expecting to be scolded. It wasn’t like his friends to be so intimidated by him.

“Have either of you seen Hitomi-san? Is she still in a coma?”

The two students looked at each other and shrugged.

“We don’t know anyone by that name, Sensei.”

■■■■



Masashi rushed around the school: first to the medical ward, which was empty, then to the cafeteria, the gymnasium, and the outside recreational areas. Hitomi was nowhere in sight. Everyone he asked didn't recognize the name—it was as if he had never existed.

"That's not right! I know you're real, Hitomi-san!" Masashi yelled out into the barren hallway with tears welling up in his eyes. He pleaded for an answer, and got one in the form of a very gentle, ladylike laugh.

It echoed across the hall and grew louder as Masashi approached. These were the rooms where the club activities took place, including the Shogi and Kendo clubs. But this voice came out from one room in particular: the Flower Arrangement Club.

"Hitomi-san, are you in there?!" Masashi yelled out as he slid open the shoji door. He expected to see the room in darkness like before, but instead it lit up like a beacon of warm, glowing light. Dancing amidst this light was a girl in shrine maiden's clothes, who was overwhelmed with glee.

Hitomi stopped her dance when she heard the short shugenja approach. Though Masashi was hardly short anymore—Hitomi had to look up to meet him face-to-face. "Is...is that you, Masashi-kun? You...you don't look at all as I imagined you would!" The girl blushed, her cheeks matching the shade of the roses in her hand. "You're very handsome."

"W-well I uh, um," Masashi stuttered out in embarrassment. "Wait just a moment! Your eyes! You can see, Hitomi-san?"

Sure enough, the once cloudy pearls were no more: in their place were large, black orbs so clear that Masashi could see his own reflection in them. "*Wait...do I really look like that?*"

"It is amazing, Masashi-kun! All the brilliant colors, oh you'll have to tell me the names of each and every one! And simply moving around is so easy, and I don't have to worry about bumping into anything! I'm free! I'm finally—iyah!"

Hitomi—in her excitement—tripped over an empty flower pot. Masashi reached out to grab her by instinct, sparing her a quick trip into the floor. With the girl in his arms, it was easy for an onlooker to get the wrong idea. Especially when Hitomi squeezed him.

"It seems that even with eyes I'm still clumsy! Hehe," Hitomi grinned. "If...if it suits you, I would like to visit the art gallery Fumihiko spoke of in his letter. Would you accompany me, Masashi-kun?"

The young shugenja was overwhelmed with emotions, but seeing Hitomi's genuine smile put all uncertainties to rest. Being able to see was a blessing that he himself had taken for granted. Masashi was determined to show the itako as much as there was to see.

"Of course, Hitomi-san! Let's get go—ing?" Masashi gulped as his companion wrapped his arm beneath his. She was no longer blind, but this was a habit for her even still. The problem was...

*“...it really looks like the two of us are going on a date!”*

■■■■

“I dares not think what horrors the Son of Hashimoto faces in the realm beyond!” said Fumihiro, clutching his heart as well as his forehead, the later still stinging after his self-inflicted trauma. “Wouldest only my battle ritual bore fruit, ‘twould be myself at peril in his place.”

Masashi’s two companions stood beside his unconscious body, which had fallen over atop of Hitomi’s in the medical ward. The magical boy appeared to be sleeping soundly, but any shugenja would know otherwise: the spiritual energy the boy once emitted was no more. He had left this realm for another.

“I can’t believe I fell asleep,” Hikiko grumbled, looking outside. “It’s dark out already...I don’t like it.” Shugenja were taught to pay close attention to possible omens, and a black sky before evening was hardly a good one.

“We have naught to do now but wait patiently,” Fumihiro declared, crossing his arms and taking a seat on the floor. “Indeed, ‘tis a test of endurance I intend to see through!”

At that moment, a voice murmured out from within the ceiling. The Academy had a series of talismans lined in the roofing tiles, an extensive series of papers allowing voice transmission from out of the Headmaster’s office. It was only used for announcements and the most pressing matters.

“Masashi Hashimoto, please report to the Academy’s stables at once. The head of the Shinsengumi requests your presence. This is a matter of the utmost urgency.”

Fumihiro and Hikiko looked at eachother.

“Failure to comply will result in your immediate expulsion. That is all.”

“Aaaah! Curse the spirits, wake up Masashi-kun!”

■■■■

Masashi couldn’t believe his eyes, for on the exhibit before him was the first shogi board ever made. The pieces were crude and uneven, the board cracked, but many of the tiles were just like their modern counterparts: the silver generals, the knights and the lances. But there were others, too, like the elephant and chariot!

“So that is what a shogi board looks like. You shall have to teach me how to play sometime, Masa-kun~” Hitomi giggled and squeezed Masashi’s arm tighter. It was both an uncomfortable and pleasant sensation at the same time. Yet Masashi couldn’t help but think the itako was acting strangely.

“Teaching...right, for some reason I’m a sensei now?” Masashi clutched his head as it began to beat with a pulsating pain. “How can that be...and why weren’t you in class, Hitomi-san?”

His companion only giggled in reply. “None of that matters. Oh—look at this!”

Hitomi pointed out to the next exhibit, this one being a series of outrageous outfits and masks: kabuki attire belonging to none other than Okuni-sama, the founder of the first kabuki troupe to ever exist. It was an all-female group of mikos renowned for bringing hope and laughter to the people during the chaotic decades of the Golden Era.

“So this is the kabuki Hikiko-chan is so interested in. We ought to watch a play sometime, Masa-kun! I’m certain it will be fun!”

While Masashi wanted to agree with her, a sharp pain deep in his gut told him otherwise. Something felt deeply wrong—a sensation that was only confirmed when Masashi looked around to see no one else in the museum but them. “Hitomi-san...how did we get here in the first place? I don’t recall leaving the school...”

Hitomi grabbed Masashi’s hand and squeezed. “Those details don’t matter. Come, let’s enjoy our date, unless...you’d rather leave.”

“Oh no, it’s not that!” Masashi assured her, not wanting to upset his friend. This was Hitomi’s first day of being able to see, and the shugenja was determined to make it a good one.

So the couple moved on to exhibits of armor and katanas, of banners used by clans that no longer existed. These didn’t hold much interest to Hitomi, who was more interested in the colorful designs of the porcelain and jade sculptures. She wanted to feel them—an old habit—but didn’t realize just how delicate centuries-old pottery could be. Masashi tried to stop her but before he could get close, the damage had been done.

*\*shatter\**

The handle of the ancient tea kettle broke and the bottom fell out. Masashi gasped before looking around fearfully to see if anyone had noticed. No one had because there was no one else there. Letting out a sigh of relief, Masashi knelt down to pick up the shards of porcelain. With the proper spell, it was possible to meld the pieces back together with minimal signs of damage.

“Wait...it’s not even scratched,” Masashi blinked once and then twice as he couldn’t believe his eyes. The porcelain tea kettle was in perfect condition. *“Am I going insane? Was this not broken just one second ago?!”*

“Goodness, look over there Masa-kun! It’s the wardrobe of Lady Sakiko, the Lioness of the Golden Era! Those kimonos are so pretty!”

Masashi nodded and assured Hitomi that he would be right there, and that he just needed a moment to collect his thoughts. Looking over the exhibits—the shogi board, the kabuki clothes and the ancient tea kettles—it seemed as if each and every one held special appeal to *him*.

This entire museum seemed too perfectly suited for the shugenja. It brought his own lecture back to mind. *"The spirit world shapes around the visitor's own memories and desires...none of this is real, is it? I'm in the spirit world, and all of this is nothing more than an illusion!"*

The walls began to rattle as Masashi started to run, to try and escape this museum that wasn't real. Yet one hallway only ever led to several more. He was lost within a labyrinth of his own mind, seeing exhibits of paintings, bonsai trees and sculptures that he knew belonged to the Hashimoto family estate.

*"Everything here is a projection of my own memories, of things I've seen or read about,"* Masashi concluded, trying to make sense of the insensible. Though just as he did, a contradiction appeared in the form of an odd, wooden sculpture.

It was, upon closer inspection, a red panda. It was a baby one, and crudely made—the work of an amateur. It didn't belong in this museum, which made it all the more interesting. Masashi felt a tremor of spiritual energy from inside it, with each step closer causing it to grow exponentially. The vibrations of energy became so great that it felt as the shugenja was amidst an earthquake just standing within arm's reach.

"I've never seen you before. Could it be, are you..." Masashi reached out to touch it. It was solid and felt like wood, yet it was especially warm to the touch. He stroked the panda's mane gently as if it were real. He smiled and wished that it was—red pandas were awfully cute.

Some wishes did come true, at least the spirit world. Light pierced from out of the sculpture's eyes, breaking the wood like a baby bird through its egg. From within the wooden sculpture came a miniature red panda, which stretched out on its hind legs and tilted its head to give Masashi a curious look.

The kid's dimples were showing as he beamed out a large smile. He had to struggle to resist the urge to hug it, out of fear of scaring it away. "You're real, aren't you little fellow? Could it be...are you my spirit animal?"

Masashi offered his hand to pet the little guy, but the furry critter took to his arm like a branch, climbing inside his kimono sleeve, tickling him all over before finding its way up his collar and perching on his shoulder.

"D-don't get too familiar! Goodness," Masashi said amidst a series of giggles. "I think I shall call you Pan-kun. Will that name suffice?"

Pan-kun affirmed the choice by licking Masashi's cheek. He then jumped off, scurrying to the ground and beckoning him to follow. Just as the shugenja was about to, however, Hitomi arrived.

"What's kept you, Masa-kun? I just got us tickets to a kabuki show! Oh, it shall be absolutely wondrous, don't you agree?" Hitomi asked, wrapping her arm once more beneath Masashi's.

"I, uh..."

“Let us hurry before it’s too late!” the once-blind girl pulled, determined to lead the way. Part of Masashi wanted to follow her, to go on a date that lasted forever. But deep down he knew that was wrong. *This world* was wrong.

“Masa-kun? Please, come with me,” Hitomi pulled, her voice cracking in a plea.

The young shugenja shook his head, and finally acted as mature as he appeared. With a sadness met with determination, Masashi made his next words clear. “I’m sorry. But I have to follow my spirit.”

He hurried off after Pan-kun, through one hallway into the next, all while the walls and floor tiles disappeared around him. As for the exhibits—they each made less sense the further he went in. The first was a tall, wooden device with a hole and a bucket at the bottom and giant blade overhead.

After that was a kabuki mask covered in shogi tiles, then a garden of red flowers being burned, and then finally: a duck sleeping upon the largest koi fish Masashi had ever seen! *“These aren’t my memories...are they something else?”*

The shugenja couldn’t make sense of it. He just kept on following Pan-kun, who finally stopped running in front of a familiar door: the door to the medical ward in the Academy. Somehow they had left the museum and returned to the school.

Bracing his courage, Masashi puffed out his cheeks and opened the door. What he saw was himself: he was resting atop a futon beside Hitomi, with a very concerned Hikiko and Fumihiko pacing around and arguing. The two were pleading for him to wake up.

“Hey, you two, I’m over here!” Masashi yelled out but to no avail. Inside this room was the physical world, he knew, and it was where he and Hitomi had to return to.

“Look at me,” said a voice from behind. It was Hitomi, though she was gesturing to her other self on the sickbed. “I’m covered in burns and bruises...what reason do I have to return to that life, Masashi? It is only filled with pain and darkness!”

“But you’ll die if you stay here!” Masashi exclaimed. “And what good is it to see if you live alone? Don’t you miss your friends?”

Hitomi wiped her tears with her sleeve, but they were falling too freely. So instead she put her head against Masashi’s chest and mumbled. “I have you, don’t I? Don’t you like being older and more mature? You’re a teacher...respected by all your students. Everyone listens to you.”

Masashi hugged Hitomi and patted her head, comforting her like a father would a daughter. “There, there. I don’t mind being underestimated because of how I look. It’s part of who I am. It’s not always easy, being different...but it sure beats being alone. I know I can make friends and be happy by just being myself. Do you understand, Hitomi-san?”



She didn't reply with a yes or a no, but with a loud and lengthy sob that made Masashi's red kimono grow damp. Even still, the teacher held the student tightly, allowing the fear and pain the time it needed to settle. Hitomi was born without the ability to see. To be able to give up such a gift, to return to blindness willingly, took a will beyond that of an ordinary shugenja.

"Alright, I'll go back," Hitomi sniffled, "but if you could indulge me just this once...would you accompany me to the Flower Arrangement Club, just one more time?"

Masashi nodded and smiled. Hitomi was far from ordinary.

■■■■

"*You're* Masashi Hashimoto?" asked the captain of the Shinsengumi. "I was made to believe you were shorter, and favored red silk kimonos."

Fumihiro laughed, a bit too loudly. "Oh, but the boy doth becomes a man! 'Tis the beauty of such budding flowers that doth summons the bee," the poet said, gesturing to a pair of female classmates that were pointing and laughing at him. "N-now then, I must say once more how great an honor it is to be the presence of the Shinsengumi. Why, your service—"

"I don't care how good you are at magic kid, you talk too much," remarked one of swordsmen. He, like the rest of them, wore a light blue kimono with white mountain trim. These were the elite of the elite: the Emperor's personal task force. And they weren't known for mincing words.

"You are familiar with a man by the name of Sadao Hamasaki, are you not? We have an urgent need to find out his whereabouts. We were told you imbued an item of magical power for him during a classroom competition. Have you any way of locating this item through magical means?"

Fumihiro scratched his chin. Item imbuing was far from his expertise, and if he recalled the competition correctly, he had spent most of his time in practice duels with the samurai his team was paired up with. Though he couldn't quite recall the man's name, he had a very good Jigen-ryū stance.

"I am afraid what you ask for is impossible, good sirs. But with that matter settled, perchance I may be granted a practice bout? You do not know how I've dreamt of crossing blades with—oh, you're leaving..."

■■■■

Masashi and Hitomi sat side-by-side, amidst the itako's carefully curated garden. The two took in the majestic sight of morning glories, lotuses, bellflowers and irises, roses, carnations, camellias and cherry blossoms, too. There was so much beauty to be had in the arrangements, that you never would've guessed that a blind girl had made them.

"They're so pretty. I knew they were, but I never knew how brilliant colors could be. I'm glad they make others happy," Hitomi said with a wistful sigh. She leaned up against Masashi and said that it was time.

“Are you certain? Is there nothing else you would like to see before we return? Perhaps—ah!”

Masashi shot out a gasp as Hitomi cupped the shugenja’s face in her hands. She stared into his eyes intensely, looking deeply into Masashi’s soul. She smiled at what she saw.

“You’re the last person I’ll ever see. That makes me very happy, Masa-kun. You really will grow up into quite the looker, hehe!”

Masashi blushed, not sure how to take such a compliment. He could only nod and begin the incantation to return, to send their consciousness and spirits back to the realm below: where their friends and the rest of Hyuga waited for them.

Just as the light was about to take them in, he saw Pan-kun waving goodbye. He waved back, at least until a large fowl flew in from the sky. It wasn’t a duck but a swan, though it was colored black instead of white. It spoke directly into Masashi’s mind.

“Study well and learn quickly, Hashimoto-san. For you do not have the luxury of time.”

[Which character should July's side story be about?](#)

[Jun 7, 2019](#)

This poll will close at the end of June.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+17)

4%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+5)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+28)

6%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+12)

1%

Keiko, the maid (+30)

8%

Kohaku, the samurai (+3)

3%

Kuniko, the farmer (+8)

1%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+0)

1%

Momoko, the doctor (+14)

5%

Nishi, the yakuza (+43)

16%

Satsuma, the emperor (+10)

9%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+28)

42%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+9)

4%

Poll ended Jun 30, 2019 · 79 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapters 14 & 15](#)

[Jun 15, 2019](#)

Two chapters this month! Rejoice! ٩(^̣^)

Chapter 14 isn't particularly short, but I felt like pairing them together because what the heck, there won't be many early access chapters left! That's right: Samurai of Hyuga Book 4 is currently in publishing! That said, there's still lots of weeks left for all the copyediting, save import testing and Apple marketplace bullcrap to delay it further.

Another reason I wanted to bundle chapters 14 and 15 together is because they finish the Fun & Games portion of Book 4, before we move into Chapter 16 which contains the midpoint of the story. That doesn't mean that everything's gritty from here on out—there will be plenty of humor going forward, rest assured! It just means the stakes are about to get raised!

[Guys & Gals](#)

[Jun 25, 2019](#)

For those who have played through SoH multiple times, is your ronin always attracted to the same gender?

Yes, women.

Yes, men.

No, I mix it up!

190 votes total

[SoH Artwork: Book 4, Part 10](#)

[Jun 29, 2019](#)

Tug-of-wars, food fights and...**final draft Cover Art?!**

This month we have a pair of very fun scenes brought to life courtesy of Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#))! Bonus points if you can guess which Dragon Ball Z character makes a cameo!

With Book 4's release date on the horizon, it is finally time to unveil the final-draft version of the book's cover by Kanitama Corokke ([twitter](#))! This one is definitely unique from the other covers, taking us away from the "female character facing one way, male character facing the other way" stuff. It's intimate, dangerous and has a lot of punch to it.

Just like Book 4! ( ^ ▽ ^ )

### Chapter 22 Art: "Unlikely Voters"



### Chapter 23 Art: "Food Fight"





Book 4 Cover Art: Final Draft





## Initiation Day

Jul 5, 2019

When you started reading my books, which was the latest one that was out?

Fatehaven (2014-2015)

SoH Book 1 (2015-2016)

SoH Book 2 (2016-2017)

[Side Story #12: Toshie's Guard Duty](#)

[Jul 7, 2019](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>



Side Story 12: Toshie's Guard Duty



■■ Yamato ■■

Toshie was in a poor mood this morning. For starters, she had only just managed to put on her Hyugan makeup before a servant came running down the hall screaming bloody murder. Literally—there was a death among the Shinsengumi, or rather, one of their wives. Sadao Hamasaki had taken the life of his wife, Kanae.

“*Hardly a murder mystery,*” the kunoichi grumbled as she made her way to the Hamasaki residence. It was the crack of dawn, but even still she had to force herself through a mob of samurai stirred up by the commotion. Though usually she was more subtle, this morning Toshie shoved, elbowed and otherwise removed those in her path. Before they could respond in kind, the infamous ‘Heartless Hound’ gave them a glare.

It wasn’t long before even the most veteran samurai gave the ninja a wide berth.

Solving mysteries was Toshie’s favorite pastime, yet this was an open-and-shut case that would be nothing more than paperwork to delay her usual morning tea with Satsuma-sama. She enjoyed briefing the Emperor on the day’s activities, the first of today’s being a breakfast with Shibuya & Sons: a company of shipwrights out of Jijinto with a revolutionary new ship design.

An armored warship was likely a farce or a scam, or at best a promise that was impossible to keep—regardless, Toshie wanted to brief the Emperor beforehand. Instead, she had to deal with a scandal within the Shinsengumi. It wasn’t a matter she could ignore; they were the royal guard and therefore, their actions reflected upon their master. And their master happened to be the same as Toshie’s.

“He was a new recruit—told you this batch was no good!”

“Rumors were, she was sleepin’ around.”

“Everyone knew he was a bit off, but no one expected this.”

A trio of men in bright-blue haori jackets with white mountain trim argued in front of the gruesome scene. They were no strangers to bloodshed, and were among the top swordsmen in the land. But swordsmanship didn’t carry over much to detective work. Toshie made her presence known with a cough.

“No signs of breaking and entering. Nor is there any alcohol on the premise nor damage to the furniture,” Toshie observed. “It would seem to be a domestic dispute, as everyone has already guessed. What I want to know is why—if Sadao was so unstable—no one deemed it necessary to report him?!”

“We figured it was stress,” said one of them. “He was a new member, recently accepted after his training with some shugenja at the Academy. Not every man can handle the responsibility of—”

Toshie held out a hand. She *knew* the name sounded familiar. The culprit was the samurai who had been paired with Masami Hashimoto; with her magic he was able to read into the Emperor’s mind during a visit just two weeks prior. Such a powerful artifact had potential for great good, Toshie imagined.

*“And great evil,”* Toshie shook her head at the corpse of Kanae. She had an ‘X’ cut deep into her stomach, and worst of all...she had been pregnant. Toshie hung her head in shame. *“I cannot believe that for a moment I considered Sadao a possible candidate. This is not the work of The Sword Who Cuts the Heavens.”*

“Masami Hashimoto,” Toshie spoke, “is the shugenja at the Academy who was tasked with the creation of Sadao’s artifact. Send a group to her and find out if she is able to track the object’s location.”

“You don’t get to boss us around! No lowly ninja is going to tell us how to do our job!”

Toshie ignored the outburst and examined the walls. “Kabuki masks and posters...it would seem Sadao is a fan of theater. I would keep tabs on traveling troupes in case he reveals himself. Now if that’s all—I’ll take my leave.”

The ninja gave the curtest of bows before making for the exit, though in the entrance way was the captain of the Shinsengumi himself, Hijikata Toshizō. He was not a large man nor did he have a powerful frame, but his presence instilled a sense of respect that made Toshie’s feet stop and her back straighten.

“This imperfection sullies our reputation. It is a matter we will conduct with our own discretion. Your input is appreciated, Toshie-san, but do not overstep your bounds. You have a gift of observation, but you do not seem to realize how your words affect others. Consider this both a warning and a piece of advice.”



Toshie didn't understand the captain, though bowed and thanked him all the same. She had to hurry—the breakfast meeting was about to begin.

It was taking place on the castle's East-facing veranda. An outside porch was hardly the most secure location, but it was a cool summer's day and offered a generous view of the ocean. It also, however, faced the Kondo ghettos. The dilapidated slums were nothing but an eyesore to the nobility, though today—Toshie realized—it would be more than that. The ninja scolded herself for forgetting that today on the Wasure Rareta's calendar marked the celebration of the hunt.

“Ko KoOo-Ka-E Ko-Ro Ki-Ya! Ko KoOo-Ka-E Ko-Ro Ki-Ya!”

Toshie paused, for a moment feeling like a child again on her father's farm. Dancing to the thump of the warrior's beat, clapping and praying for rain, a good harvest and a plentiful hunt—it was such a simpler time back then. Back before Fuji-sama, Satsu-kun and his mother arrived and changed the Kondo girl's life forever.

“I don't miss it,” Toshie said, speaking to herself. She snapped herself back to reality, to Yamato, where the Kondo festivities were drawing the ire of the locals. This chanting would go on for hours, as each adult male had to be blessed for the hunting season. The most popular dance was the Ku Rimse, the bow dance, where women gathered and chanted around the hunter who performed a series of archery movements with a bow and arrow.

Though the kunoichi had an analytical mind, she knew from experience not to discount her instincts. A feeling of dread hit Toshie then and there, just before the arrow flew towards the castle. It felt as if it had stricken the ninja's heart, for it did not beat out of fear for Satsu-kun's life.

“Assassin! Assassin!” came shouts from the guards. Toshie was overwhelmed by concern, and by the time she had recovered and traced the path of the arrow, the shooter was gone. The entire guard came upon the slums in a roar, scattering the Kondos amidst their festival. Cries broke out among her people.

Part of Toshie wanted to run to them, to protect them from the overzealous samurai. But she had buried that part of her long ago. For a purpose higher than herself, for an ideal beyond imagination, and for the oath she would uphold past her death—she ran to the Emperor's side.

*“Satsu-kun! Please be unharmed!”*

■■■■

Satsuma was in his quarters, unharmed though visibly unnerved. Though not from the danger that had interrupted his morning meal: the arrow went well stray, and was shot as such a distance that it had no force behind it after making it up to the veranda. If anything, it had ended a very tedious meeting with an overbearing shipwright.

Instead, the Young Lion was worried over the Kondos, and how this would worsen the already horrific relations between them and the Hyugans. It didn't help that within his room was a legion of samurai and



guardsman just begging for the order to set the slums ablaze.

*"You cannot appear soft, nor friendly towards the natives,"* Toshie said, sympathetic to Satsuma's situation. This was the sort of difficult decision a man in his position made each and every day. Yet through all this, he was able to retain the same smile of his childhood. It reminded Toshie of just how special a person he was.

"I will not have a massacre break out within Yamato, not for such a half-hearted attempt at doing me harm. Instead of using a samurai's kanabō, let us use a doctor's scalpel instead," Satsuma declared. "I wish for this matter to be dealt with swiftly and quietly. I would ask who among you has the most experience with the Kondo people."

While the rest of the room looked around with uncertainty, Toshie gulped. Her identity was something she had to keep well-hidden if she intended to stay at the Emperor's side. Yet right now her master needed her. So she stepped forth and—

"Your Imperial Majesty, please allow me this task," said a man with greying hair and longest, oddest moustache Toshie had ever seen. Wispy tendrils fell from beside his lips, down his chin and then inches beyond. "I am Captain Hanbei, of the Yamato City Watch. It is my failure that allowed this to happen. Please allow me to seek this assassin, or grant me permission to take my life. For this shame is too great to bear."

Toshie gave the captain a scrutinizing gaze. He spoke well for a soldier, and didn't seem particularly overwhelmed at being in the Emperor's presence. Likely a samurai once of high renown, that for whatever reason was stripped of his titles. He wore a white kimono beneath a suit of ashigaru armor, painted purple save for the golden crest of the Chrysanthemum Seal.

Satsuma had already seen enough seppukus for a lifetime in his short reign, and had little intention of watching another. He granted the guardsman his request, though asked once more if there would be someone to aid Captain Hanbei in this task. Toshie took her cue and bowed low.

The Emperor accepted the kunoichi's offer and sent them off with a smile. Though it was more like a grimace. *"Worry not for me, Satsu-kun. I shall see this through!"*

■■■■

"You offered to take your own life in shame," Toshie grumbled, "so why are you drinking in an izakaya?!"

The ninja released her pent-up frustration by slamming a fist into the bar table. Time was of the essence, and they were wasting theirs with saké of all things. This was a seedy tavern—or as seedy as they got in Yamato—on the West side of the city. Nowhere close to where they needed to be.

Hanbei ignored his companion, focusing instead on pouring himself a cup. After bringing it up to his nose and savoring it with a sniff he downed it. "Aah! I never start a job without a good drink. Sets the

tone to any endeavor. It's only a shame we don't have the time to take a dip at the Steamed Scholar. I've got a wicked knot in my back that's killing me!"

*"That won't be the first thing that kills you, if you keep this up!"* Toshie yelled, at least inside her head. She took a long breath to regather her composure, and brought out a detailed map of the slums as well as calculations for the arrow's trajectory. From what she witnessed and where the arrow happened to land, she could narrow down where the shooter must have shot from.

"Ho? What's all this then?" Hanbei asked with an amused smirk. "It's a pretty map, I'll say that much. But I've patrolled through those ghettos for years, lass. They move around every week, trying to escape taxes and smuggle goods into and out of the city. Clever little dirtskins."

"Captain Hanbei," Toshie spoke while tracing arcs across her paper, "I shall investigate the matter on my own. You may stay here and continue to indulge in your drink."

"Tempting. But let me ask you something, lass: how do you feel about Kondos?"

The kunoichi was taken aback, unprepared for such a question point-blank. The irony here being that she *did* have a prepared answer to give, and promptly gave it.

"Kondos disgust me. They are a savage people: uncivilized tribes of hunter-gatherers. They are little more than animals, and should be treated as such."

Hanbei slapped his knee and laughed. Toshie couldn't imagine what in her answer could possibly be humorous. "Going into the slums with that attitude will get you nowhere. They're a crafty lot who like to keep their lips tight around us Hyugans—even if their neighbor is a deranged killer. Must be some sort of dirtskin code," Hanbei sighed before pouring a drink and offering it to Toshie. "Luckily, I just so happen to speak their language."

Toshie rose a hand to reject the offer. "It is surprising that you speak the Kondo tongue. I hear it is quite difficult to articulate the various tenses of verbs they use in—"

"Eh? What are you going on about? I'm talking about ryō, lass! Here, I'll show you!" Hanbei hailed over the barkeep and requested to see the cleanup kid. Before long a sullen-faced boy no older than eight came out from the back room, holding a mop in one hand and a bucket in the other. He kept his head tucked between his shoulders as if prepared for a beating.

That all changed when he recognized Hanbei. The boy smiled and waved.

"Toshie, meet Ko-chan. He's my eyes and ears, for the right price."

"To...shie?" Ko-chan asked, scrutinizing Toshie's face. The ninja had to turn away and curse. Ko-chan was one of *her* informants. Rascal was playing both sides, it seemed.

Hanbei twisted his moustache out of habit. “Alright, kid. You know what a bow is, right? Good. I need you to run back to your part of town and hunt them down for me. Each one you find gets you a nice little bonus, got it?”

Ko-chan got it and then got going, much to Toshie’s relief. The captain of the city watch mistook her relief for something else. “Haha! Kid wasn’t going to bite you. But you really can’t stand dirtskins much, can you? You must be from a high pedigree family, I take it?”

“Something like that,” Toshie replied flatly. “More importantly, we need to find out who is selling the Kondos their weapons. The crime of a savage wielding a bow and arrow is punishable by an arrow to the arm—that is the law of the land. They knew that danger...yet proceeded to perform the ceremony anyway.”

Hanbei downed his drink and slammed down his cup. This was his third. “Ceremony? Oh, that thumping dance? Figured it was some sort of bear mating call—who knows what those types are into! Hahaha...well anyway, your gear’s here.”

Toshie was rightfully confused, at least until another member of the Yamato City Watch arrived carrying a suit of purple armor. He gave the two of them a head nod. “Cap’n, found the spare suit. Looks like it’s gonna be a size too big, though.”

“It’ll do, Ganji,” Hanbei said before handing it over to the kunoichi. “Go ahead and slip it on, and we’ll start our patrol.”

“I don’t wear—” Toshie started, before giving pause. If she was being forced to accompany this goon of a guardsman into the slums, it would be important that her fellow kinsmen didn’t recognize her. This armor would work as a disguise.

“...very well, I’ll wear the armor. Though I don’t expect I’ll have need of it.”

■■■■

Toshie fidgeted for the hundredth time. For starters, the ashigaru armor was well too large on her frame—though she was hardly delicate she was still a woman built for finesse and not load-bearing. And though the cuirass was bulky it was also dented in a way that gave her chest discomfort at every step.

Though the worst feature by far was its smell. “I take it the Yamato City Watch does not clean their armor regularly, or at all for that matter.”

Captain Hanbei tugged at his moustache while he chuckled. “Kimura-kun had a habit of sweatin’ like a stuffed dog. A summer down here will do that to a fellow.” The guardsman wiped a cloth across his forehead with his left hand. In his other was his spear—much more than a walking stick, the hardwood shaft was covered in lacquered bamboo, and had a wicked blade about an arm’s length at the top.

"You wield the spear quite proficiently," Toshie noted, looking over his grip and stance. She had inspected enough soldiers to tell the skillful ones at a glance. While the yari was thought to be lowly weapon, the truth was more men had died at spearpoint than ever by a katana's edge. "May I assume you served during the Golden Era?"

"Sorry—I don't have any good war stories to tell. Now look alive, lass. The dirtskins in this street can be particularly jumpy."

Toshie noticed it as well. The Kondo slums were like an entirely different place from the perspective of a Yamato City Watchman. The natives quieted up and shot glances from out windows, from alleyways and partially-opened doors. It was eerie not hearing even the children playing at midday. It almost made the kunoichi wish she had a weapon.

*"What a foolish thought," Toshie scolded herself. "I'm here to clear my people of a crime against my lord—not do them harm!"*

An elderly man who was too stubborn or too senile to catch the mood, wandered about the streets as usual. When he saw the pair of guardsmen he began shouting in a foreign tongue, and it was clear to Toshie that the man's mind hadn't left the days of the Kondo War. Or rather, the Kondo Massacre. For the old man's sake it was a good thing that Captain Hanbei didn't understand the curses flying in his direction.

The veteran city watchman pulled out something from his pouch—an apple—and tossed it over to quiet the old man. The appeasement actually worked, and the elderly Kondo went on his way. As much as it pained Toshie to admit, her people had little in the way of pride these days.

"Old bastard and I go through this routine every time I come through here. Problem for him is that his eyes are no good," Hanbei shrugged. "We've got beater crews who take this route from time-to-time, and they don't discriminate when it comes to beatings."

"There have been multiple reports of guards treating the natives harshly, in some cases beating them to within an inch of their lives. I take it you employ alternative methods?"

"Back when I was younger and angrier, I'd probably do the same to these dirtskins," Hanbei said as he stroked his chin. "Lot of guardsman come from samurai families stripped of their titles and lands. They have to take out that anger on someone, even if its poor Kondo grannies. Speaking of which..."

"What's everyone shushin' up for? Why can't you all be dhis quiet at night when I'm trying to sleep, eh?!" a small, shriveled yet sprightly grandmother came out with her hands on her hips. It was Ume-Ume, who had no fear nor concern at all for a pair of Yamato City Watchmen.

"Oh, it's you Hanbei-kun. What's with dhe recruit—run out of spears of something?" the old lady laughed at Toshie's expense, and the captain joined in. There were even snickers from the shadows.

"She said she didn't need it, Ume-chan. I'm thinkin' she's in over her head, but we'll see. Now you wouldn't happen to see any bows and arrows around here, would you?"

The grandmother tightened her lips and looked away for but a moment. It was a slight tell but a tell all the same. Hanbei hadn't picked it up, and was about to accept Ume-Ume's offer for tea when Toshie intervened.

"I think you're holding back what you know, old maid," Toshie said, pretending to be rude. Though in all honesty there wasn't much make-believe involved. "You know all about the celebrations that went on this morning. I'm talking about the Ku Rimse."

Upon speaking the name of the ceremonial dance there was a gasp, not from Ume but from the Kondos spectating all around them. The grandmother bit her lip and looked around with a scowl, before letting out a sigh and forcing them inside her hut. "Alright dhen, come in. Dhis new recruit of yours Hanbei, I don't dhink I like dhem very much."

Toshie was reluctant to enter, having seen the fungus that lined the old lady's residence before. The squeaking of mice was nearly ever-present, yet if you believed Ume this place was a palace fit for a lord and a lady. Built, of course, from her late husband's bare hands.

"Seems like quite the man," Hanbei said, trying to shorten Ume-Ume's story. "Now tell us about this Koo-Whimsy thing."

The grandmother wasn't pleased at being cut short, but—like all opinionated people—she was anxious to let her two guests in on how she felt. "It's dhe hunting dance, hasn't been done for years around here. Dhat's because it makes no sense to be! See, not one of dhese boys has shot a fawn let alone an elk. Why, my husband, when he was courting me, once came back carrying a bear on his back twice his size! Dhat's when I knew I would marry him! I said..."

Toshie went deep into her thoughts while Ume-Ume spoke at length about how her husband had wooed her decades ago. She had confirmed the ninja's suspicions: there were few if any skilled hunters among the Kondos living in Yamato. To shoot an arrow from the slums to the Imperial Castle's veranda took a skill these natives no longer possessed.

The kunoichi was about to say as much when a boy slid open the door and interrupted them. Before Ume-Ume could scold him for his lack of manners, the boy handed Hanbei a bow. This was Ko-chan, who was beside himself with glee. "Found 'a whole warehouse filled with 'em! You'll have to come see for yourself!"

Hanbei and Toshie exchanged glances. They weren't going to say no to a fresh lead.

■■■■

Though the lead was fresh, the stench in the air wasn't—this section of the slums bordered the Southside Harbor. The waft of unsold fish made the already ill wind go fouler. This was where the



Danzaemon—the Untouchables—lived and worked their unsightly crafts: leatherworking, grave digging, and collecting nightsoil to name a few.

They were the lowest social class a Hyugan could belong to: a caste of outcasts. Some were criminals or sons and daughters of criminals, though many were the offspring of warriors who had chosen the wrong side in previous wars. There was likely over a hundred clans among them, broken up to bring about an era of peace all thanks to Satsuma's father, Emperor Seijirō.

*"The only banner they follow now is one of shame and defeat. In some ways, they have it worse than Kondos do. At least we have our culture and identity. These people have neither,"* Toshie thought while looking over the impoverished settlement. Whereas the Kondos tended to avoid the guards the Danzaemon sneered and looked at them with an exceeding amount of curiosity—especially at their armor.

"You won't find this law written in any book, but we patrolmen don't often come down these parts. So long as these outcasts keep quiet and keep at their work, we let them rule themselves. From what I hear, they have a new 'king' every week!" Hanbei chuckled, but his humor didn't reach his eyes. They were busy scanning the area for threats. It seemed he was far more uneasy around them than Kondo grandmothers.

Ko-chan was even more terrified. From what Toshie understood, Kondos and Danzaemon kept to their own. The boy's presence here wouldn't go unnoticed. It was all the more reason to wonder how the young Kondo discovered this warehouse in the first place.

"It's, it's *that* one, over there!" the boy pointed. It wasn't a warehouse but a shrine, though it was so crude Toshie could forgive Ko-chan's misjudgement. There were torii made from scraps of driftwood leading up to the building, which was the only two-story shack around. There was a good explanation for that: it had originally been a watchtower, back when Yamato was a frontier town.

Hanbei let out a groan, but grabbed his coin pouch ready to reward Ko-chan. "Alright kid, a deal's a deal. Now...where'd you run off to?" Not even Toshie could chase down their informant, who had gone into a full-out sprint down a nearby alley. The ninja couldn't blame him for not wanting to stick around, but still...

"...this feels like a trap," the two said in unison. Hanbei let out a chuckle while Toshie grimaced. It was good that they were on the same page, at least.

"You go in first lass, I'll keep watch from out here. If there's anyone in there, you'll have a better chance to talk them down without a weapon," the captain said while twisting his moustache. "Just keep in mind that while Untouchables don't have much pride, they're sensitive about the pride they *do* have."

"Do not speak to me of pride," Toshie replied coldly. Hanbei was a coward and a firm believer in gender equality—or at least, he had no qualms against sending a woman in his place. It was commonly said that only warriors with caution grew grey hairs, and the Yamato City Watchman certainly had plenty of

both. Though Toshie was rarely the sort to take such risks, the safety of every Kondo in the Capital was on the line. More than that...

"I am here for the sake of His Imperial Majesty. You're just here for a paycheck," Toshie said, speaking down to the guardsman. "That is the difference between you and I, Captain Hanbei. I am entirely capable of handling this matter on my own."

■■■■

Toshie proceeded to do just that: for starters, she obtained a cloth left out to dry, draping it over her armor. Revealing that she was in the employ of the city watch would likely do her no favors. After that she waited and observed the people going into and out of the shrine: there were none. In fact most actively avoided it.

There was no entrance aside from the front one, at least at ground level. But above and at the back, at the waterside, there was a window she could climb through. Getting the high ground on what was likely an ambush would be a tactical advantage.

"Ergh...so heavy," Toshie groaned out through clenched teeth. She had put on fifty pounds courtesy of the oversized armor, and every ounce of it bore down into her fingertips as she tried to climb up the watchtower-turned-shrine. Footholds were hard to come by, but with enough grit and muffled yells the ninja managed to get to the window.

*\*thunk\**

It wasn't a perfectly silent entrance as Toshie tumbled into the open window and down several feet to the second floor balcony. It was set up similar to many of the older shrines in the Temple District. The first thing Toshie noted was the smell—just a single sniff made her feel as if she was amidst a ceremony in the Imperial Castle's grand shrine.

*"That can't be...agarwood? That's a luxury even for members of the Imperial Court! What's going on here?"*

"Both'er gone, milady. The one with'ah spear headed on back—look like he tucked his tail and runned!" said a voice that cracked with a squeak no different than the mice that ran freely across the floor.

*"Captain Hanbei ran off, did he? Kuso,"* the ninja cursed to herself, *"I shouldn't have expected anything more!"*

There was a silence as Toshie slowly skulked over the balcony for a glimpse. She didn't have to peer over—there were enough holes in the wooden boards to catch a decent view. Unfortunately that went both ways.

"The word isss 'ran' not 'runned', you imbecile! Why must I always be ssssurrounded by such ssstupidity?!" said a slithering, angry yet elegant voice from below, which sounded far too noble to

belong to an outcast. “Now then, are you fools going to deal with our guest upstairs or not?!”

The voice belonged to a middle-aged woman with a heavy coat of makeup on her face, though not heavy enough to cover the wart on her chin. Toshie could see it as it faced upwards towards her from below, though something odd was happening. It was getting larger.

*“No...it’s getting closer?!”*

To the ninja’s horror, the woman’s neck stretched out one foot and then a dozen more in length, wrapping around like a serpent eyeing its prey. That her inhumanely long tongue was hissing certainly added to the imagery. Toshie was so horrified that she hadn’t heard the pairs of footsteps that came running up the stairs. By the time she had recovered from the sight, the Danzaemon were atop her. Or rather, their fishing nets were.

“Lively, I’ll give ‘er that!” said a man, toad-like in appearance, who came hopping up the stairs. He had a blowgun in one hand and a nasty looking dart in the other. He was also a yakuza—with a serpent across his bare chest.

“Bring our guest down below. I wisssh to be out of this sssshithole as quickly as possible.”

The Danzaemon did as they were told, though while they were grabbing and restraining her, Toshie noted that their eyes were empty. Vacant, as if there was no mind behind it. It didn’t make sense but nothing did inside this unholy shrine.

The demon recoiled her neck back into its proper place above her shoulders. But it was what was beside her and at the center of the shrine that took Toshie’s breath away. It was a statue—no, a wooden sculpture of a viper. Its body was coiled while its head and top half were raised. Its tongue was out and its fangs were bared. There was also another detail: a gash down its stomach.

*“Satsu-kun, this is your work—I’d recognize it anywhere. Did you foresee this? What does it mean, and...and why didn’t you warn me?!”*

“I see thisss carving disgusts you as well,” the demon scowled, first at Toshie then at Satsuma’s sculpture. She traced her finger over it. “Made of cheap and pathetic wood...I shall ssssurround myself with gold and gemstones before I’m done! I shall have an entire city of ssservants, once the Kondos are purged from Yamato. They will flock to me and I will welcome them with open arms, fufufufu! Ahahaha—*\*ah\*!*”

The woman’s laughter was cut short after she got a splinter on her finger. She stomped on the ground and let out a hiss, the spittle flying among the Danzaemon who did not so much as flinch. They were under some sort of spell.

Her attendant, the frog-like yakuza with the blowgun, gestured to a stack of papers. “What shall we do with’ta contract for the archers? Got some left over bows ‘ere, too!”

"You will do with them what we shall do to this disssstasteful shrine and this Imperial interloper: burn it all to the ground! Servants, light your torches!"

The mind-controlled Hyugans did as they were told, lighting torches and passing them around. Toshie gulped as sweat dripped from her brow. Trapped tightly within three separate nets, she could hardly feel her hands let alone use them to free herself.

*"Am I to die here, Satsu-kun?! Am I not meant for a greater purpose?!"*

The demonic woman with the stretchy neck opened the door, letting the afternoon sun come into the shrine. She turned around to face Toshie, outstretched her finger and hissed. "Have you any last words?"

Toshie grit her teeth and shouted, "Your days are numbered, demon! Satsuma-sama has seen your death a thousand times! The Sword will tear you asunder!"

"H-how dare you!" the demon bit her tongue in frustration. She then grabbed hold of her toad-like assistant and shook him. "Ssssilence her already! And bar the door after you're done. I've wasted enough time with this filth!"

*\*swoop\**

A poisoned dart came flying into Toshie's chest. It was wedged in there—in her cuirass, that is. The smelly and oversized armor had saved her life, if only for moments more. The squeaking laughter of the yakuza was the last she heard before the door slid shut behind her. And once it closed, the torches fell.

The ninja watched in horror as the Danzaemon set themselves ablaze with their torches. They let out painful wails and cries, yet didn't move as they each turned into human torches. The stench of burning flesh, the fumes of it—Toshie was in hell. She struggled with her bindings, using her teeth to chew apart the nets but to no avail.

She had better luck with her feet, able to stand up after some difficulty and hop around. Unfortunately by then the smoke filled the air, making it hard to see. Even worse was the creaking from the rafters above. The aged drywood was already beginning to cave. Toshie hopped over to the entrance and slammed against it, though it was no use—it was barred from the other side!

She coughed and as desperation kicked in, she looked towards the snake sculpture, fell to her knees and prayed. "Spirits, please! I cannot die here! I am meant to serve the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens! Allow me to survive this trial...I beg you!"

*\*wham\* \*WHACK\**

A thumping came from the other side of the door, before a spearhead poked through. A familiar Yamato City Watchman followed thereafter, coughing at the fumes flying into his face. Captain Hanbei had to squint, but could see Toshie's figure well enough.





Toshio was in a poor mood this morning. For starters, he had only just managed to put on his Hyugan makeup before a servant came running down the hall screaming bloody murder. Literally—there was a death among the Shinsengumi, or rather, one of their wives. Sadao Hamasaki had taken the life of his wife, Kanae.

*“Hardly a murder mystery,”* the shinobi grumbled as he made his way to the Hamasaki residence. It was the crack of dawn, but even still he had to force himself through a mob of samurai stirred up by the commotion. Though usually he was more subtle, this morning Toshio shoved, elbowed and otherwise removed those in his path. Before they could respond in kind, the infamous ‘Heartless Hound’ gave them a glare.

It wasn’t long before even the most veteran samurai gave the ninja a wide berth.

Solving mysteries was Toshio’s favorite pastime, yet this was an open-and-shut case that would be nothing more than paperwork to delay his usual morning tea with Satsuma-sama. He enjoyed briefing the Emperor on the day’s activities, the first of today’s being a breakfast with Shibuya & Sons: a company of shipwrights out of Jijinto with a revolutionary new ship design.

An armored warship was likely a farce or a scam, or at best a promise that was impossible to keep—regardless, Toshio wanted to brief the Emperor beforehand. Instead, he had to deal with a scandal within the Shinsengumi. It wasn’t a matter he could ignore; they were the royal guard and therefore, their actions reflected upon their master. And their master happened to be the same as Toshio’s.

“He was a new recruit—told you this batch was no good!”

“Rumors were, she was sleepin’ around.”

“Everyone knew he was a bit off, but no one expected this.”

A trio of men in bright-blue haori jackets with white mountain trim argued in front of the gruesome scene. They were no strangers to bloodshed, and were among the top swordsmen in the land. But swordsmanship didn’t carry over much to detective work. Toshio made his presence known with a cough.

“No signs of breaking and entering. Nor is there any alcohol on the premise nor damage to the furniture,” Toshio observed. “It would seem to be a domestic dispute, as everyone has already guessed. What I want to know is why—if Sadao was so unstable—no one deemed it necessary to report him?!”

“We figured it was stress,” said one of them. “He was a new member, recently accepted after his training with some shugenja at the Academy. Not every man can handle the responsibility of—”

Toshio held out a hand. He *knew* the name sounded familiar. The culprit was the samurai who had been paired with Masashi Hashimoto; with his magic he was able to read into the Emperor’s mind during a

visit just two weeks prior. Such a powerful artifact had potential for great good, Toshio imagined.

*“And great evil,”* Toshio shook his head at the corpse of Kanae. She had an ‘X’ cut deep into her stomach, and worst of all...she had been pregnant. Toshio hung his head in shame. *“I cannot believe that for a moment I considered Sadao a possible candidate. This is not the work of The Sword Who Cuts the Heavens.”*

“Masashi Hashimoto,” Toshio spoke, “is the shugenja at the Academy who was tasked with the creation of Sadao’s artifact. Send a group to him and find out if he is able to track the object’s location.”

“You don’t get to boss us around! No lowly ninja is going to tell us how to do our job!”

Toshio ignored the outburst and examined the walls. “Kabuki masks and posters...it would seem Sadao is a fan of theater. I would keep tabs on traveling troupes in case he reveals himself. Now if that’s all—I’ll take my leave.”

The ninja gave the curtest of bows before making for the exit, though in the entrance way was the captain of the Shinsengumi himself, Hijikata Toshizō. He was not a large man nor did he have a powerful frame, but his presence instilled a sense of respect that made Toshio’s feet stop and his back straighten.

“This imperfection sullies our reputation. It is a matter we will conduct with our own discretion. Your input is appreciated, Toshio-san, but do not overstep your bounds. You have a gift of observation, but you do not seem to realize how your words affect others. Consider this both a warning and a piece of advice.”

Toshio didn’t understand the captain, though bowed and thanked him all the same. He had to hurry—the breakfast meeting was about to begin.

It was taking place on the castle’s East-facing veranda. An outside porch was hardly the most secure location, but it was a cool summer’s day and offered a generous view of the ocean. It also, however, faced the Kondo ghettos. The dilapidated slums were nothing but an eyesore to the nobility, though today—Toshio realized—it would be more than that. The ninja scolded himself for forgetting that today on the Wasure Rareta’s calendar marked the celebration of the hunt.

“Ko KoOo-Ka-E Ko-Ro Ki-Ya! Ko KoOo-Ka-E Ko-Ro Ki-Ya!”

Toshio paused, for a moment feeling like a child again on his father’s farm. Dancing to the thump of the warrior’s beat, clapping and praying for rain, a good harvest and a plentiful hunt—it was such a simpler time back then. Back before Fuji-sama, Satsu-kun and his mother arrived and changed the Kondo boy’s life forever.

“I don’t miss it,” Toshio said, speaking to himself. He snapped himself back to reality, to Yamato, where the Kondo festivities were drawing the ire of the locals. This chanting would go on for hours, as each adult male had to be blessed for the hunting season. The most popular dance was the Ku Rimse, the

bow dance, where women gathered and chanted around the hunter who performed a series of archery movements with a bow and arrow.

Though the shinobi had an analytical mind, he knew from experience not to discount his instincts. A feeling of dread hit Toshio then and there, just before the arrow flew towards the castle. It felt as if it had stricken the ninja's heart, for it did not beat out of fear for Satsu-kun's life.

"Assassin! Assassin!" came shouts from the guards. Toshio was overwhelmed by concern, and by the time he had recovered and traced the path of the arrow, the shooter was gone. The entire guard came upon the slums in a roar, scattering the Kondos amidst their festival. Cries broke out among his people.

Part of Toshio wanted to run to them, to protect them from the overzealous samurai. But he had buried that part of him long ago. For a purpose higher than himself, for an ideal beyond imagination, and for the oath he would uphold past his death—he ran to the Emperor's side.

*"Satsu-kun! Please be unharmed!"*

■■■■■

Satsuma was in his quarters, unharmed though visibly unnerved. Though not from the danger that had interrupted his morning meal: the arrow went well stray, and was shot as such a distance that it had no force behind it after making it up to the veranda. If anything, it had ended a very tedious meeting with an overbearing shipwright.

Instead, the Young Lion was worried over the Kondos, and how this would worsen the already horrific relations between them and the Hyugans. It didn't help that within his room was a legion of samurai and guardsman just begging for the order to set the slums ablaze.

*"You cannot appear soft, nor friendly towards the natives,"* Toshio said, sympathetic to Satsuma's situation. This was the sort of difficult decision a man in his position made each and every day. Yet through all this, he was able to retain the same smile of his childhood. It reminded Toshio of just how special a person he was.

"I will not have a massacre break out within Yamato, not for such a half-hearted attempt at doing me harm. Instead of using a samurai's kanabō, let us use a doctor's scalpel instead," Satsuma declared. "I wish for this matter to be dealt with swiftly and quietly. I would ask who among you has the most experience with the Kondo people."

While the rest of the room looked around with uncertainty, Toshio gulped. His identity was something he had to keep well-hidden if he intended to stay at the Emperor's side. Yet right now his master needed him. So he stepped forth and—

"Your Imperial Majesty, please allow me this task," said a man with greying hair and longest, oddest moustache Toshio had ever seen. Wispy tendrils fell from beside his lips, down his chin and then inches beyond. "I am Captain Hanbei, of the Yamato City Watch. It is my failure that allowed this to happen.

Please allow me to seek this assassin, or grant me permission to take my life. For this shame is too great to bear.”

Toshio gave the captain a scrutinizing gaze. He spoke well for a soldier, and didn’t seem particularly overwhelmed at being in the Emperor’s presence. Likely a samurai once of high renown, that for whatever reason was stripped of his titles. He wore a white kimono beneath a suit of ashigaru armor, painted purple save for the golden crest of the Chrysanthemum Seal.

Satsuma had already seen enough seppukus for a lifetime in his short reign, and had little intention of watching another. He granted the guardsman his request, though asked once more if there would be someone to aid Captain Hanbei in this task. Toshio took his cue and bowed low.

The Emperor accepted the shinobi’s offer and sent them off with a smile. Though it was more like a grimace. *“Worry not for me, Satsu-kun. I shall see this through!”*

■■■■

“You offered to take your own life in shame,” Toshio grumbled, “so why are you drinking in an izakaya?!”

The ninja released his pent-up frustration by slamming a fist into the bar table. Time was of the essence, and they were wasting theirs with saké of all things. This was a seedy tavern—or as seedy as they got in Yamato—on the West side of the city. Nowhere close to where they needed to be.

Hanbei ignored his companion, focusing instead on pouring himself a cup. After bringing it up to his nose and savoring it with a sniff he downed it. “Aah! I never start a job without a good drink. Sets the tone to any endeavor. It’s only a shame we don’t have the time to take a dip at the Steamed Scholar. I’ve got a wicked knot in my back that’s killing me!”

*“That won’t be the first thing that kills you, if you keep this up!”* Toshio yelled, at least inside his head. He took a long breath to regather his composure, and brought out a detailed map of the slums as well as calculations for the arrow’s trajectory. From what he witnessed and where the arrow happened to land, he could narrow down where the shooter must have shot from.

“Ho? What’s all this then?” Hanbei asked with an amused smirk. “It’s a pretty map, I’ll say that much. But I’ve patrolled through those ghettos for years, lad. They move around every week, trying to escape taxes and smuggle goods into and out of the city. Clever little dirtskins.”

“Captain Hanbei,” Toshio spoke while tracing arcs across his paper, “I shall investigate the matter on my own. You may stay here and continue to indulge in your drink.”

“Tempting. But let me ask you something, lad: how do you feel about Kondos?”

The shinobi was taken aback, unprepared for such a question point-blank. The irony here being that he *did* have a prepared answer to give, and promptly gave it.

"Kondos disgust me. They are a savage people: uncivilized tribes of hunter-gatherers. They are little more than animals, and should be treated as such."

Hanbei slapped his knee and laughed. Toshio couldn't imagine what in his answer could possibly be humorous. "Going into the slums with that attitude will get you nowhere. They're a crafty lot who like to keep their lips tight around us Hyugans—even if their neighbor is a deranged killer. Must be some sort of dirtskin code," Hanbei sighed before pouring a drink and offering it to Toshio. "Luckily, I just so happen to speak their language."

Toshio rose a hand to reject the offer. "It is surprising that you speak the Kondo tongue. I hear it is quite difficult to articulate the various tenses of verbs they use in—"

"Eh? What are you going on about? I'm talking about ryō, lad! Here, I'll show you!" Hanbei hailed over the barkeep and requested to see the cleanup kid. Before long a sullen-faced boy no older than eight came out from the back room, holding a mop in one hand and a bucket in the other. He kept his head tucked between his shoulders as if prepared for a beating.

That all changed when he recognized Hanbei. The boy smiled and waved.

"Toshio, meet Ko-chan. He's my eyes and ears, for the right price."

"To...shie?" Ko-chan asked, scrutinizing Toshio's face. The ninja had to turn away and curse. Ko-chan was one of *his* informants. Rascal was playing both sides, it seemed.

Hanbei twisted his moustache out of habit. "Alright, kid. You know what a bow is, right? Good. I need you to run back to your part of town and hunt them down for me. Each one you find gets you a nice little bonus, got it?"

Ko-chan got it and then got going, much to Toshio's relief. The captain of the city watch mistook his relief for something else. "Haha! Kid wasn't going to bite you. But you really can't stand dirtskins much, can you? You must be from a high pedigree family, I take it?"

"Something like that," Toshio replied flatly. "More importantly, we need to find out who is selling the Kondos their weapons. The crime of a savage wielding a bow and arrow is punishable by an arrow to the arm—that is the law of the land. They knew that danger...yet proceeded to perform the ceremony anyway."

Hanbei downed his drink and slammed down his cup. This was his third. "Ceremony? Oh, that thumping dance? Figured it was some sort of bear mating call—who knows what those types are into! Hahaha...well anyway, your gear's here."

Toshio was rightfully confused, at least until another member of the Yamato City Watch arrived carrying a suit of purple armor. He gave the two of them a head nod. "Cap'n, found the spare suit. Looks like it's gonna be a size too big, though."



"It'll do, Ganji," Hanbei said before handing it over to the shinobi. "Go ahead and slip it on, and we'll start our patrol."

"I don't wear—" Toshio started, before giving pause. If he was being forced to accompany this goon of a guardsman into the slums, it would be important that his fellow kinsmen didn't recognize him. This armor would work as a disguise.

"...very well, I'll wear the armor. Though I don't expect I'll have need of it."

■■■■

Toshio fidgeted for the hundredth time. For starters, the ashigaru armor was too large on his frame—though it fit his chest and arms well enough, it's previous bearer had something the ninja didn't: a plentiful gut. Because of this the cuirass felt more like a shell, making quick maneuvers next to impossible.

Though the worst feature by far was its smell. "I take it the Yamato City Watch does not clean their armor regularly, or at all for that matter."

Captain Hanbei tugged at his moustache while he chuckled. "Kimura-kun had a habit of sweatin' like a stuffed dog. A summer down here will do that to a fellow." The guardsman wiped a cloth across his forehead with his left hand. In his other was his spear—much more than a walking stick, the hardwood shaft was covered in lacquered bamboo, and had a wicked blade about an arm's length at the top.

"You wield the spear quite proficiently," Toshio noted, looking over his grip and stance. He had inspected enough soldiers to tell the skillful ones at a glance. While the yari was thought to be lowly weapon, the truth was more men had died at spearpoint than ever by a katana's edge. "May I assume you served during the Golden Era?"

"Sorry—I don't have any good war stories to tell. Now look alive, lad. The dirtskins in this street can be particularly jumpy."

Toshio noticed it as well. The Kondo slums were like an entirely different place from the perspective of a Yamato City Watchman. The natives quieted up and shot glances from out windows, from alleyways and partially-opened doors. It was eerie not hearing even the children playing at midday. It almost made the shinobi wish he had a weapon.

*"What a foolish thought," Toshio scolded himself. "I'm here to clear my people of a crime against my lord—not do them harm!"*

An elderly man who was too stubborn or too senile to catch the mood, wandered about the streets as usual. When he saw the pair of guardsmen he began shouting in a foreign tongue, and it was clear to Toshio that the man's mind hadn't left the days of the Kondo War. Or rather, the Kondo Massacre. For the old man's sake it was a good thing that Captain Hanbei didn't understand the curses flying in his direction.

The veteran city watchman pulled out something from his pouch—an apple—and tossed it over to quiet the old man. The appeasement actually worked, and the elderly Kondo went on his way. As much as it pained Toshio to admit, his people had little in the way of pride these days.

“Old bastard and I go through this routine every time I come through here. Problem for him is that his eyes are no good,” Hanbei shrugged. “We’ve got beater crews who take this route from time-to-time, and they don’t discriminate when it comes to beatings.”

“There have been multiple reports of guards treating the natives harshly, in some cases beating them to within an inch of their lives. I take it you employ alternative methods?”

“Back when I was younger and angrier, I’d probably do the same to these dirtskins,” Hanbei said as he stroked his chin. “Lot of guardsman come from samurai families stripped of their titles and lands. They have to take out that anger on someone, even if its poor Kondo grannies. Speaking of which...”

“What’s everyone shushin’ up for? Why can’t you all be dhis quiet at night when I’m trying to sleep, eh?!” a small, shriveled yet sprightly grandmother came out with her hands on her hips. It was Ume-Ume, who had no fear nor concern at all for a pair of Yamato City Watchmen.

“Oh, it’s you Hanbei-kun. What’s with dhe recruit—run out of spears of something?” the old lady laughed at Toshio’s expense, and the captain joined in. There were even snickers from the shadows.

“He said he didn’t need it, Ume-chan. I’m thinkin’ he’s in over his head, but we’ll see. Now you wouldn’t happen to see any bows and arrows around here, would you?”

The grandmother tightened her lips and looked away for but a moment. It was a slight tell but a tell all the same. Hanbei hadn’t picked it up, and was about to accept Ume-Ume’s offer for tea when Toshio intervened.

“I think you’re holding back what you know, old maid,” Toshio said, pretending to be rude. Though in all honesty there wasn’t much make-believe involved. “You know all about the celebrations that went on this morning. I’m talking about the Ku Rimse.”

Upon speaking the name of the ceremonial dance there was a gasp, not from Ume but from the Kondos spectating all around them. The grandmother bit her lip and looked around with a scowl, before letting out a sigh and forcing them inside her hut. “Alright dhen, come in. Dhis new recruit of yours Hanbei, I don’t dhink I like dhem very much.”

Toshio was reluctant to enter, having seen the fungus that lined the old lady’s residence before. The squeaking of mice was nearly ever-present, yet if you believed Ume this place was a palace fit for a lord and a lady. Built, of course, from her late husband’s bare hands.

“Seems like quite the man,” Hanbei said, trying to shorten Ume-Ume’s story. “Now tell us about this Koo-Whimsy thing.”

The grandmother wasn't pleased at being cut short, but—like all opinionated people—she was anxious to let her two guests in on how she felt. "It's the hunting dance, hasn't been done for years around here. That's because it makes no sense to be! See, not one of these boys has shot a fawn let alone an elk. Why, my husband, when he was courting me, once came back carrying a bear on his back twice his size! That's when I knew I would marry him! I said..."

Toshio went deep into his thoughts while Ume-Ume spoke at length about how her husband had wooed her decades ago. She had confirmed the ninja's suspicions: there were few if any skilled hunters among the Kondos living in Yamato. To shoot an arrow from the slums to the Imperial Castle's veranda took a skill these natives no longer possessed.

The shinobi was about to say as much when a boy slid open the door and interrupted them. Before Ume-Ume could scold him for his lack of manners, the boy handed Hanbei a bow. This was Ko-chan, who was beside himself with glee. "Found 'a whole warehouse filled with 'em! You'll have to come see for yourself!"

Hanbei and Toshio exchanged glances. They weren't going to say no to a fresh lead.

■■■■

Though the lead was fresh, the stench in the air wasn't—this section of the slums bordered the Southside Harbor. The waft of unsold fish made the already ill wind go fouler. This was where the Danzaemon—the Untouchables—lived and worked their unsightly crafts: leatherworking, grave digging, and collecting nightsoil to name a few.

They were the lowest social class a Hyugan could belong to: a caste of outcasts. Some were criminals or sons and daughters of criminals, though many were the offspring of warriors who had chosen the wrong side in previous wars. There was likely over a hundred clans among them, broken up to bring about an era of peace all thanks to Satsuma's father, Emperor Seijirō.

*"The only banner they follow now is one of shame and defeat. In some ways, they have it worse than Kondos do. At least we have our culture and identity. These people have neither,"* Toshio thought while looking over the impoverished settlement. Whereas the Kondos tended to avoid the guards the Danzaemon sneered and looked at them with an exceeding amount of curiosity—especially at their armor.

"You won't find this law written in any book, but we patrolmen don't often come down these parts. So long as these outcasts keep quiet and keep at their work, we let them rule themselves. From what I hear, they have a new 'king' every week!" Hanbei chuckled, but his humor didn't reach his eyes. They were busy scanning the area for threats. It seemed he was far more uneasy around them than Kondo grandmothers.

Ko-chan was even more terrified. From what Toshio understood, Kondos and Danzaemon kept to their own. The boy's presence here wouldn't go unnoticed. It was all the more reason to wonder how the young Kondo discovered this warehouse in the first place.

"It's, it's *that* one, over there!" the boy pointed. It wasn't a warehouse but a shrine, though it was so crude Toshio could forgive Ko-chan's misjudgement. There were torii made from scraps of driftwood leading up to the building, which was the only two-story shack around. There was a good explanation for that: it had originally been a watchtower, back when Yamato was a frontier town.

Hanbei let out a groan, but grabbed his coin pouch ready to reward Ko-chan. "Alright kid, a deal's a deal. Now...where'd you run off to?" Not even Toshio could chase down their informant, who had gone into a full-out sprint down a nearby alley. The ninja couldn't blame him for not wanting to stick around, but still...

"...this feels like a trap," the two said in unison. Hanbei let out a chuckle while Toshio grimaced. It was good that they were on the same page, at least.

"You go in first lad, I'll keep watch from out here. If there's anyone in there, you'll have a better chance to talk them down without a weapon," the captain said while twisting his moustache. "Just keep in mind that while Untouchables don't have much pride, they're sensitive about the pride they *do* have."

"Do not speak to me of pride," Toshio replied coldly. Hanbei was a coward but also the older man. It was commonly said that only warriors with caution grew grey hairs, and the Yamato City Watchman certainly had plenty of both. Though Toshio was rarely the sort to take such risks, the safety of every Kondo in the Capital was on the line. More than that...

"I am here for the sake of His Imperial Majesty. You're just here for a paycheck," Toshio said, speaking down to the guardsman. "That is the difference between you and I, Captain Hanbei. I am entirely capable of handling this matter on my own."

■■■■

Toshio proceeded to do just that: for starters, he obtained a cloth left out to dry, draping it over his armor. Revealing that he was in the employ of the city watch would likely do him no favors. After that he waited and observed the people going into and out of the shrine: there were none. In fact most actively avoided it.

There was no entrance aside from the front one, at least at ground level. But above and at the back, at the waterside, there was a window he could climb through. Getting the high ground on what was likely an ambush would be a tactical advantage.

"Ergh...so heavy," Toshio groaned out through clenched teeth. He had put on fifty pounds courtesy of the oversized armor, and every ounce of it bore down into his fingertips as he tried to climb up the watchtower-turned-shrine. Footholds were hard to come by, but with enough grit and muffled yells the ninja managed to get to the window.

*\*thunk\**

It wasn't a perfectly silent entrance as Toshio tumbled into the open window and down several feet to the second floor balcony. It was set up similar to many of the older shrines in the Temple District. The first thing Toshio noted was the smell—just a single sniff made him feel as if he was amidst a ceremony in the Imperial Castle's grand shrine.

*"That can't be...agarwood? That's a luxury even for members of the Imperial Court! What's going on here?"*

"Both'er gone, milady. The one with'ah spear headed on back—look like he tucked his tail and runned!" said a voice that cracked with a squeak no different than the mice that ran freely across the floor.

*"Captain Hanbei ran off, did he? Kuso,"* the ninja cursed to himself, *"I shouldn't have expected anything more!"*

There was a silence as Toshio slowly skulked over the balcony for a glimpse. He didn't have to peer over—there were enough holes in the wooden boards to catch a decent view. Unfortunately that went both ways.

"The word issss 'ran' not 'runned', you imbecile! Why must I always be ssssurrounded by such ssstupidity?!" said a slithering, angry yet elegant voice from below, which sounded far too noble to belong to an outcast. "Now then, are you fools going to deal with out guest upstairs or not?!"

The voice belonged to a middle-aged woman with a heavy coat of makeup on her face, though not heavy enough to cover the wart on her chin. Toshio could see it as it faced upwards towards him from below, though something odd was happening. It was getting larger.

*"No...it's getting closer?!"*

To the ninja's horror, the woman's neck stretched out one foot and then a dozen more in length, wrapping around like a serpent eyeing its prey. That her inhumanely long tongue was hissing certainly added to the imagery. Toshio was so horrified that he hadn't heard the pairs of footsteps that came running up the stairs. By the time he had recovered from the sight, the Danzaemon were atop him. Or rather, their fishing nets were.

"Lively, I'll give 'em that!" said a man, toad-like in appearance, who came hopping up the stairs. He had a blowgun in one hand and a nasty looking dart in the other. He was also a yakuza—with a serpent across his bare chest.

"Bring our guest down below. I wisssh to be out of this sssshithole as quickly as possible."

The Danzaemon did as they were told, though while they were grabbing and restraining him, Toshio noted that their eyes were empty. Vacant, as if there was no mind behind it. It didn't make sense but nothing did inside this unholy shrine.



The demon recoiled her neck back into its proper place above her shoulders. But it was what was beside her and at the center of the shrine that took Toshio's breath away. It was a statue—no, a wooden sculpture of a viper. Its body was coiled while its head and top half were raised. Its tongue was out and its fangs were bared. There was also another detail: a gash down its stomach.

*"Satsu-kun, this is your work—I'd recognize it anywhere. Did you foresee this? What does it mean, and...and why didn't you warn me?!"*

"I see thisss carving disgusts you as well," the demon scowled, first at Toshio then at Satsuma's sculpture. She traced her finger over it. "Made of cheap and pathetic wood...I shall ssssurround myself with gold and gemstones before I'm done! I shall have an entire city of sssservants, once the Kondos are purged from Yamato. They will flock to me and I will welcome them with open arms, fufufufu! Ahahaha—\*ah\*!"

The woman's laughter was cut short after she got a splinter on her finger. She stomped on the ground and let out a hiss, the spittle flying among the Danzaemon who did not so much as flinch. They were under some sort of spell.

Her attendant, the frog-like yakuza with the blowgun, gestured to a stack of papers. "What shall we do with'tha contract for the archers? Got some left over bows 'ere, too!"

"You will do with them what we shall do to this dissstasteful shrine and this Imperial interloper: burn it all to the ground! Servants, light your torches!"

The mind-controlled Hyugans did as they were told, lighting torches and passing them around. Toshio gulped as sweat dripped from his brow. Trapped tightly within three separate nets, he could hardly feel his hands let alone use them to free himself.

*"Am I to die here, Satsu-kun?! Am I not meant for a greater purpose?!"*

The demonic woman with the stretchy neck opened the door, letting the afternoon sun come into the shrine. She turned around to face Toshio, outstretched her finger and hissed. "Have you any last words?"

Toshio grit his teeth and shouted, "Your days are numbered, demon! Satsuma-sama has seen your death a thousand times! The Sword will tear you asunder!"

"H-how dare you!" the demon bit her tongue in frustration. She then grabbed hold of her toad-like assistant and shook him. "Ssssilence him already! And bar the door after you're done. I've wasted enough time with this filth!"

*\*swoop\**

A poisoned dart came flying into Toshio's chest. It was wedged in there—in his cuirass, that is. The smelly and oversized armor had saved his life, if only for moments more. The squeaking laughter of the

yakuza was the last he heard before the door slid shut behind him. And once it closed, the torches fell.

The ninja watched in horror as the Danzaemon set themselves ablaze with their torches. They let out painful wails and cries, yet didn't move as they each turned into human torches. The stench of burning flesh, the fumes of it—Toshio was in hell. He struggled with his bindings, using his teeth to chew apart the nets but to no avail.

He had better luck with his feet, able to stand up after some difficulty and hop around. Unfortunately by then the smoke filled the air, making it hard to see. Even worse was the creaking from the rafters above. The aged drywood was already beginning to cave. Toshio hopped over to the entrance and slammed against it, though it was no use—it was barred from the other side!

He coughed and as desperation kicked in, he looked towards the snake sculpture, fell to his knees and prayed. "Spirits, please! I cannot die here! I am meant to serve the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens! Allow me to survive this trial...I beg you!"

*\*wham\* \*WHACK\**

A thumping came from the other side of the door, before a spearhead poked through. A familiar Yamato City Watchman followed thereafter, coughing at the fumes flying into his face. Captain Hanbei had to squint, but could see Toshio's figure well enough.

"Better late than never! Now let's get you out of here, lad!"

Toshio laughed—not from humor but from sheer relief. His companion hadn't abandoned him after all. He gave the captain a nod, and after snatching what papers they could, they ran out of the shrine right as the roof came toppling down behind them.

■■■■

"You'll have to forgive him, Your Imperial Majesty. Sometimes when folks experience great fear, their eyes play tricks on them," Captain Hanbei said while twisting his lengthy moustache. "We all know demons aren't real."

Satsuma let out a chuckle while sipping his tea. "Regardless of who or what this woman was, I am relieved that you are safe, Toshio-san. The loss of life is unfortunate, but the documents you have found clear the Kondos of this crime. You have done the city of Yamato a great service. I do believe you two work well together!"

"It...it is as you say, Your Imperial Majesty," Toshio said with his head bowed low. There was much more he wished to say, though now was not the time to say it.

When the shinobi raised his head he found an arm around it. It was Captain Hanbei's. "If you think we're getting along now, just wait until I get a couple cups of saké down him! The rest of the guards are throwing us a celebration—that is of course, if Your Imperial Majesty allows it."

The Emperor held a hand to his lips and laughed. “*Allow?* I believe I shall order it! Toshio-san, please enjoy yourself...”

“...this day and every day we have left.”

[Which character should August's side story be about?](#)

[Jul 7, 2019](#)

This poll will close at the end of July.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+20)

5%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+5)

1%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+33)

10%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+13)

1%

Keiko, the maid (+36)

8%

Kohaku, the samurai (+5)

6%

Kuniko, the farmer (+9)

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+1)

9%

Momoko, the doctor (+18)

8%

Nishi, the yakuza (+56)

19%

Satsuma, the emperor (+17)

18%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+0)

13%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+12)

4%

Poll ended Jul 31, 2019 · 80 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapter 16](#)

[Jul 15, 2019](#)

Almost forgot to upload this one! (pls no bully >\_<)

Chapter 16 is, from a storywriting perspective, the midpoint of Book 4. The midpoint is where the 'false peak' or 'false collapse' happens to our hero. I'll let you figure out which one takes place here! We get to see some old faces make a return, and boy are they ugly—inside and out!

[Koi Fish](#)

[Jul 25, 2019](#)

In your first playthrough of Samurai of Hyuga, what did you do to that koi fish back at the Sleeping Duck?

Spike

Bash

I tried to do neither, but ended up spiking it!

I tried to do neither, but ended up bashing it!

173 votes total

[Location, Location, Location](#)

[Aug 5, 2019](#)

What country do you live in?

United States (West)

United States (East)

United States (Central)

China

India

Japan

Germany

Russia

Indonesia

Brazil





"Thou makest quite the proposal, Lady Hayashi. Are thee quite certain that I am a suitable candidate? Perhaps I am unready," suggested a teenaged girl with soft and elegant words. They were forced and fake, just like her smile and obedient bow. Noriko may have been the daughter of a samurai, but dining at expensive tea houses with wrinkled old ladies was *not* her idea of a good time.

"On the contrary! There is much potential in you, Lady Noriko. No doubt due to your pedigree—of which we have your dearest father to thank!" The older woman giggled and grinned towards the third occupant of the table. "Lord Morita, I speak for all the instructors at the Lioness Institute for Charm and Etiquette when I say that you daughter will be welcomed with open arms! Our finishing school boasts a flawless rate of marriage arrangements within one year of graduation!"

Noriko had to bite her tongue to hold back a groan. If there was any respite, it was in the steamed dumplings that were on the plate in front of her. They were what the Sleeping Duck was known for and were the only reason she'd bothered to dress up and show up to this meeting in the first place. But while she was eager to dig in, Noriko couldn't get her chopsticks out in time before a withered hand fell on her sleeve.

"A lady eats only after the gentlemen are finished, Noriko-san. This is but one lesson of many you shall learn in our decorum classes." Lady Hayashi smiled the sort of smile that made one's face especially punchable, or so Noriko thought. She was starving and her father was a pig. Not to mention there was nothing sadder than a cold dumpling.

"Nori-chan, tis past time to consider thy future," said Lord Morita between bites. "Thou mother and I worry upon what crowds thee involve thyself in. Becoming a proper lady and marrying a famous samurai shall bring great honor to our clan. It is thy duty to our family, just as it is thy younger brother's path to follow the way of the sword."

The way of the sword sure sounded a hell of a lot more appetizing to Noriko than the way of the old maid did. Unlike every other samurai daughter her age, marriage had no appeal to her—and neither did men for that matter. Her focus was elsewhere: currently, it was on the young waitress who served their table.

She was Noriko's age and had a habit of playing with her hair, and was shy but stole glances at her direction from time to time. She was too young to be a geisha, more likely an apprentice in training. She was clumsy, too—which would end up cutting this meeting blissfully short.

"Oh no, no-no-no!" the waitress cried out as she tripped towards their table. In her hands was a tray with a hot kettle of tea along with a second helping of dumplings. Noriko dodged the kettle but the lady beside her wasn't as lucky nor as agile, and got boiling hot green tea got all over her silk kimono.

"Eiiiyah?!" she screeched in what was hardly ladylike fashion. But while she was busy being outraged, Noriko was busy with the waitress who had fallen atop her. The girl was even cuter up close, but what caught her eye was what ran down her neck.

*"Is that...ink on her skin? Cherry blossoms?"* Noriko had never seen such a thing before and was intent on examining the waitress further. But she wouldn't get her chance—Lady Hayashi grabbed the waitress by the ear and almost twisted it off.

"How dare you! You unscrupulous wench!" The older woman raised a hand as if to slap her, but then came to her senses upon noticing the commotion she was causing. She forced out a fake giggle, released the ear, and bowed to Lord Morita. "Ahem. I do apologize for my unbecoming outburst. I'm afraid I must retire for the evening, as it won't do for a lady to be seen in such...unpleasant circumstances."

She bowed as low and stiffly as she could, considering that hot tea was running down her legs. Noriko wanted to thank the waitress for her mistake, but she had already been taken away to be scolded by the staff. She was alone with her father—and they rarely saw eye-to-eye.

"I have decided that thee will enlist in this institute, Nori-chan. Furthermore, I forbid thee from socializing with those beneath thy station." Lord Morita spoke of a familiar point of contention between the two. Noriko had friends outside the offspring of samurai. "Thy shall be under strict curfew so long as thee are a member of my household. Understand?"

Noriko's patience snapped along with her chopsticks, the latter of which she wedged into the last dumpling and ate it. "To hell with thee! And with the old hag, too! I shall do whatever the fuck I wish!"

Lord Morita nearly choked. "I forbear thee speak such maledictions in my presence!"

"Then I'll gladly rid myself of yours!" Noriko yelled, storming out of the Sleeping Duck. She was pissed off and hungry, but tired most of all. It wasn't exhaustion that fatigued her but the dull monotony of upper-class life. Sneaking out at night to watch gamblers toss dice and geisha seduce drunkards was all the fun there was to be had in Yamato. It was the most boring city you could live in—of that much, the young woman was certain.

At times like these, Noriko went where she always did: to a nearby lumber mill. It was abandoned at this time of night, and had plenty of trees in need of becoming logs and axes to help make it happen.

After tying up her hair, pulling up her kimono's sleeves, and spitting in her hands, Noriko grabbed an axe and started to get to work. Though she wasn't getting paid for it, when it came to venting her anger, chopping wood was second to none. It helped even more when she imagined her father's face on them.

*\*chop\* \*chop\* \*chop\**

Noriko had been sneaking off to do this for quite some time, enough for rumors of a ghost haunting the mill to have taken root. It was also enough time for her to develop her strength, of which had grown in leaps and bounds beyond what any lady should possess. The young woman had the strength and temperament of an enraged bear, and used both to wedge the axe clean through the oaken log.

*\*WHOMP\**

The two halves of the log fell. Noriko wiped her arm across her forehead only to realize she hadn't broken a sweat. At this rate it would take a dozen trees and all night to wear herself out. Cursing at herself and the world, the girl reached over to pick up another log from the stack. Wasn't hard to imagine her surprise when she saw the waitress there waiting with a tea set.

"What the—?!" Noriko jumped back and flailed her axe around by instinct. She grew embarrassed, too, to be seen amidst her hidden hobby. The waitress quickly went into a series of bows, apologizing before introducing herself.

"I'm so sorry! I ruined your meeting earlier—I'm such a ditz." She sniffled. "My name is Keiko...I hope you don't mind me following you. I just wanted to apologize...for being so useless. I came from Jijinto to learn how to be a proper lady, yet I can't even serve one!"

Noriko looked around. Keiko seemed to be alone. "If thee are suggesting that I am a proper lady, thou art mistaken. I am but...what is it thee finds so humorous?"

Keiko held a hand to lips in a failed attempt to hide her giggle. "Please forgive me, Lady Noriko. It is just that your accent...is very unique. It is very different than the girl who speaks it."

Noriko spat on the ground and grimaced. "I hate how I sound! And that's not all I hate." The samurai's daughter looked at her father's corpse in the form of a broken log. "Thou came to the capital to become a lady, correct?" Noriko brought a hand to her chin and went deep into thought.

What came to mind was a plan: one to escape the likes of Lady Hayashi and the old maids at the institute. "Then here is what we shall do: myself and thee will swap places! Thou will enroll in my place, and I shall take up thy duties in yours."

Keiko's eyes and lips went wide. "But we mustn't! We couldn't! I work and live with types a person of your class would deem...unsavory. It would not do for a samurai's daughter to associate with them. My father and my family, they're yaku—"

"It matters not to me what they are," Noriko grinned as she hefted up her axe above her shoulders, preparing to cut this next log in a single blow. "Hyah!" Noriko shouted, and after making several more pieces of firewood, she tossed the axe aside.

"Show up here tomorrow at dawn. I'll have thy kimono ready for thee, Lady Keiko."

■■■■

After the exchange was made the next day, Noriko made her way to the city's Old Temple Town district. From what the waitress had told her, Keiko worked with a group of mostly unskilled laborers tasked with jobs that changed from day to day. Today's work involved painting and repairing the Koi Fish Temple.

"Just my luck. Had to be my family's spirit animal," Noriko grumbled as she made her way to the dilapidated shrine. She had never been to this one nor knew it existed, as her family had always prayed

and donated to the newer shrine in New Temple Town. This one didn't get many visitors—the stench of dead fish was probably one of the reasons why.

“Kuso! And here I signed up for this ‘ere Yamato trip to escape the smell of dead fish! How much longer is the boss keepin’ us ‘ere?” The grumbling came from a giant of a man, who was tall even while he was sitting down being lazy. He was bald and spoke with an accent Noriko had never heard before.

*“This must be what they sound like in Jijinto, the big city,”* Noriko thought to herself. Though she tried to be confident, her usual swagger had become more of a timid strut. The entire group consisted of fearsome-looking men, with all of them muscled and many of them scared. Oddly enough, none of them were shirtless. The reason had nothing to do with fear of getting sunburned.

Eventually, one of the more attentive laborers who were lazing about spotted her. “Hey, it’s Keiko! How are...wait’ah second.” The man looked Noriko over and sneered. “Shrine’s closed for repairs. Beat it.”

Noriko had never been looked at that way before, nor had she ever been told to ‘beat it’—she didn’t know what that meant. She just knew the way he had said it pissed her off, and when the daughter of Lord Morita got angry...well, no hell had equal fury.

“Repairs? I see naught but a group of Jijinto lowlives being both idle and incompetent! Keiko-chan was right to leave thee behind!”

The lowlives jumped to their feet in unison and put on their ugliest scowls. Noriko knew the look—every man and woman had one, but only the poorest let you see theirs freely. In this screwed up world only the poorest could afford to be truly honest. To be truly free.

“Daisuke, you hearin’ this bitch? She’s callin’ us stupid!”

“We’s not stupid!” said the giant named Daisuke. “An’ Keiko would never leave us! We an’ her are family...so screw off before I grind ya’ to pieces!”

A fire lit up in Noriko’s eyes. It may have been figurative but it burned all the same; its fuel was adrenaline, the tension of battle. For the first time in the young woman’s life, she felt stress—more than that, she felt danger. She was undersized, unarmed and outnumbered. Every second felt like a lifetime as the group of Jijinto thugs encircled her.

That was when she discovered that she lived for moments like these.

“Thou art but a bunch of bastards! Come at me!” Noriko yelled and laughed, charging at the first thug in a bull rush that caught him off guard. He thought he was safe once he had recovered and halted her charge. He wasn’t. Noriko wrapped her arms low, behind his knees, flipping him down hard into the koi pond.

*\*SPLASH\**



The others hesitated, looking at each other for guidance. There wasn't a single leader among them, least of all the bald giant. Noriko taunted him into a fight. "Daisuke, was it? Are thee a man or an oversized baby?"

"G-go to hell!" yelled the giant, who came tumbling forth. He had picked up a plank of wood just as large as Noriko was, and even the enraged daughter of a samurai began to grow weary. She had neither a defense nor a weapon—though upon seeing a nearby stone, she opted to use it for both.

"AaarGh," Noriko grunted as she hefted up the stone. It was smooth save for an odd engraving and immensely large, making it difficult to get a good grip. But with the adrenaline of battle flowing through her, the young woman hefted up the large rock over her shoulders just in time to shield her from Daisuke's overhead blow!

*\*THUNK\**

The stone held and so did its wielder, though her sandals were now in inch deeper into the ground. The plank of wood bounced back and out of the giant's hands. Daisuke was forced backwards from the force and ended up tripping on his own feet.

But the battle only truly ended when a shriveled priest came out from inside the shrine.

He gasped in shock, though not in anger at a brawl atop holy grounds. He was amazed at Noriko, who still held the large stone above her head. "That is...impossible! My eyes, have they failed me? What you are holding is our famed chikaraishi stone, girl. Only one man—one legend has been able to pick up this stone before. I never thought to see it lifted again in my life!"

With the battle seemingly over, the adrenaline faded and the weight atop her shoulders was now far too much for Noriko to carry. She let it drop, and inspected the engraving carved into it. She let out a gasp and then a groan at what she saw. It was a name—and not just any.

*"Yusuke Morita. My great grandfather...the founder of our clan, and the man my family is obsessed with."*

Noriko decided it was an odd coincidence and nothing more. The thugs around her were still angry but more than that—they were impressed. They quickly grew out of their grudge and instead turned their focus to the test of strength in front of them.

One by one, each man from Jijinto tried and failed to lift up the chikaraishi stone. Daisuke was the last one to try, the effort turning his face every shade from pink to purple but to no avail. It was hilarious; both the men and Noriko joined together in a hearty laugh at the giant's expense.

"For a highbred dame, ya' ain't too bad," one suggested.

"If the boss's daughter likes you—shit, so do we," said another. "Come to think of it...Keiko did say somethin' about a girl comin' over for work. Yo, Daisuke—think she's strong enough to help us?"

The bald giant was still panting from his earlier efforts. He nodded and agreed once he found the breath for it. "Yeah, okay."

■■■■

Noriko returned back to the lumber mill that night with a spring in her step. Though her shoulders were sore she felt numb to all pain. After fighting with the men from Jijinto, she had proceeded to work all day with them: listening to their vulgar stories while they cussed and complained about anything and nothing at all. Subjects from wives to samurai were all fair game. Noriko felt a sort of kinship with them even though their lives and upbringings were so drastically different.

Keiko was already there waiting for her. It took three yells to catch her attention—the waitress was occupied with her thoughts. While Noriko thought it was cute, she needed to get home before her dad got suspicious. She had to learn all she could about Keiko's first day at the Lioness's Institute for Charm and Etiquette if she was going to fool her father.

"Oh...the institute is very big, and the girls there are all very pretty. I am certain I will learn a lot there, thank you again for the opportunity," Keiko bowed, though winced as she did. "But what about you? Did the boys give you trouble? I told them you were coming...but they aren't the best listeners."

Noriko assured her that after an initial misunderstanding, everything went well. The two agreed to continue their scheme, and separated in time for supper. While Noriko was an expert in entering her family's mansion unnoticed, she felt no reason for subterfuge this early in the evening. Not to mention the sight of a few priests in a heated discussion with her father caught her attention.

She put her ear against the living room's shoji door and listened.

"...not a matter of if, but when! The boy has it—tis truly a gift from the spirits!"

"But how will this affect his training as a samurai? How long must he remain in confinement?"

"It is a necessary precaution, Lord Morita. The powers flowing through Fumihiko-kun are as great a danger to himself as they are to everyone around him."

Noriko had heard enough. She didn't understand what was going on, but—like all her other problems in life—she decided to face it head-on. She marched over to her younger brother's room and slid open the door.

Or at least she tried to. It was jammed.

"What the...hell is...this shit?!" Noriko cursed as she tried and failed to slide open the door. It was a shoji door, which weren't known for being locked, but they were known for being made of paper. Noriko was about to dive into the thing shoulder-first when a hand on that very shoulder stopped her.

It was her father. “Nori-chan. You must leave Fumi-kun alone for now. His powers as a...a shugenja are awakening.”

“A *shugenja*?” Noriko asked in astonishment. Fumihiro was her baby brother, known for writing on the walls and eating his boogers. For him to have magical powers...well, the spirits were certainly fickle. “That’s...great! That’s even more prestigious than a samurai, ain’t—\*cough\*—isn’t that right?”

The priests agreed, the two of them jumping like schoolchildren at the start of summer vacation. While Noriko wasn’t overwhelmed with glee, having a sibling with magical powers seemed to have more benefits than downsides. The only one who showed no hint of excitement was Lord Morita, who waited until after the priests left to explain why.

“The cost of admittance into the Academy is not cheap. Our family’s funds are...not in the best of shape, yet Fumihiro’s future must always come first,” said her father, who paced about the living room.

“Then I shall leave the Institute at once. Fumi-kun’s education is what matters,” replied Noriko, being especially thoughtful of her bratty little brother. “I could even work a job to help with—”

“Out of the question! Thee shall not shame our family with such nonsense!” Lord Morita paced a little faster before suddenly coming to a stop. “That’s it. I’ve a friend who owns a real estate business in the city. He should be able to help.”

Noriko left her father to his schemes, or whatever it was samurai did when they no longer had wars to fight and battles to win. The man was insufferable but at least he put his family first. And speaking of family, it was time Noriko caught up with her younger brother.

She knocked on the door twice, then three times, then two more, then just once. It was their code—it was how Fumihiro knew it was her. It was stupid and silly, but all kids were.

“Art thou there, Onee-san? I’m so bored. How was thy day at school?”

Noriko sat down beside the door and proceeded to lie as she always did. Much as she would’ve loved to tell Fumihiro the truth, the boy had a habit of telling his mother anything and everything—especially in regards to Noriko’s unladylike behavior.

“Is all well, sister?” asked the boy after hearing Noriko’s tall tale. “Thy voice is different and thy dialect sounds unfamiliar. Could thou perhaps be sick?”

Noriko let out a giggle. “Maybe I am...but I’ve never felt better, Fumi-kun. Now go get some sleep. I’m sure we’ll see each other again soon.”

■■■■

“Come on you prickless pansies, time’s up!” barked a young woman with a wooden club resting on her shoulder. “Pay your tabs and get the hell out! And don’t forget to tip.”

The group of Jijinto lowlives were currently working for a local brothel in the capital. They weren't working in the sense that required Daisuke to doll himself up in makeup, but instead they were hired muscle to make sure no samurai snuck out without paying for services rendered.

One such samurai approached the woman in charge, hiccuping and staggering about as he did so. He was impressively drunk for it being so early in the evening. "I've gottaaa tip for you, dear! Hehe-heh-heh-heh!"

The young woman flipped him a rude gesture, then told him where she was about to stick the club of hers if he took a step forward. To her displeasure, he stopped where he was and squinted his eyes.

"Heeey now, you look familiar. What's your—*hiccup*—name?"

She cursed below her breath and then above it. This was one of her uncles. "The name's Nishi. Now if you're not here to screw one of the working girls, then screw off."

"Heh-heh-heh, oh but I am!" the drunk samurai reached out to grab Nishi's arm, but his hand never got that far. The samurai's daughter swung her club in what was now a well-practiced motion, smacking the offending hand away and turning it an unsightly shade of purple.

"Boys! Get this bushido bastard outta here!" she ordered, and two of the Jijinto men picked up her uncle and tossed him out into the streets. The group was rough—far rougher than what Yamato was used to—but nobody questioned their results. Nobody dared. They were effective, especially with Nishi at command.

Daisuke, the young woman's second-in-command, let out a gulp. "You sure has changed a lot since ya' joined with us, Noriko. I—I mean, Nishi." The giant scratched his head after misspeaking. Noriko wasn't a name Nishi answered to, not during working hours. "You know 'ah, our boss is comin' in tonight, and he's sure to be impressed with all ya' done for us. But uh, about Keiko..."

The giant trailed off into silence. Nishi hadn't seen Keiko for a few days, though every time she had the girl seemed very distant. Which was a shame because Nishi still had a crush on her.

"Out with it, Daisuke. We ain't got time to waste pissin' around."

In her usual blunt and vulgar way, she convinced Daisuke to open up. Apparently it wasn't just her that Keiko had been distant to—the lady-in-training had been spending less and less time with the boys, hardly saying a word and going straight to bed after school. The giant even swore he heard her crying in her room once, and that was enough to upset Noriko.

And these days, when Noriko got upset, Nishi took over. And Nishi was a real bitch that you *didn't* want to mess with. "You take over here, Daisuke. I'm going to pay this Institute a visit."

■■■■

The perfectly maintained gardens of the Lioness's Institute for Charm and Etiquette were impressive, if you cared about that sort of thing. Nishi didn't. Inside those gardens were tables with tea sets and ladies enjoying a cup of expensive tea before retiring back to their houses to eat a dinner that someone else had made and that their daddies had paid for.

It was such a soft and easy life. It bred weakness and boredom—neither of which described Nishi. Not anymore. Every day was an adventure with new challenges, new fights, and new battles. With her crew behind her, she felt invincible.

But she was alone this time. She wasn't invincible and that was fine by her. A bit of pain never killed anyone. But the pain she was about to feel wasn't the sort she was prepared for.

Nishi came upon a group of girls giggling especially loud in a corner of the courtyard. After wading through a couple of squared hedges, she saw that there were three of them--and that none of them were Keiko. Even still, she stuck around to see what was the source of their laughter.

"Huehuehue, you are correct, Madoka-chan, the furniture is performing quite well as a cushion! It's far less noisy than it was on the first day," remarked a young lady who took a sip of tea out of a silver cup. "Sawako-senpai, I believe we should test the furniture further. Take a seat beside me—I insist!"

The girls giggled. Only then did Nishi spot the cushion move, and only after that did realize the furniture was actually a person—and that person was Keiko!

"Wh-who is this? You are intruding upon our tea time! This area is reserved, I'll have you know," spouted one of the highborn brats upon seeing Nishi swagger towards them. She still had her club in hand, and wore a scowl that was nothing short of menacing. She walked over as the girls stayed where they were; they were paralyzed like rabbits at the sound of thunder.

Nishi placed her hand over the girl's—the one who was holding onto the silver cup. She squeezed down hard, enough to elicit a welp from the highborn. "You stuck-up bitches think it's funny to sit on people, do ya'? Treat them like they ain't even human?!"

"AaaaaahH! AAAAH!" the rich girl screamed out as the silver cup folded in from the pressure clamping down on it. The hot tea within it came shooting up into the girl's face, which was contorted with pain. Her plentiful makeup ran down her cheeks as tears flowed freely from her eyes.

Nishi yanked her off Keiko and tossed her to the ground. She grabbed the other two 'ladies' by the hair before they could make a break for it. She slammed their faces into a bed of thorny roses and shoved them in further for good measure. She landed one final kick in the first girl's back before the three scampered off, sobbing all the while.

"There's more where that came from, you samurai whores!" Nishi yelled after them and was about to give chase until an arm wrapped around hers and stopped her. Keiko looked both happy and sad to see her, and was unable to match Nishi's gaze.



“When they...when they found out about my low birth, they threatened to expel you and report what we were doing to the authorities. I couldn't let them bring shame to you and your family, Noriko-chan.” Keiko wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “I had to do what they said.”

Nishi was pissed, but Noriko was relieved. Both sides of the young woman held Keiko tightly in her arms, and promised that this would never happen again. *“Keiko-chan...you've been suffering all this for weeks, all for me...”*

Nishi took Keiko's hand in hers, determined to let her spend the night at her place. Though her parents wouldn't have approved of a commoner, Keiko looked every bit like a delicate lady—she was short and cute and naturally more polite than Nishi could ever be. From what the boys mentioned of her, Keiko was something akin to Jijinto royalty.

But even royalty had trouble dealing with drunken samurai, of which Lord Morita now counted among their ranks. It was odd—in her sixteen years alive, Nishi hadn't once recalled her father indulging in drink. But there he was, drinking and waiting at the front of the family's mansion.

“Wondering when thouuu would showest up!” he slurred. “Who be that with thee? Take leave of my premises! This is the home of my father's father, the great samurai Yusuke Mooorita!”

Nishi was about to object when Keiko apologized and bowed out as quickly yet as politely as she could. It left Nishi in a foul mood that only got fouler when she caught wind of her father's rancid breath.

“What's with you...with thee? Why does...thou reek of liquor? Answer me!” Nishi yelled, becoming Noriko once more as the two paced deeper into the living quarters. Lord Morita staggered back to the table, pouring himself another drink while managing to spill half of it out of the cup.

“It's all over, Noriiiiii-chan,” Lord Morita said as he drowned his sorrows in saké. Almost literally—the alcohol went down the wrong pipe, and the samurai started hacking up a cough. It was sad and pathetic, but seeing such a proud man in shambles was enough to give Noriko pause.

“What has happened, Father?”

Lord Morita brought his hands to his face and wept, confessing in between sobs. From what his daughter could gather, he had been taking for a fool—tricked into investing into a company and holdings that didn't exist. He lost all the family's savings because he was a gullible idiot, a shame to his father's father and so forth.

“And...and dearest Fumi-kun. If he doesn't get proper training at the Academy, he'll be branded as a rogue shugenja! Spirits help him—they put bounties on those! *Whua-whaaa!*” Lord Morita cried.

Noriko felt more than a pang of remorse for the man, even if he was a fool and an overbearing father. And while Fumihiko was a snot-nosed brat, Noriko still loved him. They were her family, and if Noriko had learned anything from the thugs of Jijinto, it was that family always stuck together.

"If there's anything I can do, Father. I will."

Lord Morita wiped away his tears. He then tried to look his daughter in the eyes, but found himself unable to. His girl had changed into a woman, and a fearsome one at that. But a formidable woman was a woman all the same.

"There is. There is something thee can do for our family, Nori-chan."

■■■■

The next day, Noriko and her father arrived at the Sleeping Duck. The samurai's daughter was even more dressed-up than she had been during their visit weeks prior, at their meeting with Lady Hayashi of the Institute. Noriko even had makeup on as well; she was coated up prettier than a geisha.

"Are thee going to tell me why I had to spend two hours dressing up? I said I would help—but what are we doing here?" Noriko asked, giving the afternoon tea drinkers a scowl.

Lord Morita looked about the room with anxious glances, taking a seat and then nearly jumping out of it when their server arrived. But what was most suspicious was his order: no food, just the cheapest tea on the menu. For her father not to have an appetite meant something was especially wrong.

They sat in awkward silence until a pair of muscular men in ill-fitting kimonos arrived, claiming to be from the Yamagata family. Noriko could tell at a glance they were the sleazy type: criminals or close enough to it. They reminded her of the Jijinto men she had been working with—which wasn't a compliment.

That a samurai of Lord Morita's status was willing to share tea with them meant something was foul. Yet Noriko couldn't piece it all together until one of the swindlers gave it away.

"Your daughter is quite the beauty, yessiree!" He whistled while looking Noriko over. "Say she'll make a perfect bride fer the boss. Lord Yamagata 'polozies fer not being here personally fer the marriage 'rangements—but he's already agreed!"

Noriko went lightheaded as she bolted upright in a single moment. She couldn't believe what was going on here. She wanted to scream out but for once couldn't find the words. She caught herself shaking, trembling in outrage.

"Y-you...thee...thee cannot be serious, Father! You would...thy would...sell thine own daughter?!"

"I am sorry, Nori-chan," Lord Morita spoke meekly, looking down at his tea. "For Fumihiro and the future of the Morita line...thou hand must be given in marriage. Please understand my position."

Noriko clenched her teeth down upon her tongue as she watched in silence as a large and heavy pouch of ryō exchanged hands from the Yamagata men to her father. *"My hand given in marriage?! You bastard! I'm being sold!"*

Noriko was stunned and Nishi—the part of her that took over at times like these—was nowhere to be found. This betrayal cut so deep that the samurai's daughter did not fight back nor curse or even yell as the men escorted her to their carriage. She held back tears knowing that the man who had raised her had sold her off for but a handful of coins.

*"I thought we were family...I thought..."*

It could've been a minute or an hour that passed after that, as Noriko lost herself in her grief. She was alone and overwhelmed with sorrow on every side; she was a helpless girl, a bride to a monster, and a daughter to a man she now despised.

Yet not all of that was true. Because Noriko wasn't alone and she wasn't helpless. She was *Nishi* now, and with the Morita name gone that was all she was. Noriko was dead and that was fine by her, because Nishi always knew what to do. She was strong and tough and ruthless and mean. Enough to survive anything—including this.

When the carriage stopped, Nishi jumped out and took note of her bearings: she was in Old Temple Town, right outside the Koi Fish Temple where she and the boys worked weeks ago. The place still reeked of dead fish but the shrine was considerably cleaner than before.

"This Yamagata wants a wedding ceremony, huh?" Nishi cracked her knuckles. "Like hell!"

The first of the two didn't have a chance before Nishi's fist came down on him. She didn't go for the face—she went much lower, to a spot between his legs. He howled out in pain while the other ran off into the shrine yelling for help.

"The bastard I got sold to is in there, is he? Good." Nishi grinned as she swaggered inside. She was going to beat the snot out of him and every goon that got in her way. She psyched herself up as she marched in, prepared to fight for her freedom even if it cost her everything.

*"Cause I got nothin' left to fuckin' lose!"*

Rage and sorrow accompanied her into the temple's main hall. Yet all three of them halted upon the sight inside: there was a gang of men waiting for her, all of them surrounding a man with a menacing aura around him. Though he was unlike any man Nishi had ever seen, the others were: they were the men from Jijinto she had worked with.

Yet they were shirtless now, though their skin was not bare: it was inked in various tattoos, from dragons to tigers to naked women, but featured most of all were cherry blossoms. The man at the center had symbols across his chest, which read '起死回生'.

"Wake from death and return to life? What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Nishi yelled, fearless even amidst the most powerful man in Jijinto. Though the underlings gasped, Lord Yamagata could only laugh.

"Lady Noriko...you are as spirited as I've heard. Please, step forth." When she did, a short figure appeared from behind Lord Yamagata. It was Keiko who was smiling and waving. "I know what you did for my daughter, who speaks very kindly of you. And what you have done for my boys...who knew a samurai's daughter was what it took to get them into shape!"

The carriage driver from earlier staggered in behind her, wincing as he did so. After explaining the misunderstanding from earlier, laughter broke out led by Lord Yamagata himself. He had a powerful voice and a presence that made even the most stubborn of men respectful. Same went for Nishi, too.

"You're certainly a fighter, aren't you? Well, anyway...you're free to go. Us yakuza always pay our debts. What I gave your father was payment for the work you have done for us. You are free to return to your family."

Nishi looked at Lord Yamagata, then at Keiko, then Daisuke and the rest of the boys. They were all smiling yet sad, many of them wishing her well. It was a hell of a scene, and a terrible time for tears to start welling in her eyes.

"I don't have a family. Not anymore, boss," Nishi said, sniffing and cursing under her breath. "So I was wonderin' if...if you would take me in."

Gasps and cheers broke out from the gang of criminals. They all silenced when Lord Yamagata raised a hand. He looked Nishi squarely in the eyes, keeping his gaze there for a minute or more. Nishi held the stare even as saltwater trailed down her cheeks.

"A yakuza fights not for honor or glory, but for family. Will you fight for us, Noriko?"

Nishi shook her head and grinned. "Noriko's dead. I'm Nishi now, and I'll fight any bastard who gets in our way!"

[Which character should September's side story be about?](#)

[Aug 7, 2019](#)

This poll will close at the end of August.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+24)

6%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+6)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+41)

21%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+14)

1%

Keiko, the maid (+42)

9%

Kohaku, the samurai (+10)

7%

Kuniko, the farmer (+9)

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+8)

9%

Momoko, the doctor (+24)

13%

Nishi, the yakuza (+0)

3%

Satsuma, the emperor (+31)

11%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+10)



14%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+15)

6%

Poll ended Aug 31, 2019 · 70 votes total

[Book 4 Early Access: Chapters 17 & 18](#)

[Aug 15, 2019](#)

Hello early access people! We've got two chapters this month, because I wanted to make sure to leave you with a dramatic ending! \ (// ·ω·) /

**These will be the last early access chapters for Book 4.** With the book's upcoming release (potentially August 29th!) I have to pull the plug on early access.

I can't stress enough how important your support has been. These months leading up to a book release are always the most difficult for me financially, as revenues from the previous books settle down and I'm struggling to keep my fridge stocked with orange juice! (ノ•ω•ノ)

But that hasn't been the case this year, and it's all thanks to you guys! While the \$10 tier will remain in case you just like giving me money, I'd highly encourage you to move down to \$5. I'll be adding an additional feature to the \$5 tier where you guys will be able to vote and 'design' a face for MC every month. In Book 5, players will be able to select from the illustrations to have one displayed on their stats screen if they so choose.

Anyway, enough of that! This is what you're here for:

[Twitter Poll](#)

[Aug 25, 2019](#)

Are you following me on twitter? ([@MChoiceStudios](#))

Of course I am!

Not yet, but I'm about to!

Nothin' personnel, kid...but I'm too cool to follow you!

I don't use twitter.

127 votes total

[MC #1's Face Poll: 1/3](#)

[Sep 1, 2019](#)

Hope you all enjoyed Book 4! Now it's time to look towards the future, namely a feature I hope to introduce in Book 5: main character art! It'll be an optional feature that allows players to select a picture of what they want their ronin to look like!

Return to the GameRestartSettings

Name: Name

Spirit:

Impulsive: 60%

Calculated: 40%

Perverted: 10%

Chivalrous: 90%

Charming: 85%

Stoic: 15%

Drifter: 30%

Protective: 70%

Brutal: 45%

Finesse: 55%

Attunement:

Book 1: 60%

Book 2: 85%

Book 3: 70%

Book 4: 50%

Skills:

Observation: 70%

Deduction: 100%

330x 480y

(1:1.45)

Next

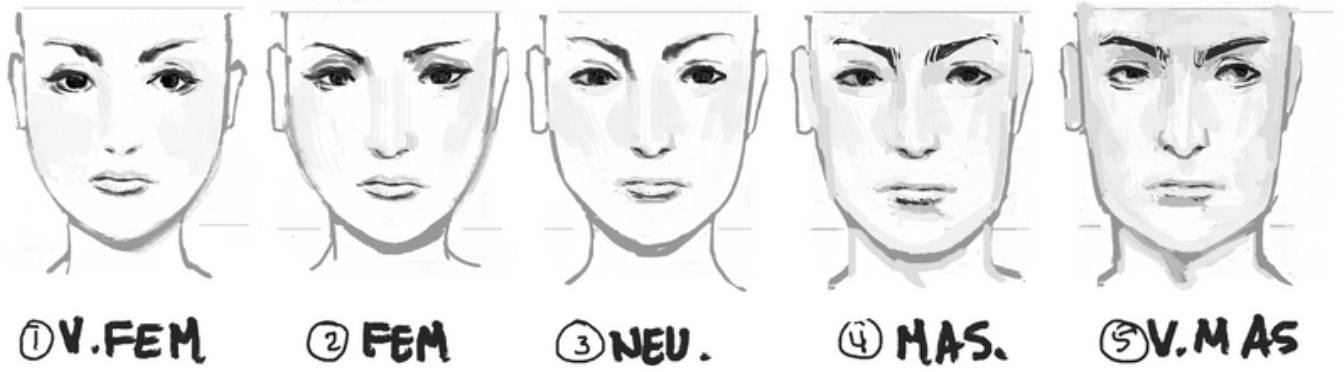
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission Book 4's illustrator, Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#)) for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

The first poll is masculinity-femininity, from the 1st-5th.

The second poll is favored stat (personality+expression), from 6th-10th.

The third poll is hair, from 11th-15th.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!



Very Feminine (+0)

8%

Feminine (+0)

43%

Neutral (+0)

20%

Masculine (+0)

25%

Very Masculine (+0)

5%

Poll ended Sep 5, 2019 · 61 votes total

[Fan Creations](#)

[Sep 5, 2019](#)

Do you ever draw fanart or write fanfiction for games you have enjoyed?

Yes, I do it more often than is healthy!

I make that stuff from time to time.

I make that stuff, but rarely.

I used to make that stuff, but not nowadays.

I'm not into making that stuff.

95 votes total

### [MC #1's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Sep 6, 2019](#)

The design for MC #1 continues! This poll focuses on the favored stat of the character, which will provide a personality and facial expression for the artist to work with.

Current Build: **Feminine**

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Impulsive (+0)

4%

Calculated (+0)

9%

Perverted (+0)

23%

Chivalrous (+0)

7%

Charming (+0)

26%

Stoic (+0)

9%

Drifter (+0)



2%

Protective (+0)

12%

Brutal (+0)

7%

Finesse (+0)

2%

Poll ended Sep 10, 2019 · 57 votes total

[MC #1's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Sep 11, 2019](#)

The design for MC #1 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Feminine, Charming**

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Short (+0)

25%

Long (+0)

45%

Ponytail (+0)

15%

Chonmage (+0)

4%

Long bangs (+0)

Poll ended Sep 15, 2019 · 55 votes total

Sep 13, 2019

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“Hyah! Hyah! Hy...ah?”

A young boy shouted with uncertainty across a modest-sized training hall, a dojo for martial arts nestled between the East and Westside slums of Jijinto. Though they weren't slums back then, in the days before the samurai and other nobility moved to the new capital of Yamato. Wealth was slowly but certainly leaving Jijinto and the evidence was as clear as the near-empty halls of the Ken Raijingu Dojo.

“Hesitate not, Hachi-kun! Each movement within the form, give everything to!”

Some men held no regard for riches or reputations. Among them was an aged warrior, who spoke in a broken Hyugan tongue. His nose and several dozen bones across his body were broken, too—the result of a lifetime of battles. Though his greatest challenge yet was raising his grandson Hachirobei alone. The boy was a bundle of energy with an open heart and a closed mind—especially when it came to learning.

“Hyah! Yah-yah-yah-yah!” Hachi-kun freestyled the remaining moves in the form, adding techniques like leg sweeps and uppercuts to add a bit of variety to an otherwise dull blocking and punching routine.

Grandpa shook his head and scolded the boy for the fourth time that morning. "Maintain focus you must, Hachi-kun! Engraving the strikes into your mind, the purpose of the form is. Perform them even while blinded, you should be able to!"

"They're so dumb and borin'...I wanna learn the cool moves!" the boy complained. "Real fightin' ain't like this at all, Grandpa."

"Real fighting?" It was at this time that Grandpa grabbed the boy by his karate uniform's collar and inspected his hands. Notably, his knuckles—which were bruised. "Getting into fights, you are?!"

When Hachi shut his mouth and gave no reply, Grandpa shook the boy in frustration. From out the boy's uniform came a skewer of dango. Hachi let out an audible gulp before quickly trying to explain himself.

"They didn't wanna share, Grandpa! And the boys were makin' fun of how you talk, sayin' you ain't Hyugan! So I took—"

Grandpa swepted Hachi's legs out from under him, following up with a downward punch into the boy's stomach. Hachi re-tasted the dango he had eaten earlier as it threatened to come up the way it went down. But the real shock wasn't the taste or even the pain: this was the first time Grandpa ever struck him.

"Never forget, Hachi! Behind your punches...that is what matters most!"

A knock against the shoji doors interrupted the lesson. They were already open, of course, to welcome any and every potential new student to the Ken Raijingu Dojo. Though this man had little need for training: he was a master in his own right, though his style of fighting was geared towards subterfuge. He was about as old as Grandpa with a grey peppered beard on his chin and an odd child covered head to toe in rags behind him.

And like most old men who visited Grandpa, the two already knew each other.

"Choe Yeong! Still kicking around I see. And who's this? Your girl's, I take it?"

"Fujibayashi! Come in, you two must. Kanna's, he is."

Hachi wasn't at all interested in Fuji-whomever. The kid behind him was much more fascinating to the young martial artist. Hachi assumed it was a boy though he couldn't be sure, considering the child was covered in oversized robes. He couldn't even make out the kid's face, which made for a mystery that sparked his youthful curiosity.

"Tosh, play with the boy while I reminisce with an old friend," Fujibayashi said before turning back to Grandpa. "You don't happen to have any more of that soju, do you Yeong-san? I've been craving it for two decades now!"

The child named Tosh bowed and approached Hachi, inspecting the floors and walls of the dojo. Hachi, in his excitement, grabbed Tosh by the hand to give them a tour of the place, or at least tried to. Tosh didn't appreciate being touched, and twisted the boy's arm hard enough to nearly break it. Instead crying out in pain, however, Hachi started laughing.

“What dhis so funny?” asked Tosh. “Dhere’s nothing to joke about. Don’t touch me again!”

Upon hearing the unfamiliar accent, Hachi laughed even harder. After he was done, he wiped the spittle from his lips before putting on his usual boyish grin and raising up his hands in the ready position.

“You’re gonna be a good fight, aren’t cha?”

The two proceeded to clash, Hachi being the less skilled but more eager of the two. When it came to combat between children, that made for an even brawl. At least until Hachi winded up a punch and declared it his ‘ultimate technique’. Tosh grabbed his outstretched arm and flipped the boy over their shoulder.

“Quit playing around! Martial arts is a serious practice,” Tosh scolded, looking down at the dazed boy beneath them. “You disrespect Master Yeong. Fuji-sama says dhat he is an elite warrior, said to have killed a hundred pirates with but his hands!”

Hachi had no clue that Grandpa had killed anyone. That didn’t bother him so much as the fact that this brat knew more than he did about the man who raised him. That wasn’t fair—and it was enough to send Hachi charging forward.

“Aaaah! Ow, It hurts!” the young martial artist moaned, as the mysterious child sat upon Hachi’s back while forcing up one of his legs in a painful leg lock. Upon hearing the cry, Grandpa and Fujibayashi came in—the later yelling at his pupil to stop.

“That’s enough, Tosh! I swear...what sort of kid doesn’t know how to horse around without hurting someone? No small wonder why you don’t have any friends...” Fujibayashi let out a sigh as Tosh separated himself from Hachi and bowed deeply to apologize. “Don’t bow to me—bow to Hachi-kun, over there.”

Reluctantly, Tosh did as they were told and bowed deeply to Hachi. From his angle down on the floor, the boy was able to get a better view of his opponent’s face. He saw a pair of green eyes, and not just that.

“Brown skin...? Grandpa, that kid is a Kondo! No wonder they don’t fight fair! It’s illegal for ‘em to fight anyways, isn’t it?”

“Keep an open mind. To one style, never limit yourself,” Grandpa said while lifting the boy to his feet and patting off the dirt from his uniform. It was a futile effort, he knew, as dust and grime attracted to the boy like rice flour on bean paste. “Now then,” he addressed his guests, “weary from your travels you two must be. Please, spend the night.”

Fujibayashi appeared tempted by the offer but ultimately shook his head. “I’m afraid duty takes us elsewhere. The truth is—I’ve only come here to pay back the debt I owe you from the war.”

“Which debt and which war?” Grandpa replied with a grin.

"I've learned more of Kanna-chan."

The reply sucked all humor out of Yeong's face. He held his pronounced jaw with his hand, lost deep within thoughts of his missing daughter. He spared Hachi a glance out of the corner of his eye. "Are they...are they true, the rumors are? Leave for a man, did she?"

Kanna's husband had died in the war, and the news of it shocked the woman so deeply that she was never the same afterwards. Even giving birth to the man's child did little to improve her mood. She was despondent for days until one day, she was gone.

Fujibayashi thought long and hard before nodding. "Yes. I found the man," he said, pulling out an odd necklace from his sash. "He's hanging from a cross."

Hachi gasped, staring at the tiny figure that took his mother away.

■■ Years Later ■■

"Here we are!" Hatch said with a grin. "Ken Raijingu Dojo. Still, er, workin' on the repairs to the roof. Can get a bit wet when it rains, but hey—that's what buckets are for!"

The street fighter picked up one of the many buckets placed across the training hall to keep the floor from flooding. He brought it to his lips and chugged down a gulp before offering it over to his guest. She promptly refused.

"Ew, no. Let's just get this over with," said the woman whose name may have been Aiko or Kimiko. Hatch couldn't recall, though in his defense he had only known her for a minute before she decided to come home with him. She wore a yukata, a summer kimono—or at least pieces of one. Her skin that was exposed (which was most of it) was deeply tanned from standing around outside all day.

Hatch had seen her and suspected she must be bored, and true enough it didn't take much to convince her to check out the dojo. "*A womanly presence would really do this place some good!*" Hachirobei grinned, thinking to himself. "*And so would another student!*"

"This here's the closet where we keep the sparring equipment! Oh and Grandpa's shrine is over this way. I like to make an offering at least once a month, somethin' small like—"

"Look, this place is a dump but I've done it in worse. Now where's your futon?"

Hatch's eyes went wide in surprise. It wasn't because he had pieced together her true intentions, or that her profession was that of a prostitute. The young man was too dense for that.

"Tired already? But I was hoping to teach you a lesson, first! I know a technique that works great for novices!"

The prostitute let out a laugh that sounded more like a cackle “Do I look like a novice to you, boy? I’ll be the one teaching the lessons here,” she said, leaning her breasts against Hatch’s chest. Her hand traced up his inner thigh. “Now let’s talk pricing: one ryō gets you one hour. Pay upfront.”

“Eh? I don’t think you understand,” Hatch said, scratching his head. “You’re the one whose gotta pay me. Nothin’ to worry about though: membership fees are discounted this month! Hows about we get started with the first lesson before you decide to commit to a—”

*\*slap\**

The streetwalker walked away, leaving Hatch confused and with a sore cheek. It wasn’t the slap that hurt—he was accustomed to those by now—but that was the third potential student he had lost this month. “*Why are women so hard to understand?*”

To take his mind off the disappointment, Hatch retightened his headband and proceeded to start training. The martial artist had just finished his stretching routine when the dojo’s front door slid open. Hatch’s boyish grin returned, thinking the woman had reconsidered his offer.

To his disappointment, he was met with three men instead: a lowlife, a ruffian and a goon. You had to be a Jijinto native to tell them apart. But they were more than just street punks: they had ink on their skin, notably snakes wrapped around their throats.

“This shithole yours, I take it?”

“Who’s askin’?” Hatch said with a frown. “What yakuza group are you from? Haven’t seen snakes before.”

The three snickered. “We’re Shiroyama’s boys. She’s marryin’ into the Yamagata-gumi. And she’s callin’ in all the debts from squatters like you. We got papers sayin’ some Yeong feller has an unpaid loan on this lot. Pay it up by the end of this week or we’re throwin’ yer ass out.”

The goon looked over the place and spat on the floor. “Dump like this needs to be torn down. Not a half-bad spot for a whorehouse, I’d say.”

Hatch knew better than to show fear in front of wanna-be gangsters. So he cracked his knuckles and shrugged. “Alright, so my old man owes some money. How bad can it be?”

■■■■

“This is bad,” Hatch said while staring back at his reflection inside a dirty cup of cheap saké courtesy of The Canary. Beside him was Tan-kun, his best friend, and across from him was Eguchi, his best bartender.

“That kind of coin can’t be earned in a week! A year—maybe!” said Tan-kun, who slammed his fist into the bar for dramatic effect. It earned him a cold glare from Eguchi.



"Word 'round town is that they found a monk not far from your dojo, Hachi-kun," said the bartender. "Found 'em dead. They say his face was missing. Might be its best for you to move on out of there. It's not like you've got any students."

Hatch downed his drink and grimaced, before gesturing for another. "Not for lack of tryin'. All the girls I bring back just want my money and to sleep on my futon! Can you believe that?"

Tan-kun and Eguchi exchanged stares before shaking their heads in unison. Hatch was the most oblivious man either of them had ever known.

"You sure are an odd one, Hatch. But what I want to know..." Tan-kun paused, deep in thought, "...is why the yakuza waited so long to ask for their debt. The fact Ken Raijingu Dojo has lasted this long is a miracle itself! Must be that dumb luck of yours."

"Dumb luck...that's it!" Hatch raised and shook his fist. "Few good rolls of Chō-Han and I'll be able to turn my pocket change into a pouch full of ryō! I'll pay 'em off that way!"

Hatch slurred together his goodbyes and headed on out before his support group convince him otherwise. Tan-kun sighed as he once again paid off his best friend's tab. "Leaving destiny to the roll of a dice...he makes it sound admirable!"

On his way out The Canary, the streetfighter bumped into somebody. That somebody had something he rarely ever saw, this deep into the Jijinto slums: a katana. Hatch couldn't get a good look into their eyes but he really didn't want to. The samurai had a fearsome aura and a reputation to match, judging by how Eguchi shot up upon recognizing them.

The bartender hurried to grab a bottle from the top shelf to pour out a cup for the odd guest. Hatch wondered what a samurai was doing in a joint like this, but he was sure he could get the story out of Eguchi later.

*"I need to focus on winning! Come on lucky spirits," Hatch prayed, "don't fail me now!"*

■■■■

The spirits were cruel that early afternoon, as luck—dumb or otherwise—was well outside Hatch's grasp. In his excitement to pay off his grandfather's debt, he ran to the nearest gambling den he could. That early in the day, he wasn't up against casual, half-drunken sailors but full-fledged bakuto: old gambling addicts who were like sharks compared to Hatch who was more akin to a dolphin.

The young man's desperation was blood in the water.

"I'm not done yet! I gotta win sometime, kuso!" Hatch cursed as he stripped off the top of his karate uniform. He had just lost the shirt off his back—along with the rest of his meager savings. There wasn't much more for him to lose, and the other gamblers said as much between laughs and chugs of spoiled rice wine.

*"There's one more thing I can bet,"* Hatch thought to himself. He then thought of Grandpa and of all the training and memories they shared together in that training hall. He had to keep it, and to do so... *"I have to be willing to risk it all!"*

"You guys know the Ken Raijingu Dojo, right? It's a few blocks west of here. Whose willing to put up a price for it? Come on, let's place a bet!"

Though the wager was a pittance for its actual worth, Hatch had to take what he could get and accepted the gamble. He called for 'han'—odd—and left the rest to the hands of fate. Unfortunately for him, those hands belonged to a cheat who was intent on robbing him blind.

When the bones came up even the old gamblers began to holler and slap their knees in excitement. Hatch clenched his teeth and his fist, the former clattering while the other shook with rage. His world and everything he loved was in that dojo. He couldn't...he *wouldn't* lose it.

The street fighter looked across the room. They were six old men, three of them little more than skin and bones. Hatch easily shadowed over them, stronger than all of them put together. While he soaked in their laughter and jeers, he outstretched a fist and—for the first time since his grandfather scolded him for stealing dango years ago—thought about using his fist to get what he wanted.

But before he could decide, a hand closed over his.

It belonged to a monk, who appeared at Hatch's side with a knowing smile and a shaking head. He was Bhuddist: his head was shaved and his robes were bright orange, exposing his right shoulder. Monks like these weren't uncommon—though they usually kept away from the slums and certainly from dens of sin like this one. But this fellow wasn't a typical monk; the evidence hung around his neck.

"A cross?" Hatch gasped as he stared at the odd necklace. *"Where have I seen that before?"*

"It would appear I've interrupted some excitement," said the monk, who spoke in a polite yet foreign accent. "This game reminds me of Hazard, though simpler, perhaps more akin to Highest Points? In any case, I shall make the next wager at this young gentleman's behalf. For his home," the monk said as he pulled out a pouch of coins and pushed it forward, "I shall take a gamble. Though," he turned to Hatch, "I will require something in return for—"

"Sure! I'll do anything!" Hatch yelled, jumping for joy. "You heard the holyman, roll up another pair! My luck is about to change!"

The gamblers looked at each other with unease. Hatch was an easy mark, about as easy as they got when it came to locals. This well-spoken monk was something else, not to mention it was probably bad karma to cheat a member of the clergy. But in the end their greed and the large pouch of ryō won them over. They nodded and agreed.

Though that wasn't ryō in that pouch, it was florins: a foreign currency no Hyugan had seen before. This monk was more than he appeared, and his eyes stared into the very soul of the dealer. Unable to

control himself nor cry out for help, the dealer became no more than a puppet. He took the dice and put them into the cup with awkward movements, before shaking it and asking Hatch to make the call.

“Chō! It’s gonna be even, I just know it!”

And with a bit of suggestion and perhaps some magic too, the dealer raised the cup from the floor and a pair of ones were revealed. Regaining control of his voice, the dealer gasped out the result. “One and one makes two! It’s chō!”

“Yatta!” Hatch jumped in joy, punching the air and nearly the monk beside him. He snatched his partner’s purse from the floor and handed it back to him. “A pair of snake eyes means we win. Thanks a ton, pal!”

“Snakes eyes...very fitting,” said the monk, who took his earnings in hand. He then outstretched his other in front of Hatch. The street fighter looked at it, puzzled, unsure what to make of the odd gesture. The monk eventually realized his mistake and corrected himself by bowing instead. “My name is Ro...Rokuhara. I’ve need of an able-bodied warrior.”

Hatch scratched the back of his head. “I dunno about being a warrior, but I can hold my own. I’m guessin’ you need some muscle? Heard talk of someone stealin’ the faces off monks around here.”

Rokuhara let out a smile as the two made their way out of the gambling den. Hatch owed this man for bailing him out, though as for what the monk wanted in return...it wasn’t his services as a bodyguard.

“I am, you see, in town to meet with my sister. Sister of a sort, anyway. But she is a difficult woman to reach—though she certainly stretches far enough! Har-har!” Rokuhara laughed while Hatch furrowed his brow. The street fighter couldn’t understand the monk’s humor, and understood even less after he pulled out a parchment with words and an illustration of two men kicking each other.

“What’s it say?”

“It says ‘Kumite.’ There’s to be an underground tournament, ran by the Yamagata-gumi. You’re going to enter it for me.”

Hatch should’ve been worried or at least skeptical. But instead, he was beside himself with excitement. “A tournament...a chance to show off the Ken Raijingu-Ryū! This is just what I need! I’ll get tons of new students this way. I’ll do it!”

Rokuhara looked Hatch over and nodded. “First I’ll need to see what you’re capable of.”

■■■■

“Behold the Ken Raijingu-Ryū’s special technique: Palm—*uack!*” Hatch’s cry was interrupted with a quick jab to his stomach. Rokuhara was faster than any middle-aged monk had the right to be. Dodging, weaving and striking with immense speed.

“Quit announcing your attacks before you strike! I cannot imagine a worse habit for a combatant to possess!”

Hatch took the monk’s advice on the chin—almost literally, as a wicked left hook whiffed just in front of his jaw. Rokuhara’s stance was unlike any Hatch had seen, and he had seen plenty in his young lifetime of street fighting. The monk kept both his arms high in front of his face, bobbing them up and down while keeping his legs mostly straight.

*“He’s not even usin’ his legs at all,”* Hatch noted. *“Guess they don’t know how to kick where he’s from.”*

“This style is called prizefighting, quite popular in...Tonogasha,” the monk said after giving it some thought. “I believe ‘boxing’ is another term for it—though I highly doubt you’ve heard of either.”

Hatch whiffed a roundhouse kick that was meant for Rokuhara’s shoulder. “What the heck does punchin’ have to do with boxes?!”

Missing the kick left the young man’s back exposed, prompting the monk to close distance with a lunge forward. Hatch turned in time to see an uppercut sailing right under his chin. He winced and braced his teeth for impact. It wasn’t the first concussion the martial artist had taken.

But the hit never came; Rokuhara halted his fist right under Hatch’s chin.

“The Hyugan style of kicking is flashy, I’ll admit, but it leaves one too open to being rushed down. There’s much you’ll need to work on.”

Hatch spat out a wad of blood. He had bitten down on his own tongue while bracing for the punch that never landed. He was in a sore mood, and though he was still on his feet his pride as a martial artist had just suffered a knockout.

“You talk like you’re not a Hyugan yourself! Who taught you this style, anyway?” Hatch asked, adopting the raised-fist stance to get a feel for it. “And if you’re such a capable fighter, why don’t *you* join the Kumite? Why bother with me?”

At that moment, for but a blink of the eye, something on Rokuhara’s face moved. It was as if all his features shifted and blurred, like the stroke of a painter’s brush across canvas. Hatch couldn’t believe his eyes.

The monk turned around and muttered under his breath. “I can’t keep up this...form very long. By that I mean endurance, of course. I’m older than I look,” he turned back to face Hatch and grinned, his features back where they belonged. “Now then, do you wish to learn what I know or not?”

Hachirobei was already starting to shake his head out of stubbornness, until the words from Grandpa repeated inside his head. *“Keep an open mind. To one style, never limit yourself.”*

Hatch looked up and smiled, up into the heavens where he knew his grandfather was. The heavens answered with a raindrop. Hatch shook it off and returned his gaze back to his opponent, this time with a grin.

“Alright, monk! The Ken Raijingu-Ryū has no limits—and neither do I!”

■■■■

Tanjiro, also known as Tan-kun, hadn’t seen his pal Hatch around in days, and with the week closing in he was beginning to worry. The odds of paying off such a steep loan with Chō-Han were low, especially when he didn’t know how to look for cheating.

“Poor guy is going to lose his home. The least I can do is offer him a bottle of Eguchi’s watered-down best,” Tanjiro thought aloud on his way to the dojo. The two used to hang around there all the time when they were younger, before Tan-kun joined Shibuya & Sons and became an overworked shipwright.

“I sure miss those days,” he sighed as he looked over the Ken Raijingu Dojo. The door was already open so he let himself in. Then he sneezed—the culprit was the white fur littered across the tatami floor. *“Just great, a cat must’ve made its home here. At least it’ll keep the rats away.”*

But even disregarding his allergies, the sight inside the training hall was enough for Tanjiro to stagger a breath. Hatch was hanging in the air, tied in ropes—one on each arm and each leg—attached to two columns across the hall. His legs were outstretched into a painful split while his face contorted in pain as he grunted and held back a cry.

The Bhuddist monk, Rokuhara, sat beside a water clock—a crude device involving water buckets to keep track of time. “Two hours have passed! That’s enough,” the monk said, concern growing in his voice. “Let me get you down from there before you get hurt.”

“No!” Hatch yelled through clenched teeth. “I can do it! Aaaaah!”

Hatch roared out to summon what strength remained in him, pulling at the ropes to lift himself up. Suspended into the air, his entire body trembled. And it was more than just him: the columns trembled, too, shaking from the force pulling against them. Tiles from the roof came falling down as Hatch wailed out his warrior’s cry.

“Don’t do it, Hatch! It’s too dangerous,” Tanjiro yelled. “The dojo is falling apart!”

The martial artist couldn’t hear his best friend nor pay any heed to the danger he was in. Hatch was the sole practitioner of the Ken Raijingu-Ryū and the only student of his grandfather. This was to honor Choe Yeong. Hatch had to become stronger if he was going to save his home!

“So this is the resolve of a Hyugan,” the monk whispered between coughs. The fighting hall had become filled with dust from the fallen tiles. “The samurai spirit is quite a sight indeed.”

"The Ken Rajjingu-Ryū...lives through me!" Hatch roared as the column attached to his left arm and leg collapsed, his leg hitting the ground hard in an agonizing split against the floor.

Yet Hatch didn't scream or cry. He didn't even blink. He stared out at the monk and when the dust settled, he nodded.

"I'm ready."

■■■■

It was midway through the afternoon when Hatch, Tan-kun and Rokuhara made their way towards Jijinto Temple. Though that wasn't its official name, it had earned the title: it was the largest temple in the city and sat at the top of the tallest hill. It was a holy site in an otherwise sinful city, though even it possessed a dark underbelly beneath the surface. Literally, in its case.

"You tellin' me this hill has been hollow all this time?" Hatch asked as the three made their way through an entrance into the dirt mound, the opening flanked by yakuza checking for weapons on either side. Even beneath the ground you could hear the yells of merchants hawking their wares above. The wives of fishermen were trying to sell what remained of the day's catch.

"We're at the center of the busiest marketplace in the city," said Tan-kun. "Crazy as it is, some folks would pay handsomely to live in a location like this. I guess it's—"

Just then, a group of bats flew by the rafters overhead. The two Jijinto locals looked at each other and gulped.

"Nevermind the ambiance," said Rokuhara, gesturing them forth. "The cavern opens up ahead. That must be where the Kumite is being held."

The monk was on the mark and sure enough, a swarm of tough-looking men and women sporting tattoos were up ahead. Above them was a hole in the ceiling, allowing enough sunlight to light up the arena floor. It was made of clay and reminded Hatch of a sumo wrestling ring, though this ring was many times larger than what wrestlers used.

The walls were braced with wooden logs and an extensive series of rafters were crisscrossed overhead. Hatch had feared he'd be cramped down here but the ceiling stretched higher than any the street fighter had seen before. The only comparison that came to him was a temple, but instead of worshipping spirits...they worshipped violence instead.

A scream a spray of blood shot through the air as a gang war threatened to spark inside the underground cavern. This was a meeting of the toughest criminal groups Hyuga had to offer. Hatch and his companions began to realize that the greatest danger they faced wasn't a cave-in.

"Alright, next!" Barked a yakuza holding a long scroll of papers. "To every contender waitin': get ready to strip and show your ink. You need tattoos and an invitation for a shot in the ring."



Hatch did a double-take. He hadn't realized that only yakuza would be able to compete in the event. Rokuhara was also surprised, pulling the street fighter aside and getting the group into a huddle. He spoke with hurried whispers, and ordered Tan-kun off to fetch a squid for ink.

"I'm a rather accomplished artist, if I may brag. Enough to trick them into thinking it's a tattoo," said the monk after Tan-kun left. "What design would you wish me to paint upon you, Hachirobei? A tiger? Or a dragon, perhaps?"

It was then that Hatch caught another glimpse of the monk's necklace, which he now kept hidden under his orange robes. Though it had taken him this long, Hatch finally recalled where he had seen that cross before.

"Rokuhara," Hachirobei said, sounding serious, "tell me about that cross you're wearin' around your neck. What does it mean?!"

The monk coughed and only then did Hatch realize he had grabbed the man by the collar out of instinct. He released his grip but not the grimace on his face. *"Mother...why did you leave Grandpa and me? I need to know!"*

Rokuhara pulled out the necklace from within his robes for a better view. "This...this means a lot of things to a lot of people." He traced his finger over the man bound by stakes, and over the unfamiliar letters inscribed above him. "It means resurrection and salvation. Liberation from—"

"Use some easier words, damn you! Just tell me what it means!"

Hatch yelled loud enough to quiet the chamber. He didn't care that he was getting unwanted attention, nor was he concerned by their stares and sneers. He just wanted to know why his mother left him. Why she had abandoned him and Grandpa all those years ago.

Rokuhara closed his eyes and nodded. "It means to be saved. If not in this life...than the one after."

Hatch didn't know a thing about being saved, or of any life other than the one he had now. It didn't make any sense and maybe it wasn't supposed to; as far as he figured, there was no reason for a mother to run out on her kid. Hatch nodded to himself as Tan-kun arrived with a fresh squid in hand.

"Alright then," Hatch said, taking the squid and looking it in the eyes. "Paint the cross on me, monk. If it has any meaning—I'll find it myself!"

Rokuhara's eyes went wide, wide beyond what any Hyugan's were capable of. After giving it ample thought, he nodded, chuckling as he did so. "To bear such a symbol...you are the oddest Hyugan I've ever met, Hachirobei."

*"I don't know what you were tryin' to save, Mother,"* Hatch said to himself. *"But I'm gonna save the dojo and all the memories Grandpa and I shared!"*



The tournament had a problem aside from bat droppings and a lack of restrooms: there was an odd number of combatants. The yakuza decided the solution was a three man free-for-all, randomly selected among the entrants.

Unfortunately for Hatch, his number was called along with two fighters from the Yamagata-gumi. They weren't just the biggest yakuza group in Hyuga—they were the hosts of the Kumite and had their leader, Lord Yamagata, watching down from a throne above the arena. That they had the home-field advantage went without saying.

"You've gotta be shittin' me," said a muscled woman who swaggered into the ring. She cracked her neck and her knuckles, and looked intent on cracking Hatch, too. "What sort of dumbass walks around with a giant cross on his face? Not to mention that karate getup. What a joke!"

Because the squid ink was painted atop his skin and not stained inside it (like an actual yakuza) the only place Rokuhara could put it was on his face. The cross went across his eyelids and down his nose, reaching down to the tip of his chin and up to his red headband. Though the ink had dried enough not to run, Hatch thought it best not to take any blows to the face just in case.

*"As if I needed another reason to keep my guard up,"* Hatch thought to himself as his second opponent made his way to the ring.

This one didn't swagger so much as lumbered. He was a bald giant of a man yet he carried himself much smaller than one would expect. The reason, Hatch realized, had everything to do with the woman who was giving him a sneer.

"Daisuke. Last time we fought was back in Yamato, ain't that right? I went by a different name back then—still gonna kick your ass, though!"

Daisuke nodded. "T-that's right, Nishi. Back then, you's were called Norik—*ouch!*"

The battle had begun with a stiff kick to the giant's shin. Nishi spat on the clay floor before smacking her fist into an open palm. "Forget that name you oversized idiot! Boss wants a show for his new wife—we'll give him one. First, go take out 'Crossface' over there. After he's gone we'll get the real battle started!"

A gong sounded after Nishi's order was given, and Daisuke charged forward at Hatch like a wild boar on two legs. He was about as steady as one—the kick to his shin made his running awkward, but he didn't have to run far to reach Hatch on the other side of the ring.

"Don't let him push you out of the ring, Hachi! You'll lose if he does!" yelled Tan-kun from the stands. It was good advice but had also taken Hatch's attention away from the present moment. Not good when that moment involved a giant ball of sweaty force in his direction.

“Hya—*argh*...” Hatch let out a welp as he braced himself against the giant’s weight. Daisuke was shirtless and sweaty, which didn’t make it easy nor appealing to grab hold of him. With the yakuza’s large stomach pressed against him, Hatch had to crane his neck not to get a facefull of the man’s blubber.

“Get ‘em outta there!”

“Break this wimp into pieces!”

“Go on, Daisuke! Sit on him!”

The crowd wasn’t on Hatch’s side and neither were the forces of gravity. Hatch’s knees threatened to buckle as he felt his back heels on the ring’s outer line. He knew one step backwards would be the end of not just him, but the Ken Raijingu Dojo.

And though knowing was half the battle, he didn’t have the power within his limbs to step forward. In a competition of brute strength, Hatch would never win. But the martial artist had been in enough fights to know strength wasn’t everything. He had to remember his training. He had to get down deeper than any man felt comfortable—literally!

“Eiiyaaah!” Hatch roared, falling into a split and punching Daisuke in his gut. Though he was aiming for his stomach, the sudden maneuver had toppled the giant forward, towards and over him. The punch ended up connecting in a decidedly more sensitive area below the belt.

“Oh! Oh...!” Daisuke let out a series of high-pitched gasps as he clutched his privates and flopped over Hachirobei, squirming in pain as he landed outside the line.

Hatch expected anger and boos from the crowd for downing one of their comrades. But the yakuza, for all their faults, had a wicked sense of humor. Case in point was Nishi, who was bent over in amusement, pointing and laughing at Daisuke’s crumpled figure.

“Hahahaha! Right in the nuts! Could’ve sworn I heard one pop—that’s too good!”

The crowd’s attitude towards Hatch had shifted tremendously as the laughter continued to echo across the underground chamber. A bit of humor was more than welcomed in such a tense environment. Though there was at least one yakuza who didn’t appreciate it.

“Cease thissss circus!” Shouted a middle-aged woman who sat at Lord Yamagata’s side. She wore a white silk wedding kimono and was covered in so much jewelry Hatch doubted she could stand. “I, Shiroyama, sssshall not have my wedding ceremony be made a farce of! I demand you fight!”

The mood was killed as the chuckles turned to murmurs. Hatch recovered from his split and prepared for round two. He had a hunch that the same technique wouldn’t work so well on the foul-mouthed woman.

"Well screw me sideways! You're flexible, Crossface, I'll give you that much. But there's somethin' you don't know about this tournament." Nishi raised out a hand and let out a whistle. A wooden staff came hurling in her direction. She caught it and pointed it towards Hatch's face. "Anything goes!"

The yakuza charged forth with her staff overhead. It was too long for Hatch to dodge—he had to block, and brought his arm above his head to do just that.

*\*WHAM\**

Hatch retreated and cradled his blocking arm. It stung as if it had just gone through a hornet's nest and ached as if it was nearly broken. His opponent was remarkably strong—and wild, too, swinging her staff about in a frenzy. The crowd cheered her on, and she was more than willing to bask in the applause.

The street fighter went into the monk's boxing stance with his hands raised. The swings of the staff were not so different than kicks from the legs—there was an opening afterwards. Hatch saw one and charged forward, no differently than Rokuhara had done against him. Nishi's front torso was complete exposed to an attack, though the torso itself proved to be a problem.

*"Crap, I forgot she's a girl! Should I really hit one?"* Hatch thought as he darted in. His chivalry towards women would prove to be his undoing, as Nishi recovered and whipped the backside of her staff into Hatch's ribs.

Hatch shot out a glob of blood from his mouth. He was lucky if all his ribs were still in one piece.

"Keep it together, Hachi! You're going to get seriously hurt if you don't!" yelled Tan-kun from the stands.

His best friend was right. Hatch had to remain focused, but that wasn't easy when you were facing down an insane yakuza with a weapon. It didn't help that Nishi had wizened up to Hatch's advances; her swings became less reckless, cutting his chances of charging in for another blow.

*"I have to get rid of that staff,"* Hatch thought to himself and grinned. Though it wasn't quite a grin—he was clenching his teeth in preparation for pain.

*\*whack\**

Hatch met Nishi's swing with his leg, as his roundhouse kick snapped up against the wood to stop it mid-swing. It would probably have been less painful to have let the strike land, but the martial artist was nothing if not stubborn. The same could also be said for Nishi, as she continued swinging over and over again.

*\*whack\**

*\*whack\**

*\*whack\**

“What in the hell is wrong with this guy?!” Nishi yelled in frustration. The entire audience went quiet, though upon the sound of each brutal exchange they gasped and cheered for another. The two combatants continued as wood clashed against bone.

*\*whack\**

*\*whack\**

*\*whack\**

*\*whack\**

Hatch could no longer feel his leg, only the tremors that went up it and across the rest of his body as his nerves lit aflame. But he wasn't going to stop. For the future of the Ken Raijingu-Ryū, he couldn't!

“Eiiyah!” he roared, sounding more like a stallion than a man. He certainly kicked like one.

*\*whaCRACK\**

The staff snapped and the crowd cried out in excitement. With Nishi's defenses gone, Hatch wasted no time as he flipped to his other foot, bringing his leg around hard into the side of Nishi's face.

It landed with enough force to send the yakuza rolling across the clay arena floor. Hoots and hollers and chants of 'Crossman' broke out from the audience. Hatch would've enjoyed the moment more if his right leg wasn't screaming out in agony.

The battle wasn't over, though, as Nishi's body hadn't past over the ring. When the street fighter staggered over to her, he found her sniffing and cradling her head in pain. Hurting a girl went against Hatch's moral code, causing him to forget the match long enough to kneel down and offer a hand to help the yakuza up.

The sniffing became a snicker. Nishi turned over and tossed a fistful of sand into Hatch's eyes, following up with an elbow directed into the street fighter's gut.

Hachirobei gasped out in surprise and pain. He could taste his own vomit and smell his own blood; he hear the cheers echoing around him and he could feel the nerves across his body burn. But he couldn't see a thing. He blinked and scratched his eyes in a desperate attempt to regain his vision, but to no avail.

“Huah!” Hatch cried out as Nishi landed a fist into his neck. The blinded martial artist couldn't defend himself, and Nishi was more than willing to take advantage. Punches and kicks came at him from every angle; before long, just the anticipation of the strike was enough to rattle Hatch's resolve. He cradled his arms around his head to protect his skull as the rest of him submitted to Nishi's beating.

"You landed a good kick on me, Crossman. Think I'll pay back the favor by turnin' you into a bleeding punchin' bag!"

Nishi was true to her word, cutting Hatch's lips open with a wicked cross across the cheek. Hatch tried and failed to fend her off, swinging wildly out of fear. It wasn't until he took a nasty conk on the head that his brain and better senses starting working again.

His mind took him to the past, to the words of his grandfather. *"Maintain focus you must, Hachi-kun! Engraving the strikes into your mind, the purpose of the form is. Perform them even while blinded, you should be able to!"*

*\*thunk\**

Hatch swung out an arm to block Nishi's incoming kick. It had surprised him as much as it did her, but the martial artist wouldn't stop now. He closed his eyes—he didn't need them, not to perform the form Grandpa had taught him.

One punch led to another, then a sidestep, a low block and then a front kick. Every movement was crisp; each technique was performed to the standards of Choe Yeong, a master who had come to Hyuga from a foreign land. With each punch and kick Hachirobei let out a *kiai*—a shout—that commanded so much power that it drew the crowd silent.

Everyone watched as Hatch performed his powerful routine, blocking and striking at Nishi even with his eyes closed. The clay crumpled beneath his feet at every strike. Nishi, getting clever, tossed a stone ahead of Hatch to draw his ears and attention away from her. But he wasn't listening, and unfortunately for her—the next attack in his form was a reverse stance spinning side kick!

"Shiit!" Nishi cried out, staggering backwards and clutching her stomach. She had to fall to a knee to recover her breath.

And though she was off her feet, the yakuza boss was on his. Lord Yamagata bellowed from above. "I recognize that technique! It can be no other's!"

Nishi cursed again as she got back up on her feet. She then let out another whistle. Another weapon was thrown to her—this one, a heavy iron gauntlet. She put it on her right hand and made a fist, grinning all the while.

Hatch could see now, well enough at least to see he was in trouble. He was sore and wobbly and running off adrenaline. But when he saw Nishi charge ahead with her iron fist, he knew he had to meet it with his.

Grandpa's words once again resonated inside his only grandson and pupil. Hatch put on a boyish grin as he ran forth, determination in his stride. "I know what's behind my punches now, Grandpa! What matters most...is to protect the people I love and care about! That's why I fight! ORA!"



The punches collided and the iron gauntlet broke into pieces. The crowd went crazy as Nishi flew backwards, collapsing beyond the line and ending the match.

“Yattaa! You did it! Hachi-kun, you did it!” Tan-kun yelled in joy, storming the arena and raising Hatch’s hand high in the air as a sign of victory. Hatch was still in shock from the whole ordeal, but smiled and thanked the new fans that gathered around him.

He then brought his sleeve across his face to wipe the sweat from his brow. It ended up being the biggest mistake he could’ve made.

“Eh? There somethin’ on my face?” Hatch asked before looking down at his sleeve and seeing it covered in ink. He had smudged the cross right off of his forehead.

“Oh, crap.”

■■■■

“I never thought I’d see Yeong-sama’s grandson in my fighting ring, with a smudged Christian cross on his face, no less!” said Lord Yamagata. He had his tattooed arms crossed with an expression on his face that Hatch couldn’t read.

But he could certainly read the scowls of the fearsome yakuza who surrounded him. Most of them looked ready to scalp Hatch alive for wearing fake tattoos and competing in their tournament. When they voiced as much, their boss told them to quiet down.

“Shut up! After putting on such a performance, I’ve decided that I will allow you and your friend to leave. No harm, no foul.”

Tan-kun let out a sigh of relief. Hatch looked around for Rokuhara but the monk was nowhere to be found. His focus turned to the dojo. “I take it you know my grandpa, then. I’ve been meaning to ask about a debt of his...” Hatch went on to explain his situation and of the three thugs who came to the dojo trying to collect.

The news surprised Lord Yamagata, who looked towards his new wife, Shiroyama, with a frown. The woman let out a hiss, remarking that it was an outstanding debt and that she had wanted the books cleaned for their marriage. To that, the yakuza boss shook his head.

“Yeong-sama could’ve taken my place, had he put on the ink. But he preferred a simpler life. May he rest well...and may his dojo live on. Your debts are cleared with us, Crossman.”

Hatch jumped in excitement, before crying in pain from his damaged leg. He collapsed on his back, everyone laughing including him. It had all turned out fine in the end. Looking up into the rafters, into the shadows above, Hatch saw a pair of golden eyes looming over him. The figure looked more beast than human, vile and feral, with a katana at its hip.

*"Isn't that the samurai I saw before?"* Hatch wondered, but before he could tell anyone else, the figure vanished. He began to doubt his own eyes.

But the one thing he didn't doubt was that the Ken Raijingu-Ryū would live on. His grandpa's legacy was saved, and more than that, Hatch now understood the true power behind his punches.

[Which character should October's side story be about?](#)

[Sep 13, 2019](#)

This poll will close at the end of September.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+28)

12%

Borgia, the butler (+0)

2%

Daisuke, the servant (+6)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+0)

0%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+15)

5%

Keiko, the maid (+48)

5%

Kohaku, the samurai (+15)

7%

Kuniko, the farmer (+9)

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+14)

12%

Momoko, the doctor (+33)

0%

Nishi, the yakuza (+2)

3%

Satsuma, the emperor (+39)

10%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+20)

40%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+19)

3%

Poll ended Sep 30, 2019 · 58 votes total

[Traditional Fiction](#)

[Sep 26, 2019](#)

How often do you read traditional (non-interactive) fiction? These could be novels, comics, fanfiction and so on.

I haven't read traditional fiction in ages!

The vast majority of my time spent reading is with interactive fiction.

It's about half-and-half.

Most fiction I read is traditional, with some exceptions.

I hardly read interactive fiction at all except for SoH!

109 votes total

[MC #1 Face Art](#)

[Sep 30, 2019](#)

A new month, a new face! That's right: in Book 5, players will be able to (optionally) select a face for their main character! Faces will be designed each month by the intermediate+ tiers via polls. They'll be drawn by the illustrator of Book 4, Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#))!

This month's build: **Feminine, Charming, Long hair**

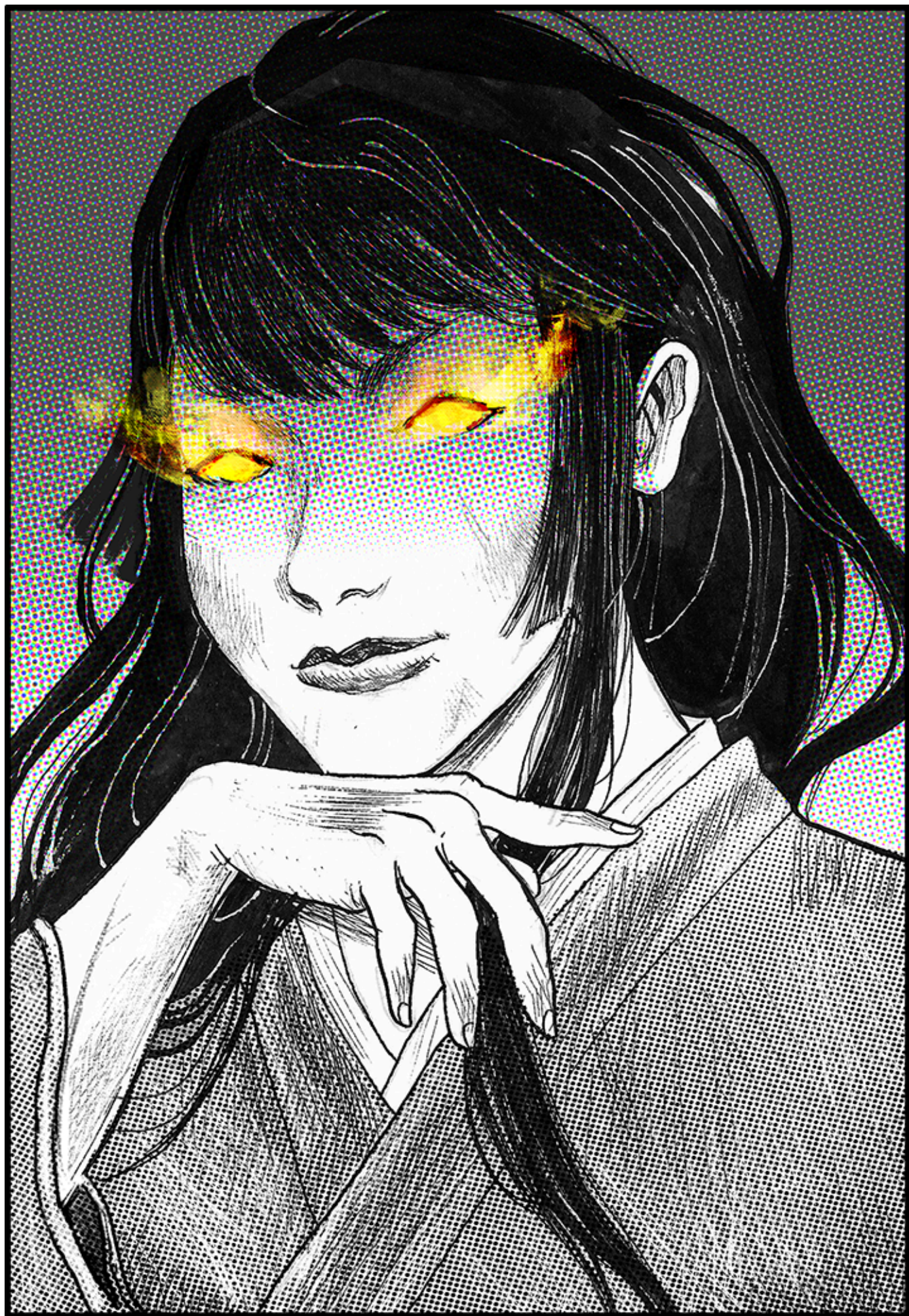
**Portrait (Normal)**





Portrait (Jigoku)





In-Game (Normal)



by Devon Connell

[Return to the Game](#)

[Restart](#)

[Settings](#)

Name: MC #1

Spirit:

Impulsive: 50%	Calculated: 50%
Perverted: 50%	Chivalrous: 50%
Charming: 100%	Stoic: 0%
Drifter: 50%	Protective: 50%
Brutal: 50%	Finesse: 50%

Attunement:

Book 1: 60%
Book 2: 85%
Book 3: 70%
Book 4: 50%
Book 5: 0%

Skills:

Observation: 70%
Deduction: 100%



In-Game (Jigoku)

by Devon Connell

[Return to the Game](#)

[Restart](#)

[Settings](#)

<You have forgotten yourself.>



**Next**

[Make your own games with ChoiceScript](#)

[MC #2's Face Poll: 1/3](#)

[Oct 1, 2019](#)

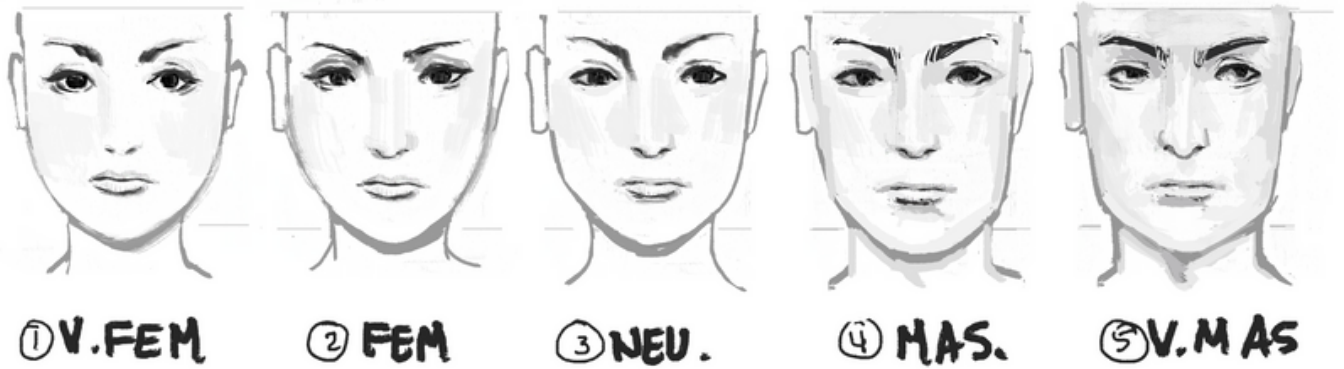
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission Book 4's illustrator, Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#)) for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

The first poll is masculinity-femininity, from the 1st-5th.

The second poll is favored stat (personality+expression), from 6th-10th.

The third poll is hair, from 11th-15th.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!



Very feminine (+5)

13%

Feminine (+0)

9%

Neutral (+12)

33%

Masculine (+15)

36%

Very masculine (+3)

9%

Poll ended Oct 5, 2019 · 45 votes total

[CoG Mailer](#)

[Oct 5, 2019](#)

Are you on the Choice of Games mailer? (the email they send out a few times a month)

Yep! It's how I find games that have been recently released.

Yes, but I find newly released games through other means.

Nope, but now I'm interested.

No, I hate spam!

99 votes total

[MC #2's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Oct 6, 2019](#)

The design for MC #2 continues! This poll focuses on the favored stat of the character, which will provide a personality and facial expression for the artist to work with.

Current Build: **Masculine**

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Impulsive (+2)

10%

Calculated (+5)

6%

Perverted (+13)

21%

Chivalrous (+4)

6%

Charming (+0)

6%

Stoic (+5)

6%

Drifter (+1)

0%

Protective (+7)

38%

Brutal (+4)

6%

Finesse (+1)

0%

Poll ended Oct 10, 2019 · 48 votes total

[Side Story #15: Keiko's Kabuki Act](#)

[Oct 7, 2019](#)

*<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>*



Side Story 15: Keiko's Kabuki Act



■■ *Tonogasha* ■■

"We don't deal with your kind here! This is a legitimate establishment!"

The barkeep yelled loud enough to wake up half of Tonogasha. It was a wake-up call the sleepy town desperately needed: it was past mid-morning and most of the residents were still asleep. Keiko envied them—she hadn't slept a wink in the past week. She wouldn't risk the nightmares, not when the waking memories were enough to bring her to tears.

"Papa, what should I do?" Keiko asked while wiping fresh tears away with the sleeve of her dirty silk kimono. What were once stunning white robes with lavish blossom designs were now browned with mud and stained pale green with nights spent sleepless atop beds of grass. The daughter of the recently deceased Lord Yamagata, head of the Yamagata-gumi, was alone and without a ryō to her name.

It wasn't always easy being a yakuza.

Keiko lifted the cloak she had borrowed from an unattended wagon over her head. It wasn't because the overcast sky warranted concerns for a sudden downpour. It was because of her face—specifically, the inked cherry blossoms that ran up her neck, across her chin and over her cheek. Facial tattoos were reserved for yakuza royalty: she was a princess in the criminal underworld of Jijinto, permanently marked on her eighteenth birthday.

*"But here I'm no better than a Kondo. No, at least they can find work!"* Keiko groaned and her stomach followed. She was starving—a poor time for a kasutera vendor to open up nearby. The moist cakes were fresh and lathered with honey, emitting a scent that caused the yakuza's mouth to drool.

Remembering that she was a lady and not a dog, Keiko snapped from her daze and headed towards a long rectangular building at the center of town. It had caught her eye because of one detail: the windows—or rather, the lack of any.

"A gambling den? It has to be!" Keiko smiled, her pace speeding up as she heard clattering tiles and bickering men from inside. "I could be a Chō-Han dealer. Spirits know I've watched Papa play enough games!"

Her excitement turned to confusion after she slid open the shoji doors. The hall was even larger than it had appeared from outside, lined with dozens of small tables with pairs of men sitting across from each other. Raised seating lined both lengths of the hall, with many onlookers batting fans as the scent of sweaty men permeated the venue.

"This...this isn't Chō-Han. And it's not Hanafuda either," Keiko said with a gulp. On the tables were boards with dozens of tiles upon them, each etched in symbols referring to their rank and value. The clattering she had heard from outside wasn't from dice being rolled but wooden chips being placed and maneuvered in this nerdy and incredibly boring game.

It was too late for Keiko to escape unnoticed.

"Oh? A female!" said one of the shogi players, standing up from his table and pointing to her as if she was an exotic animal. A group of smelly 'gentlemen' quickly surrounded her.

"Greetings m'lady!"

"Are you perchance interested in shogi?"

"It would be my honor to teach you how to play!"

Keiko found herself in a corner, surrounded on all sides by men giving generous—if suspect—offers to teach her the rules of the game. They were overweight, smelly, and above all desperate for a woman's attention. Were her stomach not already empty she might have lost her breakfast.



“Back off!” she yelled, pulling off her hood and giving them a good look at her cheek. “You know what I am, don’t you?!”

Each man gave her a stare more red with blush than white with fear. The shogi players quickly competed to give compliments to her flowery facial design. It was obvious that these men were so sheltered from crime and the underworld that they had never met nor seen a yakuza before. Keiko’s popularity only grew—much to her dismay—as most players delayed their games to gaze upon her.

“K-kuso!” Keiko cursed, summoning the Nishi side of her. She pulled out a knife and brandished it, causing several men to tumble back and give her room enough to escape. She used one man’s gut as a launching pad to jump free, running out the front entrance while swearing never to deal with shogi nerds ever again.

Not watching where she was going, she ran into a passerby who was carrying a bag of vegetables—which were now rolling across the street. She bowed and apologized to the one she bumped into, before raising her head and looking him in the eyes.

Or at least, she tried to. The man’s eyes were behind slits that were barely open, giving him a mischievous expression that was only amplified by his broad, sly smile. His hair was white and his kimono was stitched together in a hundred different colored patches. He brought a hand to his chin as he spoke in an odd falsetto:

“A face of blossoms,

well-watered with tears untold,

seeks the sunlight’s grace.”

Keiko sniffled, not understanding the weird poet’s haiku. To be polite, she smiled and nodded, helping him gather his tomatoes before they rolled away. Her first day in Tonogasha looked to be a horrible one, yet fortune was about to change in her favor.

“I’m sorry again, sir. I just came in from Jijinto and I...oops!” Keiko realized she was waving her knife around, and nearly cut the poet’s sleeve. She gave a cute little laugh as she bowed once more in apology.

The poet found the routine incredibly amusing. “A cherry blossom with thorns is a rare find indeed! My name is Bashō, a modest poet with bold ambitions. Now if I might ask, what is a member of the notorious Yamagata-gumi doing outside my door?”

Keiko looked around and found that they were in front of a poetry house. With little left to lose, she gave Bashō a nod. She’d tell him the story—parts of it, anyway. It began with a name. She gazed into her reflection on the knife’s edge and spoke it.

“Nishi-chan.”

■■ *Jijinto, Days Earlier* ■■

It was just before the crack of dawn when the three yakuza—Keiko, Nishi and Daisuke—had returned to Fish Eye Hospital in Jijinto's Eastside slums. They had returned expecting to see their bloodied master in rough but stable condition. The yakuza boss was tough enough to survive an assassination attempt that to any weaker man would've been fatal.

Keiko had even brought flowers and cards from the rest of the gang wishing him a quick recovery. Their spirits were high and hopeful.

But when Nishi slid open the door to the clinic they were assaulted by a mouthful of metal. The stench of blood was so heavy they could taste it. They traced back a pair of bloody footsteps to the backroom and saw the doctor's assistant, Momoko, sitting slumped against the wall with her eyes wide and vacant in shock.

And across from her, on the operating table, was what remained of Lord Yamagata.

Keiko couldn't bear to look at him. The scene was too gruesome; vomit filled her throat as she spotted her father's heart outside his chest. His blood—the same that flowed through her veins—puddled into a pool across the floor. She saw her own red reflection beneath her, trembling upon the fall of her tears.

"Damn it! Damn it all! Damn *you*!" Nishi yelled, grabbing Momoko by the throat and raising her up off the floor. The yakuza captain clenched Momoko so tightly that the woman couldn't speak, yet Nishi demanded she do so all the same. "You killed him, didn't you?! Tell me that it's all your fault!"

Momoko gasped out an unintelligible groan. With her arms limp at her sides, she made no motion to stop Nishi from snapping her neck. The enraged woman was about to do just that when Keiko grabbed her fellow yakuza and put herself between them.

"Nishi-chan! Please, stop it!" Keiko screamed, tears streaming down her face. "Papa's dead! Killing her won't change that!"

Nishi raged a little longer, but once the initial anger subsided the adrenaline left too, and the sleep-deprived yakuza could only gaze upon the truth while her legs folded beneath her. When Momoko found her voice she told them of the culprit: an assassin, more beast than human, with golden eyes that pierced right through her. The one who had nearly killed their boss had returned to finish the job.

A silence came over the group, until the bald giant Daisuke looked towards the captain with a question. "What are we gonna do now, Nishi?"

She stood up and braced her forehead with her now-bloodied fingers. "How'd that bastard—bitch, whatever—find out he was here? Only told the most loyal of our boys where we were keepin' him. Them and...and *her*."

“Shiroyama.” Keiko said the name that Nishi didn’t. The two exchanged looks and mutual scowls for their boss’s new wife, a woman who was as suspicious as she was greedy, and far too ambitious for their liking. Ambitious enough, perhaps, to do the unthinkable.

Nishi planted one hand upon Keiko’s shoulder and held out a knife in the other. “Take it and go, Kei-chan. You have to leave the city—it’s not safe for you here!”

The heir to the Yamagata-gumi took the knife but shook her head all the same. “I don’t want to leave you, Nishi-chan! And where would I go? Perhaps...I could head to—”

Nishi brought her lips down and against Keiko’s. The two shared a deep kiss, interrupted only by Daisuke’s gawking. When they parted, the captain looked at the yakuza princess and said her goodbye.

“It’s safer if I don’t know where you’re going. We’ll meet again soon, after I clean up this fuckin’ mess!”

### ■■ Tonogasha ■■

Keiko stood and waited outside of the White Peach: the largest kabuki theater in town. Though it wasn’t as lavish as the theaters she had seen in Yamato, it was just as beautiful. Brightly painted tapestries hung from above the front entrance; depicting actors in costume, they fluttered in the wind as if tonight’s performance had already started.

But it was early afternoon and the theater was closed off to visitors. That was fine—Keiko didn’t intend to be one for long. This was where the poet Bashō recommended she go for a job. So she steeled her courage and walked forward, under the illustration of a long-nosed oni demon in battle with a red-haired samurai in a golden kimono.

There was a flurry of activity both on stage and off of it, with workers and actors alike carrying around props and costumes. One young man had the misfortune of carrying a dozen sharp-looking katana swords by himself. He could hardly see where he was going much less where his feet were, and tripped upon the flowy kimono of one of the spirit maidens. The result was a ruckus that ended with him getting smacked several times over the head with a paper fan.

“For spirits’ sake, Ige! *Get* those swords *backstage* before I *stab* you with them!”

Keiko gasped. Not at the sight of the large older woman abusing a stagehand, but upon the name: Ige was the one Bashō told her to ask for. Though he was a far cry from the starring kabuki actor she had hoped for, the yakuza princess followed the young man backstage all the same.

When she caught up with him, the stagehand was hanging the katanas up onto a rack. That he was grabbing them by the blades was a good sign that they were blunted—for theatrical use only.

“Excuse me, are you Ige?”

“Eeeip!” Ige yelled and jumped in surprise. The sword he held in his hands dropped to his foot, and though the blade wasn’t sharp it was heavy all the same. “Ow! That really smarts!”

Keiko bowed to apologize but did so too quickly; she came off-balance and fell forward into the stagehand, collapsing both Ige and the rack of swords behind him. The two were bombarded from above as a shower of blunted blades fell over them. By the way Keiko fell, the young man’s face was smothered between her bosoms. Though he didn’t die from lack of breath, he was close to doing so from embarrassment as a couple actors came by to see what was the matter. Both congratulated him on his youthful resolve.

“I’m so, so sorry!” Keiko said, apologizing once more after freeing Ige from the awkward embrace. “I can’t believe I’ve made such a bad first impression. I should never have listened to that Bashō in the first place!”

“Ah, Bashō-san?” Ige said, his face still crimson from blushing. “I take poetry lessons from him twice a week. He’s quite a profound teacher, once you get past his...eccentrics. The theater is in need of extras during our crowd scenes, so I asked if he found anyone suitable to send them our way.”

Extras, as Keiko understood it, were background characters. They were ordinary and wore plain clothes, making the colorful protagonist and their romantic pursuits stand out by comparison. It was an important yet far from glamorous occupation, yet the yakuza was in no position to be picky.

She put down her hood and smiled. “Would I be suitable, Ige-san?”

Ige’s eyes went wide as he saw Keiko’s blossom branding. Realizing he was with a yakuza, he let out an audible gulp and then an ‘Ah’ that went on for a minute. He eventually recovered, enough at least to nod his head and come up with a plan. “Please follow me. What was your name, again?”

Keiko introduced herself as Ige led her to the powder room. It was called that for a very obvious reason: it was where the actors dabbed their faces with the makeup kabuki was most known for. The white powdery mist in the air was so heavy that the yakuza nearly choked on her own breath.

“Covering my face...I feel like I’d be hiding who I am,” said Keiko, nervous as she took a seat in front of the mirror. Mirrors were incredibly rare—this one was no doubt the greatest luxury item in the theater. It had been years since Keiko had last looked at herself through one. She smiled and her reflection smiled back, both of them relieved that she still looked as cute as always—even after the week’s horrific ordeals.

“Ah, well,” Ige started, “though masks and makeup may hide our faces, oftentimes they help us better express who we truly are. Once we look beyond what’s outside...we can see the beauty within.”

Keiko giggled. “I think you’re wise beyond your years, Ige-kun! I imagine you’ll be running this theater yourself one day.”

Ige let out a nervous laugh as he proceeded to cover up Keiko's tattoos with a shade of paint nearly identical to her skin color. Though it was ticklish to have a brush sweeping across your neck and face, the yakuza kept perfectly still as the stagehand did his work. After he was done, Keiko saw that the face looking back at her no longer resembled a yakuza but was as un-inked and natural as any other's.

"Amazing! It's fantastic!" Keiko took Ige into her arms and squeezed. "How did you get so skilled?"

"Ah, well I...I have to help the Headmistress each morning with her makeup. I've gotten plenty of experience covering up all her warts and wrinkles. Older women tend to—*ah!*"

The paper fan from earlier had returned with renewed fury, and the grimace atop the Headmistress's face was hot enough to send her makeup running. "So *this* is what you've been up to?! Entertaining *trollops* when you should be *working*?"

Each emphasized word came with another wallop. What was worse than the assault, however, was the glare the Headmistress directed towards Keiko. "Let me guess. You want to be an actress—a star!"

Keiko shook her head, but the head of the theater continued her scolding.

"Do you have any idea how many geisha dropouts we get each week? Where did you even train, girl? Or have you no training at all—aside from spreading your legs in dirty ryokan, that is!"

Keiko was too afraid to say anything but the truth. "I...I trained in Yamato, Headmistress. At the Lioness Institute for Charm and Grace." It wasn't a lie but it wasn't entirely true, either: she had gone there under Nishi's old name: Noriko Morita. Nishi had forsaken her birthright as a proper lady and given Keiko the chance she had only dreamed of. Though her stay there was short, it was a gift Keiko would never forget.

The Headmistress was taken aback by the name of the institute, nearly dropping her fan. "*You* went to the Lioness? What happened to the standards there? Not even *my* application was accepted! Do you think that makes you more graceful than I?!"

Keiko shook her head once again, yet the Headmistress ignored her.

"You do, don't you?! Well then—let's see just how graceful you are covered in filth!" she yelled, picking up a nearby mop and bucket and tossing it at Keiko. "You wanted work, right? We've got a show tonight and those floors better sparkle!"

"Y-yes Ma'am!"

■■■■

Kabuki plays were often day-long affairs, and a large portion of the theater's income came from the overpriced offerings at the intermission tables. Tonogasha wasn't close to the ocean but they had plenty of sushi cooled and ready for sale all the same. It wasn't cheap nor fresh but it sure looked delicious.

“Looks like the new girl has an appetite,” said an actor in an ugly oni mask. When he lifted it off his shoulders he revealed himself to be a woman as pretty as any Keiko had ever seen. “The Headmistress will notice if you snatch any now. Your best bet is taste-testing during the second act.”

She gave Keiko a wink and continued on her way. The actress was kind and as welcoming as all the other performers and stagehands; they were like a family, joking and bickering and calling each other by their first names. They weren’t blood related yet shared a close bond all the same. It reminded her of the yakuza and all of her friends in the Yamagata-gumi.

Keiko shook off the memories of her past and focused on the here and now. Though she was an outsider, she was determined not to be one for long. *“I’ll work so hard I know they’ll accept me!”*

Rice, noodles, and spilled saké were all over the floors, while dust, hair and stains covered the cushions. That didn’t even include the dozens of old pamphlets scattered everywhere. Though the guests wouldn’t see most of it—considering it was often pitch dark away from the stage—that didn’t make such a mess acceptable.

Keiko had a talent for cleaning and a love for it too. There was something deeply satisfying about cleaning something unclean and bringing out a room’s hidden beauty. It wasn’t often that the yakuza princess got the opportunity to tidy up, but here at the White Peach she let herself loose.

Time flew by unnoticed as she went from one row to the next like a woman possessed. Ige had to grab hold of her arm to stop her, much to her annoyance—there was a stubborn stain of soy sauce that had yet to come out.

“Ah, Keiko-san! You did a fantastic job. But the doors are about to open for the guests! We need to get backstage.”

Keiko nodded, then smiled and blushed as her new coworkers gave her praise and approval. Some even remarked that she was too pretty to be cleaning soy stains, offering her acting lessons. That talk was cut short thanks to the whack of a paper fan from the Headmistress, who gave Keiko a scowl as she barked out an order.

“To your places, everyone! Stagehands—make like the rats that you are and scurry out of sight!”

■■■■

Keiko fell over laughing. She and a hundred kabuki patrons were enjoying a rendition of ‘The Zen Substitute’: a comedy where a man switches places with his servant during meditation to trick his possessive wife—all so that he can visit his courtesan in secret. The antics and close-calls were so compelling that, even with the worst seat in the house, Keiko couldn’t help but be captivated.

“The first act is just about over,” Ige said with a sigh of relief. He was more concerned about things going wrong—like actors forgetting lines or props falling apart—to enjoy the humor. Looking at the other



stagehands, Keiko saw the same level of focus. She still had a lot to learn about show business, she realized.

After the curtains closed, one of the actors yelled out for Ige, saying that they had a costume emergency. The young man ran off backstage, leaving Keiko to herself. Though she wasn't alone long; the Headmistress appeared behind her with a wicked grin, as well as with a bar of soap, bucket and mop.

"Having a laugh, are we? Get back to work! Ichikawa managed to cut his toe on stage. Go clean up the mess!"

Keiko took the cleaning instruments but was confused as to what her employer wanted. "The next act should be starting soon, Ma'am. Shouldn't we wait until intermission?"

The response came in the form of a push. Keiko was flung on stage, and thanks to a spilled bucket of soapy water, she slid across the floor. Chuckles and a loud growing murmur met her ears. To her horror, a hundred pairs of eyes stared down at her watching her every move.

Stagefright hit Keiko like a martial artist's uppercut. Her legs clamped together as she went stiff as a board; she fell so flatly that she flopped over on her head. It was an embarrassing stunt that drew even more laughter from the crowd. *"This is bad! I'm making a fool of myself!"*

Trying to recover, she reached out for the bar of soap—which proceeded to fly out from her fingers. She hurried and crawled over to reach it, but every attempt proved as futile as the last until she had squirmed across the entire stage floor.

The laughter grew as did Keiko's shame. She couldn't look at the crowd so she looked backstage and found a line of stagehands gesturing frantically for her to get out of there. She nodded and hurried over, or at least tried to. Not watching her feet, Keiko tripped over the mop while swinging out her arms in a futile attempt to keep her balance.

She face planted the wet stage with a *\*splat\** that sent the crowd wild. It was all she could do not to cry. One of the stagehands tossed her a towel out of pity. Keiko used it to hide her face. Several of the actors—men dressed as overfully fanciful samurai—came to drag her off stage, but them coming near her was the last thing she wanted.

For beneath that towel wasn't the face of the new girl they knew, but the yakuza princess they would fear. The makeup had come off. Keiko staggered back, blind with a towel on her face, and unsteady on her feet. For the latter, at least, she managed to grab hold of the mop. She tried to swing it around to keep the actors at bay, but ended up striking one across the head and another in the gut by mistake.

She bowed deeply and apologized after each accidental strike.

The crowd roared out with a belly-aching laughter as the absurd combat ensued. They were watching a hopeless house cleaner fend off half a dozen supposedly-legendary samurai. They didn't have a clue

that this wasn't scripted, and that the cute maiden on stage was actually a yakuza on her first day.

With another actor down—this time with a shot to the groin—the remaining samurai quickly routed. Keiko looked around before turning towards the audience, lifting her towel just enough to reveal an embarrassed smile.

She waved her goodbye as the crowd stood from their seats and broke into applause.

■■■■

After her impromptu performance, Keiko was hurried off by Ige to reapply her makeup. The stagehand had just finished when a group of actors barged in and demanded Keiko be fired on the spot. Or at least, that was what she imagined they were there for.

"She's a natural! Ige-kun, quit hogging her to yourself!"

"They loved it! Ichikawa has his work cut out for him following *that* routine!"

"Hope you're ready to sign some autographs after the show, dear!"

Getting hugs and praise from the performers put Keiko in a state of bliss. She thought she had made a complete fool of herself—and in all honesty, she had—but it turned out to be exactly what the audience wanted. Even the Headmistress couldn't complain at the results; she stood at the door with her arms crossed and refused to look her in the eye.

Keiko was ditzy and cute—the combination of which enraptured the hearts of all who came to the White Peach. Their male audience especially loved her, and among those was a wealthy silk trader who happened to be one of the joint-owners of the theater.

He introduced himself to Keiko as Anzai Sukenobu, fourth son of Miyahira Sukenobu, called the *Striker of Sells*...

"...though my opponents know me as the *Gold General*! Indeed, my skills in shogi have earned me the title of the game's most powerful piece. I suppose my habit of wearing golden silk also helped in that regard, haha!"

Keiko feigned a smile. She was sitting across from the man in a fancy teahouse, and cared as much about the tea as she did the conversation. That was to say, not at all: the White Peach's newest actress was too busy stuffing her face with dumplings and tempura to be concerned with anything else.

"*Why even bother inviting me out to dinner if you're only going to talk about yourself?*" Keiko thought as she downed a second bowl of beef stew. Anzai was deep into this month's sales report, bragging at length on how his investments last year were already beginning to pay dividends. It was a one-sided conversation made worse by the man's lackeys who hung behind him and feigned interest.

Anzai was overweight and generally repulsive, not to mention he was a shogi player. Yet as a fan of hers and an owner of the White Peach, Keiko had felt compelled to go out with him. Not to mention that the Headmistress had all but ordered her to do so. She hoped to finish the meal and this ordeal as quickly as possible, yet Anzai had other plans.

He placed a hand over hers. It was all Keiko could do not to snap it away. “But enough of me. Your performance was remarkable. Your cuteness is like a blossom I wish to cultivate. I can make you a star, Kei-chan.”

Keiko felt the opposite of attraction but the temptation of stardom all the same. At least until the silk trader had called her by the name that only Nishi was allowed to use. She pushed Anzai off her and stood up from her seat.

“Thank you for the dinner, General-san. But I suggest you find another flower to...cultivate.”

“You wish to be an actress, yes? I would hate to see such a promising flower wilt before its time,” said Anzai in a thinly-veiled threat. “Besides, I’ve already set up our accommodations for tonight.”

Keiko pounded the table, rattling the bowls and plunging the teahouse’s dining room into silence. All eyes were on her just as before—but this time she wasn’t going to be paralyzed by stagefright.

“How dare you threaten me into your chambers, you piss-stained bastard! I’ve had enough!”

Keiko stormed out of the teahouse and into a summer rainstorm, much preferring the company of the warm downpour over Anzai. The silk merchant huffed and puffed over to follow her out, shouting curses and making the mistake of grabbing her on the shoulder.

The yakuza whipped out her knife and cut him apart—or at least, his sash. With his belt in pieces, his kimono flew open and the bottom half of him became exposed. Keiko—the real Keiko, with the inked blossoms on her face showing—looked him over and shook her head in disgust.

“I am the Blossom of the Yamagata-gumi, and I’m proud of it! Now get the hell out of my presence, you short-stemmed weed!”

Anzai quickly obeyed, hurrying off while clutching at his robes to conceal his shame. Keiko stood there in silence amid the rain watching him go, realizing that her days at the White Peach were at an end.

Suddenly, the rain stopped. No—an oil paper umbrella was raised over her head. The umbrella’s holder was looking at her with an amused grin, which shifted into a concerned frown after seeing her expression.

“That’s not just rainwater falling down your cheek,” said Bashō. “What is the matter, Keiko-san?”

She blinked away her tears and explained it all. Though she enjoyed working at the White Peach with Ige and the others, she had made an enemy out of Anzai—an owner of the theater. Her kabuki career

was over the day it began.

The poet patted a finger to his lips as he went deep into thought. “Perhaps your services could be better used elsewhere, then. My master is a lord with a large mansion. One that his butler and personal chef are woefully ill-equipped to clean. He would welcome you with open arms, I’m sure.”

Keiko thought on it as the rain pounded down above her. Though the poet looked like a weasel, he hadn’t steered her wrong yet. She did love to clean, and a mansion by a mysterious lord certainly seemed inviting. But was it too good to be true?

“This lord...your master, what sort of man is he?” she asked.

Bashō grinned with lips that seemed to stretch from one ear to the other.

“He is a man unlike any you have met before—of that much I’m certain! Come, let me take you to the estate of...Roderico da Mirandola!”

[Which character should November's side story be about?](#)

[Oct 7, 2019](#)

This poll will close at the end of October.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+35)

19%

Borgia, the butler (+1)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+6)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+0)

0%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+18)

4%

Keiko, the maid (+0)

4%

Kohaku, the samurai (+19)

6%

Kuniko, the farmer (+9)

2%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+21)

11%

Momoko, the doctor (+33)

0%

Nishi, the yakuza (+4)

2%

Satsuma, the emperor (+45)

6%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+43)

38%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+21)

9%

Poll ended Oct 31, 2019 · 53 votes total

[Oct 11, 2019](#)

The design for MC #2 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Masculine, Protective**

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Short (+14)

52%

Long (+0)

7%

Ponytail (+8)

24%

Chonmage (+2)

7%

Long bangs (+6)

11%

Poll ended Oct 15, 2019 · 46 votes total

[Website Blog](#)

[Oct 25, 2019](#)

Have you read any of the blog posts over on [multiplechoicestudios.com](http://multiplechoicestudios.com)?

Never been to the site before!

Not usually.

I've read a few.



I've read a bunch! Make more of them!

87 votes total

[MC #2 Face Art](#)

[Oct 31, 2019](#)

A new month, a new face! That's right: in Book 5, players will be able to (optionally) select a face for their main character! Faces will be designed each month by the intermediate+ tiers via polls. This month's face was drawn by the illustrator of Book 4, Dana Sanguir ([website](#), [instagram](#))!

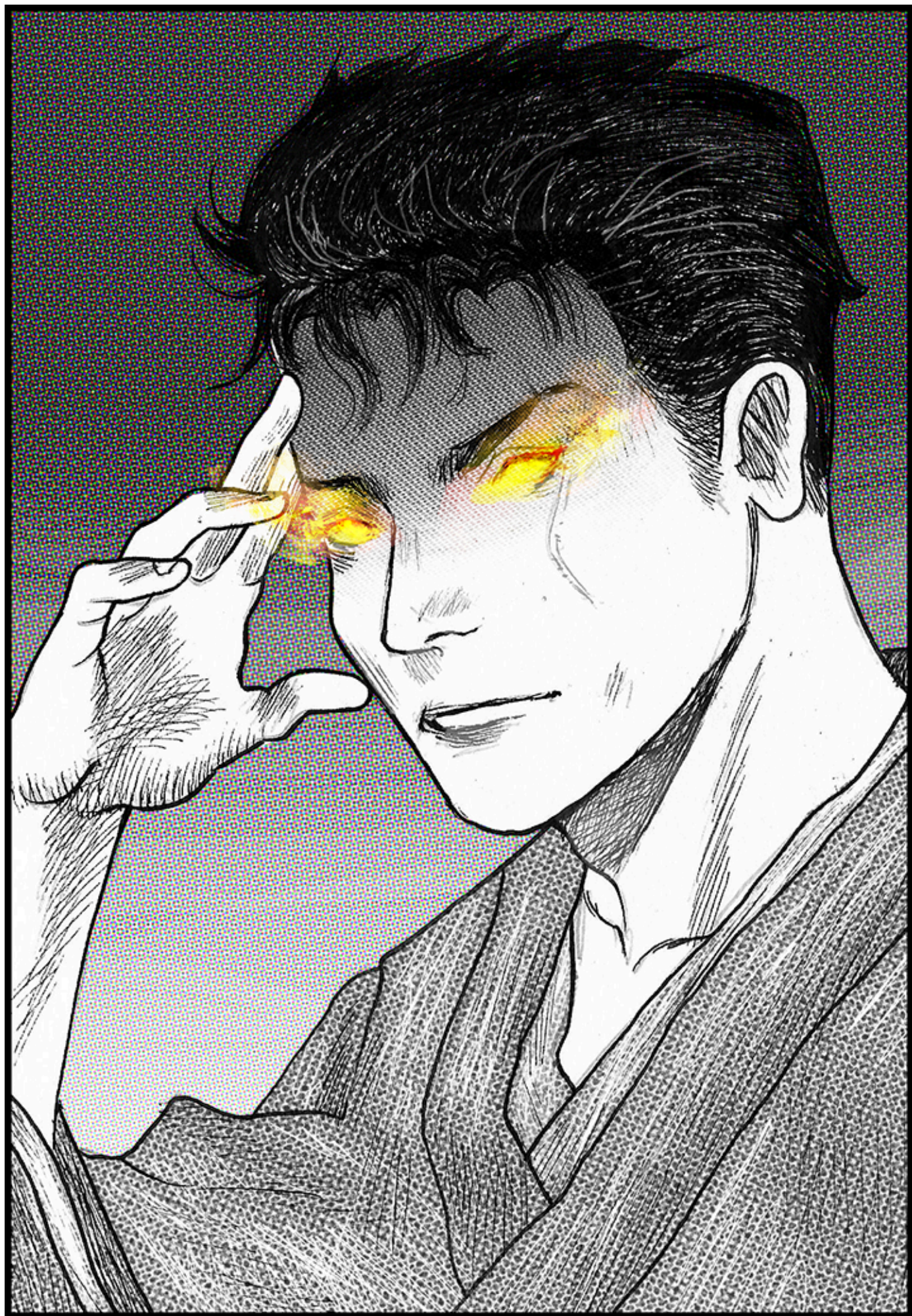
This month's build: **Masculine, Protective, Short hair**

**Portrait (Normal)**



Portrait (Jigoku)







[Nov 1, 2019](#)

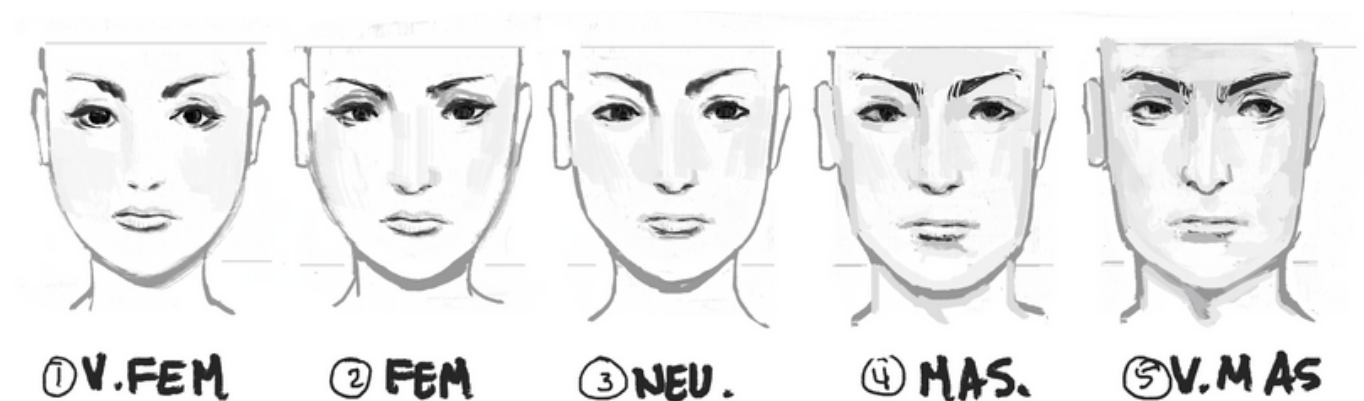
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

The first poll is masculinity-femininity, from the 1st-5th.

The second poll is favored stat (personality+expression), from 6th-10th.

The third poll is hair, from 11th-15th.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!



Very feminine (+11)

18%

Feminine (+4)

15%

Neutral (+27)

41%

Masculine (+0)

5%

Very masculine (+7)

21%

Poll ended Nov 5, 2019 · 39 votes total

[Getting Educated](#)

[Nov 5, 2019](#)

What best describes what you majored in (or plan to) in college/university?

I don't like student loans! (didn't go)

I'm not there yet! (too young)

Art

Biology

Business

Chemistry

Communications

Computer Science

Criminal Justice

Education

Engineering

English

Law

Marketing

Math

Medical

Psychology

Political Science

Something else!

106 votes total

[MC #3's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Nov 6, 2019](#)

The design for MC #3 continues! This poll focuses on the favored stat of the character, which will provide a personality and facial expression for the artist to work with.

Current Build: **Neutral**

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Impulsive (+7)

6%

Calculated (+8)

20%

Perverted (+23)

31%

Chivalrous (+7)

0%

Charming (+3)

3%

Stoic (+8)

17%

Drifter (+1)



0%

Protective (+0)

11%

Brutal (+7)

9%

Finesse (+1)

3%

Poll ended Nov 10, 2019 · 35 votes total

[Side Story #16: Toshie's Cruise](#)

[Nov 7, 2019](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>



Side Story 16: Toshie's Cruise



■■ To Jijinto ■■

Toshie gripped her head as it pounded. It was difficult enough to read about ship maintenance and naval warfare—doing so on a bumpy carriage ride while getting your ear talked off by a sociable shipwright was next to impossible.

“I speak on ‘alf of all my boys when I say Shibuya & Sons are mighty honored having you with us, Toshie-san. We can’t wait to show the Emperor’s top naval inspector what we’re up to! Truth be told, I was worried of losing our best customer after that arrow mishap at the castle. They ever figure out who done it? You know if I was a samurai, I’d—”

"That information is confidential," Toshie said, raising her hand to silence Shibuya for the hundredth time in their three days of travel out from the Capital. That 'arrow mishap' had been a half-hearted assassination attempt on Satsuma's life, a scheme intended to frame the Kondos of Yamato and force them out of the city.

And the schemer was nothing less than a demon: an actual, living monster.

### ■ ■ *Yamato, Days Earlier* ■ ■

"I believe you are suffering from what they call a hangover, Toshie-san," the Emperor said with a polite chuckle. "I trust you enjoyed your evening out with Captain Hanbei?"

Toshie grimaced upon hearing the name as she poured her master's morning tea. The tea ceremony was a moment to clear her thoughts and—more importantly—report to Satsuma all she had learned from the day before. It was usually her favorite time of the day.

Not this day, though.

"He insisted upon a tour of every izakaya in Yamato," Toshie groaned. "And we were accompanied by just about every member of the city watch—off-duty or otherwise. I will spare you the details of their jokes, but their stories...they only grew more outlandish as the night went on. One would think a guardsman in the safest city in Hyuga fought perilous battles on a daily basis!"

The Emperor braced his stomach as he let out a full and hearty laugh. They were rare to see, Toshie knew, but she would've appreciated it more had it not been at her own expense.

When Satsuma calmed down and sipped his green matcha tea, he thanked his companion before getting on to the much grimmer matter at hand. "A monster from my nightmares now walks in Hyuga. The Danzaemon...the men this demon ordered to be burned alive...I fear they will hardly be the last of the lives she takes. Her greed has no bounds nor regard for human life."

Toshie nodded. "She spoke as if she bore a serpent's tongue. Her face was unremarkable save for an unsightly wart. She had a servant with a snake tattooed across his chest, and she had wealth enough to burn expensive agarwood incense. I've already checked with all merchants who carry it and none recall selling it to her."

"You're forgetting one detail," Satsuma said after taking a long sip. He held out a dart—the one that had been fired at Toshie at the shrine just one day before. "You were nearly poisoned by her venom in your last encounter. Had you not been wearing the guardsman's vest, I could've lost you. That's a fear I do not wish to experience twice."

The Emperor had anticipated the ninja's thoughts—as he often did. Toshie hadn't just been bar-hopping last night: she had been plotting a course of action to not just discover the identity of the demon, but to put an end to her.

"Satsu-kun...even so, if but one of your enemies is out there, I must go after them. I cannot wait for the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens to cut me a path. Please, allow me this."

"You saw my sculpture at the shrine, did you not? Then you already know that I have seen the death of this demon. Yet you would still go...is it that you have lost faith in my dreams?" the Emperor asked, more out of curiosity than anger.

Toshie shook her head then looked down at her tea cup. Though its contents were hot, they were lukewarm compared to the fire brewing within the ninja. "It's not a matter of faith," she said, before letting her thoughts take over. *"Or maybe it is. Is it too much to wish that you'd have as much faith in me as you do your Sword?"*

A hand on Toshie's shoulder brought her head up with a jolt. Satsuma met her surprised expression with a warm one. "You have my permission to do as you wish, Toshie-san. If I may suggest, the shipwrights I met with earlier are returning to Jijinto today. Though I will miss our morning tea, I suspect you may do well to accompany them East."

The ninja's smile went wide. "Arigato, Satsuma-sama! I will handle this demon who haunts you to the best of my ability. I will make use of all my strengths to make your vision of the future a reality!"

"It is not your strengths that worry me, Toshie-san." The Emperor put down his tea cup and refilled it, this time with plain water instead. He stirred it with his fingers before flicking them dry. "I am more concerned about the weaknesses that you are reluctant to see."

## ■■ Jijinto ■■

*"My weaknesses...what are they, Satsu-kun?"*

That question had been on Toshie's mind all during the travel to Hyuga's biggest and busiest city, and remained on it even as she was escorted to Shibuya & Son's headquarters. The company of shipbuilders were stationed by the docks as one would expect, which was like a wooden coastline that stretched as far as the eye could see—especially on a foggy afternoon like this one.

"Nothing a sailor likes to see less than clouds on the water," Shibuya remarked. He spat into the ocean as if to insult it and motioned Toshie beside him. Once the ninja drew closer, the man whispered, "Truth be told, been talk of pirates prowling 'round these parts on days like these. Best be careful, Inspector!"

"I would be more concerned with fishermen not watching where they're going," Toshie remarked coldly, playing the part of the practical naval inspector to a tee. "When we arrive, I'd like some time to go over your records—your clientele in particular."

Shibuya laughed and gave Toshie a pat on the back that—had she not braced for it—would've sent her over the edge of the pier. "Clay-and-tell? They sure use fancy words over in Yamato! Far as papers go, all that work we leave to Tanjiro. The boy can't tie a sailor's knot to save his life, but he can count higher than anyone you ever seen. I'll take you to him!"

Toshie nodded but wasn't optimistic about anyone Shibuya recommended. She had suspected and confirmed during their travels together that the shipwright and his crew were illiterate and, to put it kindly, self-educated. *"How they manage to make seaworthy vessels is a mystery. One that not even I am interested in!"*

What wasn't a mystery was the building Shibuya & Sons operated in. Illiterate though he was, Shibuya could certainly spell his own name. He did so on just about every board on the deck leading up to a large warehouse with an open face towards the water, where a small fleet of ships could come in for repairs or out for their maiden voyages.

They were met by two broad-shouldered laborers who bowed well before Toshie and Shibuya were within range. It was obvious they knew they were coming; the boss had sent a messenger out ahead and had done so in secret—or so he believed. Shibuya would have to be far more subtle to get past Toshie's notice.

*"Either this is a trap or he's desperate on making a good impression,"* Toshie thought to herself. She wouldn't realize until later that it was both.

"Boss! I mean, Shibuya-sama!" a crewmember yelled out and bowed. He was at the head of a line of sailors, each standing straight and all of them visibly uncomfortable. "Everybody, bow to him and the Inspector—uh, I mean, his guest!"

They each did so, not in unison but one after the other, making the drunk ones even more obvious to spot. One of them—an older fellow—was so boozed that he managed to bow sideways instead of forward, and another hadn't even bothered to release his grip on a saké bottle. After them were a pair of gamblers holding cups that rattled with Chō-Han dice.

Shibuya was furious, but it wasn't until after one of the gamblers asked him if he wanted in on the next throw that the shipwright went off on them. "Quit actin' like the scum-eating sardines that you are and get back to work! We gotta customer here," Shibuya shouted, gesturing to Toshie, "and I want you working like she's the Emperor himself!"

Though Toshie didn't expect Imperial treatment, the words got the sons of Shibuya off their feet and into action. Though half of them were drunk and all of them reeked of alcohol, it was obvious that they knew their jobs and got back to them right away. It was interesting seeing them in action: carving oars, crafting sails and smithing anchors—but that wasn't why Toshie was there.

"Which one of them is Tanjiro?" the ninja asked, scrutinizing the crew. Toshie was a decent judge of character but an even better judge of capability, and none of the muscled sailors present seemed capable of the calculations required for nautical engineering. Even Toshie had trouble grasping the literature she had read on the ride East.

"Reckon he's in the den. Not too social-like, that one," Shibuya said with a sigh as he guided Toshie deeper into his headquarters. "Though all of them are my boys, Tanji's my flesh-and-blood. Worries me

more often than not, he does, but he'll be set straight once we get 'im hitched. Wife and I are arranging a marriage meeting for him with a geisha. Real pretty lass, er...Keiko, I think her name was."

"I don't have time for women, Fa—I mean, Shibuya," said a voice from within the den. "Especially if we're to fix the Tekkō's tendency to flood her cabins when going astern! I hope you managed to delay those troublesome auditors at the Capital; as it is, we—"

Shibuya let out a burst of laughter that was as awkward as it was forced. He put on a fake grin as he pulled himself and Toshie inside the very cramped quarters of Shibuya & Sons one and only engineer: Tanjiro.

He was a scrawny fellow who looked bookish or at least, he was surrounded by parchments, maps, scrolls and diagrams from all sides. He gulped as soon as he met eyes with Toshie, before dropping his gaze back down to his work.

"That's my boy, always the joker! Hahaha," Shibuya faked out a laugh before giving introductions.

"This here's Toshie-san, an Imperial inspector who insisted on coming back with us to see our progress. That's how much *interest* His Imperial Majesty has on the Tekkōsen! So you're gonna answer all her questions satisfactory-like, okay Tanji?"

Tanjiro was dumbfounded but only for a moment—after which he nodded, understanding the thinly-hidden stress behind his father's words. A contract with the Emperor's fleet for making warships would set Shibuya & Sons up for life. That said, the idea of working for his father in this cramped den for the next few decades was enough to make the young man gag.

He held back his distaste and gulped. "W-what is it I can help you with, Inspector Toshie?"

Toshie was about to ask for Shibuya to leave when the man excused himself. He didn't need an excuse but offered one anyway: he had a surprise in store for Toshie of which—the ninja was promised—she'd never forget. After his exit, the kunoichi was quick to slide the door closed behind him.

"Now then," Toshie said, "I wish to know of everyone this company has conducted business with in the past year. I trust you have the records on hand?"

Tanjiro nodded and looked through one drawer after another, mumbling to himself frantically as he tried to recall where the 'business stuff' was. Though the young man was uneasy, it was something else that was causing him to shake and stumble about.

"You haven't slept for some time," Toshie observed. "Is it customary for Shibuya to work his employees so hard?"

The young shipwright gave a slight laugh. "My father...if he doesn't see me out in the shipyard hauling barrels, then he assumes I'm lazing about back here! He doesn't understand just how much work it



takes to manage all the company's finances and ship designs. Honestly? I'm not sure which will sink us first!"

Toshie brought a hand to her chin and thought aloud. "You're being awfully candid to an Imperial inspector."

"Maybe I'm just tired of living a lie," Tanjiro whispered to himself as he let out a defeated sigh. More importantly, he found the pile of parchments with the previous year's orders. Toshie looked them over quickly but didn't see any names of particular interest.

"Dozens of fishing boats, a few transports from General Shatao in Shima, several merchant vessels to Yamato and Genfu," Toshie said, reading aloud. "This most recent order here is marked out. It's dated just a week before Shibuya's arrival to Yamato."

Though she'd never admit it, interrogations like these excited Toshie. *Especially* when the interrogatee began to squirm and resist. Tanjiro's body language spoke volumes even though his mouth clamped shut. His feet were pointed towards the door and his eyes were anywhere but on Toshie's face. He held his arms closed and coiled as if prepared to defend against a series of strikes.

Toshie wondered if it would come to that.

"D-deals fall through all the time," Tanjiro remarked, shrugging his shoulders and reorganizing his papers. "Meeting His Imperial Majesty took priority over anything else—my father has a one-track mind. And speaking of this meeting, is it true that there was some sort of attempt on the Emperor's life? I pray that is only a rumor!"

A bottle with a miniature ship inside it caught the ninja's attention. She picked it up to examine it closer, but really her attention was on Tanjiro's reaction. The reluctant shipwright seemed to value the display piece highly, grimacing as Toshie handled it with roughly.

"What's the phrase? Loose lips sink ships?" The ninja asked, being coy, while turning the bottle around and then dropping it—or at least, pretending too. She snatched it up right before Tanjiro looked ready to dive for it. "When Satsuma-sama arranged that meeting with Shibuya & Sons, it was expressly stated that it was to be confidential. Yet I have reason to believe it was leaked."

Tanjiro gulped and wiped the sweat from his forehead before falling back into his seat. "Those aren't the sort of leaks I expected a naval inspector to be looking for. As far as *that* goes...well, you've met my father, Inspector Toshie. He's a sailor at heart, and bragging and boasting is what they do best—after drinking, I suppose. But for all his faults, he's a shrewd businessman. Father likes to play potential customers against each other to drive up bids."

"And for the Tekkōsen? Who besides the Emperor wanted that ship?"

Tanjiro replied with a mumble. "The yakuza were interested in it. The Yamagata-gumi in particular."

Of all the factions in Hyuga—from disgruntled samurai to zealous warrior monks—Toshie never expected an organized crime syndicate to have need of warships. Merchant vessels and luxury liners, sure—but a galleon encased in an iron shell?

“T-the Yamagata would use it as a means of offering protection...for a fee,” Tanjiro added, more than a little nervous. “Pirates, you see, are an ever-present concern out here.”

*\*WHAM\**

Toshie pounded the shipwright’s desk with her fist, shaking the bottle with the miniature vessel and sending a stack of papers falling over. It wasn’t that she was concerned about the illegal affairs of the yakuza—but she would pretend to be so long as it offered her the leverage she needed.

“Extortion on the sea! Legally speaking, that would classify them as pirates, and abetting privateers goes against the Charters of the Celestial Sea, signed into law at the turn of the Golden Age! I don’t think you realize what a precarious situation your company is in!” Toshie yelled, feigning anger to play up her threat. “If His Imperial Majesty heard of this...I cannot imagine what action he would take!”

Tanjiro looked halfway between a scared cat and a beaten dog, which was right where Toshie wanted him. In interrogations, threats alone were useless—there had to be a means of escape. Toshie was about to offer one when Shibuya barged in.

“You two are certainly ‘aving a spirited conversation! Ah-haha, haha!” He laughed, patting Toshie on the back all the while. “But talk is cheap—and you didn’t travel ‘ere from Yamato for just that, right Inspector? You’re here to see the Tekkōsen! Well, we’re gonna do you one better than that: we’re gonna take her for a ride!”

Tanjiro objected to the idea before Toshie could, claiming that the ship wasn’t ready: measurements weren’t made and features weren’t fixed. All of that was ignored by Shibuya, who forcefully dragged the two of them out of the den and into the harbor where a vessel unlike any other awaited them.

“I see you’re in shock at ‘er beauty, aren’t you Inspector? Come on, get on aboard and we’ll sail her maiden voyage!”

Toshie realized her mouth was open. The ninja was shocked, true enough, though not out of amazement—though the floating fortress was certainly a spectacle, it was fear that stopped the kunoichi in her tracks.

The woman known as the Heartless Hound—the ruthless right hand of the Emperor—was forced to face one of her greatest weaknesses.

*“I’ve...never been on a boat before.”*

■■■■

Toshie grew nauseous the moment the crew weighed anchor and set sail; she looked back on the pier with a longful gaze. With her legs and the world around her unsteady, she braced the center mast and prayed this ordeal would end sooner rather than later.

“What’re you doin’ there, Inspector?” Shibuya shouted, with a voice that carried from stern to aft. “You look like you haven’t gotten your sea legs on yet!”

“I’m just...just checking the integrity of the mast,” Toshie replied. Much as she’d rather be on land, she had a role to play as a naval inspector for the Emperor. *“Although I’m here under a false pretense, I refuse to dishonor Satsu-kun. I can do this!”*

Bracing her courage, Toshie unbraced the wooden pole to stand beside Shibuya on the deck out front. Though one needed to specify *which* deck on the Tekkōsen, as it had three: a below deck, where the oarsmen did their rowing, a main deck where the archers lined up behind large walls plated in iron, and a top deck where the sails and navigational crew were.

“Fear of heights, huh? Can’t say I blame you—we’re the biggest and tallest ship in the water! Look at those fishing boats scatter off like minnows! Hahaha!”

“The height doesn’t concern me,” said Toshie, who was the best climber among the Imperial ninja. “But this fog does. It may be best to delay this voyage until it passes.”

“She’s right, Shibuya!” said Tanjiro, panting after running down one deck up to another. He was holding a measuring stick in one hand and a leveling tube in the other. “The weight distribution...she’s starboard-heavy! A right turn may well send us under!”

Shibuya waved him off. “Ignore the boy, Inspector. He’s the sort to worry—takes after his mother, he does! We’ll just be going on a quick tour ‘round the docks. Be back in time for lunch!” he said, with confidence only a captain could have. He then opened a hatch down to the oarsmen below. “How’s The Canary sound, boys? Drinks will be on me today!”

A cheer echoed throughout the hull as the rowing spurred the galleon forward. Ships unfortunate enough to be in the Tekkōsen’s way had to scramble to get out of it; fishermen had to cut their nets to save their boats while merchant vessels rang bells to alert others to the new sea monster made from wood and iron.

The floating fortress was like a castle built upon a foundation of tofu, Toshie decided, though she instantly regretted thinking of food while her head spun and stomach churned. They were out of the shallows now and the waves were larger, crashing against the hull in a nonsensical pattern that brought upon a renewed seasickness in the ninja.

“I believe I’ve...seen enough, Shibuya-san,” Toshie said while fighting back the urge to vomit. “Take us back to port.”

The captain and head of the company raised his hands and pleaded for a little more time. He gave a whistle and then looked past the stern as if hunting for shadows in the fog. A crewmember arrived to hand him a spyglass, though even with its aid he couldn't confirm his findings.

"Be happy to take you back, Inspector, but we been 'earing talk of pirates lurking around these parts. Wanted to do a little look-see...shame I can't see past this fog, though."

Toshie snatched the handheld telescope from him. She looked upwards to the crow's nest—a small platform high enough on the mast to be free of the fog. "I'll go up there myself and look. If I see nothing, you are to return this ship to its station. Do we have an—*erGh*—agreement?"

The seasick ninja retasted the morning's miso and began climbing up the mast even without the captain's consent. Toshie hoped being up higher would cure her nausea but even if it didn't, a moment alone on this crowded galley was reason enough to make the climb.

"I've...made a terrible mistake," Toshie admitted to herself after she made it to the crow's nest. Because it was so far from the ship's center of mass, rotational movement was at its peak—which meant Toshie was at her worst, staggering about like a drunk suffering from a massive hangover.

"Ho up there!" yelled Shibuya from below. "You're quite the climber, Inspector! Let us know if you spot anything out of the ordinary, will ya?"

Toshie nodded but not out of approval; her head bobbed outside her control, spinning with every teeter and sway of the ship on the ocean. She both cursed and prayed that the spirits would see her through this, that she would find and destroy the demon of Satsuma's dreams, and most of all: that the contents of her stomach would stay where they were.

"I'd look starboard for signs of trouble, Inspector!" shouted Shibuya once more. Toshie struggled to recall which side that meant—it wasn't an easy task when you were choking on stomach acids.

*"Why are we wasting our time? To find pirates this close to shore is exceedingly unlikely,"* Toshie grumbled to herself as she peered into the captain's spyglass. *"Not even in the most chaotic years of the Golden Era were they so..."*

The ninja lost her train of thought as a shadow drew from behind the fog. She first assumed it was a scuttled ship, left abandoned to sink on its own accord. But this one was sailing towards the Tekkōsen. Toshie didn't know if its captain was blind or foolish, but after seeing the black flags spout up from the mist she knew it was trouble.

*"Pirates...really? And that emblem on the sails—could they really be the Sumitomo?"* Toshie questioned her own eyes before reporting to the captain down below. "Pirate vessel incoming, starboard side!"

Shibuya let out a gasp before ringing a bell and shouting to the crew. "All hands on deck! Looks like we're gonna see how powerful the Tekkōsen is in real combat!"

To Toshie's amazement, every crewmember—save for Tanjiro, perhaps—sprang to their posts without so much as a moment's hesitation. Sailors not required on oars took up bows and readied arrows behind the iron walls on the main deck. *"Expected of experienced soldiers, sure,"* Toshie thought, *"but these are mere boatbuilders! How is it they appear so well-practiced and at ease?!"*

The ninja scaled down the mast with the utmost haste, trying to make sense of the unsensible. Tanjiro, Shibuya's son and sole voice of reason among the crewmembers, voiced his unease.

"N-now isn't the time for this, Father! There's too much that could go wrong...the iron plating is already throwing us unbalanced as it is! We haven't tested how the Tekkō will handle rapid maneuvers!"

It struck Toshie as odd that the existence of pirates seemed of secondary concern to Tanjiro. She highly doubted the young man had ever been under attack on the ocean before, yet his greatest worries were much more mundane.

"Urusai, Tanji! Get the Inspector and take her to the main deck with the archers. Let's see if these Sumitomo bastards can put a dent in us! Hahaha!"

Toshie didn't recall mentioning they were Sumitomo pirates. It was quite an assumption to make considering the Sumitomo were stationed South in the waters around Genfu, not in Jijinto. It was also worth noting that Shibuya seemed to know the pirates would approach them from their starboard side.

"Do you take me for a fool?" Toshie asked, stopping midway down the stairs inside the armored shell. She took Tanjiro's hand—which had been leading her down—and twisted it, pulling the shipbuilder close. "I don't appreciate being lied to, Tanjiro."

"S-so you saw through the theatrics...I knew this was a dumb idea. But Father is determined to show off the ship in actual battle. These...pirates, they'll shoot a few arrows and then leave. Hopefully," Tanjiro winced, "that'll be the end of it!"

A few metallic thuds against the hull signalled that the pirate vessel was within range. The armored carapace of the Tekkōsen was an engineering marvel all its own: there were slits in the shell where archers could see the enemy, and beside them were moveable sections—shields, essentially—that crew members would close and open depending on whether the archer was ready to shoot or was busy reloading.

The crew's lack of both military discipline and soberness became apparent, however, as the men bumbled about with arrows, bows and shields falling every which way. It did them no favors that many had never shot a bow before, Toshie determined, as she stopped one crewmember from firing an arrow into his own chest.

*"I'm surrounded by idiots, spirits help me!"*

A wooden creak broke out from the lower deck. Though ships were known to screech and groan, after this particular sound it seemed as if the floor was tilted towards the right. The only engineer on the ship

confirmed Toshie's observation.

"There's too much weight on the starboard! We need to move those shields portside—now!" Tanjiro yelled, though the crew only offered him blank glances. They took orders from Shibuya and not a mumbling kid.

The man himself came down the stairs with a wicked grin. His face was flushed, his eyes wide and unblinking. Toshie knew the look: it was that of a man enraptured in the heat of battle. The shipbuilder had never experienced a naval combat before, and even a mock fight such as this was enough to send a foreign thrill down his spine.

It was the sort of thrill that made men do foolish things.

"The Tekkōsen's performing even better than I expected! Them pirate bastards can't lay so much as a dent on us! Hahaha!" Shibuya laughed, then took a swig out of a saké bottle. He tossed it overboard after he was done. "Say it's time we show the Inspector our secret weapon, boys! Take a look at the future of naval warfare!"

Toshie's attention was directed towards a large, lengthy object draped in a white sheet at the center of the deck. The ninja had originally assumed it was a spare mast, and to her credit she wasn't far off the mark. It was three maple logs tied together, though with something special at the front tip.

It was an iron weight: an anchor that had been repurposed and recasted, designed with the likeness of a shark. A bullheaded shark, to be precise.

"That there's the Shibuya spirit animal, all eleven 'undred pounds of her! Slide her up to the stern, boys—we'll see how this pirate ship handles a battering ram! Full speed ahead!"

The battering ram was on wheels, but even then it took every oarsman grunting, sweating and cursing to move it forward. As it moved away from the center, the Tekkōsen began to dip forward. This was a problem that didn't require extensive education to understand: the ram rolled forth on its own, picking up speed and dragging the crew with it.

"Hold her! Hold her steady, damn it!" Shibuya shouted. A man screamed in reply—his foot had gotten caught under one of the wheels. Though he was likely to be limping for the rest of his life, his foot had managed to halt the ram just in time. The other crew members quickly tied it down with ropes to the stern. The Tekkōsen now had a spear from out of its nose.

"Father, please! This is madness!" Tanjiro cried out but his voice was drowned by the splash of crashing waves. The Tekkōsen wobbled, creaked and spun at every turn of the ocean; her crew tasted saltwater as it sprayed across the bow. Its captain shouted orders for men to return to their oars.

"Shibuya! She's taking on water! Half the lower deck is flooded!" a sailor cried.



Shibuya grabbed the man by the collar and pushed him below deck with a splash. If he kept this up he'd be in for a mutiny. "Turn us starboard, sailor! We're going to chase this pirate outta the water if it's the last thing we—"

The captain quieted once Toshie's arm wrapped around his neck. He was staring at a kunai—a ninja's throwing dagger—held in front of his face by none other than the Heartless Hound. Toshie held Shibuya hostage, daring any of his crewmembers to make a move.

"H-have you lost it, Inspector?! Let him go!" Tanjiro pleaded.

"Crewmen!" Toshie barked, her eyes livid. "As a naval inspector for His Imperial Majesty, I am commandeering this vessel. I am invoking the law as described in Article Five, Section A of the Celestial Sea Charters. You are to return the Tekkōsen to the shore immediately!"

Though there was no Article Five, there didn't need to be: the composed ninja had become the Heartless Hound, instilling fear and discipline in even the most drunken sailor. And even if she hadn't, the raising water level in the lower deck made for a compelling argument.

Shibuya's men weren't pleased about it but took Toshie's orders all the same. All save for an older man who scrutinized the ninja's face and didn't like what he saw. He was, according to his boast, the only one among them who was a samurai by blood. He was a Southerner too, judging from his accent.

"Aye...these eyes 'ave seen enough of dirtskins to spot 'em in the dark! You're an awfully pale one—but I knows what you are! Fought enough of you bear-worshippin' bastards back in the war! Ain't gonna let you gut my boss!"

The retired samurai-turned-boatbuilder pulled out a knife more akin to a meat cleaver. He swung the weapon haphazardly, forcing Toshie to step back and drag Shibuya along with him. It was more for the captain's safety than his own; Shibuya was a much larger target and the cleaver didn't discriminate.

"Put that thing down, Noda-san! The Inspector means well...and she certainly isn't a Kondo!" Shibuya cried. This was the first hostage situation Toshie had seen where the hostage pleaded the would-be rescuer to stop.

Toshie backed up again until she was up against the center mast. Realizing the danger of fighting atop a wobbly ship, the ninja conceded and released Shibuya. The captain pushed off and hurried away, though in his wake the crazed veteran of the Kondo War charged ahead!

\*chop\*

The cleaver wedged into the mast, cutting rope and wood instead skin and tendons. The ninja had managed to duck and roll to safety, nearly going overboard while doing so. Bracing the railing of the upper deck, Toshie turned around to see her attacker.

But what she saw was many times worse: the rope Noda had cut flew upwards as the main mast of the Tekkōsen flew open. The crew had been using only oars to power the floating fortress so that it was easier to control; now the heavenly power of wind was involved.

And at that moment, the heavens blew.

“She’s keeling over!” Shibuya cried. The gust pushed the ship straight ahead—which meant it went straight down, with the weight of the battering ram sending them under. The largest ship Hyugan waters had ever seen flipped on its head, and its crew was now under it!

It was an expensive tombstone for a watery grave. Especially for the kunoichi who couldn’t swim.

■■■■

The weight of the Tekkōsen against the ocean’s surface as it flopped and capsized nearly crushed those on the top deck, including Toshie. Were it not for the mast dragging across the ocean’s floor, they would’ve been killed on impact.

As it was, Toshie was only blacked out and unconscious inside the crashed fortress. Her body was pushed, prodded and pulled around by the debris of the collapsing ship. She was sucked inside it, up into its lower decks that were now at the top of the capsized vessel. At least there was air there—all of which flooded into the ninja’s lungs.

“AAAAAH! Aaahhh, ahhh!” Toshie gasped for breath, panting heavily. It was dark and her head pounded and the rest of her was sore. Blood was in the water—no doubt her own, as her lips and limbs were cut by broken planks of wood.

The kunoichi treaded water while frantically feeling around the hull for a means of escape. She saw none because she saw nothing: it was pitch black inside this watery grave, the screams of men echoing around her.

*“Am I dead? What sort of hell have I ended up in?!”*

Toshie was sure of nothing save that the water level was raising. She reached a hand up and felt the ceiling above her. By determining how close it was to her head, she’d be able to calculate how many seconds she had left to live.

“Kuso! What a dismal fate!” Toshie yelled, before swallowing and gagging out a mouthful of saltwater. “Satsu-kun, please! I’m not supposed to die here! My father...my people...our future—there’s still so much work yet to be done!”

The ninja’s throat throbbed painfully from gurgling bloody saltwater and shouting at the top of her lungs. She took in a deep breath to regain her composure; being overwhelmed with fear would assuredly kill her. But the reality was that she couldn’t swim and that the act of keeping her head above water was becoming a more and more difficult task.

But that wouldn't stop her from trying to escape. After one large breath and then another, Toshie took a third before holding it and dunking her head down. She opened her eyes and only got a sting for her troubles, confirming what she had already known: there was no way to see where she was going. She paddled using her hands and feet, but when that became counterproductive she opted to crawl down (or up) the hull instead.

That worked until she bumped her head into a beam. Her mouth opened and consequently flooded; she had to return back up for air.

"Aaah, curse it all!" Toshie said to herself. She raised a hand to see how much time she had left, and could only get it half as high as before. "I can't escape this deathtrap. Is this divine punishment for trying to take up the role of the Sword?!"

The ninja closed her eyes and prayed. She listened not just for the spirits but the sailors screaming in other areas of the ship. Except there weren't any, not anymore. "*They must've already drowned,*" Toshie thought, her dire situation taking a turn for the hopeless.

It was at that moment of hopelessness, when her head thumped against the ceiling and the air ran thin, that the proud ninja—the Heartless Hound—became truly humbled. She cried for the first time since her mother passed so many years ago. She pleaded for help, fresh saltwater coming down her eyes as she begged for mercy.

And at that moment, something caught onto her leg and dragged her under.

■■■■

"Yes, vomiting is quite what you'd expect in the case of near drowning."

That voice belonged to Doctor Fujii of Fish-Eye Hospital. He wore a pair of spectacles that made his eyes look comically large, though Toshie was in no shape for humor. The ninja was bent over and peering into a bucket, tossing up fluids which belonged both to herself and the ocean.

"I'm just so happy you're alive, Inspector!" said Shibuya, who was on his knees clenching his hands together. "If there's anything, *anything* my boys and I can do to make this up to you, we'll do it in a heartbeat! Ain't that right?"

Once Toshie was finished retching, she gave a look over the crew crowded into the clinic's emergency room. They all had their heads down as they muttered their apologies, some outright pleading for their lives. They knew the danger they and their company was in after that shipwreck.

"It is remarkable," Toshie said, wiping her mouth with a cloth, "that no one died. It certainly would've been nice to know about the escape hatches earlier."

Shibuya placed his head down against the clinic's floor as he continued to apologize. Toshie had been trapped under the ship for over an hour—though it had felt like seconds at the time. The screams the

ninja had heard weren't cries from drowning sailors but from rescue parties, risking their lives for hers.

The one who had found her happened to be none other than Noda, the man who had swung a kitchen knife at her earlier. When Toshie asked why he saved her, the old veteran only mumbled about his upcoming execution at the hands of the Emperor.

"I'll be needin' a katana for my seppuku," he said, referring to the suicide ritual. "Always figured I'd die with 'ah sword in my hands. Never reckoned it'd be like this, though..."

True enough, attacking an officer employed in His Imperial Majesty's navy and capsizing a vessel was a seppuku-worthy offense. For a samurai. But this old sailor was no samurai any more than Toshie was a naval inspector. Noda had dived under the wreckage of a floating fortress to save her. And that was worth something.

"Have mercy on Noda-san, please," said Tanjiro, who now kneeled next to his father. "I'm the one who...who engineered the Tekkōsen. She shouldn't have sailed—it was my fault she sunk."

"No, Tanji, you fool!" Shibuya said, shaking his son. "You tried to stop us, but I refused to listen. Inspector, please, I am...I was the captain. I assume full 'sponsibility on account of my crew. When you...when you report this to the Emperor, please spare 'em all you can!"

The crew members then took turns shifting the blame onto themselves, until it seemed as if the Imperial executioner was going to have his work cut out for him. It was a heartwarming moment, even if Toshie was shivering from a newly-acquired cold.

The kunoichi raised a hand to silence them. "Before I get to that, I want to know about the yakuza who were interested in the Tekkōsen. Who leads them?"

Shibuya choked down a breath, relieved for the sudden change in subject. "Lord Yamagata runs them, well—he's their boss, anyways. The one interested in a fleet 'o warships was his wife. Rather, wife-to-be. Not much of a looker, truth be told, but rumor 'round town is that she's loaded with ryō!"

"Does she have a wart on her face?" Toshie asked and Shibuya nodded. "Her name?"

"Shi...er..oyama? Shiroyama, that's it."

Toshie then turned towards the shipwrights, many of which were too fearful to glance up from their sandals. They hung their heads in shame, awaiting for the Imperial inspector's verdict. Their appearance of weakness made her recall Satsuma's parting words.

*"It is not your strengths that worry me, Toshie-san. I am more concerned about the weaknesses that you are reluctant to see."*

The weaknesses were threefold, Toshie realized, the first two of them obvious: her unfamiliarity with ships and her inability to swim. Those would be remedied as soon as she returned to the Capital. But

the last she had only come to terms with in the moment before her apparent death at sea.

*"I need others. If I'm to survive the trials ahead...if I'm to serve Satsu-kun and the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens, I have to accept the help of others."*

Toshie was so swept up in her own thoughts that she didn't notice the poignant silence that filled the air. The crew and employees of Shibuya & Sons fearfully awaited their fate, uncertain of both their lives and livelihoods.

It was time to cast aside the fear.

"As for what happened out at sea," the ninja said, pausing as the men drew in a collective breath, "I will look over this mishap—on one condition."

Shibuya pounced up from the floor as if a hundred hornets had needled his behind. "Yes! Anything! Anything at all, Inspector!"

Toshie brought a hand to her chin, her eyes piercingly cold and calculating. She had just learned to rely on others, and was determined to put the new lesson into practice.

"Set up a meeting with Shiroyama."

#### [Side Story #16: Toshio's Cruise](#)

[Nov 7, 2019](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>



#### Side Story 16: Toshio's Cruise



■■ To Jijinto ■■

Toshio gripped his head as it pounded. It was difficult enough to read about ship maintenance and naval warfare—doing so on a bumpy carriage ride while getting your ear talked off by a sociable shipwright was next to impossible.

"I speak on 'alf of all my boys when I say Shibuya & Sons are mighty honored having you with us, Toshio-san. We can't wait to show the Emperor's top naval inspector what we're up to! Truth be told, I was worried of losing our best customer after that arrow mishap at the castle. They ever figure out who done it? You know if I was a samurai, I'd—"

"That information is confidential," Toshio said, raising his hand to silence Shibuya for the hundredth time in their three days of travel out from the Capital. That 'arrow mishap' had been a half-hearted assassination attempt on Satsuma's life, a scheme intended to frame the Kondos of Yamato and force them out of the city.

And the schemer was nothing less than a demon: an actual, living monster.

### ■ ■ *Yamato, Days Earlier* ■ ■

"I believe you are suffering from what they call a hangover, Toshio-san," the Emperor said with a polite chuckle. "I trust you enjoyed your evening out with Captain Hanbei?"

Toshio grimaced upon hearing the name as he poured his master's morning tea. The tea ceremony was a moment to clear his thoughts and—more importantly—report to Satsuma all he had learned from the day before. It was usually his favorite time of the day.

Not this day, though.

"He insisted upon a tour of every izakaya in Yamato," Toshio groaned. "And we were accompanied by just about every member of the city watch—off-duty or otherwise. I will spare you the details of their jokes, but their stories...they only grew more outlandish as the night went on. One would think a guardsman in the safest city in Hyuga fought perilous battles on a daily basis!"

The Emperor braced his stomach as he let out a full and hearty laugh. They were rare to see, Toshio knew, but he would've appreciated it more had it not been at his own expense.

When Satsuma calmed down and sipped his green matcha tea, he thanked his companion before getting on to the much grimmer matter at hand. "A monster from my nightmares now walks in Hyuga. The Danzaemon...the men this demon ordered to be burned alive...I fear they will hardly be the last of the lives she takes. Her greed has no bounds nor regard for human life."

Toshio nodded. "She spoke as if she bore a serpent's tongue. Her face was unremarkable save for an unsightly wart. She had a servant with a snake tattooed across his chest, and she had wealth enough to burn expensive agarwood incense. I've already checked with all merchants who carry it and none recall selling it to her."

"You're forgetting one detail," Satsuma said after taking a long sip. He held out a dart—the one that had been fired at Toshio at the shrine just one day before. "You were nearly poisoned by her venom in your last encounter. Had you not been wearing the guardsman's vest, I could've lost you. That's a fear I do not wish to experience twice."



The Emperor had anticipated the ninja's thoughts—as he often did. Toshio hadn't just been bar-hopping last night: he had been plotting a course of action to not just discover the identity of the demon, but to put an end to her.

"Satsu-kun...even so, if but one of your enemies is out there, I must go after them. I cannot wait for the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens to cut me a path. Please, allow me this."

"You saw my sculpture at the shrine, did you not? Then you already know that I have seen the death of this demon. Yet you would still go...is it that you have lost faith in my dreams?" the Emperor asked, more out of curiosity than anger.

Toshio shook his head then looked down at his tea cup. Though its contents were hot, they were lukewarm compared to the fire brewing within the ninja. "It's not a matter of faith," he said, before letting his thoughts take over. *"Or maybe it is. Is it too much to wish that you'd have as much faith in me as you do your Sword?"*

A hand on Toshio's shoulder brought his head up with a jolt. Satsuma met his surprised expression with a warm one. "You have my permission to do as you wish, Toshio-san. If I may suggest, the shipwrights I met with earlier are returning to Jijinto today. Though I will miss our morning tea, I suspect you may do well to accompany them East."

The ninja's smile went wide. "Arigato, Satsuma-sama! I will handle this demon who haunts you to the best of my ability. I will make use of all my strengths to make your vision of the future a reality!"

"It is not your strengths that worry me, Toshio-san." The Emperor put down his tea cup and refilled it, this time with plain water instead. He stirred it with his fingers before flicking them dry. "I am more concerned about the weaknesses that you are reluctant to see."

## ■■ Jijinto ■■

*"My weaknesses...what are they, Satsu-kun?"*

That question had been on Toshio's mind all during the travel to Hyuga's biggest and busiest city, and remained on it even as he was escorted to Shibuya & Son's headquarters. The company of shipbuilders were stationed by the docks as one would expect, which was like a wooden coastline that stretched as far as the eye could see—especially on a foggy afternoon like this one.

"Nothing a sailor likes to see less than clouds on the water," Shibuya remarked. He spat into the ocean as if to insult it and motioned Toshio beside him. Once the ninja drew closer, the man whispered, "Truth be told, been talk of pirates prowling 'round these parts on days like these. Best be careful, Inspector!"

"I would be more concerned with fishermen not watching where they're going," Toshio remarked coldly, playing the part of the practical naval inspector to a tee. "When we arrive, I'd like some time to go over your records—your clientele in particular."

Shibuya laughed and gave Toshio a pat on the back that—had he not braced for it—would've sent him over the edge of the pier. "Clay-and-tell? They sure use fancy words over in Yamato! Far as papers go, all that work we leave to Tanjiro. The boy can't tie a sailor's knot to save his life, but he can count higher than anyone you ever seen. I'll take you to him!"

Toshio nodded but wasn't optimistic about anyone Shibuya recommended. He had suspected and confirmed during their travels together that the shipwright and his crew were illiterate and, to put it kindly, self-educated. *"How they manage to make seaworthy vessels is a mystery. One that not even I am interested in!"*

What wasn't a mystery was the building Shibuya & Sons operated in. Illiterate though he was, Shibuya could certainly spell his own name. He did so on just about every board on the deck leading up to a large warehouse with an open face towards the water, where a small fleet of ships could come in for repairs or out for their maiden voyages.

They were met by two broad-shouldered laborers who bowed well before Toshio and Shibuya were within range. It was obvious they knew they were coming; the boss had sent a messenger out ahead and had done so in secret—or so he believed. Shibuya would have to be far more subtle to get past Toshio's notice.

*"Either this is a trap or he's desperate on making a good impression,"* Toshio thought to himself. He wouldn't realize until later that it was both.

"Boss! I mean, Shibuya-sama!" a crewmember yelled out and bowed. He was at the head of a line of sailors, each standing straight and all of them visibly uncomfortable. "Everybody, bow to him and the Inspector—uh, I mean, his guest!"

They each did so, not in unison but one after the other, making the drunk ones even more obvious to spot. One of them—an older fellow—was so boozed that he managed to bow sideways instead of forward, and another hadn't even bothered to release his grip on a saké bottle. After them were a pair of gamblers holding cups that rattled with Chō-Han dice.

Shibuya was furious, but it wasn't until after one of the gamblers asked him if he wanted in on the next throw that the shipwright went off on them. "Quit actin' like the scum-eating sardines that you are and get back to work! We gotta customer here," Shibuya shouted, gesturing to Toshio, "and I want you working like he's the Emperor himself!"

Though Toshio didn't expect Imperial treatment, the words got the sons of Shibuya off their feet and into action. Though half of them were drunk and all of them reeked of alcohol, it was obvious that they knew their jobs and got back to them right away. It was interesting seeing them in action: carving oars, crafting sails and smithing anchors—but that wasn't why Toshio was there.

"Which one of them is Tanjiro?" the ninja asked, scrutinizing the crew. Toshio was a decent judge of character but an even better judge of capability, and none of the muscled sailors present seemed

capable of the calculations required for nautical engineering. Even Toshio had trouble grasping the literature he had read on the ride East.

“Reckon he’s in the den. Not too social-like, that one,” Shibuya said with a sigh as he guided Toshio deeper into his headquarters. “Though all of them are my boys, Tanji’s my flesh-and-blood. Worries me more often than not, he does, but he’ll be set straight once we get ‘im hitched. Wife and I are arranging a marriage meeting for him with a geisha. Real pretty lass, er...Keiko, I think her name was.”

“I don’t have time for women, Fa—I mean, Shibuya,” said a voice from within the den. “Especially if we’re to fix the Tekkō’s tendency to flood her cabins when going astern! I hope you managed to delay those troublesome auditors at the Capital; as it is, we—”

Shibuya let out a burst of laughter that was as awkward as it was forced. He put on a fake grin as he pulled himself and Toshio inside the very cramped quarters of Shibuya & Sons one and only engineer: Tanjiro.

He was a scrawny fellow who looked bookish or at least, he was surrounded by parchments, maps, scrolls and diagrams from all sides. He gulped as soon as he met eyes with Toshio, before dropping his gaze back down to his work.

“That’s my boy, always the joker! Hahaha,” Shibuya faked out a laugh before giving introductions.

“This here’s Toshio-san, an Imperial inspector who insisted on coming back with us to see our progress. That’s how much *interest* His Imperial Majesty has on the Tekkōsen! So you’re gonna answer all his questions satisfactory-like, okay Tanji?”

Tanjiro was dumbfounded but only for a moment—after which he nodded, understanding the thinly-hidden stress behind his father’s words. A contract with the Emperor’s fleet for making warships would set Shibuya & Sons up for life. That said, the idea of working for his father in this cramped den for the next few decades was enough to make the young man gag.

He held back his distaste and gulped. “W-what is it I can help you with, Inspector Toshio?”

Toshio was about to ask for Shibuya to leave when the man excused himself. He didn’t need an excuse but offered one anyway: he had a surprise in store for Toshio of which—the ninja was promised—he’d never forget. After his exit, the shinobi was quick to slide the door closed behind him.

“Now then,” Toshio said, “I wish to know of everyone this company has conducted business with in the past year. I trust you have the records on hand?”

Tanjiro nodded and looked through one drawer after another, mumbling to himself frantically as he tried to recall where the ‘business stuff’ was. Though the young man was uneasy, it was something else that was causing him to shake and stumble about.

"You haven't slept for some time," Toshio observed. "Is it customary for Shibuya to work his employees so hard?"

The young shipwright gave a slight laugh. "My father...if he doesn't see me out in the shipyard hauling barrels, then he assumes I'm lazing about back here! He doesn't understand just how much work it takes to manage all the company's finances and ship designs. Honestly? I'm not sure which will sink us first!"

Toshio brought a hand to his chin and thought aloud. "You're being awfully candid to an Imperial inspector."

"Maybe I'm just tired of living a lie," Tanjiro whispered to himself as he let out a defeated sigh. More importantly, he found the pile of parchments with the previous year's orders. Toshio looked them over quickly but didn't see any names of particular interest.

"Dozens of fishing boats, a few transports from General Shatao in Shima, several merchant vessels to Yamato and Genfu," Toshio said, reading aloud. "This most recent order here is marked out. It's dated just a week before Shibuya's arrival to Yamato."

Though he'd never admit it, interrogations like these excited Toshio. *Especially* when the interrogatee began to squirm and resist. Tanjiro's body language spoke volumes even though his mouth clamped shut. His feet were pointed towards the door and his eyes were anywhere but on Toshio's face. He held his arms closed and coiled as if prepared to defend against a series of strikes.

Toshio wondered if it would come to that.

"D-deals fall through all the time," Tanjiro remarked, shrugging his shoulders and reorganizing his papers. "Meeting His Imperial Majesty took priority over anything else—my father has a one-track mind. And speaking of this meeting, is it true that there was some sort of attempt on the Emperor's life? I pray that is only a rumor!"

A bottle with a miniature ship inside it caught the ninja's attention. He picked it up to examine it closer, but really his attention was on Tanjiro's reaction. The reluctant shipwright seemed to value the display piece highly, grimacing as Toshio handled it with roughly.

"What's the phrase? Loose lips sink ships?" The ninja asked, being coy, while turning the bottle around and then dropping it—or at least, pretending too. He snatched it up right before Tanjiro looked ready to dive for it. "When Satsuma-sama arranged that meeting with Shibuya & Sons, it was expressly stated that it was to be confidential. Yet I have reason to believe it was leaked."

Tanjiro gulped and wiped the sweat from his forehead before falling back into his seat. "Those aren't the sort of leaks I expected a naval inspector to be looking for. As far as *that* goes...well, you've met my father, Inspector Toshio. He's a sailor at heart, and bragging and boasting is what they do best—after drinking, I suppose. But for all his faults, he's a shrewd businessman. Father likes to play potential customers against each other to drive up bids."

“And for the Tekkōsen? Who besides the Emperor wanted that ship?”

Tanjiro replied with a mumble. “The yakuza were interested in it. The Yamagata-gumi in particular.”

Of all the factions in Hyuga—from disgruntled samurai to zealous warrior monks—Toshio never expected an organized crime syndicate to have need of warships. Merchant vessels and luxury liners, sure—but a galleon encased in an iron shell?

“T-the Yamagata would use it as a means of offering protection...for a fee,” Tanjiro added, more than a little nervous. “Pirates, you see, are an ever-present concern out here.”

*\*WHAM\**

Toshio pounded the shipwright’s desk with his fist, shaking the bottle with the miniature vessel and sending a stack of papers falling over. It wasn’t that he was concerned about the illegal affairs of the yakuza—but he would pretend to be so long as it offered him the leverage he needed.

“Extortion on the sea! Legally speaking, that would classify them as pirates, and abetting privateers goes against the Charters of the Celestial Sea, signed into law at the turn of the Golden Age! I don’t think you realize what a precarious situation your company is in!” Toshio yelled, feigning anger to play up his threat. “If His Imperial Majesty heard of this...I cannot imagine what action he would take!”

Tanjiro looked halfway between a scared cat and a beaten dog, which was right where Toshio wanted him. In interrogations, threats alone were useless—there had to be a means of escape. Toshio was about to offer one when Shibuya barged in.

“You two are certainly ‘aving a spirited conversation! Ah-haha, haha!” He laughed, patting Toshio on the back all the while. “But talk is cheap—and you didn’t travel ‘ere from Yamato for just that, right Inspector? You’re here to see the Tekkōsen! Well, we’re gonna do you one better than that: we’re gonna take her for a ride!”

Tanjiro objected to the idea before Toshio could, claiming that the ship wasn’t ready: measurements weren’t made and features weren’t fixed. All of that was ignored by Shibuya, who forcefully dragged the two of them out of the den and into the harbor where a vessel unlike any other awaited them.

“I see you’re in shock at ‘er beauty, aren’t you Inspector? Come on, get on aboard and we’ll sail her maiden voyage!”

Toshio realized his mouth was open. The ninja was shocked, true enough, though not out of amazement—though the floating fortress was certainly a spectacle, it was fear that stopped the shinobi in his tracks.

The man known as the Heartless Hound—the ruthless right hand of the Emperor—was forced to face one of his greatest weaknesses.

*"I've...never been on a boat before."*

■■■■

Toshio grew nauseous the moment the crew weighed anchor and set sail; he looked back on the pier with a longful gaze. With his legs and the world around him unsteady, he braced the center mast and prayed this ordeal would end sooner rather than later.

"What're you doin' there, Inspector?" Shibuya shouted, with a voice that carried from stern to aft. "You look like you haven't gotten your sea legs on yet!"

"I'm just...just checking the integrity of the mast," Toshio replied. Much as he'd rather be on land, he had a role to play as a naval inspector for the Emperor. *"Although I'm here under a false pretense, I refuse to dishonor Satsu-kun. I can do this!"*

Bracing his courage, Toshio unbraced the wooden pole to stand beside Shibuya on the deck out front. Though one needed to specify *which* deck on the Tekkōsen, as it had three: a below deck, where the oarsmen did their rowing, a main deck where the archers lined up behind large walls plated in iron, and a top deck where the sails and navigational crew were.

"Fear of heights, huh? Can't say I blame you—we're the biggest and tallest ship in the water! Look at those fishing boats scatter off like minnows! Hahaha!"

"The height doesn't concern me," said Toshio, who was the best climber among the Imperial ninja. "But this fog does. It may be best to delay this voyage until it passes."

"He's right, Shibuya!" said Tanjiro, panting after running down one deck up to another. He was holding a measuring stick in one hand and a leveling tube in the other. "The weight distribution...she's starboard-heavy! A right turn may well send us under!"

Shibuya waved him off. "Ignore the boy, Inspector. He's the sort to worry—takes after his mother, he does! We'll just be going on a quick tour 'round the docks. Be back in time for lunch!" he said, with confidence only a captain could have. He then opened a hatch down to the oarsmen below. "How's The Canary sound, boys? Drinks will be on me today!"

A cheer echoed throughout the hull as the rowing spurred the galleon forward. Ships unfortunate enough to be in the Tekkōsen's way had to scramble to get out of it; fishermen had to cut their nets to save their boats while merchant vessels rang bells to alert others to the new sea monster made from wood and iron.

The floating fortress was like a castle built upon a foundation of tofu, Toshio decided, though he instantly regretted thinking of food while his head spun and stomach churned. They were out of the shallows now and the waves were larger, crashing against the hull in a nonsensical pattern that brought upon a renewed seasickness in the ninja.



"I believe I've...seen enough, Shibuya-san," Toshio said while fighting back the urge to vomit. "Take us back to port."

The captain and head of the company raised his hands and pleaded for a little more time. He gave a whistle and then looked past the stern as if hunting for shadows in the fog. A crewmember arrived to hand him a spyglass, though even with its aid he couldn't confirm his findings.

"Be happy to take you back, Inspector, but we been 'earing talk of pirates lurking around these parts. Wanted to do a little look-see...shame I can't see past this fog, though."

Toshio snatched the handheld telescope from him. He looked upwards to the crow's nest—a small platform high enough on the mast to be free of the fog. "I'll go up there myself and look. If I see nothing, you are to return this ship to its station. Do we have an—*erGh*—agreement?"

The seasick ninja retasted the morning's miso and began climbing up the mast even without the captain's consent. Toshio hoped being up higher would cure his nausea but even if it didn't, a moment alone on this crowded galley was reason enough to make the climb.

"I've...made a terrible mistake," Toshio admitted to himself after he made it to the crow's nest. Because it was so far from the ship's center of mass, rotational movement was at its peak—which meant Toshio was at his worst, staggering about like a drunk suffering from a massive hangover.

"Ho up there!" yelled Shibuya from below. "You're quite the climber, Inspector! Let us know if you spot anything out of the ordinary, will ya?"

Toshio nodded but not out of approval; his head bobbed outside his control, spinning with every teeter and sway of the ship on the ocean. He both cursed and prayed that the spirits would see him through this, that he would find and destroy the demon of Satsuma's dreams, and most of all: that the contents of his stomach would stay where they were.

"I'd look starboard for signs of trouble, Inspector!" shouted Shibuya once more. Toshio struggled to recall which side that meant—it wasn't an easy task when you were choking on stomach acids.

*"Why are we wasting our time? To find pirates this close to shore is exceedingly unlikely,"* Toshio grumbled to himself as he peered into the captain's spyglass. *"Not even in the most chaotic years of the Golden Era were they so..."*

The ninja lost his train of thought as a shadow drew from behind the fog. He first assumed it was a scuttled ship, left abandoned to sink on its own accord. But this one was sailing towards the Tekkōsen. Toshio didn't know if its captain was blind or foolish, but after seeing the black flags spout up from the mist he knew it was trouble.

*"Pirates...really? And that emblem on the sails—could they really be the Sumitomo?"* Toshio questioned his own eyes before reporting to the captain down below. "Pirate vessel incoming, starboard side!"

Shibuya let out a gasp before ringing a bell and shouting to the crew. “All hands on deck! Looks like we’re gonna see how powerful the Tekkōsen is in real combat!”

To Toshio’s amazement, every crewmember—save for Tanjiro, perhaps—sprang to their posts without so much as a moment’s hesitation. Sailors not required on oars took up bows and readied arrows behind the iron walls on the main deck. “*Expected of experienced soldiers, sure,*” Toshio thought, “*but these are mere boatbuilders! How is it they appear so well-practiced and at ease?!*”

The ninja scaled down the mast with the utmost haste, trying to make sense of the unsensible. Tanjiro, Shibuya’s son and sole voice of reason among the crewmembers, voiced his unease.

“N-now isn’t the time for this, Father! There’s too much that could go wrong...the iron plating is already throwing us unbalanced as it is! We haven’t tested how the Tekkō will handle rapid maneuvers!”

It struck Toshio as odd that the existence of pirates seemed of secondary concern to Tanjiro. He highly doubted the young man had ever been under attack on the ocean before, yet his greatest worries were much more mundane.

“Urusai, Tanji! Get the Inspector and take him to the main deck with the archers. Let’s see if these Sumitomo bastards can put a dent in us! Hahaha!”

Toshio didn’t recall mentioning they were Sumitomo pirates. It was quite an assumption to make considering the Sumitomo were stationed South in the waters around Genfu, not in Jijinto. It was also worth noting that Shibuya seemed to know the pirates would approach them from their starboard side.

“Do you take me for a fool?” Toshio asked, stopping midway down the stairs inside the armored shell. He took Tanjiro’s hand—which had been leading him down—and twisted it, pulling the shipbuilder close. “I don’t appreciate being lied to, Tanjiro.”

“S-so you saw through the theatrics...I knew this was a dumb idea. But Father is determined to show off the ship in actual battle. These...pirates, they’ll shoot a few arrows and then leave. Hopefully,” Tanjiro winced, “that’ll be the end of it!”

A few metallic thuds against the hull signalled that the pirate vessel was within range. The armored carapace of the Tekkōsen was an engineering marvel all its own: there were slits in the shell where archers could see the enemy, and beside them were moveable sections—shields, essentially—that crew members would close and open depending on whether the archer was ready to shoot or was busy reloading.

The crew’s lack of both military discipline and soberness became apparent, however, as the men bumbled about with arrows, bows and shields falling every which way. It did them no favors that many had never shot a bow before, Toshio determined, as he stopped one crewmember from firing an arrow into his own chest.

*“I’m surrounded by idiots, spirits help me!”*

A wooden creak broke out from the lower deck. Though ships were known to screech and groan, after this particular sound it seemed as if the floor was tilted towards the right. The only engineer on the ship confirmed Toshio's observation.

"There's too much weight on the starboard! We need to move those shields portside—now!" Tanjiro yelled, though the crew only offered him blank glances. They took orders from Shibuya and not a mumbling kid.

The man himself came down the stairs with a wicked grin. His face was flushed, his eyes wide and unblinking. Toshio knew the look: it was that of a man enraptured in the heat of battle. The shipbuilder had never experienced a naval combat before, and even a mock fight such as this was enough to send a foreign thrill down his spine.

It was the sort of thrill that made men do foolish things.

"The Tekkōsen's performing even better than I expected! Them pirate bastards can't lay so much as a dent on us! Hahaha!" Shibuya laughed, then took a swig out of a saké bottle. He tossed it overboard after he was done. "Say it's time we show the Inspector our secret weapon, boys! Take a look at the future of naval warfare!"

Toshio's attention was directed towards a large, lengthy object draped in a white sheet at the center of the deck. The ninja had originally assumed it was a spare mast, and to his credit he wasn't far off the mark. It was three maple logs tied together, though with something special at the front tip.

It was an iron weight: an anchor that had been repurposed and recasted, designed with the likeness of a shark. A bullheaded shark, to be precise.

"That there's the Shibuya spirit animal, all eleven 'undred pounds of her! Slide her up to the stern, boys—we'll see how this pirate ship handles a battering ram! Full speed ahead!"

The battering ram was on wheels, but even then it took every oarsman grunting, sweating and cursing to move it forward. As it moved away from the center, the Tekkōsen began to dip forward. This was a problem that didn't require extensive education to understand: the ram rolled forth on its own, picking up speed and dragging the crew with it.

"Hold her! Hold her steady, damn it!" Shibuya shouted. A man screamed in reply—his foot had gotten caught under one of the wheels. Though he was likely to be limping for the rest of his life, his foot had managed to halt the ram just in time. The other crew members quickly tied it down with ropes to the stern. The Tekkōsen now had a spear from out of its nose.

"Father, please! This is madness!" Tanjiro cried out but his voice was drowned by the splash of crashing waves. The Tekkōsen wobbled, creaked and spun at every turn of the ocean; her crew tasted saltwater as it sprayed across the bow. Its captain shouted orders for men to return to their oars.

"Shibuya! She's taking on water! Half the lower deck is flooded!" a sailor cried.

Shibuya grabbed the man by the collar and pushed him below deck with a splash. If he kept this up he'd be in for a mutiny. "Turn us starboard, sailor! We're going to chase this pirate outta the water if it's the last thing we—"

The captain quieted once Toshio's arm wrapped around his neck. He was staring at a kunai—a ninja's throwing dagger—held in front of his face by none other than the Heartless Hound. Toshio held Shibuya hostage, daring any of his crewmembers to make a move.

"H-have you lost it, Inspector?! Let him go!" Tanjiro pleaded.

"Crewmen!" Toshio barked, his eyes livid. "As a naval inspector for His Imperial Majesty, I am commandeering this vessel. I am invoking the law as described in Article Five, Section A of the Celestial Sea Charters. You are to return the Tekkōsen to the shore immediately!"

Though there was no Article Five, there didn't need to be: the composed ninja had become the Heartless Hound, instilling fear and discipline in even the most drunken sailor. And even if he hadn't, the raising water level in the lower deck made for a compelling argument.

Shibuya's men weren't pleased about it but took Toshio's orders all the same. All save for an older man who scrutinized the ninja's face and didn't like what he saw. He was, according to his boast, the only one among them who was a samurai by blood. He was a Southerner too, judging from his accent.

"Aye...these eyes 'ave seen enough of dirtskins to spot 'em in the dark! You're an awfully pale one—but I knows what you are! Fought enough of you bear-worshippin' bastards back in the war! Ain't gonna let you gut my boss!"

The retired samurai-turned-boatbuilder pulled out a knife more akin to a meat cleaver. He swung the weapon haphazardly, forcing Toshio to step back and drag Shibuya along with him. It was more for the captain's safety than his own; Shibuya was a much larger target and the cleaver didn't discriminate.

"Put that thing down, Noda-san! The Inspector means well...and he certainly isn't a Kondo!" Shibuya cried. This was the first hostage situation Toshio had seen where the hostage pleaded the would-be rescuer to stop.

Toshio backed up again until he was up against the center mast. Realizing the danger of fighting atop a wobbly ship, the ninja conceded and released Shibuya. The captain pushed off and hurried away, though in his wake the crazed veteran of the Kondo War charged ahead!

\*chop\*

The cleaver wedged into the mast, cutting rope and wood instead skin and tendons. The ninja had managed to duck and roll to safety, nearly going overboard while doing so. Bracing the railing of the upper deck, Toshio turned around to see his attacker.

But what he saw was many times worse: the rope Noda had cut flew upwards as the main mast of the Tekkōsen flew open. The crew had been using only oars to power the floating fortress so that it was easier to control; now the heavenly power of wind was involved.

And at that moment, the heavens blew.

“She’s keeling over!” Shibuya cried. The gust pushed the ship straight ahead—which meant it went straight down, with the weight of the battering ram sending them under. The largest ship Hyugan waters had ever seen flipped on its head, and its crew was now under it!

It was an expensive tombstone for a watery grave. Especially for the shinobi who couldn’t swim.

■■■■

The weight of the Tekkōsen against the ocean’s surface as it flopped and capsized nearly crushed those on the top deck, including Toshio. Were it not for the mast dragging across the ocean’s floor, they would’ve been killed on impact.

As it was, Toshio was only blacked out and unconscious inside the crashed fortress. His body was pushed, prodded and pulled around by the debris of the collapsing ship. He was sucked inside it, up into its lower decks that were now at the top of the capsized vessel. At least there was air there—all of which flooded into the ninja’s lungs.

“AAAAAH! Aaahhh, ahhh!” Toshio gasped for breath, panting heavily. It was dark and his head pounded and the rest of him was sore. Blood was in the water—no doubt his own, as his lips and limbs were cut by broken planks of wood.

The shinobi treaded water while frantically feeling around the hull for a means of escape. He saw none because he saw nothing: it was pitch black inside this watery grave, the screams of men echoing around him.

*“Am I dead? What sort of hell have I ended up in?!”*

Toshio was sure of nothing save that the water level was raising. He reached a hand up and felt the ceiling above him. By determining how close it was to his head, he’d be able to calculate how many seconds he had left to live.

“Kuso! What a dismal fate!” Toshio yelled, before swallowing and gagging out a mouthful of saltwater. “Satsu-kun, please! I’m not supposed to die here! My father...my people...our future—there’s still so much work yet to be done!”

The ninja’s throat throbbed painfully from gurgling bloody saltwater and shouting at the top of his lungs. He took in a deep breath to regain his composure; being overwhelmed with fear would assuredly kill him. But the reality was that he couldn’t swim and that the act of keeping his head above water was becoming a more and more difficult task.

But that wouldn't stop him from trying to escape. After one large breath and then another, Toshio took a third before holding it and dunking his head down. He opened his eyes and only got a sting for his troubles, confirming what he had already known: there was no way to see where he was going. He paddled using his hands and feet, but when that became counterproductive he opted to crawl down (or up) the hull instead.

That worked until he bumped his head into a beam. His mouth opened and consequently flooded; he had to return back up for air.

"Aaah, curse it all!" Toshio said to himself. He raised a hand to see how much time he had left, and could only get it half as high as before. "I can't escape this deathtrap. Is this divine punishment for trying to take up the role of the Sword?!"

The ninja closed his eyes and prayed. He listened not just for the spirits but the sailors screaming in other areas of the ship. Except there weren't any, not anymore. "*They must've already drowned,*" Toshio thought, his dire situation taking a turn for the hopeless.

It was at that moment of hopelessness, when his head thumped against the ceiling and the air ran thin, that the proud ninja—the Heartless Hound—became truly humbled. He cried for the first time since his mother passed so many years ago. He pleaded for help, fresh saltwater coming down his eyes as he begged for mercy.

And at that moment, something caught onto his leg and dragged him under.

■■■■

"Yes, vomiting is quite what you'd expect in the case of near drowning."

That voice belonged to Doctor Fujii of Fish-Eye Hospital. He wore a pair of spectacles that made his eyes look comically large, though Toshio was in no shape for humor. The ninja was bent over and peering into a bucket, tossing up fluids which belonged both to himself and the ocean.

"I'm just so happy you're alive, Inspector!" said Shibuya, who was on his knees clenching his hands together. "If there's anything, *anything* my boys and I can do to make this up to you, we'll do it in a heartbeat! Ain't that right?"

Once Toshio was finished retching, he gave a look over the crew crowded into the clinic's emergency room. They all had their heads down as they muttered their apologies, some outright pleading for their lives. They knew the danger they and their company was in after that shipwreck.

"It is remarkable," Toshio said, wiping his mouth with a cloth, "that no one died. It certainly would've been nice to know about the escape hatches earlier."

Shibuya placed his head down against the clinic's floor as he continued to apologize. Toshio had been trapped under the ship for over an hour—though it had felt like seconds at the time. The screams the



ninja had heard weren't cries from drowning sailors but from rescue parties, risking their lives for his.

The one who had found him happened to be none other than Noda, the man who had swung a kitchen knife at him earlier. When Toshio asked why he saved him, the old veteran only mumbled about his upcoming execution at the hands of the Emperor.

"I'll be needin' a katana for my seppuku," he said, referring to the suicide ritual. "Always figured I'd die with 'ah sword in my hands. Never reckoned it'd be like this, though..."

True enough, attacking an officer employed in His Imperial Majesty's navy and capsizing a vessel was a seppuku-worthy offense. For a samurai. But this old sailor was no samurai any more than Toshio was a naval inspector. Noda had dived under the wreckage of a floating fortress to save him. And that was worth something.

"Have mercy on Noda-san, please," said Tanjiro, who now kneeled next to his father. "I'm the one who...who engineered the Tekkōsen. She shouldn't have sailed—it was my fault she sunk."

"No, Tanji, you fool!" Shibuya said, shaking his son. "You tried to stop us, but I refused to listen. Inspector, please, I am...I was the captain. I assume full 'sponsibility on account of my crew. When you...when you report this to the Emperor, please spare 'em all you can!"

The crew members then took turns shifting the blame onto themselves, until it seemed as if the Imperial executioner was going to have his work cut out for him. It was a heartwarming moment, even if Toshio was shivering from a newly-acquired cold.

The shinobi raised a hand to silence them. "Before I get to that, I want to know about the yakuza who were interested in the Tekkōsen. Who leads them?"

Shibuya choked down a breath, relieved for the sudden change in subject. "Lord Yamagata runs them, well—he's their boss, anyways. The one interested in a fleet 'o warships was his wife. Rather, wife-to-be. Not much of a looker, truth be told, but rumor 'round town is that she's loaded with ryō!"

"Does she have a wart on her face?" Toshio asked and Shibuya nodded. "Her name?"

"Shi...er..oyama? Shiroyama, that's it."

Toshio then turned towards the shipwrights, many of which were too fearful to glance up from their sandals. They hung their heads in shame, awaiting for the Imperial inspector's verdict. Their appearance of weakness made him recall Satsuma's parting words.

*"It is not your strengths that worry me, Toshio-san. I am more concerned about the weaknesses that you are reluctant to see."*

The weaknesses were threefold, Toshio realized, the first two of them obvious: his unfamiliarity with ships and his inability to swim. Those would be remedied as soon as he returned to the Capital. But the

last he had only come to terms with in the moment before his apparent death at sea.

*"I need others. If I'm to survive the trials ahead...if I'm to serve Satsu-kun and the Sword Who Cuts the Heavens, I have to accept the help of others."*

Toshio was so swept up in his own thoughts that he didn't notice the poignant silence that filled the air. The crew and employees of Shibuya & Sons fearfully awaited their fate, uncertain of both their lives and livelihoods.

It was time to cast aside the fear.

"As for what happened out at sea," the ninja said, pausing as the men drew in a collective breath, "I will look over this mishap—on one condition."

Shibuya pounced up from the floor as if a hundred hornets had needled his behind. "Yes! Anything! Anything at all, Inspector!"

Toshio brought a hand to his chin, his eyes piercingly cold and calculating. He had just learned to rely on others, and was determined to put the new lesson into practice.

"Set up a meeting with Shiroyama."

[Which character should December's side story be about?](#)

[Nov 7, 2019](#)

This poll will close at the end of November.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+45)

9%

Borgia, the butler (+1)

2%

Daisuke, the servant (+6)

2%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+0)

0%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+20)

2%

Keiko, the maid (+2)

7%

Kohaku, the samurai (+22)

9%

Kuniko, the farmer (+10)

2%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+27)

23%

Momoko, the doctor (+33)

0%

Nishi, the yakuza (+5)

2%

Satsuma, the emperor (+48)

16%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+0)

19%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+26)

5%

Poll ended Nov 30, 2019 · 43 votes total

## [MC #3's Face Poll: 3/3](#)

[Nov 11, 2019](#)

The design for MC #3 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Neutral, Perverted**

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Short (+0)

17%

Long (+3)

14%

Ponytail (+19)

46%

Chonmage (+5)

11%

Long bangs (+11)

11%

Poll ended Nov 15, 2019 · 35 votes total

## [Alternative Universes](#)

[Nov 25, 2019](#)

If there was ever an alternate universe featuring the SoH characters, what setting would you prefer?

Highschool

College

Iron Chef/Cooking Competition

Pirates

Court/Nobility

Gangsters/Mafia

Police/Detectives

140 votes total

[MC #3 Face Art](#)

[Nov 30, 2019](#)

A new month, a new face! That's right: in Book 5, players will be able to (optionally) select a face for their main character! Faces will be designed each month by the intermediate+ tiers via polls. This month's face was drawn by Izumi ([twitter](#))!

This month's build: **Neutral, Perverted, Ponytail**

**Portrait (Normal)**



Portrait (Jigoku)





[Dec 1, 2019](#)

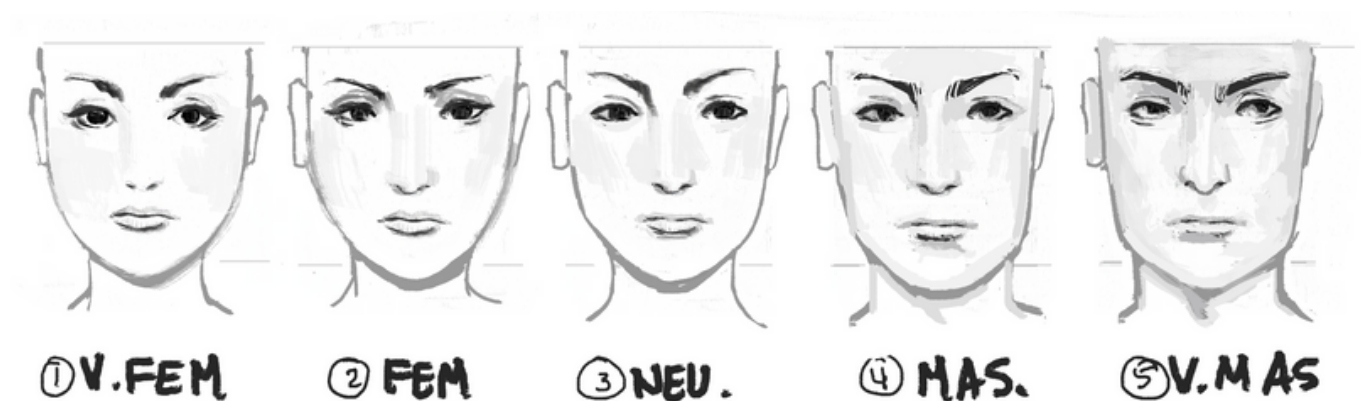
Each month during the offseason, you'll be given three polls to help shape the ronin you want to make. I'll take the results and commission an artist for a piece of artwork with your selections in mind!

The first poll is masculinity-femininity, from the 1st-5th.

The second poll is favored stat (personality+expression), from 6th-10th.

The third poll is hair, from 11th-15th.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!



Very feminine (+18)

66%

Feminine (+10)

9%

Neutral (+0)

6%

Masculine (+2)

9%

Very masculine (+15)

11%

Poll ended Dec 5, 2019 · 35 votes total

[MC #4's Face Poll: 2/3](#)

[Dec 6, 2019](#)

The design for MC #4 continues! This poll focuses on the favored stat of the character, which will provide a personality and facial expression for the artist to work with.

Current Build: **Very feminine**

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Impulsive (+9)

3%

Calculated (+15)

30%

Perverted (+0)

5%

Chivalrous (+7)

3%

Charming (+4)

0%

Stoic (+14)

5%

Drifter (+1)

0%

Protective (+4)

11%

Brutal (+10)

41%

Finesse (+2)

3%

Poll ended Dec 10, 2019 · 37 votes total

[Side Story #17: Satsuma's Friend \(Toshie Version\)](#)

[Dec 7, 2019](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>



Side Story 17: Satsuma's Friend (Toshie Version)



■■ Western Hyuga ■■

“What are you holding, Satsu-kun?!” cried a woman from the back of a wagon. Her name was Azusa—the secret wife of Emperor Seijirō—and her concern for her son’s well being was all that kept her sane on the many weeks journey west out of Yamato. Leaving the capital city of Hyuga where her family, house and future were supposed to be was far from a painless ordeal.

But it was nothing compared to what the Lioness Sakiko would do if she got her claws on them.

“Just a, um, stick, Mother!” Satsuma lied as best a six-year-old could. He hid his carving knife—the one his father had gifted him—within the robes of his kimono. Unfortunately for him, his clothes were in disrepair from travel: days marching in thick forests and nights sleeping atop twigs had turned the future emperor’s outfit from regal to rustic.

The knife fell through a broken pocket just as his mother came over. She let out a gasp that got the attention of the others—they being the Kondos they were traveling with. Their brown-skinned companions were the bears Satsuma had dreamed of for weeks, and though they had no fur they were the hairiest men the boy had ever seen.

Coarse black hairs sprouted from their chests and arms, their legs, and even their backs. One of them had hair seemingly everywhere save for the top of his head. He was called Kyō-Kyō and would soon come to the boy's aid.

"That's a weapon! You could get yourself hurt!" Azusa yelled, her face distorted with disgust as she picked up the blade as if it were a dead rodent. "Where did you get this? Did that...that Kyō-Kyō give it to you?"

"Oh, dhats just a wee shaving knife, Lady Azusa! Was teachin' the lad how to keep his face clean, is all. Wouldn't want it to get as hairy as mine! Gehehe-heehee!" Kyō said, laughing as he always did.

He was a short man with shoulders broader than any, with a large gut that had shrunk considerably since they had left the Capital. His hands were covered in calluses from a lifetime of building houses, stables, fences and just about anything else made from rock and wood. He was friendly—overly so—and was the leader of this group of Kondos. Their journey was more than just an expedition: it was a pilgrimage to the new lands of their people, were they sought to use their skills to build a permanent settlement.

*"A place to call home,"* Satsuma thought to himself. *"I wish I had one of those..."*

After some debate between Azusa and Kyō-Kyō regarding male body hair and personal grooming, a third member of the expedition returned from scouting ahead: Fujibayashi. His long awaited return distracted Azusa long enough for Satsuma to retrieve his knife.

"You all will be happy to know that we're traveling in the right direction at least," the older man said while scratching his peppered-grey beard. "How we managed to get five carts filled with building materials through these woods...well, it was nothing short of a shugenja spell. Let's hope it holds up—in just another hour we'll be on the prairie, and then to the desert. Kyō—you and I need to have a conversation about where your tribe is exactly, and what sort of welcoming we can expect."

From what little the adults let Satsuma overhear, the boy had learned that a brutal war between Hyugans and Kondos had ended just a few years prior. Like Hyugans with their clans, the Kondos were separated amongst their own—between the Northern tribes, the Central ones, and those in the South.

It was those in the South around the old capital of Genfu who had done most of the fighting. Kyō-Kyō didn't spell it out—nor could he spell at all—but his hesitancy was enough to draw worry. "A grudge like dhat...will bleed for generations," he said solemnly. The man himself was of the North, displaced by the Uesugi and Takeda clans.

Northern Kondos were more traditional and spiritual, fantastic hunters and tougher than bears—they had to be to survive up there. They weren't fit for warmer climates, as evidenced by the buckets of sweat constantly streaming down Kyō's hairy chest.

As far as the Central Kondo tribes went...

"...let's hope they be the ones in charge over dhere," Kyō said after wiping his forehead. "Dhey are farmers and builders. Don't hold to traditions much, and I say dhat be for the best—not many bears to sacrifice in the desert! Smart and clever folk, good with horses too."

The idea of horses filled Satsuma's young mind with scenes of racing, jumping and fighting atop the mighty yet elegant beasts. They were the samurai's best friend, and it was said that the best steeds were raised on the Golden Plains of the Westlands.

"My first friend shall be a horse," Satsuma decided with a smile. "Strong and dependable, and always at my side!" While eager to return to his father and his schoolmates back in Yamato, the boy knew he couldn't return empty-handed. "I shall master the art of horsemanship—*that* will impress Father enough to let us live at the castle with him!"

Only Fujibayashi overheard the boy's affirmation; it was enough to make the seasoned warrior grimace. His emperor and friend Seijirō had ordered the ninja to look after his son—to keep Satsuma safe meant the two were unlikely to see each other again.

"Hey, Satsu-sama!" the old man hollered, his tone cheerful. "I found a watering hole not too far up ahead. Might be we'll find a horse if we go looking!"

Satsuma bolted up and ran towards the ninja, nearly tackling him out of excitement. He quickly turned to his mother and began pleading his case to let him go on ahead. Lady Azusa was reluctant but the boy's excitement was hard to turn down. When she nodded, Satsuma shouted with glee.

"Yatta! I'm gonna get a horse!"

■■■■

A ninja did not become the right hand of the Emperor without ample amounts of caution. Taking Satsuma up ahead was one such measure; borrowing Lady Azusa's necklace was another. The jewelry was more than just a pretty ivory piece—it was a symbol of Satsuma's royal inheritance. Keeping the boy and that necklace a secret was pivotal if they were to survive out here.

"Am I being quiet enough, Fuji-san?" Satsuma asked, skulking and whispering. "I don't want to scare the horses off."

Fujibayashi assured Satsuma he was doing fine. Though he doubted there were wild horses ahead, he was far more concerned with the tamed ones; he had seen signs of recent activity during his scout ahead earlier. A large group of Kondos with their carts in tow would be spotted immediately.



"Mitigating risk is how you reach old age in this line of work," the ninja mumbled to himself. Though he wasn't keen on lying to the boy, telling him the truth would've only worried Kyō-Kyō and his mother—and of the two, Fujibayashi wasn't sure who was the greater liability.

The former was certainly louder; the ninja could hear the hairy Kondo's laughter from afar. So could Satsuma.

"He'll scare away the horses before we get there!" the boy said with concern.

As if to ease his worries, several neighs broke out from the fields ahead. The sound of horses rang out atop the prairie where golden hairgrass mixed with green dropseed and wildflowers came in blues, reds and violets. This was the edge of the Golden Plains and the start of the western frontier; and those yells came from the stallions that lived there.

"Look! Hor—" Satsuma shouted until he was muffled by Fujibayashi's hand. While both of them were excited, the ninja alone was stricken by fear. Atop those horses were men with odd blankets draped across their torsos, with large conical helmets atop their heads. At this distance, Fujibayashi couldn't tell if they were Hyugan or Kondo, friend or foe.

"Spirits help us, we have poor luck. That's the Nanbu emblem," the ninja whispered while gesturing to the clan emblem shown predominantly on the lead rider's coat. The rider was short—a woman, Fujibayashi realized—though she spoke with the confidence of a samurai captain.

A confidence amplified by the spear in her hands.

"Reckon you bit off more than you can chew, Jūkichi! And that's sayin' something, with a mouth as big as yours. Made us waste half a day's light chasing your sorry hide. Hand over the month's wages or I'll stick you through!"

"All I tooks was mine," the outlaw yelled, gesturing to the large pack on his back. "I signed up to be a rancher—not to fight off wild dirtskins who'd flay me alive sooner than look at me! I'm headed to the cities out East. Ain't ever gonna see another filthy Kondo in my life, just you wait 'n...see."

The outlaw's words came to an end upon the sight of over a dozen brown-skinned bears in human form approaching from out of the trees. Kyō-Kyō was leading them in song, letting everyone and anyone know they were there. Tactically, it was a nightmare.

"Are these good people, or bad?" Satsuma asked, tugging Fujibayashi's sleeve. The boy was perceptive enough to know that not every adult could be trusted. That was good, since trust was a rare currency out here.

"A bit of both," the ninja said, examining the commotion. The outlaw had gotten himself tied up and hogtied by the woman, called Lady Nanbu by the other horsemen. Fujibayashi had known her husband—they had fought on opposing sides during the Golden Era. The ninja's side had won, which was all well and good except that the wives of samurai were known to hold grudges.

For Lady Azusa to keep her identity hidden and for the Kondos to get themselves out of this mess alive would require the finesse of a shinobi. But that meant leaving Satsuma alone.

"You should help Mother," Satsuma said, speaking with a voice more mature than a six-year-old's. "I shall be fine by myself, Fuji-san."

With his eyes closed, Fujibayashi would've believed it was Seijirō speaking to him. But with them open he saw a young boy in dire need of a bath and a fresh set of robes. Odd as it was, not a hint of fear was found on Satsuma's eyes or peaceful expression.

*"It's as if he's already seen this unfold,"* the ninja thought to himself before shaking the silly idea away. He gave Satsuma a nod before giving him his mother's necklace. "Keep it close to you at all times, Satsu-kun. I'll deal with Lady Nanbu as best I can...what I need you to do is stay safe in the meanwhile. Do whatever you have to in order to survive, you understand?"

Satsuma nodded. Fujibayashi bowed before stepping forth out from their bush and announcing his presence. He claimed to the Westlanders that his wife and him were building an estate out here, and that the Kondos were in their personal employ. Several long minutes of hostile negotiations then passed, the result of which was Kyō-Kyō and the rest of the Kondos tied up in ropes and forced to march with armed riders on either side of them.

Satsuma waited until after they were out of sight and then waited longer until his legs grew sore from squatting. He stood up and looked around, but saw nothing and no one. There were no sounds, either—not even the song of birds kept the boy company.

"I'm alone," he said to himself. Though he had sounded brave to Fuji-san, here by himself he sniffled and wrinkled his nose. Satsuma could fill the pressure well up behind his eyes, but he quickly blinked the potential tears away.

He was brave, a lion—that was what his spirit animal was, according to Ume-Ume, the Kondo woman he had met back in Yamato. The older lady had turned out to be Kyō-Kyō's wife, and it was her wisdom and kindness that had helped the three Hyugans escape Yamato from Sakiko's clutches.

"This isn't as scary as that," Satsuma said. "Our house isn't burning down this time."

That was logic enough for a six-year-old to steel his courage and take his first steps onto the prairie. The golden fields were warm and welcoming—though the sun was overly so on both accounts. Satsuma had to squint and hold up his hand to get a good view, though as to where he was going...

"...I haven't a clue."

Fujibayashi had instructed him to remain hidden, so following their footsteps seemed far from ideal. Instead, the boy was determined to make his own path through the wildflowers, picking one of every color to make a bouquet for his mother. Such was the priority of a six-year-old.

"Violet, dark blue and light blue, yellow and pinkish-red," Satsuma spoke to himself as he inspected his haul. He then inspected his surroundings, and realized that the forest they had come from was nowhere to be seen. An anxious gasp caught up in Satsuma's throat before he choked it back down.

The pain in his throat reminded him of his thirst, which prompted him to halt his flower search for ponds, streams and rivers. Those were the places horses were most likely to be, afterall, and if he was to become a master horse rider to impress his father he'd have to find one.

Though that was easier said than done; with not a cloud in the sky and the afternoon sun bearing down on him, Satsuma quickly became dizzy and tired. Not to mention his feet were sore, his head ached and the back of his neck was sunburnt. A child in this condition wouldn't last longer than an hour.

But Satsuma was no ordinary child and continued forth across the prairie until the sun began its descent in the sky. Time and consciousness made for a dubious pair when mingled with heat exhaustion and mirages. Yet it was no trick of the eye that guided the boy forward; instead, he followed a spiritual sound that resonated from his head to his sandals.

The sound of a young mare cried out to him. Satsuma knew it was colored chestnut brown and had a black mane well before his eyes confirmed it. She was grazing on a desert shrub and wasn't pleased at the taste. She also wasn't wild: she didn't even bother to look up upon Satsuma's approach.

"There, there. Everything will be okay," the boy said, trying to comfort the animal when in truth it was he who needed soothing. The hairs on the back of his sunburnt neck stood on end as he realized that horses were far larger and more intimidating up close.

The mare was less than a year old but stood well over Satsuma's head in height. She had no saddle, which was odd considering how well she acted around people, though few could be intimidated by a child as gentle as Satsuma. She pawed the ground after he found the courage to pet her back, then lowered her head and opened her mouth.

It might have been a sign of a budding friendship had she not snatched the collection of wildflowers from the boy's hand. Before Satsuma realized what had happened, his mother's gift had become no more than stems.

"Hey, those were for Mother!" he said, chastising her. There was no real anger behind his words—especially after Kiso-chan licked his cheek as an apology. Satsuma laughed and forgave her before turning to the next matter of business.

"You need a name, don't you?" He smiled and closed his eyes, clenching them tightly as he thought intently upon a proper name for her.

From out of his top knot, several strands of his long hair flew in the wind. That was exceptionally strange when there wasn't a single gust to be had. The wind continued to blow until he opened his eyes once more, this time with the perfect name in mind.

"Kiso-chan. I believe that will be a fitting name, don't you think?" Satsuma asked and Kiso-chan bowed her head, expecting scratches behind her ears. He of course complied, and it wasn't long before the two of them were on the road together.

"At least, I think this is a road..." the boy spoke aloud. He and Kiso-chan walked side-by-side across the golden fields with frequent stops for particularly tasty pieces of grass. Unlike in the streets of Yamato or the thicket of the forest, Satsuma could see for many miles out here—which was both a blessing and a curse.

For he could see exactly where he was: in the middle of nowhere.

"We need to find Mother, Kyō-Kyō and Fuji-san. I hope they didn't get into too much—wAH!"

Satsuma yelled as his foot sunk into the ground. Salt—or what felt like it—had submerged his right sandal up to his ankle. When he freed it he shook it off, and realized the tannish-white color wasn't salt at all.

"This is called sand! I read about it in school," Satsuma exclaimed. If he was looking for praise he would have to seek it elsewhere, as Kiyō-chan continued forth across the sand with ease. Feeling silly, the boy blushed and hurried back to the side of his new companion.

He squished across the warm sand and enjoyed the new tingling sensation of it between his toes. Though it was fun to walk on it was difficult, too: pulling his feet out from the shifting floor at every step zapped what little remained of his strength. It was getting harder and harder to keep pace with Kiyō-chan, who trotted forward at an increasing speed.

"Why are you, in such a, hurry?" Satsuma asked between staggered breaths. It would seem at least one of them knew where they were going, which was good considering the sun was beginning to set and night was approaching the Westlands.

Without a wind blowing it was eerily quiet, which made a yell from afar all the more frightening.

"Horse thief! Horse thief!" it echoed. "Stay dhere or I'll shoot ya!"

Satsuma obeyed the voice and stopped mid-step. The accent was decidedly that of a Kondo, though the voice was much higher pitched than that of Kyō-Kyō and his men. Satsuma had to squint to make out the speaker, who was tiny at such a distance. Though as the figure approached, he realized the speaker was tiny—a child, in fact, no older than he.

The future emperor introduced himself. Or at least tried to.

"My name is—"

"Silence, *Sisam!*" the young Kondo said with an arrow notched back and ready to fire. It was a girl, Satsuma realized, with bright green eyes that seemed to shine against the evening's darkness. Her lips

she kept pressed and sealed, save for when she scowled.

Her coarse black hair was pulled back and covered with a bandana, made from a tanned leather called buckskin as were the rest of her robes. There were covered by a design of black and white lines that were at times square and at others, squiggly. Kyō-Kyō and the other Kondos wore kimonos with similar patterns, yet they looked entirely different on a girl.

The Kondo also inspected Satsuma for a long moment—it being her first time seeing a Sisam up close. ‘Sisam’ in her tongue meant Hyugan, though the word also served as ‘foreigner’ and ‘invader’. It was hard to imagine a kid like this as an enemy, but the Kondo had heard enough stories from the elders to be weary.

She undrew the arrow from her bowstring when she was satisfied that no one else was near, though in truth her arm had grown too tired to keep it pulled. She gestured to Kiyō-chan, clicking her tongue twice instructing her to come. When she didn’t, the Kondo girl grew frustrated.

“Come here, horse! You belong to us—not Sisam!”

“My name isn’t Sisam, it’s Satsuma! And I wasn’t trying to steal Kiyō-chan!”

The mare turned to face the future emperor at the sound of her name, bowing low to be petted just as before. Satsuma indulged her and frustrated the Kondo to no end.

“This horse has no name—and neither do you!” she shouted, stomping her feet and shaking in frustration. “Everyone knows its bad luck to name a horse before its first birthday. Go back to your ranch, Sisam, or stay here and let the coyotes get you!”

“Coyotes? What are those?” Satsuma asked, innocently.

“Desert wolves. Wild dogs who eat foolish children,” the girl replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

“What do they sound like?”

“They are like...ruah, ruah, raoOOOOOH!”

Satsuma laughed at the Kondo’s animal cry and tried his own. The two quickly entered a competition on who could mimic the beast louder, which went on until their throats were sore and they were beside themselves laughing.

*\*RuRoooAOOOAH\**

“Amazing!” Satsuma said. “That sounded so real!”

The Kondo girl jumped to the balls of her feet and looked around in panic. She notched an arrow but couldn’t aim as her arm was too busy shaking.

“Dhat was real, Sisam! We’re not alone! I have to get dhis horse back home before dhey come!”

The girl climbed atop Kiyo-chan with ease. Satsuma had never seen someone ride a horse without a saddle before and, to be honest, he still hadn’t—Kiyo-chan refused to move. She paid the Kondo no mind even as the tiny rider slapped and prodded her in every effort to get her moving.

“Go, already! Why won’t you move, stubborn horse?”

It became increasingly obvious that she wouldn’t leave without Satsuma. This hurt the Kondo child’s pride, at least until she came up with a way to recover it. With a smug look on her face, she claimed Satsuma as her prisoner.

“I have decided dhat I will capture you and bring you to Papa. He’ll know what to do about a horse thief on our lands! Dhe punishment will be severe...now get on dhe horse, already!”

Though it wasn’t much of an invitation, Satsuma preferred the company of Kondos over that of desert wolves. Keeping the possible punishments far from his imagination, he haphazardly climbed up Kiyo-chan’s back to take up a seat behind the Kondo. He clutched his arms around her tightly when the horse took off.

“Stop...squeezing so hard, Sisam!”

“Oh, sorry,” Satsuma said as he loosened his hold. His focus shifted to his bottom—which hurt, sitting atop Kiyo-chan’s sharp bones and contracting muscles. Riding bareback, he could feel the mare’s heart beat beneath him. It was scary but exciting too, sitting atop such a majestic beast.

Watching the rolling sand dunes pass around them was enough to make Satsuma’s head spin, so instead he focused on the Kondo pressed up against him. An obvious question came to mind.

“Hey, um, what should I call you?”

There wasn’t a reply for some time. The future emperor thought she hadn’t heard him until she finally spoke. When she did, she gave much more than her name.

“My name is Toshie. I am dhe second born from my father, Nobutoshi. My brother Nobu is dhe first, of course. My mother is with dhe spirits and so are my grandparents. Dhey watch over me in dhe form of a swan. I am never alone.”

Toshie’s confident words resonated within Satsuma. The idea of never being alone had a lot of appeal to a six-year-old who had just recently been abandoned across the open plains. Not to mention that he had a spirit animal too!

“And I’m Satsuma,” he replied happily. “My father is named Seijirō, and my mother is Azusa. I don’t have any brothers or sisters...but I do have a spirit animal! It’s a lion!”



Toshie nearly fell off the horse. She turned backwards and ordered Satsuma to repeat his words again, and upon hearing it twice the girl broke out in laughter.

“Lions are brave and powerful,” Toshie chuckled. “You are not brave and not powerful! Hahaha!”

Satsuma fell into a silent pout. Though this girl seemed to know more about spirits than he did, that didn’t give her the right to make fun of him. The future emperor shifted his attention to their surroundings and noticed a familiar assortment of spiky plants they had passed ten minutes prior.

He hadn’t asked before what they were—he didn’t want to appear like a fool—but the fact he had seen them twice meant only one thing.

“I think we may be riding in circles, Toshie-chan. Are you sure you know where we’re going?”

Satsuma couldn’t see the Kondo’s face, but if he could he’d see that the girl was blushing from embarrassment. In truth, Toshie had lost Kiyo-chan while grazing the other horses. To amend her error, she went out searching for the mare alone—only to get lost herself.

She’d admit none of this to Satsuma, of course.

“It is...er...my name is Toshie! Don’t add anything to it, Satsuma. I-I mean, *Sisam!*” she yelled, flustered. The idea of getting lost in the desert brought her too much shame, but if she could bring back Satsuma she’d at least have an excuse for why it took so long to return.

That is, *if* they could make their way back.

“Which direction is your family, Toshie?” Satsuma asked, staring into the sky. Even with his incomplete schooling, he had learned the names and stories of all the major Shinto deities—and one in particular was useful right now. “Ameno Minaka Nushi-sama...he can help us. He’s known as the North Star, the brightest in the sky!”

“The lights in the sky have names?” Toshie gasped, staring at them with newfound wonder. Satsuma then instructed her on how to use the stars to navigate—at least until a waft of urine reached their noses.

It was the second surest sign that you had wandered into a coyote’s den. The first soon broke out from a hole in the side of a nearby dune.

*\*GrrRowl\**

“A sand wolf! Hurry, Kiso-chan! I mean...go, horse!” Toshie yelled out as she tightened her hold on the horse’s black mane. Having spent all her years in this desert, the Kondo had never seen a Hyugan wolf before—the coyote was several times smaller, more akin to a dog, but with food as scarce as it was out here it was many times more ferocious.

Though this one was more than just angry. As it chased after them, tufts of its hair fell off its back, exposing discolored skin beneath. It was diseased, left alone by its pack to die. The two riders would've been more sympathetic if it wasn't trying to gnaw Kiso-chan's hind legs.

Toshie had never fired an arrow off a horse before, and certainly had no experience doing so while said horse was kicking out its back ankles to fend off an attacker. Gritting her teeth and sticking an arrow between them, she switched out her legs so that she was facing backwards instead of forward.

She tried to ignore Satsuma's concerned expression as she took aim at the coyote. The Hyugan reminded her not to hit Kiyo-chan by accident—an unnecessary warning that only added stress to the young Kondo's rattled nerves.

The wild canine was hard to see in the faint moonlight, and a lack of experience combined with the erratic bumps atop Kiyo-chan's back made lining up a shot impossible. Though once she did have a shot, Kiyo-chan came to an immediate stop.

She had reached the peak of a sand dune and the height scared her; her immediate halt sent the riders tumbling forward. Satsuma was able to brace himself as he had his arms free, though Toshie had no such luck. She fell backwards, over Kiyo-chan's head and down the sandy hill.

As she tumbled the coyote pursued, no longer interested in facing the mare's back hooves. It was on Toshie almost immediately, grabbing at her buckskinned sleeve and ravaging it back and forth.

Seeing the girl's body flail around beneath him invoked pure fear within Satsuma. But with it came anger too, and both fear and anger mixed to form what most men called courage. With an unspoken order, the rookie rider sent Kiyo-chan down the sand dune and after his friend.

*"Would Toshie-chan ever want to be my friend?"* Satsuma asked himself before far more pressing questions intervened. Like how he was going to free the girl from the coyote's jaws, or how he was going to kill it—or if he could even bring himself to take a life.

His body answered while his mind surrendered control to adrenaline. As Kiyo-chan neared the fallen girl, the young rider took a fistful of her mane in one hand and outstretched the other, leaning well out of his seat to do so. He caught Toshie by the arm and pulled.

The Kondo was dazed and her head was still spinning from the tumble—but even so, she kicked and fumbled against the mangy beast as best she could. It was all for naught, however, after the coyote got its teeth around her ankle.

"AAAAH! AAAH!" she screamed. "Help me, Satsuma!"

His name was all the future emperor needed to hear; he pulled out his carving knife—the one his father had gifted him—and plunged it down into the coyote's forehead. Satsuma and the sand wolf released their grip on the dagger and the Kondo respectively. Once freed, Toshie scrambled back onto Kiyo-chan's back.

The mare pushed off and sprinted down the hill, leaving a cloud of upturned sand in her wake. Her riders panted and held each other tightly for support, sweating and—in Toshie's case—bleeding. Once the adrenaline faded, her ankle began pulsing in pain.

Toshie bit her tongue and tried to ignore it. Crying over a scrape like this was what babies did, not hunters like her. When Satsuma expressed his concern she rebuffed him, and told him not to speak on the matter further.

So Satsuma changed the subject to his missing heirloom. Not the priceless necklace, but the far cheaper token that was many times more valuable in his mind. "That knife—we have to go back for it! It was my father's!"

"Forget it, Satsu...Sisam. It is gone. Find a new weapon."

"But I can't! Please!" Satsuma pleaded. "He gave it to me for my birthday...I was gonna make lots of carvings to show him when I got home!"

Toshie remained silent while her companion began weeping behind her back. It was a shameful display, the girl knew, yet her heart hurt to see Satsuma so upset. Still...getting so concerned about a Sisam wasn't right.

"Quit getting my clothes wet with those tears! I don't know about your home, but...we are almost at mine."

Thanks to the brightest star in the sky, the two made it back to familiar territory—at least for Toshie and Kiyo-chan. Satsuma could do nothing but snuffle and avert his gaze as they entered a valley with tents, firepits, and fences. There were as many horses visible as there were people, which was odd as one would expect most to be sleeping at such a late hour.

Their reason for prowling the grounds late at night was found in their yells; they called out Toshie's name and each time they did the girl sunk into her seat a little lower. She wasn't eager to reunite with them.

The one who found them was a woman who reminded Satsuma of Ume-Ume except that she had lips painted black and her fingers around Toshie's ear. She all but plucked the young hunter off Kiyo-chan, and was prepared to unleash a verbal lashing until she met eyes with Satsuma.

Those almond-shaped eyes then went wide. "Dhis is...go, young one. Take dhe Sisam to your father...let us pray you don't get us into any more trouble dhan you already have!"

Toshie nodded and pulled Satsuma down, then all but carried him into one of the larger huts at the center of the village. They were met with a cloud of smoke as Toshie held up the cloth doorway. It smelled of tobacco as well as other, earthy herbs Satsuma had never smelled before.

It also reeked of fatherly disappointment.

“Toshie! The whole tribe has been looking for you since mid-afternoon! Our best hunters had to cut their hunts short to search for you. What do you have to...” the man behind the central firepit paused. “Who is this boy with you? A Hyugan?”

The man whose features were lit by dancing flames had a handsome appearance, though an odd one as well: he had few wrinkles for a man his age, yet his hair was as white as a barn swallow’s belly. His beard was no different, though unlike the Kondos Satsuma had traveled with, it was kept short and orderly. Aside from his brown skin and white hair, he had eyes as green as his daughter’s.

It was safe to say he was the most colorful man Satsuma had ever seen. As if to contrast his appearance, his voice was a gruff monotone.

“Well? Explain yourself, Toshie.”

Toshie made the mistake of trying to plead her innocence, that she had returned Kiyo-chan and thus deserved no punishment, and that Satsuma along with countless other factors were all to blame for any potential wrongdoing on her account.

“Tomorrow you are to fetch water until supper as punishment. Now as for you...Satsuma, is it? Lady Nanbu has a child, if I recall. Are you hers?”

Satsuma shook his head. Finally remembering his manners, he bowed. “Thank you for having me, Nobutoshi-san. Lady Nanbu is not my mother...Lady Azusa is. We came from Yamato on a journey with Kyō-Kyō and—”

“That is a name I did not expect to hear. Not from a child of high birth such as you. Toshie,” Nobutoshi ordered, “go outside and look around the tent. Make sure no one is listening in.” After his daughter reluctantly complied, the Kondo brought a pipe to his lips and inhaled deeply before releasing the smoke and shaking his head.

“What troubles has my old friend brought to me this time?”

■■■■

Satsuma spent the night in Toshie’s tent, laying sleepless while learning that both the girl and her father were heavy snorers. It wasn’t as if he wanted sleep, anyway—the risk of a nightmare involving a coyote was too great.

When day broke, the Hyugan was instructed to stay inside and remain hidden. Toshie hurried off on chores while Nobutoshi left to speak with the elders. Satsuma could hear bits and pieces of their conversation as their voices carried.

The group’s shouting and cursing for hours on end was evidence enough that the Hyugan’s appearance in their lands had caused quite a stir. Satsuma fell into a depressed state as he blamed himself for all that had gone wrong.

That despair was on top of being homesick. Memories of his life in the Capital came back to him as painful nostalgia. His stomach growled but for only one treat in particular.

*"Am I ever gonna taste taiyaki again?"* he asked himself as he sulked in the corner. He thought of his mother and Fujibayashi, Kyō-Kyō and the others. He was just about to pray for their safety and swift return when the tent's flap came up.

The light from the sun blinded him long enough for his imagination to take over. It went wild: he more than half expected to see his father standing there in his silk robes with his arms outstretched for a hug.

What he got, however, was a Kondo girl in buckskin leather with her arms crossed. Toshie looked far from amused; she was grimacing but not because of Satsuma.

"Hey, Sisam...dhat knife of yours, I went back and got it for you," she said while revealing her find. "I cleaned it off but...the blade got chipped, you'll have to—ah!"

She was cut short by a hug from her thankful companion. Though it wasn't an uncommon gesture among Kondos, it still embarrassed Toshie to be embraced—by Satsuma in particular.

At that moment, Toshie staggered as her legs gave out beneath her and forced her to cling to Satsuma for support. The pain had become too much for her to bear.

"Toshie-chan! You're hurt! It's your foot, isn't it?!"

The Kondo had walked halfway across the desert with an infected ankle. Every step brought with it great pain, but she had to retrieve Satsuma's knife before the sands buried it or the vultures got to the coyote's corpse.

She had no regrets as her consciousness faded. She looked up at the pale and childish face above her and smiled.

*"One day...we'll be friends, Satsuma-kun."*

[Side Story #17: Satsuma's Friend \(Toshio Version\)](#)

[Dec 7, 2019](#)

<Author's note: This story takes place before the events of Book 1.>



## Side Story 17: Satsuma's Friend (Toshio Version)



### ■ ■ Western Hyuga ■ ■

"What are you holding, Satsu-kun?!" cried a woman from the back of a wagon. Her name was Azusa—the secret wife of Emperor Seijirō—and her concern for her son's well being was all that kept her sane on the many weeks journey west out of Yamato. Leaving the capital city of Hyuga where her family, house and future were supposed to be was far from a painless ordeal.

But it was nothing compared to what the Lioness Sakiko would do if she got her claws on them.

"Just a, um, stick, Mother!" Satsuma lied as best a six-year-old could. He hid his carving knife—the one his father had gifted him—within the robes of his kimono. Unfortunately for him, his clothes were in disrepair from travel: days marching in thick forests and nights sleeping atop twigs had turned the future emperor's outfit from regal to rustic.

The knife fell through a broken pocket just as his mother came over. She let out a gasp that got the attention of the others—they being the Kondos they were traveling with. Their brown-skinned companions were the bears Satsuma had dreamed of for weeks, and though they had no fur they were the hairiest men the boy had ever seen.

Coarse black hairs sprouted from their chests and arms, their legs, and even their backs. One of them had hair seemingly everywhere save for the top of his head. He was called Kyō-Kyō and would soon come to the boy's aid.

"That's a weapon! You could get yourself hurt!" Azusa yelled, her face distorted with disgust as she picked up the blade as if it were a dead rodent. "Where did you get this? Did that...that Kyō-Kyō give it to you?"

"Oh, dhats just a wee shaving knife, Lady Azusa! Was teachin' the lad how to keep his face clean, is all. Wouldn't want it to get as hairy as mine! Gehehe-heehee!" Kyō said, laughing as he always did.

He was a short man with shoulders broader than any, with a large gut that had shrunk considerably since they had left the Capital. His hands were covered in calluses from a lifetime of building houses, stables, fences and just about anything else made from rock and wood. He was friendly—overly so—and was the leader of this group of Kondos. Their journey was more than just an expedition: it was a pilgrimage to the new lands of their people, were they sought to use their skills to build a permanent settlement.

*"A place to call home,"* Satsuma thought to himself. *"I wish I had one of those..."*

After some debate between Azusa and Kyō-Kyō regarding male body hair and personal grooming, a third member of the expedition returned from scouting ahead: Fujibayashi. His long awaited return



distracted Azusa long enough for Satsuma to retrieve his knife.

“You all will be happy to know that we’re traveling in the right direction at least,” the older man said while scratching his peppered-grey beard. “How we managed to get five carts filled with building materials through these woods...well, it was nothing short of a shugenja spell. Let’s hope it holds up—in just another hour we’ll be on the prairie, and then to the desert. Kyō—you and I need to have a conversation about where your tribe is exactly, and what sort of welcoming we can expect.”

From what little the adults let Satsuma overhear, the boy had learned that a brutal war between Hyugans and Kondos had ended just a few years prior. Like Hyugans with their clans, the Kondos were separated amongst their own—between the Northern tribes, the Central ones, and those in the South.

It was those in the South around the old capital of Genfu who had done most of the fighting. Kyō-Kyō didn’t spell it out—nor could he spell at all—but his hesitancy was enough to draw worry. “A grudge like dhat...will bleed for generations,” he said solemnly. The man himself was of the North, displaced by the Uesugi and Takeda clans.

Northern Kondos were more traditional and spiritual, fantastic hunters and tougher than bears—they had to be to survive up there. They weren’t fit for warmer climates, as evidenced by the buckets of sweat constantly streaming down Kyō’s hairy chest.

As far as the Central Kondo tribes went...

“...let’s hope they be the ones in charge over dhere,” Kyō said after wiping his forehead. “Dhey are farmers and builders. Don’t hold to traditions much, and I say dhat be for the best—not many bears to sacrifice in the desert! Smart and clever folk, good with horses too.”

The idea of horses filled Satsuma’s young mind with scenes of racing, jumping and fighting atop the mighty yet elegant beasts. They were the samurai’s best friend, and it was said that the best steeds were raised on the Golden Plains of the Westlands.

“My first friend shall be a horse,” Satsuma decided with a smile. “Strong and dependable, and always at my side!” While eager to return to his father and his schoolmates back in Yamato, the boy knew he couldn’t return empty-handed. “I shall master the art of horsemanship—*that* will impress Father enough to let us live at the castle with him!”

Only Fujibayashi overheard the boy’s affirmation; it was enough to make the seasoned warrior grimace. His emperor and friend Seijirō had ordered the ninja to look after his son—to keep Satsuma safe meant the two were unlikely to see each other again.

“Hey, Satsu-sama!” the old man hollered, his tone cheerful. “I found a watering hole not too far up ahead. Might be we’ll find a horse if we go looking!”

Satsuma bolted up and ran towards the ninja, nearly tackling him out of excitement. He quickly turned to his mother and began pleading his case to let him go on ahead. Lady Azusa was reluctant but the boy’s

excitement was hard to turn down. When she nodded, Satsuma shouted with glee.

“Yatta! I’m gonna get a horse!”

■■■■

A ninja did not become the right hand of the Emperor without ample amounts of caution. Taking Satsuma up ahead was one such measure; borrowing Lady Azusa’s necklace was another. The jewelry was more than just a pretty ivory piece—it was a symbol of Satsuma’s royal inheritance. Keeping the boy and that necklace a secret was pivotal if they were to survive out here.

“Am I being quiet enough, Fuji-san?” Satsuma asked, skulking and whispering. “I don’t want to scare the horses off.”

Fujibayashi assured Satsuma he was doing fine. Though he doubted there were wild horses ahead, he was far more concerned with the tamed ones; he had seen signs of recent activity during his scout ahead earlier. A large group of Kondos with their carts in tow would be spotted immediately.

“Mitigating risk is how you reach old age in this line of work,” the ninja mumbled to himself. Though he wasn’t keen on lying to the boy, telling him the truth would’ve only worried Kyō-Kyō and his mother—and of the two, Fujibayashi wasn’t sure who was the greater liability.

The former was certainly louder; the ninja could hear the hairy Kondo’s laughter from afar. So could Satsuma.

“He’ll scare away the horses before we get there!” the boy said with concern.

As if to ease his worries, several neighs broke out from the fields ahead. The sound of horses rang out atop the prairie where golden hairgrass mixed with green dropseed and wildflowers came in blues, reds and violets. This was the edge of the Golden Plains and the start of the western frontier; and those yells came from the stallions that lived there.

“Look! Hor—” Satsuma shouted until he was muffled by Fujibayashi’s hand. While both of them were excited, the ninja alone was stricken by fear. Atop those horses were men with odd blankets draped across their torsos, with large conical helmets atop their heads. At this distance, Fujibayashi couldn’t tell if they were Hyugan or Kondo, friend or foe.

“Spirits help us, we have poor luck. That’s the Nanbu emblem,” the ninja whispered while gesturing to the clan emblem shown predominantly on the lead rider’s coat. The rider was short—a woman, Fujibayashi realized—though she spoke with the confidence of a samurai captain.

A confidence amplified by the spear in her hands.

“Reckon you bit off more than you can chew, Jūkichi! And that’s sayin’ something, with a mouth as big as yours. Made us waste half a day’s light chasing your sorry hide. Hand over the month’s wages or I’ll

stick you through!”

“All I tooks was mine,” the outlaw yelled, gesturing to the large pack on his back. “I signed up to be a rancher—not to fight off wild dirtskins who’d flay me alive sooner than look at me! I’m headed to the cities out East. Ain’t ever gonna see another filthy Kondo in my life, just you wait ’n...see.”

The outlaw’s words came to an end upon the sight of over a dozen brown-skinned bears in human form approaching from out of the trees. Kyō-Kyō was leading them in song, letting everyone and anyone know they were there. Tactically, it was a nightmare.

“Are these good people, or bad?” Satsuma asked, tugging Fujibayashi’s sleeve. The boy was perceptive enough to know that not every adult could be trusted. That was good, since trust was a rare currency out here.

“A bit of both,” the ninja said, examining the commotion. The outlaw had gotten himself tied up and hogtied by the woman, called Lady Nanbu by the other horsemen. Fujibayashi had known her husband—they had fought on opposing sides during the Golden Era. The ninja’s side had won, which was all well and good except that the wives of samurai were known to hold grudges.

For Lady Azusa to keep her identity hidden and for the Kondos to get themselves out of this mess alive would require the finesse of a shinobi. But that meant leaving Satsuma alone.

“You should help Mother,” Satsuma said, speaking with a voice more mature than a six-year-old’s. “I shall be fine by myself, Fuji-san.”

With his eyes closed, Fujibayashi would’ve believed it was Seijirō speaking to him. But with them open he saw a young boy in dire need of a bath and a fresh set of robes. Odd as it was, not a hint of fear was found on Satsuma’s eyes or peaceful expression.

*“It’s as if he’s already seen this unfold,”* the ninja thought to himself before shaking the silly idea away. He gave Satsuma a nod before giving him his mother’s necklace. “Keep it close to you at all times, Satsu-kun. I’ll deal with Lady Nanbu as best I can...what I need you to do is stay safe in the meanwhile. Do whatever you have to in order to survive, you understand?”

Satsuma nodded. Fujibayashi bowed before stepping forth out from their bush and announcing his presence. He claimed to the Westlanders that his wife and him were building an estate out here, and that the Kondos were in their personal employ. Several long minutes of hostile negotiations then passed, the result of which was Kyō-Kyō and the rest of the Kondos tied up in ropes and forced to march with armed riders on either side of them.

Satsuma waited until after they were out of sight and then waited longer until his legs grew sore from squatting. He stood up and looked around, but saw nothing and no one. There were no sounds, either—not even the song of birds kept the boy company.

"I'm alone," he said to himself. Though he had sounded brave to Fuji-san, here by himself he sniffled and wrinkled his nose. Satsuma could fill the pressure well up behind his eyes, but he quickly blinked the potential tears away.

He was brave, a lion—that was what his spirit animal was, according to Ume-Ume, the Kondo woman he had met back in Yamato. The older lady had turned out to be Kyō-Kyō's wife, and it was her wisdom and kindness that had helped the three Hyugans escape Yamato from Sakiko's clutches.

"This isn't as scary as that," Satsuma said. "Our house isn't burning down this time."

That was logic enough for a six-year-old to steel his courage and take his first steps onto the prairie. The golden fields were warm and welcoming—though the sun was overly so on both accounts. Satsuma had to squint and hold up his hand to get a good view, though as to where he was going...

"...I haven't a clue."

Fujibayashi had instructed him to remain hidden, so following their footsteps seemed far from ideal. Instead, the boy was determined to make his own path through the wildflowers, picking one of every color to make a bouquet for his mother. Such was the priority of a six-year-old.

"Violet, dark blue and light blue, yellow and pinkish-red," Satsuma spoke to himself as he inspected his haul. He then inspected his surroundings, and realized that the forest they had come from was nowhere to be seen. An anxious gasp caught up in Satsuma's throat before he choked it back down.

The pain in his throat reminded him of his thirst, which prompted him to halt his flower search for ponds, streams and rivers. Those were the places horses were most likely to be, afterall, and if he was to become a master horse rider to impress his father he'd have to find one.

Though that was easier said than done; with not a cloud in the sky and the afternoon sun bearing down on him, Satsuma quickly became dizzy and tired. Not to mention his feet were sore, his head ached and the back of his neck was sunburnt. A child in this condition wouldn't last longer than an hour.

But Satsuma was no ordinary child and continued forth across the prairie until the sun began its descent in the sky. Time and consciousness made for a dubious pair when mingled with heat exhaustion and mirages. Yet it was no trick of the eye that guided the boy forward; instead, he followed a spiritual sound that resonated from his head to his sandals.

The sound of a young mare cried out to him. Satsuma knew it was colored chestnut brown and had a black mane well before his eyes confirmed it. She was grazing on a desert shrub and wasn't pleased at the taste. She also wasn't wild: she didn't even bother to look up upon Satsuma's approach.

"There, there. Everything will be okay," the boy said, trying to comfort the animal when in truth it was he who needed soothing. The hairs on the back of his sunburnt neck stood on end as he realized that horses were far larger and more intimidating up close.

The mare was less than a year old but stood well over Satsuma's head in height. She had no saddle, which was odd considering how well she acted around people, though few could be intimidated by a child as gentle as Satsuma. She pawed the ground after he found the courage to pet her back, then lowered her head and opened her mouth.

It might have been a sign of a budding friendship had she not snatched the collection of wildflowers from the boy's hand. Before Satsuma realized what had happened, his mother's gift had become no more than stems.

"Hey, those were for Mother!" he said, chastising her. There was no real anger behind his words—especially after Kiso-chan licked his cheek as an apology. Satsuma laughed and forgave her before turning to the next matter of business.

"You need a name, don't you?" He smiled and closed his eyes, clenching them tightly as he thought intently upon a proper name for her.

From out of his top knot, several strands of his long hair flew in the wind. That was exceptionally strange when there wasn't a single gust to be had. The wind continued to blow until he opened his eyes once more, this time with the perfect name in mind.

"Kiso-chan. I believe that will be a fitting name, don't you think?" Satsuma asked and Kiso-chan bowed her head, expecting scratches behind her ears. He of course complied, and it wasn't long before the two of them were on the road together.

"At least, I think this is a road..." the boy spoke aloud. He and Kiso-chan walked side-by-side across the golden fields with frequent stops for particularly tasty pieces of grass. Unlike in the streets of Yamato or the thicket of the forest, Satsuma could see for many miles out here—which was both a blessing and a curse.

For he could see exactly where he was: in the middle of nowhere.

"We need to find Mother, Kyō-Kyō and Fuji-san. I hope they didn't get into too much—wAH!"

Satsuma yelled as his foot sunk into the ground. Salt—or what felt like it—had submerged his right sandal up to his ankle. When he freed it he shook it off, and realized the tannish-white color wasn't salt at all.

"This is called sand! I read about it in school," Satsuma exclaimed. If he was looking for praise he would have to seek it elsewhere, as Kiyo-chan continued forth across the sand with ease. Feeling silly, the boy blushed and hurried back to the side of his new companion.

He squished across the warm sand and enjoyed the new tingling sensation of it between his toes. Though it was fun to walk on it was difficult, too: pulling his feet out from the shifting floor at every step zapped what little remained of his strength. It was getting harder and harder to keep pace with Kiyo-chan, who trotted forward at an increasing speed.

"Why are you, in such a hurry?" Satsuma asked between staggered breaths. It would seem at least one of them knew where they were going, which was good considering the sun was beginning to set and night was approaching the Westlands.

Without a wind blowing it was eerily quiet, which made a yell from afar all the more frightening.

"Horse thief! Horse thief!" it echoed. "Stay dhere or I'll shoot ya!"

Satsuma obeyed the voice and stopped mid-step. The accent was decidedly that of a Kondo, though the voice was much higher pitched than that of Kyō-Kyō and his men. Satsuma had to squint to make out the speaker, who was tiny at such a distance. Though as the figure approached, he realized the speaker was tiny—a child, in fact, no older than he.

The future emperor introduced himself. Or at least tried to.

"My name is—"

"Silence, *Sisam!*" the young Kondo said with an arrow notched back and ready to fire. It was a boy, Satsuma realized, with bright green eyes that seemed to shine against the evening's darkness. His lips he kept pressed and sealed, save for when he scowled.

His coarse black hair was pulled back and covered with a bandana, made from a tanned leather called buckskin as were the rest of his robes. There were covered by a design of black and white lines that were at times square and at others, squiggly. Kyō-Kyō and the other Kondos wore kimonos with similar patterns, yet they looked entirely different on a boy.

The Kondo also inspected Satsuma for a long moment—it being his first time seeing a Sisam up close. 'Sisam' in his tongue meant Hyugan, though the word also served as 'foreigner' and 'invader'. It was hard to imagine a kid like this as an enemy, but the Kondo had heard enough stories from the elders to be weary.

He undrew the arrow from his bowstring when he was satisfied that no one else was near, though in truth his arm had grown too tired to keep it pulled. He gestured to Kiyō-chan, clicking his tongue twice instructing her to come. When she didn't, the Kondo boy grew frustrated.

"Come here, horse! You belong to us—not Sisam!"

"My name isn't Sisam, it's Satsuma! And I wasn't trying to steal Kiyō-chan!"

The mare turned to face the future emperor at the sound of her name, bowing low to be petted just as before. Satsuma indulged her and frustrated the Kondo to no end.

"Dhis horse has no name—and neither do you!" he shouted, stomping his feet and shaking in frustration. "Everyone knows its bad luck to name a horse before its first birthday. Go back to your ranch, Sisam, or stay here and let dhe coyotes get you!"



“Coyotes? What are those?” Satsuma asked, innocently.

“Desert wolves. Wild dogs who eat foolish children,” the boy replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

“What do they sound like?”

“Dhey are like...ruah, ruah, raoOOOOOH!”

Satsuma laughed at the Kondo’s animal cry and tried his own. The two quickly entered a competition on who could mimic the beast louder, which went on until their throats were sore and they were beside themselves laughing.

*\*RuRoooAOOOAH\**

“Amazing!” Satsuma said. “That sounded so real!”

The Kondo boy jumped to the balls of his feet and looked around in panic. He notched an arrow but couldn’t aim as his arm was too busy shaking.

“Dhat was real, Sisam! We’re not alone! I have to get dhis horse back home before dhey come!”

The boy climbed atop Kiyo-chan with ease. Satsuma had never seen someone ride a horse without a saddle before and, to be honest, he still hadn’t—Kiyo-chan refused to move. She paid the Kondo no mind even as the tiny rider slapped and prodded her in every effort to get her moving.

“Go, already! Why won’t you move, stubborn horse?”

It became increasingly obvious that she wouldn’t leave without Satsuma. This hurt the Kondo child’s pride, at least until he came up with a way to recover it. With a smug look on his face, he claimed Satsuma as his prisoner.

“I have decided dhat I will capture you and bring you to Papa. He’ll know what to do about a horse thief on our lands! Dhe punishment will be severe...now get on dhe horse, already!”

Though it wasn’t much of an invitation, Satsuma preferred the company of Kondos over that of desert wolves. Keeping the possible punishments far from his imagination, he haphazardly climbed up Kiyo-chan’s back to take up a seat behind the Kondo. He clutched his arms around him tightly when the horse took off.

“Stop...squeezing so hard, Sisam!”

“Oh, sorry,” Satsuma said as he loosened his hold. His focus shifted to his bottom—which hurt, sitting atop Kiyo-chan’s sharp bones and contracting muscles. Riding bareback, he could feel the mare’s heart beat beneath him. It was scary but exciting too, sitting atop such a majestic beast.

Watching the rolling sand dunes pass around them was enough to make Satsuma's head spin, so instead he focused on the Kondo pressed up against him. An obvious question came to mind.

"Hey, um, what should I call you?"

There wasn't a reply for some time. The future emperor thought he hadn't heard him until he finally spoke. When he did, he gave much more than his name.

"My name is Toshio. I am the second born from my father, Nobutoshi. My brother Nobu is the first, of course. My mother is with the spirits and so are my grandparents. They watch over me in the form of a swan. I am never alone."

Toshio's confident words resonated within Satsuma. The idea of never being alone had a lot of appeal to a six-year-old who had just recently been abandoned across the open plains. Not to mention that he had a spirit animal too!

"And I'm Satsuma," he replied happily. "My father is named Seijirō, and my mother is Azusa. I don't have any brothers or sisters...but I do have a spirit animal! It's a lion!"

Toshio nearly fell off the horse. He turned backwards and ordered Satsuma to repeat his words again, and upon hearing it twice the boy broke out in laughter.

"Lions are brave and powerful," Toshio chuckled. "You are not brave and not powerful! Hahaha!"

Satsuma fell into a silent pout. Though this boy seemed to know more about spirits than he did, that didn't give him the right to make fun of him. The future emperor shifted his attention to their surroundings and noticed a familiar assortment of spiky plants they had passed ten minutes prior.

He hadn't asked before what they were—he didn't want to appear like a fool—but the fact he had seen them twice meant only one thing.

"I think we may be riding in circles, Toshio-kun. Are you sure you know where we're going?"

Satsuma couldn't see the Kondo's face, but if he could he'd see that the boy was blushing from embarrassment. In truth, Toshio had lost Kiyo-chan while grazing the other horses. To amend his error, he went out searching for the mare alone—only to get lost himself.

He'd admit none of this to Satsuma, of course.

"It is...er...my name is Toshio! Don't add anything to it, Satsuma. I-I mean, *Sisam!*" he yelled, flustered. The idea of getting lost in the desert brought him too much shame, but if he could bring back Satsuma he'd at least have an excuse for why it took so long to return.

That is, *if* they could make their way back.

"Which direction is your family, Toshio?" Satsuma asked, staring into the sky. Even with his incomplete schooling, he had learned the names and stories of all the major Shinto deities—and one in particular was useful right now. "Ameno Minaka Nushi-sama...he can help us. He's known as the North Star, the brightest in the sky!"

"The lights in the sky have names?" Toshio gasped, staring at them with newfound wonder. Satsuma then instructed him on how to use the stars to navigate—at least until a waft of urine reached their noses.

It was the second surest sign that you had wandered into a coyote's den. The first soon broke out from a hole in the side of a nearby dune.

*\*GrrRowl\**

"A sand wolf! Hurry, Kiso-chan! I mean...go, horse!" Toshio yelled out as he tightened his hold on the horse's black mane. Having spent all his years in this desert, the Kondo had never seen a Hyugan wolf before—the coyote was several times smaller, more akin to a dog, but with food as scarce as it was out here it was many times more ferocious.

Though this one was more than just angry. As it chased after them, tufts of its hair fell off its back, exposing discolored skin beneath. It was diseased, left alone by its pack to die. The two riders would've been more sympathetic if it wasn't trying to gnaw Kiso-chan's hind legs.

Toshio had never fired an arrow off a horse before, and certainly had no experience doing so while said horse was kicking out its back ankles to fend off an attacker. Gritting his teeth and sticking an arrow between them, he switched out his legs so that he was facing backwards instead of forward.

He tried to ignore Satsuma's concerned expression as he took aim at the coyote. The Hyugan reminded him not to hit Kiyo-chan by accident—an unnecessary warning that only added stress to the young Kondo's rattled nerves.

The wild canine was hard to see in the faint moonlight, and a lack of experience combined with the erratic bumps atop Kiyo-chan's back made lining up a shot impossible. Though once he did have a shot, Kiyo-chan came to an immediate stop.

He had reached the peak of a sand dune and the height scared her; her immediate halt sent the riders tumbling forward. Satsuma was able to brace himself as he had his arms free, though Toshio had no such luck. He fell backwards, over Kiyo-chan's head and down the sandy hill.

As he tumbled the coyote pursued, no longer interested in facing the mare's back hooves. It was on Toshio almost immediately, grabbing at his buckskinned sleeve and ravaging it back and forth.

Seeing the boy's body flail around beneath him invoked pure fear within Satsuma. But with it came anger too, and both fear and anger mixed to form what most men called courage. With an unspoken order, the rookie rider sent Kiyo-chan down the sand dune and after his friend.

*"Would Toshio-kun ever want to be my friend?"* Satsuma asked himself before far more pressing questions intervened. Like how he was going to free the boy from the coyote's jaws, or how he was going to kill it—or if he could even bring himself to take a life.

His body answered while his mind surrendered control to adrenaline. As Kiyo-chan neared the fallen boy, the young rider took a fistful of her mane in one hand and outstretched the other, leaning well out of his seat to do so. He caught Toshio by the arm and pulled.

The Kondo was dazed and his head was still spinning from the tumble—but even so, he kicked and fumbled against the mangy beast as best he could. It was all for naught, however, after the coyote got its teeth around his ankle.

"AAAAH! AAAH!" he screamed. "Help me, Satsuma!"

His name was all the future emperor needed to hear; he pulled out his carving knife—the one his father had gifted him—and plunged it down into the coyote's forehead. Satsuma and the sand wolf released their grip on the dagger and the Kondo respectively. Once freed, Toshio scrambled back onto Kiyo-chan's back.

The mare pushed off and sprinted down the hill, leaving a cloud of upturned sand in her wake. Her riders panted and held each other tightly for support, sweating and—in Toshio's case—bleeding. Once the adrenaline faded, his ankle began pulsing in pain.

Toshio bit his tongue and tried to ignore it. Crying over a scrape like this was what babies did, not hunters like him. When Satsuma expressed his concern he rebuffed him, and told him not to speak on the matter further.

So Satsuma changed the subject to his missing heirloom. Not the priceless necklace, but the far cheaper token that was many times more valuable in his mind. "That knife—we have to go back for it! It was my father's!"

"Forget it, Satsu...Sisam. It is gone. Find a new weapon."

"But I can't! Please!" Satsuma pleaded. "He gave it to me for my birthday...I was gonna make lots of carvings to show him when I got home!"

Toshio remained silent while his companion began weeping behind his back. It was a shameful display, the boy knew, yet his heart hurt to see Satsuma so upset. Still...getting so concerned about a Sisam wasn't right.

"Quit getting my clothes wet with those tears! I don't know about your home, but...we are almost at mine."

Thanks to the brightest star in the sky, the two made it back to familiar territory—at least for Toshio and Kiyo-chan. Satsuma could do nothing but sniffle and avert his gaze as they entered a valley with tents,

firepits, and fences. There were as many horses visible as there were people, which was odd as one would expect most to be sleeping at such a late hour.

Their reason for prowling the grounds late at night was found in their yells; they called out Toshio's name and each time they did the boy sunk into his seat a little lower. He wasn't eager to reunite with them.

The one who found them was a woman who reminded Satsuma of Ume-Ume except that she had lips painted black and her fingers around Toshio's ear. She all but plucked the young hunter off Kiyo-chan, and was prepared to unleash a verbal lashing until she met eyes with Satsuma.

Those almond-shaped eyes then went wide. "Dhis is...go, young one. Take dhe Sisam to your father...let us pray you don't get us into any more trouble dhan you already have!"

Toshio nodded and pulled Satsuma down, then all but carried him into one of the larger huts at the center of the village. They were met with a cloud of smoke as Toshio held up the cloth doorway. It smelled of tobacco as well as other, earthy herbs Satsuma had never smelled before.

It also reeked of fatherly disappointment.

"Toshio! The whole tribe has been looking for you since mid-afternoon! Our best hunters had to cut their hunts short to search for you. What do you have to..." the man behind the central firepit paused. "Who is this boy with you? A Hyugan?"

The man whose features were lit by dancing flames had a handsome appearance, though an odd one as well: he had few wrinkles for a man his age, yet his hair was as white as a barn swallow's belly. His beard was no different, though unlike the Kondos Satsuma had traveled with, it was kept short and orderly. Aside from his brown skin and white hair, he had eyes as green as his son's.

It was safe to say he was the most colorful man Satsuma had ever seen. As if to contrast his appearance, his voice was a gruff monotone.

"Well? Explain yourself, Toshio."

Toshio made the mistake of trying to plead his innocence, that he had returned Kiyo-chan and thus deserved no punishment, and that Satsuma along with countless other factors were all to blame for any potential wrongdoing on his account.

"Tomorrow you are to fetch water until supper as punishment. Now as for you...Satsuma, is it? Lady Nanbu has a child, if I recall. Are you hers?"

Satsuma shook his head. Finally remembering his manners, he bowed. "Thank you for having me, Nobutoshi-san. Lady Nanbu is not my mother...Lady Azusa is. We came from Yamato on a journey with Kyō-Kyō and—"

"That is a name I did not expect to hear. Not from a child of high birth such as you. Toshio," Nobutoshi ordered, "go outside and look around the tent. Make sure no one is listening in." After his son reluctantly complied, the Kondo brought a pipe to his lips and inhaled deeply before releasing the smoke and shaking his head.

"What troubles has my old friend brought to me this time?"

■■■■

Satsuma spent the night in Toshio's tent, laying sleepless while learning that both the boy and his father were heavy snorers. It wasn't as if he wanted sleep, anyway—the risk of a nightmare involving a coyote was too great.

When day broke, the Hyugan was instructed to stay inside and remain hidden. Toshio hurried off on chores while Nobutoshi left to speak with the elders. Satsuma could hear bits and pieces of their conversation as their voices carried.

The group's shouting and cursing for hours on end was evidence enough that the Hyugan's appearance in their lands had caused quite a stir. Satsuma fell into a depressed state as he blamed himself for all that had gone wrong.

That despair was on top of being homesick. Memories of his life in the Capital came back to him as painful nostalgia. His stomach growled but for only one treat in particular.

*"Am I ever gonna taste taiyaki again?"* he asked himself as he sulked in the corner. He thought of his mother and Fujibayashi, Kyō-Kyō and the others. He was just about to pray for their safety and swift return when the tent's flap came up.

The light from the sun blinded him long enough for his imagination to take over. It went wild: he more than half expected to see his father standing there in his silk robes with his arms outstretched for a hug.

What he got, however, was a Kondo boy in buckskin leather with his arms crossed. Toshio looked far from amused; he was grimacing but not because of Satsuma.

"Hey, Sisam...dhat knife of yours, I went back and got it for you," he said while revealing his find. "I cleaned it off but...the blade got chipped, you'll have to—ah!"

He was cut short by a hug from his thankful companion. Though it wasn't an uncommon gesture among Kondos, it still embarrassed Toshio to be embraced—by Satsuma in particular.

At that moment, Toshio staggered as his legs gave out beneath him and forced him to cling to Satsuma for support. The pain had become too much for him to bear.

"Toshio-kun! You're hurt! It's your foot, isn't it?!"



The Kondo had walked halfway across the desert with an infected ankle. Every step brought with it great pain, but he had to retrieve Satsuma's knife before the sands buried it or the vultures got to the coyote's corpse.

He had no regrets as his consciousness faded. He looked up at the pale and childish face above him and smiled.

*"One day...we'll be friends, Satsuma-kun."*

[Which character should January's side story be about?](#)

[Dec 7, 2019](#)

This poll will close at the end of December.

If there is a tie, and both characters haven't had a story written yet, the winner will be selected randomly between the two.

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Bashō, the poet (+49)

13%

Borgia, the butler (+2)

0%

Daisuke, the servant (+7)

0%

Hatch, the streetfighter (+0)

5%

Ige, the kabuki stagehand (+21)

0%

Keiko, the maid (+5)

3%

Kohaku, the samurai (+26)

13%

Kuniko, the farmer (+11)

0%

Masami/Masashi, the shugenja (+37)

29%

Momoko, the doctor (+33)

5%

Nishi, the yakuza (+6)

5%

Satsuma, the emperor (+0)

3%

Toshie/Toshio, the ninja (+8)

18%

An obscure character nobody remembers! (+28)

5%

Poll ended Dec 31, 2019 · 38 votes total

[Friendly Question](#)

[Dec 10, 2019](#)

To the people you consider close friends, are they mostly online friends or “real life” friends?

I only get close to people I know in real life.

Most of my close friends are people I meet irl, a few are online-only.

About half of my close friends I meet irl, the other half are online-only.

Most of my close friends are online-only, a few I meet irl.

All my close friends are online-only.

(☺↪☺) Friends?

115 votes total

[MC #4's Face Poll 3/3](#)

[Dec 11, 2019](#)

The design for MC #4 continues! This poll focuses on the hairstyle of the character.

Current Build: **Very feminine, Calculated**

Votes from this month carry on into next month's poll (+X), so every vote matters!

Short (+6)

14%

Long (+8)

28%

Ponytail (+0)

8%

Chonmage (+9)

11%

Long bangs (+15)

39%

Poll ended Dec 15, 2019 · 36 votes total

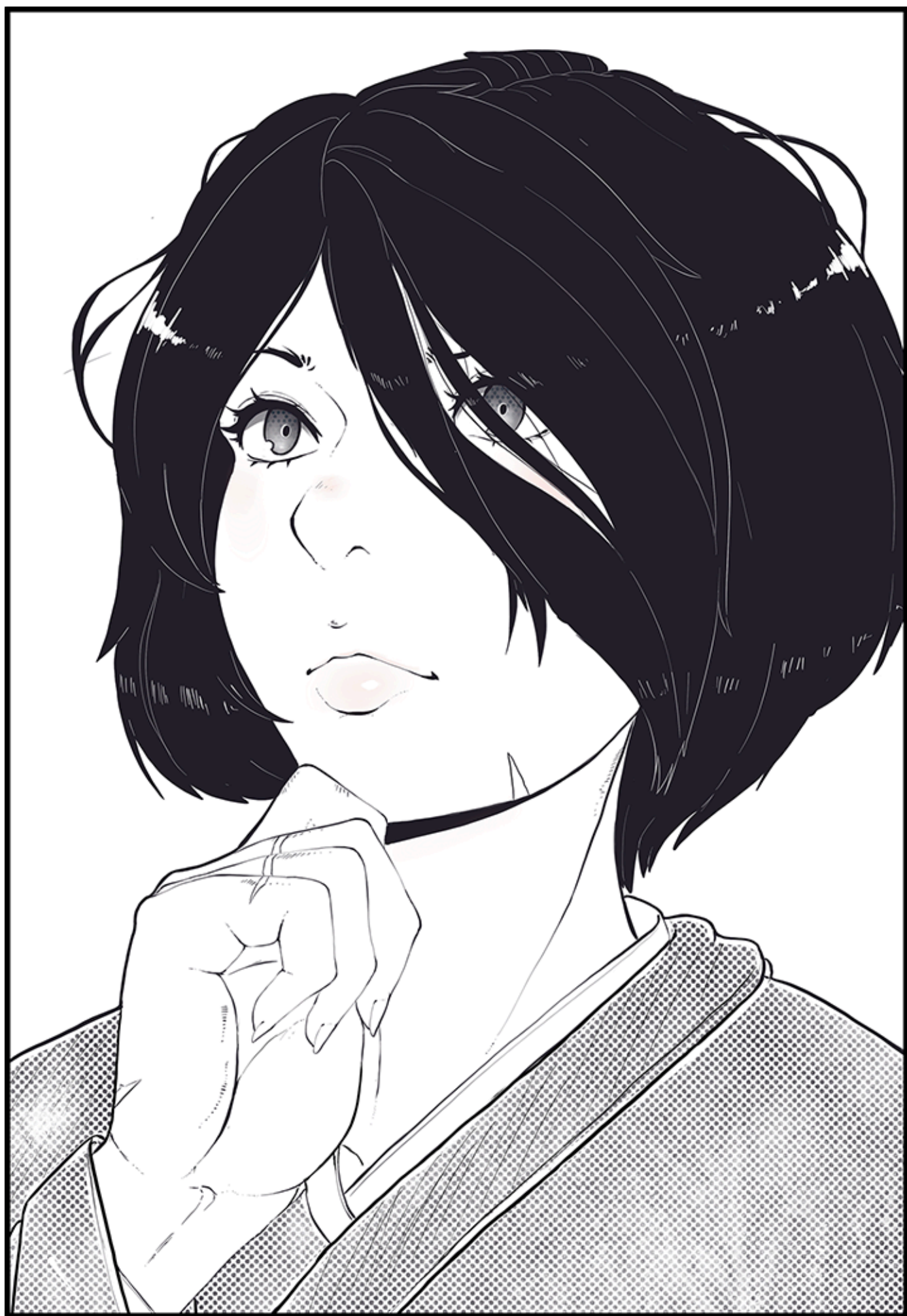
## MC #4 Face Art

Dec 31, 2019

It's the last face of the year! In case you need a reminder: in Book 5, players will be able to (optionally) select a face for their main character! Faces will be designed each month by the intermediate+ tiers via polls. This month's face was drawn by Izumi ([twitter](#))!

This month's build: **Very feminine, Calculated, Long bangs**

**Portrait (Normal)**



Portrait (Jigoku)



